

# A very public affair

For the final article in this series Jane Watt asks artists and commissioners about their involvement in current innovative projects.

**Artworks** that are made in the public realm can take a long time to be realised due to lengthy consultation, planning applications, complicated construction and contracting procedures. Once the work has been completed there may be press releases, postcards and glossy brochures proclaiming the unveiling of a public artwork. However, the artists, and their work, have often moved on to another project. Seeing these works can be like viewing a recently discovered star in the sky. Although new to us the viewer, we are actually seeing it light years after its birth. It's old news. Therefore, in order to get an up-to-date idea of what artists are doing 'now' in the public realm, and what is innovative, we have to look at work that is in progress or about to be made. Alternatively, we can look at work made in more of a guerrilla, or interventionist manner – projects that by-pass bureaucratic negotiations.

One such work is Jonathan Rabagliati's *Notes to Myself* [*Footnotes to the City*]. This is a series of four pavement pieces that Rabagliati has made

around London. If you head up Cork Street you may chance upon the word 'hope' drilled into the pavement. Half way along Brick Lane you might have encountered the word 'seek'. If you walk up Wharf Road past the drive-thru McDonalds, you might find 'love'. You could run over 'pray' whilst trying to catch the Number 19 bus at Battersea Bridge Road.

These four letter words, which offer more uplifting messages to London's public than other graffiti texts, are not chance appearances; the artist chose each site carefully. Rabagliati has used the language of the street – the knobby paving slabs that signal a pedestrian crossing – to develop a dot matrix font specifically for this piece. This work involves a carefully orchestrated process. Rabagliati removes the original pavement stone and replaces it with a temporary one. In the workshop, he drills each letter into the slab, and then returns to the street to relay it in its original position. The process involves meticulous attention to detail but is, at the same

time, liberating for the artist. Rather than asking permission to make these public works, Rabagliati just goes ahead and does it. He dons the clothes of the street-worker, luminous jacket and boots, in order "to become part of the street". He notes, "no-one questions me: a policeman passes by; a street cleaner sweeps past."

Whilst *Footnotes* sides-steps traditional publicly sited work procedures<sup>2</sup>, it refers to the well-used public commission materials of etched words and patterns in pavement surfaces. In the Whitefriars city centre area of Canterbury, artist Janet Hodgson is also using pavement materials as part of a current commission. This work, soon to be unveiled, physically maps out archaeological drawings of cesspits found on the redevelopment site. The delicate lines etched in pristine York stone reveal a rich archaeological history underneath the pedestrians' feet. The drawing itself is only a small part of the work, which has been as much about the process of collaboration and discovery between the



Facing page:  
Jonathan Rabagliati,  
*Notes to Myself*  
[*Footnotes to the City*].

Left:  
Grennan and Sperandio,  
*Canterbury Windows*,  
2002. Photo: Garrard  
Martin  
A temporary series of  
painted shop windows  
depicting images of  
people who use the  
streets where the shops  
are located in Canterbury  
city centre.





artist, archaeologists, architects, planners and members of the public. In contrast to Rabagliati's *Footnotes*, Hodgson's work has taken three years of lengthy discussion in order to be realised. However, this largely positive process has seen the gradual development of a strong working partnership and exchange of ideas between Hodgson, the architect Catherine Hennessey and the Canterbury Archaeology Trust (CAT). The channels of communication and mutual respect between these professionals have extended to the commissioning agents SWPA and the client Land Securities.

The project adopted a ground-up approach (both physically and metaphorically). Hodgson went on archaeological digs of the site, gave public talks alongside the archaeologists and worked on a series of temporary projects inspired by the idea of the HG Wells film, *Time Machine*. These more immediate works were part of a larger temporary programme around the site and wider city centre, which included work by Susan Collins, Grennan and Sperandio, Marion Kalmus and Susan Shaw. SWPA sees these works as an important part of the research and development of ideas, as well as a means to build up a dialogue

between the artists, collaborators, client and users of the space.

The mobilisation of dialogue through temporary artworks in public spaces has been a practice adopted by the architects Shillam + Smith for several years. It has involved artists in an innovative approach to public consultation. Shillam says, "working with artists helps us, and the community, look at an environment with a different eye and understand that place more. If you live somewhere you often become oblivious to the dreadful things that are there, as well as to the things which are beautiful." Shillam echoes the claims of many commissioners and collaborators that the motivation for employing an artist is to capitalise on their ability to take a different approach to an area, idea, or issue.

