

Ruth Barker and Niall Macdonald
in conversation with Jethro Brice¹

Jethro Brice: I'm a student in the fourth year of the Environmental Art Department at Glasgow School of Art. Most of the artwork I produce is made specifically for a context – often for a very open context such as 'the street', or another equally public space. I think the way I relate to the idea of 'public art' is slightly different, though, as I see myself as a 'public artist' not just because I make artwork for public spaces, but because I'm an artist who operates from within the 'public'. I'm an individual - a member of the public - who is also an artist. That's quite crucial to how I understand my practice. It's not about claiming kudos or authenticity, at all - it's just that the notion of a division between 'us' and 'them' – between artists and a homogenous public - doesn't seem to me to ring true. I recently made a piece using one of the vending machines in the art-school. In a discussion about the work I was asked whether I was 'preaching to the converted' because I was making it in an art-school for an art-school audience. That question made no sense to me. The viewers may have had a fine art background, but the work was dealing with political issues, and in that regard none of the people who would see the work could be termed 'converted'. Because I wouldn't necessarily identify myself categorically as an artist, I don't think of the art-school as being my 'home audience'. Instead I see it simply as another context, and another 'public'. The work is made in relation to a specific place, as well as to my own presence in that place, and relationship with it and the people who use it.

Niall Macdonald: How do you feel that your decision to deliberately identify yourself as a member of the public informs your wider understanding of audience?

JB: It dissolves the very notion of 'a public'. The term 'public' is essentially a catch-all category, which doesn't really define anything. As a term, it seems to focus on the differences between the artist and the audience rather than the similarities, which I think are often much more important. The differences between a given audience and myself are not the defining measure of that relationship. For example, if I were to make a piece of work for a socially deprived area of Glasgow, there are differences between my own personal position and that of 'the public' which clearly could be highlighted if that's what you wanted to do: I have more formal education, perhaps; financially I may have to worry a little less. These are just details though – they do not add up to an identity. Each person is an individual, and I find it very problematic to collect what might be quite a disparate group together based on a very limited number of obvious social factors. In a sense there is no public; there is no 'them'. The issue of audience is crucial, but it's also incredibly specific to the individual context. There's literally no sense in broad generalisations. Work should relate integrally to the context it has been

made for and if that is done properly then questions of making the work accessible by lowering its pitch become irrelevant - it would negate the point of producing work in the first place. There's a very condescending and even arrogant assumption behind the idea that it might be necessary to find some 'lowest common denominator'. For me it's more about an appreciation of the differences that do exist; in order to negotiate real communication with different individuals you have to learn how to use language to re-frame your ideas. I've got my language, my background, my life, but I meet other people who have different backgrounds and learn from that variety.

NMD Why do you choose to make public work in open sites?

JB: I find the notion of using an open site interesting for a few reasons. Partly it's due to the challenge presented by how I approach the space. People encounter work in an open site very differently to the way in which they might see gallery work, or even public work produced for a more enclosed space like a library where people's expectations are more definable. I approach a pre-existing environment and produce a work - perhaps an object - in response to that environment. Once the object is installed, it has to survive in the context of that environment.

Ruth Barker: Perhaps you could describe the project you're working on at the moment – what are the aims of that work in relation to how you've described yourself as a practitioner?

JB: In the piece I'm making at the moment for the River Kelvin I'm producing a sculpture of a kingfisher from pieces of Irn-Bru cans in such a way that both the bird and the cans are recognisable. I'm using the colour pattern of the brand and also the shape and size of the can, which both clearly resemble the basic appearance of a kingfisher. I'll be taking an element ubiquitous to the space – there are plenty of Irn-Bru cans littered around the Kelvin - and transforming it from something ugly, potentially dangerous and unwanted, into something which is hopefully actually attractive. The sculpture will be left somewhere on the banks of the river and hopefully it will do something for people who see it. It may trigger ideas or recollections they wouldn't otherwise have had, or maybe just give a moment of visual pleasure. The work, for me, is a way to present my perspective on what I see at that site in a manner that I hope other people will find interesting. The piece reflects my approach to life in a number of different ways. Recycling, retrieving, and reclaiming are key ideas for me, as is the aspect of personally intervening in a situation to change it. These strategies tie in with other rationales, not only of fine art but also of political 'direct action' - acting yourself, with your own hands, to change things. On a more abstract level, the work suggests something that's missing in the site. The kingfisher is very free, wild, and natural while the Irn-Bru cans are synthetic, man-made and in this case 'dead' because they have served their purpose and been discarded. The work presents an echo of something that is absent. It's a gesture of longing rather than mourning, while also being pro-active as, just by existing, it's already doing something.

