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The art of the inner city as a socially engaged practice:

a comparison of works by
Robert Rauschenberg and
Cornelia Parker in relation
to Guy Debord's concepts
of psychogeography.

Abstract

The introduction outlines the author's personal and political concerns that prompted the research, and the content of the paper.

The paper then examines different approaches to artists' social engagement. These include:

1. Public Participation (eg. Gormley's *Field* and Ai's *Sunflower Seeds*);
2. Public Participation Online (eg. Ono's *Smilesfilm*);
3. Community Arts (eg. SLG's *Shop of Possibilities*);
4. Public Art (eg. *Art Everywhere*, Heatherwick and Greyworld);
5. Overtly Political Art (eg. Murray's *The Spear*, Picasso's *Guernica*);
6. Widening Consumption of the Arts (eg. Arts Council).

It briefly addresses the problems of authorship and quality in participatory projects.

The paper then focuses on inner city artists' selection of subject matter and source material, arguing that this could be considered a form of social engagement. It does so through a study of examples of works by Robert Rauschenberg (*Mother of God*, *Black Market* and *Estate*); and Cornelia Parker (*Pavement Cracks* and *Prison Wall Abstract*) with reference to key texts including *Robert Rauschenberg: Phaidon Focus* (2013) by Catherine Craft, as well as sources from various media, such as the BBC Four TV programme, *What Do Artists Do All Day?: Cornelia Parker* (2013) directed by Sarah Howitt.

The paper also briefly examines how this kind of artistic practice relates to the key psychogeographical concepts of *dérive* and *détournement* as put forward by Guy Debord, and as outlined in *Psychogeography* (2006) by Merlin Coverley.

In conclusion, this paper aims to broaden our understanding of the term 'social engagement' and show how the artists profiled within it, and psychogeographical methodologies, may provide useful practical models.

The art of the inner city as a socially engaged practice:

Introduction

'I want my paintings to look like what's going on outside my window, rather than what's inside my studio.'

Robert Rauschenberg, in the film *Man at Work* (1997).

This research has been prompted partly by my situation as a long-time resident of inner South East London and by my creative practice, which is currently focused on the visual language of the inner city. It is also motivated by wider political concerns regarding artistic production and consumption. These include the problem of how to extend the accessibility and relevance of art to a greater number, who may feel alienated by the seemingly elitist and exclusive nature of much of the contemporary art world.

The paper firstly examines different approaches to artists' social engagement, before focusing on inner city artists' selection of subject matter and source material. It does so through a selective study of examples of works by Robert Rauschenberg and Cornelia Parker, with reference to key texts including *Robert Rauschenberg: Phaidon Focus* (2013) by Catherine Craft, as well as sources from various media, such as the BBC Four TV programme, *What Do Artists Do All Day?: Cornelia Parker* (2013) directed by Sarah Howitt.

While a detailed investigation of the divergent ideas and writers associated with psychogeography is beyond the scope of this paper, it then also examines how this kind of artistic practice relates to the key psychogeographical concepts of *dérive* and *détournement* as put forward by Guy Debord, and as outlined in *Psychogeography* (2006) by Merlin Coverley. Ultimately, this paper aims to broaden our understanding of the term 'social engagement' and show how the artists profiled within it may provide useful practical models.

What is social engagement?

What a socially engaged practice actually means for artists can be as varied as the reasons for doing it. Before attempting to expand its definition, it is necessary to outline some approaches that represent the term as it is commonly understood.

Public participation

The first, and perhaps most common, use of the term is in reference to projects that involve some aspect of public participation in the production of artworks. Potentially involving large numbers of people who usually have little or no professional experience in making art, an example of this kind is *Field*, a series of works shown in various global locations by Antony Gormley between 1991-2004. These consisted of thousands of terracotta figures installed on the floor of a room facing the viewer, which hundreds of volunteers made by hand, overseen by

Public participation
online

Gormley. *Field* addressed Gormley's recurrent theme of the human figure, but also reflected the infinite variety of the individuals who created them.

