

ONE DAY SCULPTURE

A NEW ZEALAND-WIDE SERIES OF TEMPORARY PUBLIC ARTWORKS

JOHN VELLA REMOTE CONTROL: FRANGIBILITY AND THE ART OF BLOOD LETTING THE PERMANENT

In... the church of Santa Cecilia in Sao Paulo lies the mesmerising image of the child saint Santa Donata. Her prostrate position combined with the uncanny anatomical veracity and naturalistic colouring with which she is rendered, gives viewers the charged sensation of watching someone sleep. The priest of this parish once confided to my grandmother that every two or three years, they had to open the glass casket in which the image rests, to trim her hair and fingernails because they had not stopped growing since the image arrived from Rome... The explanation of this miraculous phenomenon... is that beneath the waxen surface of the statue is the actual body of the saint, preserved by a remarkable embalming technique... In the 1930's, the image had to be encased in glass because skeptical visitors, drawn by the legend, would poke at the relic to see if it would bleed...¹

¹ Muniz, V., 'Surface Tension', Parkett 46, 1996, [p.46].

Natural forms and structures demonstrate a fantastic capacity to mutate and adapt in response to tactile exchanges. Aliveness enables them to breed, defend, heal and bleed.

In contrast, artworks - public, temporary, ephemeral or otherwise - that exist outside of the gallery's interior sanctum, become alive via *ultraocular* contact.

This 'poke' vulnerability belies an experience of art that often simultaneously violates (in terms of the artist's original intent) whilst value adding. Surfaces may be damaged and subsequently repaired and objects may disappear entirely, however the work - as an experience; an object accruing a history - becomes charged and enhanced.

Having regularly surrendered artworks to natural and manmade forces, I have increasingly developed an appreciation for the effects, aesthetic or otherwise, that are remote to my control. In this context, notions of embalmment – a defensive 'archivability' (an aspiration for the permanent) - become an anathema; replaced by a desire for flowing, frangible relationships that bleed.

The ideas outlined in this paper are the consequence of events and experiences that have occurred in direct relation to my art practice. In light of this I will be discussing three of my works as case studies, in order to describe various iterations of 'blood letting the permanent,' 'frangibility' and 'remote control'.

I remember as a child when my mother would go crazy if I forgot to use a coaster on the table. Without a coaster or a tablecloth, you would get this wonderful mark under the coffee mug where the heat and moisture transferred onto the timber. The extreme of this form of exchange was when I traced a title page for a school project without putting something protective underneath, and left the cover of the book *Treasure Island*, permanently engraved on the dining table. My mother bought a new table with a beautiful wooden surface, but she also bought an ugly, brown, padded cover that she used to protect the table from further acts of 'creation.' You could not see the surface of the table any more; its appearance was thus sacrificed to preserve its beauty. Only when visitors came around did the table get revealed in all of its virginal glory as an item not of use but of display.

As a carapace orchestrated to preserve newness, Mum's ugly, brown, padded cover embodied a defensive relationship to its surrounds. Despite the perceived gains, there were concomitant losses as the original table, complete with what mum saw as damage - the marks she couldn't erase or control - harboured a visible integrity in relation to its context, whilst the new table was rarely exposed, or for that matter enjoyed. For mum, the original domestic ruin - now relegated to dad's study, a place where visitors rarely go - did not project us in a positive light. As a status trophy it had in her eyes lost the capacity to convey illusions of our domestic grandeur.

