

Urban intervention as a methodology for art practice now has a history spanning some fifty years. However within the discourse of Non-Objective art practice in Australia, urban intervention represents a relatively new innovation largely exemplified by one artist group – the Australian Centre for Concrete Art (AC4CA). In comparing the practice of AC4CA and internationally established artist Leni Hoffmann, this paper will analyze the role of urban intervention as a creative method within Non-Objective art. By referring to specific works from both practices, this paper aims to establish that within Australia, the use of urban intervention as a creative methodology for Non-Objective art practice is merely an extension of existing studio based practices that evades engagement with the sociopolitical facets of the urban environment.

*The Non-Objective World* from the Southbank Centre was a survey exhibition that toured four separate institutions across England, in 1992. Curated by Ann Jones, the exhibition hosted a number of prominent European abstractionists with whom the term Non-Objective art is often associated. Written by Joanna Drew and Ann Jones, the foreword to the exhibition's catalogue provides a synopsis of Non-Objective art: 'The term "non-objective" describes art which has no representational subject matter and is created from purely pictorial elements' (Drew & Jones, 1992, p.7). This approach to abstraction emerged in the early twentieth century through the paintings of European abstractionists who sought to emphasise the autonomy of paintings pictorial elements (line, colour, shape, form) through non-figurative, non-narrative based abstraction. The geometric simplification of the painted image would in turn assert the identity of painting 'as a flat surface rather than a window onto a fictive world' (Hammer & Lodder, 1992, p.12). Whilst the discourse of Non-Objective art has since expanded beyond painting to include sculptural and installation based modes of practice, the assertion that an artwork is above all else a self-referential, *concrete* reality remains the 'applied philosophy for contemporary non-objective art' (Argyle, 2007, p.2).

Non-Objective artworks in recent Australian art are predominantly painting oriented, employing a reductive visual language that reflects the artwork's physicality or form through a process of objectification (Davis & Téllez, 2010).

These artworks are frequently exhibited within specialised gallery spaces and rarely overflow into 'non-gallery' urban environments. One such exception to these conventions is the work of the artist group Australian Centre for Concrete Art (AC4CA) who take their name from the Concrete art movement which began in the 1940s. In 1944-45 American artist Max Bill

defined concrete art as realising abstract ideas through purely pictorial elements 'to create to this purpose new objects' (Staber, 1973, p.5). In its interest in non-figurative abstraction, Concrete art is said to operate within the broader ambit of Non-Objective art. Using these principles, the AC4CA produces interventions in the urban environment, constituting the majority of work made in this field of Non-Objective art in Australia.

Beginning in 2001, AC4CA have produced a number of large wall paintings throughout the city of Fremantle's urban environment. The artist group is made up of local artists and well as foreign artists operating within Non-Objective art practice. An artist within the group or invited by the group constructs a composition or design using the principles of Concrete Art, and the group then executes this design on a large scale on a public wall. Founding member of the AC4CA Julian Goddard describes these wall projects as 'an ongoing contribution to the community in an attempt to bring some joy and pleasure into the everyday fabric of Fremantle' (Goddard, 2004, p.5).

True to the ethos of Concrete Art, the AC4CA's wall works are strictly self-referential. Goddard defines the intention of the AC4CA as producing 'an aesthetic intervention in the public domain. By appropriating large city walls this intervention can be emphatic and powerful – but none of these walls carry any symbolic or representational messages' (Goddard, 2011, p.2). Goddard again reiterates that although these works exist within the public environment, the artwork 'denies any direct political, social or moral position' pertaining to that environment, 'other than to present an aesthetic experience mediated by art in places where that might not be expected' (Goddard, 2011, p.2). Fellow Non-Objective artist Kyle Jenkins describes the practice of the AC4CA as producing 'purely visual statements' in which their urban surrounds mark a visual 'point of difference' (Jenkins, 2005, p.2). From the writings of Goddard and Jenkins it would appear that for the AC4CA, these wall projects are self-sufficient, self-validating autonomous entities that operate separately from their surroundings.

