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Four Stages of Public Art

Mark Hutchinson

INTRODUCTION

It was Benjamin who said that we must respond to the aestheticisation of politics with the politicisation of aesthetics. This, of course, was an urgent cry in the face of fascism. This politicisation, I think, must be, amongst other things, an analysis of how the practice of art is weighed down by the kind of world in which it is made. Benjamin and Adorno ceaselessly reiterated that art, just like everything else, is shot through with the unfreedoms of an unfree society. Any politics of art worth its name must have an idea of how art is denied potential: of how economic, ideological and practical factors limit what it is thinkable for art to do and to be. So any politics of art needs some idea of how art transforms itself.

Following the philosopher Roy Bhaskar,¹ I want to think about such transformative practice as a process of negating inhibitions and prohibitions. One of the things I find useful about Bhaskar is that he does not see the limits of unfreedom in positive terms (as mere facts) but as *absences*: absences of freedoms, possibilities and potentials. Therefore, his ideas of transformation and agency revolve around the process of absencing absences.

As an important aside, it is impossible to sum up what Bhaskar means by 'transcendental' (or 'critical') realism. However, keeping an eye on the difference between epistemology and ontology is crucial. Most of philosophy is riven by illicit conflation between the two. Bhaskar spells out two fallacies, which are the mirror image of each other. Unsurprisingly, these are named the epistemic fallacy and the ontic fallacy. I think they are useful, not only in untangling some philosophy but as a way of dealing with a complex, layered, structured reality in a way which is not reductive.

The epistemic fallacy is the reduction of problems of ontology to problems of epistemology. The fallacious argument runs that our knowledge of the world is partial and fallible. Any belief about the world could turn out to be wrong. We can never know anything

1. Roy Bhaskar, *Dialectic, the Pulse of Freedom*, Verso, London, 1993.

absolutely and transparently. So, every supposed knowing is merely interpretation and hypothesis. Not only do we have no privileged access to reality, in fact, we do not know anything at all about reality, only about our perceptions of it. It would be more honest to abandon any pretence that our ideas of truth have any bearing on how things are, and treat them as ideas about belief, instead. If things exist, they are inaccessible. Of course, such an argument can have many different nuances. But what is important is the structure of the argument. It starts off with a statement about epistemology, about knowledge, which is true: that it is fallible. But it ends up with ontology: the idea that reality is inaccessible. Those guilty of the epistemic fallacy redescribe everything in terms of our fallible knowledge. It is this slippage that is reductivist and in error – fallacious.

Indeed, our knowledge of things is fallible and, moreover, in constant transformation. But, for us to have knowledge at all, reality must have intransitive properties. Our knowledge is inescapably transitive but the object of that knowledge is necessarily intransitive *as a condition of its possibility*.

The ontic fallacy is the reduction of problems of epistemology to problems of ontology. Its reductions work the other way round, claiming that knowledge is merely the epiphenomenon of a physical reality. In privileging the physical or actual, it denies that the epistemological is real and irreducible.

In art, it seems to me, there are conflation at work, which are similar to the fallacies Bhaskar analyses. The idea of art's autonomy can work as a kind of ontic fallacy, reducing various knowledge about the art and modes of attention to it, to epiphenomena of the art itself. That is, it is the properties of the work that count over against interpretation. There is also an equivalent of the epistemic fallacy, which posits the reception and interpretation of the art as constitutive of it. That is, it is the circulation of the idea of a work of art in discourse that makes it art. Both approaches want an easy life: not to deal with the overdeterminations and complexities of a multiple, structured and differentiated reality. What the fundamentalist and the sceptic share is an intolerance of doubt.

This essay is going to use Roy Bhaskar's formulation of a four-stage dialectic to draw distinctions between four stages of public art.² These are not temporal stages in the sense that stage one was over before stage two began, etc. They are historical in that they trace a process of transformations in the possibilities for public art (and implicitly for art per se). To use Bhaskarian language, I want to analyse public art as an open system with emergent properties.

The idea of public art is a strange one. For some, it is an oxymoron: the distinctive relative autonomy of art seems incompatible with the distinctly non-autonomous demands of the public. For others, it is an article of faith that art should be, and is, more democratic and accessible when placed in the public sphere. The collision of the terms 'public' and 'art' seems to demand justification; and the sort of justifications it does or does not get differ greatly.

Public art seems to make an explicit commitment to a relationship with the world. Which bit of the world may vary considerably, from, say, James Turrell's inaccessible crater in the

2. Of course the trouble with dialectic is that once you start looking for it you see it everywhere. Every stage of a dialectic process is itself dialectical, and so on, like zooming in on a fractal pattern. Nevertheless, I shall resist the temptation to put provisos at every turn.



