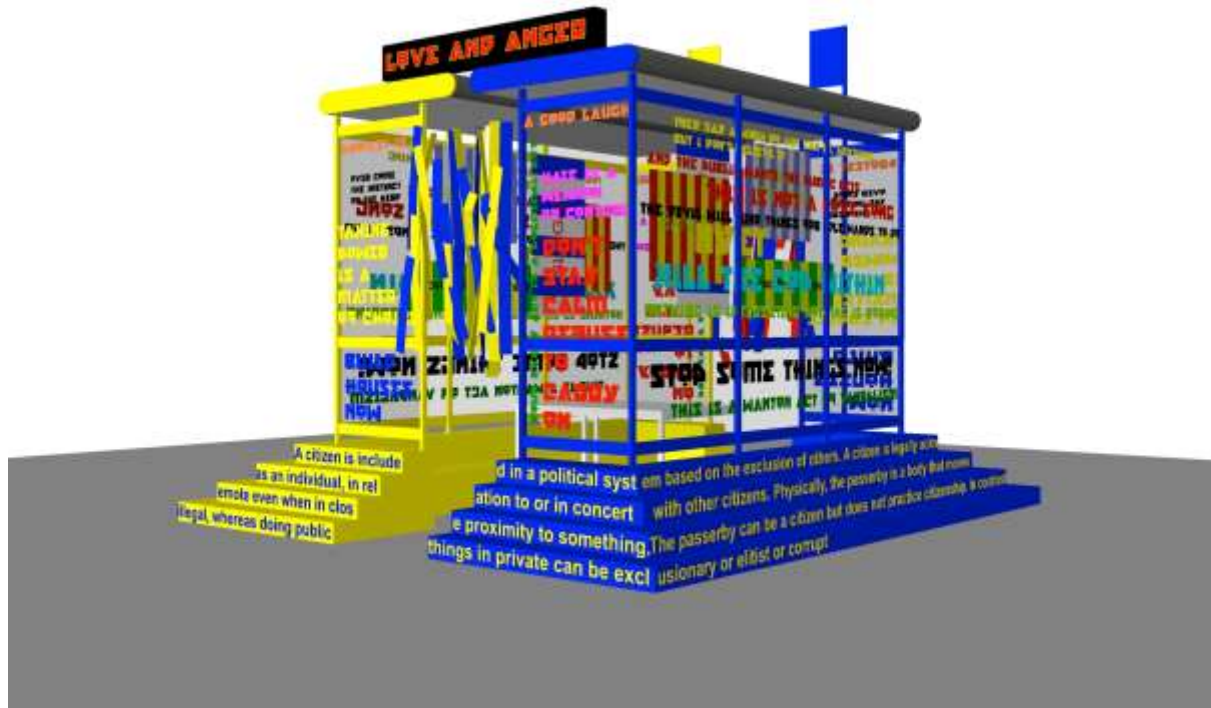


Into the Fray Freee



View of proposed pavilion for Citizen Ship, Freee & Modern Architect, 2017

When the political landscape trembles under the weight of its own inadequacy, refuge from the banality of its incompetence can, with a little help from friends, sometimes be found in the most unlikely of places. Since its inception, the artist collective Freee, has been unrelenting in its ability to seek out those trembles, exploit the cracks, and offer in that playful, dedicated journeying, critically sussed and madly inventive sanctuaries. It made sense to explore via email expose, their journey, aloud, together.

These conversation pieces, initiated with a volley by Johnny Golding, couched the discussion in terms of public space itself, and the way in which artists Mel Jordan, Dave Beech, Sean Griffiths and Andy Hewett took waded into the debate by taking back the public sphere. Here is a slice of our discussion.

My Dear Andy, Sean, Dave and Mel

It is a great pleasure to ask you to begin a conversation around the work of the FREEE collective, its inspiring vision and multiple/nuanced impact on contemporary visual art, practice and politics today. Thank you for asking me to take part, in part as fellow traveller, in part as interlocutor, and of course in large part as a nomadic philosopher. Perhaps during this email exchange, we will all embody those tropes and possibly exceed them altogether. So let's go on the journey now.