Whilst for mum the ruined table was a thing to hide, in the broader civic context, ruins have evolved into emblems of authenticity and power.²

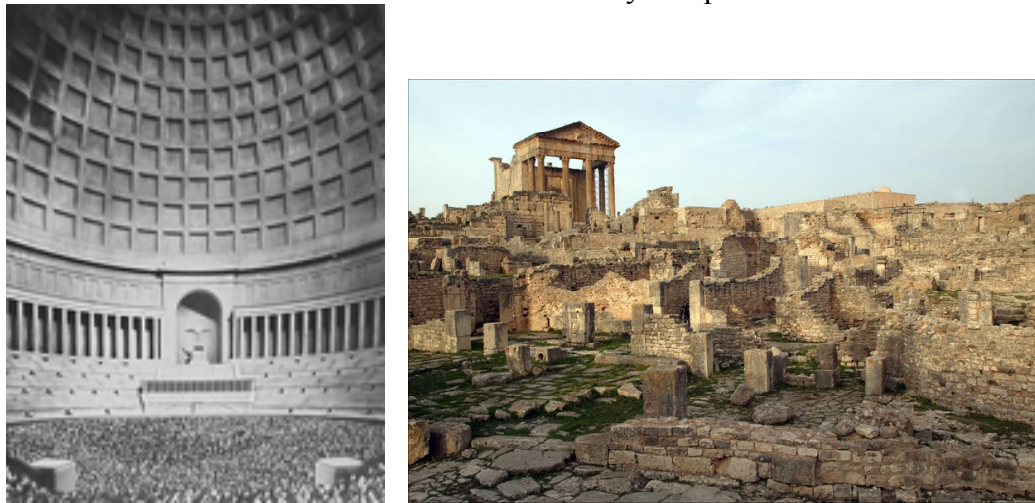


Figure 1: Model of *The Great Dome* by Albert Speer and Roman ruins

The proliferation of statues and memorials in the late nineteenth century sought to legitimise the recently acquired powers of the European or American nation states and wealth of their entrepreneurs... (For example) onto the remains of temples excavated during the Napoleonic campaigns in Egypt,... was projected a notion of their past to which the ruins were then co-opted. This does not deny a romantic reading of ruins as speaking of uncertainty against Enlightenment predictability... but it also allows Speer's 'theory of ruin value' – that buildings should be constructed to 'ruin well' in the thousand-year *reich*... "By using special material and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures which even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such were our reckonings) thousands of years would more or less resemble Roman models." (Speer)³

Speer (as opposed to mum) tried to imagine how his works might evolve, (evidence their wear and tear) and so began to appreciate their latent power as ruins *ipso facto* their commissioning agency's demise. However, this was outweighed by his myopic understanding of the ruin as a one-way street; a linear trajectory of decay to demise. In contrast the notion of frangibility I'd like to espouse, describes a public artwork's potential to evolve within its context in a continuous rebound from a ruin, to its antithesis.

2 As mum's table could have been a monument or a permanent public artwork the cover would then be a means of maintaining the integrity of materials (or in fact an impervious material such as stainless steel); absorbing the impact of weather and vandals, guaranteeing the artist's vision and the city's investment forthwith.

3 Miles, M. *Art, space and the city: public art and urban features* Routledge, New York, 1997 p.67 In 1934, the architect Albert Speer proposed "A Theory of Ruin Value", on which Ruskin's hopes and Hitler's dreams could be based. Speer explained this theory in his memoirs (1970: 56): "The idea was that buildings of modern construction were poorly suited to form that 'bridge of tradition' to future generations which Hitler was calling for. It was hard to imagine that rusting heaps of rubble could communicate these heroic inspirations which Hitler admired in the monuments of the past. My 'theory' was intended to deal with this dilemma." A Theory of Ruin-value <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/citd/holtorf/7.4.html>



Figure 2 – Richard Serra *Splashing* / *Hand Catching Lead*

...along the juncture where the wall met the floor, Serra had tossed molten lead and allowed it to harden in place. The result was not really an object at all; it had no definable shape or mass; it created no legible image... Our difficulty with *Splashing* was in trying to imagine its very possibility of continued existence in the world of art objects...⁴

...Serra's *Hand Catching Lead* can be seen as a demonstration of his own determination to invade the fixed image of stabile sculpture with the counterimage of process, of something continually in the act of making and unmaking itself...⁵

