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Author(s): Jonathan Vickery

Article Title: Art, Public Authorship and the Possibility of Re-Democratization

Year of publication: 2011

Link to published article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2011.575296>

Publisher statement: This is an electronic version of an article published in Jonathan Vickery (2011): Art, Public Authorship and the Possibility of Re-Democratization, *Visual Culture in Britain*, 12:2, 219-235. To link to this

article:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14714787.2011.575296>.

Visual Culture in Britain is available online at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14714787.2011.575296>

## **'Art, Public Authorship and the possibility of Re-Democratization'**

*Visual Culture in Britain*, vol.12. no.2. (July, 2011).

### **Abstract:**

The subject of this study is a large public art project by German artist Jochen Gerz, which was part of the urban regeneration program The Phoenix Initiative in Coventry City, 1999-2004. The study presents a short historical backdrop to Gerz's work by way of defining 'public authorship' of which the Coventry project is one example. It extends the literature on contemporary countermonument by assessing Gerz's artistic strategy in using a monument to exploring the conditions of public culture and possible shape of a cultural public sphere in the contemporary city. The public art project lasted over five years and was a mechanism by which the political issues at stake in the public life of Coventry, particularly the socio-historic conflicts that are constitutive of its civic identity, were articulated. The study argues that public authorship succeeded in identifying some crucial coordinates in the political constitution of public culture in Coventry, but in the face of competing civic rhetoric and new urban policy initiatives, the project remains an open inquiry. This study concludes by identifying some critical lines of inquiry for future studies in art's critical role in the public sphere.

**Keywords:** countermonument; Jochen Gerz; Coventry; Phoenix Initiative; cultural democracy; urban space.

### **Article**

In Britain in the last decade there has been an explosion in art commissioning for the public realm, generating, in turn, a radical diversification in public and urban art practice. Previous categories of 'community' art, 'street' art and even 'public' art (traditionally, a single sculpture in an open civic space) are dissolving, or seem less relevant as urban space has become a continuous plinth for new forms of installation, architectural collaboration, performance and social-engagement based creative practices. One by-product of this is the increasing interest in public art demonstrated by social science-based disciplines, like urban or cultural geography, management and organization studies and public policy studies. (1) However, the quantity of urban-based art produced during this time has not been matched in scale by research enterprises, criticism and theorization. (2)

This study is situated in and around the year of the Millennium, 2000, which saw a sudden surge commissions specific to celebratory millennium urban regeneration schemes. (3) In this context, we find some significant ongoing research concerning local authority management of cultural commissioning, art and regional development, culture and regional identity, social inclusion and place identity. (4) What is not in evidence is

sustained research on the constitution of the 'public' in this broad complex terrain of public culture and public space. In Britain the 'public sphere' (unlike Europe, or even the US) is not a major field of interdisciplinary research. (5) Yet the growing political fact of increasing European Union governance of urban, cultural and social policy, is argument enough for the need of more explicit attention to the actual and possible function of cultural production in current and future configurations of the public sphere.

Our subject, a major public art project by German artist Jochen Gerz and called 'public authorship', foregrounds the question of the identity of the 'public' both in a national and a European context (Figure 1). I will not be offering a visual 'reading' of public authorship's art 'objects', but will attempt to explain the 'reflexive' dimension of the project – the way Gerz's art project created a framework of investigation into the meaning and politics of the term 'public' in a contemporary British city. (6)

Jochen Gerz, began his career in the early 1960s as a journalist, poet and publisher, and maintains a driving interest in the use of language in social contexts, public dialogue, and the 'narrative' content of civic spaces – how civic identity emerges through historic narratives of people and events, and how these narratives inform the political discourse of nation statehood. Spaces of 'memorialisation', like city squares with their monuments, function in this way for Gerz. (7) His two art works for Coventry, initially commissioned in 1998, were ambiguous in their status as 'works of art' – he did not refer to them as art, though the project publicity used the term in conveying its aims to various social constituencies. (8) They were, in a pragmatic sense, urban design features and communication media for a larger social-participation project. The first was a traditional memorial-type obelisk, *The Future Monument*, and the other, *The Public Bench*, a piece of embedded street furniture positioned against the cyclorama wall at the back of Coventry's new 'plaza', Millennium Square (Figure 2 and Figure 3). (9) The defining features of both entities were plaques (engraved metal plates), and the public authorship project largely consisted of generated names of living people – largely Coventry citizens – for the plaques. The plaque is a commonplace commemorative device, and as a medium it does not lend itself to much creative manipulation. Gerz's interest in plaques is both visual and political: they are a unique inscription of individual identity within a narrative of events formative of a specific place identity; and they are an excruciatingly minimal signifier of the civic significance of an individual citizen's life (or death). As a project, public authorship was internal to an urban design plan for a future

city space, a space yet to appear, something which Gerz used as a metaphor for a future public. The names of living persons for the plaques came to signify their active participation in the unfolding fate of such a future public. (10)

