

# A NICE DANDELION

## VISUAL EXPERIENCES AT A SHOPPING CENTRE IN TRONDHEIM

· RUTH WOODS ·

### ABSTRACT

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The Dandelion, a nine meters tall naturalistic sculpture painted in bright green and yellow car paint, was installed on a traffic island outside the City Syd Shopping Centre on August 9<sup>th</sup> 2007. The sculpture provides an example with which to study the role art plays within public places. Aesthetic qualities are a useful place to start when trying to understand the role of public art. The Dandelion's form, colour and physical connection with elements within the same location, give the sculpture an opening to establish a relationship with its public. The Dandelion's public is the focus of this paper. What the public sees may lead to talk of other things connected to the Dandelion, but it is the sculpture's physical form and visual qualities which initiate the response. The judgement of form is a constant preoccupation; we make value judgements about many of the objects around us in day-to-day life. Taste is based on everyday experiences, and not on fixed standards. The dandelion provides visitors to the shopping centre with something with which to consider and measure other elements in the area with. It is likely that they would have done this anyway, but the Dandelion provides them with an aesthetic standard with which to do this. This paper is based on fieldwork experiences in 2007 and 2008 at the City Syd Shopping Centre, which is located in the Tiller neighbourhood on the outskirts of Trondheim, Norway.

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Keywords: public art, aesthetics, shopping centres, agency

### *Introduction*

In August 2007, Tiller, which is a suburb of the city of Trondheim in Norway, received its first piece of public art: the Dandelion. The sculpture, which stands on a roundabout just outside the car park of the City Syd Shopping Centre, is nine meters tall, made of bronze and steel, and painted in intense yellow and green car paint. It has a naturalistic form, and it looks like a real dandelion; a giant of its species.<sup>1</sup> The Dandelion provides an example with which to study the role art plays within public places. The intention here is to look at how aesthetic qualities may be used to understand the development of relationships between art and its public. The following paper includes a description of the fieldwork location, as well as an overview of the methodological process which brought me into contact with the Dandelion and its public. There is also a brief consideration of some of the theoretical ideas which provided further understanding of the visual experiences which are described in the main part of this paper.

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“A close up view of Dandelions” May 2008

The Tiller neighbourhood is dominated by shopping centres, specialist warehouses and a road network which services these commercial establishments.<sup>2</sup> According to one of my informants it represents “one of the most ordinary areas we have, one that is common in the Western world”. In contrast, Trondheim city centre may easily be described as picturesque and is often marketed as a ‘wooden city’ with its low-rise wooden buildings dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Located in central Norway, Trondheim is the country’s third largest city, with a population of 160,000. Founded in 997 primarily as a harbour town, it lies along the banks of the river Nid just as it swings out into Trondheimsfjord (Eriksen 1999).<sup>3</sup>



“City Syd and its Dandelion” Autumn 2008

A taxi driver I met outside the entrance to City Syd gave the following description of Tiller’s commercial district: “It’s very practical. It is function before aesthetics every time.” When I discuss my research with people in other parts of Trondheim many of them claim not to like City Syd; they find it ugly, stressful and some even claim that they “have never been there, and never will”. Despite having a negative reputation amongst some of the local population, City Syd is a popular place to shop. The number of customers visiting each year shows no sign of declining and the commercial district around it continues to grow.<sup>4</sup> One of the standard questions which I ask informants at City Syd is: “What do you think to the City Syd/ Tiller area?” A common answer to this is: “It’s a practical place; you can get everything that you need at one stop”. What City Syd lacks in aesthetic qualities it makes up for through the services it provides. The public art project which eventually resulted in the Dandelion sculpture developed from this background of aesthetic absence and practical qualities.

