

# Back to the City? the re-berth of coal

LISA SLADE & GERALDINE BOBSIEN



Allan Chawner, *Pasha wave*, 2007, digital print. Collection Newcastle Region Art Gallery. First exhibited in *Float: watercraft in art*, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, 2007

## LISA SLADE

Anyone who has ever travelled along Newcastle's main street could be forgiven for wondering what happened to the good people of Newcastle. Abandoned buildings, boarded-up shopfronts, empty footpaths and vandalised street furniture suggest the occurrence of some sort of apocalypse, a far cry from the hard sell of developers peddling the part-fiction of Newcastle's post-industrial recovery.

*Back to the City*, a temporary urban art project, was staged in and around the city's centre in January and February this year. Under the artistic directorship of Professor Steffen Lehmann, the project invited collaborations between artists, architects and landscape designers.<sup>1</sup> Rather than the intended outcome of bringing Newcastle's revitalisation into focus, the project brought into focus Newcastle's hiatus.

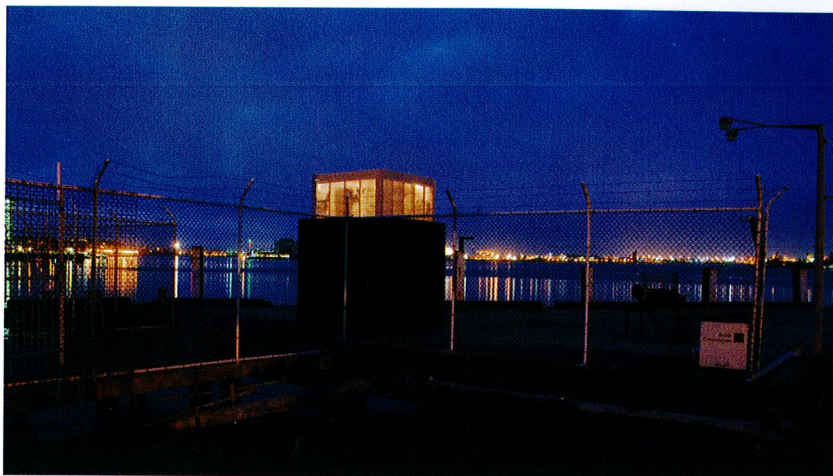
Newcastle, like every Australian city, has its share of commemorative sculpture. My personal favourite is the coal monument, an ornate sandstone plinth adorned with a cube

of black coal. Created in 1909 (long before Rachel Whiteread's ironic non-monument of a cast resin plinth in Trafalgar Square, London), Newcastle's coal monument seems an apt emblem for the uncomfortable fit of public art in the steel city. The literal nature of this paean to industry was the starting point for one *Back to the City* team.

*LIGHThouse* by Izabela Pluta, Brian Suturs, Paulo Macchia and Philip Pollard took its formal cues from the absurdity of the coal monument, and chose as its focus the workings of Newcastle Harbour, the world's busiest coal port. By day, the black cube framed strategic views of the harbour while at night, the cube became a beacon on the foreshore.

Undoubtedly the most successful aspect of this work was its location on a former tugboat berth. The dock, normally out of bounds to the public, was reclaimed by the team and their visitors, affording the public unprecedented access to the harbour. Perhaps public art works best when it is not quite art. Former Novocastrian Marcus Westbury was on to something when he championed the reclaiming of disused





Izabela Pluta, Brian Suters, Paulo Macchia, Philip Pollard, *LIGHThouse*, 2008, mixed media installation. Courtesy the artists. Photograph by Izabela Pluta.

seed into Newcastle. At risk from vandalism, this work along with an adjacent *Back to the City* work, *Preserved Fish* by Tricia Flanagan, Geoff Whitnall and Ayumi Matsuzaka, was open to the public during limited daylight hours only. Surely one of the advantages of public art is that it is unfettered by the restrictions placed on art museums. With deference to Nicolas Bourriaud, why should public art keep bank hours?

