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Safety in Numbers: Reflecting on the work of Artichoke as ‘Adaptor-Disruptor’ in Reclaiming Public Space

Jacek Ludwig Scarso and Kirsten Jeske Thompson

The School of Art, Architecture and Design at London Metropolitan University,
United Kingdom

j.scarso@londonmet.ac.uk

k.thompson1@londonmet.ac.uk

Abstract

As we navigate the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and face ever more complex challenges to our experience of the public sphere, the phrase ‘safety in numbers’ entails increasingly contradictory connotations. What is the role of large public space gatherings in rebuilding confidence in our use of public space and what creative and logistical strategies may be used to this end? This article represents the first in a series of studies, exploring the work of internationally acclaimed public art production company, Artichoke. A “reverse-engineering” focus is applied here, as we revisit three seminal projects across Artichoke’s fifteen-year body of work: respectively, *The Sultan’s Elephant* (2006), *Lumiere* (2009-ongoing) and *Processions* (2018). While there is no “standard” Artichoke work, these projects share important commonalities in relation to the potential of ephemeral public art events to adapt and disrupt our perception of public spaces. Each project achieved considerable impact, with audience numbers reaching hundreds of thousands and even millions through media dissemination: in doing so, Artichoke’s work has not only pioneered new forms of large scale spectacular and participatory events, but also played a significant role in shaping policies for public art commissioning and realisation. Drawing on archival data, as much as on a range of anecdotal experiences provided by audience testimonials and interviews with Helen Marriage, Artichoke’s Artistic Director and CEO, the article aims to evaluate learnings and strategies that have allowed this company’s approach to be resilient and innovative in relation to public engagement. The projects explored here were mostly realised long before our cities were shaped by the unprecedented restrictions caused by the pandemic; yet, they nonetheless all had to deal with substantial logistical and creative challenges, deriving from complex safety measures and an ever-changing urban and cultural landscape. Looking back is here intended as a means to think ahead, as we consider key traits in Artichoke’s work: in particular, its continued adaptability, its fluid negotiation between artist-led expertise and participation, and its unique aesthetic in temporarily disrupting our relationship with the ‘soft city’.

Keywords: Public art, participation, ephemeral art, mass gatherings, performance, soft city.



Figure 1 The Sultan's Elephant, Royal De Luxe, 2006. Produced by Artichoke in London. Photograph by Sophie Laslett. Courtesy of Artichoke.

The phrase 'safety in numbers' is a peculiar one in the English language: its once prolific use implies the reassurance that a collective presence makes us less vulnerable to impending dangers. As we emerge from the imposed physically insular conditions of COVID-19, we have increasingly come to terms with a paradoxical connotation to this phrase: we are not necessarily 'safer' in events featuring large numbers of people, but we do need such events to reclaim our confidence in and collective ownership of public spaces. In the two years of intermittent lockdowns we experienced across the globe, having been forced into a digital realm of communication, our own private spaces - the vignettes contained within our screens - have been exposed on public platforms; yet, these innermost spaces never felt more restrictive, making access to public space even more desirable. In this sense, Covid has potently reminded us of the importance of the physical public sphere, but its aftermath is not a straightforward one. The risk of pandemics is now ever-present in our minds and is further combined with new and existing problems: a spiralling cost of living, the risk of terrorist and war attacks, the environmental crisis. Whether directly or not, all these factors contribute to an ever more complex experience of public space, in terms of access, civic responsibility and safety.

As Andrew Hewitt and Mel Jordan observe, performativity is a useful frame to gauge our understanding of publicness: “The public is neither an empirical body, nor a spatial concept. The public sphere is a performative arrangement; it is the activity of ‘going public’ or ‘making something public’ that fills particular places and spaces with public life” (Hewitt and Jordan, 2015, pp. 27-28). Public art is dually situated within this debate, addressing both boundaries to engagement and disruption of perception. Hewitt and Jordan consider public art to include a wide range of practices, spanning institutionally commissioned work that takes place in the public sphere, as well as approaches more akin to public assembly and activism (2015, pp. 30-31). Within the broad scope of what we may understand as public art, in whichever medium it takes form and whether this is permanent or ephemeral, art can enter the performative arrangement of public space in different ways: it may simply validate an existing arrangement by affording an existing space with cultural status and aesthetic focus; or it may actively confront it by both radically adapting to it and creatively disrupting it, albeit within the necessary boundaries of security measures.

It is in the latter understanding of this performative arrangement that we find in the body of work by internationally acclaimed company Artichoke an interesting subject to research: one that brings together a renegotiation of public sphere, the context of mass gatherings and the ethos of artistic work that functions, we will argue here, as both adaptor and disruptor of a given performative arrangement. This study is the first in a series of long-term research endeavours, collaborating with Artichoke in contextualising their future work. From their fifteen-year portfolio, three projects with varied timelines have been selected to frame the discussion. The *zeitgeist* during which these interactive public art productions were staged is relevant considering that, while they were pre-Covid, they were susceptible to other instances of public risk – those inherent to logistics of crowd management and the continual threat of terrorist attacks in densely populated urban contexts.

