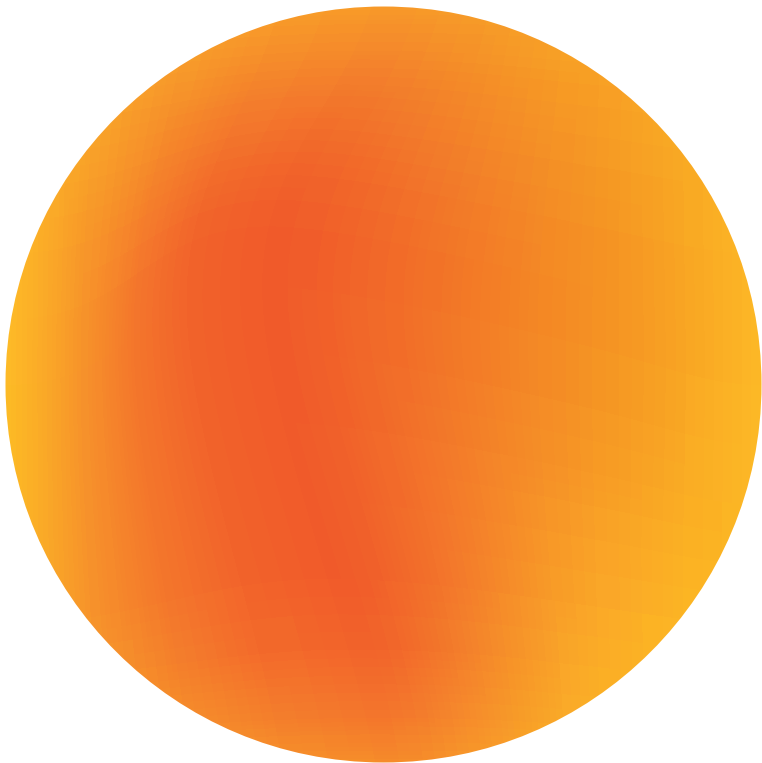


IN THE CITY,  
EVERYONE IS  
AN ARTIST



SHRIYA  
MALHOTRA

Moscow

# In the City, Everyone is an Artist

Text by Shriya Malhotra

*Today's activist urban residents do not think of art as a distinct system. They use the language of art as a tool to challenge and change their daily reality: from DIY urban repair to struggling for new forms of state representation. Unsanctioned interventions and interactions in our urban environments, combined with mass media connectivity, have become effective transformative tactics for a new, alternative vision for the future.*

An excerpt from *Partizaning's Manifesto*

## **Introduction**

Reflecting on my involvement as a member of the art collective Partizaning I hope offers insight to artistic actions in the public realm, and the challenges of collaborative, creative place-making in specific urban and cultural contexts. The collective was founded by Russian artists and art historians in 2011 as an experiment in site-specific, socially oriented street art, and emerged as an online resource to promote guerrilla-style public service while connecting unsanctioned art and civic responsibility. A blog and assorted social media became forums for us to document, inspire, coordinate and promote anonymous but constructive interventions in Moscow, Russia. Although the collective has since split up, and is no longer the cohesive entity it once was, we continue to stay in touch and to question the topics that had brought us together in the first place: how people bound by issues in a particular place can work together to address shared concerns, and collectively transform their cities using art and media.

I joined in early 2012, after finding the Partizaning website during an online search. As a conceptual (and aspiring) artist, I hoped to learn from the others and also to support international outreach and be an editor of the website. My interest was to bring enquiry, process and a feedback loop to the projects, as well as to analyse the process (and impact) of artistic interventions, and to experiment with ways in which to involve and motivate people while using public space for our own projects. I wanted to explore if, and how, street-art strategies were effective in their civic, social or political commentary, and if they could be adapted to other cities. I also wanted to create my own niche for practice, which in a sense each of us did.

