

## MONUMENTALITIES: PUBLIC ART AND THE CULTURE OF CIVIC BRANDING

**Biography:** John Vella was born in Sydney in 1969 and since 1996 has lived in Hobart with his wife Sonia and daughter Sophia Lucia. Since dropping out of architecture in 1988, he has travelled the world, served as a waiter, labourer and telemarketer, loaded trucks, worked in a phone book factory, completed a DipFA with Distinction at the National Art School Sydney, a BFA (Hons) first class and an MFA, (whilst lecturing in painting and drawing) at the Tasmanian School of Art, Hobart where he is currently the Acting Head of Sculpture.

John has developed independent and collaborative artistic projects that have been exhibited locally and nationally over the last 15 years. He has been a guest lecturer at a number of tertiary institutions and currently serves on the Contemporary Art Services Tasmania Board. In addition to having completed various public art commissions he has contributed to the development of Hobart City Council public art policy. John has been the recipient of Arts Tasmania Artist Development and Arts Industry Grants and Emerging and Established New Work Grants from the Australia Council. His work is held in public and private collections.

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### INTRODUCTION

Public art contributes to the heritage and style of the City, supports and expresses cultural life and community aspirations, and promotes the City as a creative and vibrant place, encouraging economic growth and private investment. <sup>i</sup>

The City of... is committed to developing it's cultural vitality. Strategic policy and investment decisions enhance and guide ...'s artistic life; encouraging artistic expression and community participation make it meaningful, authentic, and distinctive. <sup>ii</sup>

That communities, government schemes, philanthropists and developers acknowledge the potential for public art (in its various guises) to make a positive contribution to places and spaces is well documented. As an artist, and public arts policy consultant, I have sat on both sides of this proverbial fence gaining significant splinters (in unmentionable places) that have inspired me to compile this preliminary investigation of public arts' position in a universe of ulterior and often contradictory motives.



Figure 1 Chicago, Frankfurt, Paris, Sydney, Perth, Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo, Brisbane, Adelaide, Amsterdam, Moscow, Athens, Madrid

The contemporary neurosis catalysed by globalisation (and consolidated by initiatives such as the EU, and the various global trade agreements etc.) is that countries / cities are surrendering the characteristics that distinguish them. 'While the accelerated speed, access and exchange of information, images, commodities, and even bodies is being celebrated in one circle, the concomitant breakdown of traditional temporal-spatial experiences and the accompanying homogenisation of places and erasure of cultural differences is being decried in another...'<sup>iii</sup>This perceived homogenising of cultural civic specifics, be they language, commodity or architectural, stimulated by the virtual and actual mobility of art, artists, architects and designers, has created a discursive artistic hotpot that everybody wants and anyone can access.<sup>iv</sup> Mediated, articulated and accelerated by this (global and glocalised) culture of desire, are we in the process of engaging public art as a nostalgic mnemonic for a visible specificity lost or dying?



Figure 1 *Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao*

## THE BILBOA EFFECT AND THE ART OF PRECINCT:

The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao **is just one of the many** international Guggenheim modern art museums dotted around the world. It is, however, the newest and quite possibly the most prominent of all modern art museums in the world since its completion in 1997. **The structure of the museum itself is a piece of art**, and it is at the core of Bilbao, Spain's major river district revitalization project. If you're traveling through southern Spain, you MUST stop here to see this wonder of the modern world.<sup>v</sup>

Gehry's Guggenheim has triggered a civic pandemic infecting cities with a belief they can resurrect themselves via a single building or artwork (or building as artwork) and/or by affiliating themselves with an acknowledged cultural luminary.<sup>vi</sup> My emphasis on 'acknowledged' is intended to highlight the consensus – the tacit global agreement – that would seem to be an illogical antidote to the neurosis from which the desire to stand out from the crowd is formed. The irony is that in an attempt to 'stand out', the culture of contemporary public art has ostensibly determined a civic uniform - *the House of Gormley or Gehry*. Just as in fashion, names have come to be sewn on the outside of works and cities, maximising their marketing potential and investing the commissioners with a globally promoted (and sanctioned) cultural house. Big brands like big artists come at a big price but the question is what lies behind the purchase? Are we paying for art to compensate for the vacuum created by the genericisation implicit in globalisation?

