

## **Abstract**

This paper will examine how university art and design education can engage productively and profoundly with community. Taking as its key case study the *Treatment* Public Art project developed by Deakin University in tandem with Melbourne Water and the City of Wyndham in Melbourne's west in 2015 and 2017, this study will outline the assorted ways in which *profound* and *ongoing* dialogue and collaboration with a specific community and its varied constituencies can, and should, be core business of tertiary creative arts study. It will argue that such a pan-disciplinary partnership model not only provides professional practice pathways for students, but achieves a social and cultural value that meshes research, teaching and community-building in mutually beneficial ways.

As a riposte to the often erroneous, if persistent, accusation that art and design education does not prepare students for 'real world' encounters and engagement, the *Treatment* project has sought to build cultural resilience through dialogue, creative expression and collaboration. This paper will examine how such a project serves to build a complex skillset in students that combines dexterity across art making, curatorial practice, project management and socially-engaged community engagement strategies.

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## Public Art and Resilience: Building Socially-Engaged Practice Through Art Education



Zoe Scoglio, *The Sedimentary Collective*, 2017

The gallery system and the academy are, in our contemporary epoch, static and overly beholden to the dictates of capital. In this paper we explore how public art can be used as a mechanism to enrich our connection to place and extend our pedagogical terrain. In particular, we circumscribe a core skill/modality that is rarely prefaced in art education: the practice of resilience. In talking to this notion, we apply it to the student in the art school, the academic in the institution, and the community in a place. By doing this we explore the social and affective relations between people, bespoke experience, and the total work/curated event.

*Treatment* is a public art project focused on the 130 year-old, 10,000 hectare water treatment plant, south of Werribee, on Melbourne's Western fringe; it challenges us to consider our relationship to waste and the site's histories, cultures and technologies. There have been two iterations, in 2015 and 2017. While elaborating on the project's ambition in this paper we discuss the possibilities for the temporary work of art in the public sphere to be understood as a refrain, that captures the affective qualities of a space, time and cultural circumstance. We synthesise community engagement and creative practice to offer the student a more holistic and complex understanding of how we make art and whom it serves. Art, manifested in a unique territory such as this, becomes a tool for constructing temporary, critical and resilient communities. This paper is therefore provisional, in that it establishes a theoretical frame for the reading of discrete experiences and the overall work, and at the same time brings to light those moments when in the practice of resilience, a space for learning unfolds.

Werribee is widely perceived through a reductive prism, as a liminal smelling zone between Melbourne and Geelong. Due to the lie of the land and its distance from Melbourne, the region was

chosen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century as the city's site for treating effluent. While not visible as a facility (or acknowledged as an important agricultural hub) no one travelling the Melbourne-Geelong road regularly could ever be entirely oblivious to the presence of the 'Metro Farm', which can waft into consciousness quickly, penetrating hermetically sealed cars with a stunning olfactory potency. Most travellers remain oblivious to the histories of the place they drive past – for 80 years home to a bustling community of people (upwards of 600 at its peak), who worked and lived on the farm, but until the advances of capital and technology made them redundant in the 1970s. Treatment is a meditation on how we build and celebrate resilient communities, not just in the way we literally come together (in what we eject and what is untreatable), but in the way it challenges the perceptions of place while eliding the diversity of cultures and histories through a cultural (public art) frame.

### **Contemporary Art, Waste and Value**

The inference that the gallery might be redundant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century speaks to the complex and commodified role of the object in contemporary art. According to Hito Steyerl (2017, 182-189), contemporary art is mostly an accelerant for capital's infusion into everything, for a complete transition into a post-democratic, hyper-individualistic world of digital images. Granted, people come together in the white cube, some from contrasting demographics, but is the contemporary art gallery capable of a critical register beyond capital, sloganeering and the mutual back-slapping of a group of people that only speak one language – the language of contemporary art?