From December 2011 to December 2013, Partizaning – through our local as well as global network of like-minded affiliated artists, researchers and practitioners – attempted to leverage available creative tools and technologies to shape the city through collective interventions. These interventions were of all sorts – graffiti, text, participatory murals, sanctioned, unsanctioned – and could sometimes be considered constructive 'vandalism'. All were based on community research and public discourse, both online and offline. We collaborated with cultural organisations to design official-looking stickers to 'fine' badly parked cars, designed and distributed our own version of the Moscow metro map, painted crosswalks where there were none, installed mailboxes to collect ideas from people about their localities, and tested the idea of street-art-based, grassroots place-making in collaboration with cultural institutions and city authorities. I do not think that it is fair to say we were pioneers, or even very original – but I do think that for a moment in time what we did was inspirational to the people around us. Many artists and art groups had inspired us with their practice, and we collaborated with a number of like-minded contemporaries from around the world to demonstrate the breadth of both common and unique experiences worth sharing, and also to learn more effectively from encountering each other.

Similar actions and art activist groups have emerged in many cities over the last decade. Street-art-based guerrilla public service, in the form of individual or collective urban interventions, is an effective way for people to express themselves in the public realm. Socially oriented street art, especially in countries with socialist traditions, provided a space for testing how to edit, 'make' or craft the city using fewer resources, and promoted principles of sustainability while resolving issues of local concern. A significant idea which underpinned our work was the idea of ecological sustainability – building resilience among people but using the power of art to gain attention and create necessary discussions.

There is a complex relationship between art and urbanism. The language of unsanctioned street art provides a unique format for free, publicly oriented artistic expression – social, political or otherwise. As cities around the world increasingly face shared realities (traffic jams, pollution, water shortages, crowding etc.), Partizaning's tactics for 'participatory urban re-planning' seemed relevant across contexts, and effective in achieving a variety of aims: from 'cylcification' and urban beautification, to social cooperation and even public critique. It would appear that the archive on our website is still a useful forum for people seeking ideas for ways of creatively working with their environment and community. However, there is a fine line between personal opinion and political propaganda.

One of the first things we considered when implementing our projects in public space was whether the appeal of street art could 'speak to people' and motivate them across generations and cultural contexts. This was based on the notion that cities were not exclusionary, homogenous or simple entities. We tried to consider whether project efficacy would change depending on whether a project was sanctioned or unsanctioned; many of our projects considered how forms of vandalism can be changed and perceived as constructive, collective actions. We found that creative actions – making our own DIY navigation, maps, stickers, and ad-busting to promote social and civic good – were effective ways of encouraging people to be involved in the maintenance of their city, neighbourhood or district, while serving as tools of expression and

engagement. However, the issue of legally sanctioned or authorised activity (versus not) also seemed to change the tone of the actions and their impact – something we experimented with in different ways and formats. It would likely be difficult to catalogue the various projects we all did, but the point was that in different ways we were creatively engaged with the urban form of the city.

### **From civic disobedience to civic engagement: street art, urban interventions and place-making**

We found that an effective tactic was to use strategic, official-looking statements that employed humour, sarcasm and absurdity to highlight authorities who were neglectful of their responsibility, or guilty of blatant disregard or even socio-political hypocrisy. This is a way of demonstrating civic interest, and is a call for responsibility and taking action across city stakeholders. Generally, however, our version of civic or social street art also aimed at encouraging people to use street methods to freely edit their landscape and also, perhaps, to take responsibility for their city, even if it was being neglected by those in authority. In a sense, it was a form of public artistic activism, a rethinking of public arts, street art, civic engagement and activism.

