

## Political Public Art as Performative Response to Crisis

Stuart Andrews and Patrick Duggan

### Introduction: On the Performative Political Potential of Public Art

That art is sometimes, perhaps often political is not a new idea; nor is the argument that such work might be considered an active agent in the world, especially as critical perspectives on world events, situations and p/Politics.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there is little research on the position of political artwork as crisis response, in a formal municipal or emergency planning sense (as opposed to representation of or reflection on a crisis). In this article, we ask how explicitly political public art practices (as opposed to protest performances, for example) can reveal the nature (political, social, cultural) of a crisis as that crisis is unfolding. In so doing, we will argue that explicitly political public art can and should be taken seriously as productively performative (active, constitutive, enacting, engaging) crisis response action.

For political scientist Phillip Y. Lipsy, '[c]rises that abruptly upend political and economic relations are important and increasing in frequency' and that such crises are defined by 'threat, uncertainty, and time pressure'.<sup>2</sup> In that context, Lipsy argues, understanding and getting to grips with crises 'requires a careful examination of how these variables affect political and economic outcomes.'<sup>3</sup> As researchers of performance and cultural practices, we are acutely aware that artists in a place can speak powerfully about the crises impacting on that place and, crucially, that this work can offer novel

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, C. Viveros-Fauné, *Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art* (David Zwirner Books, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> P.Y. Lipsy, 'COVID-19 and the Politics of Crisis'. *International Organization*, 74(S1), 2020, p. E98.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

perspectives, even solutions, to such challenges. In this essay, we are interested in the ways that artists create work 'opportunistically', but which also comprise careful examinations of threat, uncertainty, and time pressure. These artworks invite those who engage to undertake similar critical and conceptual work.

As we will evidence, explicitly political public art has the capacity to reveal new understandings of crises as they unfold (like the COVID-19 pandemic) and as we prepare for their unfolding (such as climate change related flooding or extreme heat). Moreover, they can operate to change understandings of place that afford new means of intervening in crises. In this sense, then, the unfolding and encountering of some forms of public art holds what we are calling a 'performative political potential' through which these works intervene in the politics of an unfolding crisis. Thus they enact new practices and social politics of place that can be productive in understanding, perhaps even mitigating, the impacts of a crisis. In each of the cases below there is a triangulation between an explicit and intended socio-political focus (conversation, raising awareness), a performative Political potentiality aimed at policy change and different governmental actions, and the enacting of a spatiotemporal change to a place as it relates to a crisis.

In this article we are testing the idea that public art might perform (and inform) crisis response. We interpret these terms broadly, recognising that public art and artistic performance practice and research cover a breadth of fields. The interventions in public space analysed below, offer artistic event spaces where we can rehearse our engagement with and responses to pending or unfolding crises. As theatre maker and climate activist David Finnigan puts it (in relation to COVID-19 'rehearsals'): the best responses to a crisis emerge '[p]erhaps unsurprisingly... when we've had a chance to learn from similar crises in the past. In other words, when we've rehearsed, we perform better.'<sup>4</sup> The UK Government acknowledges the importance of 'rehearsal' in crisis response, with the Emergency Planning Framework (2018) stating that '[a] crisis response works best if tested in advance, and doing this with partners can ensure you build important relationships in calmer times.'<sup>5</sup>

Taking theatre 'stumble through' rehearsals (the first full, if faltering, run-through of a theatre performance) as the starting point of his analysis,

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<sup>4</sup> David Finnigan, 2022. 'What Theatre Teaches Us About Preparing for Disaster'. *Artists & Climate Change*, online, available at <<https://artistsandclimatechange.com/2022/01/08/what-theatre-teaches-us-about-preparing-for-disaster/>> last accessed 25-10-24.

<sup>5</sup> Government Communication Service, 2018. 'Emergency planning framework', p. 5. Available online via <<https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/emergency-planning-framework/>>, last accessed 21-10-24.

Finnigan aptly demonstrates the power of rehearsal for crisis management. China's public health response to a SARS outbreak in 2003, and the political fallout from this, offered a stumbling rehearsal from which to refine methods for COVID-19 in 2020. The 2007/2008 financial crisis generated lessons used by the US Federal Reserve in 2020 when it released huge amounts of liquidity into global markets to prevent collapse. The more we understand from imperfect rehearsals, the more we can prepare for future events.

Beyond a potentially useful rehearsal for means of response to future (perhaps more profound) climate related disasters, COVID-19 'show[ed] us what a global crisis really feels like'.<sup>6</sup> The feel of an experience is vital both to theatrical productions (in which it is not just the narrative and content of a work but also the embodied encounter with it that gives the event meaning) and to processes of understanding and conceptualisation that are essential to crisis response. This chimes with Helena Grehan et al.'s work on the importance of paying close attention to place to generate new thinking on and approaches to addressing the climate crisis. Drawing on Edward S. Casey's understanding of 'habitus', they argue that people 'actively relate to places by way of "habitation" as social relations inform and shape our relation to places including the built environment'.<sup>7</sup> We would add to this the importance of the scenographics of encounter that can be constructed and performed in a given place. That is, as Rachel Hann's work argues, scenographics affords 'the potential of *being with* an atmosphere as discrete from *looking at* an object or tableau'.<sup>8</sup> This is important for our concerns here because not only do the case studies we explore highlight the constructed nature of places (aligning to Grehan et al.'s position) but they also afford the creation of explicitly political event places across different spatiotemporal formations to 'be with', rather than simply to be in. In so doing, these pieces connect 'space, architecture and public arts by way of the formation of social and cultural groups or support for active storytelling'.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the powerful potential of place-based narratives to enact belonging and the processing of information in and before crises, Karen Rodham et al. recognise (in the context of health psychology during the COVID-19

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<sup>6</sup> Finnigan, 2022, online.