NMD Is there a direct political underpinning to the way that you understand these 'interventions'.

JB: In some ways my practice as an artist has as much in common with the rationale and critique behind what is termed 'direct action' in politics, as with the various rationales of the art world. The integrity of those public art practices I find most interesting is very similar to the integrity I find in the best models of direct action and political activism, and in both cases success comes from the integration of process with ultimate aspiration.

The term 'pre-figurative politics' is used in the anarchist debate to suggest that the processes employed to achieve a goal should actually be a manifestation of that goal. That might be in methods of sustainable organisation or co-operation running right through to challenging exploitative hierarchies, but in each case the aim would be to work towards those goals in a manner that remains true to the greater rationale. With anarchism, that notion becomes fundamental because the focus is on independence of action through which each individual accepts responsibility for how they live their life and interact with the world. The hope is that together we could create something better than the system we live in, but if one attempted to determine a final outcome, the goal would be undermined and you would never reach the same potential. It's important that that integrity exists here and now, because anarchist action is a process of experimentation, where physical realisation is a way of working towards ultimate change. That process enables anarchism to stay very 'real' rather than becoming utopian or academic and I find that the same applies to art. I try to make sure that my work is always real to itself, and doesn't rely on anything else to justify it. It might work towards a greater aspiration or even be informed by it, but it has to retain its own integrity.

A public artwork has to earn the right to be where it is, and the audience has to want it. Ideally of course, public work shouldn't be made for a group of people at all, but rather with and among those people.

RB Do you see broader parallels between the way that politics functions in society and the way that art functions in society?

JB: 'Politics' and 'Art' when seen as structures divorced from the everyday, can both be distractions from real change or improvement.

Politics often seems like a charade and with the institutional structures of 'Art' there is the problem that they contain potentially troublesome or dissenting voices in a fairly ineffectual context. I don't think that the phrase 'preaching to the converted' is often a relevant expression, but as an artist making work for an arts audience, you may find that you are 'preaching to the jaded' who feel – perhaps wrongly - that they've heard it all before. It's very easy to go nowhere in that context.

NMD There's a strong critical current within anarchic practice, which is often perceived as advocating the breaking down of a system to build something else back up again. The Kingfisher piece for the River Kelvin, however, relies on the notion of an unexpected beauty in discovering it; do you feel that the work operates solely on a gestural level or will it have a longer-term critical impact?

JB: The longer-term critique within my work determines both the platform from which a piece is developed and everything formed from that platform. The individual moments within that process are quite gestural but when seen as part of my broader practice, they describe a larger body of critique. Again that's very close to some aspects of direct action. Some direct action is confrontational and could be considered negative action, in the sense that the aim is to stop something happening or to oppose a process. The rationale also covers very positive strategies, however, such as the 'Reclaim The Streets' movement, which uses much more festive and celebratory structures to claim back space. These strategies are founded upon a sharp critique and they do articulate that critique even though they adopt a more gestural form. The challenge with fine art practice is that direct political critique as a methodology is very prescriptive because it requires a single, very specific, reading. A more gestural practice, which emerges from a broader body of criticism, can take you and your audience to places where direct linear critique cannot. Audiences also get a lot more out of art if it's not purely a direct criticism, because critique invites defence, especially if the person looking at the work is implicated in that critique. Something which approaches the issues at a tangent can be far more inspiring, and so will have a longer-term effect because of that.

RB Is it a question of generosity?