Are we in fact shopping for the appearance, as opposed to the substance, of our civic identities? Surely we want our cities to age and operate with the gravitas of Judi Dench or Ruth Cracknell as opposed to Pamela Anderson, Michael Jackson or Danni Minogue. Surely we want our civic spaces to embrace and celebrate their misnomers and oddities rather than metamorphose into accepted (and familiar) visual terrains.



Figure 3 Judi Dench and Michael Jackson

The well intentioned protagonists of civic ‘nips’ and ‘tucks’ spruik... ‘An original commissioned work can make your workplace or community space more welcoming, comfortable, appealing and interesting. Possibilities include reception counters and furniture, decorative glazing, custom designed fittings, floor surfaces and soft furnishings, original paintings, sculptures, photographs, textiles or prints, sound or video installations...’<sup>vii</sup>

In this context ‘creativity’ translates as a rampant parasite often leaving artistic scars in the name of ‘beautification’ and giving artists a living.<sup>viii</sup> And so schemes concocted to inveigle funds for public art often become mechanisms that force / encourage art to happen in contexts that aren’t always appropriate or necessary. ‘Reception counters’ and ‘rubbish bins’ are thrown into the same basket as ‘video installations’ and ‘original paintings’ and so the original heartfelt aims ‘...to demonstrate a visionary understanding of the way in which art works can enrich... public buildings and spaces in the public arena and enhance the general public’s access to and understanding of contemporary art in all of its diversity...’<sup>ix</sup> get lost in translation.

What doesn’t ‘get lost’ is an art mediated through the ‘this goes with that’ headspace of the ‘accessory’ where the ‘something added or attached for convenience, attractiveness and employed to contribute to a general effect...’<sup>x</sup> aspects of its definition ring true. To artworks with an intimate and considered relationship to site this is an anathema and yet all too often the tide of public or political opinion creates civic harbours that collect floating cultural detritus.<sup>xi</sup> Whilst these ‘harbours’ often arise spontaneously, occasionally (and more insidiously) they manifest as precincts – cultivated to include art as part of their mediated and market researched geographies:

The unique Docklands environment is created by its waterfront and the dramatic backdrop of the City of Melbourne. Visible from many viewpoints around and across the waterways, the scale and scope of Docklands are critical factors informing the development of the art program. In responding to the Docklands environment, artists are encouraged to consider relevant themes, in particular, the strong water focus, Indigenous history, industrial history and urban interface. The public art of Docklands has a 24-hour impact and is intended to reach a broad audience of workers, residents, tourists and local visitors.<sup>xii</sup>

A relatively recent phenomenon is the contemporary city as arts precinct... Gateshead is the public art world’s Bilbao; an originally marginalised and industrialised nowhere it has been reborn as a cultural epicentre and tourist Mecca. Where Bilbao is Gehry, Gateshead is Gormley and his *Angel of the North* facts read like something out of a superhero’s compendium. ‘...seen by more than 1 person every second... 90000 every day or 33 million annually, 54 metre wingspan is bigger than a jumbo jet... height of 5 storey buildings...’<sup>xiii</sup> and so on ad infinitum.<sup>xiv</sup>

There is no disputing the fact that Gateshead has given local people ‘...the chance to participate and make their own works through events such as the local sculpture day... and work with artists of national and international standing...’<sup>xv</sup> what’s interesting is why the powers that be decided to push so strongly for public art. The pitch isn’t about a kind of cultural authenticity or integrity but about amassing an amazing array of anointed art celebrities. Deacon, Gormley, Moore and Goldsworthy are internationally recognised household names and so here it’s also about the art of tourist attraction; about the public not the art. Paradoxically, whilst deriving from the accessory mentality, this too creates a history of sorts, but it’s as much a history generated by the commissioning of a big pineapple or sheep... the buying in of large and marketable icons.