<sup>7</sup> Grehan, H., Smail, B., Ostwald, M.J., 2024. 'Creatively Reimagining Place and Community in a World of Extreme Weather.' In: Del Favero, D., Thurow, S., Ostwald, M.J., Frohne, U. (eds) *Climate Disaster Preparedness: Arts, Research, Innovation and Society*. Springer, pp. 183-198. p. 185.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Hann, 2019. *Beyond Scenography*. Routledge, p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> Grehan, p. 185.

pandemic) that 'time and a safe space of reflection' are vital in crisis situations.<sup>10</sup> Our argument in this essay is that certain instances of public art offer a disruptive process of repurposing space in order to articulate and reveal both the intellectual problem of (climate) crises *and* offer a safe embodied encounter with a representation of it or its consequences through performative political scenographics. In being with the environments and atmospheres created, each of the case studies affords opportunities for the body to be present in crisis (so to speak); enabling an embodied critical reflection in ways that fuse the cerebral and the emotional. In so doing, these works offer new articulations of place that encourage an interrogation of the politics of place in crisis.

Where Finnigan sees COVID-19 as a rehearsal for future crises, using theatrical processes to establish the metaphor, we want to argue for the place of arts practice publicly to enable a performative politics that both rehearses for crisis *and* that helps respond to a crisis. The performative element of these works can be argued to shift and change as encounters with the cultural objects shift over time, be that the context of their encounter, the positionality of the person encountering, or both. What will become evident however is the way that each piece affords an opportunity for spectators to encounter quotidian spaces that have been repurposed to reveal the complexities of life in and with a crisis. This is self-evidently political insofar as these works ask us to consider our position in relation to the crisis at hand (be that current or future), and from there to attend to the (big 'P') Politics that lie behind processes of preparation, mitigation, response and recovery. This is important because while public art is regularly a part of sanctioned planning and development processes, our case studies add interesting texture to commissioned public art practices in so far as they appear 'opportunistic' or unsanctioned. Moreover, while what we might call 'social politics' is very often an outcome of encountering sanctioned public art (e.g. where debate might be stimulated), in appearing unsanctioned our examples operate slightly differently and so come to occupy interesting political territory.

### Case Studies: Performing Crisis Response

As part of the UK's COVID-19 Inquiry, Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer for England (June 2010-October 2019) identified a need for 'an institutional framework to ensure that there are a full range of opinions from each

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<sup>10</sup> Karen Rodham, Kiran Bains, Juliette Westbrook, Natalia Stanulewicz, Lucie Byrne-Davis, Jo Hart, Angel Chater, 2020. *Rapid Review: Reflective practice in crisis situations*. Health Psychology Exchange. Preprint  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/e8tqn>.

discipline.<sup>11</sup> This structural change speaks not simply of the ‘usual suspects’ but to the importance of a breadth of disciplinary learning in understanding and responding to crises. Davies’ work necessarily asks that we invite subjects and practices that might not normally be included in strategy review, response management and strategy development to inform pandemic management (and crisis response more broadly). Yet there are questions over how multiple disciplines might be invited meaningfully to contribute to institutional frameworks. Ultimately, such work needs to challenge existing and familiar thinking, to resist unproductive readings of a situation. While terminology from theatre has been quite widely taken into public debate and discourse, such as in emergency planning where simulation exercises constitute *rehearsals* or in politics where a bad news cycle needs to be *stage managed* etcetera, the connections between performance and crisis management are much more profound.

Our contention here is that, analysed as and through performance (theory), the explicitly political public art of our case studies operates to disrupt and challenge existing perspectives on crises (and that performance as an academic discipline can thus be vital as part of that ‘full range’ of specialist input). In doing this, the case studies offer models of practice that make performative interventions in place to make explicit the p/Politics of unfolding crises, both revealing the nature of a crisis and wider underlying approaches to crisis management in public spaces. Here we look at three instances of ‘public art’ as performative repurposing of public space as means of addressing emerging crises (COVID-19, flooding, extreme heat). The work will address the politics of such work as they attend to and afford new means of thinking about crisis.

In the UK, Led by Donkeys and the COVID-19 Bereaved Families for Justice UK collaborated to unofficially repurpose a stretch of wall on the Albert Embankment, London, as the National Covid Memorial Wall. Now seemingly incorporated into the national consciousness as a place and practice of mourning, the wall runs 500-meters along Albert Embankment, directly opposite the Houses of Parliament. Its positioning deliberately and profoundly visible to those who govern the UK, those who advise them, and those who report on parliamentary activity. In *¡Nos freímos! (We Are Frying!)* in Madrid (2020), the art collective Luzinterruptus installed a neat circle of illuminated crisps beneath trees in a city park. The artwork imagined that, in a changed climate, the leaves of these trees had fried to a crisp as they fell to the ground.

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<sup>11</sup> UK COVID-19 Inquiry, 2024. ‘Module 1 report: The resilience and preparedness of the United Kingdom’. Available online < <https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/reports/module-1-report-the-resilience-and-preparedness-of-the-united-kingdom/> >, last accessed 22-10-24.

Finally, in *HighWaterLine* (2007) the artist Eve Mosher painted a chalk line in New York City that marked the predicted ten-foot rise in the high water line. From 2011, Mosher collaborated with Heidi Quante to recreate the project in other cities in the USA, and artists internationally have developed their own versions of the work. Of these three case studies, only *HighWaterLine* had formal permission, the other two works intervened in the public realm come what may. Each of these performances addressed a pre-existing crisis, and brought that crisis more sharply and suddenly into focus, in a particular place and at a particular time. In each case, these ‘opportunist’ artworks enacted a particular performance of crisis.

While each of these works may appear to be spontaneous or opportunistic, what we encounter is the result of artistic *processes* that have performative consequences in their encounter with the public (live or in documentation). By investigating opportunist public art practices of repurposing place, we identify the ways in which arts practice can repurpose pre-existing places as sites for critical thinking on a crisis, both at the time and afterwards, in order to think creatively about challenges. We are interested in the act of each artwork, and the urgency of these interventions into public space and public discourse. This, then, is an analysis of the ways in which performance practices can create powerful spaces for collective critical thinking on a crisis, sometimes overnight. Through this analysis, we find that each work intervened powerfully in a place, transforming that place or bringing a new place into being, whether temporarily or more permanently. We recognise the potential to read each artwork through Lipsky’s terms, as a *threat* to the pre-existing form of a place that creates surprise and *uncertainty* and draws attention to *time pressure*, in a way that may not have been evident previously. As we suggest below, by taking on critical aspects of a crisis, opportunist public art is particularly able to speak to a crisis and create a context in which to rethink and reimagine that crisis.