Our selected case studies by Artichoke provide a stimulus for re-evaluating creative strategies previously adopted that make this company’s work both uniquely adaptable to a complex use of public spaces, as well as intentionally disruptive within these spaces. In this context, the terms ‘adaptor’ and ‘disruptor’ are deliberately provocative: by these, we mean the potential of an artistic work to both be resiliently tailorable to a given context, as well as positively destabilise the meaning of that context. A key aspect of this duality is the ephemerality of the work: Artichoke’s projects are largely live, temporary performances or displays that are intended not to permanently change an environment, but, rather, to alter its use for a given period of time through spectacular interventions. The scale of these interventions requires these to be meticulously planned and to be

site-specifically customised to the locations used, but such scale also profoundly changes the experience of such locations, visibly disrupting their routines. While time-limited, these interventions are created with the aim for a lingering impact on the public's lived experience in relation to the sites used. As Helen Marriage, Artichoke's Artistic Director and CEO, states "art by Artichoke is about claiming space – the legitimacy of art disrupting the status quo and the idea of who has rights to public space; about challenging the orthodoxy of public authorities" (Marriage, 2021).

Focussed questions that guide our research include:

- In what ways have the case studies flexibly adapted to given public spaces and what can be learnt from the strategies, both logistical and artistic, that they have employed to do so?
- To what extent have Artichoke's projects enabled new understandings in public engagement and participation, beyond providing spectacular entertainment on a mass scale?
- What new learnings can be achieved in looking at how these projects have creatively disrupted given understandings of the public sphere?

Our methodology combines the analysis of quantifiable data shared by Artichoke from their archival documentation, relevant to our selected case studies, as well as subjective responses by the audience, which provide less measurable but equally insightful accounts of the impact of their work and the efficacy of the creative strategies adopted. This data is further supported by anecdotal information of the inherent challenges and standpoints behind each intervention, from the point of view of the producers and specifically two interviews with Marriage in 2021. Reflections are framed by contextual debates on the subjects of public art and the public sphere. A conclusive analysis combines insights gained from these case studies, evidencing parallels and contrasts across these and considering the implications of these in light of the research questions.

Artichoke: an Overview

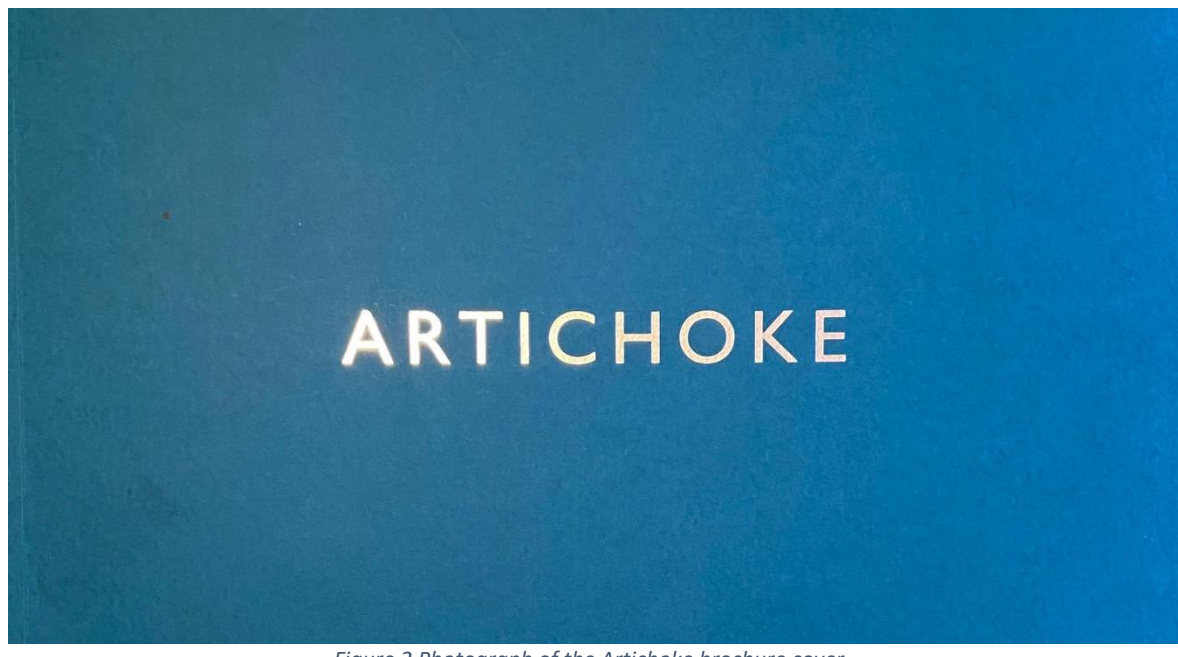


Figure 2 Photograph of the Artichoke brochure cover.

If buildings and infrastructure constitute the ‘hard city’, the *urbs*, then Artichoke infiltrates the spaces between buildings and the interactions in those spaces – the ‘soft city’, the *civitas*. The idea of the soft city is particularly relevant here, as it represents the ephemeral dimension of the urban context, precisely the one explored and subverted in Artichoke’s own performative projects. Such projects highlight the fact that each encounter we have with the city is as personal and unique as a fingerprint, as Jonathan Raban points out (Raban, 1998); furthermore, these projects directly engage with a dialogical understanding of social spaces as sites for exchange (Lefebvre, 1991). Here, a complex interplay takes place, combining the existent narratives imbued in the built environment (Psarra, 2009), with new imaginary ones that are creatively conceived in response to these, as we will see in the following paragraphs. In this sense, Artichoke’s work can be seen in relation to Raban’s concept of ‘the city as melodrama’, where a juxtaposition of freedoms and constraints exists, and where the city fabric provides a stage to engage the audience, promoting ephemeral interactions with the city’s spaces, in which the latter are temporarily re-imagined through theatrical and artistic strategies.

