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Things that make you go hmmm...

A successfully executed public art project can help generate a buzz, but beware of the dreaded 'plop' art

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Society Guardian, Wednesday October 1 2008



Richard Wilson's art installation Turning the Place Over in Liverpool city centre

Public art has the power to reinvigorate the environment, engage the community, lend existing buildings a new lease of life and reap rewards for the economy through tourism. But when badly-executed, such projects can be "gunge", as sculptor Antony Gormley neatly put it earlier this year.

Gormley's 65ft-high Angel of the North statue in Gateshead is acclaimed as one of the finest examples of public art in the country, but what are the hallmarks of so-called "plop art"? "I hate it when you can tell where the art ends and building begins," says Sarah Gaventa, director of Cabe Space, the public-space arm of design watchdog the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. "There's nothing sadder than seeing art as an add-on and not part of creating places."

According to Gaventa, among the less successful examples of the genre — although not because of the artist — was Michael Pinsky's The Lost O. The temporary project last year turned an Ashford ring road into an art space. Installations ranged from subverted road signs to bells on churchyard sheep that chimed when they moved. "It was a wonderful project, but it didn't ever have the buy-in from local councillors and there was a problem for Pinsky in the curating role, which was a real shame," says Gaventa. "I'd say don't do a public art project if you're not going to respect the artist."

Success in public art means watertight concepts and commissioning, adds Maggie Bolt, director of Public Art South West (PASW), the organisation that runs the national resource Public Art Online. "Unsuccessful work can normally be traced back to a timid commissioner. A lot of what we do at PASW is to try to nurture creative commissioners."

Bolt says projects fail if aspirations are low, the scope and role of the artist is too prescriptive and expectations unrealistically high. Other problems include a selection committee that compromises by going for a mediocre artist who won't "offend", as well as limited funds and an insistence that "everything is approved by everyone".

According to Bolt, successful spaces do not have any obvious public art — they just work well. She is a fan of Richard Wilson's Turning the Place Over. The sculptor cut an oval-shaped section from the facade of a derelict Liverpool city centre building and fixed it to a rotating pivot, allowing passers-by to look inside. "It's a radical architectural intervention — set on such a scale and location that it really creates an impact and enlivens the public realm through intrigue and inventiveness."

Gaventa praises the work of Grey World in Dublin. Its Urban Samples installation, for example, used material such as gravel and placed it on plinths that, when touched, created music reflecting the material's original location. "Public art isn't clinical," says Gaventa. "It's about playfulness and the joy that can be brought to our public spaces."

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