There are three shopping centres in the area including City Syd though the latter, which opened in 1987, is the largest in central Norway. The character of the shopping centre and the Tiller neighbourhood was established long before the Dandelion sculpture was installed. Up until the 1970s there was very little in Tiller except marshland. During the 1960s Trondheim City Council expected a population explosion and the neighbourhood was planned to take some of the pressure off Trondheim’s city centre but the explosion never occurred (Stugu 1991: 9). The marshland proved to be difficult to develop and expensive,

and the low plan neighbourhood with mixed use buildings visualized in an architectural competition from 1969 was never realised. Physical and commercial needs have been influential in defining both the form and use of the buildings in the Tiller neighbourhood and the area around City Syd. The roundabout on which the Dandelion stands is part of a larger road improvement project for Tiller, one of several new roundabouts and pedestrian crossings. Prior to the construction of the new roundabout the cross-roads outside City Syd were difficult and confusing to drive through. The new roundabout which was installed in 2007 made the crossroads much easier to negotiate.

The Dandelion is part of an art project called "Go to Tiller". Trondheim City Council in collaboration with the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) put together a public art committee to develop the art project in 2004.<sup>5</sup> The location was chosen by students and teachers from NTNU on the basis of recommendations made by Trondheim City Council. The area has, as I have already mentioned, its challenges, but as one of the eight representatives on the public art committee pointed out: "It isn't any worse at City Syd than at other places it would be natural to compare it with." Members of the public art committee were not interested in criticising the place, but they all referred to problems relating to infrastructure, architecture and aesthetics and it was on a list of areas due for investment, renewal *and* public art.

A member of the public art committee explained her expectations connected to the "Go to Tiller" project in this way: "A public space shouldn't just represent one side of things, and art can highlight the place in different ways. Art will do this at City Syd, give new experiences, be different and bring into focus how it was there before." Tiller's Dandelion is part of a public art policy which focuses on developing local qualities and strengthening the visual environment outside the city centre. Trondheim City Council's public art program is exceptional in a Norwegian context because it is different from the usual percentage for the arts system. The percentage for the arts system provides an individual public art budget for every new public building. Trondheim City Council has instead a yearly budget for public art based on 1.25 per cent of the city's total investment budget; funds are therefore not bound up within individual building projects.<sup>6</sup> The money can be spent where the need for public art is felt to be greatest, for example older buildings under rehabilitation, temporary art projects and meeting places away from public buildings.

The fieldwork involving the Dandelion and its public took place in 2007 and 2008, in and around the City Syd shopping centre in Tiller, Trondheim. Fieldwork has taken place at different stages of the Dandelion's life at City Syd with differing degrees of intensity. The installation of the Dandelion and the first year it was in place are examples of periods when fieldwork was especially intense. During this two year period I have interviewed more than 200 informants from all sides of shopping centre life, as well as the public art committee and the artists who developed the Dandelion sculpture. I am interested in the relationships that the Dandelion develops with its public and the role that it plays on the traffic roundabout outside City Syd. That is why the fieldwork has taken place over such a long period of time. By regularly returning to City Syd I have been able to study the development of relationships. I have focused on the sculpture's public at City Syd. This public, as the number of informants interviewed implies, is a large and fluid group. It is not traditional participant observation which has filled my days at City Syd. I have not participated in the day-to-day lives of people at City Syd. The focus of my research is the public's relationship

with the Dandelion, something which is only a small part of the daily lives of the people visiting the shopping centre. I have tried to compensate for this by talking to a large number of informants. Various interview forms have been used because I have tried to match my style and tempo with the day-to-day activity at the shopping centre. Interviews replace participation at City Syd. Occasionally the interview developed into a conversation or a discussion, but most interviews were short and informal, a consequence of catching people's attention just before they rushed on to the next errand.<sup>7</sup>

There is little to observe in the form of social interaction with the sculpture. I have therefore not had the luxury of being able to distinguish between what people say and what they do. It is a spontaneous response to the sculpture that I receive during the interviews. My informants are not expecting to meet an anthropologist interested in art in the car park outside City Syd. I have informed the shopping centre management and the people working at City Syd about my fieldwork activity, but in general the people I meet are a little puzzled by my role in the car park and the focus of my questions. Despite their puzzlement it is through my questions I am able to establish what kind of relationship, if any, the public at City Syd has with the Dandelion. The sculpture's physical isolation on the roundabout means that I am unable to watch the public interacting with it. I can see cars driving around the roundabout and I know that people do occasionally venture out there to be with the sculpture. Trondheim City Council's technical services are responsible for the up-keep of the sculpture and someone has drawn graffiti on the stems and leaves of the Dandelion, but I rarely see anyone out on the roundabout. What I see is therefore limited, but what the public sees has become more important as the fieldwork has progressed.