Antony Gormley, *Angel of the North*, 1998, Gateshead, weather-resistant Cor-ten steel, constructed by Hartlepool Steel Fabrications, in consultation with engineers Ove Arup & Partners and Gateshead Council

desert to Anthony Gormley's unavoidable *Angel of the North*, in full view of the motorway. But all art in the public sphere has to exist (and is seen to exist) in the same world as everything else, in one way or another. Putting art in a public place can make visible an artist's assumptions and commitments.

Different types of public art show how art conceives of possible (and the possibility of) relationships with a potential audience or audiences. Different forms of art and objects in different locations encourage or dissuade various forms of looking and engagement.

THE FIRST MOMENT

The first stage, or first moment, in Bhaskar's dialectic is non-unity. The idea of difference, or alterity (Bhaskar's preferred term), is essential to get the dialectic going. In contrast with the start of the Hegelian dialectic, which begins with unity, for Bhaskar everything is always already tinged with negativity: things are not what they are not. It is the distinctions between things, their lack of homogeneity, which is necessary even to make observations of the world. Non-unity is the necessary first step for any process of transformation.

Bhaskar is not interested in art, as far as I know; his 'transcendental realist' philosophy is interested in science, as a set of practices gaining

knowledge about the world. Such a realist project sees science as an open process of continual transformation. An example of a first moment of practice might be a positivist anthropologist's descent upon an exotic community. Such an individual would note the differing social and cultural roles of members of the community; the nuances of behaviour; the different layers of social structure; etc. What such an anthropologist would not observe or analyse would be his or her own presence: the ways he or she formed relationships with, affected, and was affected by, the community in question.

The first stage of public art is putting some art in some public place. Like the first-order anthropologist, this is characterised by an unquestioned confidence in the project and the separation of the protagonist from the place of reception. I will use the model of the budding anthropologist to try to help come to grips with the conceptual quagmire of the idea of the public artist. The anthropologist can be imagined as a public artist who does not have recourse to the 'special case' alibis customarily attributed to art, aesthetics and expression. If the artist's relationship to the public is taken seriously, then the model of the budding anthropologist struggling to build a relationship of sorts with a community could become an interesting and useful model of the public artist.

Usually, however, the artist's relationship to the public is not taken seriously; on the contrary, art is presumed to be a good thing and public art a good thing for the public. Historically, the commemorative statue or monument is the precedent for this kind of art. The monument is meant to find a unified, receptive and appreciative audience. At least, its worth is taken for granted by those who place it in the public realm, regardless of the reality of its reception. Of course, monuments can be about aggrandising the regime that made them. So the ideological tangle of who they are for and why they were made is not necessarily easy to unravel. But I want to stress the un-self-reflexive nature of such impositions of monuments into the public realm.

Today, Anthony Gormley talks about the *Angel of the North* solely in terms of the good of art. Any potential complexities or sensitivities to do with where it was put or how it might be received do not seem to have registered with him. At the time of its construction he quoted Oscar Wilde's sentiment that the task was not to make art the public would like but to make the public like art. But Wilde was not talking of a context in which a bit of art would be imposed in a way impossible to avoid. Wilde was defending the independence of the artist; Gormley was patronising his audience. He obviously does not share their cultural tastes but thinks that they should get used to his. Gormley's authoritarian rhetoric is offensive. First-stage public art need not be patronising and authoritarian but the logic of the dislocation of the making of the art from the complexities of its reception makes such offence possible.

THE SECOND EDGE

The second stage, or second edge, of Bhaskar's dialectic is negation. This is not necessarily the destruction of the first stage but rather the realisation and undoing of its absences, lacks, silences and so forth.



Stephen Willats, Introduction Personal Space, Display Board, Brentford Towers, Harvey House, Greenbragon Lane, west London, 6 October–7 November 1985

This is the relationship between subject and object becoming visible. The object of study can be affected by the process of being studied just as the student can be affected by the object of study. At the second edge agency becomes reciprocal. Where the first moment is marked by confidence in seeing differences and the detachment of what is seen, the second edge questions what those differences are and how they are made. The process has become self-reflexive.

For our hypothetical anthropologist, this is the realisation that his or her very presence affects the behaviour of the persons he or she is studying. It could also be those being studied responding to the presence of the anthropologist: perhaps behaving in ways which they think the anthropologist expects or likes.

The anthropologist, in turn, is likely to abandon his or her stance of detachment, with its model of objective interpretation, and instead immerse his or herself in the practices of the community being studied. From this internal position, the anthropologist must adopt the meanings of the community. For example, if, for them, the soul *is* a stone, then the anthropologist is now at a loss to re-describe that stone as a fetish because this would be to impose a meaning from outside. In a sense, all he or she can do is *join in*.

In terms of public art, the second stage is the negation of the idea of art's detachment from everything else. At the second edge detachment is transformed into reflexivity. The relationship between the art and the public realm in which it is placed becomes visible and troubling. This is the negation of the unquestioning and untroubled confidence in the efficacy of public art production.

