

OCCUPYING THE PAVEMENT: PUBLIC ART

Ali Bramwell



Matt Gillies, *Dunedin Beautification Project* (installation detail), Dunedin City, 2006. This was installed across the road from the Municipal Courts (courtesy of the artist).

I was sitting in a suburban bus shelter in Dunedin, some weeks ago now, doing what you do while waiting for a bus, sitting and waiting. The mutual sitting and waiting provided the opportunity for a conversation with a stranger. He (whose name I never learned) was a visitor from Wellington and unsure of his immediate future, would he stay or would he go? He had been roaming while thinking, without specific business to occupy his day, seeking diversion of an inexpensive kind. This state of mind sets up an unusual way to see a city, an attentive semi direction-less wandering possibly not unlike the Situationist *dérive*, the kind of mindset that allows you to notice small plaques attached to things, and to read them. He had happened on and read two plaques the previous day, the first was attached to the side of the Hocken Library, celebrating a significant donation, all well and good, how nice. However, nearby was another cast plaque set into the pavement. This one stated obliquely “Without competition there can be no success”. That second message had bothered him enough to begin discussing it with a stranger at a

bus stop. Not unreasonably he assumed that both the plaque and the message it contained were officially generated; designed and paid for by the city. His questions to me included wondering what the undercurrent behind this message was. What governmental values were being expressed in this manner? Was this normal behaviour for the Dunedin City Council?

This seemed to me to be a reasonable set of questions, given that he couldn't have known he had stumbled across a part of an unsanctioned public art work, the *Dunedin Beautification Project* (2006) by Matt Gillies. Without warning or any discussion with council the artist had gradually replaced a number of existing functional aluminium plates (part of the city's water and gas infrastructure, designed to allow maintenance access) with image and message bearing alternatives. The process Gillies followed was to 'liberate' a single plate at a time, melt it down, then recasting it to his own satisfaction and replacing it where he got it from. The workmanlike anonymity of the project was important to its success, nobody questions a man in overalls working in broad daylight.

The project intentionally leveraged the quiet power dynamics of how Common Good is administered by engaging directly with governmental systems and infrastructures. The systems that the work operated within were several, the most obvious systems being physical; specifically the plates and the streets they were located within. The plates are part of a service infrastructure (water and gas), as are the footpaths where the plates are located. They are also networked arterial systems of mobility and transit, which is both literally the way that people move around the streets and a schematic metaphor for the city as an organism. By extrapolating from the thing to its function allows the body of the city and its social systems to be seen in parallel. By working in an interstitial way with these existing systems Gillies was enacting a form of practical institutional critique, Foucaultian in implication.¹ The imagery and texts used on the new plates were also critical in specifically politicised ways. If the process of the work implies a post-structural critique, the content of the work sets up something different. Each plate was apparently individually issue based but when looked at collectively the set does not attempt to form any kind of coherent manifesto; in one Homer Simpson wallows apparently semi-conscious in a bathtub, in another a businessman is engulfed in soap bubbles, yet another delivers an aphorism in block letters, "WITHOUT COMPETITION THERE CAN BE NO SUCCESS". What each of these things has to do with each other or the site where they are located is unclear. In addition, the borrowed institution of the city altered and shaded the way the political statements were read; complicating otherwise relatively straightforward dystopian iterations.

Much of the tension in this work arose from a transposition of the way that we have become used to reading public works, generic built environments as well as something called 'Public Art'. There is an assumption of shared values coded into urban design in the form of homogenous aesthetics. The homogeneity does not have to be only stylistic (for example bylaws that restrict building design in specific ways), but occurs where dissenting or even merely unusual ideas are not represented. The idea of a narrowed and limited field of representation has implications for democratic principles.² An emphasis on harmonious aesthetics in the built environment creates an illusion of shared goals, an illusion of societal cohesion that is reinforced by permanent infrastructure. If it is made of permanent material it is generally obedient to the dominant schema of civic pride. Because Gillies' work utilised the city infrastructure without adhering to the associated mores of aesthetic appeal, it did appear to cause some perceptual confusion.