Artichoke, a registered charity, commissions and produces expansive outdoor art experiences that started with its first show in 2006, Royal De Luxe’s *The Sultan’s Elephant*. Each commissioning process is conceived specifically for the event in question: selected artists are supported by the Artichoke production team in a collaborative realisation of their projects. Artichoke’s shows cost

considerable sums that are raised from scratch for each event, while overheads at Artichoke are mainly funded by Arts Council England. The events draw together live audiences reaching hundreds of thousands, and higher numbers still when measuring economic impact, which is amplified by media nationally and internationally, typically fetching a high return on investment. Productions at this ambitious scale involve extensive business plans, grant applications, event management planning and post-production evaluation reporting, as “Artichoke events set out to create a different world” (Artichoke, 2006) and to “both mark and make history” (ibid.). Our interviews with Helen Marriage provide insight into the many points of entry that are drawn together by the company’s events, inviting interactions with city spaces through art and conveying the company’s intention of claiming public space and the legitimacy of art in disrupting the status quo. Marriage explains that “the cultural value added, since its start in 2006, and the societal response have shown a shift since its founding principles of 15 years ago” (Marriage, 2021), enabling Artichoke to achieve considerable influence on the Arts Council and on the way that local councils, such as Liverpool City, work in relation to their public programming.

The case studies that we selected for this research include *The Sultan’s Elephant* (2006), *Lumiere* (biennially 2009-2021) and *Processions* (2018), each of which is considered in relation to context, costs, public response, marketing, exposure and degrees of public interaction. Our aim is to provide an overview of these projects, in order to analyse these through a lens of commonality, across different time periods in the company’s history and against the three research questions listed above. We are specifically interested in the ways in which the company has been able to creatively adapt to practical challenges – a process of “reverse engineering”, as opposed to post-rationalising, that can inform strategies for future events.

Case Study I: *The Sultan’s Elephant*

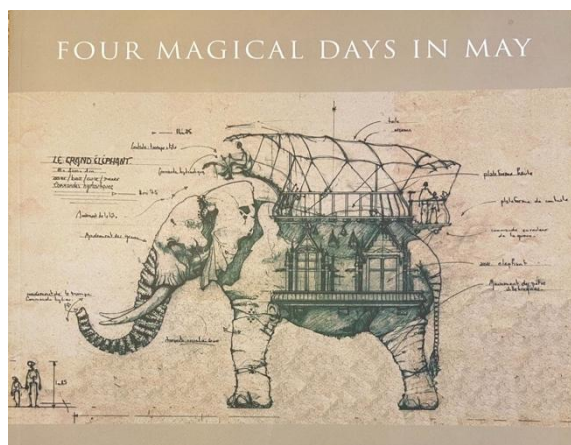


Figure 2 Photograph of *The Sultan’s Elephant* brochure cover. Produced by Artichoke in London.



Figure 3 *The Sultan’s Elephant*, Royal De Luxe, 2006. Produced by Artichoke in London. Photograph by Sophie Laslett.

The Sultan's Elephant sought to bring magic to the streets of London, “working with artists to create a work of the imagination, rather than a ceremony or protest” (Helen Marriage cited in Webb, 2006, p. 5). In collaboration with Royal de Luxe, *The Sultan's Elephant* was held in London between the 4th and 7th of May 2006 and fetched an audience of one million people, as estimated by the BBC. The total project cost was £1.2million, with a return of investment through direct spend by the audience of £28.7million. The bar was set high for Artichoke's future projects: monumental-sized marionettes of a girl and an elephant, this one with a height of 11.2 metres and with ears made from 80m² of leather, roamed the main streets of Central London in a large-scale theatrical spectacle. *The Sultan's Elephant* was a planned surprise for the people of London, turning the city into a playground for the day, with all rehearsals held out of the public eye and no advertising before the day. This was a successful first public event for Artichoke, reaping the Cultural Event of the Year award at the Visit London Awards in 2006.

As with all large productions that engage public space, safety protocols represent a significant part of the logistical strategies. In discussion with Helen Marriage, these are always approached with the goal of ‘safety out of sight’ (Marriage, 2021) to allow the audience to engage with the production to as much of a degree as they feel comfortable – to be secure yet interactive. The strategy for moving the elephant through the streets while inviting interaction with the public was to discreetly surround it with stewards in yellow shirts, adorned with a logo of the elephant and connected together by a



Figure 4 *The Sultan's Elephant*, Royal De Luxe, 2006. Produced by Artichoke in London. Photograph by Sophie Laslett.

thin rope, removing the use of hard barriers that would otherwise create visual and subconscious distance from the performance.

