

COMMISSIONS, COLLABORATIONS & CREATIVITY

*A talk given by Linda France at the 'Writers & Commissioning' Debate at the
Free Word Centre, 22nd September 2010*

When Anne Caldwell (of NAWWE) asked me to speak on the subject of my own experience of Writing Commissions, I decided to go back through my CV and check out exactly how all my various projects had come about. Most of my commissioned work is done in the field of Public Art and that trajectory seems to have evolved almost by accident, or serendipity, from my first being asked by Bridget Jones, then artist-in-residence at our local arts centre in Hexham, if I'd could write some words to be incorporated into a stained glass panel she was making for the foyer. That was in 1990 and since then I've worked on just under forty projects in collaboration with artists working in steel, stone, glass, wood, textiles, enamel, ceramics, digital media and, of course, straightforward paper. I discovered that most of my work in this area, resulting from a commission, a brief of some kind, (all involving collaborative activity, and excluding book publishing or educational projects) started as an invitation – a casual conversation leading to an initial meeting, a mutual weighing up of interest, followed by a more formal schedule of work. Another set of projects (half the number of the first) were commissions that I'd undertaken after an initial application in response to an advertisement or call for submissions, possibly including a draft proposal, and followed by a successful interview. A final set (the same amount as the applied-for projects)

arose from my own initiative – my identifying an opportunity that excited me and making something happen, often using or adapting the models I’ve learned from my experience in the public realm. This more curatorial (or in writing terms – editorial) role is something I’ve become more interested in and would like to do more of. It’s probably fair to say that I started out in this work ‘because it was there’ and, like scaling Everest, it often felt arduous, a distraction from my ‘real’ work as a poet. The task often seemed to be one of problem-solving – how do you write a 30 foot long poem, on three different floors of one building? How do you read a poem underwater? After about 10 years a natural development occurred where I found myself able to be more confident and take the initiative, seeing the opportunities in a commission, suggesting locations, materials and artists. I had a clearer, deeper sense of the process, my own aesthetic and what I and a particular situation required.

What was different was that I’d made this work part of my *practice* as a writer. It is now an activity contiguous to, and inextricable from, my work as a poet who writes for the page. They both feed into each other and meet in a deepening focus on the theme of Place. I agree with the American poet Maxine Kumin who says ‘Location is where we start from’. And if, as another American poet Wallace Stevens has said, it’s the function of the poet ‘to help people live their lives’, the Public Realm seems like a good place to do it. I have absorbed a practice-led way of working from spending time with artists and observing and learning from their studio-based model of practice – essentially holistic, organic, more or less experimental. It suits me on the level of functionality and of aesthetics. I am stimulated by thinking and imagining words and ideas in

a visual form, often in three dimensions, language seen as occupying, inhabiting, and hopefully enhancing, a space.

It has changed my relationship with space and place generally and public spaces in particular. It is possible for every aspect of my daily life to feed into my appreciation of this practice. I take photographs wherever I go of interesting corners, piazzas, monuments, street furniture and am perfectly able to get somewhat obsessed with signs and fonts. These are all my reading material, ongoing background research, grist to the mill where I make my own interventions in the place where physical and imaginative space touch. I used to say that I enjoyed this work so much because really I would have like to have been an artist myself, probably a sculptor. But lately I've felt, if I could do it all over again, that what I would like to be is an architect, the art form that Goethe famously described as 'built music', a definition that links it explicitly with poetry.

So that is the context of what I do as a writer who's been involved in commissioning processes of one sort or another for the past 20 years and still hasn't been put off! I have quite a lot of friends – writers and artists – who've decided they've had enough and have picked up their pens or sketchbooks and walked into the sunset, vowing never to put themselves in that awkward, vaguely beholden position again. Longevity, endurance, stubbornness, survival – whatever you want to call it, has its benefits – people remember you simply because you've never gone away. You're evidently in it for the long game.

So what do I see as the pleasures and pitfalls, the thrills and spills of that game? Some of you might recognise them and take heart, feel less alone,

and some of you might guard yourselves against the dangers when you embark on a new commissioned project.

Let's consider those difficulties, the spills first. As I said, these are just a distillation of my own experience. There are probably some I've conveniently forgotten and others that I haven't come up against yet. Some are avoidable; some inevitable. I don't believe there is such a thing as a problem-free commission.