Two decades ago Patricia Phillips articulated the dominant expectation explicitly by making an argument that art practice with a critical intention is most effective if it is also ephemeral and mobile.³ Gillies' work subverts this expectation by using permanent structures as a vehicle for targeted critique. In the process he also skirts the most common risk of all critique, to reinforce the thing that you wish to question. In order to engage with a specific dynamic it seems necessary to adopt the same languages, syntax and structural logic of that dynamic; in effect to become the thing you seek to criticise. By co-opting physical languages of the city which are usually regulated governmentally the artist's act was also experienced as governmental. Recall here that the visitor from Wellington literally assumed the texts were communications from the city council.

As a contrast to Gillies' abrasive counter-cultural images I consider a different image that reverses many of the dynamics that the *Dunedin Beautification Project* creates. As part of the 2006 Sarajevo Winter Festival, Miles Sanderson used fat ripe oranges as textural and compositional elements in the frame of an existing architectural structure; an installation using a bridge's decorative ironwork railing. The colour of the fruit, tied simply but with a craftsman's care, glowed in counterpoint against a winterdrab and chilly city. At first glance this seemed an aesthetic (even painterly) composition with an harmonious and possibly ameliorative intention.

It's important to note that works in public are ultimately understood primarily through the way they are experienced and perceived in context.⁴ In order to develop my thinking here about Sanderson's work I need to contextualise its occurrence more fully. The context includes time, place, phenomenal experience, social dynamics, ethical considerations and a reactive relationship to a third work by NSK (discussed below).

On a cold February day in Sarajevo 2006, standing in a plaza outside a shopping center (public space in the most generic sense) there is a small group of artists waiting for something to happen. Although it's around 2 o'clock in the afternoon and as warm as it will get for the day, the thin sunlight just makes the day more bleak. While we wait, shifting from one foot to the other to keep our toes warm, our presence attracts a handful of dirtyfaced children asking for money or food. One in particular – a small boy – attaches himself tenaciously to the leg of the artist standing next to me. While Miles Sanderson attempts to disengage, too gently to be convincing or effective, the event we had gathered to see is occurring. Several men in a vaguely familiar uniform are standing at ease, parade ground style, apparently military and arranged under a nationalistic banner: yet another armed group in Sarajevo. However, none of the things in this scene can be accepted at face value. Small details appear out of place, on closer inspection the men are wearing white armbands emblazoned with black crosses, after Malevich. The banner carries the emblem of NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst). NSK is a multi-organisational art and political project, held together ideologically by an active anti-totalitarian politic that engages with the thing it criticises in complex and parodic ways.⁵

After some minutes the men break their tableau and start posing for photographs with dignitaries and admirers. NSK has a lot of admirers from the arts community in Sarajevo. To understand why necessitates a brief detour into history. Laibach kept a promise to get to Sarajevo before the NATO troops, staging a concert on the day before the Dayton Peace Accord was signed (21 November 1995) bringing a ceasefire after over three years of bitter multi-ethnic fighting. In tandem with the concert another group affiliated with NSK, the Irwin Group, set up an embassy office in Sarajevo, declared "NSK State Sarajevo" and issued more than 350 passport documents to new citizens of the state without territory. Rumour has it that a number of those passports were actually used to travel on in the very difficult months after the ceasefire when, ironically, the borders shut tighter than ever. Because of the timing of this event, its symbolism, fiercely anarchic energy and political intentions this was an important art event and also an immensely important cultural symbol towards re-establishing more normal relations. The event I refer to on this chilly afternoon in February 2006 is a pale shadow of this original event, but with symbolic and historic freight: an official delegation marking the passing of ten years since the establishment of NSK State Sarajevo and the Dayton Accord in the same week.

But what if you didn't know the history? What does the average inhabitant of Sarajevo think when another group of (apparently) military men strike a pose in their city? Armed men both in and out of uniform are part of the urban landscape here, normalised over the last decades, and the varieties of uniform on show are many. NSK is a cipher in more than one sense, since before Yugoslavia dissolved Laibach was synonymous with rebellion, causing consternation with its fascist parodies riding an uncomfortable line between mockery and reinforcement. One of their artistic stunts involved singing approved communist party dogma in Nazi fascist regalia, deliberately showing the similarity between the two forms of totalitarianism. The performances were accepted by hardliners at face value, underlining the interpretive disjunctions when adopting dominant coding for the purpose of critique. If these four men in uniform carry anything of that (art) historical inheritance in Sarajevo today then surely that sense



NSK (Irwin Group) posing with Sarajevo Winter Festival director Ibrahim Spahi , Skenderija Shopping Complex, Sarajevo, 2006 (photograph courtesy of Miles Sanderson).