The *Monument* featured eight names of civil associations in Coventry and of nations who were once enemies; the *Bench* featured names of over 2000 individual residents (or interconnected others, such as relatives abroad). Gerz's public project was initiated by two questions: 'Who are your past enemies? Who are your current friends?' The project lasted from 1999–2004. The urban design plan of which it was a part was called the Phoenix Initiative; the Phoenix was originally the civic symbol used for Coventry as it rose from the ashes of Luftwaffe bombing in 1945. (11) Gerz's immediate concern on arrival was with the way Coventry's civic identity was so heavily invested in this relatively recent narrative of annihilation and resurrection. His interest was in part personal, for as a child he had experienced trauma and family death in the allied bombing of Berlin. (12) The term 'public authorship' was used by Gerz reflexively, as a question as well as a proper noun: what does it mean for a 'public' to act as 'author' in this urban space? Who is this public? Gerz's questions about enemies and friends were at once personal, social, national-historical questions, often eliciting personal accounts of immigration or experience of war. They also invited more conventional stories from city inhabitants about the place, its emergence and role in national narratives of origins and victories. (13) Throughout the project an emphasis was maintained on authorship – on participants constructing a narrative that articulates their experience of recent history – with Gerz negating the social expectations routinely projected onto artists: the desire for stylish art products, for answers, for cultural revival, for international prestige. Through printed leaflets, posters, public gatherings and broadcast media he publicised two questions, and the project's 'content' was to a large degree formed by the responses he received.

Gerz began using the term 'public authorship' with the Coventry commission, but since 2010 and following publication of his four volume *Catalogue Raisonné* (14) it has become a category for most of his public works since 1995. Chronologically, public authorship was initiated by the French commissions *The Living Monument* (Le Monument vivant: Biron, 1995-6) and *The Witnesses* (Les Témoins: Cahors, 1997-8). Both involved an oral dialogue with a whole community, gradually materializing as archived documentation, a series of public statements and then a published narrative. In

Biron, an older neglected war monument was reconstructed and re-inscribed with names and statements by living inhabitants in response to an unpublished question. The process lasted years and re-oriented a community around the re-writing of local history, this time where individual experiences and memories were inserted into the 'official' narrative. The ensuing discussion on allegiance, sacrifice and the cost nation states exact from their citizens in times of conflict, developed into a political meditation addressing the then current aftermath of the Bosnian War. The texts were published by Actes Sud in 1996 as *La Question secrète*. The second work, *The Witnesses*, involved recounting the experiences of local women during the Vichy era. In the town of Cahors towards the end of the famous Maurice Papon trial, statements by the women appeared on large posters in and around the town, and then in a local newspaper. Gerz's public works since then have often involved a gradual 'materialization' of personal experience or memory – where, using a form of publicity or public media, the historical content of 'subjective' experience was inserted into dominant 'objective' national narratives, interrupting the concealed processes by which such narratives are allowed to order (and 'police') collective memory.

A reverse process, of 'de-materialisation', also emerges in public authorship, but to the same end. Gerz's earlier and perhaps most famous work, the *Harburg Monument Against Fascism* (Mahnmal gegen Faschismus: Hamburg; realized between 1986-1993 in collaboration with Esther Shalev-Gerz) was a countermonument that worked by gradually sinking and disappearing into the ground on which it stood. It was a 12m high stele coated in soft lead and erected in a section of a shopping area. Pedestrians and shoppers were invited to sign their names in the lead with a steel pen (as a gesture against fascism). Names appeared, but in time were largely over-written by a growing profusion of graffiti, pro-fascist statements and angry responses. The pillar gradually sunk into the ground, and in 1993 finally disappeared. Only the top of the pillar, level with the pavement, remains visible and a nearby plaque bears a titular inscription. Gerz's use of monuments created a distinct category within the post-1960s quasi-genre of countermonuments – 'antimonument'. In this case, the absence or disappearance of the art object places the burden of the narrative's fate exclusively on the viewer. (15) Antimonument is a large and complicated subject, but a point relevant for us here is the way it becomes a site for 'conflict'. This conflict is cultural rather than social in the sense that it emerges from a discursive interrogation of the *conditions* of the social, the

collectively held narratives of belonging shared by a people, community and a nation, and the values and beliefs around which any sense of 'public' coalesce. The 'anti' in antimonument is used in its original Latin sense of 'supplanting', a re-placement, or here a process of over-writing. Antimonument simulates a discursive conflict, resisting through over-writing the consolidation or determining impact of official historical narratives on civic or social life.

In his extended essay, 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life' (1873), Nietzsche discusses the motives and cultural function of strong official narratives of past events and national origins, observing their willful dramatization, misrepresentation, and inadvertent disinvestment from the political potential of the present, or of everyday life. Officially sanctioned narrative plays a critical role in defining the parameters of cultural aspirations. (16) But official or 'monumental' narrative, admits a 'public' or an individual self-determining citizenry, only insofar as they are instrumental in the enterprise of State (particularly in acts of defining 'unity' afforded by victory in times of national conflict, which may be war, or internal civil strife). (17) Gerz's antimonument is not simply an attempt as narrative-creation without monumentalisation or the institutionalization of individual experience as a national enterprise – locating present living individual experience as formative for a new narrative-making of public-formation.

