Writing in Three Dimensions

Linda France

In 1990 I was asked by Bridget Jones, then stained-glass-artist-in-residence at the Queen's Hall Arts Centre, Hexham, to write a poem to be incorporated into a stained glass installation she was working on for the new foyer. Responding to the activities inside the building and the leafy Abbey Grounds across the road, she chose as her theme 'the Dance of the Seasons'. I wrote a short poem – four verses for the four plain panels she had included in the design for the purpose. Even though I would not have used the term then, this was my first 'public art commission'.

I found it enormously satisfying on a number of counts. The collaborative aspect of the work was a welcome change from the solitary nature of a poet's day. As a frustrated visual artist, I revelled in the chance to get closer to an artist at work, spend time in her studio and observe the differences and similarities in our practices. I enjoyed seeing something emerge that seemed to be greater than the sum of its constituent parts, as well as the undeniable fact that more people would read my words passing through the doors they were written on than would ever take a book of mine out of the library on the other side of them.

However, as a complete beginner at the game, I approached the task in what I know now was a fundamentally inappropriate way. I wrote the poem as if it were destined for the page, from top to bottom and left to right. The poem's trajectory was linear but the foyer had two points of entry. It could never be guaranteed that the verses would be read in the 'right' order. It was only after the foyer was installed that I realised my error. Lifted off the page, the poem had taken on a life of its own, at odds with the space in which it found itself. And I am very grateful for what it taught me at one glance.

Queens Hall Arts Centre, Hexham – text: Linda France, glass: Bridget Jones 1990

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Twenty years, and as many Public Art projects later, Bridget and I have recently finished another collaboration and this has felt like some sort of redress. This time the site is an enclosed bridge on the campus of Newcastle University. Built in the late 70s/early 80s, linking the Robinson Library and the new Great North Museum, it was badly in need of refurbishment. Our brief was to design an installation that

could work within the existing structure. Bridget proposed a set of enamel panels applied to the twenty-six ribs of the interior brickwork that are angled towards the centre of the tunnel. These are printed with her design of semi-abstract plant forms and my text.

As people approach the bridge from both directions, I knew what was needed was a poem that would make sense whichever end they start reading and so I wrote a palindromic poem. Each panel is over-printed with one or two words at different levels along the length of the bridge and each ‘verse’ is presented in a more traditional (on the page) justified and punctuated version on a stainless steel plaque at the entrance, which is clad in brushed aluminium, coloured to match the enamel panels inside. The piece, called *Welcome to the Palindrome*, functions a bit like a puzzle, playful and layered. I hope it will invite and carry repeated readings by those who use the bridge every day as well as communicating something to those who may see it only once.

Welcome to the Palindrome, Hadrian Bridge – with Bridget Jones 2009

During the years in between these two projects I have learnt from experience the difference between writing for the page and writing for a public space. My own commissions, studying other examples of the form and designing and teaching a post-graduate course in the subject at Newcastle University has given me new contexts and possibilities for my work and sharpened my awareness of poetic form and the aesthetics of space.

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Form and content is the heart of the matter as regards text in three dimensions in a public space. Of course a poet writing any poem has to take into account the way it is laid out, where lines begin and end, and this must at the very least reflect what the poem is 'about'. For example, the perfectly proportioned sonnet lends itself to a lyric argument, a contemplation and possible transformation of an idea or emotion. It is a quiet but firm conversation with oneself or another. This coming together of subject and structure is a version, in architectural terms, of form and function. In the 50s concrete poetry embodied the attempt more fully, graphically, to express this process of integration. The place where form and content meet and become one is invisible; only noticed when it is missing.

Writing for a space rather than the page involves taking on the fact of an embodied reading. It is not just in the space of the imagination that the reader inhabits one of these poems; rather it is as they are standing, walking through or being in the space itself, maybe talking, maybe eating, that they experience it.

If, as Michael Schmidt has termed it, a poem is a 'democratic space', the use of text in a public environment is an explicitly three-dimensional democratic space, open to any response from any passer-by. The writer's task is to 'look at what is there' (Ian Hamilton Finlay) and to write from that awareness; not simply illustrating or explaining the setting. Economy, focus and clarity become even more important when the format is limited, measured in metres, rather than lines on a page or pages in a book.

This is where good communication with the collaborators (artist, designer, architect, planner etc) is vital. The structure of the piece will suggest the layout of the text (or vice versa). Questions such as which way the text will be read – left to right, top to bottom, through a transparent surface – need to be discussed and understood by the writer and the artist or designer who is physically creating the format so their vision is a shared one. All these considerations will form part of how the poem will be conceived and written, functioning not unlike the grid of a fixed poetic form, offering necessary limitations and opening up unexpected possibilities.

Welcome to the Palindrome, Hadrian Bridge – with Bridget Jones 2009

Stages of the writing process that are similar but different when writing for a public space are research, identifying an intention and choosing a subject, and editing. These expand to include consultation (with collaborators and possibly members of the public); considering accessibility, making a text meaningful to a reader at first scan, but providing enough depth to bear repeated readings; harnessing the potential of imagery and rhythm to make a piece effective and memorable, for it to

stand out as having a different weight from the clutter of text already in an existing space – signage, advertisements etc.

