

Transcript for What is Public Art Video

Hi everyone. My name is Liv Laumenech.

I am the public art officer at the University of Edinburgh and today I'm going to give you a short introduction to public art. Keeping an introduction to this subject is in some ways easier said than done. This is partly because a definition is hard to pinpoint – essentially because public art has been around for a long time, its form and function has changed over time, and essentially each work does different things for different people.

An explanation can be complex as well because a wide spectrum of things can be categorised as public art: Stone monument, bronze statue, abstract sculpture, light installation [Coley, *The Basic Material..*], piece of sound art, painted mural or graffiti, performance, designed public furniture like a bench or fence. All very different artforms, right?

They can also serve a lot of different functions. They can be place making tools [Gormley, *Angel of the North*] or political gestures,, they can be designed to make us think or remember, creatively disrupt or enhance a space, they can act as an abstract or literal expression of an event, a culture, a person, a society or community value. More recently, public art has become more of an experience, something you do, attend or made feel [Michael Sailstorfer, *Folkestone Digs*]. For some they can be historical record, for others they are icons of oppressive power contemporary artists have been playing with historical and traditional form of public art and trying to turn it on its head [Susan Collis, *The Next Big Thing...Is A Series of Little Things*].

But, how can we define something that takes in all these different kinds of artforms and functions Putting aside these aside, what might we say is the essence or characteristics of public art?

So, firstly, public art is designed, creative addition to an environment. It's created by someone and part of how it works is that it operates as an aesthetic thing or experienced on an artistic level.

Secondly, and maybe most importantly, public art might be best explained by thinking of where it is displayed. This means in a place where people or the general public can see it. This does not always mean it is outside in a public park, it could also be in a public library. Another way of thinking of this, is that you might expect to find public art is in places where you wouldn't traditionally find art like galleries and museums.

Finally, I would add that in many cases public art is 'Context specific' or site specific'. Briefly put this means that the idea for the artwork or part of its inspiration has come from the place/space that it is displayed [Remco de Fouw & Rachel Joynt, *Perpetual Motions*.] Or that surrounding area or context for the work influences how we look at the artwork. Another way of thinking about this might be that painting of a lovely landscape, or you reading a novel – you are invited to enter and inhabit the artistic world. The outside is irrelevant. With public art there is often an exchange with the work and its immediate environment.

So there's three things to think about. So far so good? But what about all the discussions happening at the moment across the world about public art? The recent attention highlights another important thing when thinking about public art – particularly historical public art. It's important to think about what is behind this works: what they are about, who they represent, how they were created and by whom and why.

Answering these questions can be really revealing. And looking at how people respond to public art is really important. It can tell us a lot about society, values and the structures of power that are in

place. Because, remember even at the time statues of men were created in the past, not all the public liked them but they had the money and influence to be able to have a statue made [*Cecil Rhodes, Oxford*].

So any artwork, whether it is a figurative sculpture, or abstract contemporary When public artworks is being debated, damaged or destroyed by the public or by a city it is important we examine the broad factors that might have led to that action. some of which might have to do with what the artwork represents, or a broader societal attitude towards art and its value, and sometimes it has nothing to do with the artwork at all. [Vera Klute *Luke Kelly* statue]

And finally, I would say a big question and challenge when encountering public art is to ask do you like it and does it work? Politically, artistically, historically. I can name countless works that miss the mark or fail as pieces of art or that are inclusive or that make us think or remember something. So the next time you encounter a public art think about whether you like it and why? And do you dislike it and why?