### *Understanding aesthetics*

After the Dandelion had been in place on the roundabout for just over a year, I asked one of the artists what his expectations were towards the role of the Dandelion within the environment outside City Syd. He was very clear about what kind of artwork it is: "It is an aesthetic sculpture. It is not a social project. Its form is mainly aesthetic". About its role within the physical environment he said: "If the artwork had been about something completely different than the place, it wouldn't have mattered. It was important that it should function in itself as a sculpture." The Dandelion is very much part of the art historical traditions guiding the production of sculpture; the roundabout itself looks a lot like a large green pedestal. The public art committee emphasized the sculpture's size and colour in relation to location. These elements were given more focus during the planning process than the meaning that the sculpture might contain. It was important that the sculpture should stand out, should not be dominated by the buildings around it, or be dwarfed by lamp posts just outside the roundabout.

Alfred Gell notes that the aesthetic theory of art "just does not resemble, in any salient respect, any existing anthropological theory about social processes. What it resembles is existing Western Art theory" (Gell 1998: 4). Gell maintained that an anthropological theory of art should not borrow from existing art theory and that the subject matter of anthropology and the anthropology of art is "social relationships". The role of artworks in anthropological theory has been most commonly related to their social function, and the

meaning that they carry. Aesthetic theory has not always found a useful place within the anthropological study of 'indigenous' or 'primitive art'. Alfred Gell cuts straight to the chase when he calls the use of aesthetics in the study of art in non-western societies "unredeemably ethnocentric" (Gell 1992: 4).

The use of aesthetic theory in an anthropological study of western art is less problematic because aesthetics and related terminology such as beauty and taste are used by the public even in locations such as City Syd which are not traditionally associated with the contemplation of art. Understanding the role of the Dandelion at City Syd therefore has its theoretical background within aesthetic theory which has been central to our understanding of art since the eighteenth century. The enlightenment philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1988: 3) defines aesthetics as the "science of sensory knowledge". The quality which Baumgarten saw as making aesthetics different to the other sciences is the "doctrine of sensibility" (Cassirer 1955: 340). Aesthetics was, he suggested, not about providing rules for the technical production of art, or about making philosophical observations about the effect of art on the spectator; instead it is how we experience art that is central. Within the West this meant that art has played a non-instrumentalist role within society, certainly until the 1950s when aesthetics began to be applied to a wider field than just art.

#### *Aesthetics, technical enchantment and taste*

In this section I will be using Alfred Gell's theories to highlight both the usefulness and problems related to the use of aesthetics in anthropology, particularly in relation to the case of the Dandelion outside City Syd. Gell's theory of agency was published in 1998; up until then ethnographic studies of art focused primarily on questions of communication, meaning, indigenous ways of seeing, and aesthetic systems. The anthropology of art seemed unable to provide a theory that could be applied to art in general (Thomas 2001: 1). By rejecting linguistic and semiotic interpretations of art Gell was able to avoid what had become a commonsense assumption that art is about the communication of meaning (Thomas 2001: 4) and Gell's theory of agency focuses instead on causation, result and transformation. Art is seen as a system of action "intended to change the world, rather than encoded symbolic propositions about it" (Gell 1998: 6). His criticism of aesthetics may in part be seen as a criticism of the anthropological program led by Morphy, Coote and Shelton which de-emphasized the art object in favour of a more abstract focus on the valued formal properties of perception (Osbourne 2007: 6).

Aesthetics focuses on the art object and despite his doubts about aesthetics Gell maintained that anthropologists should give the art object serious attention, suggesting that we should somehow "retain the capacity of the aesthetic approach to illuminate the specific objective characteristics of the art object as an object, rather than a vehicle for extraneous social and symbolic messages, without succumbing to the fascination which all well-made art objects exert on the mind attuned to their aesthetic properties" (Gell 1992: 43). So, according to Gell, the way the art object looks is important but we must not allow ourselves to be seduced into thinking that the way it looks is all important and we must avoid valuing some visual properties over others.

