

Art Is A Lie

Surviving as an Artist in the Age of Austerity
AIR Salon Talk, 13 June 2011

My Practice And How I Survive

I've been working as an artist since I graduated in 1998. During that time I've been officially unemployed, employed full-time and part-time, and in recent years (since 2004) I've been self-employed, mixing various freelance work as an artists' assistant, gallery assistant, steelworker and web designer with making and exhibiting my own work.

My own work doesn't often make me very much money - I usually make large-scale temporary installations that are specific to their location. I've been concentrating on this work for the past five-to-six years - responding to the events and stories that shape a place, and trying to create something which draws out that narrative and resonates with the viewer. I build these works entirely on-site. This grew from two circumstances: 1) I am inspired by working with specific locations - it's what I find most interesting and engaging and I want to communicate this through my work, and 2) it's cheaper than having a studio. I haven't had a studio since I graduated and I can't really afford one. I'm also not entirely sure that I need one?

Much of my work has been made from found materials, and material left over from other artists' shows. This also grew from the circumstances mentioned above: I can't afford materials, and using materials sourced from the location informs and influences the work.

More recently I have been questioning the purpose of my work, and the purpose of art in general - almost reaching some kind of personal crisis trying to reconcile the idea of making work without making compromises in order to make money, but also trying to actually support myself through my work, because I feel very strongly that artists *should* be paid for their time. So I've been constantly fighting with myself over whether I should alter my practice to make it more commercially viable, or to stick to my principles of trying to make the art that I feel is important.

I've tried to stop working for free - I think it's an important step in professionalising yourself and also not being taken for granted. I also want to eliminate the broadly accepted image of the 'struggling artist' who has to pay his or her dues by working for nothing. It is a negative stereotype that perpetuates an out-moded idea and makes people (artists and others) think that it is OK to not pay artists (and to not *be* paid). This is wrong. When you spend a week setting up a show this is time that you should be paid for - you are doing a job.

Working for free can have its benefits though: it can be part of networking, of building relationships. You may also gain exposure if the show is well promoted. These things need to be taken into account and thought about carefully when you are approached for, or are applying for, a project.

I've got a checklist for how I appraise an opportunity:

1. Suitability: Does the opportunity actually ask for the kind of work that I do and does it complement my practice? I know this sounds obvious but it does happen - I've done it, I've spent ages on an application and then realised that they're not really asking for what I do. It takes a lot of time and effort to write up a proposal and assemble all of your visual material, and if it's not really right for the project you're wasting your own time and that of the poor souls who have to go through all the submissions.

2. Fee: Does the project pay a fee? If not, does it pay expenses? As I mentioned earlier, I'm trying to stick by this one and I regularly pass over calls that do not offer any money; but sometimes a combination of the first, third and fourth points get the better of me. The third point being...

3. Artistic Worth: Does the opportunity promote development for my practice? Would it provide me with a fantastic new work? Is the space really exciting and inspiring? Does it fulfill a burning ambition to create a particular work? All these things I find really important.

4. Career Prospects: Does the opportunity have the possibility of furthering my career? For example, is it at a venue, or with an organisation, with the kind of reputation that you respect? Research the organisation, find out about previous shows and who they've worked with - what happened to them afterwards? If you like what you see then go for it.

5 (although rapidly moving up the list). Political Impact: Political in the sense of will the work produced be able to add to, and compound, the argument for the value of the arts to society? I'm interested in the idea that through our work we can make a case for our survival. I'm not talking about an overt message (although if you want to do that you can) but a subtle undercurrent of dissent about the situation. Your work itself does not really have to change that much (and I don't want to tell you what work to make) but if you have this idea in mind whilst working the art you produce might just have that little extra edge that makes people realise what it is about it that they need, and why we shouldn't let it wither.

How Are Artists (And Art) Perceived?

The reason I've described how I work, and my method of choosing what to apply my time to is to highlight the different ways artists work. I'm sure you all have different methods which have either grown out of necessity or through your own research and practice, or both. And you all make a living in different ways. My practice is not necessarily the right way - I think there are many right ways - many ways that work. Artists are usually very resourceful people with very diverse skills, and we find ways of making ends meet whilst still making time for making art. It is this diversity which perhaps makes it difficult to understand what an artist is, so easy short-hand stereotypes are used and we are all painted with the same brush.

During my degree my work focused on how artists are perceived and how we can manipulate aspects of our persona's and our work to create contexts for it to exist within - how we create value.