JB: There's more to it; if you're delivering a straight critique then there's a presumption that you're right, that you know. I have some faith in my own opinions with regard to politics and social justice, but that is only ever a limited faith because the world is far more interesting and complicated than I have experience of. Politically I aspire to a vision of the world that incorporates a much more subtle appreciation of things and a more sophisticated way of thinking about diversity. The challenge is to try and make art that reflects that as well as helping to bring it about and so my aim is to be critical without being limited.

RB Do you think that the ideals you've articulated will change once you've graduated?

JB: I hope that they won't but I do realise that this means I will be excluded from almost all the possibilities that are available to a professional artist. That includes the potential to make a living, to fund your practice, to disseminate your work, to gain critical feedback and even to maintain routine contact with other artists – all of that really. I will have to find other ways of living and other ways of making contact with people who will enrich my art practice.

RB Is that something you're worried about?

JB: Yes! [laughs] It's a huge challenge, but not something I think of as unachievable. There are many people who have remained as self-defined and

independent as possible, even if you can't always conduct your life entirely outside of the system you oppose. There are individuals who do live on their own terms and there's inspiration to be found there, and lessons - practical too - to be learned.

NMD Do you think that your art practice will continue to be a trace of that process?

JB: Yes. It will certainly continue and in a lot of ways it will actually be about that process. The work I make now is already about my life and how I choose to live it and in a lot of ways, if I want to carry on making 'good' artwork as defined by my own criteria, I have to live my life that way.

RB You've described a very specific and well articulated political position. With that in mind, how do you view the current socio-political trend in which art is often seen as a means to urban regeneration?

JB: There are two different models which I see within that process of potential regeneration. Firstly, some artists use their practice as a way to facilitate very practical changes by merging the pragmatic with the theoretical or the poetic. In this way, you have the examples of artists initiating community orchards or city farms etc – projects that have a lot of integrity and that I find really exciting. On the other hand you can also see a more top-down process at work where institutions seek the services of artists in order to develop an area in line with the social vision held by the institution or authority. I can imagine that some artists manage to use those situations to do things that are worth doing – maybe to do great things that wouldn't have been possible otherwise - but it's a question of agendas. The approach inherent within an institution's actions is often quite faulty, and the aims are not necessarily always the initially apparent ones, or those which are being advertised.

RB What kind of secondary aims do you see there

JB: Regeneration is a huge issue and there are people who know a lot more about it than I do. In my opinion, however, regeneration often does not best serve the interests of the people whom it claims to be for; the people who are living in a given area when the project starts.

Regeneration can clearly be very profitable in terms of fulfilling government criteria and raising property prices in an area. How much does that benefit the people who were living there already, though?

Often it seems that the 'deprived community' label is a justification for involving public art in regeneration initiatives that lead to the original community being forced out of the area.

I'm sure there are a lot of exceptions to that general model, but I do wonder whose interests provide the primary motivations.

NMD Have you been involved with any of the more ground-up projects?

JB: Not much in an 'art' context. I've worked with young people in social centres and was also involved in an attempt to start a community garden in the South Side of Glasgow as part of the protest against the new M74 motorway.

In many ways the community garden project was great but it wasn't a community-initiated project, which did give rise to some fundamental questions. I wasn't involved in designing or running the project, but I was involved on the ground during the time that it was active. Though there were drawbacks to the process, there were a lot of positive aspects as well. One of these was the level of interaction with people from the area, as many local residents did speak to people who were working on the garden and were genuinely pleased to see what

was happening. Some offered money or time to support the project while others promised to keep the garden going, but a division was always present between the local residents and those who had initiated the project.

NMD Do you feel that a more interventionist practice can avoid the problematics of a collaborative structure?

JB: Gestural intervention, as a process, retains an element of the very personal, both for the maker and for the person who comes across the work. That fact in itself negotiates some of the difficulties of working with other people.

In my own practice a lot of the interactive aspects - which are important to me - are just a part of my life. I put myself into situations such as hitchhiking on long journeys where I can interact with people from very different walks of life. I make the effort to come into contact with different kinds of people through travelling, working, or even coming to art-school, which for me has been as big a shift again. It's part of my life and it feeds my perspective on the world, which in turn influences my work.

NMD Your practice seems so tied to your life experiences that perhaps the classical parallel is the artist locked away in a garret. Would you argue that the shift in your case is that your work is tied very closely to its public manifestation?