In *Minimalism* (1997), writer David Batchelor discusses the autonomy of art as asserted by Michael Fried in his text *Art and Objecthood* (1967). 'In Fried's account ... the exemplary modernist work of art is autonomous ... in the sense that its value resides entirely within the work. It exists as if it were entirely independent of its surroundings, and more importantly, as if the viewer did not exist' (Batchelor, 1997, p.67). Batchelor continues, 'In viewing such work, the argument goes, the viewer is able to leave aside any local contextual consideration

... [in which] the contingencies of the viewer's time and place are put aside by the work' (Batchelor, 1997, p.67). In analysing the practice of the AC4CA and their interventions throughout the city of Fremantle, it is evident that these artworks remain largely compliant to the notion of modernist autonomy as summarized by Batchelor. Like Fried's 'exemplary modernist artwork', the AC4CA wall paintings typically evade any reference to their immediate surrounds and any 'local contextual consideration' pertaining to their wider *locale*.

*AC4CA Project 13* was designed by John Nixon and is located on Leake Street, Fremantle (Figure 1.1). Nixon's design has been realized on the back wall of a private carpark and is approximately ten metres high by twelve metres wide. The design sees the wall divided into eight even segments by alternating white and silver stripes. Whilst it could be argued that the design is made in response to the wall's dimensions, it ignores other physical attributes of the wall, such as the row of small ventilation grates about half way up, and a placard fixed to its surface reading 'PRIVATE PROPERTY Authorised Vehicles Only'. The carpark is secured by a cable gate and hosts the vehicles of nearby companies, such as Craig Mostyn Group and Razor Business Solutions. The carpark is largely closed in by walls and whilst it is open to the street it is not a pedestrian thoroughfare. In its formal composition the wall painting *AC4CA Project 13* makes no reference to its surroundings, either to the qualities of the wall itself (besides perhaps its dimensions), or to the private carpark in which it is located.

The AC4CA's rationale for this mode of abstraction's 'move into the public domain' (Goddard, 2011, p.2) is largely practical, in that large walls provide a scale for their paintings 'unavailable in galleries' (Goddard, 2011, p.2). For the affiliated artists, these paintings are simply an 'extension of their studio or gallery practice' (Jenkins, 2006, p.5) and bear limited significance or relation to Fremantle's urban environment in which they are realized. In essence, urban intervention is being used by the AC4CA as a method to achieve large scale Non-Objective paintings that in the words of Goddard, provide a 'visual effect that couldn't be achieved in any other manner' (Goddard, 2011, p.2).

Leni Hoffmann is an internationally renowned contemporary artist that also uses urban intervention as a creative method within Non-Objective art practice. Using brightly coloured plasticine Hoffmann creates interventions in the urban environment that in their formal composition make reference to the history of non-objective painting (Berg, 2004, p.257). These interventions are oriented towards the urban environment, and are 'based upon a thorough analysis of the situation found there, the specific architectonic characteristics, the

possible social functions and everyday points of reference' (Berg, 2004, p.260). Hoffmann explains that her work 'does not try to change a given site into something else. Rather, it catalyses its special features, which may have gone unnoticed up to that point' (Berg, 2004, p.248). Contrary to the AC4CA, Hoffmann's interventions assimilate with their locale as site-specific actions or installations.

In the work *Valis* (1997), Hoffmann removed an area of asphalt from the median strip of a main highway, and replaced the asphalt with a geometric composition of pure orange, yellow and green plasticine (Figure 1.2). The dimensions of this plasticine intervention were derived from the existing grass median strip, so as to assimilate with the site. The intervention was frequently activated in the turning circle of local public buses, in which the buses tyre marks would literally leave their imprint on the mutable plasticine surface. In discussing *Valis*, Hoffmann writes, 'The specific city set-up of Greve allows *Valis* to be viewed from all sides. Almost like a classical sculpture. Different from such, *Valis* mingles with its surroundings, it can never been seen on its own. In fact, *Valis* consists not only of the plasticine intervention, but appropriates the tarmac surrounding it, the geometrically formed grass islands, the street demarcations –which it turns into graphical elements' (Hoffmann, 1997, p.18). *Valis* thus exists reciprocally with its surrounds, both visually in the appropriation of surrounding features, and physically through the recording of passing traffic's tyre marks across its surface.