If we take a closer look at the Dandelion at City Syd in the light of Gell's requirements, it is still difficult to avoid the "fascination" of the sculpture. The sculpture's ability to fascinate or appeal to the public's taste is central to the fieldwork experience. The first question I always ask informants is: "What do you think of the sculpture/Dandelion?" I am not asking directly if they like it or not, but apart from the occasion response such as, "It's big", most informants say something like, "I think it's nice", or, "I don't like it at all". Their replies point to whether they value the sculpture or not. Rather than being seduced by the way things appear, we make value judgements about many of the objects around us in day to day life and the judgement of form is a constant preoccupation (Weiner 2001: 16). British enlightenment philosopher David Hume considered such aesthetic judgements to be value judgements which were not universal, but dependent on subjective experience, thereby rejecting the notion of universal norms while pointing out that everyday experience teaches us that there is no fixed scale of aesthetic values (Cassirer 1955).<sup>8</sup> In relation to beauty Hume suggested that it "is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them, and each mind perceives a different beauty" (Cassirer 1955: 307). The physical form of the Dandelion sculpture is a protagonist within the environment outside City Syd. Responses to the sculpture may be similar because they depend on the same physical form, but responses may also be very different. For example some of my informants think it is nice because it reminds them of real Dandelions: "It reminds me of my childhood. I grew up here. I remember the area when it was still full of marshland and flower". On the other hand two informants have complained that the sculpture looks false because it looks like it's made of plastic: "I don't like it, it's too plasticity, you can see that it is artificial".

Value judgements, Hume claimed, are not concerned with the object itself, but with the relationships existing between objects and ourselves. These relationships may be true in each case without ever being the same in another example. Taste is therefore based on everyday experiences and not on fixed standards. Hume was criticised by his contemporaries because his understanding of art and aesthetics seemed too close to commonsense values and his descriptions of aesthetic understandings lacked the emotional 'extra' which separated art from everyday life. I suggest that when applying aesthetics outside the artworld, everyday experiences become important, and Hume's value judgements make sense in the environment around public works of art like the Dandelion.<sup>9</sup> I asked a dog-walker who lives in the Tiller neighbourhood what she thought of the Dandelion: "I think it's fun; I fell for it straight away. It's a funny idea putting up something like that where there are so many weird and ugly buildings." I also asked her why she thought the Dandelion had been chosen and to this she replied: "To decorate a boring roundabout". Another informant who was originally from Tiller, but has moved to a village outside Trondheim had this to say when I asked her what she thought of the Dandelion. "My kids like it, but I think it's a bit too crude, a bit too big and a bit too naturalistic." Again I asked why the informant thought a dandelion had been chosen for the roundabout. "I have thought a lot about it and what it says about the neighbourhood, because I am from here. The area has become rather ugly. It says perhaps that the area is a kind of weed which has grown too fast, but even so is viable." Both informants have a close relationship with the neighbourhood, and their opinion of the Dandelion is based on the same physical and visual factors, but this did not mean that they both ended up liking the sculpture. These factors also influence the

role that they see the Dandelion playing out on the roundabout. The Dandelion provides the visitors to the shopping centre with something with which to measure, or consider, other elements in the area. It is likely that they would have done this anyway, but the Dandelion provides the public with an aesthetic standard with which to do this.

How an art object looks within the social environment in which is placed affects how we value it, but there are other aspects to art objects which are important. The process of production is central to Gell's technical enchantment theory. The relationship between the artist and the public meeting the art object is the main focus of this argument. Our belief in the art object, says Gell, is based on our understanding of the object's relationship with the technology and with the artist that produced it. Technical mastery fascinates and impresses. All societies have a technical base and art as a separate kind of technical activity carries further the enchantment which is immanent in all kinds of technical activity (Gell 1992, 44). I often ask informants if they think that the Dandelion is a work of art and how they would define a work of art. The answers I receive in many cases relate to how a work of art like the Dandelion is made and who has made it. On one occasion when asked if the Dandelion was art an informant replied: "Yes it is, because it is nicely made. It's quite realistic". On another occasion a teenage informant, when asked the same question replied: "Yes it is, because someone must have made it". She said this even though she also admitted that she did not like the sculpture and was not fond of flowers.

