

# TYRANNY OF CONSENSUS: WHO PUT 'PUBLIC' IN PUBLIC ART



## AND WHY DO 'THEY' THINK THEY 'OWN' IT?

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### MEMORY I

In late 1993 a concrete cast of a last remaining house in what had been a Victorian terrace was created by Rachel Whiteread. This sculpture, titled *House*, a project initiated by Artangel with Whiteread in conjunction with the Bow Neighbourhood Council, was sited on one side of Mile End Park, East London, and was intended to remain after its opening on 25 October until then beginning of December. The dwelling chosen was the long-term residence of a family that had refused to be relocated into a council high rise – when that situation was resolved the family agreed to have their house become a 'concrete memorial'.

Whiteread at this time was one of the darling yBa's [young British artists], who had made her reputation by making sculptures of internal spaces of rooms, bathtubs, mattresses, etc. *House* was conceived as a result of an approach by Artangel for Whiteread to pursue a larger project within the public domain. The construction of *House* was kept under wraps, literally and figuratively, until it opened to a small private audience [but to a very public response]. Whiteread then won the prestigious Turner Prize on the same night that the Bow Neighbourhood Council refused a request to extend the life of the sculpture. Therein began a vociferous public bunfight between the media, politicians, the artworld and the general public about its merits. The polemics of the subsequent debate raged from the surrounding streets to the House of Commons, from the local to the international, from the art world to the 'real' world. *House* stood mutely as a 'domestic cenotaph', while emotive rhetoric was freely vented all around. *House* was given an extended life during this period until it was demolished early in the New Year of 1994. After three years of planning and it existing for three months, it took three hours to be demolished. Ironically, the resultant empty space became the true memorial to its 'domestic cenotaph'.

*The Independent* newspaper described *House* as, "... denatured by transformation, things turn strange here. Fireplaces bulge outwards from the walls of *House*, doorknobs are rounded hollows. Architraves have become chiselled incisions running around the monument, forms as mysterious as the hieroglyphs on Egyptian tombs... A strange and fantastical object which also amounts to one of the most extraordinary and imaginative sculptures created by an English artist this century."<sup>1</sup>

An earlier Artangel project stood somewhat more quietly for several months in Jubilee Gardens on the south bank of the Thames River opposite Westminster. As part of the Hayward Gallery's *Doubletake*, a major international exhibition exploring the relationship of collective memory to contemporary art, a Juan Muñoz sculpture, *Untitled [Monument]*, modelled loosely on Edwin Lutyen's Cenotaph on Whitehall across the river, was constructed from artificial stone, with flags of bronze – without inscription or signs. Muñoz built his sculpture 4.5 metres high, of granite slabs, with three bronze flagpoles and three bronze flags. Muñoz conceived his sculpture designed as a monument, "a monument to nothing". He said of the Cenotaph, "It is one of the most outstanding pieces of modern geometry I can think of. It hasn't been damaged by the passage of time."<sup>2</sup> It was a stepped and canted obelisk with minimal ornamentation, whose largest angled planes, if projected vertically, would meet at a single point exactly one mile above the base. Opposite in intent and response to *House*, *Untitled [Monument]* was an anonymous sculpture, Muñoz's intention being that it be one which people would pass by as if it had always been there, a monument to the idea of memory itself. Both the artist and commissioner Artangel were responding to the novelist Robert Musil's comment about monuments and the city – that attention "slips away from them like water slips off a duck's back". As quietly as it appeared in February 1992, it remained until its equally quiet disappearance the following April.

What is fundamentally instructive about these two projects is that neither was the product of a current local public art committee philosophy – of structure [socially inclusive] – and process [democracy in all its warmth and fuzziness], incorporating the ‘Professional’ dicta of Town Planners, Social Planners, Engineers, Architects, Councillors and other ‘Professionals’ [private-opinion-as-public-interest] – with those of residents, action groups, heritage satellites, moral highgrounders and minority dispossessed interferers [read ‘key stakeholders’]. Rather, simply – and appropriately, *House* and *Untitled* [Monument] emanated from a transaction between Artist and Curator [commissioner]. Artangel’s philosophy, “to respect the singular chemistry of the commissioning process so that artists, art forms and audiences can together explore new and uncharted territory”, in its “production of powerful new ideas by exceptional artists... at the forefront of changing attitudes and growing expectations amongst both artists and audiences”,<sup>3</sup> precipitated rather than kowtowed to ‘Public interest’. That ‘Public interest’ nonetheless played a major role in the life of *House*, adding unwittingly to its memory by the furore it created. As Artangel co-Director James Lingwood wrote in the London press at the time, “the hunger to erase *House* so quickly masks an insecurity about the potential for art to communicate in ways which are unheralded and unpredictable”.<sup>4</sup>