The Shtrafstoyanka (January 2012) sticker intervention, named for the Russian word for 'car impounding', sought to startle car drivers who parked illegally in Moscow's congested downtown pedestrian zones. Official-looking stickers were stuck onto badly parked cars, in a way that to drivers would appear to have been done by city parking authorities. Shtrafstoyanka was essentially targeting Moscow's growing car dominance in an attempt to reclaim space from cars for people, particularly pedestrians. This sort of creative, direct action is easily replicable in any city, but – based on perceived success – the act of replication is not just the responsibility of the artist. It is up to interested groups of people and the appropriate agencies to come forward and implement change – otherwise, the role of the artist is relegated to simply that of a mimicker of previous projects, or performer. This is why we don't see copyright as important for public space action: whatever works can be used, as long

as it is not for profit and is in the public interest. Repetition is useful, but neither ground-breaking nor contextually relevant for artists. Rather than importing ideas without thought, artists need to contextualise and localise creative tactics in order to be relevant. This is where arts and cultural institutions can get involved: to support the work of arts and of the artist without compromising their intentions, provide those tools (time, space, materials) to deal with context, and to help to build bridges between like-minded communities, or simply to identify issues of concern. This is important, because in an era of unprecedented social media and online connection, creative tactics can easily be shared across contexts. However, such tactics need to be implemented from the grassroots by interested people, and not by authorities with a specific agenda – otherwise the artist and even the project risks being used by institutions as a tool to achieve political ends, under the guise of being ‘creative’, or may simply serve as PR for political aspirants. Neither of these outcomes would be true to the original ideas. Another problem we faced was avoiding commercialisation or political appropriation. Ideas that are effective and creative are often copied by advertisers and marketers. We tried to emphasise the fact that ideas shared and implemented for social and civic good are different: they may be offered free of intellectual property rights and attribution, but this does not apply to profit-making or commercial ventures. It is necessary to consider such risks when working with communities.

Similarly, after we redesigned the Moscow metro map in 2013, in all likelihood we could have attempted the same in any Russian city (or any city really). Hacking everyday signage, another favourite tactic of ours, was also highly dependent on localised dialogues and language. I think, as a collective, we were not interested in the hype – sensationalism and surprise were part of what we were doing, but certainly not the goal or main point of our action. We were more interested in the potential to create dialogue in an otherwise apathetic situation. Using simple design principles and our own personal opinions, we took aim at advertisements for cars and at the fact that the metro map seemed to deviate from socialist planning principles, which emphasise walking and use of public transport. In another city, different concerns might be highlighted in the design of the map. All that we had hoped was that our action and

surrounding media discussion would generate a discourse regarding the city's transport priorities – which perhaps it did. Thus, although these creative strategies are sometimes effective because they are placed in unexpected places, it is the reaction they provoke (and not simply the attention they garner) that spurs change. The creative processes we shared and reflected upon became an important part of the process of doing projects in public space. Sometimes it also helps for local artists to work with and encounter artists who are not from their community, to bring fresh eyes, perspectives and experiences. The issue of trust and connection with a local community, however, cannot be underemphasised. There are two aspects to artistic activism: the sanctioned, community-oriented projects versus unsanctioned individual actions, and both have different benefits.

### **Social artistry and community engagement: the new collectivism?**

Throughout history, artists have sought through their work to comment upon or achieve social, political or civic aims, with public realm actions traversing the line between reality and performance. Part of what Partizaning succeeded in doing was to inspire people to take action wherever they were, in myriad formats. As a group of strangers working in sync, our project also sought to highlight the power of people working and coming together. We were motivated to share the belief that 'everyone is an artist', popularised by German artist Joseph Beuys, allows creative practitioners to rethink the city as a shared commons, a space for people freely to take civic responsibility through collective actions and forms of peaceful activism. 'Artist' in this case refers to the essence of being human, and one's innate need to create and be creative. Beuys was known for planting 7,000 oak trees as a public performance, based on the idea that the city was an extension of the traditional gallery or privatised art spaces, which everyone was free to shape. These examples of one person planting trees, or even the tradition of tree huggers from India, continues to resonate with environmental activists, blurring the line between art and environmental actions across cultures and time periods. Extending Beuys's theory of social sculpture, artists as citizens in the city can be creative in whatever way is available and natural within his or

her broader identity. Thus, if everyone in the city accepts that they are potential artists, they can individually, collectively and creatively transform their surroundings. This gives impetus to the general urban population to be actively involved in small-scale maintaining and repairing, or larger-scale planning discourses, often referred to as ‘place-making’ in the city. The risk, in my experience, is of artists being appropriated as tools to achieve the broader aims of public or private institutions, or of volunteerism becoming a forced form of community service and reflective of desirable social morals – converting it into being neither art nor authentic.

