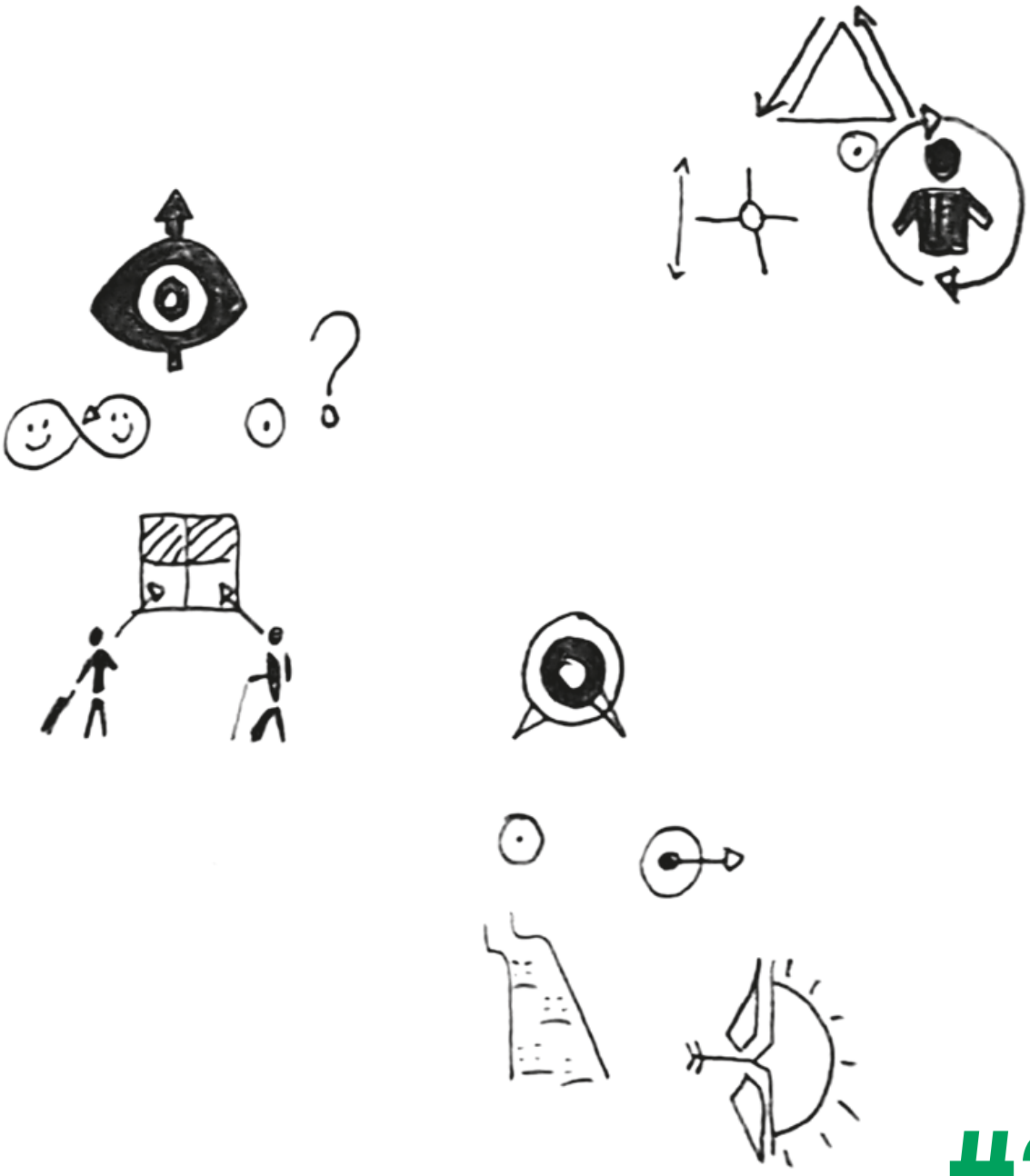
¿Creative Villages?



Hanne Van Dyck, *A Subjective Map*, 2017

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IN DEFENSE OF PLOP ART

ROSA TYHURST

Newport, South Wales, where I grew up, had a lot of public art; none of it seeming too precious to be touched, climbed upon, or otherwise interacted with. I called my mother to ask her what the first city sculpture I encountered was. She couldn't remember so, at the risk of a disappointing introductory anecdote, here are my memories of some of the works:

› My father once lifted me up so I could sit on Peter Fink's steel sculpture *Wave*, 1991. Once I was five feet up – wobbly, sitting at the bottom of the works giant red circular curl – I began screaming to be taken down. I must have been about four at the time.
› Originally produced for the Ebbw Vale Garden Festival, Andy Plant's *In the Nick of Time*, 1992, is a gigantic animatronic clock with flaps that open to reveal hidden moving characters every hour. It was situated just outside the library but even better it was near the best fish-and-chip shop in the city.
› My sister and I used to play in and around *Union, Prudence, Energy*, 1991, a figurative bronze sculpture, by Christopher Kelly. It was only a few years ago that I realized it depicts (amongst other things) the grim reaper and crushed bodies. I always thought they were fairies and children.
› Kenneth Budd's *Chartist Mural*, 1971, was situated in a dank underpass in the city center. Although far from understanding its subject – the last large-scale armed rebellion against authority in Great Britain[11] – even at a young age I think I understood the labor, and extreme detail, of the scene it depicted.

I was lucky to spend my formative years in a city that revealed bravery in its public commissions, and an insistence on celebrating its legacy of Chartism[12]. These public sculptures are one of the lasting memories that always come to mind when I think of Newport, they're part of the makeup of the City, just like the Transporter Bridge, the train station, the indoor produce market, and the perennial queues outside the passport office.

The term "Plop Art" (or "Plonk Art," as it is sometimes known) is attributed to the architect James Wines in 1969. It's one of many derisive epithets used to categorize a certain form of public art first popularized in the 1950s and 1960s, in which "often-less-than-distinctive Modernist sculpture was sited in front of often-less-than-memorable Modernist buildings."[13] In the US, this is often situated outside government offices or NGO buildings, buildings that require 1% of their construction budget to be spent on a federally funded public artwork. The term suggests something abject, something thoughtless, formless, a nd senseless. Something ill-conceived, even. Plop also suggests something wet and heavy falling, squeezed out from the art world into the public realm with little care or attention to where it lands. Generally speaking, these works are of a certain ilk – big, shiny, and waterproof – and have little relationship to their immediate surroundings. The Urban Dictionary dictates that these works are large, geometric, and often red[14]. For an example, and case in point, the picture on the Wikipedia entry for Plop Art is Tony Rosenthal's *5 in 1*, 1973–1974 [fig. XX].

In the canton of the Valais, in Switzerland, there seems to be a propensity for large abstract "Plops" on roundabouts. During the *Creative Villages* workshop we must have travelled past hundreds. On our short seventeen-kilometer journey from Martigny to Leytron we passed four alone. That's almost one every four kilometers. Our tendency might be to dismiss and disregard them as expelled detritus, selected and funded by the "non-experts" at local councils. At the risk of appearing completely contrary however, I want to state that I think Plop Art is great. These works may not always be pretty, they may not entirely make sense in terms of their environment and locale, but I do

[11] The mural depicted the Newport Uprising of 1839, when 10,000 Chartist sympathizers – led by John Frost – marched to the Westgate Hotel in Newport intent on liberating fellow Chartists who had been taken prisoner there.

[12] Chartism was a working-class movement most active between 1838 and 1848. The aim of the Chartists was to gain political rights and influence for the working classes.

[13] Eccles, Tom, *PLOP*. New York & London: Merrell, 2004, p.8.

[14] Definition for Plop Art. UrbanDictionary.com http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=plop%20art (accessed November 17, 2016)

believe that they can have positive and lasting effects. What follows is an incomplete list of these effects; a case for the defense, if you will.

Firstly, these works reach huge audiences, and can thereby create a communal experience that is in some way akin to films or popular music in its accessibility. They are inherently brave, and strong, as they open themselves up to scrutiny from anyone that passes by. Everybody can have an opinion, be it good or bad. And that opinion can change. As history reveals, art can outlive animosity, and more often than not once people get used to a giant blue cockerel,[15] for example, they can even come to love it. It's worth remembering that when the Eiffel Tower was being built it was described as useless and monstrous, a ridiculous tower dominating Paris like a gigantic black smokestack. Now, of course, it is possibly more emblematic than the Tricolour.

Secondly, these sculptures are open all hours, and don't shut up shop for the weekend or the holidays. You don't need special access, like you do to get to the art beyond the hallowed walls of a gallery or museum. And there's no discrimination when you're looking at work outside – there's nobody shushing you, or telling you to step back. Where else could you scream at the top of your lugs alongside a priceless object? What other piece of public furniture could you stomp over, eat your lunch on, and play with? These works are in this way at the same level as quotidian bollards, post boxes, and street signs – totally accessible and inclusive. For example, Jeppe Hein's *Modified Social Benches*, 2015, recently shown in New York City as part of his citywide exhibition, *Please Touch the Art*, appeared as angled, curved, twisted, and bent common park benches [fig. XXI]. They surprised and delighted some visitors, whilst others used them, as they would a "regular" bench. Like much Plop Art, they lowered the boundaries for art, physically and metaphorically.

