Chapter 6. **Of Place and of People.** Mary Jane Jacob.

Antony Gormley, *Another Place* (detail), 2005. The sculpture was brought to Crosby Beach by Liverpool Biennial in partnership with South Sefton Partnership, and later acquired by Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council, with the support of The Northern Way, to remain permanently on the beach. (Photograph, Steve White)

I know Liverpool firsthand from seeking out works of art in public spaces, and this began by trekking to see the Tate Liverpool soon after its opening in 1988. Later, biennials brought me there. On the last occasion I saw Antony Gormley's *Another Place*. Of course, I didn't just happen upon this work. You wouldn't unless, perhaps, you lived there. Instead I went specifically, seeking it out, and this time bringing along six other arts professionals whom I had detoured from London, urging them this was a trip worth taking. The poetry of this otherwise-not-so-poetic place resonated fully: drawing us to look out to sea, with longings and dreamings; conjuring histories of trade then and now from traces of industry and toxic imaginings; feeling the presence of new residencies and occasional recreation. Maybe even deeper still was the sense of interiority, of the human mind facing all eternity as symbolised by the vast sea of life and death, and of a kind of collective isolation – being with others yet always alone in our body and with our own thoughts.

In some ways this is an unusual contemporary work of art. Figurative work had been pretty much wiped off the international scene by the 1970s as not new, downright retarditaire. It had certainly been expunged from public art circles (as we would call such outdoor work in the US) for being too closely aligned with monuments of men – all those statues seen to be littering parks and cityscapes, now irrelevant and outside contemporary consciousness. Yet, here, at Crosby Beach, these figures made sense – they had to be – and they claimed our attention in spite of, or maybe because of, being no one in particular, because they are us. What I recall is that the experience of this work was not so much of art as of place. Yet I

know I would not have had this experience of the place without art's presence. These figures were of this place (though the artist had employed like figures in other places and in other waters) and, amazingly, they stood more steadfast in the rushing water and slipping soil than if they were on a pedestal in a square.

What was also memorable about this experience was the conversation with the cabbie who brought us there and then accompanied us, not waiting in the parking area but making the pilgrimage, too, walking on wet and dry land to be with these sculptures. This wasn't his first time visiting here, and as we walked together I learned that he sensed that this work should be there, that it had a rightness in this place. His belief in this work was not as an art-goer but as a local citizen. Yet it wasn't so much about civic pride, being proud of this local attraction (though there was some of that, too); it was about his sense of the environment in which he lives and which he shares with others, and a way in which this silent collective brought all that into play.

Why detour to other places and travel outside London, or from wherever you are, to see art? The discourse of place has swept the landscape of contemporary art since John Willett's writing on art and Liverpool. It has resulted in a vast compendium of site-specific and installation works, a genre that I think Willett might well have supported. Art in public space, with direct connection to local histories and everyday concerns or issues, has increasingly flourished over these past four decades. Their references, no matter how particular and rooted in a place, at their best have echoes elsewhere – and herein lies their potential for meaning and their power as art.

Willett understood the relationship of art and location in essential ways. He saw place as both a mechanism for the making and for the receiving of art. A deep resonance occurs when we go to a place to see art, leaving behind our life for a while, when we spend time with one work, as I did Gormley's – so different an experience from walking the halls of a museum among many works – and when the mind has time to follow a path to other places and then find its way back home, back to the place we thought we left behind when we set off to travel. Connecting places, art can also bring the insider and outsider into a dialogue, as my conversation with the cabbie with whom I walked along Crosby beach, or into a communion not verbalised. Art in the public sphere draws its concept and physical disposition from such contexts, and when it does not, as Willett observed, it fails. Even when a locality is not the direct subject or inspiration, place plays a role in the artist's process of creation and then in the act of 're-creation' by the viewer, and because places are dynamic, so too, is our experience of a work and it changes over time.