Historically, artists as both performers and workers have been recognised for their contributions to the discourse shaping the public realm. My inspiration for any project has always been the sanitation intervention, in which artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles took up a residency at New York’s department of sanitation and shook hands with the men who dealt with the city’s trash. This project not only dispelled myths around hygiene, but I think to this day remains my inspiration and favourite example of how arts and artists are constantly open to interpretation. It was also, for its time, ground-breaking in the ways it pushed the boundaries of artistic practice.

Artists have always been an alternative voice commenting on unfolding events. Increasingly, however, what emerges as the most valuable role of the artist seems to be that of a catalyst, mediator or a facilitator, rather than as a sanctioned enactor or authorised worker. Social artistry has continued to evolve in the 21st century, in diverse cities and cultural contexts, responding to shared concerns. A striking similarity in response has been not to replicate unsanctioned actions, but to spur collective events and movements. For instance, New York street artist and billboard hacker Jordan Seiler is now known for his mass ad-busting campaigns, and for creating a virtual reality phone app that allows users to replace ads with art on billboards – an effort to take back public space from advertising. There is a shift from individual to collective action, evident in creative civic groups, such as the Kaam Admi Party of New Delhi, Sao Paulo’s Muda Colectivo or Acupuncture Urbano, New York’s Do: Tank, Seattle’s Polite Cycling Brigade and Toronto’s Urban Repair Squad, whose



clandestine interventions are considered less vandalism and more in line with creative place-making around temporary events to catalyse long-term change. One question that emerges from all this is: are spontaneous, individual and unsanctioned actions more easy or effective than collective, community-oriented do-gooding? And how can artists resist being co-opted by authorities, institutions or agencies in a manner that frees them of their public realm responsibilities but allows them to continually create critical and expressive work?

A major, recent shift in how artists and institutions work is that individual actions have moved into the realm of collective actions. The difference with collective action, however, is that it becomes less performative, gestural or provocative, and more logistical; it needs community-based consensus, resource sharing and brainstorming. These are not easy or straightforward to negotiate for anyone, let alone an artist. Collective action perhaps now demonstrates a shift towards the ideas of the 1970s group Anarchitecture, rather than urban interventions. Thus, the role of artists and art groups should be re-thought not only to create or catalyse civic action, but to generate discussions that may not be taking place, to create new narratives that are ignored by the mainstream – to look out for justice and change. The site-specificity of art in the public realm is a crucial aspect not only of decorating and place-making, but also of memorialisation. Artists, as a profession almost external to the mainstream, are in a unique position to critique and question – perhaps the last-standing profession to do so.

One of the most interesting insights to emerge from our projects was that cities in countries across the world – particularly formerly socialist societies that have liberalised their economies in the last 20–30 years – experience many similar socio-economic realities. Rapidly growing cities in Russia, India and Brazil experience similar challenges stemming from the privatisation of formerly public infrastructural enterprises, environmental degradation as a result of rapid economic growth following the removal of socialist economic protections, and so on. We therefore sought to make our work relevant beyond national borders, and to spur an almost transnational civic and social street-art 'movement'.

This seemed to generate some good ideas, such as ways in which citizens could regulate traffic or even trash systems, and has spurred a re-think of resource-conservation based on tradition. And this is perhaps why going back to analyse what works and what doesn't is more relevant now than ever. The risk with not seeking to continue to do this work, as the only people that were acting on it, is that it may be seen as cultural transformation or propaganda.