'Monumentalisation' (the structuring of public space by heroic civic narrative) is irrepressible, open only to interruption or temporary interjection. In Coventry, the mechanism of inscription was one such means of interruption, in the first instance a list of names – volunteered. Lists of names are common features of public authorship, at once semantically empty, yet active in articulating a new criteria for the public inscription of the past (Figure 4). Charting Gerz's public work since the Harburg *Monument*, provokes questions of the narratives that define the location, position and meaning of individual conscience in public life. Of course, Germany is a specific case (18), but the principle is relevant throughout Europe. As Gerz pointed out: 'If we think of the present as history, in Germany it is the Nazis, in Britain it is colonialism'. (19)

Monuments, for Gerz, are simply markers of the largely invisible work of official civic narrative, an urban unconscious and historical self-representation that rationalizes its own emergence in an incontestable version of a sequence of events, morally sanctioned by its nation state. While the narrative itself may not be apparent to public consciousness, its social epiphenomena are the criteria for public membership. As

James E. Young suggests, civic spaces used for memorialisation are empirically 'open' (to physical access) but epistemically 'sealed' (from cultural production): monuments are a means by which the mnemonic-cognitive enterprise of public narrative-making is at once exemplified and pre-empted. (20) And since Haussmann's reconstruction of Paris, civic spaces in Europe have been a means of securing the permanency of civic authority and its narratives against the undermining power of modernization's temporality, social ephemerality, historical relativisation and thus openness to contestation.

The antimonument strategy of public authorship raises the constitutive power of civic narrative to a popular social consciousness by inviting a random social response to questions or contentious terms. The emerging social conversation serves to interrupt the hermetic fixity of the narrative, de-naturalise its historical constitution by admitting new 'objects' into that narrative (such as the testimony of marginalized citizens, or even repentant civic officials). The process usually takes some years, but Gerz purposively 'de-sanctifies' the civic by revealing that power and not ethical 'right' animates the narrative's historical self-justification. In Coventry, the *Monument* and *Bench* were designed for a brand new plaza and before the actual project began. Public authorship did not attempt an inevitably disingenuous simulation of collective creativity – the public was to engage in 'authorship', not collaborate on the construction of visual objects. The 'art' was the way in which the space was used as a site for acts of inscription, involving the mobilization of a random social populace (Figure 5). The *Monument* and *Bench* were media for an activity that would define whether or not any coherent articulation of 'public' was possible. Gerz does not push for 'outputs' and sometimes acts of dialogue did not amount to much. In Coventry, the project ended but for lots of reasons was left unfinished. Public authorship asks questions, creates spaces, but does not provide on-demand cultural value.

### **Future publics**

The concept of 'the public' is at once old and tired (think of its English provenance, from Locke and Mill) and yet internal to the increasingly urgent debates on international democratic legitimacy (21). Jürgen Habermas's classic text, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, took 27 years to find its way into English (German 1962; trans.1989), and during that time generated vast discussion in Europe. (22) This

was not replicated in Britain, where it seems that 'public' is so internal to our cultural consciousness we mistakenly assume it to be a natural progeny of our civil institutions and historic parliamentary system. Peter Uwe Hohendahl, in his historical study of the concept of the public, disabuses us of the idea that Britain's civil society naturally cultivated a strong public sphere. (23) The political concept of a British 'public' was only tangentially related to an actual cultural 'public sphere', and with some irony, Hohendahl indicates that our current dominant concept of 'public' is actually Habermasian. For Habermas, the public sphere was bourgeois (of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), comprising the press, media, civil associations, public spaces, social and political reformers, their 'societies' and of course cultural institutions. The point was, that from an active 'public culture' emerged 'rational' debate (debate conducted according to explicit criteria), producing a political consensus that informed the State mechanisms of representation and governance on decision-making. The term 'public' in Britain, by way of general observation, is anachronistic insofar as it still assumes a transparent relation of equality between the political and juridical function of civil institutions and the State, and that a breadth of substantive dialogue among its citizens mediate that relation. (24) Confusingly, the 'civic' in a UK sense (commonly in policy documents) often denotes devolved State powers, such as local authorities, and the term 'public' is often used as a synonym for such powers. State officials often refer to their affairs in terms of 'public life'; public space is assumed to be under the complete jurisdiction of a devolved State power. The political representatives of the 'public' trade off this ambiguity, an ambiguity seemingly critical to the legitimisation of democratic State power.

Gerz arrived in Coventry, a city of memorials, in 1999 promoting a public authorship project, whose first task was to encounter 'the public'. That public was introduced to Gerz via various media announcements and newspaper articles, many identifying him as an 'avant-garde' artist. Anyone acquainted with Gerz's radical multi-media and performance work of the 1960s and 70s, as seen at his 2002 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou (25), would however be surprised at Gerz's unassuming manner and lack of artistic self-assertion. The old avant-garde impulse for radical 'opposition' was to a large degree born out of a critique of nationalism, and as a German intellectual who suffered in World War Two, Gerz is typically anti-nationalist. However, for him the emphatic binary oppositions between art and life, culture and economics, state and civil society, no longer hold. In Coventry, public authorship revolved around three distinct spheres of



activity – the location (the site of *Monument* and *Bench*), the participation (of random populace), and communication (Gerz's mobilization of all the forms of media available). An interesting element in Habermas's *The Structural Transformation* is how his earlier radical interests in 'direct democracy' and political participation re-emerge in the form of speculation on a possible revitalization of the public sphere. As Habermas phrases it: we must find 'a critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it', and 'a critical publicity brought to life within intraorganizational public spheres', that is constituted by the 'public' of the organizations' members. (26)