### Crises in Public Space

In being concerned with the impact of public art on crisis response in the public realm, we situate our work in the context of existing discussions of situated responses to crises. Unsurprisingly, there is established interest in the fields of architecture and urban planning. Notably, Carlos García Vázquez, an architect and urban planner, is interested in ‘contemporary urbanism and urban design from a cultural standpoint’.<sup>12</sup> Vázquez traces local practices within

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<sup>12</sup> Carlos García Vázquez, 2022. *Cities After Crisis: Reinventing Neighborhood Design from the Ground-Up*. Routledge, p. xv.

cities that address specific challenges, notably of sustainability. Critically, he identifies ways in which crises can lead to innovations in urban design, as inhabitants of an area seek to meet pressing challenges. As he writes of local responses to COVID-19,

the pandemic deeply disrupted the livelihoods of the inhabitants of cities, making them reflect on their lifestyles, values, and priorities in an unprecedented way. These reflections, which occurred during a period of intense stress, uneasiness, and anxiety, induced change.<sup>13</sup>

While the stress of the pandemic might be one means of stimulating reflection and action in the face of crisis, as we argue below, the case studies we consider here enable opportunities for more aesthetic encounters with understandings of place that work towards the same goals. Relatedly, Sheeba Amir, also an architect, urban planner, and writer, finds that ‘public spaces play a prominent role in disaster management’.<sup>14</sup> Amir reflects on practices of public spaces in Bungamati, Kathmandu following an earthquake in 2015, in which Amir was involved in post-earthquake response. Amir identifies the changing local practices of public spaces post-earthquake which included the construction of temporary shelters, installation of essential services, public meetings, workshops and performances. Recalling Grehan et al’s perspectives on experiences of place, public spaces afford opportunities for collective gathering in and beyond crises, making them ripe for shifting aesthetic practices that interrogate and rehearse the changing lived experiences and politics of those crises.

Such a sense of the possibility of interrogation, of political action, is also crucial to philosopher and political theorist Oliver Marchart’s conceptualisation of the role and function of art in public space. For Marchart, the political power of public spaces and of art in these spaces lies in their capacity to afford opportunities for public political debate:

the public sphere is not a space of consensus, but rather a space of *dis-sent*. The urban public space - we may summarise - is generated by conflict and not by a consensus having recourse to rational and procedural meta-rules.<sup>15</sup>

While we are not advocating for conflict *per se*, the disruptive potential of the case studies we analyse is vital to their performative political effect insofar as each invites public questioning of the conditions (crises) of their production.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 195.

<sup>14</sup> Sheeba Amir, 2018. ‘Public Spaces and Disaster Recovery’. *My Liveable City*, online. Available at <<https://www.myliveablecity.com/public-space>>, last accessed 22.10.24.

<sup>15</sup> Oliver Marchart, 2002. ‘Art, Space and the Public Sphere(s)’. *transversal texts*, online. Available at <<https://transversal.at/transversal/0102/marchart/en#f48>>, last accessed 22.10.24.

The works below perform interventions in public spaces to stimulate debate, arouse curiosity, and motivate action as crisis response.

### Local Stories: Making Sense of Crisis

As climate researchers Krauß and Bremer identify, narratives are vital in disseminating scientific knowledge about climate challenges<sup>16</sup> However, they find that while ‘powerful scientific *narratives of climate change*’ have been crucial in influencing individual behaviours, their ‘top-down and technology-focused “risk-management”’ have limitations, especially as they fail to account for ‘ways of living with the climate that make sense locally’.<sup>17</sup> In light of this, Krauß and Bremer argue for local ‘place-based stories’ to inform understanding and invite action, contending that,

[L]ocal narratives serve to improve knowledge of the impacts of climatic change (the problem framing), introduce local ways of relating to and coping with these changes, and root climate governance in social life (Krauß, 2010a). Such narratives give meaning to abstract scientific information and are key to understanding, making sense, of what it means to live in and with a changing climate.<sup>18</sup>

This sense of the importance of the local in narratives that address and story climate change challenges offers a clear articulation of the importance of cultural forms in seeking to understand crises beyond ‘abstract scientific information’. However, while we are firmly in agreement with the importance of the ‘cultural turn’ in crisis response, our argument here is that this turn needs to be understood *beyond narrative alone*.<sup>19</sup>

That is, public art practices offer means of repurposing urban spaces and thereby enacting political – and, sometimes, Political – outcomes, indicatively: imagining possible futures and the consequences of hidden threats (*High Water Line*); aestheticizing consequences of climate change to stimulate new understandings and possible action (*We Are Frying!*); revealing the scale of bereavement and suffering of COVID-19 and marking the politics of Political decision making (National Covid Memorial Wall, London).

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<sup>16</sup> Werner Krauß and Scott Bremer, 2020. ‘The role of place-based narratives of change in climate risk governance’. *Climate Risk Management*, Volume 28 (100211), online. Available at

<<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2212096320300115>>, last accessed 22.10.24.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., emphasis in original.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See *Performing City Resilience*, n.p. ‘Publications’ Available at <<https://performingcityresilience.com/publications/>>, last accessed 25.10.24.



As Vásquez and Amir's work demonstrates, local experiences of crisis lead to locally-situated responses, and public, neighbourhood spaces can comprise critical sites for this work. While local crisis response is necessarily affected by interrelated factors including physical geography, facilities, resources, training and experience, public space remains a critical site for public crisis response. Our interest here is in what happens when arts practices intervene in public spaces in unsanctioned, disruptive, or 'opportunist' ways to address particular crises that face (or may go on to face) communities who engage with those spaces. While narrative may be part of these interventions in public space, in the analysis that follows it is the spatiotemporal dimension of artistic works that disrupts normative or quotidian understandings of place in order to enact a performative political interrogation of place in crisis to reveal new understandings of and intervene in crises as they unfold (which we address here in terms of COVID-19) or as they may unfold (for instance in relation to flooding and extreme heat in the face of climate change).