My current work *is* a development from that - the core of my practice is

still concerned with the perception of art and value, but also a kind of reversal as I felt that the earlier work was less accessible - it was art for artists. I don't think that I make particularly inaccessible work now - I don't immerse it in artspeak or conceptualise it beyond what I feel are my own intentions and ideas about how I want my art to operate. I think it's very easy to over-think and over-theorise art, and very easy to apply meanings to work in retrospect. I try to make things that are enticing, intriguing and that draw you in.

I feel that one of the main hurdles artists face in their perception by the general public is the preconceived idea that art is difficult, or 'not for you'. I went to see the Ai Weiwei exhibition at the Lisson Gallery a couple of weeks ago and was struck by the rather unfriendly and austere atmosphere there. This was not really to do with the art, and it is not unique to the Lisson - a lot of commercial galleries utilise this same, spartan aesthetic of the white cube with large windows and a locked door. You have to ring the bell and wait, and there's always this sense that perhaps you are being judged before the person behind the desk decides to let you in. Maybe I'm being paranoid, but if I hadn't previously visited lots of these kinds of galleries before - if this was the very first time I was going - maybe I'd be put off?

There are preconceptions about artists that I feel are negative and unhelpful - the starving artist in his garret (mentioned earlier), the super-rich YBA playboy/partygirl or artist as celebrity, and that being an artist is not a proper job, or that you're not an artist unless you actually make a living from your art. Some of these exist, of course, and some of them are rubbish. All of them want dispelling.

From my own experiences of working on public realm projects I have noticed the varied ways that art and artists are perceived by the public. These reactions range from joy through to indifference right down to revulsion. And it's the indifference and revulsion that I'm interested in. I've seen people physically recoil when you tell them that something is art, that an art project is about to take place here, or that an artist is going to be involved with a project. On one hand there seems to be the fear that you won't understand it, and on the other there is a prejudice against something which you thoroughly believe you don't need - that art is a waste of money.

What This Means For Artists

This creates a barrier to artists. We need to get more people on our side. Art has a value to society and culture - and not just a monetary value. There's a great clip on YouTube of the comedian Stewart Lee¹, talking about the cuts to education, where he describes two interesting moments: The first is a memory from the 1980s that has stuck with him of Margaret Thatcher, on the television, visiting a college - it's just a bit of filler in a news story - she's meeting some students and she asks a girl 'what are you studying?' and the girl replies 'ancient Norse literature' and Thatcher says 'oh, what a luxury.' Lee points out that this is a very telling response because ancient Norse literature is not a particularly vocational subject - it probably won't make you loads of money, so therefore - in Thatcher's view - it has no value. The second moment is about two

theatres that had had their funding cut. The theatre executives responses in their defence against this was to point out that they had developed certain shows that had transferred to the West End and gone on to make lots of money for the theatres and surrounding businesses by bringing in tourists. You would think that this was a good argument but Lee points out something I think is very interesting - that if you do this you are pandering to their game, you are engaging on their terms, you are admitting that the work you produce has no value other than how much money it makes. What they should have done, Lee argues, is say 'but we put on for a week, a bloke blowing into a balloon and dragging it around on the floor and making funny sounds, and that didn't transfer to the West End because it has no commercial future. But it is inherently worthwhile and that's why it requires funding.'

That's the bit that I like. Art has an intrinsic value in and of itself which is valuable to society - it is inherently worthwhile. We need people who know about ancient Norse literature, we need people who do little-seen experimental theatre that doesn't transfer to Shaftsbury Avenue, we need people who do creative things just because they want to do it - because they feel they have something to say. It has a trickle-down, and reciprocal, effect - it is responsible for popular culture, and popular culture in-turn affects (for want of a better phrase) high culture. The two are not mutually exclusive and I feel, sometimes, that the line between the two is incredibly blurred. They are two ends of a creative spectrum with many shades in between, and one end isn't more important than the other.

I think we are in danger of allowing government policy to define the importance of art. What Thatcher said in that TV clip back in the 80s is very similar to the current cuts to arts education and funding: it implies that art - or at least a particular kind of art - is worthless, and the interest in, and pursuit and study of such things is a luxury available only to those who have the financial means.

What Can Be Done?