I have to come clean and say out of all the work I do this particular tranche of it is the most frustrating, time and energy consuming and disappointing. I don't want any illusions about political or cultural idealism or kudos to blur the less than appealing reality. Lots of people are involved in this process – the commissioner first of all – a council department perhaps, or a regional development agency, maybe an arts agency; then a panel of 'experts' – architects, town-planners, health and safety officers, artists, designers, the community itself, if you're lucky a project manager – so inevitably many different needs and interests are being focussed onto a complex creative act, whatever it is that is being translated from the invisible to the visible.

As well as being a very sociable activity, it is necessarily a very political activity too. These are human beings – they have strong feelings about different issues, they disagree, they're not always able to say what they mean, they forget, they omit, they criticise and they defend their own actions to the bitter end.

Occasionally there is harmony and a project might go relatively smoothly – communication is good, timescales are realistic, budgets are

flexible, administrators are efficient and the writer and artist see eye to eye, not too distracted by other work commitments and able to give the work in hand the attention it deserves. There are moments like this, when all is right in the world, even with the most challenging project, but the opposite is also true and sometimes communication breaks down, timescales are ridiculously tight, budgets resist the demands of both the brief and the proposal, administrators leave mid-project or just disappear, the vision of the writer or artist is seriously impaired, neither being quite able to reflect back what the other has in mind, which just makes it harder to find the time or energy to work through the dissonances between them and resolve their, probably quite fertile, differences into some unified workable outcome.

That's all once a project gets under way but often the writer is invited on board some way down the line in the evolution of the commissioning process and unwittingly inherits all sorts of unresolved issues in the politics or bureaucratic structure of the commissioning body and its sphere of influence. Employees are concerned about their own jobs, their own power, not to mention their own salaries. And the writer walks in to what slowly reveals itself as an arena for the twin poles of ambition and anxiety. My approach to this aspect of the work is to try and stay as detached as possible, whilst focussing enthusiasm on the task in hand. There are some things you're never going to change and I prefer not to waste too much energy trying to achieve the impossible. Pragmatic idealism seems to be the essence of what carries me through.

Unfortunately sometimes the hidden agendas that might be part of the background to a commission can't be ignored. They configure the subtext of a project, the hidden bulk of the iceberg. They can manifest

themselves as a lack of clarity or certainty that directly impacts on the writer. I have had various experiences where commitments failed to materialise – even after a substantial amount of work has been invested in a project. After all these years of working in this business, I can still get so excited about a project that I fail to see the warning signs that seem so clear with hindsight, when everything's fallen apart and you're left high and dry and feeling slightly bereft and confused. Perhaps this is the equivalent of working really hard on a piece of writing of your own for days, weeks, months, even years and it just not coming together, it not fulfilling your expectation of it or satisfying the demands of an agent or publisher. I don't think it would be going too far to suggest that most writers have a finished but abandoned novel gathering dust in a drawer. When this sense of a dead end, resounding silence, occurs with a collaborative act, feelings of disappointment and regret are harder to shut away or rationalise. There are other people involved – surely it must be someone else's fault? Well, actually, who knows?

The rigour, as Fred Astaire tells us, is to pick yourself up, brush yourself off and start all over again; not to dwell on the fact that in this situation you don't have the power to make anything happen on your own. At home you can rearrange the words on the page, give it a new title, do what you can to make a piece of writing work. With a Public Art commission, you can't get planning permission, you can't find x thousand pounds, change a council's policy or carve a line of poetry in a slab of Welsh slate all by yourself.

Sometimes it's easy to forget you don't have ultimate authority when you are out in the field, consulting with members of the public about pedestrian access, vandalism and what the community really needs or

desperately wants. You are right there in the front line, fielding enquiries and listening to concerns, making real relationships with people who care about the place they live in. It is a very humbling and inspiring experience, a privilege to be what amounts to the mediator between the people and the state on a matter that will so graphically impinge upon their village or park or library or whatever. This part of the job is part-blessing, part-curse. Often it can feel as if you've been given the task that no one else wants – or is stupid enough to undertake – explaining to folk that what they really need, and what their taxes are going to be spent on, is a sculpture on the high street with some poetry on, while they know and will insist on telling you over and over again that their local hospital/school/GP's surgery/library is facing cutbacks or having to be closed down. Again an instance where a certain degree of detachment is helpful – based not on denial, but an awareness of the deep mystery of large-scale budgeting, what you can change and what you can't.