While just an idea, with it Habermas indicates the possible effectiveness of a three-platform strategy, combining location, participation and communication in an active 're-democratizing' of our world of monolithic government and corporate bureaucracies. It involves making the organizational entities of bureaucratic systems self-reflexive, subverting their monoculture and publically unresponsive character. The objective is to create provisional and plural micro-publics, generated by participants within a given organization or system (i.e. professionals, employees). This participation is conducted by generating new means of communication, new forms of 'publicity' (publizität, a broader public information, entailing free speech, rather than the 'promotions' connoted by contemporary English). After Habermas, Gerz believes a public sphere is not a given and civil institutions (in our case, city councils and state-sponsored media) are not its guarantor. Yet the future of democracy lies in an active public sphere, where political systems are opened up to social and cultural intervention. (27)

Habermas was ambivalent on the role of artistic culture – contemporary art particularly – as a formative influence on a prospective public sphere. (28) And for Gerz, the occupation of actual urban space is a condition of the development of a public culture, not such an issue for Habermas, despite his historical conceptualization of 'public' in terms of the spaces it occupied -- the cafes, streets, squares, public halls and suchlike. As major commentators from Nancy Fraser to Douglas Kellner, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift have pointed out, these 'spaces' are indeed fast becoming plural micro-spheres of intraorganizational (and inter-organizational) interaction, propelled by diverse emerging 'publics' (29), from new religious sub-cultures to internet-based political communities. Examples of Gerz's public authorship in Coventry (and currently in Dublin and the cities of the Ruhr) (30), have in one sense involved 'intraorganizational' mechanisms of civic governance in the form of complex urban regeneration schemes. Gerz does not stand

outside, oppose or define himself in opposition to, the governing 'establishment' (city authorities, municipal museums, cultural commissioning consultancies, and so on), but plays a role in their mechanisms of civic ideology and self-certified legitimacy. Public authorship in Coventry entailed networking among professionals in various organizations, but the participants themselves were largely outside professional spheres, and were disconnected social groupings, many immigrant and non-British national associations. Mass immigration as it appears in debates on future public spheres particularly interests Gerz, in part as recent demographic shifts pull apart the traditional critical theory idea that culture is a monoculture 'culture industry' run by a corporate monolith. The late capitalist insatiability for low-cost labour seems to have been bought unwittingly at the cost of a centralized political administration of culture, a condition of its own political control.

### **Coventry, rhetoric and narrative**

Gerz's work in Coventry, from 1999 to 2000, featured an antimonument strategy, but without an original monument, monumental site or place of ritual civic memorialism. Antimonument usually required an interrogation of 'location' (as in the narrative constitution of specific place identities), but here the location itself was physically under construction, and from a cultural and urban policy standpoint, under 'narrative' reconstruction. In Germany, as Gerz often repeated, Coventry is famous for being 'successfully' obliterated in the first blitz bombing in 1940. In 1999, after a routine art commissioning process, Gerz's project began in the city with his two central questions: 'Who are your past enemies? Who are your current friends?' The questions on some official publicity avoided the second person pronoun and asked 'Who were the enemies of the past?', particularly after September 11, 2001, when various city officials attempted to halt the project. In tandem with the masterplanner, Sir Richard MacCormac, Gerz conducted initial public presentations, debates and conversations, opening up a complex web of competing rhetoric on what 'public' meant in Coventry. He took up a visiting professorship at Coventry University School of Art and Design, who availed him of a studio and research team of volunteers. For four years the team carried out ethnographic research on the local populace, including religious and ethnic groups and refugees. They identified the various associations, clubs, societies and protest groups that made up a possible public, transcribing conversations with individuals concerning 'their past enemies; their current friends'. The growing 'living archive' of

stored material was a subject of conceptual debate in public talks and presentations. The students also designed the publicity and the plaques, garnering names of individuals, groups and 'countries' who were enemies but now friends. Gerz, during this process, was an intellectual interlocutor inserting himself as a 'reference point' into the networks that control decision-making mechanisms of both local political and social spheres, such as City Council (though, interestingly, not the 'art world').

The Phoenix Initiative was driven by a design team led by a masterplanner, initially supported by an art consultancy who set up the public selection process for the seven artists eventually commissioned. (31) The masterplan itself was indicative of the overdetermined concept of 'public' in Coventry, and the fact that both the commissioning organs of the City Council and the Phoenix Initiative team had their own strong public-realm-constructing agenda. (32) The urban expanse available was structured in terms of a metaphorical journey (the physical trajectory being an actual pedestrian route) through what was left of Coventry's historic centre, animated by the theme of reconciliation between the past, its industry, conflicts, the present and its aspirations for renewed productivity and for 'peace'. (33) Physically this would run from the old cathedral bombed-out during World War II and earlier archaeological sites through a new boulevard, into a new plaza onto which the famous transportation museum opened, around a new spiral ramp and up to a parkland area: The Garden of International Friendship – an ethically charged journey from past to future. In his essay, 'Art and Regeneration in the City of Coventry', Sir Richard MacCormac pointed out that the intention was to 'literally and metaphorically unearth the past of the city and use our interpretations of its history to give a new kind of energy about its possible kind of future.' (34).

