Interview with Stella Ioannou, co-director of Sculpture in the City

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Stella Ioannou is co-director of Sculpture in the City, and has been involved in the award-winning, international public art initiative since its inception six years ago. Over the course of the project, Sculpture in the City has showcased work from over 50 artists including Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor and Ai Wei Wei. This year, the programme includes work from Sarah Lucas, Gavin Turk, Humza Bhabha and Giuseppe Penone. Plinth writer Emily Watkins sat down with Stella Ioannou after a guided tour of this year’s show, and spoke to her about the intricacies and implications, challenges and joys, of public art.
Emily Watkins: It would be great to get a description of Sculpture in the City in your own words – if you don’t mind, you must have been doing that all week.

Stella Ioannou: But it’s a pleasure. I describe the project as an urban sculpture park. We display contemporary sculpture in one of the most unique urban spaces in London, amidst a cluster of new buildings in the City. The area has great public spaces, and they’re really enhanced by the placement of sculpture. It is a very special place and the fact that we change the artworks once a year means that we’re using the urban fabric as a rotating exhibition space.

EW: Speaking of urban fabric, there must be particular problems – or challenges – that exhibiting outside, in public, presents.

SI: Absolutely. I often say it’s the constraints that define the project just as much as our ambition to push the boundaries. All the practical things, like the weights and durability of the work, become very much part of the process. How the context changes with the different seasons is an interesting one, too – everything looks so different in the snow, or with a backdrop of trees shedding their leaves.

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EW: Do you think some of the pieces work better in certain seasons?

SI: That’s definitely part of the unknown and the fun of the project. We really don’t know until we see the works on site how they’ll sit within their surroundings. One of our team was explaining to the photographer that at 4pm there’s a shaft of light that hits the Penone piece (‘Ide di Pietra – 1372 kg di Luce’, Giuseppe Penone)... and things can happen like that. As the sun sets in the west it comes through the gaps in the buildings, and if you’ve got an artwork there it gets lit in a particular way by this amazing shaft of light. We’re showing a screen based work this year – because it’s summer most people haven’t seen it in the dark where it takes on a different character – and the fact that it’s a recording of the sun makes it even more interesting.

EW: ‘In the dark’ is an interesting thought as well, because of course – by its very nature – public art is on display 24 hours a day. I’m interested in the selection process, which that must play into. Do you do a call for submissions, or are some pieces commissioned, or...?

SI: We do a call for submissions which our Arts Advisory Board shortlists. Last year we had over 120 entries and ended up with a shortlist of 33 works. We established the Arts Board two years ago because we were getting inundated with artworks, but also because the project has been growing year on year and we needed the experience and guidance the board could bring to the project. I then take all the shortlisted artists or their gallery’s around the area and identify where they want to see their work situated. The work is almost always pre-existing, but there have been a small number of occasions where work has been made for us, for a specific site. Generally, though, they’re already made so it’s important for us to situate the work after a long walk and conversation with the artist. That’s the first part of the process, and then we move to negotiating landowner permissions, technicalities and practicalities.
Sure, do they come to you and volunteer their spaces before you show the artist round?

Well, we've been doing this for a while now, so we have a pretty clear understanding of the spaces that are available. When it comes to our own partners, we're especially clear. There are also spaces we've used in the past so we're aware of any particular physical constraints, which is almost always weight. And then there's another layer, which is the layer that comes with installing art in the public realm. There are things like health and safety that we need to consider – is an artwork a climbing frame? Is it too dangerous for people to sit on? Are there sharp corners? But the first part of it, of course, is the most interesting and the most inspiring. Some artists know the area particularly well, some have never been in the city, and that's the really interesting part... I've always argued that the process of the project curates the project. We have this very definitive process which we have to go through, and that is what curates it. We put a lot of work in, and there's a lot of people involved; absolutely everything is considered and in most cases negotiated. The fact that we've been doing this for six years has made it easier, but without the huge support our partners give us it would be much more difficult. They want the project to happen and succeed which makes most of the negotiation very straightforward. It is a local project supported by local partners who want their staff to enjoy it on a daily basis as well as the visitors who come in to the area specifically to see it.

And when you're walking around, everything feels terribly carefully placed.

Well, that's because of this process I mentioned; everything has been so carefully considered. But it always has to start with the artist and their artwork.
EW Do you like the idea, or does it frustrate you, that more people don’t stop to look? Or do you like the idea that the sculptures, for some people, become part of the fabric of the city?

SI It doesn’t frustrate me – there’s also something called reality, and I think if we didn’t acknowledge that we’d be very wrong. I know where we are. I also know there will be times when those particular people may be walking more slowly, not always rushing from the office to get something for lunch, or running home after work... I’ve often been told by people that they saw the artwork while they were on a bus going down Bishopsgate.

EW Something I noticed – and maybe it’s just something that human beings feel when they see art outside, and I’d like to hear whether you feel it’s a theme that’s cropped up before – was that a lot of the sculptures felt like ‘totems’. There was this pseudo-spiritual dimension, not so much in the form or subject matter of the pieces but maybe just in their placement...

SI Yes, it was a word I used about the Jürgen Partenheimer (‘Axis Mundi’), and the heads by Ugo Rondinone (‘Sunrise, East, July’ and ‘Sunrise, East, October’)...
Also, I thought, the piece by the Pakistani-American artist (The Orientalist), Huma Bhabha who looks to be overseeing the construction of whatever they're building over the road...

