

Part TWO

Attempts as socially engaged work in the past have received mixed reviews. A Whitney Biennial in New York concerned with social issues produced criticisms along the lines of ‘art is a form of visual communication that must exist for its own sake before it can further a cause’ and ‘while the exhibition dwells at length on the problems that face fin de siècle America, it does not often demonstrate their conversion into convincing works of art’ and ‘generally, almost no artist is helped by these ancillary statements of purpose; when they do not grossly exaggerate or simplify the artist’s effort, they explain what should be self-evident in the work itself, but is not’.

Is this work more about the times and less about the art of our times.? Attempts to produce socially or politically relevant art no not always prioritise aesthetic, transformative or sublime functions.

As a sculptor I’ve been publically commissioned and the process is either me persuading a committee to accept my proposal, or me accepting the committee’s wishes for an inclusive set of references. This piece called ‘Hinxton Crowd’ was commissioned by the Wellcome Trust to celebrate the completion of the human genome. It is intended to refer both to

the community of scientists that worked on the project and the ‘audience’ of people that would benefit from the advances in medicine possible through genetic therapy. You’ll notice however the presence of a security camera, making the point that this was not a public environment but a protected, specialised context.

Working with schools has been a rewarding way to facilitate the production of meaningful art, by and for the people involved. At Swaffham Prior I worked with all the children at a primary school to commemorate a favourite tree that was dying. Each child participated in producing a part of the whole and as a result felt both responsible and I hope further enlightened by the process. Art was not a remote, elitist thing, but a product of society. They could see the whole project was negotiated, but with me leading the way in the overall concept. It had to have a clear vision and an inventive outcome.

Looking at social processes for recent work, I’ve been struck by how little people seem able to be involved in planning their own environment, despite systems in place to try and establish that. These systems get bogged down in details and do not really engage in the initial stages where many of the major decisions are made. Scale, materials, environments and viewpoints are often fixed before consultation. In Anglia Square in Norwich,

the development assessment looked at Positive and Negative buildings, vistas and Spaces. Qube consultancy from Cambridge produced this document, from which I derived a series of photographs. This was directly engaged with the planners viewpoint and produced some unattractive images. Is this how the planner sees the environment? What kind of world do people want? Are artists able change the world or do they simply take part in it? Are they decorators producing expensive luxuries for a cultural elite, or social and political activists?