If the measure of public art's success is the degree to which it is incorporated into the everyday lives of the public, then *Living Room* by Victoria Lobregat and Josephine Vaughan was a triumph. A cozy domestic scene was translated into a functioning bus shelter and located to a city bus stop. Romance novels, needlepoint and Tupperware were installed in the walls of the shelter, and cushions and a coffee table provided a welcome relief from the logocentrism of capitalist advertising that usually adorns such sites. *Livesites!*, a Newcastle city activation project, had similar success in recent years when they invited choristers to perform on inner city buses, while in Scotland a bus converted into an art gallery receives more visitors than any other gallery in the country. These parasite models of art intervention use the city's existing architecture and services. Dismissed as not quite art, they quietly subvert the capitalist demands placed on the city's architecture and its citizens.

Unfortunately, the *Living Room* was de-installed at the end of the project, leaving bus travellers wondering what happened to their shelter and forcing school kids in wet weather to stand in the alcove of the adjacent hotel while waiting on a bus. *Living Room* could be read as an antidote to the model of destination



Sylvia Azzi, Ruth Goodwin, Gionni Di Gravio, Caroline Hale, Ann Hardy, Varelle Hardy, Jason Harvey, Elizabeth Milgate, *Breath of Life*, 2008, mixed media installation. Courtesy the artists. Photograph by Lauren O'Brien.

architecture and the call for landmark monuments that seem to be currently casting its spell. Tacitly embracing a Maslovian approach to public art, this work begs the question: why give the punters erudite puzzles when they need shelter? Most interestingly, not only was the *Living Room* spared the harsh vandalism that many of the other works suffered; in the weeks following the de-installation came reports of lounges installed on top of inner city bus shelters in Newcastle.

Newcastle Harbour as a contested, politicised site was also the focus of *Surrogate Trojan* by Richard Goodwin, Adrian McGregor and Russell Lowe. In their work, a shipping container placed on a bed of canola seed screened video footage of political activism. The site selected for this work was the newly developed Honeysuckle Precinct, its lively night scene lying perilously close to Hunter Street's dereliction. *Surrogate Trojan* directly referenced the 2003 Greenpeace blockading of the floating dock that prevented an international grain trader from sneaking 57 000 tonnes of genetically modified canola

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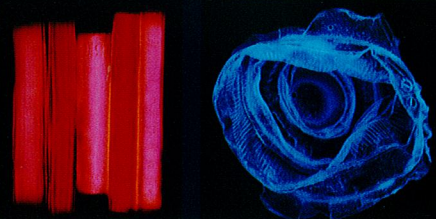
**Site addiction: Back to the Generic Post-industrial City**  
**GERALDINE BOBSIEN**

There is much to say about *Back to the City*. There is the exploration of the creative outcomes of cross-disciplinary

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Victoria Lobregat, Josephine Vaughan, *Living Room*, 2008, mixed media installation. Courtesy the artists. Photograph by Lauren O'Brien.



Peter Brock tribute, Mount Panorama Motor Racing Circuit, Bathurst. Courtesy Bathurst Regional Council.

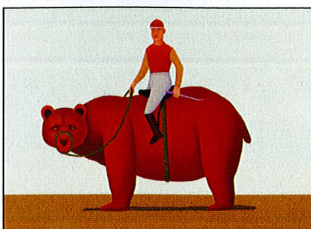
collaborations and the social engagement of some of the more political works on show, and they cannot all be essayed here. Instead, this article will focus on the current groundswell for site specificity and the implications of this addition on the way we move about the city as urban museum. Our cities evidence increasing levels of over-interpretation. 'Sense of place' is used as therapeutic remedy for revitalisation projects in urban development and art is used as prescription for a perceived identity loss.<sup>3</sup>

Site specificity has become the foundation for most contemporary public art briefs and alongside this, there is a growing need to investigate the consequences of a voracious culture industry intent on interpreting so many aspects of our lives in the public domain. What beckons to be explored amongst the flurry of revitalisation projects in Newcastle<sup>4</sup> and beyond is the erosion of free spaces (the 'useless' spaces,

the 'terrain vague') and the complicity of contemporary urban art in the 'privatopias' emerging as waterfront playgrounds from brown-field sites throughout the country. So how can urban art resist this duplicitous relationship with real estate and act as double agent in redevelopment projects? How can artists resist the earnest calls for our very own landmark work of art?<sup>5</sup>