### **A brave new art? Artists and society**

The May Interventions series (2012) was an example of collective, unsanctioned actions in the public realm, and as a series of actions was far more effective than individual acts because it was small-scale and spontaneous. Over the course of a month, we performed urban interventions that ranged from painting crosswalks, putting up a mailbox for soliciting ideas/suggestions, building a bench, and installing guerrilla cycling signs. These created an immediate discussion among people intrigued at the prospect of artists performing and promoting others voluntarily to take on municipal tasks.

The mailbox was a suggested site for inspiring civic DIY urbanism in a selected Moscow district. By definition, DIY urbanism refers to the local and temporary, but can be made more strategic – in the form of 'tactical urbanism', an idea established by Mike Lydon which has become a widespread planning movement in North America. These interventions were quick to implement, easy to conceptualise and inexpensive for us to execute. They were also, as is the case with most direct DIY urban actions, kept to a small, manageable scale. As a result, the collective was commissioned to design, implement and collaborate on a broader, long-term community project.

These unsanctioned, ephemeral and spontaneous interventions spurred a collaborative civic project: Cooperative Urbanism (which ran from June to August 2012), in which people installed mailboxes to gather place-making suggestions and also sought to involve the elderly and

youth/children in place-making activities. Cooperative Urbanism built upon notions of DIY urbanism, and offered individuals and communities an opportunity for inclusive, sustained and meaningful civic engagement and space for contributing urban activism. From a research point of view, it was effective because it built on a widely and well-established letter-writing tradition in Russia, where people are generally highly educated and take pride in their revolutionary past: i.e. are more likely to be aware and engaged on political issues, and have proof from history of being able create absolute change, to reform the existing inadequacies of a system through their actions. The following letter is an example of what we received, and signals what happens when trying to involve people in place-making processes:

There is neither a supermarket nor a grocery store next to the Pyatnitskoe highway, Building 23, Mitino district. Locals have to go buy food and groceries in other districts, which is not comfortable and is time consuming after work. Thank you for your attention. We suggest inexpensive supermarkets – smaller, informal and not very expensive ones.

PS: next to us the construction of a high-rise apartment building is in progress, so this problem is going to become more complicated.

*A letter dated 12th July 2012, as part of Cooperative Urbanism*

The project resulted in many useful suggestions, revealed a lot of competing priorities, and brought to the fore much unintended complexity which reflected the reality of the local experience. While our interventions tried to make statements to and provoke a reaction from city authorities, we were suddenly tasked with organising budgets, mediating conflicting interests, moderating discussions and even trying to convince people of individual practices. This prospect of mediating not just multiple interests and points of view, but also being faced with vested social or even political interests, was a challenge.

Based on this experience, it again seems that the artist is more effective as a catalyst and not necessarily as an enactor of policy. There are risks and challenges that emerge, including that communities may be used on a whim by the artists, or even that public realm place-making may manipulate culture to frame space. While this intervention series demonstrates that direct action is perhaps the best way of creating and prolonging a discourse that is currently non-existent, the Cooperative Urbanism project was an experiment with exactly the opposite form: sanctioned, collaborative, involving professionals, authorities, planners, architecture students, and activists.

There are many positive and negative aspects to these kinds of public realm artistic projects, but I think the greatest challenge is managing many different opinions and expressions without trying to judge or censor them. The mailboxes were in essence place-making suggestion boxes for a community in which people lacked freedom of expression, were experiencing a development upsurge, and had a tradition of letter-writing to use as a method of articulating local concerns. Outcomes are often unintended, and it is difficult to control or even mediate people's desires. Fortunately or unfortunately, creating a dialogue or a discourse in the public realm gives voice not only to positive but also to negative sentiments, by providing an equal and anonymous opportunity for bigots, racists and xenophobes to express themselves. For example, several letters and comments received online in Mitino focused on the removal of migrants – whose informal shops or food-vending stalls were described as dirty, smelly and offensive – as the most valued local improvement. The aims of the artist and of the community being worked in may not always match, and this is something to recognise when implementing such projects. This perhaps speaks mostly to the nature of the commons: that it is not unidimensional or one-sided, it gets messy, and it generates a conflict of views and of opinions. Often, these may be in direct opposition to the sentiments and views of the artists.