Technical processes provide a link between art and its public though the importance of the link varies; not all informants stress the importance of the Dandelion's production in defining it as art. At City Syd a common reply to the question, "Is it art?" is: "Everything is art these days", which is not necessarily a positive comment. A female informant who was fond of the Dandelion said: "Yes it is art because it is decorative, but almost anything can be art these days. I once saw a typewriter exhibited as art, but it wasn't art for me." The Dandelion is easily defined as art within such an open category. Informants are implying that those defining art have opened the boundaries quite dramatically; form and beauty do not appear to be important any more in the artworld's idea of art, but form and beauty are still important to many of my informants. Including the lady mentioned above.

Gell was aware of the problems in relying just on technical virtuosity to understand the role art plays in society. His theory of agency proposes that the effect of art lies not only in technical virtuosity, but within the network of relationships surrounding the art object. Gell (1998: 16) describes agency as "attributable to those persons (and things) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is events caused by acts of mind, will or intention". Agency is normally associated with social actors, but Gell was most interested in "the kind of second class agency which artefacts acquire once they become enmeshed in the texture of social relationships" (Gell 1998: 17). The idea that artefacts such as works of art can play active social roles and even be agents is interesting in relation to public art works like the Dandelion, because those commissioning public art expect it to play a role within the public places in which it is placed though there is not always agreement between the expectations of the public art committees and the actual role that public art plays within its social environment. The relationship which develops between the art and its public is dependent on both agency and aesthetics. Art may operate on different levels within the same context (Campbell 2001: 119). The visual impression that the Dandelion makes inspires interest and understanding and may in turn allow the sculpture



to play an active role within the physical and visual environment at City Syd. In the words of an elderly informant:

It's a beautiful plant which lights up. It is also a weed which pushes itself forward everywhere; at the same time it is a useful plant. There are a lot of people who make wine from it and it is a nice wine. We used to live here on one of the first housing estates, although we remember it when it was just marshland.

The informant's comments start with a description of the sculpture and then develop into a list of personal connections with the flower and the people who use it. The dandelion was more than just a beautiful plant to my informant, but it is the sculpture's physical form which triggers the associations. This form is central in the process of building relationships between the sculpture and its public. It does this by establishing contact with the public at City Syd, playing a role in the physical environment in Tiller and being open to interpretation.

*"Nice art"*

Because it looks like a real dandelion, the sculpture reminds informants of weeds: "It is amusing that a big weed should be there, where there are so many weeds from before". The plant has useful qualities, but the physical determination causing it to grow almost anywhere if not stopped has resulted in dandelions being regarded as weeds in Norway: "a wild plant growing where it is not wanted, especially among crops or garden plants" (Wehmeier 2005: 1730). It is a common association made by informants about the sculpture outside City Syd: "It's a weed, I don't like them in my garden, but I like it here". In the spring and summer there is no shortage of dandelions growing on the verges close to the roundabout, but weeds were not important before the Dandelion sculpture appeared on the scene. It was not a meaning that existed in the physical or social environment before the sculpture was put into place. Dandelions growing on the verges and through the tarmac around the roundabout have gained a new resonance because of the sculpture, which "habitates and prompts us" (Miller 2005: 5). The Dandelion is a sculptural protagonist, within a physical environment composed of, amongst other things shopping centres, shoppers, cars and weeds. Being a weed links the Dandelion to the everyday lives of many of my informants. When asked why he thought a dandelion had been chosen for the roundabout an informant replied: "Because it is down-to-earth. It's not like for example a rose. It is something everyone understands." Its 'common-placeness' its part of what makes it easy to understand and relate to.

