IMMA: *What is_?* programme

What is Public Art?

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One of the dilemmas of public art has been the difficulty in offering any clear or shared definition. We might say simply that it is art that happens outside of the gallery or museum, but implicit in this definition is the assumption that public art exists outside the mainstream of contemporary arts practice, or at least is secondary to what goes on in the main spaces and, as such, it has lacked a certain credibility as a fine art discipline. The lack of a clear definition is perhaps one of the greatest obstacles for public art and yet, as Cameron Cartier points out "a clear definition is elusive because public art is simply difficult to define".[1] Part of what makes public art practice so difficult to define is that it encompasses a vast umbrella of practices and forms: from permanent sculptures to temporary artworks; political activism; socially-engaged practices; monuments; memorials; community-based projects; off-site museum and gallery programmes; earthworks and land art; site-specific work; street furniture, urban design, and architectural decoration have all been classified under public art. Some argue that categorising public art is misleading – public art is just art. Certainly we see more and more how the distinction between an artist's studio practice and one that is publically motivated (i.e. political, social, situational, or relational) has blurred and there is considerable fluidity in how an artist's work resonates within the gallery, art fair, biennial and public project contexts. (Think, for example, of Martin Creed's Work No. 850, 2008, with athletes timed to run as fast as they can, one at a time through the Duveen Hall, Tate Britain; or Francis Alÿs' When Faith Moves Mountains, 2002 – a performative work in Lima Peru, involving 500 volunteers who with shovels moved a sand dune a few inches – land art for the landless.)

What we consider today as public art has been around since the beginnings of art – the Paleolithic cave paintings, such as those at Lascaux, France (no longer accessible to the public) or the frescoes and religious art from the medieval era that spoke to a 'community of interest' about hell, salvation and the divinity of God; or the tradition of monuments and memorials increasingly evident in cities and towns since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries amplifying battle and death and noble heroes. Yet the term Public Art is relatively new. It was coined in the late 1960s in the USA and UK and associated with government Per Cent for Art programmes (introduced in Ireland in 1987), which provide funds for a public artwork linked to capital development – urban regeneration, new roads, social housing, public buildings – and until the last decade involved the commissioning of mostly permanent, site-specific sculpture. Around the same time – the late 1960s and '70s – vangardist artists in the USA, such as Robert Smithson, Richard Serra, Christo, Mary Miss, Nancy Holt, Walter de Maria and Bruce Nauman, consciously broke from the constraints of the gallery and began producing interventions into the landscape and architecture. The art they

made – termed invariably site-specific, earthworks, land art or environmental art – was inseparable from their (non-art) surroundings, creating a very different kind of viewing experience. Walter de Maria's Lightening Field, 1977, for example, is conceived to be experienced over an extended period of time and involves an overnight stay at the remote site in Western New Mexico. Art historian Rosalind Krauss, keen to map this rupture with high modernism's formalism, recognised the need for a new terminology for sculpture that had moved off the pedestal, into the gallery and out into the environment, titling her influential essay 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field'. In this essay she draws on the Klein technique to articulate new boundaries of aesthetics that move towards the limits of postmodernism's formlessness.[2] This 'loosening out' of art's limits has, since the 1970s, generated new categories of (public) art that operate within ever expanding and interdisciplinary fields.

Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson, constructed in 1970, is perhaps the best known of these land works and has taken on a mythic status due to its disappearance a few years after it was built, submerging under high level lake water, only to re-emerge in the droughts of 2004. It is a massive spiral earthwork at Rozel Point in Utah, USA, that curves its way out into the lake; a great swirl of basalt and soil that redefines the landscape it inhabits with its juxtaposition of industrialism and beauty, decay and rebirth, rot and permanence. It was, writes Lynne Cooke, curator of the Dia Art Foundation, New York, "the sense of ruined and abandoned hopes that interested [Smithson]".[3] He was concerned with 'entropy' or energy drain (the reverse of evolution) and saw the future, like Vladimir Nabokov, as obsolete in reserve. Jane Rendell suggests that the distance (and remoteness) we have from many of these earthworks today, such as Spiral Jetty, allows them to resonate in more speculative ways and they take on a sort of heroic quality or site of pilgrimage, as suggested in Tacita Dean's journey to find the jetty recorded in her 1997 work Trying to find the Spiral Jetty.[4] The British artist Robert Long's strategies for art made by walking in the landscape operate in a similar vein of remoteness and pilgrimage, going out into the 'middle of nowhere'. His works are concerned with the relationship between time, distance, geography and measurement, and so walking as a form has enabled him to explore these ideas, while simultaneously extending the boundaries of sculpture – walking becomes art. (Walking is a practice, which other artists such as Francis Alÿs use, but for Alÿs it is principally the city that is his site, studio and readymade.) Questions of monumentality and transience are present in Long's work: stones are used as markers of time or distance, or exist as parts of huge, anonymous sculptures in remote landscapes and his walks are exhibited afterwards in galleries through maps, photographs, texts and floor sculptures. Long's work in IMMA's collection, Kilkenny Landscape Circle, 1991, is a stone circle, an artwork that we might feel resembles the ancient field monuments. Long writes, "I consider my landscape sculptures inhabit the rich territory between two ideological positions, namely that of making 'monuments' or conversely, of 'leaving only footprints'".[5]