Public art found an opportune moment of expansion and revival with urban regeneration in the late 1960s. Willet saw this writing in 1967. At exactly that time, a parallel effort in the US, termed urban renewal, was given a boost with the first federal funding in 1968. Likewise, it was born in the face of poverty, social disenfranchisement and a desperate need to beautify and clean up dying cities. Art as an antidote, however, was destined for criticism, especially when employing the outdoor modern art collection approach. Such abstract work conformed to the artist's signature style, though made on a colossal scale; it carried with it validation by virtue of its art pedigree but it seemed so *out of place* and was out of touch with public perceptions. Willett saw the failure of this scheme as a result of modernism's reliance on studio practice and personal expression, disregarding a setting's defining physical, cultural and historical terms, as well as collective psychological energy.

By the late 1970s in the US funding directives sought to restore a fusion of art and architecture practices, but these remained mired in professional power struggles. Moreover, artists were educated to protect their mode of expression and the originality of their ideas, and this meant keeping their distance from the public so that aesthetic standards would not be influenced or subverted by public taste. The result was a 'disconnect': works remained irrelevant to people's everyday life and, so, unsupported by local populations. Upon unveiling, public art administrators saw their job as one of providing art education or just waiting it out until people came to like or got used to the new art.

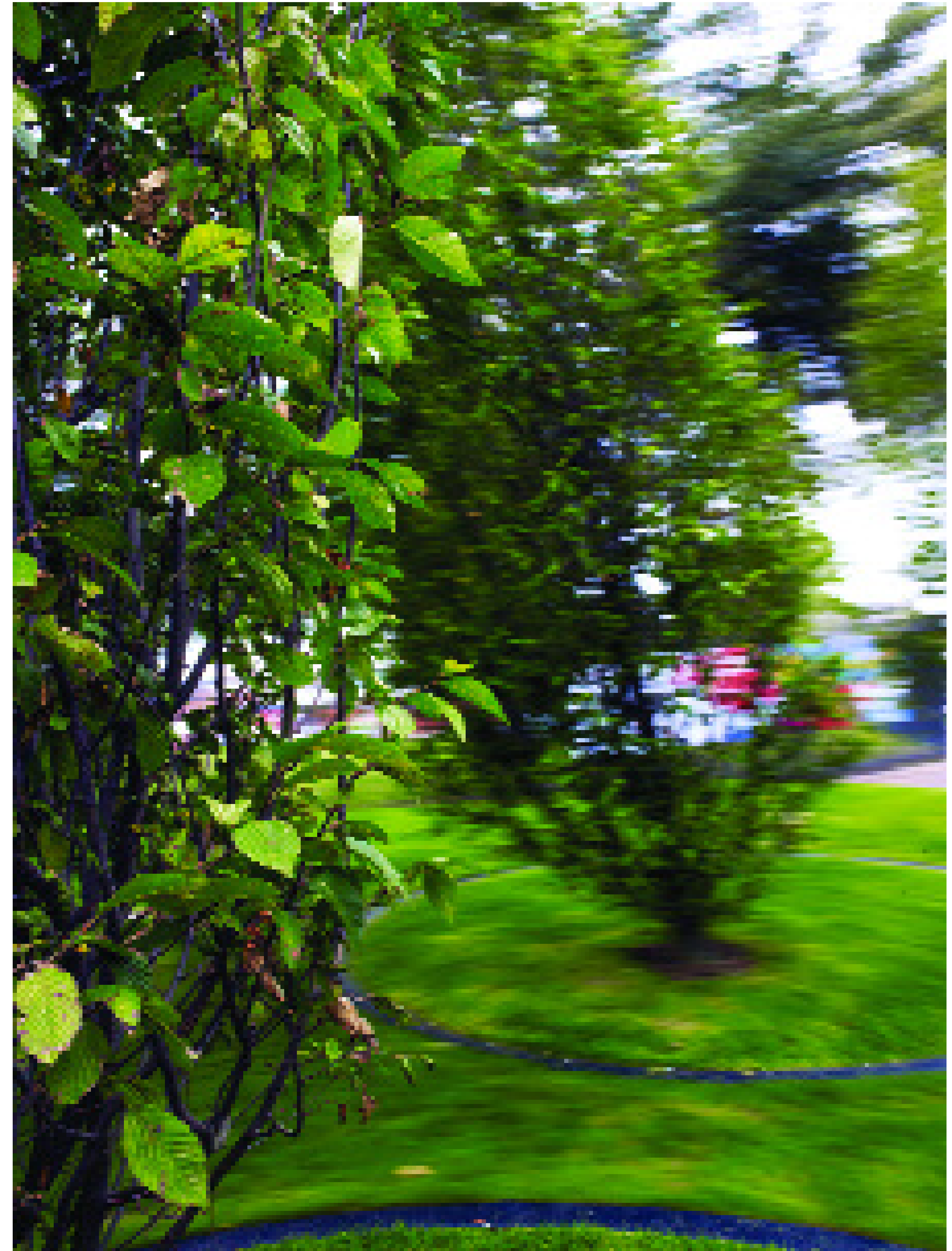
Attuning art to its surroundings is not just a matter of a well-

