

## Debra Phillips: A talker's echo

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Welcome everyone and thank you for coming. We're meeting today on unceded Gadigal Country and I wish to acknowledge and pay my respects to elders past, present, and emerging. It's my great pleasure to open Debra Phillips' exhibition *A talker's echo*, which has been lovingly curated by Jasmin Stephens. I've known Debra and Jasmin for several years and am grateful for the wonderful conversations we've had during that time—often impromptu, always rich and engaging, and seemingly never long enough! And that's really what this exhibition is about: time for gathering and sharing ideas.

What you have come to see is a staging of fragments from a well-known public artwork by Debra called *Viva Voce*, augmented with photographs from her own archive and a new edition of medallions produced at the Royal Australian Mint. *Viva Voce* was commissioned for the Sydney Sculpture Walk, originally intended for a 10-year install from 1999, which was extended a further 10 years to 2019, when it was deaccessioned. This prompted Jasmin and Debra's project here at The Cross Art Projects, where Director Jo Holder runs a rigorous programme that often includes keenly sociopolitical exhibitions such as this one. *A talker's echo* commemorates *Viva Voce* and, in so doing, considers the history and afterlife of public works. The title of the work translates to "living voice" or "orally," and honours the history of soapbox oratory, specifically the Speakers Corner in the Domain here on Gadigal land, which began in the late 1800s as a place for locals to gather and speak on important issues. Debra has neatly fused public speaking and public art in this work, fundamentally probing the essence of that which is "public," how the public forms, is utilised, and, most pressingly, what happens to public enterprises when they dissolve or disappear.

After being deaccessioned, components from *Viva Voce* were returned to Debra at her request, after which she spent a lot of time cleaning them—polishing up the relics of this history as an act of preservation. Marble pedestals were deconstructed and returned as fragments, which now form an installation along the floor in *A talker's echo*. Maquettes for these are included in this exhibition, as is a steel ladder cast for *Viva Voce* that Debra has subsequently fitted with its timber original, which sits inverted on top.

Aptly, the exhibition title, *A talker's echo* is in fact an anagram of "rake the coals," which implies wilful forgetting or punishment. So, how do voices echo? What are the implications of passing time? These are particularly interesting questions for contemporary art, which continues to grapple with potential amnesia, archives and the past with such fixation that some philosophers like Franco Berardi worry, conversely, about a "slow cancellation of the future."

The photograph in the window, *Nuclear Disarmament Rally at the Domain, Sydney*, is particularly striking to me. It was taken in 1984 and printed for the first time for this exhibition, on aluminium, which suggestively lends the image a sculptural quality. Debra has been documenting large public gatherings like this for many years, including ANZAC day parades under the pseudonym Agnes T. Earl (the name of her greatgrandmother). Each person in the rally is a fragment, like these marble pieces, that, when assembled, create "a public" and public memory in a most visceral way. Photography, philosophers like Derrida and subsequently curators such as Okwui Enwezor have claimed, is tied directly to our archival impulse—our desire to build and author historical records. The archive, thus, becomes something of a monument in itself. In his exhibition essay, "Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument," Enwezor writes:

"Yet against the tendency of contemporary forms of amnesia whereby the archive becomes a site of lost origins and memory is dispossessed, it is also within the archive that acts of remembering and regeneration occur, where a suture between the past and the present is performed, in the indeterminate zone between event and image, document and monument."

Debra is well known for her work with photography, and although this medium remains a trusted documenter, its utility is also increasingly lost in the banality and excess of daily reproductions on social media. Nowadays, the soapbox for public speaking takes the form of blogs or online posts. Yet, we know the potency of ideas and action is lacking in these forums, while disinformation thrives. In this way, *A talker's echo* also contrasts modes of storytelling: oral histories (especially significant to

Indigenous cultures) and photographic documents. Researching the Speakers Corner reveals a host of eccentric regulars, whose unconventional ideas are given a platform in the context of a voluntary, self-organising public intended for generative discourse. Of course, Debra's *Viva Voce* wasn't intended as an installation of static sculptures. Though the use of classical marble toys with the language of monuments, it also recalls the dialectics of Greek democracy. The point, Debra makes clear, is for the space made by her installation to implicate people. Real bodies, sharing real time and space, which leads to less remote and dehumanising connections. This vehicle for public engagement is a healthy and essential part of democracy, which Debra has fittingly transposed to a close relative of these aforementioned forums: the exhibition.

While reflecting on this exhibition I was reminded of Joseph Beuys's notion of "social sculpture," which analogises society to sculpture. A tree and basalt stone from one of Beuys's most significant public artworks, *7000 oaks*, is also sited in the Domain, near to where *Viva Voce* was installed. As an artist who has documented and fashioned public gatherings, Debra is deeply aware of the politics of space and the configurations of society, both physically and conceptually. What we do with and in space is of crucial importance to society's formations. Beuys also believed that ideas are plastic—a fascinating thought to ponder, especially in an exhibition concerned with the ways monuments and ideas relate and persist or "echo."

The case can be made—and I must admit that I sympathise—that nothing lasts forever, and monuments, including public artworks such as Debra's, naturally tire. So what is the legacy of such projects? Even if public artworks like *Viva Voce* run in 20-year cycles, the possibility for their products to reemerge, to be recycled, remains open indefinitely. Like Debra proves in this very exhibition, even marble monuments can be restaged—they are just as "plastic" as the ideas they generate.

Congratulations to Debra, Jasmin, Jo and Belle on this thoughtful reflection on an important local history. Thank you all, again, for coming. Enjoy the exhibition.