Social engagement of this kind is usually conceived as happening in the physical world, but is also increasingly happening online. In *Smilesfilm* Yoko Ono realised a project first conceived in the late 1960s when she stated that, 'My ultimate goal in film-making is to make a film which includes a smiling face snap of every single human being in the world' (Ono, 1970). This ambitious aim began in the physical world with an installation at her retrospective show at the Serpentine gallery in September 2012, but is ongoing on a website where contributors can upload their smiling portraits. To date, almost 20,000 have done so. The potential of digital media and technologies to offer substantial new possibilities for artistic social engagement is only just beginning to be fulfilled.

Community arts

It is not only artists that seek to involve people, but also institutions, such as the South London Gallery. It has a long tradition of participatory community arts projects and education programmes that reach out to local residents, particularly those living in the neighbouring estate of Sceaux Gardens. Its *Shop of Possibilities* opened in May 2012 and is a renovated former retail unit and a 'free afterschool and weekend play space for children and families on a number of local housing estates, with a focus on bringing together children's play and contemporary art practices' (Willis, 2012).

Public art

The siting of artworks also has a significant impact on its perceived social value and while the tradition of 'public art' considerably predates the notion of social engagement, the presentation of artworks in public spaces can undoubtedly attract audiences that might not usually choose to visit a dedicated art space. *Art Everywhere: a very, very big art show* was a project that showcased 57 'British masterpieces' on over 22,000 poster sites such as billboards and on public transport across the UK, for two weeks in August 2013. *Art Everywhere* claimed to be 'the largest exhibition of its kind in the world... with an expected reach of 90% of the UK's adult population' (*What is Art Everywhere?*, 2013).

This kind of approach is perhaps more intuitive for those artists who also have one foot in the world of design – with their background in mass production for a mass audience. As Thomas Heatherwick said during an interview with Alan Yentob:

I've always been interested in 'public-ness'. I've no interest in people's private homes, or individuals... [I'm interested in] the bit that we all share. That's just as much the rubbish dump, as it is the

bit that gets called the art gallery' (*The Culture Show*, 2013).

Andrew Shoben of the London-based artists' collective Greyworld, shared this sentiment at the What Design Can Do conference in Amsterdam:

I make public art. I make art... primarily for urban spaces. I've got very little desire to make art in those really weird white boxes that you call galleries and museums... What is public art? Public art is usually bronze statues... [We are] about making work where the human being, primarily, is in the centre of the work (Shoben, 2012).

Political art

A contrasting approach to social engagement is to make art with an overtly political message or statement. Such work could not only explicitly address social issues, or contribute to movements advocating some kind of social change, but also generate publicity and therefore reach out to new audiences. This was certainly the case with *The Spear* by South African artist Brett Murray, which was originally exhibited as part of Murray's solo show at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, 2012. The painting showed South African President Jacob Zuma with his genitals exposed, and was stylised as a pastiche of a Soviet propaganda poster. This equated the ANC government with Stalinism and mocked the alleged corruption and polygamous lifestyles of its senior members. Murray was sued for defamation by the ANC and his painting was defaced by having paint smeared over it. As is often the case with reactions of this kind (and like the tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica* at the United Nations, which was obscured when Colin Powell gave a press conference there, in February 2003, arguing for the war in Iraq) it generated more beneficial exposure for the artist and his political message, than if the artwork had otherwise not been attacked. However, to what extent overtly political work may restrict possibilities of creative process for the artist and interpretation for the viewer, is a problem that deserves further scrutiny.

Widening consumption

Finally, social engagement can simply be understood as increasing and widening consumption of the arts in general, one of the key aims of the Arts Council of England:

Achieving great art for everyone: a strategic framework for the arts (2010), sets out the Arts Council's ten year strategy for championing, developing and investing in artistic experiences that will enrich people's lives. The report provides the rationale for future investment and funding of the arts. The vision is one of collaborative action and partnership to create the conditions in which art can be

made and appreciated by as many people as possible (Froggett et al., 2011).

