

Sculpture In The City, 2023

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Abstract

This article discusses the unique qualities and experience of attending London’s *Sculpture In The City* trail. The piece also explores differences between gallery art and public art, as well as notions of transcendence in art. The concept of belief is also

discussed as variously illustrated by religious architecture, art or a financial system that gambles on futures and insurances. Ultimately and implicitly, the piece encourages ways to think about our encounters with art in our urban setting, and specifically with public sculpture.

Keywords London, public, belief, Sunday, church, trail

Figure 1: Jesse Pollock, *The Granary* (2021). Copyright the artist. Photo: © Nick Turpin. An orange steel sculpture in an urban setting with two passers-by.

Introduction: Teaching, sculpture and public art

I have been fortunate enough to teach contemporary fine art sculpture for many years in one of London's leading art schools. During this time, I became interested in public sculpture, a slightly overlooked area then, although it has received increasing attention in recent years, largely in connection to the controversial monument tradition.¹

Sculpture in the City is a sculpture park in London's financial district with an annually changing curation of sculptural works.² The locations span a walkable area stretching from Liverpool Street down and across to Aldgate, covering 100 Bishopsgate, Leadenhall Market, Fenchurch Street Station Plaza and Mitre Square. The exhibition is free and is accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, attracting an unusually large and diverse audience, some art lovers visiting the trail and others rushing lunch gatherers. The project is directed by Stella Ioannou and provided by *The City of London* Corporation, alongside LACUNA, a leading cultural studio. Since the project began in 2011, it has displayed 141 artworks by 121 artists.³ The year 2023 sees the eleventh iteration, and features works by Arturo Herrera, Elisa Artesero, Emma Louise Moore, Emma Smith, Isamu Noguchi, Jesse Pollock, Jocelyn McGregor, Larry Bell, Mika Rottenberg, Oliver Bragg, Pedro Pires, Phyllida Barlow, Rafael D'Aló, Simeon Barclay, Ugo Rondinone, Vanessa da Silva and Victor Lim Seaward. Some works have proved popular enough to be bought by adjacent businesses, or by *The City of London* itself, and made permanent in what was assumed to be their temporary site.⁴

Some years prior to the inception of *Sculpture In The City*, while teaching sculpture to undergraduate students at Camberwell College Sculpture department, I conducted

public sculpture field trips to view and discuss monuments around Westminster, Trafalgar Square and Buckingham Palace. These were very different to my usual experiences with students in London's contemporary art galleries. For one, the walks entailed dealing with the noise and dirt of London's shamefully traffic-clogged roads. I would come home from these sessions with a sore throat. Nevertheless, myself and the students had managed to, at the very least, begin to collectively think about the differences between public sculpture and other cultural expressions, and were critically engaging with the relationship between public works, history and monumentality. In recent years, I have come to annually incorporate a tour of London's *Sculpture In The City* trail into a short summer course, titled *Art of the World in London* for a student body composed mainly of Asian students at The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. It is always exciting to introduce students to contemporary art, but especially when set amidst the maverick mix of the city's ancient churches and cutting-edge Hi-Tec architecture. Every year I come away from this experience full of enthusiasm and admiration for the work of the team in charge of *Sculpture In The City*, and with special gratitude for Project Support Officer Samantha Greer.

As an art writer who has lived for decades in London, and has always felt the city to be the backdrop to my experience of contemporary art, I have long intended to respond to *Sculpture In The City*. This year (summer 2023), I finally managed to do so. I hope readers will enjoy both my broader observations about sculpture, public sculpture, the city and *The City*, as well as more specific interpretations and evaluations of the unique phenomenon of the *Sculpture in the City* initiative and its 2023 iteration.

Figure 2: Jocelyn McGregor, *Earthing* (2022). Copyright the artist. Photo: © Nick Turpin. A dry-stone wall sculpture with snail motifs in an urban setting.

The City

Sundays remain special, even in a supposedly secular society in which – many would concede – money dominates our belief system. Weekdays, during lunch time, *The City of London's* ancient streets are packed with crowds of smartly dressed, well-remunerated workers, all out to find the most fashionable eatery or hostelry in London's

banking and insurance district, incorporating the old exchanges, Mansion House, Bank of England, Guildhall, various guild houses and numerous other trading institutions. On a Sunday morning however, *The City's* streets are all but bereft of people and cars. Fenchurch Street and City Thameslink stations, which every weekday disgorge hundreds of thousands of workers into the city from the suburbs, close their doors on Sunday to conduct much needed maintenance, as if privately nursing the past week's bruises.