So what can be done? I think we need to subtly change the perception of art and artists. As mentioned in point 5 of my checklist: by having the work itself prove its worth and make a point about the value of art in general. I think we can do this through language; through how we describe our work and the language we use to promote it. I'm not quite sure how this would work yet, it's just a vague idea, but what I envisage is a situation where when someone is informed that an artwork is due to be installed somewhere the first thing they think will be positive. So it's about removing or changing the negative connotations of art - that it's a waste of money, it's pretentious, you won't understand it etc...

I've started thinking about the idea that art is a lie - not just in the sense that it is reproductions, simulations and images of things that may-or-may-not be true - but in the sense that we are being lied to about art and artists, and that the art market is based on an exaggerated image of what an artist is. We have become entrenched in a celebrity-based culture where a lot of cultural worth is given to fame. There are now multi-billion pound world-wide industries propped

up by fame. These industries require sustaining so we are force-fed celebrities as role-models, people you should aspire to be like and people you should want to see. I don't think that this is necessarily the celebrity's fault, by the way (although there are some that are definitely guilty of self-aggrandisement), it's the result of a spiralling business. And greed.

Celebrity artists are used in a similar fashion. There is an art market which relies upon big names, art-stars are created and pushed, mythologies are built up around them (sometimes they build them up themselves) and they are required to perform their role to sustain the market.

To counter this I propose two impossible things:

1. End the age of outrageously priced art. It's not really worth *that* much is it?

A recent article in the New York Times² looked at the fluctuation of auction prices of artists' work - speculating on what it is that causes an artwork's stock to rise and fall.

"We in the auction business want to put our best foot forward, so when we get a good price, we make a big fuss about it," said Elaine Stainton, the director of the painting department at the auction house Doyle New York. "When we have a disappointing sale, we keep our mouths shut."

I know that they are running a business here, but this business seems to be completely devoid of any consideration for the actual artistic quality of the work.

"It's an unfortunate truth that some people buy with their ears rather than their eyes — listening to hear who bought what," said Cristin Tierney, who owns a gallery in Chelsea and has consulted for Christie's. "They want to get in on the action. They're not really looking at the work."

This is coming from the mouth of a gallerist!

The article tops and tails itself with the plight of painter Francesco Clemente, a contemporary of Julian Schnabel and Jean-Michel Basquait, who's stock has fallen since his 80s heyday.

"Clemente is still stuck with the label of the 1980s artist, which in five years could be super trendy," Ms. Tierney said. "So maybe a good thing to do is start buying Clemente now. You'll be ahead of the pack."

I don't really want anything to do with this area of the art world. I feel that incredibly high-priced art only goes to help compound the notion that it's a waste of money. When you read about record prices being spent on artworks does it make you question the value of what *you* are doing? Do these inflated prices belittle the work of the very many good artists who haven't been 'discovered', who perhaps don't want fame (as it currently stands) and just want paying properly for what they do?

2. End the notion that artists are special people. I am not denying that there are exceptional people among artists, but we are not special. Yes, we work hard, can become incredibly skilled, can make great things happen, and I do agree that a unique person produces unique things, but to paraphrase the old retort: 'anyone can do it', and I think this would be an important step in creating a perception of art and artists that would promote positive responses -

changing the idea of 'I could do that' from an intended insult or disparaging remark to a cry of solidarity between artist and viewer. 'Yes, we could all do it, we all have the right to do it, and we shouldn't allow it to be stifled'. Art is not a secret (although mystery plays a part) and it is not difficult (although hard work plays a part). The fact that anyone *can* do it should be celebrated and encouraged.

Paranoid?

Maybe I'm just really cynical (and perhaps a little paranoid) and there probably isn't really a conspiracy to commodify art and creativity to the extent that it becomes a purely capital-driven product. There exist many levels to the artworld, each with their own benefits and problems, altruists and egoists and, as there are as many artists and ways of working, there are as many ways of looking at the dilemma of creative integrity verses commerce and the basic need to make a living.

I've written this really to provoke some response because I feel that there is complacency and there is a tendency to try and play the game and work with the preconceptions, but I think the game is broken and we need to start a new one on a level field. Surviving as an artist is hard enough without having to contend with a system that seems to be against many of us from the start.

Having said all that; despite all the obstacles, the difficulties, the not having any money, and now the funding cuts and slashes to arts education causing there to be even fewer opportunities, I'm pretty certain that many people (myself included) will still want to be artists, regardless of how they are perceived, and will still make their work the way they want to make it.

Maybe I'm harping on about nothing?

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1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDEZ2h41t0I>

2. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/31/arts/design/not-all-art-market-prices-are-soaring.html>