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About not separating art and writing: The unfinished public artwork that studies finished public artwork in New York

ABSTRACT

This article articulates an example of the relationship between practice and theory that utilizes the Freudo-Lacanian approach, of a researching art object. The artwork and the writing are not separate entities, but rather ask the same questions and intervene into public space in New York, and the academic world simultaneously. The Public Utteraton Machines, which will be installed on pavements in New York in 2014, are not finished when installed, because they ask questions.

   This article furthermore synthesizes arguments for the relinquishment of traditional notions of the creative magus or genius figure, disengaged with society, in favour of artistic research as a means to forge a coherent connection to the world outside the artists own life world. It argues that the separation between practice (making art) and art history (writing about other art), i.e. an art historical approach to interpreting art, is not the only way to create or interpret public art and writing. Therefore in this case, intervening into the public art discourse in New York where my research takes place, through an unfinished object in space is most appropriate.

This article has its genesis in the form of a paper I gave at the College Art Association conference in Los Angeles, 2012, in a session that questioned the Ph.D. for artists in the United States, where the terminal (highest) degree in the arts is (still) the MFA, and where the Ph.D. for artists remains under much debate.[1]

NEW YORK

In 1995, at the Turner Prize ceremony Brian Eno made a dramatic speech. He spoke of the ways in which the sciences have been able to engage the public successfully with the problems it tackles. He said this about the arts:

> the intellectual climate surrounding the arts is so vaporous and self-satisfied that few of these questions are ever actually addressed let alone answered […] the arts routinely produce some of the loosest thinking and worst writing known to history […] Why has the art world been unable to articulate any kind of useful paradigm for what it is doing now? […] the lack of clear connection between all that creative activity and the intellectual life of the society leaves the whole project poorly understood, poorly supported and poorly exploited.
>
> (Eno 1995: 258–59)

This is hard to hear, yet he may be right. His comment could be interpreted as articulating the function art has in our society (or the lack thereof), and the fact that for many people contemporary art poses somewhat of a mystery, whether it is in a gallery or in public space. Brian Eno's comments make this disconnection between artistic activity and what he calls the 'intellectual life of a society' clear.

I claim that artists should be highly articulate and qualified individuals, especially if they are teaching in universities – they should explain themselves well, as Brian Eno demands, to society at large and anyone who asks. The notion of artistic genius, in which the artist expresses his/her feelings in their own work only, with no further explanation to others, no theoretical framework or connection to a specific subject matter or problem, could be interpreted as insular and perhaps not relevant today. How does practice-based research as artistic practice perhaps elaborate or change Brian Eno's assertion? Since 1995, the Turner Prize has for the first time been won by an artist who holds a doctorate degree (Elizabeth Price). 'The artist, by definition, is someone who works in an expressive idiom, rather than a cognitive one and for whom the great project is an extension of personal development: autobiography rather than understanding' (Frayling 1994: 2).

Is not this stereotype what we as practice-based Ph.D. students strive against? And is not the understanding and engagement what we do strive for? And yet, we are faced with a new confusion, especially when embarking on a practice-led Ph.D. as artists.

As designer makers and visual thinkers, we must now write. Not only must we write, but we must write academically and now everything we know about art-making, objects and thinking visually (something many of us have done for decades), is thrown into flux. The 'spectre of a totalizing, and inappropriate explanatory framework arises' (Quinn 2010: 244), namely that of rigour and episteme. As practising artists, the idea of art as research then, has become just as perplexing, as contemporary art has become to the general public.

