Case Study

PUBLIC COMMISSIONS: Mark Titchner

Mark Titchner is a contemporary artist who works across various media: sculpture, installation, digital print, performance, video and film. He uses the visual languages of complex pattern, design and advertising together with text to create works that critique contemporary culture and attitudes. In recent years Titchner has undertaken many large-scale public and private commissions for architects, local councils, housing associations and art galleries.

Live the Life that you Imagine — an installation at 1 St Peter's Square, Manchester:

Can you talk us through the process of a public art commission?

Generally you'd have a client such as a local council, a developer or a housing association, but it could be anyone. They would engage an art consultant, someone who has a track record of working with artists and delivering public artworks. The consultant presents a long list of artists to show to the client, and from that, a shortlist of three or four would be chosen.

Artists on the shortlist would receive a brief to respond to. They'd work on the brief and then present to the client. It normally takes me about a month to put together material for a presentation. And it can be a very involved and demanding process. You have the concept but then you'd also maybe have to make samples, trialling materials you intend to use, you might have to get prototypes made and now, more often than not, it involves making computer models.

And all that time you're being paid, or not?

Sometimes you can get paid well at this stage, but at other times you have to think of it as a sort of loss-leader in the hope of winning the commission. It's really quite unregulated. It depends who you're working with…

I think good practice is you should be paid. But at this stage it still feels very much like you're in the middle of an extended job interview. It can be quite hardcore, you can put an awful lot of work into a project, it could be a really big project and you might feel like you've got a great idea, but obviously the decision is out of your hands and you find out that it's just not happening, it's rejected by the client.

For more complex projects, or anything that is publicly funded, they will assemble a team: people from the local community, maybe local gallery people or others who've got an interest in the project… Then you'd get a phone call saying yay or nay. If yes, you'd get a contract, which can be quite a complicated process in itself.

Do you have to get your own solicitor to look at it?

Sometimes, that could all be in place and there would be someone on hand to offer impartial advice. Other times, you'd be responsible for the legal side yourself.

Then you'd get into a secondary design stage. Obviously, it depends on the job; if it's really straightforward, you might just take your proposal, the one you pitched, and start making it. Other times you'd go back to the design and start looking more closely at practicalities, finding people to make elements, sourcing materials, etc.

So do you begin to feel a bit like a manager at this stage?

It can feel a bit like that, obviously there's a lot of technical things to consider. And if you're installing the piece in a public space, the work has to be produced well in terms of safety, the process of production and installation means that insurances are in place and obviously the work has got to last.

It can be quite a slow process and at this stage it doesn't always feel very creative. Even putting something up, if it's going onto a building, you're liaising with architects, planning — planning permission has to be in place — you might have to consider road closures, get cranes in, it's all very different from, say, designing and putting a poster up outside, which is where I started off. You may begin with an idea that feels very immediate but then it can become quite protracted.

You have to have patience and the resilience, in a way, to see it through?

Certainly. But normally in a contract you would have a timescale, so payment within that would be broken down into 'deliverables'; stages such as the (i) Detailed design stage, (ii) Steps in the fabrication, (iii) Installation, (iv) Signing off. And then throughout those stages there's potentially a lot of toing and froing, depending how involved the client is. You know, some people like to see what's happening during the fabrication stage and others just want to turn up at the unveiling…

And so, once it's up, do you think about viewers connecting with the piece?

Well, again, there's a great variation there. A lot of the projects I work on have a public engagement aspect from the very beginning. So, for a current project I'm working on in Burnley, Wigan and Hull, all the outcomes will be based on a month of workshops with young people, so that can be the way that it works. Or you can do a project and there's an engagement element afterwards. Feedback could come directly from the public or through the local press. If it's a massive project like, say, the London Underground project, then they will have 'viewing figures' because they have the facilities to do that quite straightforwardly.

How did you start working as an artist/designer?

Although my work has many design elements, I would call myself an artist.

I liked drawing: I didn't know anything about contemporary art and design. I won a few drawing competitions when I was younger and because of that, I was encouraged by my parents. Although, when it came to deciding to do it as a job — I was doing maths, physics and chemistry at A-level but I had very little interest — I was a bit nervous about telling them I wanted to study art.

What would you say your strengths are?

Well, my practice has changed a lot over the past five years since winning more and more public commissions. I used to spend a lot of time in the studio, I used to make everything and I'd like to go back in that direction again. A lot of the 'making' I do at the moment is very much inside a computer. I do enjoy drawing a lot, but I suppose that side of my work has had to take a backseat for now.

I mean, you need skills, whether that be thinking skills, understanding art and design concepts, that's important. I'm not that interested in anything that's purely about craft.

What projects give you the most pleasure?

I like the collaborative ones because they can be more open, like anything can happen, and I like improvising a bit. Especially given the various constraints that are attached to a lot of the projects I do. Within these longer-term public projects I've been trying to push aspects like wall painting — it's great to do something fast; say you have four days to complete a mural and then it's done. People are in the space, living with the work, using it and enjoying it. I like to see a piece unfold quickly, sometimes.

How do you think digital design resources have influenced the processes of making, and the outcomes of artists and designers?

Obviously, CAD has been incredible for, say, the last 20 years. It's a brilliant tool but the trouble is it can become a bit of a default setting. But for the public works I think digital is good; it's what people expect to see. It borrows the visual language of, say, advertising.

Can you talk to me about designers, artists that you like?

Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, Lawrence Weiner… I look at those artists all the time. Also, I've always been interested in the design, say, of record covers, comic art, the more ephemeral stuff. But at the same time, I'll look at Caravaggio, Rembrandt… My influences stretch to CIA manuals, self-help books, the layout of photographs in old magazines. It's kind of a process of forgetting and rediscovering.

I get annoyed with the idea that being an artist is easy. Art has been very successful at entertaining people in recent years, but for me, artists shouldn't be celebrities. Nor should it be important how much money they earn. It's about having the time and freedom to think and work, to experiment, to challenge and surprise yourself, to make work you believe is worthwhile.