

## Talking Public Art

APRIL 04, 2012 *by Ronald Jones*



Asli Cavusoglu in collaboration with The Hand of God Church and its Voice of Melody Gospel Choir, 2012, performative lecture at 'Going Public'. Photo: Roke Gezuraga

Spunky if nothing else, The European Network of Public Art Producers (ENPAP) held their first symposium on public art, entitled 'Going Public: Telling It As It Is?', in Bilbao, Spain, within the shadow of the Bilbao Effect created in part by Frank Gehry's architectural masterpiece.

[ENPAP](#) is an EU-funded group comprised of six arts organizations (Baltic Art Center in Bisby, Sweden; consosni in Bilbao, Spain; Mossutställningar in Stockholm, Sweden; Situations, University of the West of England in Bristol, UK; SKOR | Foundation for Art and Public Domain in Amsterdam, The Netherlands; and Vector Association, in Iasi, Romania). By their own account, ENPAP is dedicated to undertaking 'a comparative study to discover common practices and to explore the distinct challenges of their individual contexts, in order that we might begin to articulate the vibrancy and importance of this role to public art.'

Setting aside their grant-writing-speak, what they are, are a few individuals committed to taking so-called art in the public realm over the hurdle marked 'the public art ghetto', with sincere hopes of breathing life back into a practice that was left for dead years ago.

The second day of the symposium 'Going Public' was devoted to a string of 'performative lectures', a genre that skips like a flat

stone tossed across a lake, from Hugo Ball to Joseph Beuys to Mike Smith, and then revived and honed by [Tris Vonna-Michell](#) and a few others. I was first entertained by Tris when he was a student at the Städelschule in Frankfurt a decade ago, but during our studio visits I lacked sufficient imagination to recognize his theatricality as the next iteration of ‘public art’.



A 2008 performance by Tris Vonna-Michell at Galerie Jan Mot, Brussels

I felt, when seeing his work, of like-mind with Robert Pincus-Witten, who memorably admitted upon seeing the 1968 exhibition ‘9 at Leo Castelli’ (which included Eva Hesse, Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra and others, and was organized by Robert Morris) that he didn’t know what he had just seen, but whatever it was, it wasn’t sculpture. Or as Lucy Lippard said at the time, ‘The future of sculpture may well lie in non-sculptural styles.’ Or as Donald Judd wrote in *Specific Objects* (1965), ‘Half or more of the best new work in the last few years is neither painting nor sculpture.’

Well, it does seem that the future of public art may well lay in non-public art styles, though I wonder if we are navigating a sea change as significant as the one from Minimalism to Post-Minimalism. Nevertheless, the point of ENPAP’s research and initiative is that at the bleeding edge, the forms of public they are lifting up are so nascent, so under-determined, that like Post-Impressionism and Post-Minimalism, they can only be described by what they are not, and where they appear in history. Count me in as a champion of their ambition and let’s see where they get to from here.

The symposium’s full day of ‘performance lectures’ brilliantly dialed up the relationship between high art and entertainment. There was quite a range, from the poignant recounting of Reg Butler’s [proposal for a monument to The Unknown Political Prisoner](#) (1955-56) by Asier Mendizabal to Olof Olsson’s sharp and insightful comedy, to Asli Cavusoglu’s old time religion.



Asier Mendizabal, performative lecture at 'Going Public', 2012  
photo: Roke Gezuraga

Mendizabal led off the day, and since there are no stories around public art more melancholy than Butler's, it set the tone. That Butler's monument never got beyond a maquette (now in the collection of Tate Modern) is affecting because it was fully of its time and an honest expression of Cold War angst. Anthony Kroman, who had served as the United States' cultural attaché in Stockholm before becoming the Institute of Contemporary Art's Organizing Director dreamt up the idea of an ICA-sponsored sculpture competition that was meant 'to pay tribute to those individuals who, in many countries and in diverse political situations, had dared to offer their liberty and their lives for the cause of human freedom.' Sixteen-thousand Pounds Sterling was the prize money, donated anonymously, but we know now that it was by John Jay Whitney, the American publisher of the International Herald Tribune and Honorary trustee of the Museum of Modern Art. His money was meant to extend, as public art, the Cold War ideology of the time. Whitney – who had provided significant financial backing to Dwight Eisenhower's and Richard Nixon's campaigns and had worked closely with the Central Intelligence Agency from its founding in 1947 – reneged on financing the construction of the monument when British public opinion towards Butler's sculpture turned sour. What was undoubtedly a CIA-backed attempt to promote liberal democratic individualism in the face of Communism failed to materialize. Those were the days.