Some of the most interesting writing on urban art comes from cultural geographers and urban designers who take the phenomenological reflections of Michel De Certeau and apply them to the way we function in space, and the way bodies, subjects and built environments are interlinked and enmeshed.<sup>6</sup> Catherine De Lorenzo's critique of *Tied to Tide* by Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford is a very good starting point for this idea of urban art as double agent; one that reveals an approach based on the more successful elements of a wider installation practice that acknowledges the importance of the sensory aspects of a work. *Tied to Tide* sits on Sydney Harbour as part of the makeover of inner-city industrial suburbs yet maintains a different value system to the 'profiteering around it'.<sup>7</sup> An installation in constant state of change, it is 'free from the need to inform, improve or impress ... it does it all anyway as the hypnotic arrhythmia of the bobbing and spinning ladders invite us to look beyond the work to the wider setting. In a radical gesture to the open and public nature of the site, the work appears to resist the idea of a strong gestalt in favour of a concept of interdependency'.<sup>8</sup>

It was clear from the beginning that *Back to the City* intended to question ideas of urban revitalisation. Unfortunately, the collaborative teams were restrained by a thematic brief with a well-trodden emphasis on site and context. There were several works in this exhibition that maintained a phenomenological point of difference and these works all activated the viewer in space. In some cases, this was not the intent. In order to enter a selection process, the collaborators were required to address the brief and this insisted on a contextual relationship to site (it should also be noted that many of the submissions referred to past-use as a form of site specificity). In this way, *Breath of Life*, (an installation that included the collaborations of architect, artists, archivist, environmentalists and sociologist),<sup>9</sup> was tied to site in that the mini-windmills that turned poetically, albeit briefly, on Obelisk Hill referred to the windmill that once stood on the site – a windmill that had its own double agency as navigational ships' beacon and seed mill. Like *Tied to Tide*, *Breath of Life* became a double agent. It referred to site but also operated on a level that provided scope for viewer engagement. It was both tied to the brief (historically and site specifically) but it came adrift when viewed as an immersive work providing pleasure as the objects responded to the weather, the time of day and the changing sky-scape.



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In *Back to the City*, works like *Breath of Life*, *Living Room*, and *Harbour Lights* by Peter Tonkin and Robert Owen, provided for an encounter that Claire Bishop refers to as crucial elements of a work's aesthetic impact: absurdity, eccentricity, doubt or pleasure.<sup>10</sup> These works maintain a phenomenological presence in the here and now. They allowed for a pause and space for viewer engagement that sits outside the constraints of site specificity where over-prescription denies the potency of chance recollections and reflection. For a closer look at this interpretation in public space, it is useful to consider the memory frenzy present in recent urban art commissions. As public art continues to be used to 'authenticate' the unique qualities of place, it contributes to an approach based in cultural tourism that identifies a city as 'different' from others. Public art becomes a tool for product differentiation. More and more we see public spaces tied to programmatic functions – to the activation of space. Main-street and precinct committees and community cultural development organisations use place activation and public art as a tool for attracting custom; where empty and sometimes evocative sites, once anarchic and open for interpretation, once wild and unregulated, become targets for 'activation'. This can also be seen as an extension of a wider makeover culture where the need to renovate our bodies, our homes, our gardens, our public spaces is compulsive.

When the massive coal freighter, the Pasha Bulka, grounded onto the reef at Nobbys Beach in June 2007, there was an overwhelming and anarchic reaction by locals. Songs were written, bumper stickers made and stubby holders

produced and sold. These memorials were all created without the sanction of institutional authority and with overwhelming local embrace. An official memorial has now been proposed using part of the rudder left behind when the ship was finally hauled off the reef. This memorial has the potential to undermine the potency and larrikin appropriation by the city's unruly citizens, best reflected in the Pasha Bulka memorial stubby holder. This is part of a wider commodification of communal yearning where pedagogical, historical memory overrules the perceptions of locals (in this case, Novocastrians) who know exactly who they are and where they are from.

There is another recent example of this anarchic memorialising in the form of a local response to the death of Australian motor sport legend Peter Brock in the town of Bathurst, in central west NSW. The public response to his death was an extraordinary outpouring of grief in written messages inscribed lovingly in permanent marker on the concrete barriers of Mount Panorama, the racetrack that made him a legend. The local council painted over this unofficial memorial and instead commissioned a public art project that has since had a lukewarm reception in the town. This has to raise the question: why weren't the messages plastered along the concrete barriers memorial enough?