In discussion with Helen Marriage, logistical public space challenges were extensive, not stopping at removing the centre island and a strip of traffic lights, in order to enable the mobile display to manoeuvre down the centre of Pall Mall and ensuring it would not tip over on the cambered edges of the street. The Licensing, Operations and Safety Planning Group (LOSPG), comprising 20-30 people from Royal Parks to police, fire and ambulance, was involved in meticulously discussing timetables and health and safety issues, assessing possible obstacles on the day. While nearly ten years of effort went into negotiating and working through logistics of public space interaction, not all circumstances could be foreseen. Responsive creative strategies were needed on the day of the epic display, as trees, trimmed to the height of double decker buses, obstructed the path of the moving elephant: astonishingly, actual chainsaws were hoisted up to the artists atop the elephant, to trim the branches, adding drama to the arrival of the elephant at its final destination (Marriage, 2021).

“Nothing less than an artistic occupation of the city and a reclamation of the streets for the people”.

Lyn Gardner, *The Guardian*, 6 May 2006 (cited in Artichoke, 2021 p. 3)

The closing of London's streets to motor cars allowed people the freedom to experience the production, evoking entrancement and child-like wonder – offering the ability to “stroll the city, rather than have to dodge it” (Howard Jacobson, *The Independent*, 13 May 2006, cited in Webb, 2006, p. 7). In a piece entitled “Four days that shook the world”, Susannah Clapp, theatre critic for *The Observer*, describes the elephant as a marvel that invited the citizens of London to see the city in a fresh way, creating “a new map of the city; it made spirits soar” (Webb, 2006, p. 12). The surprise and wonder of *The Sultan's Elephant* captured TV audiences on the day and newspapers around the world after. In 2006, in a world with social media in its infancy, knowledge of the elephant's arrival was down to word on the street, or the very analogue method of texting photographs, or at most a post on Flickr, facilitating the element of surprise in the creative strategies pursued.

Reclaiming public space is not only about access to the physical space (the *urbs*/the concrete city) but also about engaging with the subconscious references to spaces in the city (the *civitas*/the soft city). In this sense, it could be argued that, through a project like *The Sultan's Elephant*, which took place not long after the acts of terrorism of July 2005, that had attempted to claim this intangible aspect of 'being' in London, an emotive reconnection with London was experienced, as aptly described by a member of the audience:

‘Just to say thank you for a piece of totally awe inspiring wonderfulness. Last time I was in Piccadilly with the traffic stopped it was for the Iraq demo. Last time I was in Trafalgar Square with the traffic stopped was for the 7/7 memorial vigil. Utterly joyous to see London come to a standstill for an elephant and a little girl and to see a smile on every face young and old, all faiths and cultures wrapped up in the magical silliness of the scale of it all and our beautiful city.’ (Comment from audience member, provided by Artichoke).

The Sultan's Elephant established many of the strategies that have defined Artichoke's approach since: an emphasis on collaboration and a desire for its ephemeral projects to have a long lasting impact on the life of the city, as is captured by countless requests for harnessing the momentum of the occasion for future interventions, such as in the email conversation documented in the legacy of the project: “Longer term we must work to ensure that the implications of the last few days are deep and far-reaching for the cultural landscape of this country.” (Quote from correspondence with Arts Council England, provided by Artichoke).

Also notable in this project, and subsequent ones, is the championing of an aesthetic of disruption, whereby Artichoke's interventions aim to temporarily stop everyday conventions of the city and radically re-imagine public spaces, triggering the excitement of the public. As an audience member explains,

'It was the most wonderful, awe inspiring and magical event. My eight year old son has declared it the best weekend of his life! I am sure that there will be people around (probably not the ones who saw it) who will be questioning the vast amount of money spent on this and the huge disruption caused by it, but I hope that there will be enough people like myself telling you how totally worth it the experience was, that you will be able to consider staging more events like this.' (Comment from audience member, provided by Artichoke).

This disruption is not limited to the routines and rhythms of the city: a level of disruption extends to the politics inherent to the management of large scale public art events, and further, to an effect on policy, explained by Helen Marriage as she challenges the concept of the city as a mere machine for trade, toil and traffic, proposing rather that the events of the city play a role in the wellbeing and in the creative lives of its citizens (Marriage, 2021).

Case Study 2: *Lumiere*



Figure 5 Photograph of the Lumiere brochures, 2009, 2017 and 2019. Produced by Artichoke.

Lumiere is a light festival staging a biennial programme of artist-led light displays on a grand scale, making use of spaces and buildings as night-time sites. Celebrating the 10-year anniversary of productions in Durham between 2009-2019, it was also staged in Derry-Londonderry in 2013, and in London in 2016 and 2018. In 2021, this festival of light took place in Durham once more, despite having to navigate the complex restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Shows in Durham have fetched audiences of over 1 million visitors over six festivals, with over 10,000 people participating in community learning and engagement programmes since 2009. Project costs were £9.5million with a PR value of £22.4million and an economic impact of £40million across the six festivals. *Lumiere* was winner of two awards: Best Arts and Cultural Programme and Best Collaboration for a Single Event, Corporate Engagement Awards 2020, for *Lift Off*, a learning

programme that was part of *Lumiere 2019*. Contribution was made from over 100 sponsors, with seed money committed by Durham County Council. Marketwise was commissioned by Durham City Council to do an evaluation of the audience and the economic impact, while Audience Agency was appointed to do evaluations in London for *Lumiere 2016* and *2018*, as well as *Processions*.



Figure 6 A selection of images from Lumiere exhibitions. Produced by Artichoke in London. Courtesy of Artichoke.