### **National Covid Memorial Wall, London**

Standing on Westminster Bridge in central London, the August sun beating down about as heavily as the sun can in the United Kingdom, the performative politics of the National Covid Memorial Wall are strikingly apparent. Running some 500 meters along Albert Embankment, directly opposite the Houses of Parliament, the memorial deploys the aesthetics of public art to make deliberately and profoundly visible the ongoing trauma and grief of COVID bereaved families to those who govern the UK (see fig 1). In being visible as a swathe of pink and red from the Palace of Westminster's famous Commons' Terrace (and the Terrace Pavilion event space), the wall calls to parliamentarians, advisors, and reporters. The scale of the wall means that at the very least, the red of the hearts presented in this location operate as a visual reminder that COVID-19 was as much about the politics of place and governance as it was about public health management.



Fig. 1: National Covid Memorial Wall, across River Thames from Houses of Parliament.

In July 2024, the UK COVID-19 Public Enquiry published *Module 1 Report – The resilience and preparedness of the United Kingdom*. The report identifies that government ‘ministers commence their role, by and large, as amateurs, and are often not professionally trained in the policy areas of their departments.’<sup>20</sup> The report argues that ministers should, as a result, ‘challenge the advice they receive from both experts and officials.’<sup>21</sup> That is, government ministers need to engage in the rational, sceptical and unbiased interrogation of the ‘evidence’ provided to them. There is, then, a need for ministers to engage with the knowledge presented to them with a critical thinking framework if they are properly to synthesise data and make decisions in the best interests of the communities they represent. Government ministers, we might argue,

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<sup>20</sup> UK COVID-19 Inquiry, 2024, p. 134

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

must then act as brokers between experts (and their evidence) and ‘the people’. Or, as Denis McMahon, Permanent Secretary to the Executive Office of Northern Ireland (2021-2023), puts it in the Enquiry’s report: ‘*ministers see things from the point of view of the person on the ground... they just connect us back to the community.*’<sup>22</sup> Such connection, though, suggests that the community is not necessarily valued as a knowledge base; or at the very least that its voice is not as prioritised as it might be in policy development. If that is the case, and recalling Marchart’s sense of the importance of dissensus to proper democratic functioning, it raises questions of how community voices might properly be *heard* by the ministers who run Government departments as ‘amateurs’ in needs of diverse expertise. As the COVID-19 pandemic broke in February and March 2020, most ministers in the UK Government had been in role for only some seven months following the election of Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson (Boris Johnson) as Prime Minister in July 2019. In this context, the COVID-19 Memorial Wall in London can be read as a long form means of ‘being heard’, a performance of political presence through critical, creative intervention in public space.

Despite now being named the ‘National Covid Memorial’, the Wall’s painting was an unsanctioned act when first undertaken. Politically astute and powerfully performative in design but initially, no more official than a street graffiti artist tagging the same space. Nevertheless, the Wall in London now stands as a profound example of performative intervention in the urban landscape, embodying collective grief and remembrance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This grassroots memorial, stretching along the South Bank of the River Thames, represents a unique form of public performance art that engages with the socio-politics of trauma, crisis, resilience and mourning. Stretching more than 500 meters, its location directly opposite the Houses of Parliament, and visible from that side or the river, it creates a compelling spatial dialogue between public expression and political power. Creatively repurposing a municipal or functional stretch of the Thames’ southern embankment walkway, the Memorial Wall functions as a performative act of witnessing that forces a confrontation between the human cost of the pandemic and the seat of governmental decision-making.

Initiated by the COVID-19 Bereaved Families for Justice campaign, with support from guerrilla political campaign and activist group Led By Donkeys, the wall’s creation was a collaborative performance of mourning, as well as an unsanctioned *performative* disruption, repurposing and rearticulation of

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 135, italics in original.

public space. In her seminal book *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*, performance theorist Peggy Phelan argues that,

performance respond[s] to a psychic need to rehearse for loss, and especially for death... [and has] especially potent lessons for those interested in reassessing our relations to mourning, grief, and loss.<sup>23</sup>

At the most surface level, the wall ‘performs public memories’ (as the subtitle of Phelan’s book calls for). More potently, the Wall intervenes in public space to scenographically create (recalling Hann) a performative environment which both enacts mourning and which grants permission to mourn and to be with mourning, so to speak, in public and with others (see fig.2).



Fig. 2: Conversations at the National Covid Memorial Wall.

Acting as collective memorial for bereaved families and rallying cry for better Political decision making and more transparent governance, the act of hand-painting approximately 150,000 hearts by volunteers can be viewed as a durational performance piece, one that continues to evolve as new hearts are added and existing ones maintained. Reflecting on the COVID Wall in *The Guardian* (2021) the writer Dorian Lynskey recalls the work of Maya Lin who has created a series of what she describes as ‘Memory Works’.<sup>24</sup> Lin reflects that,

if we can accurately remember these historic events we can better learn from our past in order to help shape a different future. And to that end

<sup>23</sup> Peggy Phelan, 1997. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. Routledge.

<sup>24</sup> See <https://www.mayalinstudio.com/memory-works>.



these memorials have never been strictly about loss, but I have seen them more as teaching tools. They all share a sense of quiet human scale. I like to think of these works as putting a book out in public, or asking people to gather together around a table, or take a walk.<sup>25</sup>

Lynsky cites Louis Menand who writes of Lin's work, '[n]ow we expect a memorial will be interactive and that it will visibly move the viewer. If it doesn't make you cry, then it isn't working.' Where Lin identifies her work as 'teaching tools', we suggest these might also be understood, echoing Phelan, and Finnigan, as rehearsals and, more specifically, open rehearsals – public revisitings of past pain shared to discuss, reflect on and, ultimately, limit future loss. The ongoing process of contribution, repair and protection that the volunteer custodians of the Wall undertake, transforms the Wall into a living memorial, constantly adapting to reflect the pandemic's ongoing impact. Even in the summer of 2024, some 14 months after the World Health Organisation had declared an end to the pandemic, we witnessed people writing into freshly painted hearts and touching up the text of others; meanwhile, an interview to camera focused on the lingering impact of COVID-19 and the place of the wall in framing that impact.<sup>26</sup> These live and ongoing interventions ensure the Memorial Wall maintains its role as site of collective mourning and a potent political act of public creative practice.