There was slippage between the semantics of 'future' in Gerz's *Future Monument* and the broader future proposed by the Phoenix Initiative, particularly in the context of Millennium Commission heavily branded aspirations and new Government funding under the brand of national urban 'renaissance' (35). The year 2000 was the year that New Labour's massive intellectual investment in public policy research began to manifest itself in urban policy initiatives. Two powerful policy discourses emerged – a promised revitalised local democracy (arguably American New Public Management in different clothes), and a 'culture-led' urban regeneration (where 'culture' could mean urban design-driven, major art commissions, or simply concern with 'quality of life', an

increasing popular policy phrase). From New Labour's *Modernising Local Government* (1999) to the new Urban Task Force's *Towards an Urban Renaissance* (36), a stream of design in public realm directives emerged from the new Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and its sponsor, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. (37) At the time, according to Claire Bishop, a 'social turn' was happening in contemporary art, a 'cultural turn' was happening in the unlikely realm of British Town Planning. (38) Massive investment schemes for civic spaces followed, and the term 'urban' was elevated to fashionable use within national public policy-making circles. All this contributed to New Labour's explicit attempt to reconstruct a sense of 'public' and old clichés like 'the public good' and 'in the public interest' returned to public policy with force. (39)

Coventry City Council had been for some time a pioneer in Government urban initiatives, and the Phoenix to a significant degree was invested with strong political capital. Gerz of course had no intellectual property rights over the term 'public', and the sustained dialogue between various sectors of the city on Coventry's history, identity, public realm and possible futures, continued as a confluence of national and local changes in public governance. And issue emerges here concerning what Gerard Hauser called the 'rhetoricity' of the public sphere, where 'a plurality of publics' are created by involvement in distinct rhetorics. (40) A rhetoric, for Hauser, can create a 'public', but more commonly creates interest groups whose agenda is not necessarily in a 'public interest'. As Malcolm Miles further observed, the plurality of civic rhetoric can function *against* the formation of a democratic public, often as they are animated by strong lines of advocacy by politically motivated civic sponsors. (41) Rhetorics can be fictive or non-fictive; in Coventry they were non-fictive, that is, generated from an understanding of a sequence of historical events, a pivotal moment of course being the Second World War. These embodied a certain measure of self-belief, and a determination to construct a viable future; (42) each had their own informal lobby group, each created a different framework within which to articulate policy priorities and ideas on future civic development, and each emerge from a wide range of media, whether in public debates or from the city tourist office. The dominant rhetorics could be listed as Coventry 'city of the future', 'city of the people', 'city of industry', and 'city of Peace and Reconciliation'. Gerz's interaction with the city council, traditional political associations, the labour unions or the older generation, tended to be so conceptually framed.

Competing rhetorics are still evident around the City as its popular visual culture, manifest in a diverse and unlikely panoply of images from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Lady Godiva to classical modernist architecture, Triumph motorcycles, Jaguar cars and Coventry Cathedral. Along the way there have, of course, been many counter-rhetorics, emerging from the anti-Thatcher polemics of pop chart hits 'Concrete Jungle' (1979) and 'Ghost Town' (1981) by Coventry pop group The Specials, or the anti-National Front rhetoric of Ska and Two-tone movements. Contemporary histories of the city testify to how the conventional rhetorics emerged – from the European modernism of city architect Donald Gibson in the 1950s, to the development of post-war Labour Party welfarism into the 1960s, to the massive rise and decline of industry in the 1970s and 1980s. The most enduring rhetoric of all is Coventry 'city of peace and reconciliation'. After the Second World War the Cathedral quickly established a mission for international peace diplomacy, also establishing close relations with the German city of Dresden. Designed by Basil Spence and consecrated in 1962, the Cathedral was the origin of the 'phoenix'. Spence had commissioned a carving in the emblem on a sunken stone outside the bombed out shell of the old cathedral. A pagan symbol of resurrection lost on most, it was celebrated in Spence's 1962 memoir of the period, *Phoenix at Coventry*.

Gerz assumed a role of civic 'convenor' of public authorship, but at the same time refused the role of city 'storyteller' stringing together the disjunctive rhetorical readings of civic history emerging in public debates. He also avoided the potentially patronizing role of social spokesman for the disadvantaged, immigrant or refugee, many of whom were 'participators'. Public authorship was not polemic, and did not use its civic context as a foil, but as with previous antimonument projects it opened up a space for disconnected stories, personal statements, protests, the presence of minority groups and their aspirations for recognition. Given Coventry's almost unequalled ethnic mix, and religious unease after '9/11', the predicted social conflict did not transpire; what emerged was a tangible field of ideas, experiences, social interactions, and representations, provisional social and political formations from the city, council estates and beyond. This, what I called a 'field' of research, is not easy to define – after a few years, discussions were ubiquitous in and around an informal network. The process-oriented dynamic nature of the project meant that apart from the archive the only stable record of events was the (future) installation of the plaques.

## Public authorship and re-democratisation

Gerz's criteria for 'success' is not visible in his monument or bench – he was less concerned with the detail of the fixed physical markers of public authorship than the project's content, even if that content is ephemeral, and actual substantive dialogue does not emerge. I have suggested that Gerz's artistic strategy configured 'location-participation-communication' in a way that opens up the question of art's role in 're-democratisation'. This involved a future monumental space, mass random participation, all figured around the concept of 'public', invested with national political capital at this point. A critique of the Coventry project could take many forms. Being embedded in an urban regeneration scheme involves potential compromise, and long-term multi-dimensional projects can easily fragment. Here I will make some concluding points based on the distinct components of public authorship, outlining the way a re-democratisation process emerged by creating cultural conflict and what that means, and identify some central issues for urban art research on the role of culture in a putative public sphere.

