

Public Transport and Pedalling as Public Art: The Work of Mick Douglas

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Now that we can choose our own superannuation, I thought it was time to have a serious look at my own. I reviewed UniSuper's 'Socially Responsible' shares option, and wondered if I have enough working years left to absorb the risk that socially responsible investment imparts. Like many my age, marketing and economic forecasters would consider me to be a 'light green' consumer – all for saving the environment, careful in my shopping choices, even willing to spend more on a home appliance with a low energy rating.

So I felt a pang of dismay when I came across the following statement in the UniSuper booklet *Investing for the Future*: 'SRI [Socially responsible investment] products have a relatively short and untested record, particularly in Australia'. I felt annoyed. Why are we so risk-averse when it comes to environmental and social support? It then occurred to me that by extension, we are also quite wary of socially or environmentally responsible art, considering them part of a 'community' art that is done by someone else. Although I reduce my carbon footprint by catching a tram or riding a bike to work instead of driving, I've never considered these opportunities for a public art initiative. However, Melbourne artist Mick Douglas decided these modes of movement were sites for a public art, and that both presented unusual opportunities for a social and environmental art dialogue.

Working across industrial design as well as fine art disciplines, Douglas has developed an interest in environmentally-sound transport as a locus for public art. If you live in relatively flat Melbourne and need to get around, one green option is to go by bicycle. Another well-known option is to go by tram. Douglas has a keen interest in both for their ability to engage an art audience on a social level, with links to performative practice and happenings. The low-impact, grass-roots aspects of these modes of transport are a slow way of experiencing movement through a city, wherein one has to abandon oneself to an unfolding series of events without the separating layer that an automobile resolutely imparts. To ride a bike allows one to be engulfed in the smells, sights and sounds of a city, and independently experience a flexible and free flowing response to the traffic that raises the blood pressure of those behind the wheel. To ride a tram is to experience something similar but within the parameter of the public event, with a ready-made community following a predetermined route, the participants being an important element that shifts and changes as one trundles along.

Douglas has worked with both, most recently setting his focus on the bicycle, and this body of work will be reviewed later in this paper. However, much of his best-known public work thus far has centred on the tram, and extends well beyond Melbourne, as several other British postcolonial cities

have retained their tramways, including Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). Reflecting the collective nature of public transport to some degree, this series of tram-oriented projects has taken ten years, and involved many others. The events of this journey to date are thoughtfully reflected in the book *Tramjatra: Imagining Melbourne and Kolkata by Tramways* (2005), the title derived from combination of the English word 'tram' and the Bengali word for journey, 'jatra'.¹

A tram journey has many of the elements of a performative event: the central character in oneself, an instant audience (which one can blend into or entertain); readymade and tangential scripts; and the hardware of stage, backdrop, and a seat. Through the *Tramjatra* projects, the spatial and social experience that is a tram ride became the focus of a number of events and projects to investigate how a city can be imagined and experienced from within that shared travelling space. A collaborative connector by practice, Douglas developed a number of projects that focussed on the tramways, some through RMIT where Douglas works, some with other creative practitioners, and others directly with tram-related organizations. The projects had the logic of a tram ride – purposeful, unimpeded, direct, and ponderous in many ways, but also changing, surprising, relational and continuously unfolding. The boarding and disembarking public were also invited to embark on a journey that allowed a new awareness of the participatory experience of imagining a city by tram.

Douglas began his research with the idea of 'tracking': and an investigation of vehicles that 'track', both literally and metaphorically. This phase incorporated a series of student design projects, including one performed at Moomba called *Grooving*, and also an extended text, image and sound project by Douglas called *Tracking Vehicle*.² The latter formed an early blueprint for the *Tramjatra* book's format, and posed the question: 'What if a dialogue with the tramways of Melbourne were to mobilise an approach toward the design of art in public space?'

What the *Tramjatra* projects created was a kind of intersection where public transport and public art could connect, and so too driver and passenger, artist and audience. Through this merging tactic, Douglas deftly created a project that was hodological in nature, effectively a study in the emergence of pathways.³ Like the tram ride itself, *Tramjatra* recurs with no fixed end, if not through Douglas' work directly, then through the many participants in three countries – Australia, India and now also Pakistan – whose own paths have crossed the project at some point. In regard to relational aesthetics and inter-human relationships, the project had many players and many parts, its inclusivity part of an open-ended and evolving plan.

Tramways were built throughout the British Empire at the turn of the 19th century, including Karachi, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney. As we know from the Australian context, many of these have now disappeared, falling prey to the almighty automobile. Before long, the tramways of the city of Kolkata caught the attention of those on board this project series. At the same time that the conductors on Melbourne's trams were being replaced by ticket machines, Kolkata's tramways were under threat, their lines gradually being shortened and their funding

reduced. Douglas and his collaborators linked the two cities through a series of projects, which included exchanges involving artists, writers, tram workers, students, and of course, passengers.