was to complement the major ‘Eastern Gateway’ sculpture projects instigated the previous year<sup>5</sup> [the resultant implementation process, which rode roughshod over the guidelines and attendant re-apportioning of the significant funds is a topic for another text]. A decision [assessed by a selection committee comprising representatives from Arts SA, Adelaide City Council, State Government Transport and Planning Departments, the indigenous community, Local Government engineers, et al.] was required to be made [including *all aesthetic, engineering and other* considerations] at one sitting. As a major public artwork sited in the City parklands [a sacred-cow-like untouchable zone], the commission had to further embrace necessary and complicated legal permissions. Ultimately, it became the target of ‘Public interference’, i.e. a singular private-opinion-as-public-interest legal contestation. It is now over eighteen months since that one-sitting commissioning day...

#### PROBLEMATICS I

Late last year while listening to ABC weekday afternoon radio I came across a discussion between the host and an architect [or equivalent ‘Professional’] concerning the proposed redevelopment of one of Adelaide’s major boulevards, the cultural golden mile of North Terrace. This discussion centred upon interpretative signage circa the environs of the Art



Opposite page: Rachel Whiteread, *House*, 1993 Photo courtesy Artangel  
Above: Juan Muñoz, *Untitled* [Monument], 1992 Photo courtesy Artangel

#### CONTRAST

Consider three Adelaide commissions, though they are not deserving of being isolated as they have numerous past and present counterparts. In 1995 The City of Adelaide advertised for expressions of interest to commission South Australian artists for sculptural works in the CBD’s Rundle Mall. A selection committee of visual art professionals [from the Art Gallery of SA] and Council representatives assessed the submissions, with the successful proposals coming from artists of robust conceptual professional backgrounds [graduates of the SA School of Art]. A promising sign. And then what might be looked upon as the “singular chemistry of the commissioning process” between artist and commissioner collapsed through singular [private-opinion-as-public-interest] interference, the winning proposals being deemed ‘unsuitable’ by the Lord Mayor. What was deemed suitable instead, after an autocratic commissioning of an unknown interstate community artist, was four life-size bronze pigs. Their names are Augusta, Oliver, Horatio and Truffles – chosen by The Public.

About the same time, a local artist was commissioned to create a linear artwork connecting the Victoria Square tram terminal to South Terrace, a distance of over four city blocks, almost half the width of the city. This was the commissioning body’s guidelines for the artist, who was allocated a five figure budget minus a zero for such an ambitiously expanded work – being small, odd shaped metal cutouts on curved poles in the middle of the median strip in between the tramlines. It has since been much derided, setting back the ‘cause’ of public art and its acceptance by The Public. But this was not the fault of the artist, rather the commissioning guidelines and process of implementation. The artist, though understandably wanting to get a public-art-guernsey, should not have accepted the commission – the artist simply should not have been placed in such a lose-lose position.

In 2001 the State Government, in conjunction with the City of Adelaide, called for proposals for a major sculptural work to become the ‘Western Gateway’ to the city. This

Gallery of South Australia, the State Library and Museum SA. After some general explanation of the redevelopment’s composition, the ABC host called for a listener feedback. The first phoner, from the twilight zone of outer suburbia, commented against all-this-new-fangled-bloody-arty-stuff-is-a-waste-of-bloody-money-why-do-we-have-to-have-new-signs-what’s-wrong-with-the-old-ones?-and-I-bet-the-bloody-artist-is-making-all-the-money! And so on.

Therein lies the “singular chemistry” of process difference between *House* and *Untitled* [Monument], and the fundamental failure of ‘key stakeholder’ Common Denominator

Mehmet Adil, *Untitled*, 1994 Photo Alan Cruickshank



driven public art – the latter’s righteous surmise that ‘it owns’ and has a right to choose public art, due seemingly to its dim perception that ‘public’ being half of the descriptive phrase justifies ownership. It’s ‘our’ domain! But then buildings, streets, parks, landscaping, highways, freeways, etc. make up the majority of that domain. While The Public is consulted by degrees in many Architect/Town Planner/Engineer determined urban elements, the former providing the base statistics from which the latter’s usage circumscribes social function, what is the Common Denominator’s rationale for assuming that it has a right to direct influence in choice? Did ‘it’ design the pseudo-postmodern lego-set Myer department store or the 1960s cream brick Stamford Hotel on North Terrace? [‘it’ didn’t need to, the ‘Professionals’ got it wrong and ugly all by themselves, the latter construction being a truly Adelaide ‘masterpiece’ of non-design and ugly use of materials]. Did ‘it’ design the War Memorial on North Terrace?