JB: There is a real weak-point in my work, though, in that it is often very tight or closed - perhaps because it is very studio based; the individual pieces are very resolved, which is just the way I work and think. Most artists who work within a similar political platform do choose strategies that aren't nearly so studio-oriented, initiating much larger-scale interactive projects, or maintaining more performative practices.

My practice is an attempt to do what I love to do in a way that serves some of the aims that I feel it's important to reflect. Trying to hammer out those aims gives me real insight into those issues and hopefully that makes life interesting.

RB Could you describe any pieces by those other practitioners you mentioned which have been particularly influential?

JB: There's a piece by Nancy Kelm in which she organised a plant exchanging system in a town in the States, which became a small additional economy within the mostly Hispanic community. It acquired the name Community Orchard and it resulted in cultivated sites as well as interaction between homes. There are also more object-based artists such as Mel Chin who produced a series of casts of the negative spaces of animals that had gone extinct in east coast America. The casts were placed back into the animal's habitats. Chin's work is clearly closer to 'art' and further from 'activism', although that aspect is still there, in terms of raising awareness. There are also artists who operate through a very research-based or reflective practice – one example being the Glasgow-based artist Kate Foster. Foster's practice is extremely reflective and very contained within its context but nevertheless is still public because it's not made in an art context or for an art audience.

Within the conventional attitude to public art, where you have art for the 'art-world' and then art for the 'public', reaching the public seems to be a large part of the issue. Public art should not be art for the public but rather should be a practice that is public. I can make artwork that relates to a very specific context, which can be both powerful and meaningful because I can find the elements that I have in common with that context.

Kate Foster often works with nature conservationists, scientists, and geographers and so she has a shared understanding because that's her specialism as well. That point of commonality allows her to frame her artistic knowledge to the best advantage within that context. She brings the languages and methods of art, and the insight that affords her, to a non-art context. Similarly, if I choose to make something in the art-school then I bring my (limited) knowledge of ecology or politics to that.

Audience is not necessarily about size. Sometimes it would be great to make work that reaches vast numbers of people because sometimes it feels that the more people you can touch the better, but I suppose it's a matter of balancing between working with the lowest common denominator or with the highest .

RB Is it fair to say that you think of the public as a group of people with different specialisms?

JB: Yes, certainly. And that specialism for example, might be a very intimate experiential knowledge of what it's like to live in a high rise in Pollockshaws. I suggest that because that's another project I'm working on at the moment - a piece in Pollockshaws for Cabin Exchange. I may work with some young people that I met there and they have a whole range of understanding that I can't begin to appreciate.

RB How did you meet them?

JB: I met them on a site visit with Beth Hamer from Cabin Exchange. They were hovering on the edge of the square we were in and seemed quite aggressive, but Beth, who's braver than I am, went up and started talking to them about the project and managed to break the ice. I showed them my drawings of them, which provided another point of contact, and we exchanged phone numbers and nicknames. If I still want to work on that same project

once I've done some more research, I'll get back in contact and try to build something together with them. Because I don't know the area, for me to simply 'import' a piece of work wouldn't be appropriate. As an outsider, what I have to contribute feels fairly limited at the moment but what I might have to contribute together with people who do understand the context could be much more exciting. That's where interaction becomes crucial and where this kind of practice can really broaden your vision – mine as much as that of the people with whom I work.

That goes back to what I was saying about anarchism. You don't have a utopia that's predefined; you're just working to change the general perspective so that you can all build something different.

NMD That shift between public art and work which is public seems quite crucial – how would you expand on that distinction?

JB: There are real assumptions that the term 'public art' implies, which limit how much use the word is any more. If you don't challenge the underlying assumptions that are buried in the term, you start to have the problematic questions of pitch and 'dumbing down' and so on.

So long as you continue to see it in terms of 'us' and 'them', those two words will define the extent of your problem; how can we make something that is acceptable to 'us' and yet accessible to 'them'? And you'll never get very far with that because the underlying supposition is so deeply flawed. If you refuse to let yourself be bound by that division however, you can learn so much more, and so can make art that is so much better.

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