The same study cited above also addresses the conception of social engagement as a participatory practice, but critically, highlights some of the problematic aspects of it:

Authoring & Participation: In collaborative social engagement projects the boundaries between artists, curators and publics are transgressed and the locus of artistic control can shift between any of those involved. Authorship is often contested and negotiated... Socially engaged practices must question the notion that a reduced authorial status for the artist is necessarily desirable (Froggett et al., 2011).

It is then evidently arguable that if a large number of non-specialists are involved in the production of artworks that quality, as well as the artist's singular aesthetic vision, can be compromised. The best examples turn this very problem to their advantage and make a virtue of it, as was the case with Gormley's *Field* – and like Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* installation shown at the Tate Modern Turbine Hall in 2010 – where each constituent piece is uniform yet unique. Nonetheless, how else might an individual artist, who may not have the resources, logistical means or desire to recruit an army of volunteers create socially engaged work, other than with the approaches mentioned above?

Selection of subject matter and source material

An alternative strategy is for artists to consciously and directly seek their source material from the world around them, their immediate surroundings and by implication, their own social context (rather than focusing inwards on individualistic or purely aesthetic concerns). Consequently, it can also be made a central feature of the subject matter of their work. The inner city as a site to conduct such practice is not just relevant to those of us personally resident there, but also becomes more generally significant as the global population continues to shift from the rural to the urban. Typically characterised by an intense concentration of diverse peoples, materials and environments, inner cities also offer unique opportunities as a source of inspiration for artists living in them.

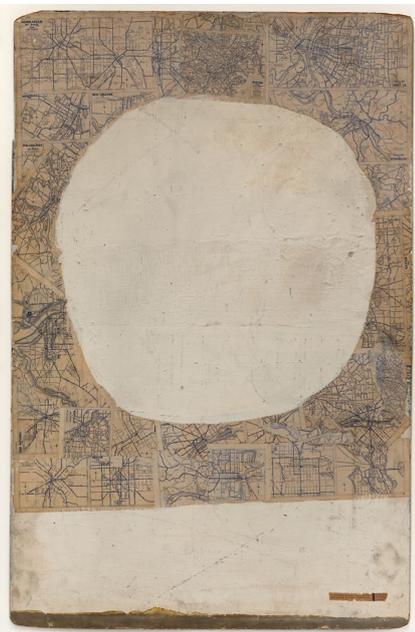
Robert Rauschenberg

One such artist is Robert Rauschenberg – originally from the backwater town of Port Arthur in Texas, he went on to study under the Bauhaus master Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina – before moving to downtown New York City in 1949. In order to understand how Rauschenberg might be considered a socially

engaged practitioner it is necessary to outline the context from which he first emerged as an artist. Rauschenberg is often described like a 'bridge' between the first two major art movements of the postwar USA, he 'came to attention at a fertile juncture in American art, as Abstract Expressionism wound down and Pop art appeared' (Wye, 2004).

While his early work was often stark, austere, monochromatic and highly abstract, as it developed it can be seen increasingly as a reaction against an inward-looking, self-absorbed Abstract Expressionism:

'I wasn't involved in chance... I wasn't interested in attaining a precious state of isolation. I was interested in what was around me. Art doesn't come out of art... My paintings are an invitation to look somewhere else' (*Painters Painting*, 1973).



