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Public Art Discourse: A Case Study of Gateshead, England

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Abstract: This paper discusses how the purposes of public art are understood in official discourses. Discourses legitimise desired courses of action, such as whether public art is commissioned compared to other spending priorities, and the processes that surround its use as a type of intervention. The multiple meanings attached to this art genre constitute it as an argumentation field with alternative and possibly conflicting objectives. This makes it particularly interesting to approach public art sociologically as a constructed practice. The focus of the study is a local authority with an international reputation for public art: Gateshead in England, home to Antony Gormley's Angel of the North. The study sourced a range of municipal documents and undertook an analysis informed by a grounded theory approach to identify important themes and connections between them. Four coherent discourses are revealed, not easily discernible from the often fragmented references to public art across various schemes, projects and strategies described in the documents. These were 'venue', 'inclusion', 'quality of life', and 'civic pride'. The paper shows how these discourses relate to wider sociological and policy concerns, especially regarding municipal improvement.

Keywords: Public Art, Municipality, Policy, Discourse

Introduction

THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES how the goals and purposes of public art are understood in 'official discourses': the linguistic framings of the public bodies that sponsor public art. Discourses are important because they convey power and legitimise courses of action - for example, whether public art is commissioned compared with other spending priorities, and the processes that surround public art, such as top-down or bottom-up approaches to commissioning and creating public art.

Public art is frequently claimed to be for public purposes, but the objectives have not always been clear (Selwood, 1995). This leads to problems with evaluating whether public art has an impact or benefit because the lack of clear objectives means that there are no obvious evaluation criteria (Bennett et al. 2005; Fazakerley, 2005; Hall, 2002, 2003; Hall and Robertson, 2001; Hall and Smith, 2005; Reeves, 2002; Sharp et al., 2005). The aim of this article is to go beyond the ambiguity that can arise from an absence of clarity about the public purposes of this art genre by investigating whether coherent discourses about both purpose and process do in fact underpin various references to public art in official documents. These are not necessarily explicit, and a thematic analysis of relevant documents can begin to reveal 'theories of change' (Connell et al., 1995). In other words, what does public art seek to change and how?

In the UK, local municipalities have been important sponsors of public art, and the purposes envisaged for the art are often embedded in municipal documents. An appropriate method of investigation is therefore a content analysis of these sources. The research discussed in

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this article uses a case study of documents from Gateshead council, a municipality in North East England that has a wide range of municipally-sponsored public art and is particularly well known for Antony Gormley's 'Angel of the North' sculpture (figure 1). The research sourced 28 local policy and strategy documents, and undertook an analysis informed by a grounded theory approach of identifying and grouping themes (Strauss, 1987).

Figure 1: Antony Gormley's 'Angel of the North', Gateshead, England

The article is structured into four sections. Following the introduction, the first section discusses public art as policy, its definition and the claims surrounding it. The second section explains the methodology used. The third section presents an account of the results from the discourse analysis of Gateshead council documents. The final section draws together some conclusions.

Public Art as Policy

The early 1980s saw an expansion of art in public places across the UK (Hall and Robertson, 2001). By 1984 it was estimated that there were approximately 550 public artworks by 195 contemporary sculptors located across the country (Selwood, 1995). The number of local authorities commissioning public art continued to rise during the early 1990s. More recently, in 2007 around 60 per cent of local authorities had adopted a public art policy of some kind (Ixia, 2007). This has been a movement that does not only justify art for its creative values but also makes claims about the art in terms of serving some public purpose. This public purpose may include, for example, claims to improve the environment of public space, engage the community, attract business and tourism, or celebrate heritage. The aim can be very ambitious, such as with the role for public art articulated as part of the 1988 Action for Cities Programme in England, where it was identified as addressing '… problems of unemployment and alienation in the country's inner cities, as well as contributing to the creation of a classless and tolerant society' (Department of National Heritage, 1993, cited in Policy Studies Institute, 1994:38).