Serra's early works challenged traditional notions of the finished art object as existing independent of process. Experimenting with a visual illegibility, Serra revealed the sham of the archival and the pretence of newness, simultaneously embracing the potential for ruin and the ruin's potential. With *Splashing*, the gallery became an active participant in the work and the work itself; its geometries surreptitiously orchestrating the eventual 'object' outcome. In *Hand Catching Lead*, Serra consciously toys, ironically through the protective sheath of his glove, with double jeopardies related to contact – the 'do not touch' of the gallery, the toxic 'do not touch' of lead, and the implicit 'do not touch' of tradition.⁶ Enabling the object to transcend its static physicality, Serra begins to literally juggle our polar understanding of permanence and ephemerality, thereby revealing a zone where losing control – surrendering to forces natural or otherwise – might resuscitate works, eyes and minds.

4 Crimp, D *On the Museum's Ruins*: MIT Press, USA, 1993, p.151

5 Bois, Y *Formless a User's Guide*, Zone Books, New York, 1997, p.137

6 'At the end of March 1944, Dubuffet gave Jean Paulham one of his recent pictures as a gift. Several days later it began to melt...the painting kept "melting", due to the untested materials he was then employing...' 'I am astounded. And with great unease I imagine what the other pictures are doing (those which are not reliable). *ibid* p.181 Serra's early work's began to question 'reliability' as only being associated with a fixed form.



Figure 3 – *TerraTowel*

CASE STUDY 1: *TerraTowel*

Attempting to suggest that my international extended family had moved in locally⁷, I freighted in their 120 towels from Malta, Canada and Australia and hung them on other peoples' balconies.

As a metaphorical family reunion, *TerraTowel* spawned all manner of bizarre negotiations and conversations with residents who I had to invite/veigle to participate. Most towels were 'managed' as per my instructions, however some residents became fed up and removed their towels too early, whilst in another case, a workman tore a strip off Maltese cousin Edwin's towel to recycle it as a safety barrier accoutrement. A mystery resident (who I eventually discovered was non – English speaking)⁸ decided spontaneously to participate in the work; not fully aware of what was happening, he chose to put his towels out by securing them to his glazed balcony with masking tape. I draw attention to these events as they articulated a place where the work somehow began to make itself; where it exceeded my contrived aesthetic vision and conceptual premise. These moments were ultimately only possible via *TerraTowel's* vulnerability to a tactile engagement, that literally wove the work into an intimate relationship with it's animate and inanimate surrounds. Definitely part of the work, these developments were not strictly damage, nor were they design/ed. As 'remote control' occurrences they were anomalies and also opportunities to reappraise my role as an artist; to recognise the things I didn't necessarily intend but had somehow triggered.⁹

⁷ *Terratowel* has been installed in Canberra, Hobart and Sydney

⁸ Who I had not managed to make contact with via phone, mail or otherwise.

⁹ Particularly in the permanent public art context, in the attempt to reduce damage / vandalism and so on, these occurrences are often either designed out of the equation or alternatively rarely celebrated or acknowledged.

JJS So here you are, Marcel, Looking at your *Large Glass* (severely damaged in transit).

MD Yes, and the more I look at it... the more I like the cracks: they are not like shattered glass... there is... almost an intention there, an extra - a curious intention that I am not responsible for, a ready-made intention, in other words, that I respect and love.¹⁰

CASE STUDY 2 – *Coles Old World*



Figure 4 - *Coles Old World*

Coles Old World is ostensibly a mural on the façade of a Hobart supermarket that depicts distortions of shopping trolley designs. The image itself is divided by a series of stainless steel columns that reflect and so activate the work for the obliquely passing traffic. Over time, *Coles Old World* evolved via what was ostensibly vandalism perpetrated by the usual suspects, and perhaps less usual, the 'client'. There were various boot kicks that created voids to which were added objects such as milk shake containers and the odd tag.



Figure 5 - *Coles Old World* (damage detail)

One day I arrived to find the words 'Mighty Vella' scrawled across the face of the work in 'permanent' marker, on another someone had parked a shopping trolley in each bay, not so subtly revealing the source of the various abstractions. These spontaneous interventions began to literally break down the work, whilst simultaneously recreating the streetscape in an intuitive way, that I came to enjoy.

