# Transcriptions of the audio guides series “Perspectives on Public Art”

## Perspectives on Public Art: *Hermes/The Spirit of Enterprise* – William Chattaway, 1958

**Layla** – Welcome to Perspectives on Public Art, I’m Layla Bloom, I’m the curator of the University of Leeds Art Collection, which includes our fantastic collection of Public Art. I’m delighted to be speaking with Pietro Bellomo. Pietro, could you introduce yourself?

**Pietro** – Hi everyone, I’m Pietro Bellomo, and I’m a cultural geographer. I am a postgraduate researcher at the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. My main research interest is to investigate about any human social and spatial interaction in the modern urban environment. At the moment I am working on a project to understand what the students at the University of Leeds think about campus public art, and where and to what extent the campus public art might influence students’ life. During this podcast we will try to show you what these artworks are, what we think about, and what is the students’ opinion about them.

**Layla** – Walking through the Chamberlain, Powell, Bonn building complex of brutalist architecture on campus, we see a flying figure adorning the Roger Stevens building just above a pond full of ducklings and fish that you can feed on a warm day. The flying figure is in bronze, a work by William Chattaway, born in 1927, and it has two names, it is called both ‘Hermes’ and ‘The Spirit of Enterprise’. Created in 1958, it was originally created for the Midland Bank for their London offices in the 1950s, it was later gifted to the university by Stanley Burton in 1983. Pietro, what do our students think about ‘The Spirit of Enterprise’?

**Pietro** – Thank you very much for this question Layla. For the students this sculpture represents one of the symbols of the university, according to the students that I interviewed, indeed it looks like if ‘The Spirit of Enterprise’ symbolises a sort of totem that remembers to the students that they are here to achieve success. Like if Hermes is a metaphor representing that students are spreading their wings towards success. Furthermore, for some of the students this sculpture might symbolise the transition from adolescence to adulthood following the beginning of the university course.

**Layla** – The reason this sculpture has two names, ‘Hermes’ and ‘The Spirit of Enterprise’ comes from its interesting history. Chattaway, the artist, called it ‘Hermes’ after the god Hermes, but his patron suggested that it might be renamed ‘The Spirit of Enterprise’. This is because the Greek god Hermes had a number of undesirable roles including the guardian of less desirable characters including thieves, not necessarily the right message for a bank! Later on, when the Midland Bank was sold to developers for 30 million pounds it was rumoured that the sculpture was to be sold for scrap, it was such an important sculpture it hit the national press. Stanley Burton, who was a great patron to the University, stepped into the breach and saved the work for Leeds, he purchased it and the work, weighing four and a half tons, arrived on a low loader from London, and was installed on campus in 1983. Chattaway was delighted to see the piece reverted to its original title ‘Hermes’ once it was on campus.

**Pietro** – Thank you for this explanation Layla, it has been very interesting and I would like to add also a little joke about that, because Hermes was in Greek mythology the messenger of the gods, so he was used to run from one place to another, at least metaphorically. But actually he really did again, because Hermes changed his position and did something that is very unconventional for an artwork, or for a statue – to move from one place to another, and to change also the meaning.

**Layla** – And so Pietro, what is your reaction to ‘The Spirit of Enterprise’ or ‘Hermes’?

**Pietro** – Thank you Layla, I think that ‘Hermes’ is probably the most curious artwork on the campus because if its peculiar story. Usually when we think about a sculpture or a statue, we think about something that is fixed in the space and in the time. For example, in Latin, the word “sculptura” indicates something engraved in the stone and therefore destined to last, while “statua” means that something is fixed and immobile in the space. But ‘Hermes’ actually moved from a place to another, changing its meaning and its function, questioning the same idea of a sculpture or a statue as a static artistic expression. This last reflection introduces the last theme of the contemporaneous debate about public art: what the real nature of public art is? Should public art be something of static and permanent, or something of dynamic and non-permanent?

**Layla** – Thank you so much Pietro Bellomo for sharing your research into the public art on the University of Leeds campus, and thank you to our listeners for tuning in to Perspectives on Public Art.