Deprived of human activity *The City* becomes a more mysterious world. Some of its beautiful and ancient stone churches open their doors, as they have for hundreds of years, and some ring bells in the hope of attracting a congregation. But this is not really a residential area; rather, it is an area of working hard and leaving once you have done your bit for your boss, your team and your bank balance. It is estimated that less than 10,000 people actually reside in *The City's* 'square mile' while somewhere between half a million and a million workers enter and leave it every weekday. In fact, becoming familiar with *The City* means gaining a sense that the wider city – now stretching out to the fuzzy edges of what is sometimes called *Greater London* – originated here in *The City* within the city [*sic*].⁵ This was, after all, a convenient place to cross the river, trade and defend a settlement on the northern bank of The Thames.

On Sunday, *The City's* churches are more clearly juxtaposed against, and dwarfed by new architecture that seems to be relentlessly filling and crowding *The City's* relatively tiny space. Big name and blue-chip financial companies clamour, claim or maintain prestigious addresses and snappy postcodes like '30 St Mary Axe' – the official title of the building popularly known as 'the gherkin'. Sub-regions and subdivisions of *The City* are demarcated by especially decorative bollards, and *The City* also has its own police force who wear a special uniform and insignia. The 'square mile' (as *The City* is also described), heart of a belief system where the tallest towering temples of capitalism are clustered, might just take on the mythical attributes of a sacred realm of finance, tended by those who work most arduously for the gods of wealth and prosperity. On Sundays, *The City* reveals itself as a utopia, though it seems not built for humans but for its own sake, with its buildings spending the day of rest and worship reciprocally

studying their reflections in a neighbour's similarly majestic grid of polished glass and steel. Now, on Sundays, the spaces are largely unpopulated, empty stages, stilled like photographs until re-animated by the movement of a rare passer-by. On Sundays the financial giants rest in silence. No-one passes through their automatic doors, no-one hurries across their aspirational foyers, nor enters their express lifts. A few security guards spend the weekend reigning over an empty kingdom while the crowd of workers take their leisure a commuter's distance away from this heart of the capital. You might see some window cleaners and their apparatus in action, and if you stop for a while in one of very few coffee bars that remain open, you might only be able to interact with the barista. Outside, you might just see an occasional lone traveller, crossing an empty plaza, pulling their noisy trolley suitcase; someone perhaps fortunate enough to be making their way to a train station after spending a night in *The City*.

At the entrance of an open and active church, benign Christian helpers sweep away the first of the year's autumn leaves, as if such a gesture will encourage a congregation to attend. Instead, a pack of skateboarders swish and clunk their way through space, momentarily making it their own just as fast as they leave it in their wake. As I begin my search for the sculptures featured in this year's *Sculpture In The City* trail, I hear one lone church bell begin to ring. I estimate that it must be Saint Botolph's, adjacent to Aldgate Underground station (at one extreme of the trail). The stark singularity of the chimes and their carefully paced rhythm lend a special atmosphere to the area within their acoustic reach, and I wonder why a sculptor has not yet incorporated this sonic space into their work for the trail. Then I notice that the peals are becoming faster, then faster still, as if time is running out for the person ringing, running out for all who hear, or maybe for Christianity at large – is it too late to qualify for redemption? But perhaps the accelerating sound of the bell signals to potential members of this morning's congregation at Saint Botolph's that they had better hurry if they want to find a place to pray amidst the pews. And just as it had sped up, so the bell now begins to slow, until it finally stops altogether, brought to a gentle and skilful end by an experienced campanologist. A moment later, the modern din of a helicopter passing overhead resets the atmosphere.