On 18 February, 2003, a public artwork by Adelaide based artist Anton Hart was opened in the Adelaide CBD, a product of the City of Adelaide’s newly introduced *City Arts & Living Culture Strategy*. Part of the upgrading of the convergence of a major intersection within one of the city’s squares, the work, *The Forest of Dreams*, comprised one metre high words in rusty metal, one word sited at each of the four corners of the intersection with attendant stone seating. The artist’s intention was the insertion of “poetry back into the landscape... a simple use of text... that sweeps and is read from corner to corner... a place to sit, rest and contemplate”.<sup>6</sup> The idea of text as art proved difficult for local residents, the work’s rationale that it attempted “to embrace the relationship between site and civic



Anton Hart, *The Forest of Dreams*, 2003 Photos Alan Cruickshank

space, and a Public understanding through the mediation of art” obviously being beyond them.<sup>7</sup> The public response was predictably emotive in its surmise that ‘they’ had a right to explanation. Wrote one resident, “We have already asked Lord Mayor Alfred Huang to explain why the City of Adelaide went to the expense of putting in a new... pavement along Hurtle Square only to tear it up almost immediately and install unsightly lettering announcing *The Forest of Dreams*... Cr. Judith Brine claims there was ‘extensive community consultation’ on the subject of this installation, which, one is told, is a ‘public art project’. I checked with the *local community centre*, The Box Factory. They not only did not hold any meetings but, like many local residents, knew nothing about the plans...” [my italics].<sup>8</sup> Another response; “Should any artwork involve significant sacrifice of the environment?... I am reminded of *The Forest of Dreams*’ massive metal letters *forced* into Hurtle Square *forever*. If artwork becomes so *overly conceptual* that it becomes *simply words*, shouldn’t it confine itself to the page rather than *inflicting* itself on a hitherto word-free oasis such as Hurtle Square?” [my italics].<sup>9</sup> The tenor of this Common Denominator harping is the belief that in a democracy everyone has a right to choose *everything* constructed within it. This naïve and uninformed tyranny of consensus continues in the same writer’s letter regarding Aleks Danko’s proposed artwork for the above mentioned ‘Western Gateway’ commission [being an extended linear pattern of Aboriginal stone shelters, the material wisely chosen for longevity and indestructability]; “the use of concrete or other such permanent material seems particularly inappropriate for what were essentially temporary seasonal shelters... given that many Aborigines frequent the area... could they not be involved in the design... in a far more sensitive and authentic way? Such activity would enable us all, especially young indigenous people to learn new skills”. This blanchmange of righteous indignation further denies the artist any intelligence whatsoever for such a ‘sensitive’ major project and demonstrates succinctly the irrelevance and inappropriateness of ‘extensive community consultation’.

## MEMORY II

Much like the Artangel projects of the early 1990s, several art projects, though infinitely more modest in their conception and resources, insinuated themselves into the Adelaide landscape about the same time via that same “singular chemistry of the commissioning process” between artist and curator. During the 1994 Australian Formula One Grand Prix, in the market buildings marked for demolition in the adjacent Rundle Street East End, Mehmet Adil quietly screwed 150 chairs onto the building’s rooftops/edges which faced inwards to an open carpark. The chairs rimmed the rooftops of the market office buildings and one skeleton structure [resembling the nearby temporary racetrack stands]. The parking ticket seller at the main entrance, a lesser than average art-lover, remained bemused if not abusive. One day he confronted me with what’s-this-bullshit? After an explanation of something like... the chair’s functional relationship with an audience or onlooker and the reversal of that relationship, the chair becoming the object of contemplation, from within a car while parking, or walking to and from your car, and the equation of cars and chairs and grandstands just across the way at the racetrack... his imagination stimulated, if not captured, he then proceeded to inform everyone parking their cars for the remainder of the work’s lifetime what it was they were looking at and why it was something to behold. The project’s correlation to the environment’s short and long-term fate was mutely poetic. As Adil described it as, “the chairs flew and perched on the roof-edges, as birds do from time to time”. Adelaide based writer Linda Marie Walker saw that, “the work disappears... and is beautiful... placed by movement... precarious, haunting... The chairs perched: say nothing, reveal nothing: simply announce”<sup>10</sup>



A corresponding quiet art insertion into the public domain was the botanic work *Title*, in 1995, by Richard Grayson, at the north end of Victoria Square in the CBD centre, a ‘living sculpture’ that existed for the lifetimes of the differing flower components, referencing theoretical and historical notions of entitlement, ownership and occupation, with flower varieties of varying types and growth rates forming a sculptural signature of Queen Victoria, after whom the square is named, and the word ‘Kuarna’, being the name of the indigenous people who lived in the pre-settlement environs. From small plantings it grew into differing sizes and shapes until it went wild. Seen by a myriad of pedestrians and commuters it nonetheless drew a singular moral high-ground response whose rhetoric demonstrated a continuation of a “hunger to erase... masks an insecurity about the potential for art to communicate in ways which are unheralded and unpredictable”.