Gateshead council has been involved with public art since the early 1980s, when the council decided to incorporate public art into the environmental improvements it was making to the riverside area of the town, as well as incorporating art into urban regeneration programmes. In 1986, the council established a public arts programme. The aim of the programme

was to 'enhance the overall landscape architecture in the borough and to enhance the social and community benefits of arts-based regeneration' (Cameron and Coaffee, 2005:48). In 1990, Gateshead played host to one of a national programme of Garden Festivals, where various art works were displayed, providing a catalyst for the legacy of artworks that can now be found around the town. Today there are over 80 pieces of public art, including by leading artists such as Antony Gormley, Andy Goldsworthy and Lulu Quinn. As a result, Gateshead council is a rich source of documents that can help with uncovering the defining claims made for public art as a municipal practice.

The term public art, however, is ambiguous in its meaning and diverse in its form. It can be temporary or static, anything from performance art, street furniture or graffiti to murals or sculpture. It is not usually situated in conventional art sites, such as galleries, but instead in outdoor public spaces, making it – arguably – a socially inclusive rather than exclusive art form. Lovell (1998:10) argues that it is the public artist's job to 'create artworks that engage people's imaginations yet sustain the capacity for infinite interpretation by successive publics'. It is too simple to define public art as art for the public or art that is placed in public spaces for everybody to experience and enjoy (Knight, 2008). Instead, it is now claimed that public art 'directly engages with people who do not regularly visit galleries and museums with the sociopolitical issues that affect their communities' (Maksymowicz 1992:148). Here we see a narrative of public art as more than 'art in public' but art for a purpose.

Who, though, defines this purpose? Some commentators still regard modernist sculpture set in an urban plaza as public art, defined by the power of government or business to sponsor it. Dismissed pejoratively as 'plop art', this is not what most writers on public art frame the genre as since it is little different to an outdoor gallery, lacking the engagement with community and place that is seen to be distinctive about the 'public' in public art. Sharp et al. (2005:1004) see public art as having the goal to 'engage with its audiences and to create spaces – whether material, virtual or imagined – within which people can identify themselves, perhaps by creating a renewed reflection on community, on the uses of public spaces or on our behaviour within them'. For these authors, public art is not art for art's sake, based primarily on a passive aesthetic experience, but art as engagement and change making.

Methodology

As already noted, the aim of this study is to investigate how public art is 'framed' in local policy documents. The use of the term 'framing' can be traced back to Goffman (1974) and concerns the way that ideas about a topic are organised to make them meaningful in particular contexts. My concern is with understanding the goals and purposes of public art in the context of a single case study. This is explored as a process of framing in which different discourses are potentially in play, each 'producing' public art or a version of it. Public art, in other words, is a 'discursive field' and this research is interested in what discourses, arguments and interests are evident in council documents, constructing versions of public art in this field both positively, by privileging some ideas, and negatively, by marginalising or ignoring others.

A case study approach is used. Case studies have a number of advantages and disadvantages as a method but enable an in-depth investigation where the emphasis is on interpretive understanding rather than empirical generalisation (Bryman, 2008; Seale, 2004). The aim of the case study is to illuminate what public art *means* for Gateshead council and to show how

this involves framing and construction, rather than simply being a 'given'. This is of general interest in terms of both policy and art criticism, as well as social theory, but the empirical findings relate only to Gateshead and their wider generalisability is a matter of corroboration by other work.

The first stage of the research was to interview Gateshead council's Curator of Public Art, both for background purposes and to find out where to start looking for the documentary sources needed for the research. This then led to the next step of data collection which was to use Gateshead council's website and their reference library to collect as many strategy and policy documents, reports and minutes as possible that included some reference to public art. Using the approach of 'thematic saturation' associated with grounded theory, the process of collecting and analysing documents stopped when themes started to recur: that is, new data did not add to the developing theory (Seale 2004; Spencer et al., 2003; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This meant that the analytical strategy was staged, coding one sweep of documents in the qualitative data analysis computer package NVivo, and then continuing with further sweeps until the pattern settled into clear themes and sub-themes. After deliberation, the discourses took shape by grouping the themes conceptually.

The research also took a 'split' approach to the text (Tonkiss, 2002). This means that as well as looking at how meanings are formed through the text, it is also important to read against its grain and to look for silences or gaps that may appear. For example, in examining the local authority documents it may be found that some public art discourses are present but others are absent. In critical research, it is important to be looking for what remains 'unsaid' within the discourses.