Questions of permanence and ephemerality are major themes in public art, and histories and memories find expression in the built environment – but whose history and whose memories are recorded and can the monument always maintain its original meaning and purpose? "There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument" writes Austrian historian Robert Musil.[6]How many, for example, would instantly recognise the four angels at the foot of John Henry Foley's Daniel O'Connell Monument, 1882, at the riverside of Dublin's O'Connell Street, as representing the four provinces of Ireland? While historic, artistic and literary figures, and famous dead pop stars, sports people and popular local heroes find their way onto our streets and squares, to sit alongside the dead heroes and triumphal arches and public sculptures, they usually take on traditional – generic and heroic – aspects of monumentality. But many contemporary artists have

found other ways of remembering, both using and subverting the monument as a means in which to readdress everyday and political issues or to disrupt a sense of familiarity, as Rachel Whiteread achieved in her 1993 work House, by casting in concrete a soon-to-be-demolished house in East London, turning inside space out. And, John Byrne's Misneach (Courage), 2010, situated in Ballymun, Dublin – an equestrian statue of a girl on a horse – which shows how an everyday person (a young local girl) can be as much a hero as the celebrated public figure.

The meaning these public artworks will have for a particular public and how the public experiences the work becomes a central concern of the artist. Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 1982, in Washington, is the opposite of the traditional overpowering monument – authoritarian, vertical, phallic. It succeeds, as Tom Finkelpearl suggests, in being both abstract and personal – it does not include an image of the dead, but instead names them (naming has been used in many other memorials since, such as the AIDS Memorial Quilt begun in California in 1987 and which still continues today, now the biggest community arts project in the world). The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is anti-monumental, anti-heroic, intimate. It includes the viewer as participant in the work in a very physical way. It is, says Lin, made for a "one-to-one experience".7 Conversely, Christo and Jeanne- Claude's 'Wrappings', such as Running Fence, California, 1973, or Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, Australia, 1969, (made with the aid of 130 workers who devoted 17,000 work hours) might also be considered as monuments. The 'Wrappings' offer new ways of seeing the familiar, but only for a short time (like an event), giving them an almost legendary character. Visually impressive and monumental in ambition, scale and execution they perform as spectacles. Nearly five million people saw the Wrapped Reichstag in Berlin, in 1995. But most of us will only know the works through photographs and recorded documents. Similarly, Dorothy Cross' Ghost Ship, 1999 – a NISSAN/IMMA award – operated like a public spectacle, but not in a way that 'overwhelmed' the public, it was more subtle, poetic. Conceived as a homage to the lightships around the coast of Ireland, which were being decommissioned in favour of automation, Cross' decommissioned lightship (a found object), was painted in phosphorous paint and with a UV light timed to fade and glow; the obsolete vessel made visible at night in repetitive sequences of appearance and disappearance. Moored off Scotsman's Bay, Dun Laoghaire for three weeks, it demonstrated, like Christo's 'Wrappings', how the impact of temporary public artworks can powerfully resonate long after the work is complete.

The focus on everyday life, 'ordinary people' and ordinary things and the influences of popular culture on 'high art' originating in historical avant-garde strategies to bring art and life closer, are all evident in the work of German artist Stephan Balkenhol. Large Head, 1991, is an everyman (an individual). It sits on a simple table – carved, craggy and cracked. Ordinary rather than idealised, and anonymous rather than heroic, his works represent the familiar strangers that occupy our everyday lives.