¹⁰ Sanouillet, M (ed.) *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1973, p.127

Without informing me (the artist), the client proceeded to repair the work by literally patching it up. Their system of raised geometric panels was clunky, but offered the positive possibility of introducing an overall texture to the work that would record its history of damage. Ironically, perhaps the greatest act of vandalism and demonstration of *remote to my control* logic was the unannounced, and complete erasure of the entire work by the client.



Figure 6 – *The work formally known as Coles Old World*

I suppose the work became so ‘alive’ that they felt the need to kill it off (to literally stop it breathing and bleeding) and so they eradicated everything bar the least mutable component, the stainless steel. In the ‘afterglow’, The Hobart City Council is investigating this breach of contract¹¹ and I am reflecting on the possibility of resurrecting the work, whilst considering arcane, if not illegal strategies for reclaiming the space for art.

The aforementioned events lie in direct opposition to modernism’s stance that proposes ‘...the ideal as ...sculpture, immobilizing harmony, guaranteeing the duration of motifs whose essence is the annulment of time.’¹² This valorisation of permanency; the ‘immobilisation’, ‘guarantee’ and ‘annulment,’ is the direct

¹¹ On 05/03/2009, at 2:11 PM, Belinda Robertson wrote: Howdy John, I chased and chased and chased and chased and finally got a little bit of information out of the HCC last week. Apparently they've passed the matter onto their solicitors Simmons Wolfhagen. SW will send a letter to Coles, I presume, telling them that they've breached their planning requirement. I've been into Coles to meet with their store manager, Torren Leaman, to let him know that he actually painted over your artwork. I've also let him know that the remaining silver 'pillars' are also part of your work. He didn't realise any of this and thought he was doing a great job of tidying up the front of the store. It seems to me that the outgoing manager did not pass on any information about the background of the artwork or the maintenance details to Torren. I've emailed a rundown of our meeting to him and he's going to discuss it with his Regional Manager. I'm still unsure as to whether they're required to re-instate your work (there was no contract with the life duration of the work mentioned) or whether they'll just have to replace it with something else. I advised Torren that either way they're going to have to negotiate with you as part of your work is still there. I'm sure the manager had no idea of the protocols of dealing with a professional artist and their work. I've asked Coles to keep me informed. I don't know whether they'll want to re-instate the image, ask you to create a new piece or draw up a brief for a new piece of work and advertise that. Of course, I've encouraged them to use the Corporate Art Scheme but I don't know whether they'll do that either. I do feel though, that it looks like they'll have to put some art on the façade. We'll have to wait and see what the Simmons Wolfhagen advice is. It's a bit hard getting the information from the Council but I'm sure between Jane Castle and myself we'll get there. Bye Belinda, Belinda Robertson, Program Officer - Corporate Art, arts@work, Department of Environment, Parks, Heritage and the Arts, 146 Elizabeth Street Hobart Tasmania 7000 (03) 6233 5087

¹² Bois, Y Formless, opcit p.187. There was a sovereign contempt in the artist Gordon Matta-Clark's attitude towards architects that I believe could equally be directed towards 'public artists': 'What I do, you could never achieve, since that presupposes accepting ephemerality, whereas you believe yourselves to be building for eternity.' Gordon Matta-Clark ibid p.191

consequence of the desire to distance contact. This civic ‘do not touch’ or change mentality echoes the museum’s archival obsession and interestingly, ‘The German word *museul* (museumlike)... describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying...’¹³

The failure of much contemporary art to create a public is linked to its location within the ethos of modernism, in which the interests of artists and publics may be contradictory; modernism imposes constant revolutions of style within a largely static conception of art as constituting an autonomous, aesthetic realm which acts as an alternative to everyday life, and endows the artist with a freedom which Marshall Berman describes as ‘a perfectly formed, perfectly sealed tomb.’¹⁴

Mum’s PST (Perfectly Sealed Tomb) was her obsession with the trophy status of her domestic objects, and how they would in turn reflect on her household. Public art’s PST lies in a similar preoccupation (i.e. how audience perceives objects) and in its briefs that all too often over emphasise a defensive archivability.¹⁵ Here, an artist and hence a work, are often encouraged to be more concerned with visible self preservation - how a work might withstand the impact of vandals or time - than how it might laterally explore these regimes and evolve, or in fact involve, an audience. This is symptomatic of a disease that determines permanent public artworks through their ability to endure thereby echoing the plight of the urban in general.