Nevertheless, the bell might remind us that the juxtaposition of churches and insurance companies here invites consideration of what might be the best way to address mortality and approach an uncertain future. Is it most wise to live a pious life, regularly attending to and heeding the word of God? Or, might it be wiser to provide care for mind and body in later life by taking out a life-insurance policy, or investing in futures markets? The existence of an afterlife has not been scientifically proven or disproven, and yet we know that when someone close to us departs, science seems inadequate to our emotional human experience. We might therefore opt to 'hedge our bets', keeping one foot in the barely open door of a metaphysical explanation of life and death, while at the same time chipping-in to a financial system which is only so rational. We know all too well that it defaults to a casino-like activity, often risking collapse, not just of an individual's stake but of the entire system.

But now it is time to cease this conjecture, leave the doors of that casino and briefly contemplate the specificities of sculpture as a form of art most appropriate to this particular context and locale.

Figure 3: Elisa Artesero, *The Garden of Floating Words* (2017). Copyright the artist.

Photo: © Nick Turpin.

A neon artwork spelling out a poem in an urban setting with plants in a bed.

On sculpture

Teaching experience has revealed to me a special relationship between sculpture and transcendence. We might sometimes gaze into a framed painting as if it allowed us a window-like view into another world; and we might enter a Roman church, gaze up and see successful painted illusions (sometimes aided by cunning architecture) that create a quite convincing image of eternity and infinity. But sculpture will invariably, and eventually, bring us down to earth and back in touch with a certain kind of materiality. Sculpture informs us that we cannot actually defy gravity unless aided by a complex apparatus. Of course, sculpture can create its own illusions. Michelangelo's magical *Pieta* conveys the illusion of a mother grieving and caring for her deposed son, and makes it seemingly possible to mould marble into wax. It also grounds us, however,

when we read Michelangelo's own earthly name etched into a sash that passes over the virgin mother's breast. In this way, having achieved one of sculpture's most 'transcendent' moments, Michelangelo added a reminder of the work's worldly and human manufacture – including the fact that it was a commissioned work of art. We can take some form of assurance from sculpture's special dialogue with dense, haptic reality, but sculpture also invites a certain levity as it often wears 'on its sleeve' the heart of its inability to transcend. There is, after all, something absurd about the mismatch between our dreams, wishes and imaginings, and their frustration by material limitations. Sculptors, perhaps more aware of these boundaries than most, often concede to them with wry elements of irony – of which Michelangelo's signed *Pieta* might be an example.

Walking the *Sculpture in the City* trail we might also note that public sculpture – sited in the streets, beyond the protection of gallery or museum, denied the special lighting that would aim to show it at its constant best, and minus the constant security provided by invigilators – is prone to all kinds of vicissitudes and interventions. On my own tours, alone or with students, I have found dry leaves, newspapers, spiders' webs, a coffee cup and more on or near the sculptures, as well as one work whose pinnacle figurine had been stolen, presumably by a demonstrative reveller. Public sculpture occupies a special place in contemporary art, one that acknowledges and incorporates sculpture's playful response to its own limitations, as well as its special, unframed and direct relationship to its immediate surroundings. The weather, lighting, the day or the night, the week or weekend all become fickle factors influencing our receipt of and response to public sculpture. It also enjoys and endures an expanded audience who receive it unconsciously, in a kind of osmosis that differs from actively venturing into a contemporary art gallery or a museum. A successful public sculpture is prepared to engage with all these contingencies.

When street artist Banksy opened his recent retrospective in Glasgow, he celebrated the fact that a colonial-era bronze equestrian statue that stands outside the building now housing the city's modern art museum has, for decades, sported an irreverent traffic cone hat. The origin of this inspired gesture has been forgotten even as it has become a permanent update on the original sculpture, tacitly agreed upon, or resigned

to by the police and/or local council, who must have tired of repeatedly removing it only to see it replaced. It has become (as Banksy warmly approved) a symbol of the city's people and their refusal to be dictated to by public monuments imposed upon their present environment by previous generations with different values. The cone shows the audience's interaction with public art and monuments in Glasgow, augmenting them with their own gestures where necessary, and thereby expressing their own current values. Hence, here, monumental public sculpture has been rendered 'street art'.

Figure 4: Emma Smith, *We* (2019). Copyright the artist. Photo: © Nick Turpin.

The facade of a modern building with words spelled out across it in red neon.