Figure 4 *Nike of Samothrace / Angel of the North* Anthony Gormley

In stark contrast another public angel - the *Nike of Samothrace* evolved from a very different place.

Samothrace, an island in the North Aegean ...offered a naturally spectacular site for architectural endowment, and it was in the *exedra* or portico of the elevated sanctuary of the Great Gods that this massive Nike was displayed, shown as if she were alighting on the prow of a ship. The sculpted prow itself was set in a pool of water, whose surfaces must have been ruffled by sea breezes... it makes sense for Demetrius to have advertised his victory at Salamis with a sculptural landmark to drive home his numismatic message. The Samothracian sanctuary, while remote, maximised the effect of the statue...<sup>xvi</sup>

In contrast to the ‘Nike’ of Gateshead, (sited in full view of a massive freeway) this angel was deliberately located in a remote location and evolved as a response to a local event. Unencumbered by the implicit demands of a civic promotional package determined by local government, this Nike existed (in its original location) as a poetic and isolated celebration.

‘Poetic’ and ‘isolated’ are terms rarely attributed to contemporary public artworks. Contemporary virtual/web culture determines that even physical isolation does not

necessarily imply 'difficult to access' and so the term 'remote' is more likely to be understood as referring to the television control than to a category of distance. In this context, on being commissioned to undertake preliminary research to develop a public art policy for the Hobart City Council (HCC), and encouraged to research towns with similar populations and demographics, seek out like-minded individuals (who had been recommended by others of proven worth/expertise in the field) I began by conducting *Google* searches. Downloading all manner and number of public art policies I realised that the very notion of 'previous best practice' implies a confirmed *a priori* assessment, a consensus of sorts and that this *Googled* consensus at the very least contributes to, and at times determines public art policy, and hence public art. In fact the selection and eventual commissioning of the consultancy firm that undertook to write the final HCC report was a function of them having had prior experience working on similar projects.<sup>xvii</sup> Their demonstrated expertise suggested they were up to the task (and why wouldn't it?) but it also suggested that 'THE TASK' in Hobart was similar to that of other cities and so it followed that tried and true strategies could be successfully employed, adapted and applied.

#### SALAMANCA SQUARE                      A CASE STUDY

Behind Hobart's historic waterfront is an open space where you can escape from some of the hustle and bustle of *Salamanca Place* and sit back, enjoy a coffee and cake and watch the restful fountain. Local musicians often perform in the area, particularly in summer, and it is not unusual to be able to enjoy singers, flautists, guitar and violin players and sometimes a string quartet. Shops, including galleries, restaurants and coffee shops and attractions such as Antarctic Adventure are located in the Square.<sup>xviii</sup>



Figure 5 Salamanca Square



Fig. 6 Il Campo Square (Sienna)

As a typical Anglo perversion of the Italian piazza, Salamanca Square comes complete with cafés, residential apartment balconies and the obligatory fountain. Religious/ historically determined, key civic infrastructure - grand buildings, churches and the like - often fringe Italian piazzas, whilst this square has evolved around the now defunct *Antarctic Adventure* (a kind of frozen *Disneyland* experience). It's a pleasant enough place but a dark side lurks beyond the façade... 'An owner of a (Salamanca Square) residential flat must not hang, or permit any person to hang, any clothing, sheet, blanket, towel or other similar item on the common property or on or from the exterior of the owner's flat so as to be visible from outside

the owner's flat.<sup>xix</sup> Festivals and events in the Square are often closed down early or never occur due to the residents (who by the way have chosen to live on the perimeter of a very public space) complaining about the noise. Piped music (Sinatra and the like) plays on loudspeakers specifically orchestrated to keep young people (that could be potentially problematic) away at night. A freestanding aluminium and steel megalith '*Curious Nature*' by artist Peter Wilson (based on the movement and rhythm of a folding wave), an Art for Public Buildings Scheme (APBS) project that arose out of (and in response to) the *Antarctic Adventure* development (remember it's now defunct) stands in a far corner.