Figure 1: Rebecca Hackemann, (2014) The Public Utteraton Machines, *public art, aluminium/steel alloy, solar panel, plastic, electronics, telephone, LCD interface, 16" in x 6' ft., x 12" in., digital rendering, Fabrication and Design Aid: Northpenn Machine Works; © Rebecca Hackemann.*

Figure 2: Rebecca Hackemann, Digital Rendering of The Utteraton Machine *in Macri Triangle Park, Brooklyn, NY, 2014, digital rendering, © Rebecca Hackemann.*

Yet, one might argue that what we are doing is reconnecting a disparate and split discipline that consists of artists-designer makers and art historians and theorists. This is a difficult and extra task for an art student to fulfill. After all, in the sciences for example, theory and practice are inseparable. The laboratory experiment emerges from a problem and the result is written up into a paper – both tackle the same problem. But in practice-based artistic research, academic writing and the conception of problems might not begin as a way of working and thinking until an art student reaches the M.Phil. or Ph.D. stage, or if one is lucky one's institution features an M.Res., a preparatory year for writing a research proposal for a Ph.D.

As Sir Christopher Frayling (1994: 50), Brad Buckley (2010: 82–85) and others have explained, artistic research is not research about other people's art, which is traditionally the domain of art history and art criticism. It is rather research through art, a feedback loop, an informed focused experiment, an hypothesis that includes art-making, a test, a synthesis of ideas, a new way of looking at something familiar, an extension of someone else's work, a new location or new area of social life for existing work, etc.

As Frayling aptly notes in his now famous research paper on the arts, artists have been misunderstood and stereotyped for centuries and it is time that art simply reveals part of its own process. This also means that art needs to be explained by its creators, by artists, using coherent arguments, building on previous arguments – with references, both recent and historically.

Michael Schwab (2014) is interested in finding out if artistic research actually requires particular notions of 'art'. With this I believe he means that art created as part of a research practice perhaps cannot be read entirely in the same way as other art created under the art world aegis. Thus art created by an artist with the intention of a sale to a collector who will hang it in his/her house, or as part of an exhibition in a commercial gallery or museum, may mean differently and be accepted in different circles within the art world. As Schwab (2014) notes, it may in addition be read differently by the viewer, than art created within a research context.

Frayling's definition of art within a research project as 'research through art' (Frayling 1994: 5) is most appropriate here. As part of my Ph.D. inquiry, *The Public Utteraton Machines* (2014) were formulated with the central research question at hand. These artworks will themselves conduct research on pavements, as researching art objects, asking passers-by what they think of other public art, what role it should play and where they have seen other public art. In this case then, the research is conducted through art – the research questions within my Ph.D., are replicated and re-asked of passers-by in public in New York by an object, and artwork, a machine, that looks at first glance like an old French telephone, leftover from another time. *The Public Utteraton Machines* will be installed for one month on pavements in the New York City boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn. They are not finished – by this I mean that they are not completed aesthetic axiomatic objects in space, to be admired for their beauty, optical illusion or aesthetics by spectators, as most object-based public art is in New York. They are also not ephemeral works, or socially engaged participatory works that according to Gretchen Coombs and Justin O'Connor, 'can easily conform to fairly mainstream entertainment objectives; […] [that] have the potential to become just another "experience" in an experience-driven economy' (Coombs and O'Connor 2014: 149). The *Utteraton Machines* aim to bridge the gap between a finished object, a long-term object that is plopped into a concrete plaza[2] and a socially engaged practice, that is

temporary and ephemeral; engages the public but takes place in a public space for a very short time period. While *The Public Utteraton Machines* may continually garner input, they simultaneously ask for public reflection on other public artworks in New York. The resulting audio and data files will be available at local libraries and on the Internet.

It is important here to distinguish between the context of object based public art in New York (that is an object anchored into a public space for a long period of time), and the context for public art in other cities and countries. In New York, contrary to what one might expect (as one of the commercial art world centres), public art discourse has remained fairly stagnant since the Richard Serra *Tilted Arc* controversy in 1980. As Casey Nelson Blake notes:

> Public art is in crisis for many reasons, notably the collapse of consensus about a symbolic public language and about the values and ideals to be embodied in that language. But the Tilted Arc controversy also demonstrates that the most important source of the aesthetic crisis of public art is the ongoing political crisis of the public sphere. Bitter disputes over the aesthetic and social functions of public spaces both reflect and contribute to the waning belief in the very possibility of a democratic public sphere constituted by collective deliberation.
>
> (Nelson 1993: 250)