Last year, Shillam + Smith was appointed to undertake a new consultation and redevelopment proposal for North Fulham NDC (New Deal for Communities) and the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. A major part of this scheme was the redevelopment of Normand Park in north Fulham. The team's main concern was to engage with the local community about what it wanted and needed in its

Above: Susan Collins, *Holy Mackerel*, still from video, 2001. A series of stereo (video) viewers embedded into the building site perimeter hoardings in Canterbury city centre. Filmed entirely at the location, by day the work showed stereo video documentation of the site itself whilst by night the documentation was occasionally interrupted by a strolling Yeti.

**"the motivation for employing an artist is to capitalise on their ability to take a different approach to an area, idea, or issue"**

park. Shillam + Smith invited artist Roxane Permar to develop a public event that would stimulate debate<sup>3</sup>. Permar's experience and interest in talking to people meant that she soon built up a close working relationship with older members of the community, parents and teenagers. Her dialogue with them ranged from conversations at group meetings to text messaging. The outcome of this interaction was *Park Matters*, two public events in September and October 2003. In the first, four thousand pansies were laid out in a grid across the park. People were asked to take away a plant, think about ideas for the area, and come back to discuss them at the closing event two weeks later. At the second event *Wishing Tree* was also created to allow an alternative public display of aspirations for the site. Permar considers the works' creation – both conceptually and physically – to be truly collaborative: the fruits of a sustained dialogue.

Shillam points out that this type of work is like a performance. It tries to push the boundaries of what people expect and know of their environment, as well as concepts of what an artist does, and what a publicly sited work can be.

Both Permar and Shillam admit that innovatory work carries the potential risk of a very public failure. However, Shillam asserts: "you have to be brave!" At Normand Park, experience, commitment to dialogue, confidence in ideas and the community's wishes paid off.

Permar is currently working on a project – Coal, Salt, Tin – that examines post-industrial issues of regeneration in Newcastle, Leeds and Cornwall<sup>4</sup>. The project brief pushes many public art commission buttons: it calls for artists to work with the community, local sites and social histories. However, the project departs from the well-trodden path of public engagement and regeneration in three ways. Firstly it involves a group of artists, sites, communities and regeneration issues specific to areas that are geographically disparate. Secondly, by touring work in The Caravan Gallery, a wider debate takes place between the sites. Finally, and most radically for a public project, Permar's contribution to the project, her work *Rosebud*, will be made in collaboration with the residents of Newlyn and sited in an established public gallery, the Newlyn Art Gallery.

This last point is of particular interest if we examine the pairing of 'public' alongside words such as 'art' or 'project'. The somewhat contentious term 'public art' has often been used (including by myself) as a general term to distinguish artwork made in a non-art building or place, from work made for – and viewed in – a gallery environment. However, Permar asserts: "I see the gallery as a

dynamic public arena for public engagement." By adopting this attitude Permar, along with the collaborating community and gallery are breaking down the traditions of where public work can be made and sited. In addition, they challenge the function of the art gallery space together with the variety of work and practices that it platforms.

'Public art' is also sometimes assumed to be open to all: a general term for a faceless mass of people. Like many assumptions it is inaccurate and, I would add, not particularly desirable. This series of articles has attempted to highlight the diversity of practice and issues that artists navigate when they engage with people, places, and ideas. As with any relationship, the artist/art/place/public each has its own idiosyncrasies, problems and triumphs. These elements make the relationship interesting and give it meaning. Whether it is a brief affair lasting months, or a more long-term engagement, it needs passion and commitment to succeed and, most importantly, be any fun at all.

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**Coal, Salt, Tin is taking place from May to October 2004. For more details contact Karen Watson at East Street Arts, Leeds 07967 136142**

**Roxane Permar's 'Rosebud' will take place during 1-8 May 2004 at Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall.**



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**Left:**  
Janet Hodgson, *Time Machine*. Photo: Garrard Martin  
A temporary projection installation by Janet Hodgson in vacant shop unit, Canterbury city centre.

**Above:**  
Roxane Permar, *Four Thousand Flowers*, 2003. Volunteers from the local community helped Roxane Permar to lay out 4,000 pansies in Normand Park in the first event to launch the public consultation conducted by architects Shillam + Smith for North Fulham NDC.

<sup>1</sup>Brick Lane is currently being repaved. At the time of writing, Jonathan Rabagliati was researching suitable places to re-site the word 'seek'.

<sup>2</sup>Interestingly, as a public work, it cleverly has a built-in maintenance cleaning schedule.

<sup>3</sup>Shillam + Smith had already worked on a similar, and highly successful consultation programme in Birmingham which resulted in the project *A Splash of Colour* in 1998.  
<sup>4</sup>The Cornwall based group Penwith Artists Led Projects (PALP) is co-ordinating Permar's project in Newlyn as well as The Caravan Gallery's tour of all three sites. Multiplus is co-ordinating Stefan Gec's project in Newcastle and East Street Arts (ESA) is managing Les Biggs and Redundant Technology Initiative in a web project in Leeds.