The Wall serves as a physical manifestation of collective trauma, each heart representing an individual loss. This visual representation of grief on such a massive scale creates a powerful aesthetic impact, transforming personal loss into a shared public experience. The ongoing maintenance of the wall by 'The Friends of the Wall' exemplifies community resilience in the face of crisis. This continual act of care and remembrance can be seen as a performative practice that reinforces social bonds and aids in collective healing in public. As a case study, the National Covid Memorial Wall offers compelling insights into how performative practices can reshape urban spaces and contribute to collective memory formation; the Wall makes present and puts into networked relation the multiple, hidden, 'socially distanced' deaths resulting from COVID-19 (both at the height of the pandemic, and ongoing). Its presence challenges traditional notions of memorialization, offering a more dynamic and participatory model of public remembrance. Not only this but the Wall is aesthetic, its encounter visually striking and composed to be noticed, the red and pink hearts standing out vibrantly from the sandy-grey of the wall

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<sup>25</sup> Dorian Lynskey, 2021. 'Wall of love: the incredible story behind the national Covid memorial'. *the Guardian*, 18 July, online. Available at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/18/wall-of-love-the-incredible-story-behind-the-national-covid-memorial-led-by-donkeys>>, last accessed 22 October 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Observed by Duggan during research fieldwork, August 2024.

itself. As bereaved author and journalist Catherine Mayer reflected of her own experience contributing to and encountering the Wall:

Up close, [the hearts] tell individual stories, however incomplete. ‘ANDY MY LOVE,’ I wrote. Stand back and the hearts form constellations of sorrow. Cross the river to the Houses of Parliament directly opposite and they merge, turning the wall blood-red, an unblinking reminder to the lawmakers within that their actions, and inactions, carry consequences.<sup>27</sup>

In so doing, the Wall performed (at the time of its first emergence) an articulation of the trauma of COVID-19 deaths for those impacted and put into visible, material circulation the political underpinnings of that trauma, refusing the possibility of absencing Political decision making from their consequences. Even as the pandemic unfolded, this public art intervention created a place for mourning and political commentary and activism.

Thus, the Wall stands as a potent example of how performance practices can emerge from and respond to moments of social crisis, embodying themes of trauma, resilience, and collective action that are central to contemporary performance studies. In essence, the National Covid Memorial Wall represents more than just a static monument; it is a living, breathing performance of grief, remembrance, and resilience. It continues to evolve, serving both as a personal tribute to individuals lost and as a stark reminder of the pandemic’s impact on society. Through its ongoing performative nature, the wall not only commemorates the past but also actively shapes how we collectively process and remember this extraordinary global crisis.

### *¡Nos freímos! (We Are Frying!)*

Where the last case study was determinedly focused on the impact and legacy of COVID-19, with a particular focus on the UK, we turn now to a public art event that was created during the pandemic but addressing a longer form, perhaps less visible crisis: the climate emergency’s impact on extreme heat. Responding to the artists’ perception that the global viral crisis was distracting from politicians and populations from the pressing challenges of climate change, artist-activist group Luzinterruptus created *¡Nos freímos! (We Are Frying!)*

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<sup>27</sup> C. Mayer. “Stand back and the hearts form constellations of sorrow” – at the Covid memorial wall in London”, *Apollo Magazine* (online), 28 February 2022, available at <<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/national-covid-memorial-wall-london/>> last accessed 25.10.24.



Fig. 3: *¡Nos freímos! (We Are Frying!)* installed in park in Madrid (2020).  
Credit: Luzinterruptus and Melisa Hernandez.

In a park in Madrid in 2020, a low circular mound of what appears to be leaves is glowing in the night (see fig 3). The neat edges of the circle and the warm golden light that emanates from within the mound suggest that something otherworldly is at play. This installation is *¡Nos freímos! (We Are Frying!)* an artwork by Luzinterruptus (who identify as an anonymous art collective, based in the city). The installation was not in fact leaves but crisps (potato chips in the US), that had been carefully poured into a neat pool on the ground and illuminated with small lights secreted in and amongst the crisps (see fig 4). In creating *¡Nos freímos!* Luzinterruptus has reflected that, ‘we have imagined a future where the atmosphere is so warm that the leaves are already fried before they hit the ground.’<sup>28</sup> Here, as the ‘leaves’ lie on the ground, crisped (albeit by oil rather than air), they glow, as if still hot from their fall to earth.

<sup>28</sup> Luzinterruptus, 2021. *We Are Frying! / ¡Nos freímos!* [web page], available at <<https://www.luzinterruptus.com/?p=7496>> last accessed 14-10-24.



Fig. 4: Illuminated crisps in *¡Nos freímos! (We Are Frying!)*  
Credit: Luzinterruptus and Melisa Hernandez.