**Pietro** – Thank you to everyone, it has been a pleasure to share this moment with you Layla, and also with the students that will listen to this podcast, and maybe will share with us their opinion, because the most important thing of public art is that it belongs to the public, and you are the public.

## Perspectives on Public Art: *A Spire* – Simon Fujiwara, 2015

**Layla** – Welcome to Perspectives on Public Art, I’m Layla Bloom, I’m the curator of the University of Leeds art collection, which includes our fantastic collection of Public Art. I’m delighted to be speaking with Pietro Bellomo. Pietro, could you introduce yourself?

**Pietro** – Hi everyone, I’m Pietro Bellomo, and I’m a cultural geographer. I am a postgraduate researcher at the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. My main research interest is to investigate about any human social and spatial interaction in the modern urban environment. At the moment I am working on a project to understand what the students at the University of Leeds think about campus public art, and where and to what extent the campus public art might influence students’ life. During this podcast we will try to show you what these artworks are, what we think about, and what is the students’ opinion about them.

**Layla** – Standing outside the Laidlaw Library, the university’s undergraduate library, stands a tall column that is often unnoticed by students or unrecognised as a sculpture in itself, it looks like a remnant of an industrial past, an old spire or chimney that has been left behind. But it is indeed an artwork by Simon Fujiwara, born in 1982, called ‘A Spire’ created in 2015 out of cast jesmonite. So Pietro, what do you think of this artwork?

**Pietro** – Thank you for this question, I think that the theme of this artwork is perfectly fitting in the surrounding landscape. Indeed, from my point of view Fujiwara successfully reached his target to create something that was able to recall the industrial past of the city and university, and at the same time creating something that would fit well in the surrounding environment. Furthermore, Fujiwara is the only artist who belongs to a minority background. Indeed, Fujiwara is the only artist who belong to the LGBT community who have ever given a contribute with his art to the public art collection of the University of Leeds. Moreover, Fujiwara is one of the few artists who do not come from the UK and the only who came half from a non-occidental background being half British and half Japanese. This last topic introduces one of the most relevant themes of the current debate in public art: how to help minority groups to have access to the artistic production and placemaking in public spaces?

**Layla** – Pietro, what do the students think about ‘A Spire’?

**Pietro** – Thank you for this question Layla. All the students who commented this artwork confessed to me they had never thought that ‘A Spire’ was an artwork. Indeed, according to the students' point of view this artwork was perceived more as a piece of landscape of the industrial past that has been conserved as a sort of memorial to remember the industrial past of the city of Leeds. This kind of interpretation is clearly showing how many times public art is not so easy to access for the general public, but only for people who may have expertise about public art in general, or maybe who know the process that generated this artwork. Because many times we do not speak only about creation, about generation, there are many different forces that together act to create something; the decision where to place an artwork, the decision of what kind of material to use, and the way in which the artwork should interact with the surrounding spaces and with the final users.

**Layla** – Thank you so much Pietro Bellomo for sharing your research into the public art on the University of Leeds campus, and thank you to our listeners for tuning in to Perspectives on Public Art.

**Pietro** – Thank you to everyone, it has been a pleasure to share this moment with you Layla, and also with the students that will listen to this podcast, and maybe will share with us their opinion, because the most important thing of public art is that it belongs to the public, and you are the public.

## Perspectives on Public Art: *Sign for Art* – Keith Wilson, 2014

**Layla** – Welcome to Perspectives on Public Art, I’m Layla Bloom, I’m the curator of the University of Leeds art collection, which includes our fantastic collection of Public Art. I’m delighted to be speaking with Pietro Bellomo. Pietro, could you introduce yourself?

**Pietro** – Hi everyone, I’m Pietro Bellomo, and I’m a cultural geographer. I am a postgraduate researcher at the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. My main research interest is to investigate about any human social and spatial interaction in the modern urban environment. At the moment I am working on a project to understand what the students at the University of Leeds think about campus public art, and where and to what extent the campus public art might influence students’ life. During this podcast we will try to show you what these artworks are, what we think about, and what is the students’ opinion about them.