Figure 7 *Curious Nature*



Figure 8 *Journeys to the Southland*,

Centrally sited in the Square, the bronze fountain (*Journeys to the Southland*) by the ubiquitous Tasmanian artist Stephen Walker has an amazing history all of its own, an example of the worst kind of public art as accessory... the hand me down. Sponsored by the Electrolytic Zinc Company of A/Asia Ltd and the Tasmanian Government and originally sited at the now infamous Risdon Cove, it celebrates the Dutch, British and French 'explorers' who discovered Van Diemens Land. No wonder that on having their land returned, the original Indigenous owners promptly decommissioned the work and returned it to the artist where it lay languishing in a shed only to be resurrected by the divine hand of the Salamanca Square developer.

Harbouring a genetic disposition for things European, I determined to transform this *aussi-anglo-wog-abo* melange through a simple mechanism. Under the cover of an artwork (entitled *TerraTowel*) and the 2001 Ten Days on the Island Festival, I freighted in the 120 towels of my entire extended family from all over the world and convinced the body corporate to allow the apartment residents to hang them on their balconies.



Figure 9 *TerraTowel*

As a metaphorical family reunion this work spawned all manner of bizarre negotiations and conversations that reorchestrated hierarchies of ownership and control. My early approaches to residents requesting towel-hanging permissions were sometimes met with rejections that manifested as *towel less* balconies. At the other extreme I received a phone call from an apartment resident asking meekly 'do you think Barry and I could hang our own towels on our balcony?'



Figure 10 *TerraTowel* residents

Reflecting on the art in the Square, one work resulted from the discretion of a visionary developer seeing the opportunity in a hand me down, the other from a well-intentioned government scheme whilst the third was the direct result of an artist making a self-funded work happen. Originally this paper went on to argue the 'success' of my work in the context of 'creating histories':

This is not to say that *TerraTowel* is better than the other works but merely to articulate the potential for artworks in public spaces to activate, provoke and challenge communities in ways that can develop memories as monuments and so enrich spaces in ways that are not about physical and/or permanent often expensive infrastructures. In this case the (read my) artwork was a temporary stimulus/ catalyst that in collaboration with the community, encouraged other things to happen... The stories, processes, discussion and controversy in effect created histories for the respective community...<sup>xx</sup>

Thankfully, on reflection I have been able to see, and consequently admit, that this is self-righteous crap. I have come to realise that the 'success' or otherwise of the Square and the artworks in it has to be seen in the context of the space, as opposed to the individual works within it, and it is their collective contribution, the 'melange' that brands and activates the Square. What I am proposing is that the potential for public artworks to afford a particularity to a site (what the civic desires) is as much a function of the perceived cultural mistakes (the hand me downs and the like) as it is the works determined by well crafted (and well intentioned) policies and committees.

#### SUMMARY

In often neglecting our differences and histories; so quick to impose marks, logos and badges on our civic skins we are missing the authenticity and beauty of the scars that are already there. Infected with a desire bred by a commodified, celebritised culture we fall for names with which to trade a cultural kudos. (*The Nike of Samothrace* is not about the ubiquitous tick or the 'just do it' mentality but about an honest desire to commemorate a specific historic event in a public space.)



Figure 11 *Nike of Samothrace with Nike swish*

Whilst I can't blame artists and their allies for accepting and encouraging public art funding and infrastructure they have a responsibility to advocate for works that go beyond the safety

net of client and community... to step outside of the existing models and mechanisms and continue to operate in the public domain as mavericks. However they also have a responsibility to encourage and apply a culture of civic hetro (as opposed to homo) geneity that is capable of accepting and articulating the danger implicit in 'consensus'. The internationally sanctioned success of major public art projects such as Rachel Whiteread's *House* and the like is in terms of the artworks' ephemerality (or ability to be erased), go beyond their physical constructs and create histories as memories rather than monuments.<sup>xxi</sup> However this 'success' must be seen in the context of certain works inability (or refusal) to disappear – our civic *plonk art* bunions - that allow us to come to terms with, and respond to them over time. In the context of civic quality control and selection these 'bunions' are mavericks of sorts (to be celebrated as such) that can only exist outside the precinct mentality.