Miles Sanderson, untitled installation, oranges and bridge over Miljacka River, Sarajevo, 2006 (photograph courtesy of the artist).

of rebellion must be a nostalgic one; nostalgic in a peculiar sense for a clearly identifiable target to rebel against: Yugoslavia was nothing if not a monolithic entity. Sadie Plant talks about political resistance arising in specific relation to the dominant power; that power always shapes and produces the forms of resistance “with which it is irreducibly implicated.”⁶ In this sense NSK, formed in specific relation to central European communist totalitarianism, has lost its original nemesis and natural opposition and must reformulate the nature of its resistance strategies to remain relevant.⁷

Speaking of identifiable oppositions, I left Miles Sanderson hanging two paragraphs back with a Mafia-affiliated street urchin attached to his pants leg. For Sanderson, the presence of the very youthful beggars profoundly altered the way he understood the NSK presence in the shopping centre, because the contrast was so brutal. States without territory collided both metaphorically and literally with the small and stateless, who are vigorously asserting their right to exist in this specific territory. More plainly: the abstractions of ideology, politics and art came into contrast with a lived reality in the form of a very cynical child. Not that either entity acknowledged the other: The opposition existed mainly as an ethical confusion in the mind of an artist in the wrong country.⁸

Within days of this incident, with all its particulars held in mind (including especially the small leg limpet) Sanderson installed his deceptively simple work on a bridge. There is a kind of unconscionable cruelty in aestheticising food when people are hungry, something that Sanderson was acutely aware of. The artist's personal warmth and the quiet beauty of the image acted to alleviate this cruelty but it remained in the form of conspicuous consumption.⁹ However, the same consumption considered in a larger context has an elegant political symmetry, because Sarajevo has literally been using artistic production as a way of sustaining itself. In the years immediately After The War cultural funds and artistic donations poured in from agencies in Europe.¹⁰ As a guest of the festival the city was paying for the artist to eat while he produced art from food. To underline the absurdity bear in mind that sixty percent of adults there have no paid employment and, also, no social security or public welfare system is sustainable in such a broken economy. This situation is ironic in savage ways that many artists will identify with. Perhaps a more direct encounter with an artist who decorates the city with food might also be seen as a more transparent and ethically desirable form of cultural patronage.¹¹ The woman who daily occupied the pavement near that bridge asking strangers for help could literally reach and take the fruit if she wanted, cynically one might say she benefited from the regenerative effects of art.

Usually the political potential of public practices are assessed through embedded polarities of the avant-gardist project around the ideas of criticism and celebration, disruption and harmony, antagonism and placation, elitism and inclusion. The expectation that effective criticality should be anti-hegemonic, actively disruptive and about instigating change is widespread and underpins the ways that public practices are assessed artistically. Public art has an intellectual inheritance from radical democratic theory that insists that good democracy in the form of representational parity is evidenced by the presence of agonism. Chantall Mouffe states that democracy is in peril not only when there is insufficient consensus “...but also when its agonistic dynamic is hindered by an apparent excess of consensus, which usually masks a disquieting apathy ...A healthy democratic process calls for a vibrant clash of political positions and an open conflict of interests.”¹²

The logic is that if there is no sign of agonism then something has been repressed, as contestation is the basic condition of democracy. Where this logic has been applied to art practices the democratic function of a work becomes a measure of its artistic criticality; the teleology being that the presence of agonism is equivalent with artistic criticality, making political aims and art-theoretical ones coincide without always making that coincidence explicit. Conversely, in this framework artistic attempts at harmony are interpreted as implicitly hegemonic. Some of the reasons for this have been articulated in my earlier comments regarding harmony and permanence in relation to Gillies' work.¹³ Communitarian politics are supposed to be celebratory rather than critical. Over time this conflation of ideas has resulted in a largely unexamined wholesale dismissal of specific artistic strategies, including the use of permanent materials or beauty, as both critically and politically suspect.