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Inseparable from these, there is the social responsibility of placing work in the public domain, which needs to ask what is the intended effect on the reader: will it enhance their experience of the space? Might planting a tree be a more effective, simpler and greener, solution? N.B. Ogden Nash's *I think that I shall never see/A billboard lovely as a tree./Perhaps, unless the billboards fall,/I'll never see a tree at all*.

Suzi Gablik has written about 'The Re-enchantment of Art': *Re-enchantment implies a release from the affliction of nihilism…it also refers to that change in the general social mood towards a new pragmatic idealism and a more integrated value system that brings head and heart together in an ethic of care, as part of the healing of the world.*

In 'Art, Space and the City', Malcolm Miles suggested: *…imagining possible futures…is as much part of a democratic society as informal mixing in public spaces, and…may produce an urban regeneration in which the social benefits are primary.*

These ideas open up important areas for discussion. Rather than being irrelevant add-ons in a landscape, urban or rural, a well-placed piece of text-based art has the potential to bring communities together in both the making of it and the living with it. A writer's role is not unlike that of the court fool: to say what needs to be said and no one else is able or willing to put into words. They can act as a community's conscience, giving voice to the needs of a particular place. Work approached like this is transformative, has magic in it; no doubt one of the reasons why people have such strong feelings about public art and why it attracts so much controversy.

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What writers think of as ‘tone of voice’ – itself inseparable from form and content, sound and sense – is where writing for a public space starts to depart more radically from writing for the page. The text is supported by and inextricable from the font, the medium and the site. Letter types are graphic and gestural, adding expression and weight and any number of visual effects to the finished piece. The mood will also be suggested by the medium and the location. The finished work is a synthesis of all these constituent parts. Every material will suggest a setting and every setting will suggest its own material. Given that, anything is possible. The work may be manifest in stone, wood, metal, glass, neon, paper, digital, projection, textiles or applied to existing objects (e.g. birdboxes, windmills, signposts. See www.alecfinlay.com).

Sculpture: William Pym, text: Linda France and local community participants: Hawthorn WordWorks, Murton, Sunderland

The starting point and the end point however is the site: this is what the piece is 'for' as well as what it is. Whether it is an interior or exterior space, urban or rural, a permanent or temporary installation will affect the spirit of the piece, the manner of address and tone of voice, and therefore inevitably, the desired medium, layout and font. The writing can echo the spirit of the place, or contrast and interject. A single line has the capacity to surprise and delight, the power to rearrange perceptions and bring a new relevance to the reader's experience of that environment.

It will be clear that this process is anything but linear. The preparation for writing and the writing itself must open out and inhabit the space and make full use of it, so that it becomes part of the work itself. What this approach makes possible is a suspension of certainties that the blank page can at times sabotage. Nothing is able to be fixed, except after sustained dialogues between the various collaborators; and clear provision for several proof-readings. As with any collaboration, the whole process is a public rather than a private one, involving meetings, negotiations, false starts, adaptations and what can seem endless amendments. It can be both immensely rewarding and intensely frustrating.

What it also encourages is an embracing of a visual aesthetic, not generally necessary for the writer working on and for the page. The finished piece must compete for attention with all the various features of the landscape, whether they are trees or buildings, other people or traffic, or simply the fact that it is raining and the reader is in a hurry to catch her train. This is quite different from the way people read books. The ambience is one of constant change; stillness is momentary. Life goes on all around and becomes part of the piece, the daily experience of the space.

It is this that makes writing for public spaces such an exciting and fresh, vivid and contemporary form. Relatively new, it is still evolving and will continue to do so, part of a wider discussion that everyone is taking part in about our environment, choosing what sort of places we want to live, work and spend our time in. As far as I can see, writers – people who are good at thinking laterally and imaginatively, putting ideas into words and making meaningful connections – have an important contribution to make to this conversation.

LINDA FRANCE lives in rural Northumberland, not far from Hadrian's Wall. She has published five poetry collections with Bloodaxe Books – including *The Simultaneous Dress* (2002) and *The Toast of the Kit Cat Club* (2005), a biography in verse of the 18th century traveller and writer Lady Mary Wortley Montagu – as well as various limited edition pamphlets. Linda also edited the acclaimed anthology *Sixty Women Poets* (Bloodaxe 1993, a Poetry Book Society Special Commendation). Her 'year renga' *book of days* appeared from Smokestack in 2009. A new collection *You Are Her* is forthcoming from Arc in 2010. Linda's work has been broadcast widely on radio and television and published in various anthologies, magazines and newspapers. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle and in other community contexts. She has a particular interest in cross-arts collaborations and has worked with visual artists and musicians on assorted projects, particularly in the field of Public Art. See *www.lindafrance.co.uk* for details.