Modernism’s literal gridlock has formed a physical, and psychological seal over the civic carapace that in striving to sidestep the ruin, and so claim a certain power over nature, operates in denial. This has in turn has impaired our ability to comprehend and experience our constructed civic space/art/architecture as something that can be alive. Our spaces and bodies are not celebrated just for their heroic, invincible potential,¹⁶ but for their capacity to develop character and harbour an honest reflection of experience. We all know that *botox*, in the anatomical or urban¹⁷ context, is designed to not yield. Whilst Hollywood directors bemoan the dearth of actors with faces remaining capable of expressing real emotion, what might our civic / artistic / cultural directors make of ‘permanent’ public art’s often stainless steely faced visages?

13 Theodor W. Adorno in Crimp. *D On the Museum’s Ruins*, MIT Press, USA, 1993, p.45 Art in public spaces has the capacity to transcend this separation, to in Acconci’s words, thicken the modernist plot. 18 The built environment is built because it’s been allowed to be built. It’s been allowed to be built because it stands for and reflects an institution or a dominant culture... public art can use this marginal position (in relation to architecture) to its advantage...public art exists to thicken the plot.’ Vito Acconci quoted in Mitchell, W.J.T.(ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990, p.176

14 Miles, M *Art, space and the city*, opcit p.13

15 Public art commission briefs invariably include a phrase along the following lines: all artworks should be low maintenance and highly weather resistant and vandal resistant (implied but not stated, this would include accidental damage / vandalism). The artworks must comply with standards relating to safe design.

16 For their resistance to the affects of wear and tear etc

17 Surfaces and spaces orchestrated to the point where they find it difficult to express, change and exchange.

In history as in nature, decay is the laboratory of life.¹⁸

CASE STUDY 3 – *Silicone Valley*



Figure 7 - *Silicone Valley*

Silicone Valley is a floor to ceiling installation comprising 300,000 used computer keyboard keys, embedded in 360 kilograms of silicone, covering 85 square meters of wall space in a stairwell and corridor at Rose Bay High School, Hobart... The sourcing of materials and gathering of support needed for the project began with securing thousands of obsolete computer keyboards from a Sydney recycling depot (rescuing them from their usual destination as landfill) and delivering them to the school where a group of students assisted with removing the 300,000 keys that harboured the residues of literally millions of touches... *Silicone Valley* is not only inspired by the recycling consciousness that pervades it, but like a memorial, is a moving testimony to the imperceptible incidental actions that make up our personal histories.¹⁹

It took five meetings to have this work accepted. The concern was of course re the potential for the work to be damaged by the students, the fear that they would remove keys. It became crucial for me that the work had an ongoing tactile relationship with it's audience and so rather than devise a means of securing the keys, say behind transparent barriers, or alternatively via contriving a 'key embedding' system that had 'more durable' qualities, I proposed to allow the work to embrace its frangible potential and be a living organism.²⁰

¹⁸ Karl Marx, as quoted by Bataille in an epigraph to "The 'Old Mole' & the prefix sur' Bois, *Y Formless*, opcit, p.245

¹⁹ Watkins, Philip, *Silicone Valley*, *Architectural Review*, ...andscape (ar) 095, 2005, pp 26-28

²⁰ To get back to nature, see also lizard losing its tail and so on.

This required a certain leap of faith from the client, and a commitment from me, as I return to the work ‘to heal it’ once or twice a year. Students occasionally remove keys²¹ and otherwise value add²² to the work, but are remarkably sensitive and respectful with how they engage.



