

**FROM THE  
KITCHEN TABLE  
Drew Gallery  
Projects  
1984 – 90**

# THE EDGE OF ACCEPTABILITY

John Carson



David Mach  
*Fire-Works*, 1985

←  
John Cobb  
*Somewhere in there –  
out there Somewhere*,  
1982/3

‘Blame God’ said the billboard on Kennington Road.

Every so often I would open the newspaper and read reports of strange occurrences, such as blasphemous billboards on the streets of Southwark;<sup>1</sup> sightings of ice sculptures on Hampstead Heath;<sup>2</sup> a projected swastika on the facade of the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square.<sup>3</sup>

I discovered that the strange phenomena, which were being reported by the London press, were the work of a mysterious organisation called Artangel. But who or what was the enigmatic Artangel? A little later it was brought to my attention that Artangel was advertising for a Production Director. If I didn’t get the job, at least I might solve the mystery. But I did get the job, and from 1986 to 1991, I worked as Production Director and Co-curator of Artangel, with its Founder and Director Roger Took. We worked from a small office on Oxford Street, with an Administrative Assistant Tiffany Black. The idea was to keep the organisation lean and overheads low. We would hire as many people as we needed with the requisite expertise for each project.

Artangel was set up as a funding and initiating organisation for the visual arts:

- Presenting art in public locations.
- Collaborating with artists and curators to win new audiences beyond the museum.
- Encouraging artists working in a context of social or political intervention.
- Supporting public works which are transient, temporary and not gallery based.

The impetus for starting Artangel was as a reaction against the rampant state of the art market in the eighties, as exemplified by the Saatchi phenomenon. Roger perceived a threat to the development of certain radical, conceptual, performative, feminist, socially engaged, politically concerned, contextually based, non-commodifiable work that had come to the fore in the seventies, and he felt that it was important to sustain such practices. I was of like mind, so working at Artangel was a thrilling prospect for me.

In 1985 and 1986, before my arrival at Artangel, Roger had done 7 projects, working with Hannah Collins, David Mach, Boyd Webb, Julia Wood (*The Artangel Roadshow*), Krzysztof Wodiczko, Les Levine, Stephen Willats, Mark Ingham, Kumiko Shimizu, and Andy Goldsworthy.

From 1986 to 1991, we did 24 projects, working with 40 different artists. We commissioned established international artists (such as Jenny

[1] A set of billboards in London by Les Levine, commenting the civil strife in Northern Ireland, referencing atrocities perpetrated in the name of God. (A collaboration between Artangel and the ICA).

[2] A residency on Hampstead Heath by Andy Goldsworthy (December 85 to January 86), resulting in ephemeral sculptures made from natural materials found on the Heath.

[3] Having been given permission to project onto Nelson’s Monument in Trafalgar Square, Krzysztof Wodiczko turned the projection equipment (without permission) and projected a swastika on the portico of the adjacent South African Embassy, in protest against apartheid and the South African government’s incarceration of Nelson Mandela on Robben Island. (A collaboration between Artangel, the ICA and Canada House).

Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Lawrence Weiner) with a track record of challenging public art projects, as well as British artists who we wished to work with (such as Tim Head, Tina Keane and Keith Piper), and we invited proposals from all and sundry. Consequently projects varied in scope from small-scale installations in empty premises, to national touring projects and nationwide billboard campaigns.

Project categories included temporary public sculpture, projected and filmic works, architectural interventions, posters and billboards, street works for passers-by, social sculpture, public participation, live performance, advertising strategies, media and broadcasting, publishing, and CD/DVD production. Every project was another adventure into unexplored territory.

The intention was that the works should appear guerrilla fashion, without being advertised or prescribed as art, but presented as thought provoking propositions in public locations for contemplation or consternation.

While initial projects were presented on a 'take it or leave it' basis, tactics shifted according to the intention and circumstances of each work. Sometimes work was invitational and sometimes deliberately confrontational. Both approaches, and anything in between, would demand different levels of engagement with the intended and perceived audience. It was not always possible to accurately gauge audience response, and we would be obliged to use media reportage as a somewhat questionable indicator of popular opinion. If the work was political in nature, we would generally invite some form of dialogue

Launched with private funding, Artangel was later obliged to seek public funding and it was gratifying that funding bodies such as the Arts Council and the Greater London Arts Board became interested in what we were doing. However their support came with conditions, which curtailed the political scope and maverick nature of what we might do. All funding comes with conditions, whether public or corporate. Negotiating those conditions was, and still is, a challenge to artists and agencies wanting to push the limits of acceptability.

