

A response to *Beyond Angels, Elephants, Good Intentions and Red-Nose Rebellion* (2011)  
Louise Owen

*Beyond Angels, Elephants, Good Intentions and Red-Nose Rebellion* was the mischievous headline given to a symposium asking a serious question: 'what is the future for art in the public realm?'<sup>1</sup> The headline gestures towards concerns in public art that have become familiar over the last decade and more - uneasy questions of social intervention, 'cool' pranksterism, and the production of huge iconic projects, so recognizable to an informed audience that they need not be directly named. The most assiduously promoted attribute of Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* (1998) and Royal de Luxe's *The Sultan's Elephant* (2006) certainly continues to be their colossal scale, proudly reported by their producers and funders both in terms of physical size and audience attendance.<sup>2</sup> For the *Beyond Angels* symposium, these works acted as shorthand for recent trends and preoccupations in public art commissioning – the realisation of large-scale permanent works, and the temporary introduction of performances to public space, in which 'value for money' correlates to size or 'reach'. Running with and alongside these trends, the title suggests, are an ineffective idealism and an equally problematic faux-radicalism. What then is the future for public art, a form often associated with more critical promise?

---

<sup>1</sup> *Beyond Angels, Elephants, Good Intentions and Red-Nose Rebellion: what is the future for art in the public realm?*, Friday 10 June 2011, Armada House, Bristol.

<sup>2</sup> Gateshead Council (2011): 'Since spreading its wings in February 1998 Antony Gormley's *The Angel of the North* has become one of the most talked about pieces of public art ever produced. Rising 20 meters from the earth near the A1 in Gateshead, the Angel dominates the skyline, dwarfing all those who come to see it. Made from 200 tonnes of steel, it has a wingspan of 54 metres. Getting up close and personal with the Angel is an experience you'll never forget!'. Artichoke (2011): 'Thousands packed the streets of central London as Royal de Luxe's little girl giant and majestic elephant played tourists in May 2006. *The Sultan's Elephant* was the biggest piece of free theatre ever seen in London, set against the city's magnificent landmarks. [...] The vast, time-travelling mechanical elephant, taller than Admiralty Arch and 42 tonnes in weight, was joined by a giant girl, twenty feet high.'

This response to the symposium, based on a short talk I gave at the event itself, takes an historical view on the category 'art in the public realm'. It reflects on the critical and constructive capacities of public art, first discussing the ways in which definitions of public art inform critical and historical readings of its effects, and then surveying a selection of works explored by the symposium's key speakers. Key ideas for the discussion are 'work' and 'play'. The potential for public art to perform a certain kind of productive 'work' has been something recognized and supported by governments, for reasons often that may be at variance from the desires or intentions of artists themselves. In this sense, in the recent period, public art has been put to use as a mechanism, in part, for reconstructing public space as a privatized scene of consumer entertainment (Hewitt 2011). The discussion closes with some thoughts about two unconnected works - Lone Twin's *The Boat Project* (2012) and Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield: a Confrontation* (1982). Each with the political question of resources held in common at heart, these works, in different ways, turn the symposium's key question – 'what is the future of art in the public realm?' – on its head. They stage 'the public realm' as something which art actively interrogates and constructs, and do so through taking up modes of work (boat-building and agriculture) as techniques through which public art might pursue its questions – in distinction to examples which encourage the kinds of 'play' conducive to the cultivation of consumer culture.

### Art and the public

The single, short sentence opening the symposium's programme booklet - 'in recent years the public realm has become filled with public art, outdoor arts and outreach projects' (ixia 2011) - describes four ideas of 'public' and 'public art'. Firstly, the 'public realm' is something that can be thought of as a kind of receptacle to be 'filled',