A brief, selective tour of *Sculpture In The City*, 2023: On a Sunday morning⁶

Some of *The City of London*'s ancient churches now double as cafes. They offer delicious lunches, Lattes and welcome attentive phone-scrollers to occupy their pews, apparently oblivious to the panoply of decorative and devotional imagery that surrounds them. It is all very symbolic of our society's mixed-up and half-hearted relationship with religious belief. In fact, these café/chapel mash-ups produce strange visual and cultural juxtapositions that many contemporary sculptors would be proud to have dreamed-up. Christianity might have formed a backbone of belief for those for whom these magnificent churches were originally built hundreds of years ago, but today a Focaccia, Flat White and 4G assure many that all is right with the world, and that, despite the relentless quasi-apocalyptic news feeds, they can carry-on for another day.

An allusion to such ideas is made by a work in this year's iteration of *Sculpture In The City* laconically titled *We* by artist Emma Smith. This piece of neon writing shines down from an elevated place, as would a traditional form of advertising or perhaps a stained-glass window. We look up, indulging in the important message coming from above. The text, when fully illuminated, and in slightly crowded lettering, appears to read 'WE ARE ALL ONE'. The artist, however, has purposefully installed a glitch which makes one of the letter 'Ls' switch intermittently on and off (as faulty neon signs sometimes do), thus changing the meaning of the message into its antithesis: 'WE ARE ALONE'. Regardless of the two alternative statements from which we are invited to choose, the work

demonstrates the slippery uncertainties of language and meaning in general. It highlights the pervasive ambiguities of the everyday in contemporary societies influenced by new technologies, and where we are both constantly isolated as individual prosumers and collectively united by our addiction to constant flows of online information.

Elisa Artesero also chose neon for her work titled *The Garden of Floating Worlds*, a piece that effectively enhances and imbues the hurried, competitive, workaday city with some moving poetry. The words used are romantically subtle and enigmatic, rendered even more ephemeral by the fact that we encounter them as much in their actuality as in their reflection in the glass of the adjacent building. Hence, we are likely to find ourselves standing between the words and their reflection, slightly unsure as to which is the truest version of the piece. Interestingly, when I visited Artesero's work one quiet Sunday morning, its Romanticist poetics were augmented by tiny spots of a highly localized rain strangely falling on the pavement around me. Craning my neck to look up, I discovered window cleaning operatives working far above, unaware of their subtle interaction with my viewing experience.

Jesse Pollock's striking sculpture, *The Granary*, takes a traditional rural grain store as its inspiration, but remakes it in brightly coloured, beaten and brazed metal, as if providing it with armour to withstand the more brutal aspects of *The City's* environment.

Interestingly, the grain store also connects us to the very first banks, insurance companies or futures markets, all of which are dependent, like the agricultural economy, upon a promise of future abundance or the threat of a bad season.

Arturo Herrera's *Untitled* takes advantage of *Sculpture In The City's* special invitation to potentially work on an enormous outdoor scale. This 2D piece would not fit in any contemporary London art space, with the exception perhaps of *Tate Modern's* huge turbine hall, the cavernous remainder of that building's previous life as a coal fired power station. A massive, technologically informed twenty-first-century collage, Herrera's piece is made of adhesive vinyl, like an enormous sticker. It rises up and cascades down over one building's huge façade. It also brings vivacious colour and light

into what, on an ordinary day, is a drab side street whose buildings (along with those who work in them) wear relatively subdued hues and tones.

Jocelyn McGregor's *Earthing* brings a perverse version of Surrealism to the London streets, slightly obstructing the pavement and surely baffling passers-by with its strange assortment of incongruous references. These include parts of the human body formed of bronze that seem to have been detached from each other, with one pair of intertwined legs retaining a yoga position. Then there are dry-stone-wall-like elements. But all this is slavered over by some enormous snails, the resulting visual cacophony becoming difficult to represent without the aid of a photograph. Surrealism's founder Andre Breton liked to refer to his project as a 'revolution' that aimed to transform society by changing the minds and values of the reigning bourgeoisie. Here, a twenty-first-century artist appears to be keeping that spirit and ambition alive and well.

Figure 5: Rafael D'Aló, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (2020). Copyright the artist. Photo: © Nick Turpin. A modern looking figurative sculpture in an urban setting.