Diller Scofidio + Renfro, *Arbores Laetae (Joyful Trees)*, commissioned for the Liverpool Biennial International 08, corner of St George Street and Parliament Street. (Image courtesy of Adatabase and Liverpool Biennial 2008)

placed work. It is not just about art *in* place but *of* place, so that it might be a part of the people in that place. In the years following Willett's study, several factors came together, making public art a focus for progressive artistic practice. One development was the 1970s explosion of an alternative art scene. At a time of social change and alternative lifestyles, artists assumed a new sense of agency expressed in the formation of artist-run spaces, exerting their own autonomy even if with lesser resources, departing from the public museum or commercial gallery system. This was enabled by the decline of cities that also led to governmental regeneration and urban renewal strategies. So, for example, in New York the erosion of small industries left SoHo vacant for artists' occupation. While this move was initially expedient and proved to be a challenge to the mainstream art-work system, the access to a near-abandoned neighbourhood led artists to take their work out of the studio and into public places and social actions. Temporary meant provisional and experimental – and possible – now! Not intended to be permanent and, given its medium or siting often not possible to endure, these works were not preoccupied with the collector class.

The possibility of art being temporary brought art making into the realm of the performative, with actions that ranged from theatrical to relational, and included other ephemeral arts (such as mail art and artist-produced brochures, fliers, newspapers and other handouts, take-alongs, and ultimately throw-aways). As a corollary, artists also made works in multiples, notably artist's books, a practice that aimed to subvert the economics of the gallery system but became an area of collecting in its own right. Still making an artwork available to more than one person extended ownership and offered a wider range of persons the chance to live with art.

Temporary projects also included interventions on an architectural scale. Outside, in the world, artists (with the help of organisers, collaborators and others) could do what they otherwise could not. Working in the desert or derelict buildings, these impressive works could capture public attention and became events. Even in less visible places, they incisively cut into situations and touched invested constituencies there,



opening up perspectives, shifting thought, and seeking at times to make change. I have found, that even though a work may be temporary – or maybe because of its fleetingness – it can live on long after it has ceased to exist in the memories and imaginations of the public near and far.

In writing that, 'People who are not used to painting and sculpture can still be swept off their feet by the sheer force and quality of something which they do not yet "understand"',[1] Willett pointed to the inherent power of the object and its essential relation to human experience. Thinking of experiences with contextual, site-specific art that I have had or witnessed, however, I would say that understanding can *precede* knowledge. Even though the audience may be outside the art world, they can understand a work that enters their environment – and profoundly so – in ways not even imagined by the artist. They can contribute to the meaning of work in public space and, as we have seen with recent collaborative practices, they can also contribute to its making. Thus, contemporary site practices have advanced Willett's idea, linking his sense of the value of art to people's lives with the value people bring from their own lives to the experience of a work of art.

Recognising the potential role of the public, of the content and perceptions they can bring to a work, and of their experiences that can enhance art's meaning, artists began to operate quite differently in public space starting around the mid-1980s. They became visible to the public, sharing the process and soliciting the involvement of others in the conception and execution of works. This also meant that artists had to put to the test the discourses of authorship, cultural rights and public and private space. This led to the development of new public practices, including the emergence of artists' collectives and collaborations between artists and non-artists, whether they be experts in other fields, community members or more casual passersby. Importantly, it resulted in an enlarged role for the public as maker, informer, participant, as well as spectator.