with defined limits in space. The phrase 'outdoor arts' articulates a similar kind of spatiality, 'outdoors' representing a physical location in which art initiatives might appear and to which they implicitly belong. 'Outreach' imagines the relation between professional artists, non-professional participants (i.e. 'the public') and the institutions through which art is created taking a more dynamic, if problematic, 'improving' form. Finally, the disciplinary category of 'public art' connotes permanent or semi-permanent works installed in public sites. All of these definitions are familiar, and their commonality is a treatment of 'art' and 'public' as categories that are conceptually and spatially distinct – in contrast with the deep interest espoused by artists themselves in teasing out connections and the possibilities of reciprocity between the two. Jeremy Deller's wish, for example, for his participatory re-enactment piece *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) to enable the 1984 clash between miners and police and, subsequently, the work itself to 'become part of the lineage of decisive battles in English History' (Deller 2002) imagines exactly this kind of traffic between the 'artistic' and the 'social'. Critic Michael Warner's definition better characterizes these desired effects: he sees 'a public' as something that 'exists by virtue of being addressed' (Warner 2002: 50). Warner's model envisages 'the public' – 'a kind of social totality [...] the people organized as the nation, the commonwealth, the city, the state, or some other community' (Warner 2002: 49) – as consisting, dynamically, of other publics of a less totalizing form, which might be called into being through artistic practice.

One of the symposium headline's examples, *The Sultan's Elephant*, offers an illustration. With this performance, which journeyed around central London for four days and for which advance advertising was very strictly limited, publics gathered and dispersed around the work in a number of overlapping ways: accidentally encountering the performance in the street, using mobile phones to encourage

friends to attend, uploading images online. Inspired by Jules Verne's *The Steam House* (1880), the piece evoked bedtime stories, science fiction and images of nineteenth century colonialism. In its surreal progress past gentlemen's clubs, royal palaces and public squares, it theatrically alluded to the construction and mediation of narratives of imperial power, the subsequent virtual circulation of images of the performance enabled by technologies, themselves military in origin, of a more recent historical moment. The gigantic size of the piece's chief characters, the elephant and little girl, rendered the parts of central London in which they appeared uncannily miniature, the buildings and streets temporarily taking the form of a toy town in which audience members could play. In spite of critic Lyn Gardner's inclusionary rhetoric – she saw it as 'nothing less than an artistic occupation of the city and a reclamation of the streets for the people' (Gardner 2006) – the piece instantiated publics that were both more restricted in their constitution and more differentiated in their response to the work than she admits. One such group was the critics themselves: in an internet blog post, Michael Billington (Gardner's colleague on *The Guardian*) decried the performance as symptomatic of a 'mood of infantilism' (Billington 2006) that had contemporary culture in its grip. His view elicited irreverent responses 'below the line' – GordonComstock: 'So let me get this right. You are complaining that a family event appealed to kids? Is it me?'; alexito: "Listen Mike, can you do 300 words on the elephant? It's for the blog, so see if you can get them to rise to something, would you? Do the stuffy old custodian of the fine arts thing, anything like that. Cheers'" (Billington 2006) – the textual form of the blog both demonstrating and making possible such challenges to critical 'expertise', and a corroboration of Warner's thesis.

Returning to the symposium itself, the diversity of works discussed by the guest curators reflected similar issues of performative rhetoric, cultural identity and spatial

practice. Andrea Schlieker (Folkestone Triennial), Mark Ball (LIFT), Sally Tallant (Serpentine) and Brigitte van der Sande (independent curator) described various examples of work, which, in common with *The Sultan's Elephant*, were actively multidisciplinary, engaging visual art, theatre, performance or music in combination. Though the works often focused upon the particularity of the places in which they were made and exhibited or performed, they also invoked distance and historical change. A good example is Cornelia Parker's permanent sculpture *The Folkestone Mermaid* (2011), a work offering a humorous critique of monumentality and idealized femininity, and a touching rejoinder to contemporary *X Factor*-style quests for fame. Part of a series the artist calls 'appropriated monuments', for *The Folkestone Mermaid* Parker cast local resident Georgina Baker, a 38 year-old mother of two, in bronze, miming the posture of Edvard Eriksen's sculptural Copenhagen landmark *Little Mermaid* (1913).<sup>3</sup> With and alongside its commentary on the historical representation of female bodies, this particular example of Parker's 'appropriation' work produces an unofficial cultural and geographical connection between the British seaside town of Folkestone and the Danish capital, both of which are key ports on European shipping routes – even perhaps offering a pastiche upon the idea of such cultural 'twinning'. Joshua Sofaer's *Name In Lights* (2007), commissioned by Mark Ball during his directorship of the FIERCE Festival, is a work likewise concerned with monumentality but in a way more explicitly inflected by a discourse of celebrity. Realized in 2007, the piece temporarily staged the words 'Una White' - the name of a Birmingham resident submitted to the project by her daughter CJ White and selected by a panel of judges - as a neon sign on the roof of Birmingham Central Library.<sup>4</sup> Considered in isolation from any contextualizing narrative, the piece asks an astute question