#### Notes

1. *Back to the City* involved sixteen collaborative teams and is the third in the Creative Cities series first held in Berlin (2002) and Brisbane (2004). [www.backtothecity.com.au](http://www.backtothecity.com.au)

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2. Billed as 'The art show that believes there is life outside the galleries', *Not Quite Art* was broadcast as a three-part ABC TV series during October 2007.

3. Brendan Gleeson in 'Practice Review: Deprogramming planning', *Urban Policy and Research*, Vol. 22, no. 3, Sept. 2004, pp. 315-22, comments on the rise of private sector interest and the marketing of 'communal yearning' as a commodity. He also questions the assumption that social integrity is declining in the face of globalisation.

4. Newcastle today is undergoing the inevitable post-industrial city makeover with public and reclaimed industrial space treated for revitalisation and reactivation. In 2005, a cultural tourism policy was put in place by Newcastle City Council alongside a revised public art policy. Honeysuckle Development Corporation also commissioned a public art strategy to sit alongside the flurry of development taking place on the harbour. Council has implemented a Civic and Cultural Precinct Masterplan alongside a \$35 million redevelopment of the Newcastle Region Art Gallery, and the NSW State Government Cities Taskforce has developed a Draft City Centre Plan and City Revitalisation program for Newcastle.

5. Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* is often cited as a major factor in the revitalisation success of Gateshead in the north of England. This idea of the landmark is interesting now that commissioning bodies all seem to want one. In 2005, a feasibility report was requested by Newcastle City Council for the commissioning of a drawcard work of art in one of the city's civic parks.

6. Brian Morris, 'What we Talk about when we talk about 'Walking in the City'', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 5 September 2004, p. 675.

7. Catherine De Lorenzo 'Urban undercurrents', *Urban Design International*, Vol. 10, 2005, pp. 189-98.

8. De Lorenzo, pp. 189-98.

9. *Breath of Life* team: Sylvia Azzi, Ruth Goodwin, Gionni Di Gravio, Caroline Hale, Ann Hardy, Varelle Hardy, Jason Harvey and Elizabeth Milgate.

10. Claire Bishop, 'The Social Turn: collaboration and its discontents', *Artforum International*, Vol. 44, no. 6, 2006.

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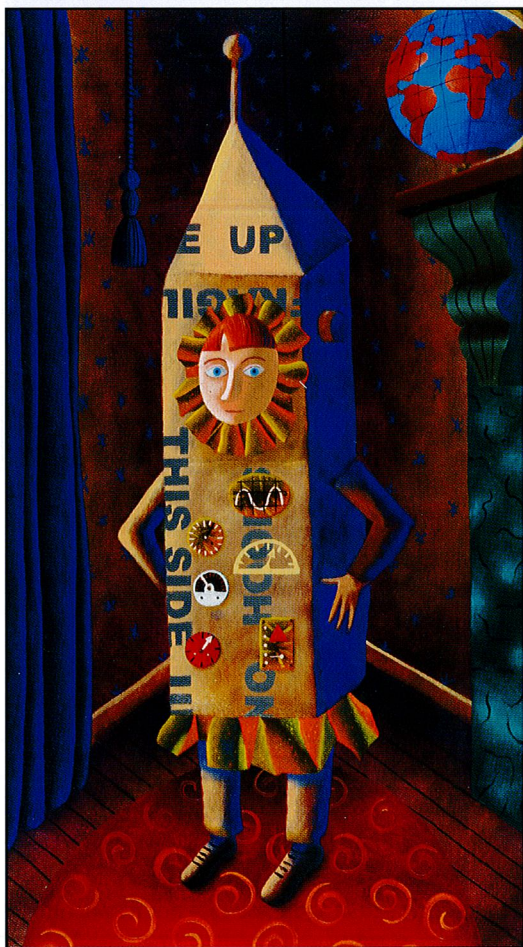
*Back to the City*, an initiative of s\_Lab space Laboratory for Architectural Research & Design, took place in Newcastle 24 January to 17 February 2008. The project was accompanied by a symposium at Newcastle Region Art Gallery (31 January), and a publication featuring related Berlin, Brisbane and Newcastle events is forthcoming.

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