Results and Discussion

The discourse analysis found that themes and sub-themes clustered into four groups, each regarded as a distinct discourse. These are given labels that summarise them as 'venue', 'inclusion', 'civic pride' and 'quality of life'. Figures 2, 3, 6 and 7 illustrate them and their constituent themes and sub-themes. There is not space to describe the four discourses in detail but their features are illustrated in the figures. They thread through the documents, establishing an image of Gateshead as imaginative and forward-thinking in mainstreaming creative practice as a municipal function. Indeed, the discourses also link this commitment to public art to the traditional functions of a local authority as a 'place maker' and champion of their local area. Each discourse is now discussed in turn.

Creating Venues

The 'venue' discourse essentially represents a set of 'place-making' practices through events, attractions, place-based creativity, urban design, tourism appeal and the fostering of a 'cultural hub' (figure 2). Public art is presented as part of 'making' places and giving them purpose and meaning (Massey, Rose 2003). The local authority in Gateshead presents itself in the documents as using its power and funding to deploy public art as a way to make places, drawing on professional design and creative expertise but seeking to work with perceptions and attributions held by local residents so that the art 'speaks' to them. Its public art policies recognise that places bring people together and are a way of engaging with the public. They are, however, part of a wider cultural strategy that Griffiths (1995:253) describes as 'a new

mode of urban intervention' that supports the growth of cultural industries, promotes the city for business and visitors, and make cities distinctive. But in these documents we also see a particular commitment to local residents, framed in the way Duxbury (2004:3) discusses of using public art is to emphasise the uniqueness of the community. The claim is that public art becomes a piece of distinctive local iconography or a physical symbol which encapsulates community feelings towards a place that initially may have been thought of as 'ordinary'. Here, the use of public art is argued as being to 'articulate and strengthen the bonds between people and place and, in doing so, to strengthen the bonds between people' (Hall and Robertson, 2001:13).