His 1950 collage *Mother of God* was an early example of Rauschenberg's inventive use of found materials and his shift of emphasis away from abstraction. It featured a large white painted circular form surrounded by road maps from various US states and suggested a spiritual journey, hinted at by the inclusion of a playful small clipping quoting from the *Catholic Review* which reads, 'An invaluable spiritual road map... as simple and fundamental as life itself'. It also anticipated Guy Debord's creation of psychogeographical maps, such as one published in 1957 titled *The Naked City*, 'dividing Paris into nineteen sections, cut up and seemingly randomly dispersed. The users of such a map are able to choose their own direction... There is no 'correct' reading' (Coverley, 2006). More significantly, it prefigured Rauschenberg's belief that anything could be art, 'a pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric' (cited in Craft, 2013) This was most vividly demonstrated in his development of a series of works known as 'Combines'.

Rauschenberg first conceived of the Combines as a means to add multiple surfaces to his paintings and they evolved into hybrids of the two- and three-dimensional that were, at the time, both radical and unique (despite the apparent lineage from Duchamp and Dada). *Black Market* (1961) is one example of many which clearly demonstrate how Rauschenberg used source material from his inner city surroundings. Aside from traditional art materials it included newspaper, printed reproductions, wood, metal, tin, four metal clipboards, a car license plate and a 'one way' road sign that was to become a recurring motif in other works. It was also an early example of an 'interactive' artwork in that it also included a wooden case which viewers were encouraged to take and leave objects (itself a social focus 'where the human being... is



in the centre of the work', as Shoben said). As Rauschenberg himself said in the 1997 documentary *Man at Work*:

Everything starts out on the street and New York was, I thought, so incredibly rich in materials that whenever I started working, instead of going to the paint store or any place else, I would just walk around the block and if I didn't have enough to start work, I'd walk around another block.



A characteristic of Rauschenberg's creative process was his prolific use of various media and materials and once he began to move on from the Combines he embraced printmaking, but continued exploring themes of urban life. In his 1962 piece *Estate*, this is even more apparent to the viewer. It features images of the Statue of Liberty, high-density housing, wasteland and street signs. The aforementioned 'one way' sign is also present again, but appears twice, wittily contradicting itself by pointing in different directions. Rauschenberg was partly inspired by Warhol to take up screenprinting but his approach to seriality is less rigidly grid-based than Warhol's – rather, his montages evoke not only a sense of the dynamic energy of the inner city, but also of the frenetic pace of modern life in general, 'I was bombarded with TV sets and magazines, by the refuse, by excess of the world... I thought that if I could paint or make an honest work, it should incorporate all these elements, which were and are a reality' (cited in Craft, 2013). This approach has wider implications and further demonstrates his social relevance, 'the fragmented, rapid imagery that overlaps and dissolves into itself here presents a congested and disorderly sensibility set within the political and social turmoil of the 1960s' (*Artwork Detail*, 2013).

Psychogeography

As mentioned above Rauschenberg used the act of walking in his immediate locality as a creative methodology ('if I couldn't find material to do an artwork walking around the block once, I wouldn't do it', cited in Maclean, 2009) and this very act is celebrated, and to an extent, formalised in the practical application of psychogeographic theory. Psychogeography comprises a disparate range of ideas, thinkers and writers – but the one most closely associated with it is Guy Debord, who first defined the term as:

the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals... retaining a rather pleasing vagueness [it] can thus be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation (cited in Coverley, 2006).

Debord elaborated on this by proposing two key concepts for conducting such investigations. The first is termed *dérive*, which is translated literally into English as 'drift'. In brief, it involves making a journey through a city without a planned route, allowing the environment to direct spontaneous movements, helping to reveal new perspectives. Employed selectively, this technique could offer possibilities for an inner city artist. As Coverley (2006) notes:

'the street-level gaze that walking requires allows one to challenge the official representation of the city by cutting across established routes and exploring those marginal and forgotten areas often overlooked by the city's inhabitants... the act of walking becomes bound up with psychogeography's characteristic political opposition to authority'.