The negation of the art of the public artist, qua independent, self-determining producer, can take many forms. One bureaucratic response is to turn the artist into a technician. 'The public', in the particular form of community groups and the like, are encouraged to make their own art under the guidance of an artist-come-teacher. Such an artist is not employed to make art but to be an expert, who might run workshops and so on. Such ideas of 'community art' are a reaction to the perceived top-down imposition of an external culture upon an indigenous population; community art attempts to replace this alien art with something internal to the community in question. The underlying principle is that only the members of a community are capable of making cultural goods that are meaningful and sensitive to the needs of that community. Whilst negating the colonialism of the first moment of public art, such strategies carry forward an undifferentiated and essentialising idea of both what art is and what an audience for public art might be and want. This is an inversion in the same way that nationalism is an inversion of colonialism.

It is worth noting, however, that some art hopes to adopt the culture or meanings of a chosen public, without relinquishing the agency of the artist in the making of the art. Steven Willats, for example, works with ordinary persons (showing a particular fondness for those who live in tower blocks). His chosen collaborators participate by, for example, telling their life stories or choosing favourite objects. Willats trades on the inclusiveness and non-elitism of this work. However, the public collaborators Willats chooses do not choose him (however willingly they acquiesce to his project). Their participation is circumscribed by a structure set up and run by Willats. His 'collaborators' are, in fact, raw material for his pre-existing practice: grist for his theoretical mill. The outcome is always a bit of Steven Willats's artwork: part of *his* practice.

Willats is the conceptual grandfather of this technique but it is alive and kicking. Gillian Wearing, for example, is just as exploitative in her use of subjects. Her infamous *Signs That Say What You Want Them to Say and Not Signs That Say What Someone Else Wants You to Say* (1992–93), for example, allowed each subject to scrawl a few handwritten words on a single sheet of paper, which was then held up for the camera.

Within this structure she had set up, each subject could say only a few words. Moreover, the repetition of this structure reduced each act of 'saying' to an image: shown together they were a set of visual equivalents. Each subject was, in fact, *silenced* by the structure of the work rather than given a voice. This reminds me of the way in which Noam Chomsky has analysed political debate on US television. The structure of a programme, divided into short segments between ad breaks, means each commentator can say very little. This is enough time for a conservative voice to reiterate an established position but not enough time for a dissenting, radical voice to put forward an adequate counter-argument.



Gillian Wearing, *Signs That Say...*, 1992–93, C-Type prints, 40 x 30 cm, courtesy Maureen Paley Interim Art, London

Art practice that disempowers in the name of empowerment is a form of bad totality, or synthesis, of the first two stages of the dialectic. Rather than opening up new possibilities it shuts them off, reigning in the power of negation. Both Willats and Wearing use ordinary people as a cipher for the negation of art in a way that positively re-affirms their status as artist.

Another form of negation is when some of the public appropriate existing public art in a way utterly unintended by the authors of the work. This is another way in which ‘the public’ cease being receptive and become active. The shock of this agency was seen in the furore surrounding the self-proclaimed anti-capitalism protesters, who gave the statue of Winston Churchill in Parliament Square a green Mohican and some red make-up. A far more meaningful, playful and creative example is the Newcastle United fans, who made a giant no 9 shirt emblazoned with the word ‘Shearer’ and managed to put it on the ‘Angel of the North’ one night. It did not stay there long, of course. But it was an event of multiple negations, including the following: a negation of the alienation affected by the monument; a negation of cultural division embodied in the monument; and a negation of the autonomy of art presupposed by the monument.

THE THIRD LEVEL

The third stage, or third level, in Bhaskar’s dialectic is totality. This is the unity of the first two stages. Whereas negation implies the recognition of the agency of the other, totality implies a reciprocal relationship between subjects. As Bhaskar puts it, this is unity-in-difference and difference-in-unity. Totality is a term of self-consciousness, of self-reflexive awareness; it is also a term of interaction: the unity of theory and practice. Totality is dialogical and reciprocal.

For our budding anthropologist, this means a dialogue with the community he or she is visiting. This is in contrast with the first-order, theoretical anthropologist’s observations from outside; and the second-stage, practical anthropologist’s participation from inside. Both of these are monological and monovalent, confining themselves to the

intrinsic limits of a particular set of meanings, whether in discourse or practice. The idea of dialogue, however, implies the acceptance of a structured and differentiated reality, where one level of reality or explanation does not necessarily exclude another.

For public art, this implies a détente between the meanings of the artist and the meanings of the public. Such art would be responsive both to its own constitution as public art and to the context of its display. This context is not so much physical as social and cultural. That is, the artist is responsive to the sense of place in terms of its various occupants and meanings, rather than to its spatial characteristics. This totality assumes a public unified through difference: a multiple and diverse public but not a segregated one.