---

<sup>3</sup> See the blog *spaciousandgracious* for a selection of images. Available at <<http://spaciousandgracious.co.uk/2011/06/folkestone-triennial-2011-cornelia-parkers-the-folkestone-mermaid-revealed/>> [accessed September 2011]

<sup>4</sup> See Joshua Sofaer's website for images of the work in situ. Available at <[http://www.joshuasofaer.com/texts/exhibit\\_nil.html](http://www.joshuasofaer.com/texts/exhibit_nil.html)> [accessed September 2011]

regarding the productive force of discourse in public: through what processes does a person's name become a 'name'?<sup>5</sup> Read next to that contextualizing narrative, accessible on the project's website, *Name In Lights* unexpectedly appears entangled with governmental discourses of social impact – no longer a questioning of discourse as such, but a celebration of an individual somehow representative of productive community. The poignant biographical recommendation offered by Una White's daughter - a heartfelt eulogy of a woman who, having settled in Britain from Jamaica in the 1960s, worked for many years with disabled people as a nurse – also exemplifies the cohesive 'cultural unity' (White 2011) prioritized by the cultural policies of the last government. A more recent LIFT commission, Dan Jones' *Music for Seven Ice Cream Vans* (2010), constructed a symphonic work using the distinctive sound of ice-cream van chimes, played in 2010 by vans themselves driving around the streets of Canning Town and Rainham in east London. Referencing 'memories of screwballs on a summer's day' (LIFT 2011), the work inserted itself into the everyday in order to make the familiar both strange and magical: Jones talks about the work in these terms as a quasi-cinematic act of 'scoring' everyday action (TheLIFTfestival 2010). However, again demonstrating the complex interplay of different historical moments within a single work, another variety of discursive transformation also seems central to *Music for Seven Ice Cream Vans* - one in which the musical call to purchase ice-cream from a van is rendered a simulacrum, reconstituted as 'art' for a knowing audience (and perhaps as disappointed frustration for others).<sup>6</sup> *Chicago Boys: while we were singing, they were dreaming* (2011) likewise performs a gesture of de- and re-familiarization. The project, devised by Kurdish artist Hiwa K and commissioned by Serpentine's Centre for Possible Studies on the

---

<sup>5</sup> See Mary Paterson's essay, 'Name in Lights' (2007) for an interesting reading of the project in advance of the winner being chosen. Available at <http://www.notcelebrity.co.uk/essay.php> [accessed July 2011]

<sup>6</sup> Thanks to Broderick Chow, who made these observations about *Music for Seven Ice Cream Vans* in a discussion about an earlier draft of this essay.

Edgware Road in London, is a 1970s revival band and study group exploring theories of neoliberal economics. Spoofing the given name of economist Milton Friedman's acolytes, the amateur participants in the band Chicago Boys learned to play their musical instruments together, in order to perform, in concert, 'popular music from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Lebanon in the 1970s, followed by presentations from archives relating to personal memories and neoliberal policies in the region' (Centre for Possible Studies 2011). This last piece reflects the ethic of practice discussed by Brigitte van der Sande, curator of the counterfactual art project *War Zone Amsterdam Safe Haven* (2012),<sup>7</sup> of establishing, through art practice, what she described as a 'communal language with non-art specialists' and of breaking out of 'the gated community of the art and theory world' – aspects of the progressive potential of public art.