“I cannot remember the last time I was in a British city so full of cheerful, excited people, and of every generation... The throng was charmed and amazed, and it kept saying so, sometimes in reverent whispers, and sometimes in joyful shout.” Rachel Cooke, *The Observer*, 20 November 2011 (Cited in Artichoke Brochure, 2021, p. 17).

One strand of the artist commissioning process for *Lumiere* has been implemented by BRILLIANT, who have supported 26 artists and commissioned 31 artworks over the many editions of the festival. This commissioning scheme invites anyone over the age of 18, in the UK, to submit a light-based artwork, from which six are selected to produce a fee-paid artwork, supported by the Artichoke production team, at the *Lumiere* festival. The scheme is particularly aimed at underrepresented groups. *Lumiere*, which has become increasingly embedded within the local community of Durham, implements a run-up programme of learning that engages schools. In 2015, the community participation programme reach was wide and multi-layered, involving 1385 participants in six installations. One such installation was titled *Litre of Light* and brought together artist Mick Stephenson, UK Festival producers, OASES, local education specialists, introducing and delivering the *Litre of Light* campaign and programme to 25 schools. The campaign aimed to bring sustainable light sources to impoverished communities and involved collecting 12,000 recycled plastic bottles that were coloured by children, then assembled as part of an installation in Durham Cathedral’s Cloisters, attracting thousands of visitors.

In Durham, the Apollo Pavilion was celebrated with colour-changing displays as a precursor to the *Lumiere* festival in April 2019. This standalone project was commissioned by DCC to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the building and of the Moon landing. A follow-up installation involved students

from East Durham College for *Lumiere* 2019. These light installations aimed to adapt and disrupt the visual experience of spaces and buildings that have integral meaning to the city, but often fade into the backdrop of this, thereby bringing them to the foreground for re-appreciation and awareness. As one visitor mentioned, the exhibition was “a fantastic showcase of County Durham itself” (*Lumiere* 2019 visitors comments, provided by Artichoke) or as another commented, it was “a really enjoyable evening with family and friends. A new way to appreciate beautiful Durham” (ibid.).

Lumiere is different from other Artichoke projects, as it is a recurring event, providing parameters for comparison and a platform for self-critique. Many audience members that commented on the 2019 event had visited in 2017 and were comparing the scale and effect of the installations. The 2019 exhibition was held in inclement weather, which had a direct effect on the experience of the exhibition. As always with public art, the unpredictability of weather cannot be easily adapted to, and it is evident that in 2019, despite the festival’s continued success, it had some negative effect on the experience of some audience members, who referred to the “mud pit” and hour-long queue created outside the Cathedral. This is of particular relevance in the context of climate change: while it would be unreasonable to expect public art events to be able to successfully cater to any weather condition, the increasing regularity of extreme weather patterns across the globe does raise food for thought in relation to the resilience of an artistic form that is inherently subject to the elements. On the other hand, we could argue that it is precisely in drawing our attention to the outdoors that such practice can foster a renewed sense of civic responsibility in relation to the environment surrounding us, be this a built one or a natural landscape. In this sense, the evident challenge in adapting to weather conditions, highlighted in the realisation of public art events like *Lumiere*, may indeed function as a wake-up call for all of us, in our collective awareness of the environmental crisis. Furthermore, it is also important to highlight that *Lumiere* and Artichoke have actively engaged with relevant organisations, such as Vision:2025 and A Greener Festival in developing environmental strategies to reduce carbon impact.

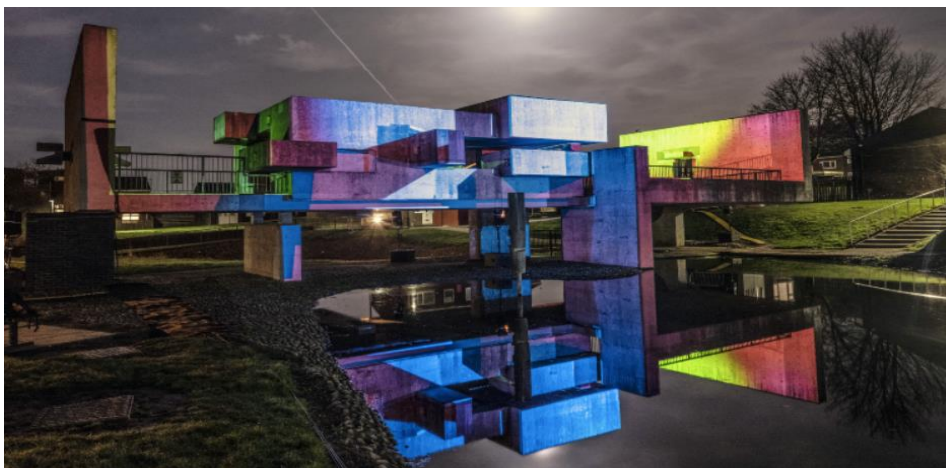


Figure 7 An image of the Apollo 50 light installation in Peterlee in County Durham, supported by the German Embassy. Image from the Lumiere 2019 brochure. Courtesy of Artichoke.

In London, *Lumiere* has confirmed the city's global cultural reputation. The extent of the 2016 London show was enhanced in the recommissioned 2018 edition, which expanded to six central districts of the city. The strategies for safety were again led by the agenda 'secure-yet-invisible', fetching a security implementation cost of over £1 million. This non-intrusive safety protocol enhanced the interactive engagement of the audience, as it gained access to parts of the city often out of bounds.