Early in the series, Douglas found a key collaborator in Melbourne tram conductor Roberto D'Andrea, who in 1996 worked on Kolkata's trams dressed in his Melbourne conductor's uniform, issuing fictional tram tickets. This was part of an array of projects in both Kolkata and Melbourne, which raised consciousness about the state of tram travel in both former national capital cities. Ironically, even the first convicts to arrive in Melbourne did so on a cargo ship named HMS Calcutta. Such interlaced histories are characteristic of *Tramjatra*, where the present and the past fold into and back upon each other.

In the new millennium, the project had a larger, more formal iteration:

[The] tramjatra community gathered together for one month in Kolkata and then again in Melbourne in 2001 to produce temporary public events throughout both cities. These included sculpture and painting, tram exhibitions and film screenings, public forums and readings, a daily column in a daily newspaper, technical reviews of tramways and of course tram conducting and street performance. With a willingness to engage in the unique opportunities for dialogue, tramjatra seeks to extend us all beyond our current practices and understandings to open up the potential for ways that might produce a difference, both practical and artistic.⁴

As Catherine Murphy points out in her *Tramjatra* book chapter, 'Engaging Contradiction', the innate dichotomies of working on a public art project, particularly if it has a social agenda, are valuable only if the project can become engaged with its various publics to expose what may be 'suppressed tensions.'⁵ When those public art projects have attracted government funding, and the partial aim of the project is to magnify what is overlooked in other areas of public funding – in this case, the social and environmental value of public transport – a paradoxical situation arises. Murphy's knowledgeable essay on public art is one of the key texts in the book in terms of seeing the *Tramjatra* project series clearly within an expanded art context:

Public art practice has claimed that it can be more ambitious and less constrained than gallery-based work. As a result, public art has often been viewed as a different kind of art that is not critiqued the same way and through the same avenues as other art. So rather than examine public art as part of art discourse, public art debate has taken place around broader issues of site, public, audience and community.⁶

Most of the contributors to the book actually took part in the project in some way, either as artists, students, or writers. Two 'critical passengers', Jogi Panghaal and Suzie Attiwill, were particularly important to spreading the understanding of the project through the written media one so often sees being read on the tram: the newspaper. Attiwill wrote thirty articles for *The Statesman*, India's major English newspaper, inviting letters to the editor and other forms of participation, with even the West

Bengal Minister of Transport becoming a supporter. In Melbourne, a weekly broadsheet called *The Passenger* fulfilled the same role, and was produced by Panghaal, Attiwill and Neal Haslem. Yet the *Tramjatra* book is open, also putting forward the position of those asking hard questions of the project. Some viewed it as a media stunt or as a public art project that would amount to little in real terms, as the funding to keep trams running is a complex social and economic issue not easily disengaged from the capitalist paradigms that value private forms of transport, and the mass consumption they generate.

In 2005, tram conductors of Calcutta Tramways Company were invited to wear a uniform shirt designed by Douglas for one day in September. The sky-blue shirt portrays a lung on the front, with the tram routes of Kolkata and Melbourne traced on each side of the organ's image. Titled *Shared Lung*, the project explores the issues of sustainability, drawing attention to the role trams play in reducing air pollution, particularly when continued government support of the tramways is yet again under scrutiny. In a clever play on words, the *Tramtactic* website charts the progress of this ongoing project, highlighting air quality as a 'uniform' issue for all cities.⁷

The most recent exchange project in the tram series was organised by Douglas and Durriya Kazi, and occurred in Melbourne in March during that postcolonial extravaganza, the Commonwealth Games. The project took the form of a lavishly decorated tram, running the rails around the free City Circle line. Hailing from Karachi, Nusrat Iqbal and his team of vehicle decorators transformed this ordinary white tram in the Pakistani tradition of honouring the source of one's livelihood, so that it will prosper. The tram's elaborate surface decoration was composed of self-adhesive vinyl, cut into highly detailed birds, flowers, plant forms, and geometric patterns. The interior of the tram was also decorated, and the much-loved poetry of Pakistan was printed out on brilliantly printed 'tickets', forming a collectable set. A jiving and thumping popular Punjabi beat emanated from the tram as it transported its passengers both literally and metaphorically, around and around Melbourne and, simultaneously, an imagined Karachi. Unfortunately, as in many other modern postcolonial cities, the trams have not run in Karachi since the 1970s, and are now replaced by the buses that usually provide the blank canvas for the vehicle decorator's veneration.