Coventry's city councilors, particularly in the immediate aftermath of '9/11', voiced in the local media the assumption that public dialogue about past enemies, violence and ineradicable differences, would entail social strife: cultural conflict and the clash of discourse would mean social conflict. This 'policy-logic' in practice forms a socially censorious denial of difference. The 'cultural' conflict of public authorship operated on the level of narrative. The content of this narrative (the nature of allegiance, belonging, origins, values) are of course the basis for ideological and thus actual social and political conflict. Yet the way public authorship admitted a vast range of narrative positions, precluded the 'taking sides' in a simplistic oppositional dichotomy. The field of social interaction that emerged generated an emphasis not on individual difference per se, but on the generative capacity of articulated differences within a collective (and creative) project. This emphasis generated some reflexivity: the conditions (and lack of conditions) for a 'public' discourse became an object of critical attention.

In terms of location, *The Future Monument* and *Public Bench* were unexpressive, generic design forms, featuring names of people, groups and nations. A tension existed in the project from the start between the uncompromising *fait accompli* of the fixed

objects (designed before the project began), and the complex random social engagement that was the process of their 'inscription'. The conflict here revolved around the way the central monument of Coventry's new central plaza, under the aegis of the Phoenix, was to thematise not the War but colonialism, for which there was no available popular rhetoric, and (at the time) no officially sanctioned standpoint. The historic enmity with Germany (something popularly understood) was displaced and contextualized within a broader historical movement of European empires and their territorial disputes, population shifts and the politics of forced cultural adaptation. The civic narrative of annihilation and resurrection was not opposed, but contested and relativised, or applied to other national or personal experiences, such as our 'German Friends' themselves (Figure 6). The officially sanctioned public signifier of the monument now positioned its contributors within a collective polemic on the cultural appropriation of history. This raised and still raises an issue internal to public art strategy, an issue on the historicity of British public spaces – what forms of civic authority are invested in new public spaces, that at once are becoming 'Europeanized', with their new plazas and street cafes, but also governed by and still perpetuate parochial rhetorics? How can art mediate or subvert processes of civic self-legitimacy that are closed to mainstream politics?

On participation: While the Phoenix was concerned with excavating the actual ground, Gerz was wandering around council estates and visiting communities, some of which did not register on the radar of the 'public' organs of civic life, such as local social services. What transpired – evidenced in Gerz's growing archive and publicly available list of participants – was that the 'social' Coventry could not be mapped onto the vision of a public realm under construction, with its anachronistic appeals for 'renaissance' or Government-motivated return to Victorian municipal grandeur. In the process of its participants 'writing' their own narrative history, public authorship provided a provisional discursive space for public culture – a position from which to speak, a protocol and representational endorsement. 'Public', it became clear, is procedurally formed by 'access criteria', determined at a deep historical-political level beyond the decision-making powers of any one current local authority or even Government. Participation involved many modes of communication, some in translation or even visually mediated for those with no English. The classical model of a public sphere of capable autonomous interlocutors fails in this context. Mediation, in fact creative mediation, was

needed in mobilizing diverse and random social participants from the level of personal confession to a broader social conversation and into critical dialogue and the modes of discourse that could conceivably impact on policy-making bureaucratic civic authorities. This process by which dialogue is constructed, managed and directed, is the core of public authorship, and articulates a series of ongoing theoretical problems for public and urban art studies.

Can participatory art forms 'model' forms of democracy, or articulate modes of representation that are constitutive of a democratic public culture? Does it follow that democratic cultural formations will necessarily be formative of a democratic public sphere (one dominated by media technology)? Or perhaps they can only play this role if allied (or in alignment with) other political, or policy-oriented intra-organizational 'publics'? For Gerz, participatory art forms could only hope to 'model' forms of democratic participation through constructing and directing dialogue within civic narrative; the visual alone cannot do it.

On our last point, the project's *communication*: Gerz began public authorship with 'publicity' -- by making contact with any and every media, publicity or PR mechanism within the city. In the city, the appearance of a German 'avant-gardist' asking questions about past enemies provoked immediate disapprobation, but for Gerz helped gauge the political topography of cultural dispositions and agendas controlling civic media space. Gerz's consistent presence over five years in both cultural, media and local authority circles gave him a strategically advantageous knowledge of the political logic animating the organizational complexity of that environment. It allowed him to accumulate intellectual capital, giving him access to, and a social overview of, regions perhaps concealed from their civic 'representatives'. And yet, public authorship was not cultural diplomacy, whatever critical powers of policy intervention Gerz could have developed. He exercised what we might call a 'politics of presence', simply asking questions, moving from one discussion space to another. He did not build a public sphere in Coventry; what transpired through the process of public authorship, were all the reasons for its absence, and the paradox of British cities, of strong civic authorities along with a civil society that assumes that an emphatic public exists because we all have the vote.

Public authorship in Coventry is over, but was not subject to closure; even with the official installation of the plaques, the discourse of the public was left open-ended, as if



demanding an independent civic intellectual leadership that in the event never emerged. What would public intellectual leadership mean? How can we use public art projects as a means of locating the political-civic conditions of public culture? Re-democratization emerged as a process of creating momentary cultural conflict, offering a framework for articulating irreconcilable difference and the civil means by which it is repressed and prevented from being formative of a dynamic public culture. At the end, re-democratisation can appear, and also disappear, and in Coventry remains only as a faint horizon of political possibility.