There is established academic research on heat waves in Spain and the effects of rising temperatures on the Mediterranean basin as a whole. For Christina Linares et al. (2020),

Climate change impacts the health of the Mediterranean population directly through extreme heat, drought or storms, or indirectly by changes in water availability, food provision and quality, air pollution and other stressors.<sup>29</sup>

In writing on ‘hot cities’, Wendy Steele, John Handmer, and Ian McShane focus on the critical contribution of art and creativity as vital means of responding to increasing heat in cities. Echoing Marchart’s earlier proposition on the importance of debate, they write, citing Rebecca Solnit, that the ‘purpose of art and activism is to make a world in which “people are the producers

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<sup>29</sup> Cristina Linares et al, 2020. ‘Impacts of climate change on the public health of the Mediterranean Basin population - Current situation, projections, preparedness and adaptation’. *Environmental Research*, 182: 109107, online. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S001393511930903X>.



of meaning – not consumers and this is connected to the politics of hope”.<sup>30</sup> As such, for Steele et al., arts practice can operate as a call to action. They suggest that ‘[t]ransdisciplinary stories of regenerative change and possibility have a critical role that can work to “unsettle the settled”, help mobilise community or generate empathy.’<sup>31</sup> The use of stories to unsettle hegemonic positions and practices is a compelling prospect; however, recalling our response to Grehan et al, we need of course to think either beyond stories in terms of narrative or at least understand embodied experience and atmosphere as part of it. While compelling as a means of generating action, if we are to engage people as ‘producers of meaning’ then we cannot simply pass messages to those people. Instead, we must allow space – in this case literally – for people to produce meaning for themselves, particularly as that meaning relates to the areas in which they live and work.

Luzinterruptus installed *¡Nos freímos!* in December of 2020, concerned that COVID-19 had distracted public attention from the climate crisis and keen to refocus interest on the environment. The collective explains that it selected a park in the Conde Duque area for its deciduous trees and for being at a distance from any Christmas lights in the city.<sup>32</sup> It reports that the piece took three hours to install and was in place for four hours (a fleeting disruption in the moment but one that is well documented).<sup>33</sup> For Luzinterruptus,

Park visitors approached attracted by the light. They didn’t notice the potato chips until they took a better look. They assumed that we had gathered the leaves from the trees, piled them there and put lights in them. The dogs were smarter...<sup>34</sup>

Luzinterruptus is not alone in recognising the potential of parks and disused patches of urban land as sites in which to rethink the everyday through environmental initiatives. Indicatively, projects that involve greening bus stops, or creating gardens in empty housing lots speak of the importance of green spaces in daily life for us, for nature, and for mitigating against climate change. The project recalls artworks by artists such as, in the UK, Andy Goldsworthy, whose practice includes assembling and creating patterns with natural materials, and which has included the creation of circular patterns with fallen leaves, ordered by shape and colour. It also echoed lightworks in gardens that

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<sup>30</sup> Wendy Steele, John Handmer, and Ian McShane, 2023. ‘The Endless Summer.’ *Hot Cities: A Transdisciplinary Agenda* ed. W. Steele, J. Handmer, I. McShane. Edward Elgar Publishing, pp.147-163, p. 151, citing R. Solnit, 2016. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Stories, Wild Possibilities*. London: Canongate.

<sup>31</sup> Steele et al. p. 161.

<sup>32</sup> Luzinterruptus, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

perform 'enchanted' experiences of nature, creating storybook worlds for visitors to explore. Close up, any impression of nature being playfully reframed is troubled. Things were out of place here: this appeared to comprise a framing of nature in a circular formation of leaves, but discarded crisps carry far less natural connotations of industrial production, perhaps consumerism and over consumption. This was a trick of the light, a warm, glowing celebration of nature, that spoke also of the threat to nature. The name of this artist collective, 'Luzinterruptus' demonstrates that the collective uses light ('luz') as means of interruption. At times this comprises illegal work, at other times the work comprises commissions. In each case, illumination is critically deployed as an invitation to draw closer.

There is something compelling about this work taking place at night, toward the end of the year, well away from seasonal festive lights and decorations. The installation was situated on a paved area at one end of the park. There were trees close by, and one imagines this is a place where leaves must regularly fall and be swept away as part of the passing of the year in the park. Not far from the installation, the ground rises to connect the park to a street above. Some fifteen or so steps separate this end of the park and street, lending the artwork an air of the subterranean. While this was a live event, it was also a carefully constructed scene for a series of images, available on Luzinterruptus's website. In these images, the park appears empty, apart from the photographer who has captured the artwork and, we imagine, those involved in the process of installation. In the darkness, the light (and with it the signified and imagined heat of these leaves burnt to a crisp) was provided by batteries, cables and bulbs beneath the 'leaves'. The elision of 'nature' and industrial production sit uneasily in the work, not least as the energy produced to manufacture the crisps or the lighting equipment will in some small way have contributed to practices by which humans are partially responsible for the rise in global temperatures and which might contribute to this dystopian scene of a burning world.

Where the hearts on the Albert Embankment have become the 'permanent' COVID-19 Memorial Wall, where, as we will see in the next case study, *HighWaterLine* was performed in number of cities internationally, *¡Nos freímos!* lasted only hours, and the images have not been widely circulated. In part, this was likely a practical consideration, the work would have been difficult to leave in the space without causing considerable inconvenience, and Luzinterruptus is particularly concerned about the sustainability of its work and its treatment of materials. Yet, Luzinterruptus's work is premised on interruption, on temporarily reimagining spaces in the present to draw attention to underlying conditions and concerns. The work interrupted the apparent peace

of the park toward the close of the year: a portent of a future in the present. Critically, in terms of crisis response, the scene of a burning world passed all too quickly to be managed, or for any response to be implemented. The speed and scale of *¡Nos freímos!* invited questions on what response might be possible and, worse, whether response was possible at all. While this terrifying vision of the future was short-lived, the irruption established, in the world of the installation, a condition in which it is possible for the future to burst in on the present. A 'dialectical image' of sorts, in which the present was bound up with the future, where, in Benjamin's terms, the image "emerges suddenly, in a flash"... blasting open "the continuum of history"<sup>35</sup>. In the context of climate change, daily actions (or their lack) to decarbonise the world are directly bound up in the future condition and future warmth of the planet, yet it can be impossible to discern any impact of daily actions that carbonate the world on the climate.

Thus *¡Nos freímos!* revealed the potential for a relatively short intervention into public spaces to reimagine those spaces in the moment, presenting the future as now. In both the live event and resulting images, *¡Nos freímos!* located the park in a future reality, where terrifying imaginings of the Anthropocene played out in the present and where those who encountered the work were but able to briefly watch the results. Where the COVID wall invited people to mark and process the loss of life that resulted from the pandemic, and as we turn to now, *HighWaterLine* offered time to plan for rising tides, so *¡Nos freímos!* revealed what may be an impossible, unmanageable risk environment, speaking of the critical importance of managing risk while it is still possible. In each case, the framing of crisis and response was planned, considered, at times with permission, before being revealed as an apparent intervention into place in a given moment in the present.