*Valis* was located in the city of Greve in Denmark on a main road that paralleled the cities Kulturhus. Hoffmann discusses the specificity of *Valis* in response to this location and the road in which it was installed. 'The road daily takes many people past the Kulturhus and Greve to their various destinations. When driving the destination is not important and the sights they fly past are not. ...Through *Valis* the endless flow of tarmac is put in relation with its surroundings. The viewer/driver now relates the street to himself and to the road's actual vicinity. A new thought space comes into existence, where there was formerly only a moment of passage' (Hoffmann, 1997). *Valis* is inclusive of and specific to the road, incorporating the road's social and functional facets as integral to the artwork's content. This integration of the intervention with its surrounds marks a significant methodological difference between Hoffmann's practice and the practice of AC4CA.

Designed by artist Jan van der Ploeg, *AC4CA Project 15* is located on Henry Street, Fremantle, on the wall of a private car park (Figure 1.3). The wall painting is approximately

twelve meters high by ten metres long. Adjacent to the car park is the historic Fremantle's Workers Social and Leisure Club and administrative buildings of the local University of Notre Dame. The historical Adelaide Steam Ship Company can also be seen from the car park. Like the previously discussed *AC4CA Project 13* the Henry Street wall painting makes no reference to these institutions or to the social and functional attributes of the private car park in which it exists. Unlike Hoffmann's interventions, the AC4CA wall paintings are self-sufficient and in their autonomy work to evade the socio-political facets of their surrounds. In effect *Project 13* and *Project 15* could hypothetically be re-executed in each other's locations, without significantly altering the content of the works. The same cannot be said for Hoffmann's interventions.

The work *Iluka* (2004) by Leni Hoffmann works in stark contrast to the paintings of the AC4CA and embodies a number of qualities that pervade Hoffman's wider *oeuvre* (Figure 1.4). Described by Hoffmann as a 'painting experiment ... a site- and action-specific task' (Hoffmann, 2004, p.262). *Iluka* consisted of a number of blue, orange, green and yellow plasticine balls. Hoffmann, two colleagues and an unknown passer-by then threw the plasticine balls haphazardly onto a nearby road. Hoffman says 'depending on their speed, passing cars transform the balls into different sized colour planes. The start of the action is determined by the artist, but the extent and form of the coloured surfaces is determined by the interaction of the possibilities in situ. An adventitious colour field appears' (Hoffmann, 2004, p.262). *Iluka* thus occurs in situ as a site-specific action, incorporating the physical, social and functional qualities of the work's locale. Whilst the work maintains its ties to Non-Objective art through a reductive, minimal aesthetic, *Iluka* extends beyond modernist autonomy to evoke notions of the social and the local through participation and temporality.

Participatory works appear consistently throughout Hoffmann's practice. The material qualities of plasticine provides a perfect avenue for Hoffmann's work, firstly as a vehicle for bold colour, but also in its ability to shift and change form, to be in a constant state of flux and to allow the viewer to physically engage in the work. Many of Hoffmann's interventions involve a plasticine arrangement on the floor of a building, gallery or urban area. Of these works, writer Konrad Bitterli says that the 'visitor, stepping and walking over it, leaves his imprints on the soft plasticine surface and, in this way, becomes a co-shaper, a so-called 'coop-worker'' (Bitterli, 1997, p.216). Hoffmann's work thus encourages the active cooperation of the viewer, allowing them to in turn physically comprehend and 'take in the work' (Bitterli, 1997, p.216) and so contribute to its configuration. As in *Iluka* and *Valis*,

participation from passers-by or local traffic becomes a method for infusing the work with a social element, whilst maintaining its ties to Non-Objective art practice through a reductive visual language of colour and form.