Julian Opie's life-size walking figures (Sara, Jack, Julian and Suzanne), displayed on the central mall of O'Connell Street, Dublin, walking in the direction of the Hugh Lane Gallery, and mounted on LED screens, use sophisticated computer technology to represent real people as simple outline reductions. They were commissioned by the Hugh Lane Gallery who have successfully used O'Connell Street as a very public platform to connect people to the gallery by using public art that is both immediate (accessible) and 'sophisticated'. Barry Flanagan's exhibition of giant bronze hares, for example, was also displayed here. These public works displayed as exhibitions, which are generally for several months, build impact over time, but unlike permanent works seem somehow less threatening for the public and give greater scope for risk taking and experimentation. The successful 'Fourth Plinth' in London makes a space amongst the monuments

of Trafalgar Square for temporary public artworks by high profile artists that capture a large audience and include the people's voice as part of the selection process, through comments on a website. The range of work seen and experienced here is considerable – think, for example, of Mark Quinn's Alison Lapper Pregnant, 2004, a sublime work in white marble of the disabled artist when she was eight months pregnant, or of Antony Gormley's One and Other, 2009, a participatory democratic work that gave 2,400 people the chance to spend an hour alone on the Trafalgar Square plinth (many used the occasion to hold up banners supporting charities or protesting).

II If defining Public Art is testing, it might nonetheless be helpful to suggest a few things central to the way a public artwork is likely to be considered today. Firstly, the majority of public artworks result from a public commission often requiring a competitive process, long-term planning, consultation and approval (that said, increasingly public art projects are artist-led, or involve a direct invitation by public art agencies that promote more avant-gardist approaches, such as Artangel, UK or Creative Time, USA). Secondly, there is an emphasis on the public and audience and the relationship the artwork will have with, and for, the people for whom it is made. Thirdly, the situation – to create artworks in 'real' or virtual places (outside of designated art spaces) – makes context a vital element in how the artwork is conceived, created, located, understood and even authored. It is within this triangulation of the artist, the situation (context, place, site, and commissioning body), and public (audience, participant, collaborators, people) that the public artwork gets made, and we might add negotiated, diluted, compromised, and received.

The tendencies for many commissioned artworks, such as those funded under the Per Cent for Art scheme has been to promote the 'usefulness' of art – be that to fill the 'social bond', create visual coherence of a city or transform the image of a public body. How successful art can be in performing these functions is wide open to debate. An advocacy of the non-contentious and the universal benefits of the art commissioned for the general public or promoting coherency of the public sphere, has resulted in the blandness of many public artworks we see in towns, along motorways and in front of corporate buildings. The emphasis on socially-engaged processes and participatory practices is widely embraced as a means of broadening access to the arts through greater social inclusiveness. However, as Claire Bishop points out, governments often compensate for social exclusion through socially inclusive strategies, meanwhile the structural inequalities of society remain uninterrogated.[8]

How the public will receive the artwork that they might feel is 'foisted' upon them is indeterminable. Still Falling, 1991, a work in IMMA's collection by Antony Gormley, whose figurative sculpture is generally made from casts of his own body, attempts to treat the body not as an object but as a place. Gormley has made some of the best known public artworks and has been invited as a high-profile artist to make work in many cities across the world and also at remote sites – on top of skyscrapers, in the sea and on mountain ranges. His most famous work is the iconic Angel of the North, 1995, which won the hearts of local people only after the replica Alan Shearer shirt was thrown over it by a Newcastle supporter. But not all his works have received the same positive response. For example, his three cruciform cast iron men made for Derry City were attacked and graffittied. Malcolm Miles, writing about this commission, asks how can the metaphor Gormley set up, "to put his body between the two sides to create a poultice to draw the poison from the wounds of Derry", carry the burden of these referenced histories?[9]

It was Richard Serra's Tilted Arc, 1981, which arguably presented the single most divisive moment in the history of public art. Commissioned for Federal Plaza, New York, the giant Corten steel

sculpture was conceived to work in "opposition to the context" – Serra was not "interested in art as an affirmation or complicity" and disdained the need for art to please its audience.[10] The sculpture drew a negative response from the workers, fuelled, many have said, by two judges which eventually led to a court case and the removal of Tilted Arc. What the art world saw as "a great avant-garde masterpiece" was, for the people who worked beside it, "enormous and threatening".[11] Tilted Arc is a fascinating case study, with the ripple effect of asking how a public artwork is to (or should) engage its public?

