Public Art in London: Creativity, Criminality and Capital in the City

Module Overview
London is one of the world’s major art capitals, famous in particular for its diverse and distinguished public art. From the low-brow independence of street art and graffiti to the high-brow dominance of commissioned art in public space, the city is filled with visual and material culture that works not just to beautify, but to both transform and reaffirm cultural norms, to empower and immobilize its associated publics.

Exploring London’s public art in order to understand the past, present, and future of the city itself, Public Art in London will examine this site as a place of communication and contestation, transmission and transformation, investigating the social, political and economic debates which these artworks implicitly intersect with and overtly investigate: It will thus enable students to critically explore both the city and the street and to discern not only what public art means, but what it does.

Week One (The Past)
Week 1 will set out the who/what/where/why/how of public art in London as well as the three lenses through which the course will function: the national / the communal / the individual. The key focus of the week will be the history of public art in London however, in particular through the key theme of Public Art and Memory: Looking at ideas such as ephemerality and monumentality, hegemonic memory and social memory, students will explore the way that our material heritage creates a certain way of understanding history, the way public art can create form of collective and individual memory and yet how certain groups are inevitably left out of the conversation and their histories implicitly silenced.

Week Two (The Present)
Whilst the first week focuses on London’s public art of the past, week two explores the way different social groups mediate the present of the public sphere – how they mediate both corporate and governmental aesthetics through public images and performances. It will thus explore how different social groups engage and
redirect both the idea of citizenship and the normative values of public space in London today. In particular, we will examine how this emerges through three different types of communicative action; through speaking, acting and appearing in the public sphere.

**Week Three (The Future)**
Following on from the focus on the past and present of London, the third week explores how public art dominates the future of the city, the way it can both assist in and reveal the increasing privatization and gentrification of our urban spaces, and the way it links to the burgeoning digitisation of the public sphere. Whilst carrying a quite dystopian edge then – showing the way the city is becoming increasingly overtaken by corporate and commercial regimes – it will also see hope in the way that the digital can act as a space of potential in itself, as well as then returning to re-enliven the space of the capital itself.

*Each week will include guest lectures and workshops by artists as well as explorations of particular exhibitions and events in a local context.*

**Module Aims**
The module will expose students to a range of industrial and other situations which use the project – a unique transient endeavour undertaken to achieve planned objectives - as the main way of delivering results. We will examine typical projects and their essential characteristics and we will use a range of quantitative and other tools to prepare, analyse and to communicate aspects of the management of projects. In doing so we will explore what can go wrong in projects as well as their more desirable outcomes. We will use examples from history, from real life and from simulated projects. Although the use of these tools will give participants in projects a great deal of control, we will also recognise the uncertain characteristics in all projects: we will prepare to deal with risks and uncertainty, and at the same time, provide robust and innovative results.

**Teaching Methods**
The course will be a mix of lectures, seminars and private reading. Students will also be required to conduct their own mini-ethnographic projects. There will also be a number of workshops and walking tours conducted by relevant artists and practitioners from the field. Finally, students will be required to visit a number of exhibitions and public art installations throughout London. Further material, including key readings, discussion forums and online quizzes will be available on UCL’s virtual learning environment Moodle.

**Learning Outcomes**
Upon successful completion of this module students will:

- Have cultivated a critical understanding of academic approaches to place, performance, and participation
- Have obtained an awareness of current developments in both public, independent, and contemporary art
- Have developed an insider knowledge of both London as well as urban locations worldwide
- Have expanded their critical engagement through the application of theoretically informed concepts
- Have analysed and interpreted different approaches to research questions and demonstrated independence of mind and thought

**Assessment Methods**
- 10-minute presentation (25%)
- 1500-2,000 word essay (75%)

*Please note that this module description is indicative and may be subject to change.*
Key Texts


Bishop, Claire ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’ in Artforum, February 2006: 179-185; Grant Kester’s response to Bishop and Bishop’s response to Kester, in Artforum, May 2006. [PDF, 61KB]


Schacter, Rafael 2015 *The Ugly Truth: Street Art, Graffiti, and the Creative City* Art and the Public Sphere Journal


Module Leader

Rafael Schacter (b. London, 1980) is an anthropologist, author, and curator, working on issues related to public art, global art, and socially engaged art practice. Presently a Lecturer in Anthropology and Material Culture at University College London, Rafael received his PhD from UCL in 2011 and was a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the same institution from 2014-2017.

Rafael has been conducting research on graffiti and street art for over ten years and has written three books within this field; the award-winning *World Atlas of Street Art and Graffiti* (2013), published with Yale University Press; *Ornament and Order* (2014), published with Routledge; and his recently completed third book, *Street to Studio*, published in July 2018 with Lund Humphries.

Rafael has also worked on numerous exhibitions; co-curating the groundbreaking *Street Art* show at the Tate Modern in 2008; the exhibitions *Mapping the City* (2015) and *Venturing Beyond* (2016) at Somerset House, London; *Crossing Borders / Crossing Boundaries* at St Petersburg’s Street Art Museum (2016); and the recent *Silver Sehnsucht* exhibition (2017) at the Silver Building in London’s Docklands. He is currently working on a large-scale mural series in a social housing complex in the Netherlands (August 2018) and a collective exhibition at the Brunei Gallery in London on Filipino contemporary art (April 2019).