

DECENTRALISING CULTURAL CAPITAL

RECENT PUBLIC INITIATIVES IN SYDNEY

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The new contemporary wing of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, showcasing the recently donated Kaldor private contemporary collection, opened with great fanfare, schmoozing and backslapping. The gallery has ingested a readymade canon of “the contemporary” into its neoclassical bowels in one gulp. While there’s no denying the benefit of public access to these many fine works, there is also something disquieting about witnessing this somewhat hidebound institution lay claim *en masse* to cultural capital once generated by radicality, then appropriated by private wealth. At the same time, the proper names of the classical canon inscribed on the gallery’s stolid sandstone exterior compete with Shaun Gladwell’s aestheticisation of contemporary icons of cultural resistance in the video *Approach to Mundi Mundi* (2007).

While this event evidences the centralisation of cultural capital in Sydney, in this city as in any other major metropolis there are inevitably multiple, small tugs in the other direction. And this will be my focus here, in response to my perception that in Sydney recently, against the backdrop of the spectacle of art and money, there has been an emphasis on the role of artists in the street. Here I mean not only the continuously unfolding street art of the city’s inner ‘bo-bo’ suburbs—some of which is captured beautifully in Melinda Vassallo *Street Art of Sydney’s Inner West* (2010), or memorialised in the panels of the May Lane Art Project, an outdoor gallery space in Sydney’s inner-west set up by Tugi Balog who runs his business behind the gallery wall. I am also referring to the focus on and facilitation of such practices by particular contemporary art spaces and local councils, which promote artists as active re-interpreters of the urban landscape and its ‘public’ spaces, capable of reading the city against the grain of developers and State imposed visions of community.

It’s worth mentioning that on a recent trip to that hypostatised core of cultural capital, New York City, both the Chelsea commercial galleries and the revamped exhibition of the pre-history of “the contemporary” at the Museum of Modern Art lost out to the appeal of The Highline. The Highline is a recently opened public walkway built along the Chelsea Pier on the remnants of an elevated railway track, thus providing strikingly alternative vistas of the city’s skyscrapers and surrounding waterways. Wending through the simple wooden boardwalk, at a moment one is brought into intimate contact with angles and textures never meant for street level viewing, while at another dazzled by unexpected glints of the Hudson River. To set off its mega-industrial context, The Highline’s aesthetic is low-tech and organic, with queen-size wooden banana lounges inviting the public to tarry. A limited number of public artworks enhance this conviviality, notably Spencer Finch’s *The River that Flows both Ways* (2009) in which the artist transposed onto panels of glass the changing colours of the Hudson River over the course of one day, and Stephen Vitello’s *A Bell for Every Minute* (2010), a sound installation that records the signature ring of bells all over New York City.

The Highline of course is a major public project, with backing from the local city authority as well as private benefactors. But this institutional intervention has created opportunities for everyday poetics, potential alternatives to the “city-concept”, to use Michel de Certeau’s term from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) that describes the hegemonic organisation of the city for capitalist ends. A similar claim might be made on

behalf of a City of Sydney initiative, the Laneways project, which over the last four years has facilitated the temporary installation of various artists’ work in overlooked urban passageways and so opened up new uses and meanings for these places. The Laneways project is part of the Council’s Local Action Plan for the CBD and aims “to breathe new life into CBD laneways with a range of creative initiatives to encourage more activity and recognise the cultural, artistic and historic significance of laneways”.¹

The curator of the 2009 exhibition *By George!*, strikes a note between Situationist *dérive* and Chamber of Commerce: “What is exciting is that the unforeseen, unexpected use of these laneways within the planned city centre might actually be the key to its future success, defining a new role for the CBD.” That year the projects focused on sustainability, and were collaborative and interdisciplinary, involving artists, architects, urban designers, landscape architects, musicians, poets, and scientists. They included *Infinity Forest* (by Mathew Chan/Scale Architecture, Isabelle Cordeiro, and Katie Hepworth), “a temporary forest jolting people who cut through Penfolds Place with an unexpected concentration of nature”, and *PS: Potential Spaces* (by architects Neeson Murcutt, contemporary gallery Chalk Horse and law firm Freehills) that manifested the idea that laneways could one day be living spaces through the installation of furnishings, mirrors and lounges in formerly derelict areas. In 2010, the Streetware event invited some renowned street artists, including Girl+Dog, notorious for her graffiti knitting as well as several paste-up artists. The latest Laneway Art project was held earlier this year. Entitled *Are You Looking At Me?* and curated by Barbara Flynn, it included the work of high profile contemporary artists such as Newell Harry, Justene Williams and Nike Savvas. Clearly, the Laneways project has developed from worthy civic initiative to coveted public exhibition with some critical cachet (unlike Sydney’s popular but critical stinker *Sculpture by the Sea*).