"What was it that made Londoners leave their homes and tourists their hotels during the city's coldest four nights in years and, as many spontaneously did, lie face up on the freezing tarmac of Oxford Circus? Light is one answer. Art, another. For those four days the art scene in London was transformed" John Nathan, *The Times*, 25 January 2016 (cited in Artichoke Brochure, 2021. p.19).

Aesthetic disruption in *Lumiere* projects takes place through a sort of sensory reframing of the city, by using the dark night sky as a canvas and the light displays to heighten and focus the connection between the audience and the surrounding buildings. This 'city as gallery' method reclaims public spaces in the altered visual of the *urbs*, to reconnect and draw in the *civitas* through the spaces. Subconsciously, the same spaces will be compared and reviewed in the daylight, thus encouraging a lingering effect of the artistic interventions.

Case Study 3: Processions

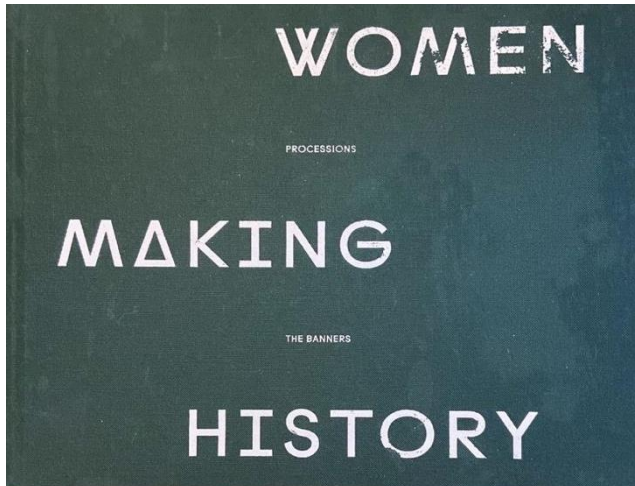


Figure 8 Photograph of *Processions* book. Courtesy of Artichoke.



Figure 9 Photograph: Cover image of report by 'The Audience Agency, June 2018. Courtesy of Artichoke.

Processions was a politically focussed production, commemorating one hundred years of women obtaining the right to vote in Britain. 14-18NOW commissioned Artichoke to produce this project, where 100 artists were nominated by community groups and 10 commissions were curated by Artichoke directly. Staged in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London, the four capital cities in the UK, on the 10th of June 2018, *Processions* saw over 80,000 women and girls taking part in large scale marches across the cities, each of them wearing white, green or purple scarves on the day – the suffrage colours. The making of the project involved 1,600 participants across 100 organisations. *Processions* drew in a live audience of 67,000 people, combined with a further reach of 3.5million viewers for the BBC 1 live broadcast and over 10million Facebook advert impressions. The total project cost was £3.1million and extended to funding multiple components of engagement. Once more, the project entailed extensive safety requirements of directing thousands of people through the streets, increasing its administrative protocols to four unique cities with individual requirements. The disruption of traffic and pedestrianisation of parts of the city was the strategy to reclaim public spaces, in this way, treating the city itself as the project's living art gallery.

A core aspect of the project was the preparation of specially created banners to be used in the live marches. These were “original artworks inspired by the banners made by the suffragists and suffragettes who had campaigned for votes for women a century before” (*Women Making History*, 2020). The making of these banners as a form of connection prior to the event drew on the tradition of embroidery as a communal activity to forge bonds: this participatory process offered a space for discussion and for comparing experiences in the political undertones of the project. The banners were eclectic works, each one drawing on unique narratives: in some cases, participants used their grandmother's dresses as material, while others donated wool for the banners from their

sheep in the Western Isles. The individuality of each banner was, hence, brought together in a combined message through the resulting “processions”. The achieved goal of unification through a single moment was the success of the event, celebrating the achievement of a much larger goal one century earlier. The banners were then collated into a book and also displayed at London Scottish House in June 2021, as part of the exhibition *Women Making History*.

“At a time when feminism can sometimes feel splintered, it was poignant to see such dazzlingly broad range of groups moving in the same direction.” Moya Crockett, *Stylist Magazine*, 2019 (cited in Artichoke Brochure, 2021, p. 23)

While physically, the live staging of *Processions* recalls a similar method to that of *The Sultan’s Elephant*, in that both entailed a parade-like performance across city centres, this level of participation reflects a developing ethos in Artichoke’s work, whereby the spectacular dimension of the projects is increasingly integrated with a level of co-creation with participants. Such co-creation is nonetheless always mitigated by the commissioned artists’ role in fostering a creative dialogue with the public. Indeed, Marriage also warns about possible dangers in the increasing tendency, within public art policies, to think of audience co-creation and participation as default strategies in this respect: it is important, she emphasises, to also validate the artist’s unique expertise and insight in the creation of innovative work (Marriage, 2021). Thus, the artist’s voice is always championed in Artichoke’s work, each project determining the ways in which public engagement is promoted as a result of this.

Compared to previous projects, in *Processions*, the role of social media was fundamental, eliminating the element of surprise, but rather inciting the support and following much like that of a civilian political protest. *Processions* was disseminated instantly through multiple platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and promoted by social media influencers, gathering momentum as the event continued. The website and E-shot also fetched thousands of visitors. The media campaign focussed on these platforms for recruitment activities, by increasing follower numbers before the event, as well as achieving amplification on the day and post-event awareness. There were over 56,800 online interactions about the project, which included high-profile mentions from International Women’s

Day, BBC Woman's Hour, the Cabinet Office and Turner Contemporary Margate, making online engagement key to the success of this event.