For both Hito Steyerl and Tony Bennett contemporary art emerges in an "exhibitionary complex" dominated by a system of entrenched labour exploitation and mega-exhibitions – museum shows, biennales, and triennials (Bennett, 2017, 347). The art museum, historicised and rationalized by Bennett as a truth producing technology, able to immerse the workers and others in the 'improving influence of middle-class' has transcended its own conceit to showcase the increasing dependence art has on the machinery of global capital (Bennett, 349). For Bennett, this has meant a 'marked diminution of any concern to bridge class divides' (Bennett, 349). Steyerl is more strident: contemporary 'art is a networked, decentralized, widespread system of value' that 'gains stability because it calibrates credit or disgrace across competing institutions or cliques' (Steyerl, 2017, 182). We would like to say that contemporary art has a use value, but the conditions – the museum, the academy, the biennale – in which it emerges, means its effects are most often anodyne, a waste of time and material.

As a collection of energies ready to be deployed, the student in the art school, like the worker in the factory before them, is connected to a production line that we might crudely describe as one of train and display. Although the material, and immaterial insights and practices introduced to students

during their time at art school nominally critique ‘hegemonic neo-liberalism’, the academy (Srnicek and Williams, 2016, 76), and the population it supports, is beholden to those very same totalising forces. As funding lifelines to the arts are increasingly cut-off, commercial galleries close and their directors transform themselves into mobile gallerists, the artists produced in tertiary art programs increasingly have limited options. The traditional feedback loops, including the one that leads back into academia, are breaking down. Internships, the casualisation of labour in the arts industry and academia, and our digital technologies, increasingly challenge the model of train and display. Art school curricula challenge this model in a variety of ways, however as the academy narrows its perspective on what constitutes a successful undergraduate trajectory (i.e. employability), it is incumbent upon those programmes to offer learning experiences outside of the academy walls, in real life contexts. This is partly because there are burgeoning vocational opportunities for artists to work with and for communities, and because these social practices in the expanded field are seen by artists as hugely compelling creative modalities. In this way pedagogy, like the experience of art, becomes situational.

### ***From Thing to Life***

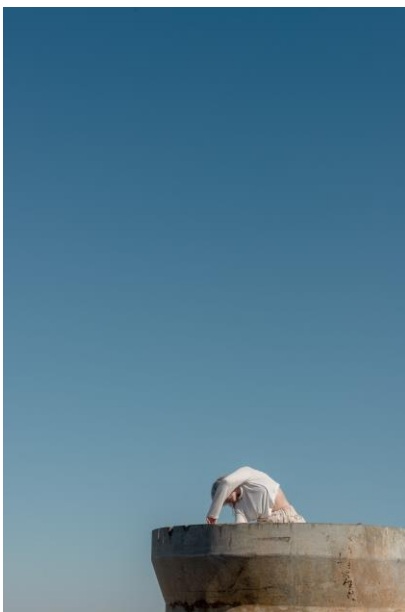
*If we understand place as an unstable, shifting set of political, social, economic and material relations, and locality as produced and contested through a set of conditions that we might describe as a situation, our experience of works which truly produce remarkable engagements with place will be characterized by a sense of dislocation – encouraging us no longer to look with the eyes of a tourist, but to become implicated ... (Doherty, 2009, 18)*



*Treatment Bus, Western Treatment Plant, 2017. Photo: Sean Loughrey*

*Treatment: Flightlines* used a fleet of buses to carry audience members to eight works (by ten artists), spread out over a 60 kilometre route. It covered a diversity of sites: vestigial forest; the disbanded township of Cocoroc; old infrastructure junkyard; the modernist information centre; the pondage and bio-solids precincts. The audience, friends and strangers alike, were confined to a mini-bus, left to view the sublime nature of the landscape – vast ponds, technologies, and extraordinary birdlife. The visual and olfactory complexity is a sensory overload into which artists are required to position themselves and their work. It takes dexterity to negotiate the scale, contexts and diversity of the plant, and crucially, to get the audience to redirect their attentions from nature and civic engineering to art. Not least is the need for the curators to build a holistic experience, to stitch the artworks together as a coherent journey from start to end.