It is not always easy to get informants to talk about the Dandelion. The majority of the people I have spoken to have a positive attitude towards the sculpture, very few informants are directly negative. Despite this, most people have little to say about the Dandelion. Just liking something does not necessarily mean that you easily become engaged in it as a subject for conversation and my interviews with informants often do not get beyond on opinion that the sculpture is "nice". The fact that the focus of the interview is a work of art does not seem to help. Clifford Geertz (1983: 94) pointed out that art is "notoriously hard to talk about". Many of my informants seemed genuinely surprised by my questions and

several agreed to talk to me only after emphasising that they were not really the right people to be talking about art, because they knew nothing about it. The shopping centre environment is not a place which is traditionally associated with the contemplation of art and, naturally, none of the informants I spoke to at City Syd were there for that reason; they were there because of the shops, or because they had errands to do connected to other services available in the area.

However, one grey morning in August 2008 I met a lady who was pleased to talk about the Dandelion. This was, she said, because she had written a poem about dandelions and she was fond of that poem. The Dandelion sculpture at City Syd was for her a prime example of what she liked about Dandelions: "It's a nice flower. It makes you feel happy. The yellow colour is like the sun, it makes you wake up. It would not have been the same with a red or blue flower." I asked her why she thought they had placed the Dandelion here and she said it was because "it is nice, and because so many people come here [City Syd]". I also asked her if the Dandelion was art, to which she replied: "Yes its art. To me it is nice art. Art can be so many things, a lot of it is ugly but this is nice art." Finally I asked her what she thought of City Syd and Tiller: "It's alright being here. My car is going to be at the garage over there for three hours and I can stay here and wait. I can get what I need here without having to go into town. I go to town as rarely as possible. But it's not nice here. I don't come here to go for walks." This short conversation sums up many of the conversations I have had about the Dandelion and City Syd. The informant described the Dandelion as nice, it's a nice flower and nice art, but City Syd is not nice. City Syd's practical qualities make up for its lack of nice-ness, but what is it the informant meant by nice and how is this connected to the western aesthetic tradition mentioned earlier?

The first thing that strikes me is the commonsense-ness of the informant's comments about the sculpture. Although she values the sculpture and responds to it on a personal level, the sculpture does not lift her on to an emotional level further beyond other experiences she has in the area around City Syd. Nice is an easy, un-dramatic word. I have also heard the sculpture described as attractive and occasionally beautiful, but nice or *'fin'*—the original Norwegian word—is the one most commonly used. Nice fits with the mildly positive attitude to the sculpture which I met at City Syd during that autumn. The Dandelion does not arouse great enthusiasm or disgust, but it does have qualities which informants like and this causes them to think that it is 'nice'. It is, I am told, "decorative"; "it brightens/livens/freshens things up"; it is "amusing". There are no superlatives here, just quietly positive phrases. Clifford Geertz has also made observations about the way people talk about art. He was critical of the claim amongst anthropologists studying 'primitive art' that the peoples of such cultures do not talk about art much. Geertz claimed that this was not necessarily true, that people talk about art as they would talk about anything striking or suggestive which passes through their lives, and this may make it seem like they are talking about something else (Geertz 1983: 97). This may be the case within the societies to which Geertz was referring, but it really seems to be the case at City Syd that people do not talk about art much. They are there to shop and the Dandelion is not associated with shopping-related activities. What is interesting about Geertz's comment in relation to City Syd is that he draws attention to people talking about art in the same way they talk other things in their lives. After a year of standing on the roundabout the Dandelion has become part of the day-to-day life at City Syd and is therefore described with words useful in

quotidian existence. Anthropologist Anthony Shelton (1992: 210) referenced Wittgenstein when he pointed out that 'beautiful' is a word rarely used in language as an expression of pure taste, it usually means that something is 'good'. Informants at City Syd could be seen as skipping a stage and going directly to the point: they do not say beautiful and mean good. They say 'nice', and mean something positive, something good.