In contrast, Žižek has written about how corporations promote subcultural identity.³ They use marketing and promotion to target the public as small, separate consumer groups, defined in opposition to each other. Belonging to a group is to adopt a highly specialised identity, which differentiates its members from every other group. Corporate strategy is to cater for the needs of each group separately, thereby reinforcing differences. This process of division and exclusion is presented as a process of inclusion and democracy: the market can provide goods and identities for everyone. This process promotes the particular whilst alleviating any sense of the universal or common interest. So corporations aggressively promote identity politics for two reasons. Not only does it disperse potential opposition to corporate interests through division, it also invents, that is increases, markets. Subjects are circumscribed by their identities *qua* consumers. This is difference-in-difference and unity-in-unity.

This distinction, I hope, will separate out differing types of so-called site-specific work. The *Angel of the North* is intentionally site-specific in that Gormley came up with the idea of the monument by researching into the skills available after the closure of the shipbuilding yards, and the materials available that would once have been used for shipbuilding, etc. But any potential dialogue with this ‘specificity’ is denied by its conversion into aesthetic form of Gormley’s choice. In contrast, Jeremy Deller’s *Battle of Orgreave*, a re-enactment of a key incident of the miner’s strike, was not only physically and historically specific but dialogical. It involved negotiations between the artist, re-enactment groups, the local community, original participants in the miner’s strike – both miners and policemen, and the local authority. These dialogues were not only necessary in order to produce the re-enactment but were part of the work. There were also differing audiences for the work: those interested in art mixing with those interested in politics; visitors mixing with locals; etc. The poignancy of the work was very different, I assume, for those who were not involved in the strike and those for whom it is personal history. None of which, necessarily, makes this work good, or any better than anything else. However, I think it does mean that it is dealing with the idea of public art with more sophisticated criteria than first- or second-stage public art.

Mark Wallinger’s *Ecco Homo* is another example of public art that is self-reflexive about its constitution as public art. This is a life-size statue of the figure of Christ, which is striking in contrast with the

3. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, Verso, London, 1999.



Mark Wallinger, *Ecce Homo*, 1999, White marbled resin, gold leaf, barbed wire, life size, commissioned work for Trafalgar Square, London. Copyright the artist, courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

normal, aggrandising, large scale of public statues. The life-size scale does two things. First, it deflates the authoritarian importance of big statues. This deflation of authority was also evident in the avoidance of the traditional iconography of Christ (a long shaggy beard, etc), in favour of an ordinary man dressed in ordinary clothes. Second, the human scale offers a means of identification and engagement for the viewer. This attempt to engage the public was emphasised by the modest posture of the figure, standing on a corner of the plinth, looking over the edge at the public just below.

THE FOURTH DIMENSION

Totality is not the end of the story for Bhaskar. The dialectical process ends up by being opened out again. The fourth stage, or fourth dimension, in Bhaskar's dialectic is agency. Agency is the *practice* of transformation, which is to say that it is self-transformation. Whereas

totality is the unity of theory and practice, agency is the unity of theory and practice *in practice*. More than reflexive awareness it is reflexive transformation.

Agency is transformative practice; that is, practice which transforms itself. At every stage Bhaskar's dialectic is soaked in negativity: the process of transformation is a process of removing absences, lacks, constraints, deceptions, and so on: the absenting of constraining ills (or absences). For Bhaskar the logic and tendency of dialectic is freedom.

At this stage of the dialectic I cannot tell you what anthropology might be like because the dialectic process would change what anthropology is and can be: it would be a transformed, transformative practice. Perhaps anthropology, thus transformed, would no longer be an academic discipline and become something akin to citizenship or political action.

The fourth stage of public art, too, is transformative practice, which includes transforming the possibilities of what public art might be. Art would be an art that changes what art is.

This is in contrast with a first-order idea of change. Gormley imagines that his art will change, for the better, some of the people who have to live with it: that they might learn to appreciate it. And that this would be a good thing. This utilitarian, not to say authoritarian, logic is about changing others; not only is it sure of the worth of art (including, or especially, itself), it is sure of the worth of exposing art to an undifferentiated public, whether they like it or not. This idea of public art effecting change is not about art changing itself or its relationships with its publics.

Instead, this fourth dimension is public art that potentially transforms itself; transforms its publics; allows itself to be transformed by its publics; and allows these relationships and definitions to be transformed, too. This is bringing into doubt (because agency is radically uncertain) what various art and various audiences (and the relationships between them) can and might be. In a radically open system you never know what you might become (or indeed what you might already have become).

Such art might, then, be hard to see and to judge because it will be transforming what counts as seeing and judging. What art might be, and become, is open ended. In a radically open system, what radical art is, is open to radical transformation in practice.