Ultimately, although artists can bring a guiding sensitivity and uncover aspects of city living that are uncomfortable or difficult to address, they may not be equipped to effectively address these issues. In fact, they are definitely not able to.

In the initial creative phase of Cooperative Urbanism, there was a wide degree of perceived trust by the community in the process and its outcome. However, this tended to fade away once cultural institutions were introduced into the project. In positing oneself in the public realm, artists need to be aware of not only being the recipients of accolades, but also of criticism and difficult discussions – sometimes even violence and destruction. Several of our mailboxes were vandalised and broken into, for instance. This perhaps offers an interesting insight into a people-based process of engagement. Cooperative Urbanism and its implementation challenged my view of ‘participation’ from an ideal of joyfully transforming urban space, in which people work towards a consensus, to one that was sometimes more nightmarish. Dealing with multiple interests in a local context, and on issues of ownership, citizenship and urban planning, can be a messy and difficult proposition. It is inherently political, even if one does not intend it to be – and personally I don’t think it should be so. It also involves a great degree of responsibility, which – as someone with limited language ability and perceived as an outsider – led to my having to face many difficult obstacles.

The subsequent experience of the collective collaborating with municipal authorities and the architectural education organisation Strelka Institute to replicate interventions and actions, arguably diminished the momentum of unsanctioned and spontaneous action. Systemization transforms the work and often attributes non-existent or subtle political leanings. There is a difference between commissioning research that is performative and in artistic acts as performance – which means there is a difference between sanctioning, for instance, a cycling project, and being commissioned or funded by a cultural or municipal organisation to replicate the same actions elsewhere. Additionally, a self-motivated work is likely to be viewed less sceptically than something with a lot of support – which is why projects where we created signs or maps as expressions of interest or of our opinion, rather than anything more than that, were more successful. The idea for drawing up a new Moscow metro map in January 2012, for instance, emerged out of a desire to promote walking, cycling and integrated mass transit. With some crowdsourced funding for printing, it was an easy project, with few strings attached, and generated widespread discussion.

Spontaneous artistic action is perhaps more useful as a catalyst or even as an anonymous statement, but when projects get commissioned, and artists are assigned more responsibilities in the manner of work, the aims – and accompanying restrictions – may transform the impact and attribute unintended politics or functions. These are risks inherent in working in the public realm, of which artists should be aware. It seems, therefore, that one of the greatest risks to the concerned artists is that of being stereotyped and typecast.

### **Everything is connected: Can artists make the road by walking?**

While civic street art can respond to problems generated in the neoliberal city in a way that catalyses younger people and also the elderly – on issues including ecological degradation in the form of rampant pollution, traffic jams, isolation, increased loneliness due to the break-up of traditional family units, the loss of traditional knowledge and forms of agriculture or craft – reflecting on limitations, difficulties and failure also provides insight into the eternal yet evolving question: what is the role of art in society?

In terms of the impact of such projects, I think that artists should be supported in such a way that the basics are met – in the form of a salary, material support in order to create, collaborate and share ideas with others – yet in a manner that does not compromise independent integrity. Cross-cultural, local and even cross-national experiences mean that people benefit from one another, and by focusing on the aims of process and on the empowerment of the artist, instead of on the output, the art is often more authentic to the artist and to the place where it is being created. I think there is a lot of value in considering the artist and the artworks as unique and masterful instead of as mass production. There is value in raising awareness rather than simply creating an acceptable outcome.