The Dandelion sculpture has become part of an everyday standard; its form is based on a common plant, a weed growing in a practical, everyday environment. Value judgements based on what the informant perceives and knows about similar objects or about other people's opinions are common to the answers I receive to my questions. The properties most commonly associated with aesthetics are beauty, elegance, grace, daintiness, sweetness of sound, balance, design, unity, harmony, expressiveness, depth, movement, texture and atmosphere (Whewell 1995: 7). Informants at City Syd do not often use words like beauty or harmony to describe the Dandelion, they say "nice". They have judged it according to standards that they apply to other aspects of their everyday lives, and value it accordingly. Alfred Gell was sceptical of evaluative systems; they were only of interest where they played a part within the social processes of interaction (Campbell 2001: 119). The 'nice' example shows that the choices do not have to be dramatic and that judgements made may be connected to everyday experience and the starting point for relationships. Hume's value judgement is a practical and empirical description of the aesthetic response. A female informant underlines this when she says, "A lot of people think its ugly, but I think it's nice". Art is about more than surface qualities of form and colour, content is also important, but when it comes to art we return repeatedly to how the objects looks. The philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto suggests a link between how an art work looks and the meaning it contains, for example devotional images he says are beautiful, but beauty is not what they are 'about'. Art, he maintains, is about more than aesthetics; an object becomes art when it has meaning, but we are still interested in the way things look because aesthetics provides access to meaning and understanding (Danto 2005: 10). It opens the doors, captures our interest and allows the message to be understood.

Aesthetics is not equivalent to beauty; it is also possible for us to respond to an artwork even if we do not like it the way it looks. A woman working at City Syd when asked if she liked the Dandelion said:

I am starting to think that it is a little vulgar because it has very garish colours. I think it is a little out place with what is around it and I understand that it is a point that we should notice it because of the colour. But it looks like something they would make in China. It was, as well, and that's the way it looks. They are fond of colour.<sup>10</sup>

It is still possible for the object to be art even if we do not like the colours it is painted in. Danto suggests that much of contemporary art is not about aesthetics and that artists are now interested in getting their message across without resorting to aesthetics. The artist Marcel Duchamp led the way with his 'ready-mades', objects that were chosen and then presented as works of art because they had nothing to do with aesthetic qualities or beauty (Danto 2005: 5). But getting away from the way artworks look is not so easy. In performance art or other art genres where there is no object involved it is possible to do this, but as soon as an object is involved its visual qualities will be discussed even when it is felt that the object does not fulfil qualities expected of a work of art. I asked the same female City Syd

employee if the Dandelion was art and although she did not appreciate the way it looks she still could not quite say it was not art:

The art police would probably say no, because it has such garish colours and is vulgar. Those not involved with the art police would say yes it is art. Who has the right to define themselves as the 'art police'? I think it's vulgar, and define it more as a sort of street art.

The physical presence of a work of art influences how it is defined and understood.

### *Conclusions*

Visual culture has often been seen by anthropologists as a distraction from the real work of discovering the social, while art has a tendency to make contact with its public on an external visual level. This is where its "primary mediatory effects" are located (Weiner 2001: 14). What the public sees may be as important as what they know and feel about the sculpture. The intention of this paper is to show how aesthetic qualities provide an opening, allowing interest and understanding, so that public art is able to develop relationships with its public. Aesthetic philosophy influences our understanding of aesthetic qualities, and in this paper I have focused on Baumgarten's "Science of sensory knowledge" and Hume's value judgements. The role of aesthetic theory in anthropology has also been given attention, particularly in relation to Alfred Gell's theories of agency and technical enchantment. The empirical presentation has concentrated on the different ways the visual comes into play when art meets its public at City Syd, highlighting the common-place in the informant's response, the 'niceness' of art at City Syd.

There is a visual standard connected to the Dandelion; it is green and yellow, nine meters tall: a naturalistic imitation of a real flower. The answers that the informants give reflect these visual elements, but examples mentioned above point to how different value judgements can be. The bright yellow and green colours that the poet finds so positive provoke a negative reaction from the female employee at City Syd. Both informants are responding to the same visual elements, but the emotions that they arouse are different. The employee who saw a "vulgar" Dandelion is a museum goer, who bases her reflections about the art at City Syd on her visits to the large art collections around the world. The poet was inclined to see the sculpture in the light of her own positive writing experiences. The Dandelion's visual qualities combined with its location on the roundabout outside City Syd are what inspire a response. The subject meeting the object makes the response a little different every time. The sculpture's aesthetic qualities are a good place to start when understanding the role of the Dandelion at City Syd. Its form, colour and physical connection with elements within the same location give the sculpture a chance to establish a relationship with its public and give me an opening to establish a relationship with my informants. What they see may lead on to talk of other things connected to the physical form of the Dandelion, but the physical form initiates the response.