Because your work energises along the lines of spontaneity, joy, play whilst simultaneously engaging in serious political acumen – what you have often referred to as 'the public sphere' – I'd like to begin our conversation by asking you to share what you mean by 'public', especially in an age when it seems to be disappearing into the netherworlds of internet supra-highways or cordoned off amongst corporate glass structures sliced through by shopping mall enclosures.

Over to you Dave, Mel, Andy, and Sean.

All best
Johnny

Dear Johnny

First a bit of background.....I was one of the founders of the group FAT, an art and architecture collective which disbanded in 2014. My association with the FREEE collective goes back to the early days of FAT in the 1990's, when long before we got any architectural commissions, we did a lot of street based art projects involving the use of bus shelters, for sale signs, business card and shopping bags. Dave Beech was involved in a lot of those projects and they were very much concerned with idea of the public sphere and art's relationship to it. So for example, the bus shelter project involved using the in-built advertising sites of the shelters to display works of art - 200 in all.

These were sited right across all different parts of London. Out of that project came the realisation that we had designed an art gallery, not a white cube, but something that was fragmented, parasitic with respect to existing aspects of the public realm and integrated into everyday life. It was at a time (1993) when advertising itself had become increasingly "arty" and many of the artists who took part played on this,

making work which was highly ambiguous with respect to its status as art. Because it was exhibited in a public sphere, it kind of allowed its viewers, who for the most part were not connoisseurs to somehow be comfortable with it.

Also interesting was the psychological characteristics of the bus shelter as an environment. They are liminal spaces of a strange disinterestedness in the sense that people occupying them don't want to be there. They are only there because they are waiting for the bus that will take them home or to wherever they are going. This always seemed to me to be an interesting situation in which people might encounter art.

That project also made me think a lot about bus shelters as public spaces. They are enclosures which are open on one side and hence they have ambiguous boundaries. They are used for other purposes, for example suburban kids hang out in them and they have been the locations of countless first kisses. In that respect they are important places which potentially allow for a kind of publicness in form of debate - whether about football, sex, fashion or politics - that is increasingly excluded from the kind of increasingly privatised "public" space to which you allude in your question. With the advent of the internet and smart phones, they also become potential sites for the collective production consumption of that information.

So given all that, when the opportunity to work with FREEE in Milton Keynes came up, the idea of doing a pavilion based on bus shelters seemed a good way forward in trying to create a public space which had a degree a familiarity, albeit one that is also defamiliarised

in a number of ways, perhaps most importantly by being progressively covered by multiple texts in a number of different forms which will be the outputs of Freee's project.

Best wishes

Sean

Hi Johnny and all,

I'm glad Sean began by talking about the bus shelter project, which, if I remember rightly, was originally called AdShite but the title had to change on request of the advertising company that owned all the advertising spaces on London bus routes and sponsored the project. These public projects in the 1990s were important to the sense of those artists who were

marginal to and critical of the YBA phenomenon and its easy relationship to the art market and the celebrity culture of the media. It was not so much that we thought public art or the general public was a cure for everything that was wrong with art's institutions and its economy, but that these artist-run (and architect-run) projects gave us a different institutional setting for making works and making exhibitions or events. They were often un-curated, in the sense that nobody was in charge of the selection of works and the numbers of artists involved in them were often very high. In fact, I think the FAT project for the Venice Biennale, held in the Post Office, had more artists in it than in the rest of the biennale put together. Quite often, then, the audience would be almost nothing in comparison with the sheer number of artists participating. As such, they felt like a different model for thinking about what public art might be: not addressing itself to the public or the general public, but using public spaces and public apparatuses as instruments for experimenting with forms of assembling works and people. One of the things I remember most from the various FAT art projects I was involved in was the way that they always seemed to result in flocks of young artists sitting on the floor of a meeting room, filling a double decker bus or whatever.