The critique of 'heavy metal' public sculptures and the removal of Tilted Arc marked, as Miwon Kwon comments, the transition to more discursive models of public art – the shift in which 'site' is displaced by notions of 'audience', a particular social 'issue' and most commonly a 'community' and dialogue, becomes a central ingredient in the work.[12] Suzanne Lacy termed this New Genre Public Art, in 1995, where she distinguished a new form of public art practice that is not about the object but is based on the relationship between the space and the audience. She was influenced by Lucy Lippard's Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972, which focused on ideas, gestures and processes (labelled conceptual art). Lawrence Weiner's Water & Sand + Sticks and Stones, 1991, at the entrance to IMMA, is a conceptual work that sees language as sculpture, where an ambiguity lies between the artwork as gesture and the statement describing the gesture.

The desire for a more compassionate identity and deeper engagement with people also found expression in the writing of Grant Kester, whose dialogical aesthetic draws on the philosophies of Jürgen Habermas and Jean- François Lyotard, to present a very different image of the artist, "one defined in terms of open-ness, of listening and a willingness to accept dependence and intersubjective vulnerability".[13] Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics, written in 1998, drew attention to contemporary arts practice that took its point of departure from the whole of human relations and their social contexts. Such highly influential texts encourage more socially conscious approaches to arts practice, where artists work closely with people or in collaboration with people, often embedding themselves within the context where they work. Mierle Laderman Ukeles' Touch Sanitation, 1978-1993, is an early example of New Genre Public Art where, through a self-initiated residency in the New York sanitation department, she began her work by shaking hands with the 8,500 sanitation workers – from street sweepers to managers. The handshake was the start of the 'getting to know' and, with each gesture she would express her thanks for "keeping New York City alive". Rick Lowe's Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas, 1994 – a major self-initiated project involving considerable negotiation in the renovation of a row of vernacular shotgun houses to transform them into homes for single mothers as well as project spaces for African American artists (of whom he was one) – came from the artist's desire "not only to put the work in the community, but also to become part of the community".[14] What's the Story Collective – an ongoing project set up in 2008, led by artist Fiona Whelan – builds a dialogical practice based on a set of horizontal working relationships with the young people of Rialto Youth Project, Dublin. Investigating power relationships, the project built on the gathering and sharing of personal stories through different forms, including intimate readings with invited audiences. The main focus has been on the young people's sense of powerlessness with the Gardaí, who have in turn been included in the process, which is to inform a ground-breaking new training scheme for the Gardaí, based on the content of findings. The art made is primarily performative, where the subject is about real people living in real situations. The level of personal commitment given by such artists to these particular situations stems from a desire to make a difference (to offer the promise of a better world) and their practices, politically motivated, often offer new aesthetic forms that represent a counter-argument to more bureaucratic programmes of social inclusion. Nevertheless,

a challenge for much socially-engaged public art practice is how to critique and evaluate it as art. The emphasis on empathy and ethics places less value on the aesthetic and political impact, crucial, as Claire Bishop argues, to critically discussing and analysing the work as art. She seeks "shock, discomfort, or frustration – along with absurdity, eccentricity, doubt or sheer pleasure, as crucial to a work's aesthetic and political impact."[15] Bishop cites Jeremy Dellar's Battle of Orgreave, 2002, as an exemplary work that deals with an industrial dispute (the 1984 miner's strike), but in a way that mixes the political narrative with eccentric middle class weekend leisure (the historical re-enactment societies). For Bishop, Dellar's work dismantled any form of sentimentality of class unity and suggests that "the whole event could be understood as contemporary history painting, one in which representation is collapsed with real-time re-enactment". Seamus Nolan's Hotel Ballymun, 2007, commissioned by the forward-thinking Breaking Ground Per Cent for Art Programme 2002-2010, presents a particularly special and distinctive project. Nolan organised the process around a collaborative relationship with local people helping him to design and build a fantasy space, through salvaging and reimaging objects, furniture and items from the flats, to create a real hotel, on top of a soon-to-be-demolished tower block. The hotel was a functioning micro-society with bedrooms, a gallery, music venue, conference centre and garden. The surreal and utopian experience (people could stay the night) became a springboard, as Mark Garry writes, for contentious opinions that "slipped into negative clichés about the practice of socially-engaged art in working class areas".[16]But in this way, this extraordinary work offered what Garry suggests, "a mechanism to question the position contemporary art holds within the capitalist model, encouraging a possible rethinking of the possible social function of art".[17]