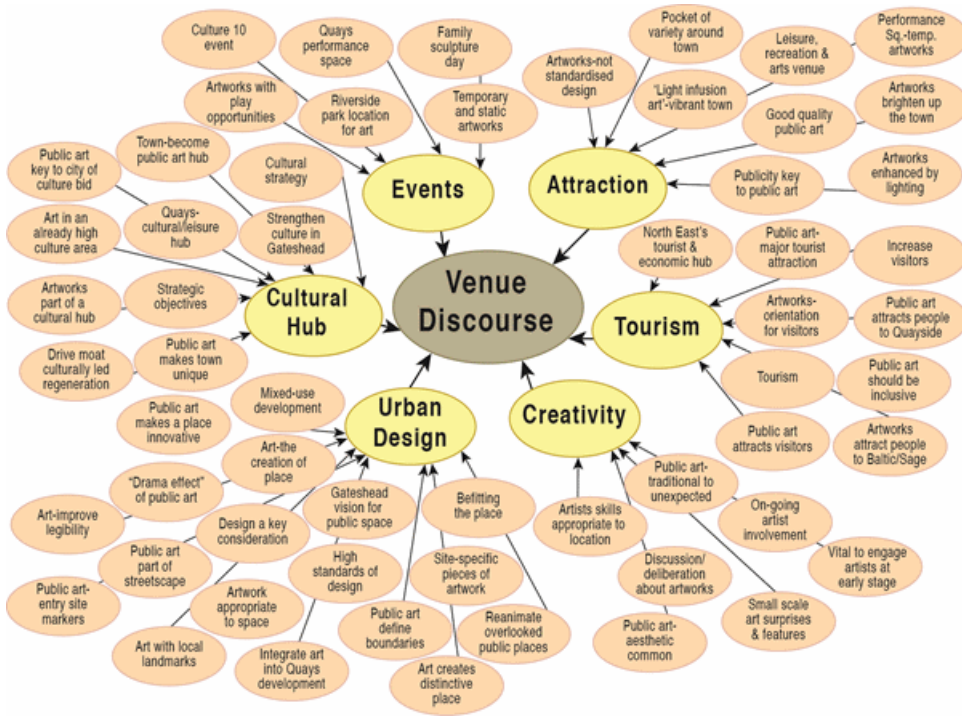

Figure 2: Venue Discourse

Gateshead Council, through wider regeneration schemes, has sought to transform the town into a venue that attracts visitors but also for artists to express their creativity in the localities used by local residents, enabling a more 'sophisticated sense of space and place' (Balfe and Wyszomirski, 1986:19). Public art reflects Gateshead's self-image as a 'cultural hub' but for local people to share and enjoy. The documents present the town as a 'destination' in which place and space are given value by being sites for artworks that encapsulate local history as identity and bring people together. Indeed, the venue discourse might be regarded as one of establishing places as *unique* and thereby contesting the forces of globalisation that continuously threaten the homogenisation of place (Kwon, 2004).

Creating Inclusion

Local authorities in the UK have a well-established role in work to promote social inclusion (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010). This is especially evident in Gateshead, and it is no surprise that its approach to public art seeks to align this work with inclusive aims, such as bringing people from different backgrounds together to share experiences as one community and break down barriers. Figure 3 shows how themes of community involvement, consultation, regeneration, public art routes and location play into the inclusion discourse.

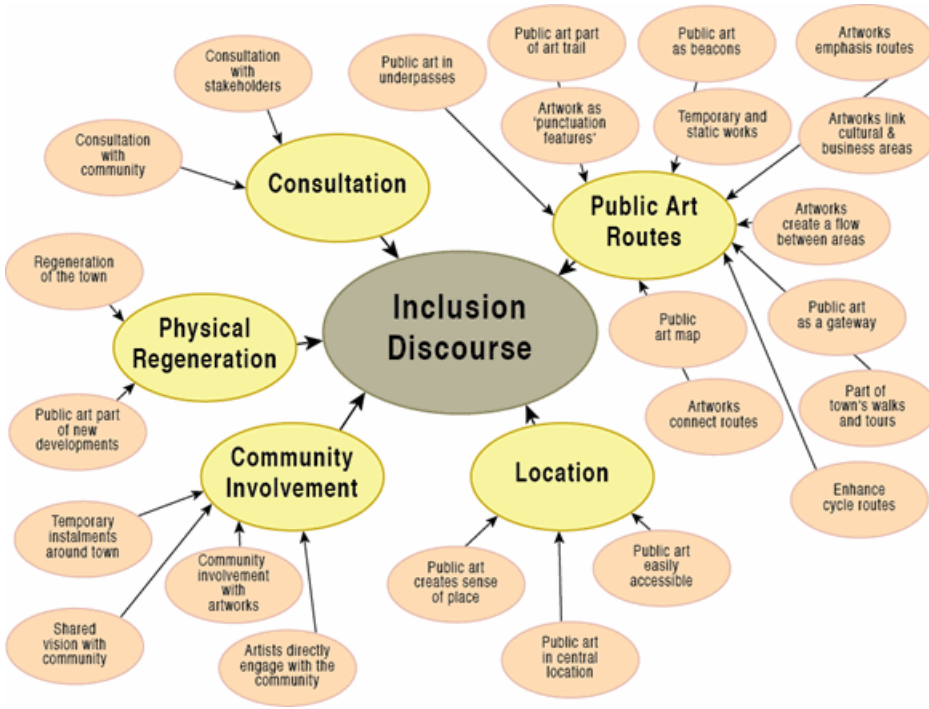

Figure 3: Inclusion Discourse

The programmes are seen as particularly important in engaging communities that are not accustomed to abstract concepts in art. The aim is not to stifle the creativity of artists, which might otherwise only appeal to art connoisseurs, but to help the public to engage with art so that social class or other barriers are not an impediment to creative enjoyment. In this respect, public art might be regarded as 'social glue' (Balfe and Wyszomirski, 1986:19).