Of course, for artists whose primary practice is on the street there are compromises inherent in working this way, similar to those encountered by Melbourne street artists who operate in Council designated laneways in the inner city. At some level, the meaning of a street work will change once it has been legitimated, especially if it goes so far as to become part of the official promotional discourse of the State in its status as tourist attraction. Yet, arguably, the use of institutional frameworks can be not only strategic but also often essential to bringing the artist’s concerns to prominence. As Pascale Jeanne, late member of the Austria-based activist art collective WochenKlausur, eloquently argued,

Art is awarded its status through its recognition; such sanctioning comes about within institutional mechanisms. Art institutions can reaffirm a traditional, object-orientated understanding of practice or can participate in its transformation... An understanding of what can constitute art changes when the term is used less to subsume fetishistic characteristics and mercantile aspects, and instead designates immaterial works that contribute to the transformation and improvement of ecological, political and social conditions. If WochenKlausur works at the invitation of art institutions, the institutions are acting to anchor activist art practice in human consciousness... the art institutions’ ‘cultural capital’ has been useful when seeking to circumvent bureaucratic hierarchies and mobilise decision-makers from politics, civil administration and the media.²

Engaging with institutions by participating in such civic renaissance projects then, does not necessarily disqualify the artist from “the ecological analysis of the... fissures in the urban network, of the role of microclimates, distinct neighborhoods with no relation to administrative boundaries”, the Situationist International urged.³ The Council-sponsored Laneways project must also be seen in the context of pop-up galleries in Sydney, many of which have also occupied disused laneways—such as artist and University of Technology Sydney (UTS) academic Mark Titmarsh’s Temperance Lane project—as well as idle commercial spaces including shopfronts. Pop-up have also become part of urban regeneration policies. For example, inspired by Renew Newcastle, UTS and Arts New South Wales have recently funded The Empty Spaces project to provide information about sourcing, negotiating and housing pop-up galleries to revive flailing commercial heartlands in Sydney and certain regional centres.

Another Local Council initiative saw the staging of a strikingly well-executed public artwork over two nights in April this year. Hurstville Council commissioned the work together with C3West, a long-term collaborative project between the Museum of Contemporary Art and Casula, Penrith and Campbelltown regional art centres. C3West is a State-sponsored strategy established to develop “new ways of working between cultural institution artists, businesses and communities in Greater Sydney”—in other words it’s tasked with nurturing ‘Culture’ in those communities not renowned for it. Installation/performance artist Angelica Mesiti (a member of the performance group The Kingpins) spent several months in community consultation devising *The Begin-Again* that comprised of four video works and one kinetic installation. The works were projected in various locations in Hurstville’s main shopping strip, including its Civic Square, bus interchange and open arcades, culminating in the rooftop parking lot of the central mall Westfields.

Mesiti’s videos are beautiful in tone and tenor, high in production values and poetic in structure. They use choreographed movement and music rather than narrative to evoke slivers of the diverse Hurstville community, including its aging population, Chinese migrants and pimped car culture. With their broad aesthetic strokes, the works cleverly cohere, while the strair of *Old Man River* that snake a passage from Memorial Square through the streets and arcades create another palpable link. In this opening piece, Mesiti has recorded a local octogenarian singing the plaintive ode to Southern slave made a classic by USA civil rights icon Paul Robeson. The old man stands in front of a glittery curtain in black tie, RSL (Returned Services League Club) style. While the singer is white, the song was selected as a tribute to a renowned local indigenous elder. The rendition was deeply moving, with the singer’s rheumy eyes and voice that loses mastery just as it reaches the climactic highest note (“I’m tired of living, but scared of dying!”) piercing through the artifice of the *mise en scene*. The next two works featured local children playing at building a railway line, each laying down a ‘sleepers’ before transforming themselves into interlinked carriages, and a sole woman in traditional dress performing the intricate gestures of a Chinese water sleeves dance. The fourth video was a mesmerising tableau of aging ballroom dancing couples, whose skill, grace and lightness of foot defy their advanced years. This work anchored the final performance, which began with three souped-up vehicles throbbling to drum and bass and synchronised lights, and ended with a Chinese dragon dance.