**Layla** – Right at the heart of campus stand two wiggly black lines that have captured the imagination of students, staff and visitors alike in recent years. These two totems adorn Beech Grove Plaza, just beyond the Michael Sadler building. It is a work by Keith Wilson, born 1965, called ‘A Sign for Art (Stelae 2014)’ created in 2014 out of cast polyurethane elastomer. Pietro, what do the students think of this work by Keith Wilson?

**Pietro** – Thank you for the question Layla, practically all the students that I interviewed simply love it. The ‘Sign for Art’ represents for them a meeting point, and at the same time a symbol of what it means to be a student at the University of Leeds. The central position is giving also more and more to this artwork because it has been identified as one of the most important walkways of the university and is like a connection between the world of the students and the external world. Any students that I interviewed told me that they have at least one picture in this place, to celebrate when they start to study at the University of Leeds and also to celebrate when they finish studying at the University of Leeds. And surprisingly some of told me they know people who have decided to have a tattoo representing ‘A Sign for Art’. I think this is a very good example to understand how much important it is to the students’ life, this artwork. But probably the most curious fact related to this artwork is that the students know it as ‘the bacons’ for the similarity with one of the top breakfast choices in the UK, however the strange thing is that nobody of them actively tried to find out what the real meaning is because they were assuming that the artwork was a piece of design, or a brand like the lighting of AC/DC or Led Zeppelin.

**Layla** – So yes, just to give some background there, Keith Wilson was very determined that the interpretation for his work not be too apparent, he’s very keen that visitors take their own meaning from this sculpture. So we had a bit of a debate and finally he agreed to have some interpretation explaining the meaning for him on a panel that is hidden in the bushes nearby. The shape itself actually references the artist’s early years working as an art instructor for deaf blind adults in the 1980’s. As he recalled, “Drawing two spaced fingertips in a wave motion across the forehead of the student, a tactile brain wave sign, announced the arrival of the artist, the subject of art, and the imminent activity of making art. This modification of the British Sign Language presumably derived from the making of a brush stroke, struck home and stayed with me.” So it’s a form that’s always been influential in the artist’s life, and he’d always wanted to present this shape on a grand scale. Pietro what do you think of Keith Wilson’s work?

**Pietro** – Thank you for the question Layla, I think that this artwork is from one hand the most important piece of public art on the campus, and from another hand is the most complex one. It is undeniable that this artwork owns a strong symbolic charge, but again as for other artworks present on the campus the meaning accessibility is questionable. I don’t want to say that this is a negative or a positive thing, it is not my duty, but remains the fact that if art is only a subjective interpretation the same concept of art might barely continue to exist. Speaking about the daily use, the ambiguous thing is that students do not consider ‘A Sign for Art’ as a proper artwork, and consequently they behave as if this is a part of the campus to use as they want, also climbing and playing with it. Speaking with you I discover that this was one of the targets of the author, but how do the users can understand when this form of interaction is allowed? This last reflection introduces another big debate about public art – to what extent users should be allowed to interact with an artwork? How users can understand what was the idea of the artist about the interaction?

**Layla** – Thank you so much Pietro Bellomo for sharing your research into the public art on the University of Leeds campus, and thank you to our listeners for tuning in to Perspectives on Public Art.

**Pietro** – Thank you to everyone, it has been a pleasure to share this moment with you Layla, and also with the students that will listen to this podcast, and maybe will share with us their opinion, because the most important thing of public art is that it belongs to the public, and you are the public.

## Perspectives on Public Art: *Levitating Figure* – Quentin Bell, 1982

**Layla** – Welcome to Perspectives on Public Art, I’m Layla Bloom, I’m the curator of the University of Leeds art collection, which includes our fantastic collection of Public Art. I’m delighted to be speaking with Pietro Bellomo. Pietro, could you introduce yourself?