Little has changed since this writing except for the increase in public art spending in New York, with placement of public art on plazas and tourist locations. Currently little research exists that examines the reasoning behind the locations of object-based public art in New York, as well as what residents might think of it, or wish for it. Whereas gallery art (indoor art) normally has a publicly constituted apparatus of commentary and scholarly interrogation that surrounds it, public art[3] which exists outside the traditional gallery space paradoxically does not have such an apparatus for dissemination and discourse. While the discourse regarding so called 'heavy metal public art practice' is not extensive, spacial practice, performance and land art have been very well researched and debated in the context of the public sphere.

The Public Utteraton Machines feature images of other public art located in tourist areas of New York, such as Times Square or Rockefeller Plaza. They each contain two further points of contact. One point of engagement is a telephone that automatically dials when the earpiece is lifted up. The user is connected to a qualitative open-ended questionnaire. The questions asked will be 'what do you understand by the term public art?' and 'have you visited the place shown in the photograph?' – or 'should public money be spent on the objects shown in the photograph?' These questions are currently still under development. The second point of contact is an LCD interface that asks five closed questions. It is designed as an alternative to the telephone, in case a user has not got time or does not want to use the telephone. Here the questions are less geared towards narrative responses and more about finding out whether respondents are residents and if so whether they would like to see it where they live, and what they think of existing works.[4]

It is important to interject here that the term 'user' is employed to replace the commonly used term 'viewer' when referring to the spectator of visual art. It appears to be more appropriate, as the art object in this case is not made to be looked at, nor is it finished (implying that it is ready to be gazed at as a separate object). It is made to be used and interacted with. Thus the artwork,

3. The research makes a distinction between different kinds of public art. Monuments will be excluded from this study, as their purpose and roles are clear and well researched. The term 'object-based public art' will be utilized as a way to distinguish between socially engaged artistic practice (that renounces the art object in favour of process as art) and works that exist in urban public spaces for a significant amount of time, as objects.

4. All participants will press a button that certifies that they are over 18 and will remain anonymous. The project is currently still being developed, but will be installed in October 2014 or March 2015.

in the form of *The Public Utteraton Machines*, exists as a continued process of the user engaging with it, expressing their opinions on other works that are finished when installed in public space. In this sense it acts as a way of studying other works through reactions and outcomes. After all, most public art is paid for with tax money; it therefore seems appropriate to find out what New Yorkers think of it, while simultaneously intervening into the public sphere. As such the *Utteraton Machines* form a visual gesture or a paradigm suggestion towards something larger that is missing from the existing discourse, whilst supplying limited data as starting point for others to use.

This approach of the artwork asking questions necessitates a departure from my previous artistic practices, which are rooted in a philosophical interpretation of the world. *The Public Utteraton Machines* are influenced by a Freudo-Lacanian approach to practice-based research. This Freudo-Lacanian approach (Quinn 2010) to research, links to the analytical situation itself, the structure of the relation between the analyst and the analysand. There, '[T]he task of the analyst is to locate a knowledge that the analysand already knows, rather than add an intellectual construction of the analyst's own' (Quinn 2010: 244).

Thus the research project is conducted like an investigation, under the assumption that the analysand already knows the answers to the problem. In this case the public's knowledge and opinions of public art are already in existence. *The Public Utteraton Machines* are conducting research on the pavements of New York, as Duchamp-esque public art objects that are not there to be looked at, but can be interpreted as sounding boards, data collectors under the guise of an artistic research practice and public art simultaneously. As works that are never finished or completed, they enable public comment on other artworks that must be finished before installation, thus questioning the public art discourse and processes instituted by the city and its various funding agencies for the practice. In addition they fill a gap in the discourse by providing a pretend public service in areas where public art is under-represented (such as the more residential areas of New York). Many public artworks in New York are installed in tourist areas and *The Public Utteraton Machines* will be stationed on pavements in Long Island City, a close borough of New York, and Brooklyn, NY as a counter narrative to the prominent locations in Times Square, Lower Manhattan and Central Park.[5] At the time of this writing for example (July, 2014), Jeff Koons's *Split Rocker*, a 37-feet high hedge animal featuring 50,000 flowering plants, is on display at Rockefeller Plaza, organized by the non-profit agency the Public Art Fund, in collaboration with Gogosian Gallery and Tishman Sayer, a real estate company, to coincide with his retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. It is a prime example of a finished work, located in a tourist spot, funded by the art world establishment and the city, a famous museum.