Figure 8 - *Silicone Valley* (damage details as works in progress)

It is important to note that there is no invitation to remove keys. Instead what is in play is what I term the ‘loose tooth principle’ whereby a work tempts and suggests flux via a slow burn temptation to poke. This gradual dialogue is not about dictating an interaction, but subtly heightening the work’s relationship to both the surrounds and its audience over time.

Silicone Valley was never couched as an interactive piece, but nor does it strive to relinquish the possibility. This stands in stark contrast to an ephemeral work that might lay legitimate claims to creating memories, or experiences as monuments through disappearing, but in so doing relinquish a certain physical *ecocentric* relationship to site. Here, in *Silicone Valley* Tasmania, the continued tactile engagement becomes paramount to the experience of the work.

²¹ This souveniring of the work has its gallery precedents. eg. Many of Gonzalez-Torres’ installations invite the viewer to take a piece of the work away such as packaged lollies from a pile in a gallery, or unlimited edition prints. These installations are replenished over the course of the exhibition. See also Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio ‘In Untitled (Roll of industrial painting), he spraypainted a long roll of canvas, which he then exposed to the sun and wind. ...It could be cut and sold by the metre, thus denying the idea of art as something elitist and detached from real life.’ Benedetta Carpi de Resmini, *2008 Biennale of Sydney Guide*, Rural Press, 2008

²² Graffiti and so on. Nice to see the overlaying of hand written marks with the keys etc.

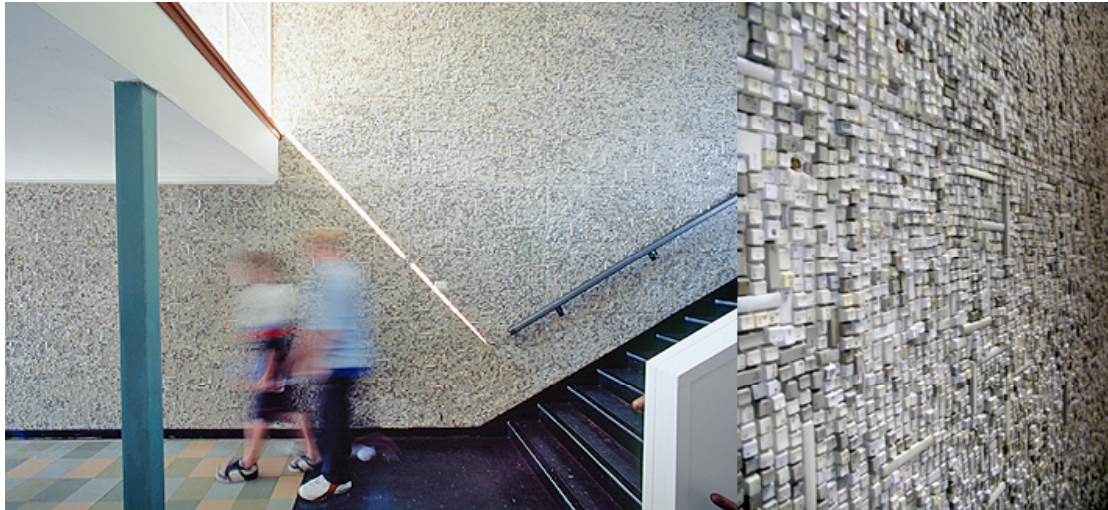


Figure 9 - *Silicone Valley*

To expand on *the loose tooth*, constructing a work to generate specific interactive responses has the flavour of sanctioned graffiti zones that have developed as a means to eradicating / reducing the spread of graffiti. The theory being that if you provide a space for something to occur you can then control it. In this context the intent is somewhat insidious as it camouflages itself as an act of generosity, or worse still caring. But this veil is, and wears thin, as it completely underestimates the intelligence of the participants, and the complexity of the act. For the residue of the activity – the tag or the mark - is only one dimension of the experience of engaging. The frisson lies in the excitement of breaking the rules, crossing the line, putting oneself and one's work at risk. Herein lies the dilemma of artworks in public spaces, to acknowledge tactile possibilities without framing them in such a way as to limit their potential or quality; to allow the art to get out of control. And so the plethora of artworks that claim interactivity as their *modus operandi* bleed on command and often bleed tomato sauce. By this I mean to infer that they fake it and orchestrate the exchange thus transforming the participants into performing monkeys. Pull this and that occurs, walk here and the light goes on, and so on. There are exceptions, where even staged interactions produce something fantastic – Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz's famous disappearing *Harburg monument against fascism*²³ being a case in point - but these are all too rare.