#### END NOTES:

1. For example, see G. Evans, 'Creative Cities, Creative Spaces and Urban Policy', *Urban Studies*, vol. 46, May 2009, pp. 1003 - 1040; P. Guillet de Monthoux, 'The art management of aesthetic organizing', in S. Linstead, H. Hopfl, eds, *The Aesthetics of Organization*, London: Sage, 2000, pp. 35-60; V.L. Pollock and R. Paddison, 'Embedding Public Art: Practice, Policy and Problems', *Journal of Urban Design*, Vol. 15. No. 3, 2010, pp. 335–356; Hamilton, J., Forsyth, L. & de longh, D., 'Public art: a local authority perspective', *Journal of Urban Design*, vol. 6, no.3, 2001, pp. 283–296.
2. The criticism and historical analysis of public art in Britain since the 1970s has been dominated by American art history and theory, contexts summarised by Cher Krause Knight in *Public Art: Theory, Practice, Populism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, and to that extent has largely avoided broader European debates on public culture, cultural policy and the public sphere. For a study that cuts across European public art, cultural and urban policy, see M. Miles, *Urban Avant-gardes: Art, Architecture and Change*, London: Routledge, 2004.
3. A good early introduction to this is T. Hall and I. Robertson, 'Public art and Urban Regeneration advocacy, claims and critical debates', *Landscape Research*, vol. 26, no.1, 2001, pp. 5-26.
4. For example: M. Bell and Jayne, M., "Design-led' Urban Regeneration: A Critical Perspective', *Local Economy*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2003, pp. 121-134; C. Bailey, S. Miles, and P. Stark, 'Culture-Led Urban Regeneration and the Revitalisation of Identities in Newcastle, Gateshead and the North East of England', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol.10, No.1, 2004, pp. 47-65; J. Sharp, P. Venda and R. Paddison, 'Just Art for a Just City: Public Art and Social Inclusion in Urban Regeneration', *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, no. 5/6, 2005, pp. 1001-1023; J. McCarthy, 'Regeneration of Cultural Quarters: Public Art for Place Image or Place Identity?' *Journal of Urban Design*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2006, pp. 243-262.
5. See J. E. Fossum and P. Schlesinger, eds. *The European Union and the Public Sphere*, London: Routledge, 2007; the American Social Science Research Council

[SSRC] since 2001 has pioneered large projects on 'public culture', see the <http://publicsphere.ssrc.org/guide/>; current SSRC President Craig Calhoun earlier introduced Habermas's classic study (see note 17 and 26 below) to an interdisciplinary audience: C. Calhoun ed. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992; and see D. Kellner's introductory text on Habermas's concept of the public sphere, <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/habermas.htm> (accessed 25 June, 2010).

6. Jochen Gerz (Born Berlin 1940) was for most of the 1960s and 1970s a conceptual artist, also known for his innovative work in performance and multi-media. He shared the German pavilion with Joseph Beuys at the Venice Biennale in 1976, but since 1984 he has concentrated on installations and Public Art projects, being awarded the Roland Prize, Bremen (1990); German Art Critics' Prize, Berlin (1996); National Order of Merit, Paris (1996); Peter Weiss Prize, Berlin (1996); National Grand Prize for the Plastic Arts, Paris (1998). Living in Paris since 1968, he has currently re-located to Kerry, Republic of Ireland.

7. S. Baker, 'Interview with Jochen Gerz', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2001, pp. 25-40; S. Wright, 'Toward Public Authorship' (Interview with Stephen Wright) *Third Text*, vol.18, no. 6, 2004, pp. 649-656.

8. The publicity was designed in part by Gerz's research team: see Coventry School of Art & Design, 'This is your Artwork' [publicity flyer for the Public Authorship project: design by Zenon Texeira], 2000.

9. J. Hunt, 'Jochen Gerz: Collaborations with the Public', *Art & Architecture Journal* 59, 2003, pp. 27-30.

10. For an overview of all his work with plaques, see J. Gerz, *Jochen Gerz – Res Publica: The Public Works 1968-1999*, Hatje Cantz Verlag, Museion Bozen/Bolzano, 1999.

11. V. Lovell and R. MacCormac, eds., *Phoenix: Architecture/Art/Regeneration*, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004; R. MacCormac, 'Coventry Phoenix Initiative Achieving Urban Renaissance through Public Space and Art', available at <http://www.mjparchitects.co.uk/essays.php> (accessed 4 June 2010), 2004; R. MacCormac, 'Art and Regeneration in the City of Coventry', available at <http://www.mjparchitects.co.uk/essays.php> (accessed 4 June 2010), 2005.

12. B. Goulden, 'Artist in Pledge to City People', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 11 December, 2001; C. Rank, 'Remembrance and Reconciliation: Public Spaces, Collective Memory, and the Development of a Municipal Peace Identity in Coventry, U.K.', Fifth International Peace Museum Conference, (1 – 6 May) Guernika, Spain, 2005.

13. Op cit. Baker, 2001; Op cit. Wright, 2004; and M. Price, 'Jochen Gerz', *Fused Magazine*, issue 15, May 2003.

14. R. Petzinger and V. Rattemeyer, eds., *Jochen Gerz: Catalogue Raisonné* (vols 1-4), Nuremberg: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2010.