## CONCLUSION

The civic exotic is ultimately contingent on an impossibly idealised isolation - a *Galapogean uberparadise* where cultural species are allowed to thrive independent of outside influences - exists for the most part as a contemporary civic wet dream. However in the end, in the globalised context, maybe the only particular contributions we can and are making to place are the particular perceived stuff ups... the incongruities, the failures of our efforts to secure public art successes... the mutations, the poorly maintained and the works rendered irrelevant have perhaps evolved into significant civic markers branding us with our own magnificent ability to get it wrong or at least fail in the attempt to get it right.

Perhaps ironically, getting it right would be the worst kind of outcome as it would imply an erasure of the very incongruities that make places such as *Salamanca Square* so terribly magnificent. Perhaps ultimately in attempting to identify and brand ourselves we should avoid the mentality of franchise - the gospel according to *Guggenheim* – and highlight the scars (and celebrate the melange) as opposed to commissioning and collecting tattoos of consensus.

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<sup>i</sup> [www.adelaidecitycouncil.com/discover/arts/public\\_art.htm](http://www.adelaidecitycouncil.com/discover/arts/public_art.htm)

<sup>ii</sup> [www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/info.cfm?top=75&pg=795](http://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/info.cfm?top=75&pg=795)

<sup>iii</sup> Miwon, Kwon, *One Place after Another, Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*

USA The MIT press, 2002, P.8

<sup>iv</sup> As a consequence the historically intimate relationship between architects, artists and places (see Gaudi/ Barcelona, Michelangelo/ Rome...et. al.) has mutated and fractured... Gehry is as much Bilboa as he is New York as he is Guggenheim Foster as much Hong Kong as London.

<sup>v</sup> [www.ringsurf.com/info/Travel/Landmarks\\_of\\_the\\_World/Guggenheim-Bilbao\\_\\_SPA/](http://www.ringsurf.com/info/Travel/Landmarks_of_the_World/Guggenheim-Bilbao__SPA/)

<sup>vi</sup> Even Hobart was considering applying for a Guggenheim Museum along with Geelong

<sup>vii</sup> [www.artsatwork.com.au/apbs/about.htm](http://www.artsatwork.com.au/apbs/about.htm)

<sup>viii</sup> Since the Art Built-in Policy came into effect in Queensland on 1 July 1999, 80 projects

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have been completed totalling \$10.01 million. These diverse public art projects have created 596 jobs for artists and artswomen throughout the State. A further 72 projects are currently active in Queensland generating new opportunities for artists, curators and public art project managers. [www.arts.qld.gov.au/publicartagency/art\\_built-in\\_projects.asp](http://www.arts.qld.gov.au/publicartagency/art_built-in_projects.asp)

<sup>ix</sup> [www.artsatwork.com.au/apbs/about.htm](http://www.artsatwork.com.au/apbs/about.htm) note I refer to Tasmanian references here. One could find similar references and terminologies in a number of public art policies. eg. ‘...Adelaide City Council’s Public Art Policy Watch This Place, provides a sound framework to guide the City’s approach to public art, defined as physical works of art for the public realm, both of a permanent and temporary nature. Council’s Public Art Policy defines agreed objectives and goals relating to the achievement of artistic excellence, best practice management, public and private partnerships, and promotion and marketing of public art.’ [www.adelaidecitycouncil.com/discover/arts/public\\_art.htm](http://www.adelaidecitycouncil.com/discover/arts/public_art.htm)

<sup>x</sup> *The Macquarie Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Revised Edition*, Macquarie University, NSW, 1981, P.55

<sup>xi</sup> See also the now infamous *vault/yellow peril* by Ron Robertson-Swann and Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* for more on public art as a hand me down.