By the late 1980s developments in public space brought focus back to museums and an interrogation of the role they play.

Jorge Pardo, *Penelope* (detail), 2002, Wolstenholme Square. (Image courtesy of Liverpool Biennial)

Tony Cragg, *Raleigh*, 1986, metal and stone. Purchased by the Tate in 1987, it is located close to Tate Liverpool at the Albert Dock. (Photograph, Angela Mounsey)

Damned as elitist, museums were seen to subscribe to hierarchies emanating from colonial or imperial times, evident in their modes of display and systems of representation. Removed from daily life, they seemed to disregard their immediate multicultural populations and a global worldview, along with the critical concerns that mattered to these peoples now. Any accelerated attendance was written off as the success of mindless entertainment and tourism at work. Meanwhile education in museums, that throughout the twentieth century had aimed to cultivate art appreciation through art history knowledge and to improve public taste according to singular standards of quality, required rethinking, too. There was a need to arrive at participatory modes and allow for a more open critical inquiry by the public.

In observing a gulf emerge between the public and modern art, Willett advocated everyday access to art and the cultivation of a sense of normalcy for art to be a part of daily life. Implicit was the idea that art is of value to life on a broad social spectrum, so he put great stock in turning around public education. I would, too, having benefited from the value of art at work in the New York public school system in the late 1960s and 1970s. But by the 1980s in the US, schools had been hijacked by Republican agendas that found contemporary art offensive and frivolous, not of use. In this expulsion of art instruction from the public school system, a new role emerged for museums and, though at times bemoaning this mandate for popular art education as not theirs, this shift presented museums with the opportunity to repair its relationship with the public. By the 1990s many museums were actively exploring new avenues of access and cultivating ways to be relevant to the lives of the visitors they desired to have inside their doors. Here artists came to their aid with site-specific and constituent-specific projects, proving to be able partners in mediating and negotiating ideas with the public, while engendering a new conversation between curators and educators.

Reaching out to the public through art and education was part of the impulse, too, at the origin of Tate Liverpool. So while the website today locates its history in a building conversion as part of urban regeneration, we also read that it was 'dedicated to showing modern art and encouraging a new younger audience through an active education programme'. When in 1988 I saw Tate Liverpool's inaugural exhibition of Surrealism, I was actually most struck by its corollary offering of works created by the public: people's surreal visions in the form of collages, paintings and sculpture; dreamlike, whimsical and bizarre images. It left a lasting impression. It seemed a kind of public art. It seemed to affirm public ownership of this new institution. It was a non-patronising and, in my recollection, seemed as large as the masterpiece collection survey. It was endlessly engrossing and it had an impact on my view of the renowned artists in the adjacent show, on the ethos of this new institution, and on my experience of this place new to me – Liverpool.

'The notion that art itself could have a relevance to the community's hopes and ideals, to its work and its leisure, seems to have gone with the Victorian age', Willett said, speaking of a perceived vitality or agreement on an arts agenda, at least among the city movers and shakers if not the populace, in times gone by.[2] But, interestingly, Willett foresaw, too, that '…the sense of individual self-expression and collective self-expression might turn out to be linked'.[3] Maybe it took the self-critical times of the 1980s to realise this potential. Postcolonial discourse led to the expansion of the art world, allowing for the full and viable participation of artists living and working outside the so-called modern art world centres of Paris, New York, London and the like. It led to recognition of multiple centres of art and the creation of a global art scene, giving increased focus to places like Liverpool. These 'other art centres' were promoted and developed in large part through the biennials that placed them on the art map.

Yet, maybe most importantly here, the postcolonial discourses altered the subjects of art, bringing other histories and cultures to bear, and with this, it changed the ways art was made in relation to the public that embodied those histories, leading to art of consensus and collaboration. Public evidences of colonial history offered artists the opportunity to show another point of view and allow for multiple and even conflicted meanings to emerge. The artist's individual self-expressions

became a collective self-expression as everyone could be part of the equation: coloniser and colonised, powerful and powerless, male and female, black and white. Moreover, artists trained in theory and sensitive to the discourses of centre versus margin cracked open social dichotomies, probing in their research, their work, their speaking and their writing the complexities that went beyond dualistic paradigms. Given the public siting of their work, the public itself could become part of contemporary art's conversation. With public participation in artists' projects 'the notion that art itself could have a relevance to the community's hopes and ideals' took on new and greater meaning.[4]