Olof Olsson, performative lecture at 'Going Public', 2012. photo: Roke Gezuraga

Olof Olsson has perfected the performance lecture as stand-up comedy and once again he opened the door to rethinking how contemporary art can express itself as soft power. He shared a string of stories that reflected critically on the routine mechanisms of political correctness and intercultural collaborations as they are saluted in art-world academies these days. He remembered that his parents, who met and conceived him in Majorca in the 1960s, found the holiday island so inexpensive that they 'forgot' that Spain was, at the time, ruled by a dictator. Had they been politically correct, Olsson reasoned, he would never have been born.

Olsson went on to recount his visit to Sztalinvaros (Stalinville), the hometown of a fellow student in post-soviet Hungary. Rebounding off Mendizabal's touching Cold War story about Butler, Olsson reminisced that Sztalinvaros had been built as a model Soviet city in the 1950s and that the Communist city planners had somehow figured that a city of 50,000 would require exactly eight artists, and therefore built eight apartments with studios attached. With an admirable sleight of hand he compared the social engineering of the Soviets with the sorts of unimaginative social engineering that Harold Bloom famously called 'the culture wars', correctly suggesting that the current allegiance to political correctness is not so far afield from the spectacularly inauthentic Soviet system.



Olof Olsson, 'Red Alert', performed in 2011

With his art-world audience laughing at themselves, Olsson confessed that the way the Sztalinvaros planners conceived of culture really didn't seem so alien to him, having grown up at the height of the Swedish social system. His comic relief bites down hard. And Olsson doesn't just play the art world, he also plays venues from rock concerts to comedy clubs, meaning that his jabs at contemporary art translate across the broader culture. Everyone, it seems, appreciates just how ridiculously self-righteous the art world has become.



Asli Cavusoglu, performative lecture at 'Going Public', 2012. photo: Roke Gezuraga

The final act was Asli Cavusoglu's production of the 'Hand of God Church and its Voice of Melody Gospel Choir'. Backed up by the choir, a preacher told the story of Lot and his wife, wondering who would have seen that she turned into a pillar of salt if anyone who looked back to see her would have been turned into salt themselves. That speaks volumes about the state of the art world. Moreover, his sermon, titled 'She Who Is Salt-White' sat conspicuously and uncomfortably within an all-white audience (down to the last person), that is, until he and the choir walked into the room. His fire and brimstone preaching to the assembled true believers, like Olsson's comedy, was a metaphor for the religion of art and all its faithful. But it wasn't all a send up, because Cavusoglu begged the question of what it means to be a religious artist in a secular age, as the preacher proclaimed that God Himself was an artist. He ended with a hymn that everyone stood to sing, which repeated the phrase, 'Everything in Heaven is sculpted'. To make the irony sting a little more, Cavusoglu didn't have the preacher or the choir arrive until it was time for them to perform, underlining just how lily-white the day had been and how lily-white the art world is. Cavusoglu's timing was everything.

Promoting performances like these, ENPAP has positioned itself beyond the limits of where serious art is believed to take place, and may fairly be called pioneers in an art world addicted to the commonplace, (read Damien Hirst's 'Dot Paintings') and banal (read Damien Hirst's 'Dot Paintings'). In a roundtable discussion led by Jörg Heiser and published in the September 2010 issue of *frieze* as '[Analyze This](#)', I said, 'I'm not sure how long we should grant artists special dispensation just because what they are producing is merely worthwhile.' The Public Art Ghetto is an example of that sentiment, simply a corpse made up to look life-like. The ENPAP initiative seems to have cracked open a door to a space beyond the 'worthwhile.' Let's see how far they can go.