It is a feature of public art that it has to balance social objectives with artistic ones, something which does not have to be a concern of privately sponsored art. A key issue in this respect is being knowledgeable about the community so that connecting with it is done in an informed and appropriate way. Local authorities should in theory be well placed to do this. Blaney (1989) has argued that public art can create inclusion in two ways. The first is that participation in arts projects can be extended to the broader social life of urban areas so that urban needs are not addressed simply as material concerns with, say, income or housing, but also as needs for an expressive or creative life. Secondly, Blaney argues that the themes

and concerns that surround public art projects can affirm non-traditional or diverse cultures, recognising both their uniqueness and their part in wider society. Blaney adds that public artworks can reach out to alienated people or communities, acting as a way to include them in wider society.

The idea of art being used to give alienated or marginalised communities a voice is a strong theme in new genre public art and, for example, the 'culture in action' project that took place in Chicago. Sharp et al. (2005), focusing on how public art is used to reclaim place and recognise the past, comment:

> 'When working on participatory projects, artists are frequently dealing with communities who have been marginalised in mainstream urban histories. There is a general sense that they have been invisible within the cityscape and therefore a key strategy in overcoming this sense of non-recognition is to render their history visible in some form' (2005:1007).

This type of process is evident in a lot of the public art pieces commissioned by Gateshead, such as the James Hill Monument (see figure 4) that celebrates a local fiddler.

Figure 4: Peter Coates' 'James Hill Monument', Gateshead, England

Hall and Robertson (2001) write that advocates of the importance of community involvement claim there are three benefits. The first is that public participation in an art project allows for teamwork and co-operation, increasing people's awareness and respect for one another. The second is that it creates tangible networks between people, and the third is that participation in and creation of their own environment gives people a sense of ownership and pride, two aspects which Gateshead presents in the documents as central to their investment in public art. Here, the inclusive nature of public art is not in the 'end product' of the artwork itself but in the process that surrounds it (Sharp et al. 2005). Sharp et al. (2005:1014) comment that this process should not impose or enforce inclusion, but instead should be 'intuitively and sensitively sought'. However, they also identify a paradox, arguing that inclusive processes may have profound implications for the aesthetic outcomes of projects.

A lot of emphasis is put on pieces of public art acting as 'gateways', 'punctuation marks' or 'focal points' in Gateshead's documents, such as David Pearl's 'Beacons' (see figure 5). Here, public art can be seen as a way of encouraging mobility and breaking down the barriers

between people and places. It encourages people to experience areas of a town in which they may have originally attached negative connotations.

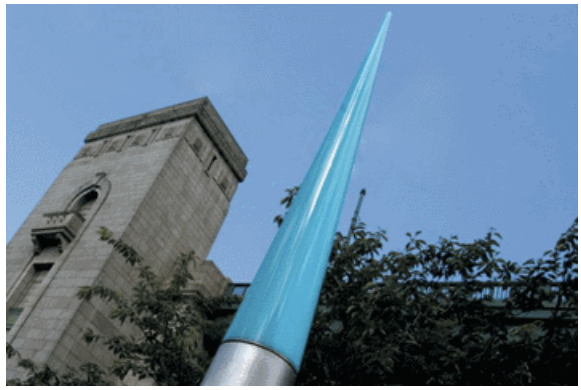

Figure 5: David Pearl's 'Beacons', Gateshead, England

Quality of Life

The 'quality of life' discourse as productive of public art practices in Gateshead has two important constituent narratives: quality of space is important to community wellbeing and economic regeneration, and education is a way to foster an 'expressive life' among local residents as a public benefit (Ivey, 2010; figure 6). Both of these narratives can, as with civic pride discussed next, be linked to long-established traditions of municipal practice – in this case the idea of 'improvement'. Public art is both a way to improve places and a route to self-improvement through education in the community. In both these respects, the political history and culture of Gateshead are important, establishing an emphasis on collective approaches to improvement (the town has a strong labour movement heritage, and the Labour Party continues to dominate local politics). In other words, both places and education are framed as shared experiences.