### The future of the past

*War Zone Amsterdam Safe Haven* asks artists and audiences to imagine a time to come in which armed conflict is a daily reality for the city. Of the projects discussed above, it is the only work explicitly modelling an idea of the future - a mode Jörg Heiser, reporting from the 2011 Venice Biennale, calls 'pro-enactment' (Heiser 2011). The other works stage past actions - manifest in the form of the public monument, the apparatus of celebrity, the signal or the popular song - as resources for present action and thought. Considered contextually, such strategies of attending to and reworking the past – especially in the light of resurgent interest in 'newly imagined scenarios and combinations of things hitherto unseen, unknown, unimagined' (Heiser 2011) – demonstrate an interesting ideational affinity to a logic of 'regeneration', a critical part of the policy context of much public art provision in recent years. The

---

<sup>7</sup> *War Zone Amsterdam Safe Haven*. <<http://www.warzoneamsterdam.nl/english>> [accessed September 2011]

design and construction of one of the flagship regeneration projects of the 1990s, the Lowry Centre on Salford docks – a building with a ‘maritime feeling’ (Lowry 2011) which, according to *The Times*, represented an effort to ‘build a new identity upon its industrial heritage’ (Anon in DCMS 2003: 18) - may bear little immediate resemblance to a phalanx of ice-cream vans playing a new composition outdoors in a district of east London, an ‘appropriated monument’, or a 1970s pop song re-performed by amateurs. But arguably there are two important similarities: the first, a form of retrospection (if not nostalgia), and the second, a modification or adjustment of past practices to suit present cultural demands or interests – which, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, produce effects relating to the changing constitution of class relations, industry and geography.

Though often itself a conspicuous contributor to processes of gentrification, public art’s notional distance from the institutional environment of the gallery holds out the promise of critical interrogation of these matters. However, ‘public art’ does not exclusively refer to work beyond the gallery, and in the contemporary broadsheet press, big building-based gallery institutions do themselves attract the term ‘public art’. *The Independent* describes Tate Modern as ‘London’s hippest public art institution’ (Rushton 2011), and according to *The Times*, the Dulwich Picture Gallery is evidence of ‘the importance of making aesthetic excellence available to public view’ (Anon 2010). In preparing this response to the symposium, encountering these journalistic citations of ‘public art’ in relation to the gallery as an institution – citations I didn’t really expect to see – suggested a connection between two historical moments. The first is the twenty-first century explosion in public art provision which the *Beyond Angels* symposium addressed. The second is the expansion of the public gallery institution in nineteenth century culture, a turn anatomized by cultural studies scholar Tony Bennett.

In his essay 'The Exhibitionary Complex' (1993 [1988]), Bennett offers a Foucauldian examination of the relation between British governmental power in the industrial and imperial nineteenth century and the rapid proliferation of forms such as the museum exhibition, public exposition, and public gallery. Bennett challenges art historian Douglas Crimp's definition of the museum as an 'institution of confinement' (Bennett 1993: 123) akin to the prison. For Bennett, this 'seems to imply that works of art had previously wandered through the streets' (Bennett 1993: 123), a thought he finds ridiculous, based both on the historical fact of artworks' private ownership by the nobility in the preceding period, and a (somewhat limited) conception of the artwork as material object, not the meanings it might have produced, more amenable to travel of this kind. Instead, he insists that we consider the crucially public dimension of the museum and its ilk:

Museums may have enclosed objects within walls, but the nineteenth century saw their doors opened to the general public – witnesses whose presence was just as essential to a display of power as had been that of the people before the spectacle of punishment in the eighteenth century. (Bennett 1993: 123)

Bennett explains the force of this display of power by recourse to Foucault's concept of 'technologies of vision'. He notes that these institutions systematized cultural goods for display – artworks, advances in technology and discoveries in natural science alike – thus creating narratives of order and progress for spectators to absorb. But, as importantly, Bennett also shows that the public gallery and museum, as sites of spectatorship, created new ways in which people, now understood as 'the general public', saw themselves, and each other, acting in the contexts of the museum and gallery. These venues of 'civility' and 'decorum' represented

new instruments for the moral and cultural regulation of the working classes. Museums and expositions, in drawing on the techniques and rhetorics of display and pedagogic relations developed in earlier nineteenth century

exhibitionary forms, provided a context in which the working and middle class publics could be brought together and the former – having been tutored in forms of behaviour to suit them for the occasion – could be exposed to the influence of the latter. A history, then, of the formation of a new public and its inscription in new relations of power and knowledge. (Bennett 1993: 137)