Artists are not exactly policymakers, but art and culture projects hold valuable insight for policymakers. Cooperative Urbanism, as an experiment in working with cultural institutions, activists,

urban policymakers and local authorities, teaches numerous lessons. Institutional involvement for artists must be carefully considered and negotiated, such as in arranging translators, negotiations around responsibility for materials, and ensuring that the artists' visions are not compromised by restraints of time. Urban policymakers could be more involved in the pre- and post-project discussion with stakeholders, as a means of evaluating the process with the artists. Local authorities might sanction activities, but, as suggested, it is less useful when they are explicitly involved, and more useful simply to be sanctioned by them with minimal involvement. In our case, the progressive deputies in Moscow districts were helpful in allowing our work and encouraging the community to get involved, but this also resulted in unprecedented responsibility for us, in the guise of 'experts'. Overall, I would say that the project was in itself, as a novel idea and form of creative engagement, transformative as an art intervention.

Artists can inspire and facilitate civic action and discourse in the public realm through creative interventions, directly (in the form of unsanctioned repairs, city maintenance and beautification), indirectly (via public discussion and discourse: letter-writing, surveys, happenings and organised events/festivals), and, sometimes, inadvertently. Some attempt to disrupt and disorient in response to the spectacle, while others contribute to a sense of connectivity, local community and shared responsibility. Ultimately, results and reactions to these forms of art may be surprising and unintended. But perhaps that is the risk that goes along with art in the city: "Utopias and dystopias can exist side by side. Everyone's shining city on a hill is someone else's hell on earth." (Alderman, 2017) If everyone is an artist, everyone is free to shape their city in the manner they wish, through their everyday living and actions, resulting in public discussion and enactment of conflicts of interest which can then be publicly resolved.

In my view, the role of the artist is to be a gentle yet persuasive critic, to bring back what government and business take away, to refocus, to protect, and to challenge any and all inappropriate restrictions of expression, speech and life. The role of the artist, or of the arts, cannot, and should not, perpetuate intolerance, isolation, inequality or extreme forms of politics. Indeed, the role of the artist is perhaps to respond and creatively address such issues: to be the voice of reason, the independent authority, of freedom, an enactment of civil society – unbound by the restrictions of space, but motivated to address the things that are overlooked or invisible but need to be worked on.

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## Shriya Malhotra

Shriya Malhotra is an independent researcher, artist and writer. Her on-going projects include an historical examination of the changing forms/subjects/materials in Indian street art, a compilation of public art practices that stem from the notion of *jugaad*, and a self-published travelogue examining health systems.



## Claire Doherty (Editor)

Claire Doherty is an arts director, producer and writer.

Previously, Claire Doherty was Director at Arnolfini (2017-19) and was the founding Director of Situations. Over the past decade, Situations emerged as one of the UK's most innovative and pioneering arts producers, commissioning and producing temporary and long-term public arts projects, creating public art strategies and visions for city-wide initiatives and leading publishing and research initiatives to improve the conditions for, and skills to produce, new forms of public art worldwide. Claire has developed an international reputation as a leading thinker in new approaches to public art policy and planning, and is dedicated to engaging those for whom the arts might have seemed irrelevant or inaccessible through transformative art and cultural experiences; advocating for the social value of the arts, and finding ways to catalyse positive change in specific places.

Claire was awarded a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Breakthrough Award for outstanding cultural entrepreneurs, 2009, and appointed MBE for Services to the Arts in the New Year's Honours List 2016.

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## ***Where Strangers Meet***

An international collection of essays on arts in the public realm.

The urbanist Richard Sennett has written that ‘the public realm can simply be defined as a place where strangers meet’. As the number of us living in cities rises, the pressures on the shared spaces of a city will increase; the places in which our future relationships to one another are negotiated. This is particularly resonant for the British Council, an international organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents through arts, education, science and the English language. Building on its multifocal work in cities, the British Council commissioned a collection of essays to explore different perspectives on how artistic and cultural experiences affect individual and collective participation and action in the public realm.

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