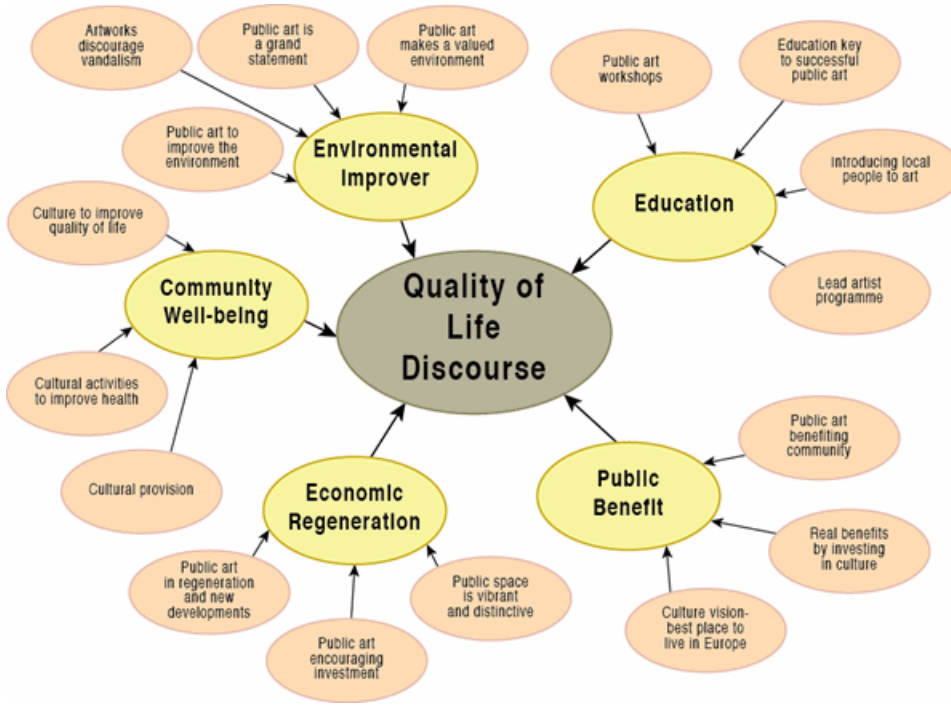

Figure 6: Quality of Life Discourse

Gateshead's Public Art Strategy states that public art should embody a high quality of design as well as consider function and use of its site. It is emphasised throughout the documents that it is important that the artwork involves the community and improves quality of life for the residents of Gateshead by bringing an aesthetic dimension into 'ordinary life' in public places. Sharp et al (2005:1004) comment that 'public art not only contributes to the visual attractiveness of the city and has the ability to aestheticise urban spaces, but also, through public art, authorities can signal their willingness to deal with social and environmental problems'. Hall and Robertson (2001:12) note that 'public art is cited with the ability to re-place a quality that has vanished from a place or has been ignored'. Public art, in this respect, is often used as an 'environmental improver' to add to the quality of space. An example is Gateshead's redevelopment of Riverside Park, where various pieces of public art were used to improve the quality of the area and help reduce vandalism, encouraging people to walk or cycle through the park, and aesthetically enhancing the area for recreational activities. This was linked to educational and participatory projects (such as artist-in-residence schemes) that encouraged community ownership of the park and of the pieces of public art on display there.

Adams (2001) considers the education programmes surrounding public art. These are to help people understand the art, the ideas that underpin it and the processes that create it; to develop people's confidence and competence as they engage in critical debate; to help people engage in public art not just as viewers but as commissioners, critics and collaborators; to help people understand new ideas and emerging cultural forms; and to promote a new awareness of public art, weaving it in as a creative strand of cultural life. Educational pro-

grammes can thus be seen as a way to enrich lives, as well as helping with the reception of artworks into the public realm, inspiring local people to become more creative themselves and encouraging critical debate.

The quality of life dimension is not passive but based on engagement and enrichment through improvement: improvement of places and improvement of minds. Public art is a focus for these aspirations, and one with a collective rather than individualistic set of values underpinning it. These are ambitious aims, and whether they are reflected in reality is something to which I return in the conclusion.