Simeon Barclay provides a sculpture titled *Pittu Pithu Pitoo*. It may be inspired by rock and mountain climbing as of the few shops to be found around the official City area, two to three are hiking, mountain climbing and skiing stores. Perhaps these are the kinds of earthy leisure activities preferred by those who spend working lives juggling abstract numbers to produce pure and disembodied wealth. Of course, advanced level hiking and climbing may also have their aspirational, competitive and possibly macho aspects, which could compliment an ambitious career in *The City*. Here, Barclay has provided a 2–3 m high rock face, comically surmounted, not by a successful and celebrating broker, but by a life-sized colourful Cockerel – an inescapable reference to masculinity. Amusingly, on the second occasion that I visited, the 'Cock' had been removed, presumably stolen. But whether it was taken as a trophy by a male reveller, captured by a competing artist or removed by a feminist aiming to castrate the composition remains unknown. Perhaps only CCTV, of which there must be plenty in the vicinity, could tell us.

The late, famously rambunctious sculptor Phyllida Barlow exhibits a proudly elevated megaphone-like form, albeit one that nevertheless looks slightly bereft of purpose. It appears to have been built only to share the artist's enthusiasm for its particularly lyrical shape. At its base, Barlow also explores her passion for well-chosen and targeted colour, but the 'megaphone' itself is a grim black. Despite its lofty pose and apparent sense of importance, this potential spokesperson has nothing to say, and yet this renders its surroundings all the more sonic or aural. Thus, Barlow's piece encourages us to think more carefully about just when to use our eyes or ears when encountering, interpreting and evaluating sculpture in a public space.

Another late and great sculptor represented at *Sculpture in the City* is Isamu Noguchi. His work *Rain Mountain, Duo, Neo-Lithic* is typical of the artist's peculiarly elegant and playful take on abstraction. His works are – on the one hand – modernistically true to their materials and relatively autonomous. Yet, they also seem to anticipate an engagement with an empathetic audience and enjoy a more playful, perhaps postmodern correspondence with all the messy and mobile complexity of their cultural and architectural surroundings.

Larry Bell's vividly coloured, geometrically crisp *Pacific Red (IV)* is a neo-minimalist work that compliments an otherwise bare plaza. It shows how sculpture can speak in the language of its surroundings, asserting its own power and presence amidst the plaza's architect's similarly forthright uses of minimalist aesthetics. The architect's duty here was to communicate the importance of their client, and they have done this by parading just how much empty space their client can command. Thus, space is trumpeted as a sign of wealth and power, and particularly in a special part of the world where every square meter of space comes at a premium. While Bell's piece, formed from a bright red/orange translucent material, might seem to aspire to a transcendent modernism, during my visit, a few dry leaves and crumpled pages of a discarded newspaper had found their way inside its abstract form. This collision – an aspiration to autonomous modern transcendence with the humbling detritus of messy nature – brings to mind the notoriously politicized controversy about public sculpture that once

embroiled artist Richard Serra and his work *Tilted Arc* (1981) in protracted legal wrangling.⁷

On the day I encountered it, Rafael D'Alo's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* serendipitously shared its plinth with a discarded coffee cup, boldly printed with the word 'HELLO'. Similarly, when I took my students to see Pedro Pires' *Habitat* – another sculpture on the trail – its only other visitor was an expired but well-fed-looking London rat. During my visits through the trail, I have become increasingly accustomed to these unexpected, temporary interventions and juxtapositions. They bring to mind the series of street photographs by sculptor Richard Wentworth titled *Making Do and Getting By*. There, the artist created a collection of images featuring inadvertently 'sculptural' practices deployed by non-artists; people simply finding impromptu solutions to material problems in their daily lives using often minimal but sometimes inspired means.⁸ A classic example might be a child's lost glove elevated in status and prominence by an ironwork railing, or a chair and a plank combined in such a way as to signal a claim to a parking space. On this Sunday morning, the coffee cup signalling 'HELLO' from Rafael D'Alo's plinth offered the trail a means to say goodbye, and a closure to my particular negotiation of the trail for that day.

