



Ruth Barker: I'm Ruth Barker and I'm an artist and writer based in Glasgow. I make work in a variety of different contexts, some of them which are more public than others. I don't really think of myself as a public artist, but my work sometimes comes into a public sphere.

Throughout the Working in Public seminars I have been thinking about a piece of work I made in 2006, which was called *Placed upon the Horizon*. It was a book that was printed and published by South Lanarkshire Council.

The book is a series of 28 interviews that Niall Macdonald and I conducted with people who were involved in public art in some way or another – so there were a lot of different kinds of people, from artists to project managers to people that commission work. The intention of the piece was always to present a number of different voices on a single, equal, platform. I guess the intention was always to listen to what people actually had to say and to hear how, and why, and when, they disagreed from each other. I set out somehow not to assimilate those differences, but to find space for them. I wanted to explore how they might co-exist, and why they might need to co-exist in the context of such a multifarious kind of practice as public art.

As an artwork, I think what *Placed upon the Horizon* does is to become a snapshot. It distils a particular moment of thought that was happening with many different people across the field at a particular time. Lots of people were thinking about very similar issues, but they were coming at them from very different directions. A kind of moment of cultural thinking is represented in the spaces in between what different people say.

I guess as an artist I became very interested in the moment of metamorphosis that occurs when spoken testimony is represented as a written transcript and in the shift of authority that happens when that occurs; when the immediacy, and sometimes the guilelessness of speech is transferred into something that is a lot more concrete and a lot more culpable in the written word.

When we speak and someone listens to us, our words can stay very, very intangible, but when we speak and someone writes it down, a very different relationship happens between our words and the world that surrounds them. Throughout the Working in Public seminars, I was able to put that piece of work; put that book that we wrote, in much broader context and see it as part of a much bigger conversation about the state of public art as a practice and as an industry today - I suppose both in Scotland and more internationally.

I think some really difficult questions have come out of Working in Public and I think that's really important. There have been a lot of questions about who decides the quality of art – of any art – whether in a gallery or in public spaces. There have been questions about how close a relationship art should have with the systems and the symbols of authority. What does it mean for us to be here today, to have this quite close conversation between art practices and a governmental system? I think we have also had to ask questions about how we can protect art's responsibility to be dangerous, to be offensive, or to be ugly, as well as to be attractive, and beneficent, and useful. I don't really know how to answer those questions, but maybe part of the way we can identify a really healthy and really exciting and really thriving field is to ask questions that we cannot answer yet.

I guess if I could close by suggesting one thing that I have come to really hold onto as an idea – something really important that has come out of the last couple of months – I guess it would be just that: That maybe we should carry on asking ourselves the toughest questions possible. So long as we don't believe that we know all the answers, then I think we're doing alright.

Artists are just like any other group of people because artists are part of the wider public: artists are part of the texture that makes up the fabric of this country. The relationships between individuals and other people are part of what makes us human, and art is one of the ways that that relationship manifests itself. So maybe art itself is one of the things that makes us human and, if that's true, then maybe public art makes us the most human of all.

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