Artangel was part of a greater movement in the UK and the USA with artists, curators and activists reacting against the commercially driven art market, offering art as an experience or a challenge to convention, instead of as a commodity. Much of the public art, which emerged during the eighties, was without precedent, and so it took a high degree of tenacity to find funding and to get permissions for such unconventional initiatives. Fortunately there were some visionary funding officers within the Arts Council, certain regional arts boards, local authorities, organisations and individuals who were prepared to support innovative public arts practice. While funders and funding bodies seemed unwilling to risk giving money directly to artists for radical projects, they seemed reassured by carefully constituted commissioning organisations offering well structured management of projects. So in parallel to a generation of artists who wanted to connect with a broader public, there emerged a number of creative and persuasive entrepreneurial individuals, from artistic backgrounds, who realised what was necessary to manifest ambitious ideas in the public realm. In London, and elsewhere in the UK, there was loose network of like minds, sparking off one another, collaborating on projects and cross-pollinating ideas.

A seminal influence on public art practices in the UK in the seventies was The Artists Placement Group, founded in 1966. The primary instigators were John Latham and Barbara Steveni. Between 1966 and 1979, placements for artists were organised within various corporations and government departments. The artists had an

'open brief', and no final product was necessarily required. It was felt that the artists presence and creative thinking could have some form of positive effect.

Another significant influence on public art initiatives in the UK in the late seventies and early eighties was the inspirational work of two New York based non-profit organisations, Creative Time and Public Art Fund.

Creative Time was founded in 1973, and Public Art Fund in 1977. From the start, the work of Creative Time tended to be issue-based and embraced the concept of temporary intervention, whereas with Public Art Fund the initial emphasis was on the placement of sculptural works for the enhancement of public space. Over time the work of both organisations covered a full range of aesthetic, political, performative and interventionist works, treating public spaces as 'places for creative and free expression'. Both organisations are still successfully operating, with pertinent contemporary programmatic content. Creative Time also organises an annual summit, which brings together artists, activists and thought leaders working at the intersection of art and politics.

In the late seventies and early eighties achievements of these New York based organisations were being noticed at the other end of the Gulf Stream. Whether by serendipity or direct influence, there were various manifestations of interest in the UK, in redefining public art, in embracing the idea of art as a form of social engagement, and in kicking against conventional notions of artistic practice.

Such radical attitudes were championed by *Performance Magazine* which was founded by Rob La Frenais in 1979, *Performance Magazine* provided a platform for awareness and discussion of new approaches to the making and experience of art and represented an active community of artists, writers and publics that crossed disciplines. The magazine also gave voice to feminist practice, as well as addressing gay and lesbian politics. Initiatives in public art were being echoed in 'performance' festivals such

as the annual *National Review of Live Art* and biennale *LIFT (London International Festival of Theatre)*, which were imaginatively staging experimental works in a variety of public contexts. Arts Admin emerged in 1980, and gained momentum in the late eighties by producing, supporting and promoting bold interdisciplinary work which crossed art forms including theatre, visual arts, dance, live art and performance. On their roster were Station House Opera and the Bow Gamelan Ensemble, purveyors of performative outdoor spectacle on a grand scale.

In terms of issue based work Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson, with their Docklands Community Poster Project (1981-1991) were working with a number of waterfront communities concerned about regeneration of the London Docklands.

Platform and Common Ground were also issue-based organisations using public art strategies to make their political points. From 1983 Platform have been combining art, activism, education and research in one organisation to grapple with social and environmental issues. While Platform has engaged itself with ecological issues on a multi-national level, Common Ground, also formed in 1983, operates on a more regional basis and concerns itself with devising imaginative ways of engaging people with an appreciation of their local environment.

Public Art Development Trust was set up in 1983 as an agency devoted to developing public art projects across the UK. PADT seemed to take its lead from New York's Public Art Fund. Under its founder and first director Lesley Greene, it was mostly involved in the placement of sculptural work on designated sites. With the arrival of Sandra Percival as Executive Director (from 1991 to 2001), the approach broadened to include a greater range of projects.

While all this was going on in London, interesting developments were also taking place elsewhere in the UK.

In Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1983, an organisation emerged named Projects UK, founded by Jon Bewley and Ken Gill. They commissioned, produced and promoted performances and site-specific works, primarily in the Newcastle area, and sometimes further afield.

In Canterbury in between 1984 and 1990, Sandra Drew staged an annual series of Drew Gallery Projects, with ground breaking temporary art exhibitions and installations in various locations across the City of Canterbury. The artists worked in-situ for the 3-week duration of the Canterbury Festival in unusual and sometimes difficult situations. This process-led/site-responsive way of working allowed for interaction between the artists and the local audience.