On 21.4.2017, the first fleet of buses departed the Melbourne Water Discovery Centre en route to the first cluster of artworks at Cocoroc. At 9.30am, at the first site, the second bus in the fleet got bogged in a junkyard full of old sewerage infrastructure. In an iterative work by Melbourne-based artist Zoe Bastin, as the performers got to the end of their routine, it dawned on them that the bus was not going anywhere. On instinct, in response to the aesthetics and affective qualities of the junkyard, they kept performing, contorting and conjoining their bodies with each other and the old infrastructure in a durational work that suddenly, potentially, had no end. The performers kept moving to the rhythms of the place, their bodies growing tired to the accelerated and urgent sounds of the tyres spinning in the mud. Eventually, after 20 minutes of what was meant to be a 6 minute work, the performers drifted back into the infrastructure. The audience endured, and took it upon themselves to extricate the bus from its predicament. They got out and pushed.



Zoe Bastin, *Milk with One Please*, 2017



Treatment Bus bogged, photo: Megan Evans

This incident cohered the logistics of the event with its concept. The system was clogged, and it was in its failure that the total work emerged, from the re-scheduling of buses, to the placation of irate people, and the stretching of time for performers/participants. The moment the audience stepped onto the bus, they were caught in the total work of art: mud, shit, art, broken down buses. The variables, beyond the affective elements of the works themselves, could not be controlled. In the sewage treatment plant the thing (artwork), up for production in the art school and contemplation in the museum, becomes an intensity inside a continuum of experience that cannot be readily distinguished.

In the middle of the old township, the band played on, and on. Fiona Hillary's four guitarists played a set list for the future over an entire day, without a break in sound. Using Melbourne's first water tower (bluestone c. 1845) as a giant amplifier the mournful chords could be heard from hundreds of metres away, drifting across the fields and old foundations of the disbanded town.  $37^{\circ}57'02.5''S$   $144^{\circ}38'02.0$  (directly referencing the GPS coordinates of the tower) amplified the affective qualities of the site, affectively becoming a clarion call to abstraction. The neon shapes, based on topographical views of the plant, and the wall of sound, bouncing around the bluestone arches of the interior, captured the audience in their own resonant bodies. Upon entering the space, in which the sonic wash drowned out discernible notes, the experience was all consuming, a moment where subject and object blurred in both the observance of the scene, and the experience of it.



Fiona Hillary,  $37^{\circ}57'02.5''S$   $144^{\circ}38'02.0$ , 2017

Franco Berardi suggests that 'art is the process of producing refrains, the creation of tuned rhythms ... singular projective structures that make harmony (or disharmony) possible' (Berardi, 2009, 135). In feedback and reverberation Hillary hints at a refrain of both dissolution and redemption, as does the bogged bus at Zoe Bastin's work. The ordinary strictures, around which we understand art, become porous so that if only for a few minutes, in getting caked in mud while pushing the bus, or letting the sonic waves created by the guitarists and the bluestone water tower wash through the body, we 'reopen the channels of communication between individual drifts and the cosmic game' (Berardi, 2009, 137). Art becomes the refrain through which a diverse collection of people – from the cultural elite of Melbourne city and academia, to birdwatchers interested in the Ramsar listed site and ex-residents of the old company town, and young and old members of the Werribee community – tune in to the technologies, histories, and the cultures of the region.

The buildings and infrastructure, including the water tower, the swimming pools and the junkyard are cyphers of the profound social connections that formed and sustained Cocoroc up until technology and modern transport undermined its viability. The project is tuned into community with the clear understanding that many of the former residents, whose lives were formed and shaped around these sites, are a key constituency for the work. For them, many in their 70s and 80s, the site has a sacred quality, the embodiment of a resilient community formed through sharing provincial isolation, the unique ecology, and working for the same employer. These former residents are a vital part of the experience of Treatment as 'performers' who are often delighted to share anecdotes and knowledge with strangers sitting next to them on the bus. They, as much as Bastin's and Hillary's artworks, bring Cocoroc back to life, offering living proof of the connection between resilient social ties and attachment to place.