The similarity between these nineteenth century cultural transformations and those related to more recent public art and policy is striking. In an article unambiguously entitled ‘Privatizing the public’ (2011) surveying recent trends, Andy Hewitt critiques rhetorics of art in New Labour cultural policy initiatives and their uptake by cultural producers. His reading of the consumption-led regeneration of ‘post-industrial’ sites and participation-as-inclusion is trenchant. In the period he analyses, ‘the production of cultural works and events function as public relations, and the city is presented as a complex for entertainment and leisure’ (Hewitt 2011: 27); in social terms, we see the development of ‘a “cultural” meritocracy based on producing “Billy Elliots”, together with the chilling image of art workers managing the underclass’ (Hewitt 2011: 33). In the late 1990s and 2000s, as in the nineteenth century, government thus defined museums, galleries and the artworks they house as an ‘uplifting’ and ‘civilizing’ force; in her essay ‘Government and the Value of Culture’ (2003), Tessa Jowell invoked the ‘transcendent thrill’ produced by witnessing ‘great art’ (Jowell 2003: 6) with and alongside its meritocratic uses as a tool for rectifying what she called ‘the poverty of aspiration’ (Jowell 2003: 3). This moment likewise witnessed a proliferation of new capital projects, and, additionally, numerous adaptations of existing ex-industrial spaces for art. But, with the exponential expansion of art in public space beyond the gallery (Hewitt 2011: 25), works of art and their spectators did indeed ‘wander through the streets’ (Bennett 1993: 123). If the nineteenth century saw ‘the general public’ coming to understand itself, and to comport itself as such, through mechanisms like the public gallery, the twenty-first century version of seemingly ‘civility’ has been imagined and practiced differently, members of the public encouraged to enter into and occupy public space in acts of consumerist *flânerie*.

Clearly, these arguments diagnose general trends, and not the effects of individual works, which of course may themselves critique, disrupt or subvert constructions of acquiescent (consumerist) 'civility'. Still, a general overview acts as a helpful reminder that the primary critical and historical element in the term 'public art' is not necessarily 'art' itself - which, as Miwon Kwon suggests of 'site specificity' (Kwon 2004: 2-3), would simply imply 'public art' as one genre among many - but 'public'.

### The past as future

If, as Hewitt suggests, cultural work has assisted in 'privatizing the public' over the past two decades, to close, I'd like to offer some final reflections on two examples of 'public art' which, through adopting techniques of work, each address the question of the commons. The examples in question are Lone Twin's *The Boat Project* (2011-12) and Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield: a Confrontation* (1982), which frame activities of craft and agriculture in terms of art and performance – the one, boat building, and the other, working the land.

*The Boat Project's* primary trope is the gift, which anthropologist Marcel Mauss theorized as a means of social exchange and, as such, a technique of producing ongoing social obligation (Mauss 2002 [1950]). Lone Twin's work is the south-east contribution to *Artists Taking the Lead*, a series of twelve works of public art commissioned by region, and the 'UK Arts Councils' flagship project for the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad' (ACE 2011). It invites members of the public living in the south-east to contribute a wooden item towards the making of a working boat, which is being designed and constructed from scratch. The boat, to be crewed by people nominated via the project website and then trained, will set sail in 2012 for two months. The artists write:

We want your wood - but not just any old wood. Pencil or piano – exotic as Zebrawood or as familiar as pine – we want something that's a part of you, something with a story to tell. Come and tell us that story, and your donation will be used along with thousands of others to construct this seafaring record of our lives. (The Boat Project 2011)