### ***HighWaterLine***

In 2007, the artist Eve Mosher created *HighWaterLine* in New York City. From May until October that year, Mosher painted a white chalk line and installed illuminated beacons through some 70 miles of coastline, to mark the anticipated ten-foot rise in the high-water line in the city. At some points, Mosher painted the line by hand, at other points she pushed a 'Heavy Hitter' chalk painting cart, leaving a neat white line behind, albeit one that was

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<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin cited in Osborne, Peter and Matthew Charles, "Walter Benjamin", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), available at: <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/benjamin/>> last accessed 25-10-24.

washed and worn away through the practice of daily life in the city. The months of making the work spoke both of the scale of the likely incursion of water into the city, and the limits of individual actions to attend to that incursion.

In 2011, Mosher reworked the project as *HighWaterLine 2.0* with collaborating artist Heidi Quante, taking the work to Miami, Bristol (UK), Delray Beach, and Philadelphia, each of which face rising water and revised high water lines. Notably, *HighWaterLine 2.0* invited local people to paint the line. This decision recognised that there is a significance in people who live or work in a place marking the future form of that place, and the land that would be lost from that place. It also limited the possibility of artists from outside a place imposing a projected high-water line on places to which they may have little connection. Alongside the painting of the line, Mosher and Quante wrote a *Guide to Creative Community Engagement*, inviting others to 'use creativity to spur change'. The installation and book led artists in other places to take up this invitation and develop 'HWL inspired' projects in Princeton (NJ), Honolulu (Hawaii), and Stockholm (2021). In several cases, the painting of *HighWaterLine* was accompanied by other arts and cultural events.

The *HighWaterLine* projects address expected rises in sea levels due to human-induced climate change. In that they reveal these projections in material form, the works draw attention to the highly localised impact of rising water levels on specific places in the city. In this context, and in terms of crisis response, we might understand the works as a form of response exercise, enabling situated thinking and practice focused on a predicted scenario. In the context of international efforts to limit the effects of climate change, the work may contribute to calls for action to reduce emissions. This said, cities in which *HighWaterLine* has been staged have already faced issues of water management. In these contexts, the work operates as a new practice of crisis response, offering means of thinking through and engaging local communities with flood incidents and future flood events in ways that are embodied and evocative, making use of performance processes beyond mere narrative or scientific data (such as scenography, props and costume, walking performance practice, mapping and improvisation).

We are struck by an image of the event in Stockholm. A woman, Maria Toll, an artist working in the city, pushes a red metal line-painting cart along a pavement. The act of painting lines, whether on street or sports pitches, marks out rules for practising a place. In this case, the line marked space for water in the city, as if sanctioning its presence or formally making space for its incursion. Yet, despite the seriousness of this predicted situation, there was a playfulness to this work. In varying iterations of the project, artists and locals

painted the chalk lines associated with sports pitches on streets and spaces across areas of a city. Where a chalk-painting cart might usually be used to mark out neat, temporary lines on sports pitches, here, the line snakes across the pavement offering a new form of line making, and potentially new rules for use. The curve of the line may have been purposeful, a safe opportunity to creatively mark the city, or it may also have reflected the shape of water. Echoing the artist Paul Klee's phrase 'taking a line for a walk', *HighWaterLine 2.0* invited people in cities to engage bodily in marking out the path of future water in a place. Practically, the act of pushing the cart looks awkward, the handles look a little low and it may be tricky to avoid walking on the freshly painted line, adding to the challenge of painting a straight line. On the road in Stockholm, Toll was in conversation with two others; this was a discursive project that allowed for conversation during the act of painting the line, where conversations on route were as important as the painting of the line itself.

In each of the versions of the work, conversation has been a critical part of the project. In Bristol, those pushing the painting cart lived in the area below the 32-mile high-water line. For Mosher and Quante, the work invited people living in given areas to recognise the ways in which the line connected them together as being at risk of future-flooding. Participants in the Bristol event have reflected on the ways in which the act of line painting led to conversations. Alice Sharp, director of Invisible Dust, which co-presented the work in Bristol, reflected on the acutely local focus of the project. For Sharp,

[y]ou literally saw people open their front door, walk out into their front yard and there was a line along their pavement.<sup>36</sup>

While this was a work about specific places in a city, mapped from above, marked on the streets, it was undertaken in the midst of city living and life, on and around buildings, along roads, paths, and scrubland. There is a disjuncture between the formal mapping of flood risk and the informality of marking that line in the moment, and in encounters on and around the line shortly thereafter. While the route of the line was carefully planned, the painting was located in the precise moment of its marking on the street, impacted by who was undertaking the labour of pulling or pushing the cart, practicalities and conversations during and after the painting.

For NOAA Shoreline, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a high water line is '[t]he intersection of the land with the water surface at an elevation of high water', while high water is '[t]he maximum

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<sup>36</sup> Alice Sharp interviewed on Invisible Dust, *HighWaterLine Bristol* [video] at Invisible Dust, n.d. 'Eve Mosher – HighWaterLine Bristol' available at < <https://invisible-dust.com/projects/eve-mosher-highwaterline-bristol/> > last accessed 25.10.24.

height reached by a rising tide.<sup>37</sup> In the context of climate change, 'high water' has become an unsettlingly contingent term. High water lines can be marked in varying ways. Major M. Zabetakis and Capt. C. Brown, both members of the US Civil Air Patrol (CAP), identify specific means of detection in their guide for CAP members, recognising that this information may be critical for emergency managers attending flood incidents. Zabetakis and Brown note that indicators can include lines of mud, seeds, debris, and ice rings. Where high water lines may be evident on rising land or walls, so they may also run across land that may not rise at all.