Two further public art initiatives did much to excite the UK arts scene in the late eighties, and early nineties:

*TSWA 3D* in 1987 & *TSWA 4 CITIES* in 1990  
The *EDGE* festivals in 1988, 1990 & 1992

*TSWA 3D* was an extraordinary initiative, which came to fruition in 1987, based on Television South West and South West Arts wanting to stimulate new kinds of work by visual artists. The result was a series of 12 ambitious public projects in 9 cities in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The project co-ordinator was James Lingwood. Projects were temporary and explored the history and meaning of the sites which they activated. In Lingwood's words "We wanted spaces which were already meaningful, already alive with the associations of history (cultural, industrial and political) and memory". Thus much public art in the seventies and eighties championed an "ideology of space which refused to perpetuate modernist assumptions about the neutrality of space" (Lingwood).

*TSWA* came back again in style in 1990 with *TSWA Four Cities Project* which involved collaborations with The Orchard Gallery in Derry, Third Eye Centre in Glasgow, Plymouth Arts Centre and Projects UK in Newcastle to present an international mix of 13 artists from UK and 13 from overseas.

Soon after stepping down as editor of *Performance Magazine*, Rob Le Frenais stepped up as the initiator of *EDGE*, a festival of performance and temporary installation works, which billed itself as Britain's first *Biennale Of Experimental Art*. There were 3 iterations in 1998, 1990 and 1992.

*EDGE 88* featured 10 UK artists and 16 artists from 11 different countries. Projects were centred in London.

*EDGE 90* was based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in collaboration with Projects UK. There were 3 artists and 1 ensemble from the UK and 16 artists from 11 different countries.

*EDGE 92* took place in Madrid with 2 UK artists and 18 artists from 12 different countries. Some of the works were re-staged at a number of venues in East London.

All the manifestations of *TSWA* and *EDGE* brought a greater international perspective to public art practice in the UK, as well as having 50/50 gender representation, which was remarkable in the art world at that time.

With all these initiatives, there was a healthy degree of cross-pollination within the burgeoning public art scene. For instance, the initial *Artangel Roadshow* at Maureen Paley's Interim Art at Beck Road in 1985 included work by David Mach and Julia Wood, who had already shown with Drew Gallery Projects and Tina Keane and Kumiko Shimizu also showed with Drew Gallery Projects before *Artangel*. Tina Keane appeared in *EDGE 88* and *Artangel* went on to work with artists such as Jenny Holzer and Krzysztof Wodiczko, who had previously been presented by Creative Time and Public Art Fund in the USA.

For me, 'public art' is as much about intention as location. If an artist truly wants to engage with certain publics then that artist will seek to devise ways of making their work accessible and meaningful to those publics. The eighties saw an expansive range of such intention, with artists commenting on social and political issues of their time, at local, national and international level. Over time those radical practices in performance and public art found acceptance from established funding bodies and museums and what had been contentious and challenging experimental work on the cutting edge was embraced by major museums and biennales and entered the educational sector (Today many art schools in the UK and the USA offer a public art component under a range of titles such *New-Genre Public Art*, *Art and Social Practice* or *Contextual Practice*). A considerable number of academics, writers and critics have now established a substantial discourse around this area of practice.

I think that what happened in the eighties in terms of public art, performance work, opened up a tremendous range of possibilities for artists and allowed for much greater general artistic licence. In the eighties there was lot of 'can do' attitude, with artists, curators, agencies and organisations pushing for greater social impact, and railing against the political iniquities and constrictions of the time. There are now well established forms of art practice which physically operate outside of gallery and museum spaces and into all facets of public life. Organisations such as Creative Time, Public Art Fund and *Artangel* (since 1991 under the directorship of James Lingwood and Michael Morris) continue to successfully function today with impressive projects coming out of the history of sculptural, site specific, conceptual, performance and socially engaged practices.

Where is the cutting edge today? Different times, different circumstances, and new technologies call for different strategies. There are always new territories to explore and new public domains exist within the digital realm, the virtual world, open source networks and social media. Artists are able to operate independently on PCs or mobile phones, without organisational assistance, via on-line spaces in which they can perform, participate in, subvert or disrupt the specificity of those spaces.

In the eighties, the 'loose network of like minds', which I referred to, was predominantly UK based. Now with the internet, networks are global. There is a temptation in looking back at the art of a particular period in time, to imagine or contrive some form of coherent or collective movement. I am not sure if there was 'movement' as such, other than that adventurous and dedicated loose network, which contributed to the zeitgeist of the times.

This essay is personal reflection on the public art sector in the UK in the eighties, and it would not be possible in this reminiscence, to list all the people, and organisational initiatives that

informed that time: so apologies to anyone who feels omitted by the limitations of my memory, research and necessary editorial decisions.  
John Carson, August 2018