The artwork brings together the contributed objects to create something new. Those who donated the wood, who may never meet in person, meet somehow in the construction of the boat. The object itself – conceived as a 'living archive' (The Boat Project 2011) - constitutes a manifestation of a social group, with a romantic sense too that the stories told to the artists are written into the structure of the boat. (The stories will subsequently enter into commercial exchange with their publication as a book.) This maritime 'archive' will encounter other people on journeys yet to be undertaken, to Brighton, Portsmouth, Hastings, Margate and Milton Keynes. Following the journey, the boat will be 'gifted back to the region as a permanent resource for the public' (The Boat Project 2011) - whether as a boat which will continue to set sail, or as a monumental memento of a moment that has passed, is not yet clear. The work thus stages micro-level acts of gift-giving as social solidarity – shared resources, experience, history – in distinction, say, to the philanthropic largesse of individual figures such as nineteenth century entrepreneurs Henry Tate and Andrew Carnegie. Yet for audiences it is also the case that gift-giving represents a prompt for strong responses whose focus is the gift as a repository of value, the constitution of that value, and how (and if) it should circulate in the future. One respondent to Jonathan Jones' blog post about the project 'would personally think a lot less of someone who gave up an object that really meant anything to them (a memento of their grandparents or parents, for example) for the sake of a gimmick' (Jones 2011). Another takes the example of his deceased father's handmade chessboard to advance a less fetishistic view:

As someone who left the beach at Dunkirk in a schoolboy's wooden canoe and then crossed the channel in an old coaler I think he would be quite chuffed at the thought of his board sailing in his memory. But could I part with it? I think so - one day someone will put it in a skip. (Jones 2011)

Finally, the last post in the thread raises the ubiquitous question of the appropriateness of the expenditure of public money – for its author, who interestingly dismisses the entire work as a ‘fetish’, *The Boat Project* is an egregious waste of funds (Jones 2011). Raised through compulsory taxation, ‘public money’ as such contrasts with the putative voluntarism of gift-giving. However, as the commentators on Jones’ blog show, both ‘public money’ and ‘the gift’ are scenes of dissent about what counts as ‘valuable’ and how that value should be put to use. Though not *The Boat Project*’s explicit theme – the ‘archive’ is surely that – the question of ‘value’ is bound up in the form of the artwork.<sup>8</sup>

*The Boat Project*’s micro-social gift exchange contrasts dramatically with *Wheatfield: a Confrontation* (1982). This work, commissioned by the Public Art Fund and created by Agnes Denes in New York City, staged something extraordinarily bold and antagonistic. Over a period of three months, the artist cleared, ploughed, planted, tended and harvested a two-acre area of land in lower Manhattan with the assistance of a small number of volunteers (Denes 1993 [1982]: 390). Adjacent to the old World Trade Center, and formerly landfill, the site of Denes’ artwork ultimately produced ‘almost 1,000 pounds of healthy, golden wheat’ (Denes 1993 [1982]: 390). Denes’ writes uncompromisingly about her work:

---

<sup>8</sup> This reading is informed by David Graeber’s important text *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value: the False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (2001). Through a close analysis of the concept of ‘the gift’, Graeber questions the routine association of ‘value’ with capitalism and its apparatuses, and examines the different ways in which value has been imagined and constructed across cultures. One example is the continuing legacy and cultural politics of the seventeenth century Dutch ‘purchase’ of Manhattan island from its indigenous residents in exchange for some beads, a tale that ‘has come to stand, in our popular imagination, as one of the defining features of their “primitiveness” - a childish inability to distinguish worthless baubles from things of genuine value’ (Graeber 2001: 91).

Manhattan is the richest, most professional, most congested, and without doubt, most fascinating island in the world. To attempt to plant, sustain and harvest 2 acres of wheat here, wasting valuable real estate and obstructing the 'machinery' by going against the system, was an effrontery that made it the powerful paradox I had sought for the calling to account. (Denes 1993 [1982]: 389)