By situating her works within urban locales, Hoffmann's interventions take on an inherently temporal quality. Her works either exist for discrete durations that coincide with the artist's exhibition at a nearby gallery, or the interventions are left installed indefinitely, only to slowly deteriorate and disappear. In again referring to *Iluka*, Hoffman says that the work 'remains visible for only a limited period of time. Once *Iluka* has been formed by the speed of the cars flattening the plasticine balls, the same process continually undoes the artwork till the traffic gradually regains the road' (Hoffmann, 2004, p.262). Again the material qualities of plasticine aid this process in its inability to remain unsullied by its surrounds. Like the participatory facets of much of Hoffmann's work, this temporal, ephemeral quality works to tie the artwork to its surrounds, acknowledging the fluctuating nature of the urban environment as the work and its locale shift and change together. Whilst the AC4CA interventions are also temporary in that each wall project exists for a time before being replaced by a new painting, it is a *different* kind of temporality, and one that is not determined by the materials of the artwork or its environment.

In returning to Fried's text *Art and Objecthood*, Fried's argument for autonomy came as a reaction to the "literalness" of 1960s Minimalism (Lüthy, 2007, p.464). For Fried, the 'transcendental power of art' and the artwork's autonomy 'was destroyed by the merely literal and concrete presence of the minimalist objects' (Lüthy, 2007, p.464). His criticism of the Minimalists was directed at artist Robert Morris, whose text *Notes on Sculpture* (1966) promoted a focus on the contingencies of experience in viewing an artwork. For Morris, the minimalist artwork 'takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision' (Lüthy, 2007, p.464). The content of the work then is not limited to the physical parameters of the object itself, but is instead manifest through an 'extended situation' that includes 'the sculpture, its surrounding space and the viewer' (Morris, 1966, 103). It would appear that Hoffmann complies to Morris' ethos, employing a sensitivity towards her work's 'extended situation' in order to situate her interventions in the most appropriate *site*.

In writing for the catalogue of the exhibition *Skulpture Projekte Munster 07* (2007) writer Knut Ebeling discusses the increasing importance of 'site' as it relates to contemporary art

discourse. Ebeling states that contemporaneously, 'site plays just as central a role as the work once did. Today, the situational reference is part of a contemporary artwork's standard equipment ...The contemporary artwork defines, demarcates, inspires and transforms sites. It has become a site-defining – and thus also a site-dependent – undertaking' (Ebeling, 2007, p.449). The AC4CA wall projects fail to compliment Ebeling's descriptions. Whilst it could be argued that the AC4CA's 'emphatic and powerful' (Goddard, 2011, p.2) wall paintings transform their site visually and provide a 'point of difference' (Jenkins, 2005, 2) where before there was none, they essentially remain 'purely visual statements' (Jenkins, 2005, p.2) and hardly employ the work's wider situational reference –that is its physical, historical and sociopolitical attributes – as integral to its "make-up."

In summarising, it can be deduced that the role of urban intervention within Hoffmann's practice is to facilitate a reciprocal relationship between the artwork and a site. In various ways Hoffmann aligns the work with the physical and sociopolitical facets of a locale, utilising these attributes as both physical and conceptual components of the artwork. For the AC4CA the site is relevant to the work such that it facilitates a large scale wall painting and any information pertaining to the wall's surrounds is deemed extraneous to the work. Hence the role of urban intervention within this practice is largely limited to logistics, and contributes little to the artwork's content. As the AC4CA exemplifies the work made in this field in Australia, this paper concludes that the use of urban intervention as a creative method within Non-Objective practice is limited to the facilitation of autonomous artworks that evade the sociopolitical facets of their locale. Within Non-Objective art in Australia, the use of urban intervention as a creative method for more site dependent, sociopolitical ends is yet to be explored.

## Figures



Figure 1: Nixon, J. (2009) *AC4CA Project 13*. Leake St, Fremantle.  
Researcher's photograph.



Figure 2: Hoffmann, L. (1997) *Valis*. Greve, Denmark  
Berg, S. (ed.) (2004) *Leni Hoffmann: beautiful one day perfect the next*, Freidburg: Modo Verlag p.137.



Figure 3: van der Ploeg, J. (2010) *AC4CA Project 15*, Henry St, Fremantle  
Researcher's photograph.



Figure 4: Hoffmann, L. (2004) *Iluka*, Hannover: Berg, S., (ed.) *Leni Hoffmann: beautiful one day perfect the next*. Freidburg:  
Modo Verlag p.32.

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