We can, of course, negotiate the trail in numerous ways, spanning the evaluation and narrativization of all that it holds. Aside from leaves, rodents and coffee cups, we might notice nature intervene in other ways that change our experience, unlike a visit to the controlled climate of a pristine white cube gallery. For instance, on a second visit to the same sculpture, you might find yourself unexpectedly breaking a spider's web as you brush past or peer into the work, and, as you do, perhaps perceive yourself as either disrupting or participating in some natural process amidst the hypermodern city environment. Thus, as we come to the end of this trail, sculpture might have awarded us new wisdom and insights into the many ways in which the built environment and nature – ourselves included – constantly overlap and interact.

Figure 6: Pedro Pires, *Habitat* (2021). Copyright the artist. Photo: © Nick Turpin.

A small green park area with a steel figurative standing sculpture.

Conclusions

Public sculpture is, by definition, denied the synthetic protection of the institutional white cube gallery space. It bravely surrenders itself to engaging with a wider, and we might say 'wilder' environment. *Sculpture In The City* is something we can walk by without so much as a glimpse while babbling into our smartphone, on our way to a business breakfast or liquid lunch. Even on a Sunday morning, when the City's streets are quiet and transit is scarce, passers-by could miss some of the artworks if not intentionally hunting them down.

The simple but adequate map and booklet provided by *Sculpture In The City* sometimes leads us to believe that there is a greater distance between two artworks than there really is. Thus, while searching for sculptures that might be proving elusive, we gain the unexpected gratification of bumping into others along the way, an experience we are unlikely to have in a typical white cube gallery. The art of *Sculpture In The City* can thus materialize, a little like a mirage, out of a moment of disorientation.

The City's streets do not have pristine white walls, nor controlled gallery lighting.

Sculpture In The City is a show that remains open, until the next year's iteration comes around. It is of course a demanding year-round project for the team, and particularly for the director who is in protracted negotiations with artists and galleries, discussing choices of works and sites, and choosing from a large annual submission that needs to be whittled down to around twenty pieces. Then, of course, follows the task of physically siting and replacing the works.

But the result of all this conscientious activity is that you can visit *Sculpture in the City* in the small hours of the night, on public holidays, in rain, snow or sunshine. For the often stressed and harried city dweller, this rich additional asset, in the form of an annually changing and ever-developing event, is always open for a free visit. *Sculpture In The City* shapes public space. Unlike gallery art, it occupies and interrupts our ways, paths and routines. Ultimately, it becomes part of us, and something that at the heart of

The City of London's capital power, is affordable and accessible. A path for all of us to feel – momentarily at least – that we own.

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Notes

1. In my recent book *History in Contemporary Art and Culture* (O'Kane 2023), the reader can find traces of my history of engagement with public art and sculpture, particularly in two chapters on public sculpture and monuments, titled: 'Dark horses and hollow men – Hew Locke and the monument' (Parts 1 and 2).

2. Although rotated annually, some of the artworks remain in place from the previous year.

3. In this article, I use the term *The City* (italicized with capitals) to refer to *The City of London* as corporate and political entity, and 'the city' (without capitals), whenever I refer to the wider, or greater city commonly referred to as London.

4. For instance, two of the works on display this year (2023) have become permanent acquisitions: *In Loving Memory* by Oliver Bragg acquired permanently by the city itself, and *The Garden of Floating Worlds* by Elisa Artesero purchased by an organization adjacent to where the work is sited.

5. London contains Greater London and *The City of London*. The London region has an area of 1572 km² (607 square miles) and a population of 9,002,488. The county of Greater London is slightly smaller, with an area of 1569 km² (606 square miles) and a population of 8,889,375; *The City of London* has an area of 2.9 km² (1.12 square miles) and a population of 8583. The region is almost entirely urbanized and contains the majority of the Greater London Built-up area, which extends into Hertfordshire, Essex, Kent, Surrey and Berkshire and has a population of 9,787,426. The Greater London Authority is responsible for strategic local government across the region. The region does not hold city status, but the districts of *The City of London* and City of Westminster do. Greater London was historically part of Middlesex, Essex, Surrey, Kent and Hertfordshire (Wikipedia).

6. The narrative of the trail does not guide the composition for my writing, nor do I include every work on the trail. Rather, I comment on a number of works that illustrate more general points running through the text.

7. See [Buskirk and Weyergraf-Serra \(1991\)](#).

8. See [Wentworth and Obrist \(2015\)](#).

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