The inheritances from the avant-garde and later from post-structuralism, include the broad idea that stasis is bad and that effective criticality consists of finding ways to instigate change. However, the emerging context of relational practices introduces different implications around what constitutes effective polity. In these more recently discussed forms of organisation the idea of beneficial effectiveness is shifted from change producing critique to connectivity. At their best these forms operate with a pragmatism that goes beyond specific ideology by dealing directly with person to person relationships.

Claire Bishop explicitly views the presence of antagonism as the benchmark of both good democracy and critical purchase, in the process seeming to radicalise Mouffe's position in the subtle difference between agonism and antagonism.¹⁴ There is a practical difference between acknowledging the inevitable continuation of conflict and contestation and insisting that antagonism be actively sustained.¹⁵ Bishop also suggests that criticality will be found in the work's content as distinct from its process. She writes in an excoriatingly scathing way about artists who rely on the dynamics arising from process for critical purchase and praises those who do not "collapse the relationships into the content."¹⁶

Bishop's position can respectively be interpolated in relation to Gillies' and Sanderson's work. Despite the inversions with permanence and temporality that the *Dunedin Beautification Project* employs, Gillies operates within generic parameters of contestatory criticality; the content is specifically politicised; and the work as a whole can be understood according to structural and territorial power relations.

By contrast, analysis of Sanderson's work by content or appearance alone would dismiss it as decorative –that it has no democratic potential and therefore is not critical public art practice. It is here that an analytical habit of separating content from process and context while discussing public work becomes unhelpful, because the implications of the work are quite different when taken in the wider context of its situation. On the next bridge downriver towards Grabvica there is a commemorative plaque attached to the handrails stating the name of the first person killed when the war reached Sarajevo, shot while crossing the bridge. As soon as this plaque was placed it was contested and a separate plaque naming a different person was also erected making the same claim – that it was she who was the first death in the conflict. The two women named were from different sides of the river; involving different ethnic groups, and the dispute seems less about personal commemoration than about establishing an iconography of martyrdom for each group.

The recent history is not seamless or stable, and the bridges in Sarajevo are not neutral sites. A lovely winter river scene with oranges, wrought iron, old stone and icy water would mean something very different in another location. It is the specific relation of its situation that imbues the untitled installation with a murky and sullen undercurrent, a masked violence felt as a sensation not unlike a coppery aftertaste, occurring in the wake of its aesthetic appeal. Bishop's parameters for successful work are where the "relations produced ...are marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibility of a 'microtopia' and instead sustains a tension among viewers, participants and context."¹⁷ Sanderson's work fulfills this condition as a specifically sited work with an unresolvable tension created by explicit exclusion and loss. However, Bishop would be unlikely to agree that this work is what she terms "good democracy" as, besides the unforgiveable beauty, the work operates primarily as imminence and process as the relations produced constitute the work. Grant Kester has a different perspective, however; that may have more room in it for work such as Sanderson's. Kester thinks about a form of practice that is less aggressive to audiences in its strategic leveraging but still allows a questioning of fixed identities. He is interested in the possibility that public work can be both open and vulnerable and also enact critical change of a slower and more incremental kind.¹⁸ In order to see this work or to take one of the oranges involved a decision to pause. The work has no narrative content, but becomes part of an ongoing story-of-place by implicating passersby in a process of being momentarily exposed in the middle of a bridge, for modest sensual reward. The work on the bridge was consumed within minutes of being completed, empty red strings left dangling, a series of exposures enacted.

Gillies' and Sanderson's work falls outside of unexamined conventions of how public art practice manifests, and is understood by inverting practical conventions. Both works use strategic temporality and harmony, and complicate assumptions about the role of transgression and the nature of complicity. During each provisional pavement occupation a specific problem is exposed but not alleviated; there is no solution posited or set in motion by the work. Sanderson's work is distinct in its ethical immediacy and its undeniable emotional power. It has an affective power despite an apparent simplicity and a critical relevance that defies emerging conventions around what constitutes criticality. It gains this dimension because of an embodied relationship with place; a short bittersweet burst of sensation, citrus tang an astringent for trauma not yet healed.