The performance attracted not only the art crowd alerted through MCA publicity channels, but also multitudes of locals, including those who featured in the videos. In front of their images, the ballroom dancing couples proudly chatted to impressed viewers and the children continued to play. On the rooftop carpark meanwhile, stereotypically anti-social ‘doof doof’ cars could be enjoyed as carnivalesque entertainment by the full social spectrum, while a site of archetypal consumer ritual was momentarily transformed.

Rather than remaining an over-determined work of public art Mesiti’s installation struck the right balance between spectacle and reflection, legibility and multivalency. Moreover, through both its research process and exhibition, it actively decentralised and disseminated cultural capital, as the locals of Hurstville became not only legitimate artistic subject matter but also co-creators themselves. As a result, however momentarily, the dominant commercial discourse of this suburban strip was displaced.

Other institutions that have hosted outward-focused projects in recent months include the Tin Sheds and Cross Art Projects, one a public gallery associated with the Architecture and Design Department of the University of Sydney, the other a private project space in the heart of urban development battleground of Kings Cross. *The Right to the City* was an exhibition curated at the Tin Sheds by Zanny Begg and Lee Stickells, with a mix of international and local artists, designers, and activists including Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, atelier d’architecture autogérée, Temporary Services, SquatSpace, and Milkcrate Urbanism. The concept behind the exhibition was drawn from a significant text of everyday urban resistance by French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la Ville*, published in 1968. The “right to the city” is the “demand... for a transformed and renewed access to urban life”. As postmodern urban theorist and contemporary Lefebvre advocate David Harvey puts it, this right is a common rather than individual right, since “the transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanisation”.⁴ The exhibition in particular highlighted urban activist collectives, such as Temporary Services, whose work ranges from poetic and whimsical, to outright pragmatic, with interventions in public space designed to build local community awareness of common ground and shared creativity. There was also an accent on imagining the city differently, with a wall dedicated to proposed urban interventions, many of them impossible but opening up ways of thinking beyond the ‘city-concept’.

Cross Art Projects run by long-time curator Jo Holder is an unique player in the Sydney gallery scene, as its self-description implies: it “foregrounds contemporary work that reflects the multiple relationships between art and life, art and the public sphere and explores the boundaries of this context. We are attentive to the local without sacrificing the scope of indigenous and international views. Cross Art enhances its projects with conversations, roundtables and screenings including talks by local activist, architectural and heritage groups”.⁵ The space has become something of a hub for local urban activism, and its recent exhibition of street art by Mini Graff and Jason Wing was no exception. Mini Graff hung some of her works on the gallery walls, including digital collages from her *Suburban Roadhouse* series, where the artist practices *détournement* to the max by branding archetypal Australian fibro homes with culture-jammed logos, including ‘Krafty’ and ‘oBey’. However, the project also entailed interventions in local streets and on the temporary hoarding surrounding the gallery, erected while building works are carried on in upstairs premises. This hoarding became the site of an interesting dispute that only went to highlight the themes of the exhibition: the local Council would not allow Graff’s adusting logos to be displayed in public space, forcing the artist to come up with a more ‘innocuous’ poster. The same City Council is both facilitating public interventions in various ways including the Laneways project, AND censoring work it considers potentially upsetting to commercial interests.

While this incident highlights the limits of institutional facilitation of creative interventions in the city, nonetheless the projects discussed here have allowed for alternative readings of particular urban spaces, and provided frameworks for artistic work that genuinely seeks to decentralise cultural capital. If that impulse at times coincides with State policy, the result is not always and necessarily compromised.

Notes

¹ Sydney City Council press release, 2006

² Pascale Jeanne interview published on Temporary Services website, http://www.temporaryservices.org/concrete_wochenklusur.pdf

³ ‘Theory of the dérive’, *Situationist International* #2, Paris, 1958, <http://www.thehighline.org/sites/files/images/finchrender.jpg>

⁴ David Harvey, ‘The Right to the City’, *New Left Review*, 2008

⁵ See <http://www.crossart.com.au/>