Bus shelters are like kiosks insofar as they are incomplete open cubes (in Sol Lewitt's sense). Kiosks have three functional components: a vertical element which typically doubles as a wall and a sign, a counter (the horizontal space shared by the kiosk operator and the 'customer'), and a barrier which prevents the 'customer' from occupying the space of the kiosk operator (often the counter and the barrier functions are performed by the same physical component). Bus shelters can have narrow horizontal elements (seats) but not counters or barriers. This is why they feel more open and less hierarchical than conventional kiosks. All this means, of course, is that the occupants of a bus shelter are all on the same side of a barrier that is not signalled by the bus shelter itself. When the bus arrives and the door of the bus opens with the bus driver cut off from the passengers, the kiosk is finally completed not only by the acts of payment but also by the counter-barrier that brings the 'customers' in contact with and separates them from the driver-kiosk-operator.

Kiosks, for us, are exemplary of an architecture of social transition. In particular - and this was what initiated our interest in kiosks - they address passersby (the signage of kiosks can be seen from relatively far off and aims to draw them towards the kiosk and its products) as potential customers. Like advertising generally, which converts readers and viewer into consumers, the kiosk and its signage hopes to

change people, to change the direction of your walk and insert a specific desire into you: come here, buy this! After spending quite a lot of time experimenting with ways to invert the transformation implied by advertising (not converting readers into consumers, but, perhaps, occupying advertising spaces with political slogans to invite consumers to become critical readers), we were interested in experimenting with kiosk architecture and the activities that take place in and around kiosks in order to convert passersby into critical members of a public sphere. In some sense this was driven by an acknowledgement that the billboard works were being treated by curators as little more than a novel format of photography. The kiosks allowed us to occupy the galleries and programme events that gave more emphasis to the social processes of opinion formation that we were calling up in the billboards but weren't acting out with participants very often. However, we quickly noticed that the kiosks could be treated as rather lively sculptures, and so we are now trying to frame them more as institutions within institutions rather than objects that occupy the place of art within galleries and museums.

Love
Dave

Mel and Andy got together this morning to respond - this is from us.

We take the idea of the public from public sphere theory which foregrounds publishing, opinion formation and exchange. We depart from thinking about the public as a mass of bodies or a space, rather we think about the public as a collection of individuals and a process by which we all make and share opinions. It is in this way that we think the 'public' has the potential to act politically- directly as a group of actants and also as a method of transforming subjectivity through an exchange of opinions.

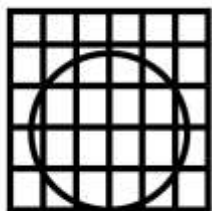
Our recent works have seen us looking at the potential of kiosks as a place in which we can exchange opinions. We have been considering how kiosks can operate as temporary meeting points in the public realm in which the passerby can develop their political ideas. Citizen Ship is the biggest and most ambitious structure we have built to date and it has been designed to accommodate a number of people. During June we will place Citizen Ship in 5 sites across Milton Keynes. Passersby will be able to visit and partake in workshop sessions on 'how to write a slogan' in which they are invited to make and publish new slogans that will be added to the structure. We are planning to include a LED display where slogans will be shown. We invited Sean Griffiths to work with

us on the design of Citizen Ship as we were fans of the art and architecture group FAT of which he was a founding member.

Just thinking about your comment on the internet and the supra highway, Habermas in his early account of the Bourgeois Public Sphere may have emphasized a face to face encounter but this was not for convivial reasons rather against a debased public sphere enacted through the colonization of the media. Opinion formation occurs through a combination of agreement and disagreement although liberalism forefronts harmony and union. Typically Facebook invites you to 'like' overlooking the importance of 'dislike', this results in a concealment of difference. The digital public sphere as it has become known needs some critical attention!

We think there is something to be gained for the function of art by thinking about the spectator or viewer of artworks as potential publics. We want to think about the role of viewers in a temporal sense in that we believe that passerby's can be simultaneously Hecklers, Witnesses, Signatories, Advocates, Spokespersons, Publishers, Badge-wearers, Distributors, Marchers, Recruits, Promise-makers, Co-conspirators, Accomplices ; we all go from one mode of being public to another. In this way we all have the potential to act on the world and we imagine the utilization of our individual agency working towards collective dreams - like making a better world to live in.

Our kiosks operate as temporary meeting points in the public realm in which the passerby can exchange dialogue and opinions. The kiosks attempt to create consumers and producers of ideas and opinions without a commercial exchange.



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