Tatsurou Bashi, *Villa Victoria*, 2002, commissioned for the Liverpool Biennial. This is the interior of the installation incorporating the Victoria Monument; see the Timeline for an image of the exterior. (Image courtesy of Liverpool Biennial)

When Tatsurou Bashi challenged textbook histories and connected the present to the past, he challenged, too, the tradition of the colonial public monuments that are found in many cities the world over that claim to represent the people. In Liverpool his work *Villa Victoria* literally re-engaged the commemorative figurative sculptural tradition and repositioned it in our own time by resituating Queen Victoria in a mock hotel room. He added to without taking away what already exists. The audience got access, literally, to rise atop a massive monument in Derby Square where they could see the queen close up and in a new way. Humour, too, became a vehicle to aid in this translation. Like Gormley's work, the pedestal was gone, though here encased, so that we could be on the same level as the figure – history levelled and re-contextualised, and brought closer to us and into our own times.

Places are comprised of and signified by public spaces and monuments, but part of the reason that Liverpool has been a fertile setting for new art is not just because of major triumphs in history but also because of people's way of life. So artists have looked to the 'monuments' in Liverpool made by industry. Like statues and civic buildings, industrial complexes and their giant equipment are commanding; we have the eyes to see them aesthetically and sentimentally after a century of rising and waning production. To those of us outside direct experience, they can be awe-inspiring. To those inside, who knew them as a place of work, they are familiar, old habits, a livelihood; they may have

been sources of affliction as well as objects of affection.

Regrettably I didn't experience Richard Wilson's *Turning the Place Over*, but it is a work, at its point of inspiration and mode of execution that acknowledges industry and engineering know-how. That work came in the year following my visit to Crosby beach. As a scholar of Gordon Matta-Clark, I appreciate it as homage artist-to-artist. Having seen Wilson's work at Matt's Gallery, I felt I could sense even from afar the scale and spatial manipulation he commanded. Then there is that edge of humour provided unexpectedly through photo documentation, as I perceive the work second-hand, watching pedestrians watching the piece and seeing street workers cutting their own hole in the pavement. Wilson's project partakes of that amazingly inventive way in which art and the everyday endlessly enjoy a dialogue and we, through art, have our senses and sense of place disrupted and adjusted.

Works of art can evoke the meaning of a place or of a people. But places, and the people who live there, can also add meaning to art. These meanings given and accrued can live on in a place even if the works are temporary and don't remain there. The art experience is remembered and the place is forever changed. I dare say that if *Another Place* was dismantled, for many people Crosby beach would be such a changed place. People and places are tied together, and for art to finds a place, it needs to be both of place and of people.

Richard Wilson, *Turning the Place Over*, 2007, at Cross Keys House, Moorfields. Co-commissioned by the Liverpool Culture Company and Liverpool Biennial, co-funded by the Northwest Regional Development Agency and The Northern Way, and facilitated by Liverpool Vision. (Photograph, Alexandra Wolkowicz)

[1] John Willett, *Art in a City* (London: Methuen, 1967; repr. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and the Bluecoat, 2007), p. 238.

[2] Willett, *Art in a City*, p. 23.

[3] Willett, *Art in a City*, p. 138.

[4] In 1991 in Charleston, South Carolina, I carried out an engaged critique between artists and audiences. Like Liverpool, Charleston is a colonial city, a former great economic power and a global port in a time before 'globalism' was coined, and a key point on the map of the triangular transatlantic slave trade. Like Liverpool, it has uniquely inspired works of art and some of these have been among the first contemporary utterances of another history. That story continues there with artist's projects re-initiated beginning in 2001 to the present. Today they engage contemporary issues of and conflicts around land ownership in the face of rapid development with impact on the built and natural environment. They touch on daily concerns which, while inflected in different ways along racial and economic lines, are shared. Thus, these art projects have become a common meeting ground and, while Charleston-specific in the details, they evoke places the world over.