Civic Pride

Just as parks and monuments reflect past displays of civic pride, public art today might be seen as a modern expression of civic pride (figure 7). Thus, the Policy Studies Institute comments that among local authorities' main priorities when commissioning public art is to 'develop positive identities for particular areas … and to foster civic pride' (1994:43). Public art as a piece of publicly sponsored artwork is therefore transformed from being just an 'object' to a reflection of civic pride. One of the attractions of public art is that it is often large and three dimensional, able to engage people with a 'big idea', or what Gateshead council term a 'grand statement' (Gateshead Council, 2008:35). Public art might therefore be seen as revitalising civic life, at least in its stated intentions (Griffiths, 1995). The historical resonance with urban parks is apparent, and not just regarding the civic pride discourse, as this extract from Maver's (1998:323) study of Glasgow's parks shows:

> 'From the mid-nineteenth century Glasgow's civic leaders recognised the effect that the rapidly deteriorating urban fabric was having on perceptions of the city, and began to construct a more positive identity, intended to inspire faith in municipal government … parks were among the first initiatives to be identified with civic interventionism, and by 1914 had become … one of the most immediately accessible to all Glaswegians'.

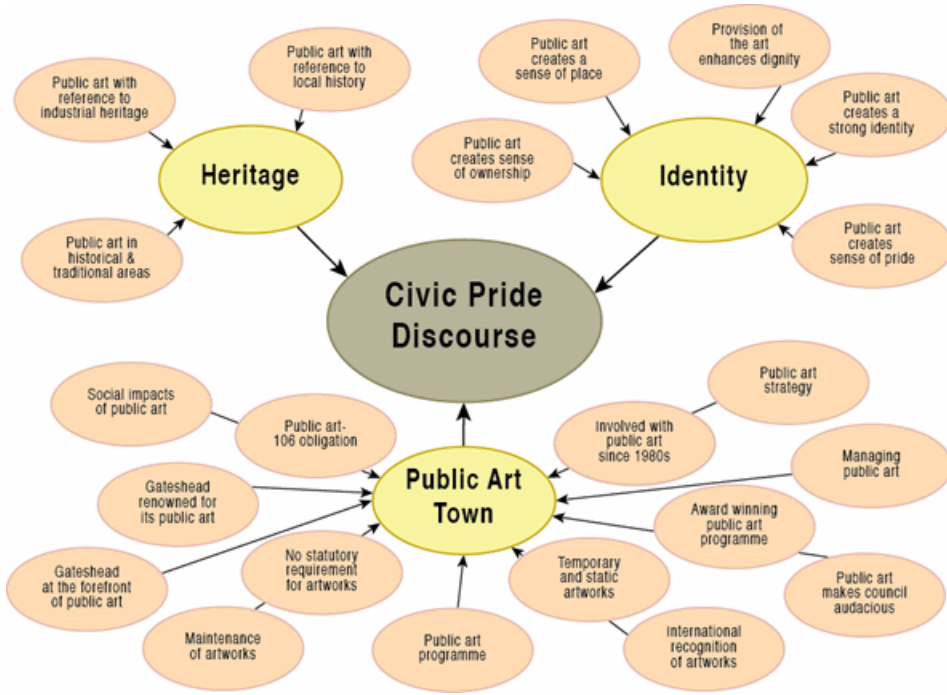

Figure 7: Civic Pride Discourse

Hall and Robertson (2001:14) note that civic identity and civic pride in relation to public art are equated with a city's public identity: 'internally and externally projected public images'. In the post-modern or post-industrial age when image seems as important as substance to self-identity, public art might be seen as responding to local citizens' needs for creative identify as much as Glasgow's parks were promoted for their material health benefits. The connection between the physical townscape of a city and the cultural aspects of civic identity appears to be much the same, reflecting the 'placeness' of the sponsor, a local authority.

Glasgow's forward-looking parks movement included references back to a historical Scotland just as some of Gateshead's post-industrial art looks back to an industrial heritage, itself also a source of pride. Bailey, Miles and Stark (2004) argue that cultural-led regeneration, including public art, helps to re-define an existing local identity, not create new ones. Instead of new cultural development creating a new urban identity, they argue it can tease out traditional identities. Thus they see the Angel of the North as not just an iconic figure for the region, but also full of deeper meanings:

> 'A sense of identity and a willingness to get things done that could transform the arts scene and perhaps even the region itself. The particularities of the local and regional identity were key factors in ensuring the success of what would emerge as an internationally significant example of culture-led regeneration; the point being here that far from taking away from it, the regeneration fed on and into that sense of identity' (Bailey, Miles, Stark, 2004:55).