<sup>xii</sup> *Taking the Art Journey* [www.docklands.com](http://www.docklands.com)

<sup>xiii</sup> [www.gateshead.gov.au](http://www.gateshead.gov.au) accessed 10 May 2005

<sup>xiv</sup> see also *Taking the Art Journey* [www.docklands.com](http://www.docklands.com)

‘Melbourne Docklands is a magnificent waterfront address in the heart of the CBD and is already home to 3,000 residents and 3,000 office workers... When the project is completed in approximately 10-12 years Melbourne Docklands will be home to an expected population of 20,000 residents, 25,000 visitors and 55,000 visitors a day.’

<sup>xv</sup> *Gateshead Council* [www.gateshead.gov.au](http://www.gateshead.gov.au) accessed 10 May 2005

<sup>xvi</sup> Spivey, Nigel, *Understanding Greek Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1996, pp.205-206

<sup>xvii</sup> note this is only a selection of Brecknock Consulting’s projects and strategy experience listed on their website: Current Projects: Intercultural City, Auckland - Auckland City Council, NZ □ Intercultural City, Logan - Logan City Council, QLD □ Cultural Strategy - Melton Shire Council, VIC □ Cultural Policy - Gold Coast City Council, QLD □ Public Art Review - Hume City Council, VIC □ Arts Centre Review - Manningham City Council, VIC □ Dutton Park Cultural Mapping - Brisbane City Council, QLD □ Brimbank Cultural Plan - Brimbank City Council, VIC □ Public Art Strategy - Belyando Shire Council, QLD Other Projects Include: □ Hobart Public Art Review - Hobart City Council, TAS □ Creative City Strategy - City of Prospect, SA □ City of Kingston Cultural Strategy Community Consultation - City of Kingston, VIC □ Museum Resource Centre Strategy Plan - QLD Museum, QLD □ Public Art Strategy - Northern Territory Government, NT □ Creative Energy Centre - Wollongong City Council, NSW □ Museum Research Centre - Arts Queensland, QLD □ Cultural Literacy - Brisbane City Council, QLD □ Thinkers in Residence - Capital City Committee, SA □ Frankston Coastal Arts Trail - City of Frankston, VIC □ Creative City Policy - Brisbane City Council, QLD □ Hervey Bay Public Art Strategy - Hervey Bay City Council, VIC □ Monash Arts Strategy - City of Monash, VIC □ Hobsons Bay Coastal Trail - Hobsons Bay City Council, VIC □ Frankston Public Art Policy - Frankston City Council, VIC □ Cultural Policy Advice - Christchurch City Council, NZ □ Manningham Gallery Review - City of Manningham, VIC □ Art Centre Feasibility - City of Manningham, VIC □ Art in Public Places Policy - Caloundra City Council, QLD □ Cultural Strategy - City of Bendigo, VIC □ Five Year Public Art Plan - Adelaide City Council, SA □ Public Art Masterplan - City of Wodonga, VIC □ Public Art Policy - Adelaide City Council, SA □ Parklands Signage Plan - City of Adelaide, QLD □ Public Art Policy Review - Brisbane City Council, QLD □ Procedural Manuals - Brisbane City Council, QLD □ Public Art Strategy - Hobsons Bay City Council, VIC □ Percent for Art Policy Statement - Arts SA, SA □ Intergrated Urban Art Reference Group - Melbourne Docklands, VIC

[http://www.brecknockconsulting.com.au/02\\_projects/projects\\_01.htm](http://www.brecknockconsulting.com.au/02_projects/projects_01.htm) accessed 10 June 2005

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<sup>xviii</sup> *Salamanca Square (relaxation with coffee and entertainment)*

[www.wcities.com/en/record/238901/266/record.html](http://www.wcities.com/en/record/238901/266/record.html)

<sup>xix</sup> *By- Laws of the Owners of Salamanca Square Battery Point*

Clause (1) Item 14 External appearance of flats and common property p.6

<sup>xx</sup> Vella, John, *Monumentalities: public art and the culture of civic branding*

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<sup>xxi</sup> ‘... Ironically, the resultant empty space became the true memorial to its ‘domestic cenotaph’. Cruickshank, Alan, *Tyranny of Consensus: Who Put ‘Public’ in public art and why do ‘they’ think they ‘own’ it?* Broadsheet, v 32 no.2, p.12

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