Denes' piece dragged the past into the present to uncanny and anachronistic effect. As Seth Robbins and Robert Neuwirth describe, until the beginning of the nineteenth century (with the exception of the City of New York at its southern end, where Denes' work grew), Manhattan island was 'a largely bucolic spread of farms, woods, fields, country homes and villages sprinkled amid the dells' (Robbins and Neuwirth 2009: 8). The chief image documenting the work stages the artist as the denizen of the bright yellow wheatfield, a pastoral thrown into sharp relief by the towering presence of the adjacent skyscrapers.<sup>9</sup> The image is, oddly, simultaneously utopian, because it describes a scenario unimaginable in the given capitalist context ('farming on *prime urban real estate?*') and nostalgic in its romantic representation of the countryside – in actuality, a venue of hard labour - conjured up again in Manhattan but in the wrong place. So unlikely is the scene that when I first saw it, I felt sure it must be a beautifully Photoshopped hoax. Once Denes' project came to a conclusion, the 'reality' of the present imposed itself, and the area she had cultivated was rapidly redeveloped as a 'billion dollar luxury complex' (Denes 1993 [1982]: 390). The creation of the wheatfield points towards the enclosure of resources held in common for profit, in the present and in the past, and materially demonstrates the ongoing possibility of alternatives – even if that demonstration in New York now persists only in the form of an image (though one *New York Times* blogger speculates that the wheat is 'perhaps flavouring the water supply by now' (Baldwin 2008)).

---

<sup>9</sup> See [greenmuseum.org](http://greenmuseum.org) for a selection of images. Available at <<http://greenmuseum.org/c/aen/Images/Ecology/wheatfield.php>> [accessed July 2011]

If the concept of Lone Twin's *The Boat Project* puts (local) questions of value beyond the (global) domains of the 'state' and 'market' in play, Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield: a Confrontation* speaks more boldly and explicitly of these entities. Alberto Duman insightfully observes that, given its proximity to Wall Street and the World Trade Center, Denes' work 'pitched the confrontation in terms of financial services vs. agricultural production' (Duman 2005: 5). In the gesture of framing the work precisely as direct and seemingly naïve confrontation, Duman sees Denes initiating a complex and dialectical contemplation of the relation between big business and agriculture and the transformation of agricultural processes in the late twentieth century (Duman 2005: 6). To this, I would add the point that the piece opens up questions of an historical nature, dramatizing the basis of industrialization in agricultural productivity, as if peeling back a layer of material accretion to expose what lies beneath - though of course, the wheatfield is not really 'beneath' these accretions, but an active introduction to the site. Denes critically deploys images of bucolic contentment, making an apprehension of the contradictions internal to such images possible, and by extension, those internal to images of wealth and luxury in the present. As Duman points out, the work's signification on all these levels has been 'permanently altered by the 9/11 events' (Duman 2005: 6). Returning finally to the 'future of art in the public realm', the financial crisis of 2007-8 and its consequences have placed questions of ownership, responsibility and value production at the centre of public debate. Denes' work movingly illustrates the historical complexity of these questions. If *Wheatfield: a Confrontation* seems germane to the present moment, as I suggest it does, it is arguably because its aesthetic engagement with working practices and embrace of paradox – both in terms of the action of the artwork, and the process of urbanization to which it gestures – defend what might best be described as the 'public interest'.

Louise Owen is Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at Birkbeck, University of London.

#### References:

Artichoke | The Sultan's Elephant,  
[http://www.artichoke.uk.com/events/the\\_sultans\\_elephant/](http://www.artichoke.uk.com/events/the_sultans_elephant/). Accessed July 2011.

Arts Council England, 'Artists taking the lead', <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/our-plan-2008-2011/london-2012/artists-taking-lead/>. Accessed July 2011.

'Anon' (2010) 'Lonely Lady of Dulwich: England's oldest public art gallery approaches its bicentenary', *The Times*, 3 December.

Anon, 'Agnes Denes, Wheatfield: a Confrontation',  
<http://greenmuseum.org/c/aen/Images/Ecology/wheatfield.php>. Accessed July 2011.

Baldwin, R. (2008) 'The Digital Ramble | Creative Processing', *T Magazine: New York Times Blogs*, 18 July, <http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/tag/wheatfield-a-confrontation/>. Accessed June 2011.

Bennett, T. (1993 [1988]) 'The Exhibitionary Complex' in ed. N. Dirks, G. Eley, S. B. Ortner, *Culture/Power/History: a Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. 123-154.

Billington, M. (2006) 'Elephantine infantilism', *Guardian Unlimited: CultureVulture blog*, 8 May,  
[http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/culturevulture/archives/2006/05/08/elephantine\\_inf.html](http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/culturevulture/archives/2006/05/08/elephantine_inf.html). Accessed July 2011.