**Pietro** – Hi everyone, I’m Pietro Bellomo, and I’m a cultural geographer. I am a postgraduate researcher at the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. My main research interest is to investigate about any human social and spatial interaction in the modern urban environment. At the moment I am working on a project to understand what the students at the University of Leeds think about campus public art, and where and to what extent the campus public art might influence students’ life. During this podcast we will try to show you what these artworks are, what we think about, and what is the students’ opinion about them.

**Layla** – Entering into the quiet courtyard of the Clothworker’s Court, we see, surrounded by dye gardens, made of plants which were all involved the dyeing of textiles, is a beautiful, floating figure. This is ‘Levitating Woman’ known as ‘The Dreamer’ by Quentin Bell, who lived between 1910 and 1996. Made in 1982 it looks like it’s bronze but it’s actually fibreglass with an internal steel armature that was designed in conjunction with Dr Gurdev Singh of our engineering department. It was a gift made by Stanley Burton in 1982. Pietro, what is the students’ reaction to ‘Levitating Figure’?

**Pietro** – Thank you for the question Layla. This artwork has a two-fold existence for the students that I interviewed, one is for the students that came from Asia, and the other is for the students who came from any other place in the world. For the Asian students, this artwork represents a sort of memorial to commemorate a famous Asian actor of the past who attended the University of Leeds in the ‘60’s, Leslie Chung. Despite for people who don’t belong to the Asian world or Asian background might be anonymous, for the people who came from Asia he is not so far from Elvis for the Americans or The Beatles for the British. Furthermore this actor was one of the first famous people to openly declare to be gay, becoming one of the icons of the Asian LGBT community. For the other students that I interviewed, the meaning of this artwork was completely different, despite it being a different meaning from the author it was surprising that the most part of the students have a common thought about this artwork. Indeed, according to the non-Asian students that I interviewed, this artwork was glorifying the gender diversity through the celebration of the woman. Moreover, for some students the horizontal position of the statue represents a different way to see the world, literally upside down, like to represent that women see the world in a different way by the men.

**Layla** – Thank you Pietro, just to give some background about the form of this sculpture, it was a scene that had transfixed Quentin Bell, the artist, when he was younger it was a magician’s trick to make this woman appear to float and he produced this image in many forms, in drawing, in sculpture and ceramics that can be seen around the country. Pietro, what are your feelings on ‘Levitating Woman’?

**Pietro** – Thank you for the question Layla. I think that this artwork is absolutely the most surprising during my research because it owns at the same time at least three different meanings. The author one, the Asian students’ one, and the other students’ one. But above all it’s curious how an artwork that was conceived by the author as a sort of personal caprice became at the same time a symbol of the gay emancipation and the Asian cultural representation and at the same time also a representation of the feminist values. However, from my point of view, this artwork from many aspects represents the opposite of what public art should be, and for which reason it should be done, indeed I think that it was a pure coincidence that this artwork became an important symbol for certain communities in the university because basically it was the opposite. This artwork was the caprice of a rich and powerful man who used the public space as a personal playground, furthermore the woman in the old magician’s trick was treated merely as an object of the scene and nothing more. This reflection about the meaning of the artwork introduces one of the central themes of the contemporaneous debate in public art, what the real meaning of the artwork is? The one that the artist assigned to the artwork, or the meaning that people are giving to it? But above all, considering that at the same time there might be many different meanings, might all of these meanings coexist?

**Layla** – Thank you so much Pietro Bellomo for sharing your research into the public art on the University of Leeds campus, and thank you to our listeners for tuning in to Perspectives on Public Art.

**Pietro** – Thank you to everyone, it has been a pleasure to share this moment with you Layla, and also with the students that will listen to this podcast, and maybe will share with us their opinion, because the most important thing of public art is that it belongs to the public, and you are the public.

## Perspectives on Public Art: Walking Figure – William Chattaway, 1989 recast of 1968 original

**Layla** – Welcome to Perspectives on Public Art, I’m Layla Bloom, I’m the curator of the University of Leeds art collection, which includes our fantastic collection of Public Art. I’m delighted to be speaking with Pietro Bellomo. Pietro, could you introduce yourself?