## PROBLEMATICS II

Inherently problematic in current public art commissionings is the inclusion of Architects, Councillors, Transport and Planning officers, Engineers etc. in the *aesthetic process*, i.e. making unqualified private-opinion-as-public-interest decisions upon ‘artistic excellence’. Within this conjugation of Local Government–Corporate Sector ‘democracy of process’ the most potent problems occur. Architects, Town Planners, Engineers et al. duly voicing their private-opinion [as-public-interest], in most cases are asked to do so by Government regarding the merits, aesthetic and otherwise, of what constitutes Art in the public environment. Artists, the creative sector, are philosophically perceived as subservient to these ‘Professionals’ and the processes and/or policies they determine. Only recently has there been the realisation that the process might work much more fluently and productively if artists are incorporated within the commissioning process from the beginning, rather than treated as building site ‘chippies’ and ‘sparkies’, given ‘artistic opportunities’ to create seating, rubbish bins and bicycle racks. Inherent within this cream brick philosophy is the society-Professional perception that artists are lesser educated cottage dwelling jewellers and clay throwers, contrary to the reality [of many artists] having *significantly higher* education [e.g. internationally achieved Master of Arts degrees], conceptual skills and professional experience [and I’m not talking about cottage dwelling jewellers and clay throwers. I have yet to meet a craft artist with a Masters Degree].

This Clochmerle-on-the-Torrens marriage of the Common Denominator with the Society-Professional, remains the key to public art's failure. A similar union aligned in theory and practice, founded on the footings of incompatibility, was recently highlighted in the national press. Australia's most respected architect Glenn Murcutt criticised severely local councils for their promotion of "junk building and stifling good design", citing Council regulations as "framed to stop the worst type of building... but too often they had the opposite effect... it is clear the issue of aesthetics is beyond the expertise of our local council officers. Most planners have not been trained in design and aesthetics". Backing his call were other eminent architects Harry Seidler, Alex Popov and Ed Lippmann who criticised council and planner imposed constraints as "enforced mediocrity".<sup>11</sup>

Replace 'architecture' with 'public art' and the predicament might almost be identical, but for the fact that it is worse, as in their collective opinion-as-public-interest, Planners, Architects, Engineers, Risk Managers, Councillors et al. presume they have the right to directly influence artistic 'design and aesthetics'. And they do. Public artworks are currently subservient to [as an example] 'risk assessment' based on children's playground equipment. Never mind the work's artistic/aesthetic qualities, as long as little Johnny doesn't get his head caught in it and strangle himself! But what about little Johnny falling off a plaza wall at the Adelaide Festival Centre or impaling himself upon Bert Flugelman's nearby chrome tetrahedra-sculpture or the design clutter in Rundle Mall? Should all public art be surrounded by rubber matting or be placed back up on nineteenth century pedestals to keep The Public away from it? Ultimately it has become an issue of people-



Richard Grayson, *Title*, 1995 Photo Alan Cruickshank

resistant design, never mind the aesthetics. Many commissions are after all only utilitarian design elements, but patronisingly sugar-coated in that 'artist-opportunity' language that gives the artist the 'big deal'. The commissioning procedures endemically extend that condescension by their failure to recognise artists as both intelligent and professional. The irony here is that Governmental public art policy statements continually use vision-bytes highlighting an inherent hypocrisy, "... public realm will speak of the City's creativity through a diversity of quality Public Artworks that *engage, please or challenge* the viewer... will promote Public Art as a contributor to the City's and State's *image...*"<sup>12</sup> via "*quality outcomes*" and "*artistic excellence*", to "encourage *high quality* contemporary art", etc. [my italics] The betrayal is that this same policy statement, which defines the artist as "a person with *highly* creative interpretative, conceptualising and creative skills" differentiates them from the gods by continuing that they, "*are not the architect or other design professionals charged with the primary responsibility for the project*". [my italics] And as they say, there's the rub.<sup>13</sup>