The Public Utteraton Machines in Brooklyn will feature an image of the Keff Koons *Split Rocker* in Times Square and ask residents if they have been to see it, know what it is, want something like this in their neighbourhood. In New York, there is no *Fourth Plinth*, as that in Trafalgar Square in London, nor do the public vote on what is to be featured on the plinth. If *The Public Utteraton Machines* are read as art objects, they can be seen to symbolically intervene into a discourse that is limited to tourist locations in Manhattan. If read as a research project, then they collect data and ask questions, just as a researcher or art historian might. It asks why public art is not in neighbourhoods, and what new roles public art might play. It also asks people if they really want public art. Perhaps residents do not want or like it after all.

The Public Utteraton Machines as public art interventions are not inserted after something has been discovered to be missing from the discourse. Rather, they play the role of helping to define and uncover some of the problems with the marginalized and fractured field of public art concurrent with problematic locations and processes of public art in New York. These can be interpreted as repressed elements that are denied by the current discourse, and will be uncovered through it. They aim to articulate the gap in the discourse of researching art objects through the subject of the artist-as-researcher and through existence in derelict urban spaces.

If as in this Freudo-Lacanian approach, the existing discourse is interpreted as a language, then the existing public art discourse in New York can be seen as a system of signs that speak in the form of the 'The Public Art Machine', a term coined by Patricia Phillips (Phillips 1989: 190–96) to describe the closed system involving artists, administrators and funders in which public art operates in New York.

She describes this machine as one with many rules and regulations that are part of the public art process, in which the art must be defendable to possible controversy later on – little has changed in this system since then.

> So every possible – and ludicrous – objection is raised at the early stages of the artist selection and proposal process, to anticipate and fend off any possible community disfavor. With programs dependent on such tightly woven sieves, it's not surprising that plenty of the hefty, powerful projects don't make their way through. And it's not surprising that, over the years, the artists who might propose such projects have ruined their energies elsewhere, while the studios of the artists who have learned the appropriate formula have become mini-factories for the churning out of elegant maquettes for current and future projects.
>
> (Phillips 1989: 98)

I argue that this system then, can be viewed as a kind of language: it speaks, it includes and excludes certain works, it sites works in certain places and not others. While traditional linguistics could be helpful here in articulating and analysing this system as a language, Jacques Lacan argues that the problem with this is that the scholar sits outside of language – and not within it. However Lacan also notes that we cannot separate ourselves from this language, that 'language speaks us' (Burke and Crowley 2000: 100). According to Lacan, linguistic theory (which in the later Lacan is renamed as 'linguistricks') does not operate as a disengaged commentary on language as semiotics does, but rather as something that indicates the position of the unconscious within language. Hence public art can be seen to be spoken through its own discourse, its own language, namely what Patricia Phillips terms 'The Public Art Machine'. Lacan contends that the only way to disrupt this language is to speak through it from within it – in the case of the discourse of public art, by creating a different kind of public art project that asks questions in new locations about the discourse itself.

In this tradition the *Utteraton* artworks are not written words that formally sit outside of the practice of public art – this is not a sociological project, but rather an urban intervention of public art objects providing a counter narrative, a counter questioning to the existing language.