**Pietro** – Hi everyone, I’m Pietro Bellomo, and I’m a cultural geographer. I am a postgraduate researcher at the School of Geography at the University of Leeds. My main research interest is to investigate about any human social and spatial interaction in the modern urban environment. At the moment I am working on a project to understand what the students at the University of Leeds think about campus public art, and where and to what extent the campus public art might influence students’ life. During this podcast we will try to show you what these artworks are, what we think about, and what is the students’ opinion about them.

**Layla** – So in the Parkinson Court, next to the Stanley and Audrey Burton Gallery, stands an armless figure, this is ‘Walking Figure’ by William Chattaway, born in 1927. It’s a 1989 recast of the 1968 original made of bronze, and it was a gift from Stanley Burton in 1989.

**Pietro** – Speaking about this artwork, students seem to be divided into macro groups: in the first group there are the students who are familiar with Giacometti’s sculpture and consequently they recognised immediately the connection between Chattaway and the Swiss artist; while in the second group there are the students who are not familiar at all, and for this reason they struggled to distinguish this artwork from a generic decorative piece of design.

**Layla** – The reason ‘Walking Figure’ needed to be recast in 1989 was that the original was damaged whilst on campus, the first version – the 1968 original – was commissioned by Stanley Burton for Bodington Hall, of which he was the chairman, unfortunately during its time at Bodington Hall it somehow became damaged and lost a limb. Stanley Burton, being the wonderful patron that he was to this university, very kindly took the original back, kept it in his garden and grew a small bush underneath its foot, and arranged with the sculptor Chattaway with whom he was friends to have a new one cast which was then returned to the university. We now keep it indoors to keep it especially safe.

**Pietro** – Another interesting thing that the students noticed about the ‘Walking Figure’ is regarding the placement of this artwork. Indeed, inside the Parkinson Building there are several old statues that have been found by many students as intimidating and really old for what a modern university should be. Therefore, many students questioned if it was really right to place the ‘Walking Figure’ in this place, and above all if it was really right to remove this statue from the original place.

**Layla** – Pietro, what do you, or perhaps the students you’ve interviewed think should be displayed in Parkinson Court?

**Pietro** – This is a very interesting question, I interviewed many students and many of them have found at the university different things that they would like to change, to modify, or to adapt more for the modern age. About the Parkinson Building, like practically about all the university, students would like to find more of the things that people of this generation might be interested in. So, moving towards a technological turn, to an ecological turn, so for example they think space should be enhanced, and at the same time should be enhanced with some kind of policies to encourage people towards an ecological turn. At the same time, another important thing that the students underlined above all – to be honest the ones that are doing an art course – would be to give the possibility to the students to contribute with their own artworks, and in this way to use this space as a way to show what the University of Leeds students are capable to do. And not only to show some old symbols of a dead heritage of the Victorian age that belong to the British for many aspects, but don’t belong to what a multi-cultural and research university as the University of Leeds should be.

**Layla** – Pietro, what do you think of this artwork yourself?

**Pietro** – I think that this artwork is little jewel, clearly shaped according to the Giacometti style. The sinuous shapes and the blurring of the face unveil almost immediately some of the themes that have characterised the sculpture of the last century as the loneliness of the human being in the contemporaneous society and as the wish to come back to the ancestral pure and uncontaminated past that is recalled by the choice of the artist in the use of bronze as material to build this sculpture. However, this sculpture is not relevant only for its evident aesthetic pleasure but also for its curious story. Indeed, this artwork have been moved from its outdoor original position because of the vandalising of some unknown people. This is one of the most contemporaneous interesting debates about public art that regards: how it’s possible to protect public art from atmospheric agents and also from the daily use of people.

**Layla** – Thank you so much Pietro Bellomo for sharing your research into the public art on the University of Leeds campus, and thank you to our listeners for tuning in to Perspectives on Public Art.

**Pietro** – Thank you to everyone, it has been a pleasure to share this moment with you Layla, and also with the students that will listen to this podcast, and maybe will share with us their opinion, because the most important thing of public art is that it belongs to the public, and you are the public.