This question of your own authority as a writer can also come up when work is commissioned for cynical, political or tokenistic reasons rather than a real belief in its value. This might be reflected in a certain dilution in the process or the finished piece being sidelined or undermined in some way. Most often I experience this as there being no provision for follow-up – no monitoring or maintenance or provision for future community involvement. It's depressing for everyone to see damaged or graffiti-ed artworks in a public place – exactly the opposite effect of their original intention.

Another more obvious indication of the tenuous importance of your contribution might be a lack of awareness of the unpredictable nature of

a freelance writer's income and employment. Occasionally the initial consultation process might not evolve into a full-blown project, despite assurances to the contrary, and this can mean a significant loss of paid work that you have accounted for, possibly even turning down other work to make room for. All the other individuals in the process have regular salaries they can rely on. It can be disheartening, not to mention disruptive, when a carefully planted seed fails to bear fruit.

In terms of the reach and the content of the work itself, sometimes it can be eroded by the preferences and prejudices of the commissioning body, the project panel or the community. There is often an emphasis, founded upon fear and suspicion, on what is safe, the lowest common denominator, least troubling, most bland – art created by consensus. However I think writing has a real advantage here, as it is able to work on so many different levels and directly address the reader, more naturally becoming part of the conversation about what it is to live in a certain place and, on a more profound level, what it is to be human.

All these things have to be borne in mind – and sometimes simply borne – in the creating of a piece of text that at best will be inseparable from its physical representation and the location, able to speak to the people that happen upon it in the course of their moment by moment lives. No wonder it can feel like you're walking a very high wire. A large part of the experience is one of risk, adrenalin, the pressure to come up with the goods, make it work and keep everyone happy at the same time. A tall order for anyone...

...but like an addiction to dangerous sports, I guess it's what keeps you coming back and makes this sort of work thrilling, fascinating and deeply satisfying.

So what do I get out of actively pursuing this sort of work, despite the downsides? My standard answer, and one that hasn't changed over the years, is the pleasure and satisfaction that comes from making something that is greater than the sum of its parts. The very fact that you couldn't manage this on your own is part of the appeal. You are able, briefly, to go beyond your limits and that is always a delight, a breath of fresh air. It extends your thinking, your imagination, expanding your range and your own practice. It refines and sharpens your ideas, your approach to things and, most beneficial for a writer, your relationship with language and its relationship to form and space. I am continually surprised and stimulated by what words can do off the page – whether that's coming out of people's mouths or carved into wood or stone, on a billboard or chalked outside a café or hung on the walls of a gallery space. The range, the scope is as limitless as the interactions between one person and another in the course of a day in a life.

Which is the other aspect of this work that nourishes me. I have met so many people that I would never have done otherwise – sometimes growing into relationships that have survived many years. I enjoy coming together with so many different folk on new projects in so many different situations and discovering mutual friends and shared passions. A case in point is my long-time collaborator, the sculptor and letter carver Alec Peever. I first met Alec in 1991 on a project in a park in North Shields, only my second commission. Since then we've worked together on three further pieces of work – installations at Mowbray Park,

Sunderland Winter Gardens and Rockliffe Hall. And he's just agreed to make something with me for my new Leverhulme Residency at Newcastle University's Botanic Garden. We all know how special it is when a respected and inspiring colleague becomes a good and trusted friend.

I've learned something from all the people I've worked with – whether stone carver, blacksmith, font designer, architect, librarian or so-called 'member of the public'. It's such a very rich environment to work in, demanding but rewarding. I really appreciate having the chance to dip into other people's worlds and see things through other people's eyes.

As well as from a participatory point of view, from the perspective of audience or readership, this work is deeply satisfying. It always reaches many more people than a poetry book will ever do. Existing in the public domain brings it to the attention of the wider population and with its three dimensions more people are invited into the conversation. Everyone's an expert on Public Art these days. We're all becoming more educated about sculpture in public spaces with each new work that hits the headlines – Antony Gormley's latest version of himself on a Tyrolean hillside or Anish Kapoor's gravity-defying structure spanning the horizon on Teeside.

