

## Public art and collective amnesia

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Public art invoking historical characters and events is not new. Neither for that matter is the kind of public art (usually temporary) that offers a critical perspective on the past. However, something that does seem largely unprecedented is a form of public art that gestures towards a local past without any didactic or ennobling intention.

Typically, municipal authorities and development corporations commission such pseudo-monuments as a marketing tool in the hope that they will draw attention to the colourful and quaint elements of a particular urban area and thereby attract inward investment and tourism. As time goes on, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that they also have another, less benign effect. They help to transform the historic centres of our older cities into what amounts to historicized stage-sets. This is because by emphasizing certain isolated fragments of the past at the expense of anything odd and indeterminate in the urban environment they deflect attention from political issues relating to how our cities have developed historically and might develop in the future. Hence, far from fostering a collective memory on which a vision of the social order might be based, they end up generating a kind of collective forgetfulness which makes it hard for us to think about our cities in anything but consumption and spectacle terms.

This paper looks at such art in Newcastle and Gateshead, northern England. These two former industrial cities have been particularly active in the field of public art in recent years. Gateshead, famously, is the home of Antony Gormley's gigantic winged figure, *The Angel of the North* (1998).