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Animating Places: A new festival phenomenon?

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Introduction

From lighting town centres to ephemeral one-off events, from nights of cultural activity to small festivals, from year-long programmes to biennials and triennials, artists are engaging in a wide variety of activities that support the idea of place-making. Emerging from the practices of interventionist art, community engagement and installation, through the processes and debates of public artists we are now experiencing new models of artistic intervention in the public realm. They are, quite literally, animating places.

Alongside larger profile-building activities such as the *European Cities/Capitals of Culture*, the past 20 years has seen a significant growth in place-based festivals and events, one-off large scale events and city-specific commissions that aim, in one way or another, to animate public spaces and strive towards the idea of place-making.

Artists are leading on initialising street festivals; intervening with politically motivated 'guerrilla' tactics to enliven places, in opposition to stasis in public engagement, and in promoting and building festival activities – some overt others more covert. For some the focus is on social and cultural change, for others the intentions are more community orientated and celebratory. All contribute to a sense of place and engagement.

This chapter considers the emergent patterns of major events and festivals alongside the need to market places in competition with each other; the phenomena of culturally-focused and culturally-led events that bring places alive; the issues affecting both the artists as producers and the commissioning bodies; and the impacts and engagement of audiences. Within this exploration this chapter will address the question of whether there are principles that can be applied to the area of animation. Building on the idea that the relationship between people and place is given particular poignancy through festival and cultural engagements, a triad of place, people and purpose is emerging as a prism through which to see artists engaging in public spaces and, by doing so, contributing to place-making. The chapter will explore specific models of working that embrace three core ideas over and above this triad – the notion of making places, questions of identity, and ownership and celebration.