Public art in and around shopping centres is becoming a common phenomenon. Following a trend started in European cities such as Copenhagen and Birmingham, Steen and Strøm, the largest Norwegian shopping centre developer, now includes public art when developing new shopping centres.<sup>11</sup> The Dandelion is still an unusual project within

a Norwegian context; this is despite the fact that the majority of local councils do have a percentage for the arts programme for public buildings. Shopping centres are commercial developments and therefore fall outside the usual percentage for the arts projects, but they are an interesting environment for public art. This is because of the number of people who visit them everyday and because they are not often places which are conducive to the quiet contemplation of art. Shoppers and workers do not visit shopping centres to look at art. The response of such a large and fluid public highlights the problems faced by planners of public art in active urban environments. Public needs are not always central during the planning of public art projects; it is more common to focus on aesthetic and architectural problems and solutions. The public is often only central within the planning process when it involves a group deemed particularly vulnerable, for example nursery schools and hospitals. Public art depends on its public, the process where public works of art like the Dandelion establishes a relationship with its public should therefore be interesting for those planning and producing art.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The artists are Arne Blytt, Niklas Mulari and Mikael Nilsson.
  - <sup>2</sup> Tiller also has housing estates, but the focus of my fieldwork is the busy commercial district where the Dandelion sculpture is located.
  - <sup>3</sup> Trondheim is perhaps best known for its cathedral and university. Picturesque and peaceful, it has not so far proved much of a source of material for anthropologists. Statoil, the state-owned oil company, has been the basis of a number of Ph.D. theses; research has been done on, amongst other things, intoxication and the use of narcotics (Flore Singer Aaslid 2007) and the AmCar culture (Gunnar Lamvik 1991).
  - <sup>4</sup> The number of visitors is a steady 3.6 million per year.
  - <sup>5</sup> The public art committee had eight members. Two artistic consultants were employed by the city council just to work with the Tiller project. The five other members represented different council departments; The City Planning Office, the Housing Office, Culture, Technical Services, and the Department of Public Utilities. The same five people represent their departments in all the city's public art committees. NTNU was also represented because the art project was originally part of a university course called 'Art in the Common Room'. NTNU's representative was one of the two artistic consultants. Most public art projects have a local representative who looks out for the people using the place where an art project is to be located. The Tiller project did not have a local representative. The project's background as a student project may be a reason why no local representative was involved. City Syd's manager participated in some of the committee meetings. Originally there were nine different project proposals. Three projects were chosen to be realised in Tiller. The Dandelion is the only artwork to be actually installed. The other two projects have proved expensive and complicated, and the City Council is waiting for more funding to be available.
  - <sup>6</sup> This funding scheme was established in 2003; up to 20 million Norwegian kroner a year has been spent on public art since then.
  - <sup>7</sup> More lasting relationships were developed with the public art committee, and with some people working at City Syd.
  - <sup>8</sup> Hume did not reject universal tendencies in value judgments completely. Man's nature, he said, prevented diversities in judgments from being infinitely great (Cassirer 1955: 308).
  - <sup>9</sup> Philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto was the first to use the term "artworld" to describe the art historical, and theoretical environment which defines art. The art philosopher George Dickie gave the artworld physical, and social dimensions when he described it as an institution.
  - <sup>10</sup> The production of the sculpture took place in a foundry in Thailand, and a metal workshop in China.

It was cheaper to make it in these locations, even when including the costs of transporting the finished sculpture back to Trondheim.

<sup>11</sup> In 2008 and 2009 I did fieldwork at The Bullring, Birmingham (Woods 2009/forthcoming).

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