The Public Utteraton Machines therefore move outside the art historical paradigm of applying a theory to an art object, in this case public art, towards

6. Creative Time is a not for profit organization in New York, that funds temporary public art projects in New York by curation and invitation only. They hold conferences, that are similar to Ted Talks, with invited speakers only. The Creative Time conferences, that began in 2009, are archived online. Their titles indicate to some extent where debate and discourse are taking place within the field of public art in New York. The direction of focus towards socially engaged art, or social practice/ activist art is evident from these titles, that began by including the word "public art", and now employ the term "activist art" in the conference titles. (See: http://creativetime. org/summit/overview/. Accessed 13 July 2014).

asking why it is applied in the first place (Quinn 2010: 246). The traditional art historical subject/object relationship has simply been 'transferred' as a discourse to public art discourse. Public artworks are assessed and occasionally critiqued by critics as artworks within the context of art historical genres and movements, e.g. minimalism; figurative works are invoked, aesthetics are described. Rosalyn Deutsche (1996: 14) notes that it is necessary for public art and its space to 'be understood, just as art and art institutions have been [understood], as socially constructed spaces'. Perhaps an art historical context is not the only way to create or interpret public art and writing. Intervening into the public art discourse and system by writing an academic article constitutes a separation between the discourse and the thing itself. By inserting an object into a space that asks questions, this separation is narrowed and the discourse is corrupted from within.

This approach to arts-based research necessitates a repositioning of the function of the artwork and a new way of reading art that is part of a research project. Creating work that fits into the existing public art system, which would entail applying for a grant and fulfilling regulations and requirements, would place problematic restrains on a practice-based research project.

The way in which this notion is translated into the practice-based research project *The Utteraton Machines* is, that 'an existing practice [in this case, a practice of discourse on public art] must be reconstructed using the terms of the problem' (Quinn 2010: 257). In the case of public art discourse in New York specifically, the problem lies in the limitations of the practice of public art within the financial, economic and political system that exists there. This 'Public Art Machine' is closed to alternative practices within it, as noted by Patricia Phillips above.

As many key thinkers such as Lucy Lippard, Jane Rendell and Grant Kester have noted in the late 1990s, 'the specialist practice called 'public art', [...] it is an impoverished field, with little critical writing through which artists and designers can interrogate their practices' (Miles 1997: 1).

> In our current political climate, most arts administrators and arts supporters fear controversy over public art. A negative response over public artwork, especially if it is funded by public dollars, might translate into drastically reduced funding for the arts, both locally and nationally.
>
> (Doss 1995: 108)

Since 1996 little has changed in the administration and practice of object-based or 'heavy metal public art' in New York, where the *Utteraton* project is taking place. However, the founding of two new journals – *Public Art Dialogue* and *Art in the Public Sphere* – indicates the beginning of such discourse, albeit in the world of academia.

Socially engaged temporary art practices have however increased in New York (also referred to as dialogic art, new genre public art, activist art or participatory art), partially as a response to the restrictions noted above posed by the processes necessary if something remains in public space for longer than one day. This is evidenced in New York partially by the changing nature and terminology employed in the Creative Time conference[6] titles and presentations from 2008–14.

Funders of object-based public art in New York thus frequently favour abstract works, and locations that are not residential. These are so-called prime locations that are well known or commercial in nature, as evidenced by

my own research through mapping. This trend if sometimes revealed in official application guidelines, as in these below:

> [Public Art] installations may be proposed for malls[7] north of Grand Central at 46th Street up to 96th Street; however most projects are staged on malls between 50th and 57th Streets as these locations are commercial, instead of residential in nature.
>
> (www.fundforparkavenue.org.11/01/2011)

Malcolm Miles notes, that 'public art has become increasingly institutionalized, internationalized, high-budget, and complicit in the social and political norms preferred by successive centrist (or centre-right) governments' (Miles 2014: 176). Is the Jeff Koons work an indication of this?

This is why the *Utteraton Machines* will be installed independently in Long Island City, Queens, NY, a primarily residential and local industrial area, and in Brooklyn, NY, another residential area.