15. J. Gerz, *L'Anti-Monument, Les Mots de Paris*, Paris Musée/Actes Sud, Paris, 2002; J. E. Young, 'The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 18, no. 2, Winter 1992, pp.267-296; M. North, 'The Public as Sculpture:

From Heavenly City to Mass Ornament', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 16, no. 4, Summer 1990, pp. 860-879; M. Miles, 'Critical Spaces: Monuments and Changes', in C. Cartiere and S. Willis, eds. *The Practice of Public Art*, London, Routledge, 2008, pp. 66-90.

16. F. Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History* (trans. Arian Collins), New York: Macmillan, 1985, p. 17 and passim.

17. On this, see C. Calhoun, 'Civil Society and the Public Sphere', *Public Culture* 10, 1993, pp. 267-280.

18. Explained lucidly in Op.cit. Young, 1992.

19. Interview with Jochen Gerz by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2010.

20. Op. cit. Young, 1992: 272.

21. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* [1689], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* [1859], Penguin Classics, 2006.

22. J. Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, with Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

23. P. U. Hohendahl, ed. *Öffentlichkeit - Geschichte eines kritischen Begriffs*, Stuttgart: J B. Metzler, 2000, p. 2 and passim.

24. Op. cit. Calhoun, 1993.

25. J. Gerz, *In Case We Meet* [catalogue for exhibition, 'Temps Détournés – Vidéo et Internet Dans L'oeuvre, 1969-2002'], Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2002.

26. Op. cit. Habermas, 1989, pp. 232; 248; The point on Habermas's quoted statements here occurred to me while reading Op. cit. Kellner, 2010; I am generally indebted to Kellner's understanding of Habermas. See his 'Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention' in L.E. Han ed. *Perspectives on Habermas*, Chicago: Open Court Press. See also Calhoun's 'Introduction' in C. Calhoun, ed. 1999, pp.32 on intra/interorganizational transformation; for Habermas's turn from this idea, see his 'Further Reflections', C. Calhoun, ed. 1992, p.444.

27. J. Gerz, 'Creating a Cultural City', *Third Text*, vol.21, no. 4, 2006, pp. 457-462; A. Hapkemeyer, 'On the Principle in Dialogue in Jochen Gerz's works for Public Spaces', in Op. cit. Gerz, J. 1999, pp. 22-32.

28. C. Mouffe, 'Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space', *Open*, issue 14, 2008, pp. 6-27; S. Sheikh, *In the Place of the Public Sphere*, Berlin: b-books, 2005.

29. N. Fraser, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, vol. 25, no. 26, 1990, pp. 56–80; A. Amin and N. Thrift, *Cities: Re-Imagining the Urban*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.

30. For more on Dublin and Ruhr, see the Gerz Studio website: <http://www.gerz.fr/>; J. Gerz, '2-3 Streets: An Exhibition in Three Cities in the Ruhr', Wuppertal: NRW KULTURsekretariat, 2006.

31. The consultancy was The Public Art Commissions Agency, now Modus Operandi. See V. Lovell, 'Coventry Phoenix Initiative: Public Art Strategy and Programme', Birmingham: Public Art Commissions Agency, V. 1998. For a critique, see D. Cottrel and K. Watt, 'Coventry's Phoenix Initiative: Sustainability and the Symbol of the 'Re-birth' in Contemporary Urban Regeneration' [unpublished], The Second International Conference on Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability: Hanoi and Ha Long Bay, Vietnam, 2006.

32: The project was given oversight by a public committee, called the Millennium Forum, but directed by The Phoenix Initiative organization, within which operated a 'design team' chaired by the masterplanner.

33. For historical background to Coventry's past and current urban design development, see T. Mason and N. Tiratsoo, 'People, Politics and Planning: the reconstruction of Coventry City Centre 1940-53', in J. M. Diefendorf, *Rebuilding Europe's Bombed Cities*, New York: St. Martins Press, 1990, pp.108-110; L. Campbell, 'The Phoenix and the City: war, Peace and Architecture', Op. cit. Lovell and MacCormac, 2004, pp. 22-27; J. Hunt, 'Coventry: City of the Future, The Phoenix Initiative', *Art & Architecture* 60, 2004, pp.13-17. See particularly S.H.Walford, 'Architecture in Tension: an examination of the position of the architect in the private and public sectors, focusing on the training and careers of Sir Basil Spence (1907-1976) and Sir Donald Gibson (1908-1991)', PhD thesis (unpublished), University of Warwick, Department of History of Art, 2009.

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35. Op. cit. MacCormac, 2004; R. Imrie and M. Raco, *Urban Renaissance? New Labour, Community and Urban Policy*, Bristol: The Policy Press, 2003.

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40. G. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres*, Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1999.

41. M. Miles, 'Interruptions: Testing the Rhetoric of Culturally Led Urban Development', *Urban Studies*, vol. 42, no. 5/6, 2005, pp. 889-911.

42. Op. cit. Miles, 2005, pp. 897-900.

Dr Jonathan Vickery  
Associate Professor  
Centre for Cultural Policy Studies  
University of Warwick  
Coventry  
CV4 7AL  
West Midlands  
Tel: 02476-523459  
02476-523005  
Fax: 024 765 24446  
J.P.Vickery@warwick.ac.uk