In *HighWaterLine*, the line itself is easy to detect, there is no debris or contaminated water to clear, there are no buildings to strip back, rebuild, or tear down. The line becomes a point of reflection on what might unfold in specific places in a city, and a focus for attending to, thinking through, and planning for the associated risks. Where cities experience flood events and/or face flood risks, it is critical to chart and plan for likely ingress of water, both for city managers and for those who live and/or work in affected areas. *HighWaterLine* offers a performance of incursion which enables people in cities to think through risks in situated ways, both for temporary incursions and for more permanent high-water lines. The piece signals that the work ahead will involve rethinking the spaces affected by flood, and those close by who themselves will be altered by rising tides. *HighWaterLine* repurposes and rethinks municipal places and practices to mark an issue that transcends local contexts but will, in no small part, need to be managed by them.

While *HighWaterLine* is a locally-situated artwork, the growth of the project to cities internationally speaks to global concerns about rising sea levels, especially for coastal communities. While the local contexts are critical sites to consider in terms of rising waters, the project offers the potential for discoveries to be shared between cities and communities. Whether in the context of the local city in which the work is performed (and read in terms of water management issues in that place), or in the global context of rising seas, the work is directly engaged in focusing attention on how people in a place attend to the predicted loss of familiar places. In inviting local people to paint the line, in creating an opportunity for conversation and debate, in engaging with both a city as a whole and the hyperlocal, in contributing to a network of locally-manged events internationally, the project intervenes in cities, connecting together inhabitants in areas identified as being at risk. While not offering

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<sup>37</sup> Major M. Zabetakis and C. Brown, n.d. 'Guide to Identifying High Water Marks'. *Civil Air Patrol*, online. Available at: <[https://www.gocivilairpatrol.com/media/cms/CAP\\_Guide\\_to\\_Collection\\_of\\_HWM\\_Surv\\_53C96A278913F.pdf](https://www.gocivilairpatrol.com/media/cms/CAP_Guide_to_Collection_of_HWM_Surv_53C96A278913F.pdf)> last accessed 24.10.24.

answers to the situation, *HighWaterLine* does invite reflection as a vital response to flood incidents and enables public reflection on changes to a city at the scale of the street.

### Conclusion: Opportunist Public Art

The three works that we consider here each evaded conventional processes of urban planning; they are unsanctioned in a formal sense and can appear productively ‘opportunist’ in nature. Opportunism being ‘the art, policy, or practice of taking advantage of opportunities or circumstances often with little regard for the principles or consequences’.<sup>38</sup> While much has been theorised in terms of the negatives of opportunism, in this essay it functions as a productive framework through which to understand how each piece performs its politics. That is, while Oliver Williamson famously argued that opportunism is ‘self-interest seeking with guile (which) includes ... more blatant forms, such as lying, stealing, and cheating ... (but) more often involves subtle forms of deceit’, here the works deploy what we are calling an aesthetics of opportunism to politically performative ends.<sup>39</sup>

While each artwork we consider here was carefully planned and process driven, their aesthetic construction appears opportunistic insofar as their engagement with place seems to ‘take advantage’ of circumstances that enable their construction, encounter and documentation. Moreover, each deploys a degree of guile in its execution: *Led By Donkeys* installed wall plaques, signage, tabards and masks to suggest this was a formal, approved action. *We Are Frying!* used the cover of night for the construction of the piece, and waited only hours before removing the work. *HighWaterLine* employed a line-painting machine, albeit one that marked lines only in chalk, to mark streets, pavements, public and private property across the cities of its staging. Perhaps unsurprisingly, while officially sanctioned *HighWaterLine* used very few explicit markers of this permission.

Far from being self-interested or deceitful, these works centre public art as a critical means of engaging in situated public debate; affording opportunities for embodied encounters between different people all effected by the crisis under scrutiny. These artworks are contributions to interrogating urgent crises that are difficult to address, where the artists demonstrate that familiar channels of discussion are not offering effective and timely response. Their

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<sup>38</sup> Merriam-Webster, ‘opportunist’, online. Available at: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/opportunist>> last accessed 25.10.24.

<sup>39</sup> Oliver Williamson, 1985 (2010). *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism: Firms, markets, relational contracting*. New York: Free Press, p. 47.

very construction are acts of positive Marchartian dissent in, and creating, public space. These works invite us to think in new ways about opportunism as a cultural, rather than individual practice, as a means of speaking with people in a place. Opportunist public art is identifiable and important for its concern with the public, with people and place, and the ways in which we, all of us, practise place in the context of crises. While such work may often be dismissed for evading appropriate means of engagement in public debate, there is a growing body of case studies that demonstrates an urgent need for alternative means of speaking together about the crises that we face. Further, such work allows new opportunities to attend to issues of equity, of who is affected by such crises, who is connected, and how we might learn from the inequities of past crises in preparing to managing future crises together.

Such opportunist arts practice is familiar, particularly in the work of graffiti artists, whether in the form of tagging elements of the urban environment or in specific and sometimes unique works. In the UK, and in his interventions internationally, the artist Banksy is known for creating graffiti images overnight, without any prior warning. While, for an artist, a work may be long-planned before being created *in situ*, for those who live, work in or pass by an area in which such artworks appear, the effect is likely to be more of a surprise. Such works enact an immediate performative intervention and evade (or appear to evade) the formal processes that might delay or entirely prohibit a work. On one level, such artworks may appear a novelty, notable for a sense of playful impertinence. On another, opportunist public artworks can speak powerfully to a crisis and our ability to manage that crisis in the present. In Judith Rodin's terms, they comprise a singular means of drawing focused public and state attention to an ongoing stress in order to yield a 'resilience dividend' through calling for local social engagement and questioning. Opportunist public art may well be Political and may well be motivated by real concern about critical contemporary issues, it may well be angry. These artworks demonstrate that opportunist public art may also offer possible solutions that too often do not find their way into contemporary readings of crises. In an unstable world, we find that not to attend to the possibilities of p/Political public art is to miss a vital opportunity and means of response to pressing local and global challenges.



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