- 1 Gillies' project can be understood as Foucaultian in method in the way it observes an existing institution and inserts itself into its structural logic. Foucault has talked about the role of criticism as being primarily one that makes existing conflicts more visible in order to shift the thinking that supports them. "Out of these conflicts...a new power relation must emerge" so that modes of action may be altered. A critical/theoretical process...understands institutions from personal experience and recognises "cracks, silent shocks, malfunctionings..." Michel Foucault, "Practicing Criticism (an interview with Didier Eribon)", 1988: 156.
- 2 The extensively documented and discussed removal of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in New York illustrates the point I am making here very well. Some of the stated reasons for its removal were that it was found to be ugly and alienating and that it was likely to encourage terrorism (!). Its defendants made the link between aesthetic freedom of expression and democratic principles of inclusion. Kwon referred to it, but there are dozens of other references. See Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, 2004.
- 3 Patricia C Phillips, *Temporality and Public Art*, 1992.
- 4 Similarly, it is necessary to address how this text presents each of the works discussed; entering via descriptions of encounter as a way of thinking through the potentials of unexpected occurrences in the city. In the interests of gaining an understanding of what affective and effective implications a particular work has outside the art bracketing of the gallery situation one approach used here is focused on phenomenological reporting: literally describing an experience.
- 5 This text is assuming a certain amount of prior knowledge about the history of NSK and Laibach in Europe. The iconic band Laibach is the core and genesis of NSK. The men posing are four members of the Irwin Group who are in Sarajevo representing NSK. The Irwin Group is a separate entity and an affiliated subset of NSK, there are several other key groups involved also. For a more detailed overview visit <http://www.nskstate.com> as last accessed on 30 September 2007.
- 6 Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture*, 1992: 119.
- 7 Bosnians insist they are not part of Eastern Europe, but of Central Europe.
- 8 Miles Sanderson and I were participating in the Sarajevo Winter Festival as guest artists, Sanderson is a Norfolk Islander; I had travelled from New Zealand. Neither of us are used to such visible extremes of poverty, such naiveté in the face of suffering become casual is also a luxury.
- 9 Sanderson was so discomfited by this dynamic that he has decided that the personal cost of working this way is too great, and he will not use food in this way again.
- 10 This phrase is always spoken as if capitalised, 'The War' brackets social memory in an absolute manner; things are referred to always in relation to it: Before The War; During the War and After.
- 11 Some muttering was heard after several years when a number of high profile cultural projects largely failed to materialise and when, as a result, the flow of cultural funding dwindled sharply. This is hardly surprising really, the canton literally needed to rebuild itself and can it seriously be argued that art is more important than roads and electricity? This might be considered enough of a problem without the complications caused by trying to distribute cultural funds bureaucratically. The complex political organism that is called the 'Bosnian Government' is made up of various aggressively separatist affiliations that struggle with the colossal diplomatic task of settling even the simplest administrative decisions. How much more so when deciding how to spend European beneficence under the vague aegis of cultural development? Where should the money go? Good question. But a handful of people on the street at least ate oranges on that one day.
- 12 Chantall Mouffe, "Introduction: For an Agonistic Pluralism", in *The Return of the Political*, Ernesto Laclau and Chantall Mouffe (eds), 1993/2005: 6.
- 13 Public works in America in the early nineties framed as politically engaged fell foul of this critical view as political engagement was often synonymous with community empowerment. In this context the Phillips text, written at around the same time, could be seen as an attempt to reframe strategies of mobility and temporality as implicitly critical and by implication to redeem a whole range of artistic practices that had been dismissed as celebratory.

- 14 While stating clearly that antagonism is ineradicable from a pluralist society, Mouffe also discusses open antagonism as a potential barrier to democratic process that needs to be managed carefully to prevent the complete alienation of entire groups. The danger of this kind of alienation is an increase in fundamentalisms that are actively anti-democracy. The difference between agonism and antagonism is the difference between relations with opponents and those against "enemies to be destroyed". Ibid.
- 15 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", 2004:60. "...in other words, a democratic society is one in which conflict is *sustained*..." (emphasis in original).
- 16 Op.cit.,70. Bishop makes this argument specifically in conversation with Nicolas Bourriaud. In helping define the field of dialogical practices Bourriaud's states that in "relational aesthetics" the art is judged according to the relations that it produces. The definition was theoretically significant because it separated the idea of relation and social engagement as a strategy that is politically imminent as a process. This is distinct from the polemical and didactic practices called "new genre public art". Claire Bishop has extensively criticised Bourriaud's work for political disconnection.
- 17 Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", 2004:70.
- 18 Grant Kester, *The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art*, 2004: 80.

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