It is a theme this year. Interestingly, when we started the project in 2010 I was calling galleries and asking for pieces which were no less than five metres tall, and the galleries all found my request rather odd. For the first year, of course, it was important that we installed works that were significant in scale and could hold their own in the context of these forty-storey-plus office buildings - this particular part of London is especially significant in terms of scale, it's a very unusual space. As the project has grown year on year - now we have seventeen artists - we can work with a variety of scales. Some pieces this year are human-scale; and some are just under. Equally, we have the Pennon sculpture, which is nine metres tall! To give you an indication of how context and scale can work - did you ever see the Chapman Brothers dinosaurs when we showed them in front of the Gherkin? The first time 'The Good, The Bad and The Ugly' were shown was in the courtyard at the Royal Academy Summer Show in 2010 and they were taller than the buildings in the courtyard! So the big t-rex looked like it was going to gobble up the buildings around it. When we put them outside the Gherkin in 2012, they looked like little Chihuahuas. So the context can really change the reality of the art work, the space it's shown in...

I wanted to ask you if you think something becomes a different work of art when you change its context.

Something definitely changes. There's a particular dialogue here...

But then, I wonder what the artist would say...

Actually, I've got some writing by Jürgen about the piece, here... [...] Reading: 'Marks a site, becomes a site... Axis Mundi, World Axis, refers to a universal symbol which finds its origin in anthropological and zoological interpretations of the vertical bridging the gap between heaven and earth...'

So it is quite spiritual, this idea of ascension...

But to return to your question - I think the context makes a huge difference to the way you view the artwork.
EW: Funny, because I suppose for most people, the context they see it in here will be the only one in which they've ever seen it.

SI: Yes. The project here is not a 'challenge', but a reinterpretation of what a sculpture park can be. Sculpture parks are traditionally shown in the countryside, with a backdrop of rolling green fields. Even Frieze's sculpture park is in the park. And so what we're doing is very different.

EW: Do you think you could do what you're doing anywhere other than London? Do you think this city in particular lends anything singular?

SI: I think what's singular about this area is the high concentration of contemporary architecture. Look at the Cheese Grater, the Gherkin... But we're still in an area which has 15th century churches which gives you that context of history and layers of history. And there are people – because we're in the insurance district the streets are full of brokers walking. This particular mix is very unusual.
How has the programme – the themes of the works and submissions – changed since you started six years ago? You mentioned that this year is the first you’ve shown a digital artwork (‘Solar Relay’, by Petros Sesti), and ‘Falling into Virtual Reality’ by Recycle Group in Leadenhall Market seemed to be concerned with digital culture, copy-pasting...

Well, this year we were looking for ways we could evolve and extend the project, so we were asking for different things...
EW ...but you don’t have a theme each year, do you?
SI No, that would be too complex. Although it may well be that we can one day. I mean, the project always exceeds any expectations we may have of it. Year on year we are surprised by how much we deliver. Looking to the future, we’d like to look at bringing in film art, performance art...
EW How do you imagine that will be integrated? What might that look like?
SI Well, we don’t know yet – but I want to look at how we can use this space for more than just sculpture. I mean, it does land itself especially well to sculpture because we have these pristine, secure spaces.

EW I guess another thing about public art is that people who don’t want to see art - I’m not sure who they might be, but I mean people who don’t seek it out, or visit galleries - are exposed to it too. And children, and so on... And so I expect the subject matter has to be, you know, age-appropriate and inoffensive. Is that frustrating? Or another challenge?
SI Well, Number one, the Arts Board is responsible for selecting the works that go on display, and we rely on their experience and expertise in that. Number two - we’ve never shied away from controversy, to the point where, in 2014, we had a performance called ‘Box Sized DIE... featuring Unfathomable Ruination’, in which the ‘suffocated’ a death metal band in a steel box. They came out alive, of course – it was a performance piece and we made sure that everything was in place to ensure that no harm came to them! The layers of negotiation involved in including this particular work were even more extreme than usual but we knew the piece had been shown before so it was possible. What we hadn’t taken on board was that we had one of the most popular death metal bands in the world. Performing in the city meant that we had groups and bands and hordes of death metal fans who you’d never normally see coming to watch, and we made the headlines worldwide... So, in a way, we are very keen to stretch the boundaries, and question what public art should be.

EW Yes, I thought that the themes were a lot more sophisticated than one normally finds in public art, and aesthetically more adventurous...
SI One thing that really works to our advantage on that score is the fact the works are there for less than a year. The lack of permanence means that you can experiment more with what’s appropriate. And frankly - I mean, we’ve never had to, but – we could remove a piece after it had been installed if we needed to. There’s a lot more flexibility in the decisions that we’re making.
EW And do the public react the way you expect? You told us a sweet story on the tour about a sculpture you had last year, ‘O my friends, there are no friends’, by Sigalit Landau, which was a circle of bronze shoes with the laces tied, and how people kept leaving their shoes in the middle of it. So how do the public react and interact?
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The most frequent thing we get is people taking selfies and assuming positions reflected in the art work. In the past we had a piece by Antony Gormley on the pavement which was two leaning figures called ‘Parallel Fields’ and people would take photos of themselves leaning at exactly the same gradient. It’s a bit of a phenomenon.

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Stella Ioannou

‘O my friends, there are no friends’, Sigalit Landau, 2011

The rituals are so funny, aren’t they, and they must be self-generating. Do you think the impulse is, ah, art in public. I can approach it and touch it? Is it the power of the pieces themselves, or do people just want to be part of something? Maybe they want to be art, going like a sculpture. That story about the shoes is really touching and can’t have been enough of a big thing for people to sell each other what they were doing, for the ritual to get around – the piece must have sparked something spontaneous, but also so specific. Maybe somehow, somewhere, we all want to leave our shoes in the middle of a sculpture of shoes.

Where did they go afterwards? Did they bring shoes especially? I mean, people are a quantity I find completely and utterly unpredictable.

And I guess it’s too early to say how people will respond to this year’s show...

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