[15] *Hahn/Cock*, 2013, by Katarina Fritsch was installed on the vacant fourth plinth on London's Trafalgar Square from July 2013 to February 2015

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XX. Tony Rosenthal, *5 in 1*, 1973–1974, Painted corten steel, 25×28×42 Feet. One Police Plaza, New York. © Tony Rosenthal/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

XXI. Jeppe Hein, *Modified Social Bench NY No.02*, 2015, Powder-coated galvanised steel, Dimensions Variable. Photo © James Ewing for the Public Art Fund, New York, NY

Not least, Plop Art works can act as focal points, or meeting places before a night out, for example, or in an if-we-get-separated-let's-meet-here kind of way. They share in a collective identity and often gain a special kind of collective ownership from the residents nearby. These sculptures, no matter their subject or deemed "quality" become engrained in the social makeup of the places in which they're installed. In Amsterdam in 1965, Provo-founder Robert Jasper Grootveld utilized Carel Kneulman's statue *Het Lieverdje*, 1959, as a site for playful protests, meetings, and happenings. In this way, it was transformed from a modest bronze sculpture of a boy sponsored by a cigarette company, to the site of political action and, now, a memorial to the Dutch counter-culture movement. Since the 1980s, the statue of the Duke of Wellington by Carlo Marochetti in Glasgow, Scotland has been customized by an orange plastic traffic cone, set directly on the statesman's head. Placed there by many a drunken reveler, this illegal activity has become a venerable city tradition. When the council proposed to spend £65,000 on raising the plinth six feet, to deter tampering, the people of Glasgow leapt to

action, organizing a rally and online petition that quickly gained 10,000 signatures, and compelled the council to back down. These kinds of illegal, unpermitted interactions with public art, seem only to enhance their appeal. The last time I saw Wellington, he was proudly wearing a gold cone in order to celebrate the return of Glasgow's successful athletes from the Rio Olympics.

To return to Newport, only two of the four works I mentioned remain in situ. After seven years in storage due to the city center Friars Walk development plans, Plant's *In the Nick of Time* now resides, Valais-style, on a roundabout near a new housing development in Llanwern. The Chartist Mural did not have such a happy ending – it was tragically demolished in 2013 despite substantial opposition and protest (including a full-page open letter in the *South Wales Argus* newspaper, written by Newport-born actor Michael Sheen). A new work was commissioned in its stead: a work in iron that also doubles-up as a wall for a new car park.

The remaining two however, I'll visit next time I'm there and greet like old friends.

DEAR J,

HANNE VAN DYCK

We met each other at the site of Furkart on October 10. Along with the students from ECAV and CCA, I participated in the workshop "Curating the Alps," organized by Benoît Antille. During the week, we saw various curatorial models and artistic approaches that have been applied in the Valais and elsewhere. As a result of the workshop, we were asked to formulate a possible proposal for a curatorial model/artistic practice in the Alps, based on our experience. Before leaving I asked you if it was possible for us to come back and you said it is. Of course, we didn't talk about the circumstances of this return, but ever since I have been daydreaming about returning to Furkart, and staying in the house of Panamarenko.

Right behind the house you can see a steep mountain slope and in front of it a road. The bus stops just outside the house. It's neither big nor small. The roof is dark grey with flat roof tiles. Three windows rise up out of the roof, each one just the same size and a little bit more to the right. The windows look like little houses themselves: each has its own tiny roof. The windows are divided in six even parts and have white frames. Each roof carries a bit of snow. Water glides towards the gutter as it melts. A little chimney sits on top of the roof on the right side. The front of the house is rectangular, proportioned like two squares next to one another. It's mostly beige with some darker spots here and there, especially at the bottom and on the left. Just below the roof are five more windows, hiding behind five shutters, from left to right: one orange, two green, one orange, one green. Thirty-five white dots are painted underneath the leftmost orange shutter, stopping just before the next shutter starts. There are three rows: the top and bottom ones each have twelve dots in the same places; the one in the middle has eleven. Each dot has been placed in the middle of the dots in the other rows. Next to this you can see a sign painted in purple; the letters in yet darker purple are unreadable. To the right, 'auto-garage' is painted on the wall in capital letters – just legible – with a wooden garage door beneath it. The green paint on the door has peeled off, mostly visible at the bottom. The planks have been placed horizontally. The front door is just left of the garage door: between the third and fourth windows. Two steps lead up to a dark wooden door. The door is decorated with wooden carving, and in the middle, there is a circle. On the left of the door something is painted in little red letters: not legible anymore. More to the left, another wooden portal: just as dark as the front door. This door is