Figure 10 Photograph of Processions in London. Photograph by Sheila Burnett. Courtesy of Artichoke.

Processions, therefore, used a combination of methods, encouraging different entry points of engagement through participatory making, time-coordinated marches simultaneously in the four cities involved, followed by the production of the book and the dedicated exhibition. The aesthetic of disruption was present once more, in the physical stopping of the everyday routines of the cities involved, caused by these large scale marches, symbolically highlighting the urgency of the project's message; in this sense, forging a deep and layered connection between participants as citizens and the city as political arena. As Jenny Waldman, the then director of 14-18NOW, described: "*PROCESSIONS captured the zeitgeist. Dreamt up well before #MeToo, it gave women of all ages the opportunity to celebrate women's achievements in the campaign for suffrage ... and to renew our determination to continue the campaign for women's equality 100 years later*" (Women Making History, 2020. p.8).



Figure 11 Photograph of Women Make History event in London, 2021. Courtesy of Artichoke.

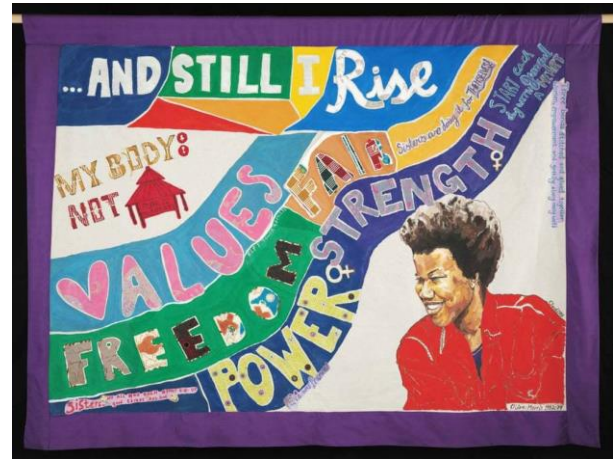


Figure 12. Banner by artist Claudette Johnson. Contributors were service users from the East London Foundation Trust, Tower Hamlets, including words by poet and civil rights activist, Maya Angelou. Courtesy of Artichoke.

Conclusion

From this initial stage in our inquiry, it is possible to identify three areas of emerging findings:

1. ADAPTABILITY AND RESILIENCE

Across the projects explored in this article, we have seen some key traits in the strategies employed, aimed at making Artichoke's work both feasible and impactful. It is clear that meticulous planning and robust structures in place for eventualities are necessitated by the mass scale of the projects in question. Each case study has taken several years in the development of logistics, through large teams of dedicated staff involved and, crucially, through continuous dialogue with local authorities and governmental structures. One of the characteristics of Artichoke's work is the company's dynamic position as both creative producer and commissioner of work. Artichoke actively mediates the relationship between the artists and the public entities involved in each project. Its position is dynamic because it is never quite the same: across *The Sultan's Elephant*, *Lumiere* and *Processions*, there are different mechanisms in which Artichoke has selected artists, has been involved in the creative process and has liaised with public organisations in relation to the work. The fluidity of this approach is reflected in Artichoke's broad mission statement, as indicated in its documentation material: there is no "standard" Artichoke project (even in the case of regular programmes such as *Lumiere*, each edition takes on a different form), other than the common traits of ephemerality, public space and ambitious scale. Indeed, it is indicative that the projects in question have all become household names in their own right, perhaps even more so than Artichoke itself. Within the company, Artichoke provides expertise on both the

institutional front and the artistic one, facilitating a dialogue that is often notoriously problematic in public art, where challenges may arise from the different styles of communication and contrasting priorities between institutions, creatives and the general public (Cartiere and Willis, 2008; Lanzl, 2020). Another manifestation of Artichoke's adaptability is in its use of "safety-made-invisible" measures, almost as an antidote to the 'security theatre' principle, to use the phrase coined by Bruce Schneier (2003, 2009) in highlighting the questionable tendency to make security strategies be outwardly performed for the public, so as to reassure its feeling of safety, whether effective or not. Here, instead, not only are many such measures deliberately not made overt, but through creative strategies they are aesthetically disguised, made part of the "show". This, in turn, disrupts the barrier between audience and artwork, inviting the public to experience a sense of ownership with the work, rather than a physical and/or psychological separation from this. How much these tactics will be feasible in the aftermath of Covid remains to be seen: it is clear, though, that the company will continue to foster this principle, tailoring this to new logistical challenges. The fact that, whilst not pandemic related, the projects explored here all had to deal with global threats to public spaces both preceding and concurrent with the projects (e.g. *The Sultan's Elephant* happening within less than twelve months after the 7/7 attacks in London or indeed *Lumiere 2021* taking place in the midst of Covid restrictions) indicates that there is a clear track record in this respect.

2. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: BALANCING OF PARTICIPATION WITH ARTIST-LED EXPERTISE

Whilst many of the projects produced by Artichoke involve participatory elements (*Processions* is a key example of this), a core principle in Artichoke's ethos is the foregrounding of the artist's expertise in creating engaging and ground-breaking experiences. As we have seen, Marriage passionately advocates the importance of the professional artist's experience and vision, and warns about the risk of inadvertently invalidating these through a tendency, increasingly seen within public funding policies, to emphasise co-creation with and delegation of the public as a means to develop new work. This is a contentious issue in public art and one that has been at the centre of numerous debates in this field. Skelly and Edensor (Courage, 2020, p. 259) provide an overview of how the process of 'festivalisation', a phrase cited from Häussermann and Siebel (1993) that we can link here to the work of Artichoke in its creation of spectacular mass experiences, on the one hand, has been regarded as an evident source of economic boost that highlights its investment potential, both cultural and commercial; on the other hand, it has also been critically interrogated as

endorsing a market-driven approach that may risk making the public into passive consumers, thus reprising Guy Debord's famous critique of the 'Society of the Spectacle' (1987). Within this debate, many perspectives in public art and placemaking have identified the need for a bottom-up approach to reclaiming public space, reprising a social turn in contemporary art (Kortbek, 2019) precisely to combat the decline in public spaces through commercialisation and privatisation (Bodnar, 2015, p. 2095). Hence, co-creation with the public, as opposed to an artist-driven authorship, has often been identified as a necessity, to ensure that public art can function as a genuine representation of a community, as opposed to being institutionally and/or commercially imposed upon the latter. Yet, critics like Claire Bishop have also pointed out the flaws of this argument, claiming that "such a denigration of authorship allows simplistic oppositions to remain in place: active versus passive viewer, egotistical versus collaborative artist, privileged versus needy community, aesthetic complexity versus simple expression, cold autonomy versus convivial community." (Bishop, 2012, p. 25). It is important to emphasise that all of our case studies in Artichoke's work were admission-free for the public (where ticketing systems were needed, to manage large audiences at peak hours, these were still free of charge). In this sense, Artichoke's projects should be distinguished from other forms of mass-scale entertainment events whereby commercial factors are key determinants in the success of the work and, more importantly, in whether this is actually accessible and affordable for the general public. Public participation, as identified by Mencarelli and Puhl (2006), can take form in different ways and, in this sense, Artichoke's work can be seen as a stimulus to encourage a more nuanced approach in policy-making, where the relation between artists and public can be seen in its full complexity, so that one does not work at the expense of the other, but, project by project, new possibilities for interaction are accordingly explored and celebrated.

3. **ART OF DISRUPTION**

Throughout this discussion, we have used the terms *adapting* and *disrupting* to convey the specific ways in which Artichoke creatively positions itself in relation to urbanist and artistic practices. As it continually evolves and reinvents itself, 'adapting' from project to project and from location to location, Artichoke's practice has the objective of actively breaking, 'disrupting', the routines of the city and to question the role that the city plays in the life of its citizens. According to Schipper (2014, pp. 18-26), a city should be seen as a process, as opposed to a static, material entity. This in many ways reprises Artichoke's ethos as it conveys a notion that an urban environment, far from being reducible to a mere machine, is a platform for human engagement and growth: a cross-pollination of ideas and experiences to stimulate thinking beyond boundaries and timeframes. Artichoke establishes new ways of

experiencing the public sphere, precisely through its 'creative mis-use' of given spaces: streets are temporarily blocked, daily routines are paused and everyday spaces are aesthetically subverted - through changing sets, through light, through giant marionettes, through people. Its approach is geared towards the 'soft city', as it explores the intangible ways in which we encounter an urban space, allowing multiple personalised subjective experiences, as is documented in the numerous audience responses that we have been able to read from across our case studies. Whilst the vast majority of these testifies the transformative impact of Artichoke's work, some responses are also critical: circumstantial factors such as bad weather and logistical hiccups can negatively affect the experience of the spectators, as conveyed in some comments. It is also understandable that the disruption of the city will provoke the disapproval of some residents and commuters, precisely as the projects, and especially the earlier ones like *The Sultan's Elephant*, largely preceding the ubiquity of social media instant dissemination, are based upon surprising a non-expectant public. An element of risk is thus inevitable in the ephemeral nature of Artichoke's projects and indeed a feature in their aesthetic vision; but it is also in this ephemerality that we can find a key strategy in initiating a performative and transformative encounter with the public, who is invited to reacquaint itself with the city, temporarily reimagining its collective function and potential in relation to this. It is through the soft city that Artichoke's work can be seen as a game changer in the Cultural Ecosystem Services (CES), defined as the "nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences" (Duconseillea and Saner, 2020). As we navigate the unknown factors that will continue to shape our experience of the public sphere in the aftermath of the pandemic and in the midst of new global challenges, it is likely that this soft city focus will continue to represent an essential strategy for Artichoke, whose methods may indeed provide a useful stimulus for other cultural producers and for the policies that can enable their work. And, as the phrase 'safety in numbers' will continue to entail contradictory connotations in this panorama, it is precisely in these methods that new opportunities and new visions may be found, highlighting the role of large scale public art gatherings as a vital vehicle in engaging with our cities.

Further notes

We see this research as a starting phase in what we hope will be an ongoing effort in reflecting upon Artichoke's current and forthcoming work. In establishing a framework to evaluate the strategies in place as utilised by Artichoke, our intention is to build on these considerations and continue to use these to document a landscape that, now more than ever, is ever-changing and unpredictable.

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