The influence of spatial theory, such as the writings of Henri Lefebvre (The Production of Space), Michel de Certeau (The Practice of Everyday Life) and Doreen Massey, who argue for a more nuanced and complex understanding of place as unfixed, contested and multiple, is reflected also in the writings of Simon Sheikh, who speaks of the fragmentation of the public sphere, which we do not enter into equally as a common shared space. And just as there is no unified public sphere, there is, he argues, no idealised or generalised public. The meaning of a public artwork will shift in relation to space, contexts and publics (an individual spectator brings his unique experiences – inclusive of age, class, gender, background – to the particular situation or art experience). Such a shift in understanding, according to Sheikh, suggests a different notion of communicative possibilities and methods for the artwork, that take their point of departure from different fields or disciplines, or a specific rather than general public, or a particular context or site.[18]

On the Irish public art website – publicart.ie – there are numerous examples that demonstrate the many directions (and forms) that public art is taking in Ireland and internationally. The possibilities within this relatively young movement to present unique opportunities to explore the multifold realities of the contemporary world, surely must make this a credible fine art discipline?

1. Cameron Cartiere, 'Coming in from the Cold, A Public Art History', in Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis (eds.), The Practice of Public Art, London/New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 3.
2. Rosalind Krauss, examining the changing dynamics of sculpture in her now-famous essay, developed the expanded field model in 1979, which is based on a series of exclusions through a binary model of architecture, not landscape and landscape not architecture. Continuing a logical expansion of these sets of binaries, the model is transformed into a

quaternary field to mirror the original opposition and includes Site Construction, Marked Site, Sculpture, and Axiomatic structure.

3. See http://www.diaart.org
4. Jane Rendell, 'Space, Place, and Site in Critical Spatial Arts Practice', in Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis (eds.), The Practice of Public Art, London/New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 36.
5. See http://www.richardlong.org
6. Robert Musil, Monuments: Posthumous Papers of a Living Author, trans. Peter Wortsman, Hygiene: Eridanos Press, 1987.
7. Tom Finkelpearl, Dialogues in Public Art, Interview with Maya Lin, Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2000, pp. 117-121.
8. Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents', in Artforum, February 2006. Also see http://www.publicart.ie/en/main/criticalcontexts/writing/archive/writing/view//422b08b059/?tx_pawritings_uid=4
9. Malcolm Miles, 'Critical Spaces: Monuments and Change', in Cameron Cartiere and Shelly Willis (eds.), The Practice of Public Art, London/New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 67-68.
10. Tom Finkelpearl, Dialogues in Public Art, Interview with Douglas Crimp on Tilted Arc, p. 61. (The quote is from Richard Serra, recorded in Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk (eds.), The Destruction of Tilted Arc Documents, Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 1991, p. 13.)
11. Douglas Crimp recounting William Rubin (Director of Painting and Sculpture at MoMA) who suggested at the testimony that all the great avant-garde masterpieces that were opposed in their historical moment … eventually everybody would come to see that this is a great work of art. See Tom Finkelpearl's Dialogues in Public Art, Interview with Douglas Crimp on Tilted Arc, p. 71.
12. Miwon Kwon, One Place after Another, Site Specific Art and Locational Identity, Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 2004, p. 109.
13. Grant Kester, Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially-Engaged Art, California: University of San Diego, 2004. http://digitalarts.ucsd.edu/~gkester/Research%20copy/Blackwell.htm
14. Tom Finkelpearl, Interview with Rick Lowe on Designing Project Row Houses, in Dialogues in Public Art, p. 239.
15. Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn', op cit.
16. Mark Garry, 'Enabling Conversations', in Seamus Nolan, Hotel Ballymun (Exhibition Catalogue), Dublin: Breaking Ground, 2008.
17. Ibid.
18. Simon Sheikh, In the Place of the Public Sphere? Or the World in Fragments, Berlin: b_books, 2005. (See also publicart.ie – critical writing: http://www.publicart.ie/main/critical-contexts/writing/archive/writing/view//30268a07af/?tx_pawritings_uid=27.)

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