and like a well-worn cloth, the city has constantly to be re-made...²⁴

²³ A work that brings together a number of the implicit contradictions in the articulation of site via the local is the *Harburg monument against fascism* by Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz 'We invite the citizens of Harburg and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves to remain vigilant. A more and more names cover this 12 metre tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day, it will have disappeared completely and the site of the *Harburg monument against fascism* will be empty...' Mitchell, W.J.T.(ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere*, opcit p.56 In inviting viewers/visitors/locals to participate they essentially encouraged the reaction and response normally associated with vandalism but then gave it a platform. ...' ibid p.63 However the 'torment' was calculated to activate experience and literally bring people together, to lure them to the one place and leave traces of them being there. In negating the need to coopt the locals to participate, in harnessing their dissent and diversity, this work negated the need to be approved as a local by the locals as it was clear from its inception that the work was destined to disappear from view (but remain present) underground and in memory.

²⁴ Mitchell, W.J.T.(ed.), *Art and the Public Sphere*, opcit p.30

Ecosystems are based on tactile exchanges - leaves dropping from trees to fertilise soils and so on - not just visual. So 'poke vulnerability' becomes not a symptom of weakness but a state to aspire to. Thinking laterally about public artworks might allow us to engage various attributes as catalysts for provoking engagement on other levels; triggers that might rearticulate events and actions not as linear trajectories, but as erratic cycles of making and unmaking. What I am proposing is then the merging of permanency and its counterpoints; a re-evaluation of these entities - who have to date been camouflaged in their embrace, or alternatively been embedded in a Romeo and Juliet relationship - as closely wedded partners.

The notion of frangibility embodies numerous possibilities for how we choose to envision public space and the art that manifests; new ways to consider how the objects and buildings we create are choreographed to exist, and how they might surrender to an experience or an accident. The frangible public artwork is not an ephemeral work, but an entity that is permanently evolving; shedding its skin, harnessing and evidencing flow.



Figure 10 – column and brick wall Leichhardt, Sydney, NSW Australia

'Re-making' the city might mean reconsidering our urban spaces as conceptual gardens of sorts; places where things could occur for a period of time only to be harvested in order for other things to literally grow. Yes the possibility exists that weeds (undesirable works) might flourish, but they could play useful roles in this ecosystem of experience, and in so doing expose the public to a 'soft modernism,' that responds and rebounds. In this place, 'permanent' objects might 'ruin well' and seed the next cycle allowing residual materials, interventions and ideas to feed the system's capacity to regenerate, thereby expanding the physical and conceptual public. Here, notions of a defensive 'archivability' (an aspiration for the permanent) become an anathema, replaced by a desire for flowing, frangible relationships that bleed.

Artists give the breath of life to works, but whether the work continues to live is rarely a function of the artist; the ongoing sustenance is instead due to the collective breaths of the audience and context.²⁵

The experiences I have described challenge how I function as an artist and on what levels – tactual, sensual, conceptual or otherwise – my works engage with their diverse publics. In addition, they have caused me to question briefs (whether set by myself or others) from the point of view of expanding their potential and fracturing their preset conditions. Ultimately the ‘non artist’ contributors to my practice: the vandals, the klutz’s, the trolley movers, the rag desirables, the souvenir hunters and the non English-speaking masking tapers, have made noteworthy contributions to my work. It just took me a while to see their celebration of my work’s various vulnerabilities, as valid and powerful collaborations.

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