### ***From Social and Affective Engagement to a Framework for Learning***

In the instant the bus bogged, a logistics network comprising of the curators, paid coordinators and production staff, community volunteers and Deakin University students, kicked into gear. Linked by mobile phone and walkie-talkie, 25 people doubled down on their responsibilities. Student co-ordinators at the information centre rescheduled the timing of the buses, and activated a charm offensive to placate confused audience members. At Cocoroc, student site-coordinators were re-directing buses, people and artists as the whole timetable was re-structured for the 70 separate busloads of people travelling through the site over the course of the day. This too, in retrospect, was a refrain, capturing chaos and reframing it to admit that these diverse works, practices and people, were conjoined in an unfolding situation. They embodied Berardi's call to a counter-system moving



collectively, towards a point not consciously known, away from the closed knowledge systems and 'semiotic flows' of post-capitalist production that the museum captures (Berardi, 130). This was an unsanitised experience of a sanitary (not exhibitionary) complex.

The focused scholarly study of socially engaged practice is still a rarity, let alone courses devoted to its practical application.<sup>1</sup> Theorists such as Desai and Chalmers argue for art education to be 'perceived more as social and aesthetic studies' crucial to all students from all disciplines; as a 'socio-cultural necessity' able to critique and re-shape the infosphere and the post-capitalist modes of production (Desai and Chalmers, 2007, 4). While the Treatment project was not a course per se, it did provide hands on training and experience to a diversity of undergraduate and postgraduate students at Deakin University in: production; event co-ordination; bus driving; and the PR enterprise of disaster management. The students were key agents in the event, empowered to make decisions, to speak about the situated works and the total project, and all the while learn how to calibrate the balance between coherence and consistency.

This syntax is the practical application of resilience. With so many variables (weather, technology, audience responses) one of the key learning exercises was to understand the delicate accord between the regularity of art experience and the potential for bespoke encounters. In seeking to ensure that each artwork was framed within the parameters of its maker's intentions, while at the same time understanding the fluidity and contested nature of such a delineation, the students were encouraged to be reflexive in these negotiations. Understanding that this meant mediating between the bigger picture view of the curators (their lecturers) and the specific visions of the artists, the students were asked to reflect on modes of decision making from consensus to agonism, to, sometimes, a desperate split-second unilateralism. When to employ consultative approaches, when to call for help and when to throw caution to the wind were both practical and philosophical conundrums rendered as practical reflexive-learning.

Audience members got on busses they knew they were not booked for, a small tiger snake made its way into the middle of Zoe Scoglio's work at the bio-solids precinct, and many audience members in the spirit of Allen Kaprow's happenings simply would not follow instructions. These are but a smattering of issues that require a tactical (resilient) response with little time to ponder. In this regard

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing the Centre of Cultural Partnerships at Melbourne University was being wound up following on from cutbacks at other universities that had extended curriculum to include socially engaged art practices. This follows changes at institutions such as UNSW Art and Design which discontinued its lively site-based unit Art and Environment. For a discussion on this see Lauren Carrol Harris' essay for Overland 'Are Australian Universities Creating Good Artists?' url <https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-221/feature-lauren-carroll-harris/>



*Treatment* was a plein-air classroom of situated, high stakes decision-making. While stressful in a way public art projects always are, the students were empowered to make mistakes, to say the wrong thing to the wrong person. In the same way that we teach in the studio that it is through failure that we learn and build resilience, this ethos also applies in the field. While the consequences of mistakes are higher in the live encounter, they are offset by the concomitant joys of both bearing witness to and helping to shape the audience's experience.

For Franco Berardi, a 'new conceptualization of humanism must be founded on an aesthetic paradigm, since it has to take root in sensibility' (2009, 133). This is a large-scale species-wide shift in consciousness that he is calling for, not just in art education. However it is in the making and experience of art that he argues we find positive signs of life and empathic relations with others and the world at large. In the works of Zoe Scoglio and Fiona Hillary there are temporal and sensate dimensions impossible to recreate here in text and documentation, in the art gallery, or the art school studio. The social and affective encounters that students, volunteers and audience are exposed to, in the wilds of the plant, take place in a space beyond conventional language and space. To successfully embrace and negotiate the chaos, they must learn to calibrate decision-making and response, to balance how each small act will play out against the whole. Only through an understanding that resilience is fundamental to both keeping the frame open and the audience alive to their own unique experience, can projects such as *Treatment* work as art and pedagogical instrument. Perhaps it was in the shared experience of being trapped inside a sewerage farm, with the common assaults on the olfactory sense, that no matter what cultural background, or social strata, we prove our collective experience and action is more than the sum of its parts.

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