In the *Tramjatra* book, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes of the class distinction in the Kolkata trams in the 1950s, describing them as 'neighbourhoods on wheels'.⁸ Douglas has recently turned his attention to another kind of wheeled transport conducive to social engagement, the even more environmentally sound bicycle. Similar to his approach in *Tramjatra*, his interest in exploring the social and environmental aspects of the bicycle emanated from his own commuting practice. Douglas is currently developing projects that, on a local level, complement the Victorian Premier's recent announcement that the Transport and Liveability Statement will deliver \$13 million per year for cycling and walking facilities in Melbourne, nearly double the current spend of \$7 million per year.⁹

Just before the beginning of the 2006 academic year, Douglas ran a Pedal Powered Vehicles Workshop.¹⁰ Participants worked over three weeks examining the latest developments in improved

rickshaws, work bikes, pedicabs, folding trailers, and trailers with cooking facilities – and then developed some of their own. The history of the human-powered vehicle is long, and the size of the international community that uses bikes for work is enormous. Countries such as India or China embrace the bicycle as part of their daily working culture, while in the West the bicycle becomes the vehicle of dissent against cities engulfed by cars. Forming various aspects of this broad picture are organisations such as the International Human Powered Vehicle Association and companies that manufacture recumbents and work bikes, through to grass roots movements such as Carbusters and Critical Mass, the worldwide monthly bike ride that occurs simultaneously in nearly 100 cities.

Douglas is currently working on scaling up another version of the bicycle as social and environmental consciousness conduit. The *Ride On Dinner* is 'a mobile conviviality event exploring human powered sustainability pedaled by anyone who wants to'.¹¹ It brings together those interested in a 'slow' and reflective mode of transport via a relaxed social engagement, with several eating stops along the way catered by the cooking trailer towed by one of the participants. The first event was a celebratory end to the Pedal Powered Vehicles Workshop, with 80 people taking part. A second, winter *Ride On Dinner* has since been held, and both have extended the *Tramjatra* model to an even more prosaic ethos. The ability to expand and collapse in scale, and combining the collective action of eating together as a group with a mode of transport that is individual but able to be massed, brings aspects of *Tramjatra*, of experiencing a city through a mode of transport, into a new and highly localised form.

Douglas' *Tramjatra* and pedal projects resonate as a public art that is both inclusive and agitprop, calling attention to issues that have no immediate remedy, but benefit from the creation of a space for discourse and engagement. As *Tramjatra* contributor Suzie Attiwill notes, Deleuze stated that 'art is never an end in itself.... It is only an instrument for tracing lines of life.... What it lays out are paths – it is itself a voyage'.¹² Similarly, in his chapter 'Still, Getting There', Soumitra Das notes the words of poet philosopher Rabindranath Tagore: 'I lie forever still and unmoving yet I never get a moment's respite . . . I am nobody's destination, I am only their means of getting there'.¹³

For the many of us who are 'light green', and as concerned about environmental sustainability as we are the viability and rigour of art, Douglas' inclusive art projects offer an unusual approach in their combination of conceptual art event and community engagement. His is a work that takes the risks of political statement and broad social commitment. For an art world where celebrity increasingly drives the systems of progress and reward, it is worth being reminded of an art that is founded in steady augmentation, connection to one's environment, and confidence in one's culture. As a mode of project-based action-research operating through psychogeographic vehicles, it continually erases and re-inscribes the line between the artist and audience, in the ride we all take to a collectively imagined future.

End Notes

- ¹ Mick Douglas (ed.), (2005) *Tramjatra: Imagining Melbourne and Kolkata by Tramways*, (Yoda Press, India and RMIT University Press, Melbourne, Australia).
- ² Mick Douglas (2005) 'Performance Code for a Tracking Vehicle', in *Tramjatra: Imagining Melbourne and Kolkata by Tramways*, pp. 250-251. See also Mick (Michael) Douglas (1997) 'A Tracking Vehicle', Master of Art durable visual record (unpublished), RMIT University, Melbourne, and the *Tramtactic* website. http://www.tramtactic.net/archives/projects/a_tracking_vehicle/index.html
- ³ Hodology is the study of pathways. See <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/transwiki:Hodology>
- ⁴ http://www.tramtactic.net/archives/projects/tramjatra_project_2001/index.html (accessed 4 June 2006).
- ⁵ Catherine Murphy (2005) 'Engaging Contradictions', *Tramjatra*, pp. 188-201. On the suppressed contradictions in the urban context, Murphy cites Rosalyn Deutsche (1991) 'Uneven Development: Public Art in New York City', in *Out of Site: A Social Criticism of Architecture* ed. D. Ghirardo, (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press) p. 172.
- ⁶ Catherine Murphy (2005) p. 190.
- ⁷ http://www.tramtactic.net/archives/projects/shared_lung/index.html (accessed 5 June 2006).
- ⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty (2005) 'Transports of Pleasure: Memories of Tramways in Kolkata and Melbourne', *Tramjatra*, p. 183.
- ⁹ In their report on the spending announcement, Bicycle Victoria's website states that, 'the time for bikes has come'. See <http://www.bv.com.au> (accessed 30 June 2006).
- ¹⁰ <http://pedalpvw.blogspot.com> (accessed 2 July 2006).
- ¹¹ <http://rideondinner.blogspot.com> (accessed 2 July 2006).
- ¹² Gilles Deleuze (1997) 'What Children Say', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, translated by DW Smith and MA Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press) p. 63, cited in Suzie Attiwill (2005) 'Passage', *Tramjatra*, pp. 145-146.
- ¹³ Soumitra Das (2005) 'Still, Getting There', *Tramjatra*, p. 65.