In my *Broadsheet* editorial of Volume 30 No 2 in 2001, I related the Great Rivers Project of London and New York to Adelaide, and the yawning gap between vision, resources and process between the two. The Thames and Hudson Rivers Project was an international public art project that brought together contemporary artists from Europe and the USA to create work about both rivers and the cities through which they flowed. A collaboration between London's Public Art Development Trust and New York's Minetta Brook, the projects were directed by two curators, and resourced by such organisations as The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, the British Council, The Henry Moore Foundation, the Arts Council of England, Chase Manhattan Bank, London Docklands Development Corporation, London Arts Board, National Lottery and so on. The Public Art Development Trust's mission was to commission and produce public projects by contemporary artists and organise talks to *create long-term relationships between artists, places and audiences*, while the Minetta Brook Organisation produces and organises public art projects, discussions and publications to *strengthen the relationship between contemporary artists and communities* [the italics are mine]. Add Artangel to the above. Fundamental to Adelaide is the lack of all three – 'vision, resources and process'.

As a post-utopian eventuality Adelaide remains encumbered by a physical and subsequent emotional gridation, clinging to a flat-earth society ruling-class rigidity of denial of the date on the wall calendar. Both its early nineteenth century conception and its 1960s social expression showed glimpses of future promise, but possibly they are no more than aberrations when compared against the totality of its history. Adelaide remains unable to shake off the moniker of 'City of Churches' [and shadows of closed-after-dark wowerism]. It could establish a Guggenheim-Bilbao-like realm for itself, of a city with major iconic artworks of international reputation that would create benefits, both tangible [cultural tourism] and intangible [sense of city identity] – if it had both a political and social will. But votes come first, and embracing the electorate requires that vision always be dumbed down.

Adelaide's past reputation for its commitment to Public Art dating from 1980s, has dissipated like the air in a party balloon – Public Art as a concept and physical expression has since been riven by both Government indecision and a 'Professional' superiority complex that treats artists like children – in all its bearded condescending paternalism. In 2000 the South Australian Government seriously considered devolving its art-in-public-places responsibility to a *craft organisation* [a truly cream brick contemplation]. After the visual arts sector rightly voiced its disapproval, the Government then commissioned the SA School of Art Head, Professor Noel Frankham, to evaluate the sector, a report lost in Governmental indifference. State Government intrinsically has



An excellent example of public art at risk. George Popperwell, *Drift...* 2002 Photo Alan Cruickshank

little money it wants to direct towards this arena, handballing the mantle of responsibility to Local Government and the corporate sector; the result of this conjugation may be gleaned from Andrew Mackenzie's following text 'Guilty Art'.

#### CAVEAT

Singapore is often considered sterile and cultureless by a smug and righteous West – only a shopping centre and an airport-lah! – but when the good Singaporean elders decided to 'instill some culture', [defined as sense of State-city identity to become a cultural 'hub' for the region and a subsequent cultural tourist destination], they imposed their envisioned-will firstly back in the early 1990s with a mere S\$20million to get the ball rolling, with the establishment of the Singapore Art Museum, then almost a decade later a cool S\$600 million for The Esplanade performing arts complex. Like all good artworks, this decision making process was not predicated by the Common Denominator. Nor should a local propensity that senior visual artist development opportunities are determined by literature, music, theatre, dance and cultural tourism minions, but that's another Adelaide story.

#### Notes

1. *Off Limits*, Merrell Publishers Ltd., London 2002: 83
2. *Off Limits*: 85
3. www.artangel.org.uk accessed 6 May, 2003
4. *Off limits*: 83
5. Mehmet Adil, 'From Gateway to Fossil Forest', *Broadsheet* Volume 29 No 4, 2000: 19
6. Stephen Bowers, 'A Missed Opportunity', *The Adelaide Review*, April 2003: 11
7. Stephen Bowers, 'A Missed Opportunity', *The Adelaide Review*, April 2003: 11
8. Reader's Feedback in *The City Messenger*, Adelaide, 26 February, 2003
9. Reader's Feedback in *The City Messenger*, Adelaide, 26 February, 2003
10. L.M. Walker, 'And the chairs flew and perched on the roof-edges, as birds do from time to time', *Salient*, ed. Alan Cruickshank, Adelaide, 1996: 30–31
11. *The Australian*, 8 May, 2003
12. *Watch this Place: The City of Adelaide Public Art Policy 2001–2006, The City of Adelaide, 2001*
13. *Watch this Place: The City of Adelaide Public Art Policy 2001–2006, The City of Adelaide, 2001*