This is also a call to responsibility for the writer involved in such work – 'members of the public' stumble upon your words not necessarily through any choice of their own. They haven't taken your book out of the library or come to a reading and bought it. It is not an advertisement, encouraging some specific consumption or allegiance. Nor is it graffiti, on the margins of society, seeking attention and defying

authority. It is commissioned and paid for by us all, society itself, so a mature and considered sense of participation is being asked for. As such it is work that can feel more 'useful' or 'relevant' than the poems in a book maybe 500 readers take to heart, if you're lucky. It is work that, done well, is more integrated into society and its visible cultural life and that is extremely gratifying. I've also found along the way that walking this line of responsibility has brought more discrimination to what I choose to publish in book form, what I consider appropriate to offer for public consumption; and that's with myself as well as the reader in mind.

It is also true that commissions make a healthy and welcome contribution to my livelihood as a freelance writer. The fees are on a professional scale and more lucrative than a lot of the other writing-related work that is available. The financial side of things is normally agreed at the outset when a contract is being drawn up and a specific fee offered. This might be broken down into hours spent on research, community consultation, workshops, meetings etc but it's probably no surprise to hear that it isn't an exact science and I have had some experiences where the pay was generous and others where the time and energy spent probably meant that the fee didn't amount to much more than the minimum wage. Generally you're not paid for extras like travel, subsistence, research materials, so you need to balance that out and keep a track of expenditure for your own tax purposes. But I find it tends to even out, as most things do.

I am in the happy position of usually having as much work as I need at any given time, with several projects on my desk at once. The timing is sometimes either stressful or fluid, depending on how I'm feeling. It seems to me beneficial to be someone who can work in lots of different

environments, with different agencies, particularly at a time when budgets are tight and an over-dependency on one institution might be to court danger. Every new project requires you to reinvent yourself, to take on a whole new set of circumstances – and that is good for any writer, who wants to stay fresh, engaged and not become jaded or complacent, saying the same thing over and over again.

An architect told me once that a building was only as good as its commission. That seems to apply to these various writers' projects too – a good, well-thought-out and backed-up brief makes it practically impossible to fail. The commissioner bears some responsibility even before the writer gets involved. As a writer it's worth looking out for holes in the commission, and raising any concerns at the interview or an early meeting. By this, I mean things like an obviously unrealistic schedule, or an inappropriate suggested material to work in, or identifying the need for more project meetings to keep lines of communication open with the architects, designers or other key people. Sometimes it turns out that a writer has to be their own project manager if no one is officially acting in that role. Probably most important, you need to make sure you get a clear and fair contract in place before you commence work.

Paradoxically, at the same time as you have to be extremely organised and focussed at the outset of a project, you also need to work on it in the spirit of 'no expectations'. Alec Peever has created a *modus operandi*, carved in slate: *Relying upon certainty at the outset but trusting the performance to chance*. I love that text – it sums up so much of the nature of this work. The way you have to accept uncertainty, and a degree of humility, being open to what arises, ready to respond

creatively to problems and opportunities. A mode similar to how best to write anything worth writing. As Paul Muldoon says, 'it is only out of humility, out of uncertainty, out of ignorance, that the greatest art may be made'.

Every single time I've worked on one of these projects I find myself identifying a 'mistake' and telling myself I won't do that again. Well, I don't, but the next time I make a different mistake, a brand new one that I learn something else from. I keep a postcard pinned on my wall of Samuel Beckett's wonderful advice: 'No matter, try again. Fail again. Fail better.'

My own suggestions are probably along the lines of:

- Approach your work as an ongoing daily practice. Immerse yourself in it.
- Keep a creative journal of the process and take photographs, make sketches – there'll be too much going on to keep in your head at once.
- Don't compartmentalise – cross-fertilise. Support and engage with work in other disciplines – allow a cultural dialogue to take place so your thinking and your work expands rather than contracts.
- Don't try to manipulate situations – take responsibility and initiative for your own contribution, whatever you have to offer.
- Accept that a commission will always have a life of its own. The writer is just a catalyst, one element of a complex, continuous process.
- And keep your technical skills up to scratch, your sense of craft. There's always more to learn. That's what mistakes are for.