They were also conceived in response to what Patricia Phillips aptly notes about existing public art in New York – that 'one basic assumption that has underwritten many of the contemporary manifestations of public art is the notion that this art derives its publicness from where it is located' (Phillips 1989: 192).

Thus the artist researcher's task is to discover how the [research] problem functions, notes Malcolm Quinn. This cannot be encountered using what one already knows about how an art or design practice functions. The artwork and its apparatus of practice, institution and site then needs to be reframed using the logic of the question or problem at hand (Quinn 2010: 257).

What emerges here then, using this approach, is the underlying assumption by administrators of public art in New York that the outdoor location of the work is what makes it public, not the way in which it might engage the viewer or user, or where and how it might be installed for example, or whether or not it is finished once installed. The *Utteraton Machines* then, were conceived based on the abbreviated contextual findings above, whilst simultaneously providing a service for public utterance that will be archived and transcribed.

The current function of public art in New York is first not to cause controversy; second, to be sited at a prominent location; and third, not to hurt anyone or cause damage. Unfortunately,

> many public art administrators are too understaffed and underpaid to worry about curatorial intent. Some even see curatorial intent as a possible conflict with the dissemination of public funds. With some exceptions, the main criteria for selection as it were, are things like – will the piece fall off the wall if it rains; is the pavement anchor the right one and what happens to the plastic red compound if it gets wet and will the engineer certify this drawing? […] In other words, the concern is instrumental, practical and not philosophical and takes place in the context of (public) art history.
>
> (Hackemann 2012: 2)

I would add one more function of public art in New York that has emerged in the last five years. Brian Tolle (2012; audio file) notes that famous names

encourage donors to donate money to Foundations. This seems to explain, why recent works sited in prime locations in New York appear to receive extra funding for publicity by established private galleries featuring artists they represent. The role of the art in the case of Koons is aesthetic.

Yet,

> when an artist adopts the position of analyst, the visual appeal of imagery is often superseded by the textual properties of the work, thus challenging conventions of beauty. Their analysis may assume its aesthetic character from the coherence of the ideas or from their relationship to visual images rather than through the images themselves.
>
> (Lacy 1995: 175)

This relationship to the visual images then is what we must grapple with as we become experts in an inquiry, which includes both writing and text. The relinquishment of traditional notions of the creative magus or genius figure disengaged with society that galleries might revere – after all that might be fun – is important if we want to widen our scope of engagement with the world. Creating objects for sale can be seen as a limited endeavour. As Allen Sekula noted in 2012 in a response to Nato Thompson's analysis of 'Occupy Wall Street' and the art world, that:

> The 'art world' is a small sector of culture in general, but an important one. […] The art world is the most complicit fabrication workshop for the compensatory dreams of financial elites who have nothing else to dream about but a "subjectivity" they have successfully killed within themselves.
>
> (Sekula 2012: 103)

The Public Utteraton Machines sit on pavements, and although they are art, some might not know, and that is perhaps a good thing. The question that remains to be asked is whether arts-based research, in which the writing and the artwork are not separate activities, is a viable future arts practice beyond the Ph.D. Or will they become separate entities once again, if only because the channels for output of such research still remain largely unchanged.

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Rebecca Hackemann is a British-German conceptual artist who has lived and exhibited in New York, San Francisco, Germany and England in the past twenty years. In 2009, she began a research degree at Chelsea College of Art, University of the Arts London.

Hackemann holds a BA (Hons) in Film, Video and Photographic Arts, University of Westminster (PCL), London (1994), and an MFA from Stanford University, CA, USA (1996). In 2001 she completed the one-year Whitney Museum of American Arts Independent Study Program Fellowship in New York. Hackemann recently presented a paper at the psi20 conference, Shanghai, China (2014), and the College Art Association Conference, Los Angeles, CA

(2012). In 2012 she published a paper with E-Flux Art & Education Papers[8]. The Utteraton Machine Project will be installed in Brooklyn and Queens, NY in October, 2014.

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