Centre for Possible Studies | Chicago Boys: while we were singing, they were dreaming, <http://centreforpossiblestudies.wordpress.com/2010/04/11/chicago-boys-while-we-were-singing-they-were-dreaming/>. Accessed July 2011.

DCMS (2003) *Culture at the Heart of Regeneration*, London: DCMS.

Deller, J. (2002) 'The English Civil War: Part II',  
[http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2001/the\\_battle\\_of\\_orgreave/background/the\\_english\\_civil\\_war\\_part\\_ii](http://www.artangel.org.uk/projects/2001/the_battle_of_orgreave/background/the_english_civil_war_part_ii). Accessed July 2011.

Denes, A. (1993) 'Notes on Eco-Logic: Environmental Artwork, Visual Philosophy and Global Perspective', *Leonardo*, 26: 5, pp. 387-395.

Duman, A. (2005) 'Nature and Agriculture: Misplaced Icons of Urban Resistance? Artistic activity and images of agriculture, farming and nature: an analysis of Agnes Denes' Wheatfield: a Confrontation (1982)', Lecture given at *NEW FIELDS: art and agriculture: Artists' interventions in agriculture, renewable energy and rural policy*, Leeds City Art Gallery, July 2005, [http://www.albertoduman.me.uk/writings\\_leeds.htm](http://www.albertoduman.me.uk/writings_leeds.htm). Accessed July 2011.

Folkestone Triennial | Cornelia Parker, <http://www.folkestonetriennial.org.uk/2011-event/artists/cornelia-parker/>. Accessed July 2011.

Gardner, L. (2006) 'The Sultan's Elephant', *The Guardian*, 6 May.

Gateshead Council | The Angel of the North, <http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/attractions/Angel/Home.aspx>. Accessed July 2011.

Graeber, D. (2001) *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: the False Coin of Our Own Dreams*, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Heiser, J. (2011) 'Postcards from Venice pt. 5: Surrealist Pro-Enactments', *Frieze*, <http://www.frieze.com/blog/entry/postcards-from-venice-pt.-5-surrealist-pro-enactments/>. Accessed July 2011.

Hewitt, A. (2011) 'Privatizing the public: three rhetorics of art's public good in 'Third Way' cultural policy', *Art and the Public Sphere*, 1:1, pp. 19-36.

ixia, *Beyond Angels, Elephants, Good Intentions and Red-Nose Rebellion: what is the future for art in the public realm?*, Friday 10 June 2011, conference programme.

Jones, J. (2011) 'I wood, would you?', *The Guardian: Jonathan Jones on Art Blog*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2011/may/19/boat-project-cultural-olympiad/>. Accessed July 2011.

Kwon, M. (2004) *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

LIFT | Music for Seven Ice Cream Vans, <http://www.lifffestival.com/events/past-events/2010-lift-festival/lift-2010-programme/music-for-seven-ice-cream-vans-dan-jones>. Accessed 20 June 2011.

Mauss, M. (2002 [1950]), *The Gift: Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London and New York: Routledge.

Paterson, M. (2007) 'Name in Lights', <http://www.notcelebrity.co.uk/essay.php>. Accessed July 2011.

Robbins, S. and Neuwirth, R. (2009) 'Introduction' in ed. D. McCorquodale, *Mapping New York*, London: Black Dog, pp. 8-13.

Rushton, S. (2011) 'No glamour, but enormous power', *The Independent*, 31 May.

The Boat Project | About the Project, <http://www.theboatproject.com/>. Accessed July 2011

TheLIFTfestival (2010) 'LIFT chat to Dan Jones creator of Music for Seven Ice Cream Vans', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HInV9TYqdMo>. Accessed July 2011.

The Lowry | About the Lowry, <http://www.thelowry.com/about-the-lowry/the-lowry-building/>. Accessed July 2011.

Warner, M. (2002) 'Publics and Counterpublics', *Public Culture*, 14:1, pp. 49-90.

White, C.J. 'Una White', <http://www.notcelebrity.co.uk/una-white.php>. Accessed July 2011.