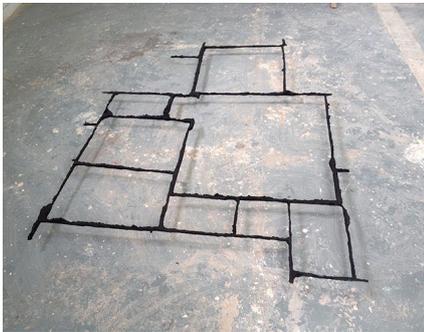
The second key psychogeographical concept is termed *détournement*, which can be translated as 'rerouting' or even 'derailment'. It is more strongly associated with the oppositional pranks of the Situationists and basically involves the appropriation of signs, images, text or media of the capitalist system and subverts them, turning an oppressive culture against itself. As Coverley (2006) again elaborates:

'The theft of aesthetic artefacts from their own contexts and their diversion into contexts of one's own device [recalls] the juxtapositions of the surrealists' found-object, similarly divorced from its original context, *détournement* creates new and unexpected meanings by hijacking and disrupting the original'.

While there may not be evidence to show that Rauschenberg consciously employed these methods, it is quite clear how they relate to his practice. His habit of walking the block, with the purpose of discovering materials and inspiration, rather than as a means of merely reaching a specific location, is closely equivalent to the idea of *dérive*. His use of found objects in the Combines, and found imagery in his screenprints, could also be claimed as an act of *détournement*. Looking again at *Estate* (1962) his inclusion of the image of the Statue of Liberty (which is almost toppling over) as well as a sample of Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* (over which he superimposed an image of a clock) seems to support this view.

Cornelia Parker

A contemporary artist who (knowingly or not) also arguably uses these methods – and who undoubtedly seeks source material and subject matter from her surroundings in the inner city – is Cornelia



Parker. She too did not originate from the big city:

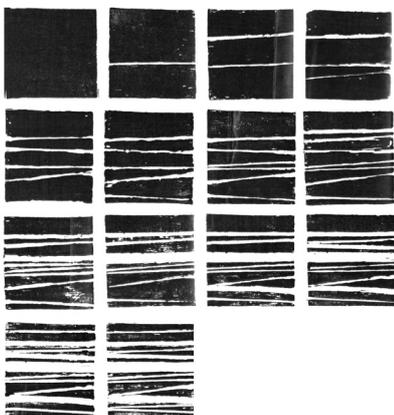
'I was brought up in the countryside and I was kind of pretty phobic about urban spaces for a long time – but now I live in London, which I have since 1984, and I don't think I could ever leave it. I mean, it's just continually throwing up stuff that I love... I left home and went to Wolverhampton... a gritty urban space... [it had] urban blight. My aesthetic changed, I began to look at decay as something that possibly could have value in the world.' (*What Do Artists Do All Day?*, 2013).



At her 2013 show at London's Frith Street Gallery, Parker presented two new works that could both be read as abstract as well as recognisable depictions of their humble origins. *Pavement Cracks: City of London* (2012-13) is made by creating a rubber mould from cracks in the pavement, which is cast in bronze, before being finished with a black patina. Parker elected to 'deify' the cracks, making them into an object – but she was inspired by her regular walking route through the city, 'the obsession with cracks is almost like a childhood thing... for years I was walking my daughter to school and we would play 'don't step on the cracks'. This piece is effective in that it resembles the original cracks as well as a street map – offering a simultaneous micro and macro view of the city.



Prison Wall Abstract: A Man Escaped (2012-13) is a series of 12 close-up photographs of Pentonville prison wall, which Parker took as builders were repairing it. She responded to them because, to her, they looked like Abstract Expressionist paintings. This brings us full circle back to Rauschenberg and his roots, who in 1948 produced a formally similar series titled *This is the First Half of a Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time*.



While both Rauschenberg and Parker are multifaceted artists whose prolific work is not confined to the urban, they nonetheless offer valuable examples for inner city artists seeking new ways to develop a socially engaged practice. The psychogeographic concepts and methods of *dérive* and *détournement* could also complement this and they warrant a more in-depth consideration than this paper allows scope for.

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