Public art as a source of civic pride reflects a longer municipal tradition but in a newer form of creative expression. This form engages the public with art as a way to reflect on where they live, promotes discussion of culture and politics, and may challenge the public with new ideas.

Conclusion: Public Art as a Commitment to Improvement

The four discourses of creating venues, inclusion, quality of life and civic pride represent bold claims for public art, but claims evident in the Gateshead documents and which resonate with both the wider role of a local authority and the literature on public art as discussed above. Neither reveal easy answers to issues such as how art that is challenging or unsettling can always be inclusive, or how a discretionary function like the arts is funded on a scale that might have a real impact on issues such as inclusion, especially when competing with claims on public spending such as social services or schools. In fact, there is a shortage of empirical work on whether these impacts are achieved. However, what I have sought to show is that these discourses are part of what *produces* Gateshead's public art, enabling us to understand and interpret this art as part of the council's commitment to improvement.

The 'public' in public art also appears to arise from this notion of 'improvement'. Gateshead council has educational programmes and artist-in-residence schemes associated with most of the pieces of public art they have commissioned. These programmes are stressed in the documents as important because they enable people to improve their quality of life through them, whether it be learning about the environment they live in, becoming more engaged in critical debate or becoming more creative themselves. The 'public' in public art also resonates with the fact that most of the public art pieces in Gateshead reflect the culture and history of the town. But there are many different types of public art, and the meanings and understandings that are attached to the term may differ based on the artwork itself, the area in which it is placed, the purposes of the commissioning body or an individual's personal opinion about it. All may not see public art as an improver.

Some might argue that it is in the nature of public art to be ambiguous and diverse in relation to its purpose. What this research has found is coherence across the council's diverse documents, rather than the contradictions and paradoxes that discourse analysis can often uncover (Fischer, 2003). This appears to be because the improvement macro-discourse has come to structure debates about public art in Gateshead council, given that this is likely to be an effective rationale in a local authority setting. Other discourses, such as one that prioritises public art as commodification and creating commercial value, or art that incorporates multi-culturalism and explores different ethnic identities, have failed to be defining claims. Their influence is still apparent playing out in the wider discursive space, although to a very limited extent with regard to ethnicity, something which reflects Gateshead as a place that is culturally fairly homogenous although not without some distinctive minority groups. The commercial discourse, in particular, may become more apparent as a framing and justification for public art if current financial pressures force an abandonment of public funding that cannot show an economic return.

Overall, this study has shown how an analysis of council documents can uncover the discursive practices at work in these documents. Four discourses emerged, enabling the macro-discourse of improvement to come into focus through venue, inclusion, quality of life and civic pride. The study also revealed how Gateshead's public art strategy is somewhat frag-

mented, with references across many different documents, reflecting the way public art is linked opportunistically to schemes and projects taking place elsewhere in the council, contingent upon different sources of funding and development opportunities. Indeed, this reflects the concerns of Pollock and Paddison (2010) that public art in the UK has no explicit policy and funding framework and therefore largely depends on advocacy. They suggest that local authorities need to have a more explicit framework for public art as well as be more systematic about the benefits they propose for it (see also Knell, 2011). The discourse analysis presented here might be seen as a first step in this direction, with the claims that have been reconstructed thematically constituting 'theories of change' for public art that can be investigated empirically. While this approach of being explicit about theories of change – that, for example, public art helps to break down social divides - might reveal differences of view about what these benefits should be, it would allow these differences to be identified and debated, and establish the clarity necessary for evaluating whether public art does indeed bring public benefit. It could also be argued that the council's official discourses represent neither the standpoint of the artist nor of the local community but are 'top-down' discourses that ring hollow in local communities. The reality is that we do not really know, but a first step is to clarify what is intended.

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About the Author

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I am a doctoral research student at Durham University, England, conducting research on public art and community well-being. I have an honours degree in Sociology and Cultural Studies from Goldsmiths College, University of London, and a Masters degree in Sociology and Social Research Methods from Durham University. I have a strong personal interest in public art and the arts in general. I have watched the growth of public art in England with great interest, and thought about what it means sociologically as a movement for social change.

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