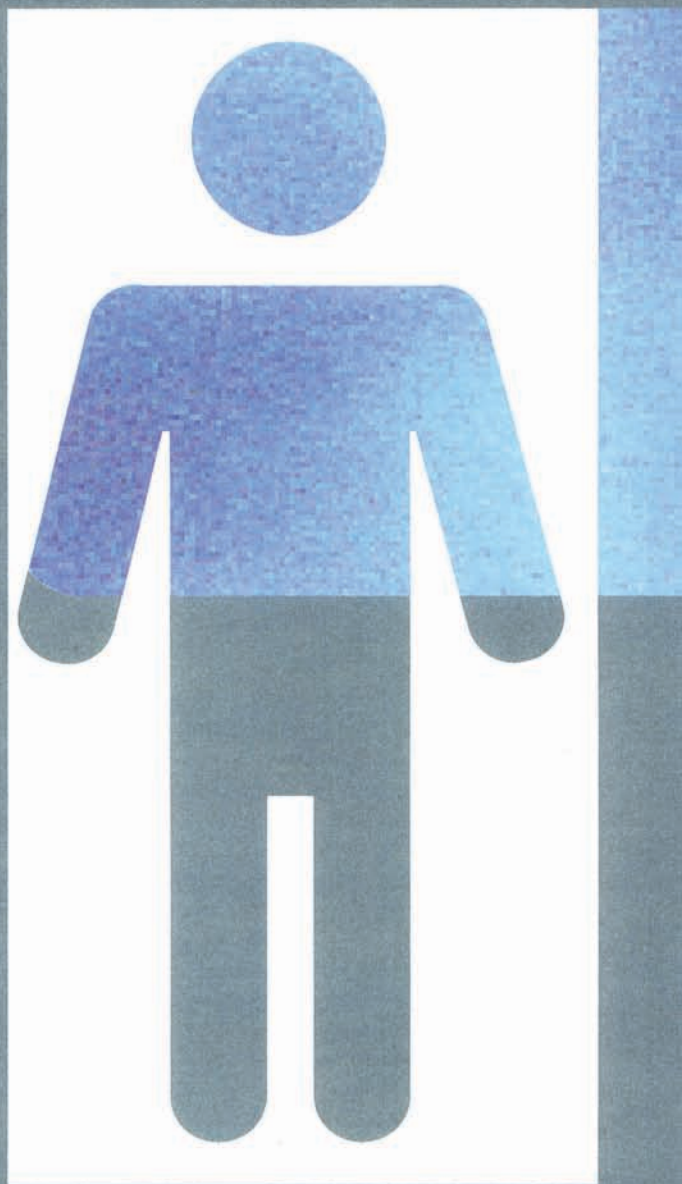
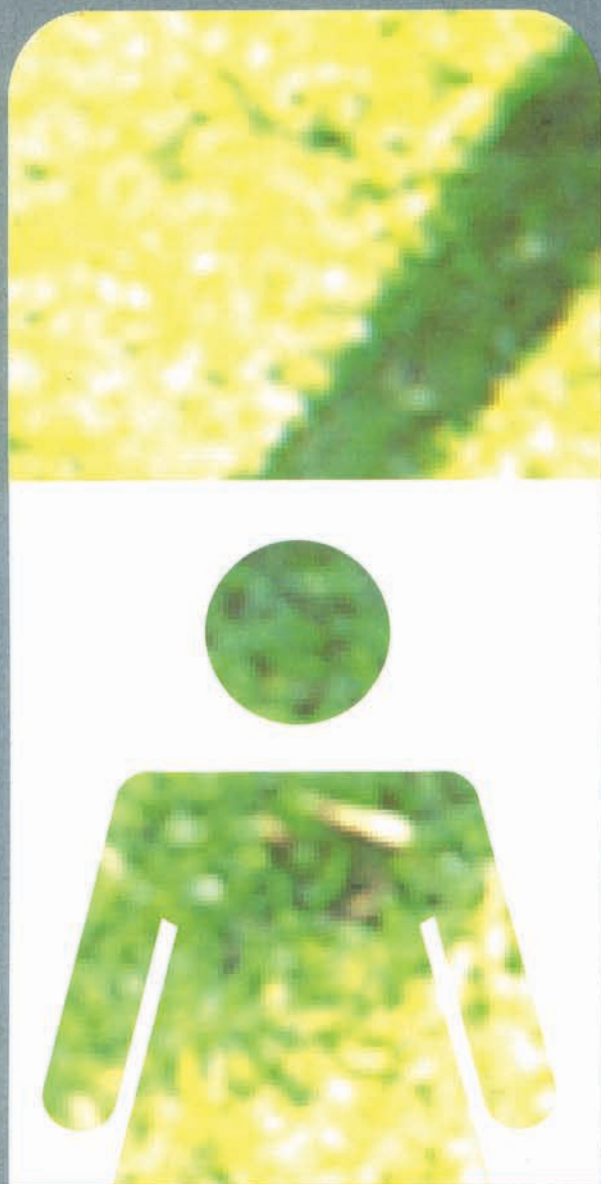
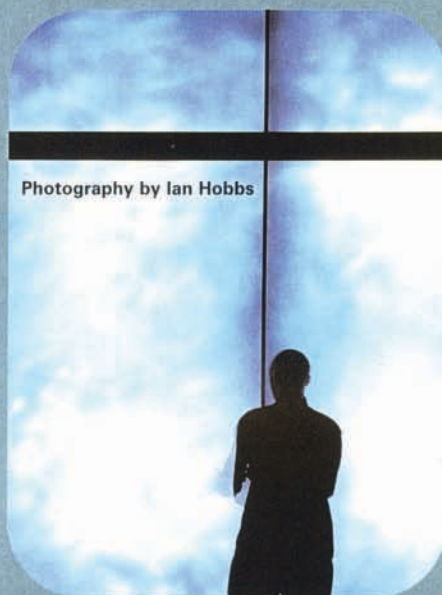


PUBLIC PLACES, PRIVATE VISIONS



In the past, public art in Australia has more often been an object of derision than a focus of civic identity. Linda Gregoriou argues that we now need to re-think its commissioning and see it as a part of urban development, while Tempe McGowan looks at two recent examples in Sydney of public art engaging with the city's sense of self.

Photography by Ian Hobbs



Photography by Chris Cole



Public art is often thought of as purely decorative or as a function performed once the primary elements of urban space have been conceived.

However, its role and contribution are changing and an all-embracing concept of public art should ensure that artists are considered as part of the urban development process.

Public art takes many forms — installations, sculptures, memorials, cultural practice, performance, decoration, advertising and industrial design. Its physical expression is usually site-specific and connected to locale. As such it contributes to the creation of cultural and commercial identities, enhancing public ownership and access to the urban spaces of the city and plays a powerful role in celebrating and humanising the built environment, reinforcing the city as a distinctive place.

If urban art is to develop as a new and relevant form, grounded in contemporary culture, the process of its commissioning and delivery must be rethought.

In recent times, the role of art and artists in the planning and execution of new and regenerated urban areas has been marginal. Public art has often been conceived as an afterthought, executed without reference to its ultimate setting and remote in its engagement with people. This typology is best demonstrated by the commissioning of stand-alone sculptures in public spaces and private foyers and plazas. While the works may often be of high quality their capacity to engage and enhance the environment for public usage is often limited.

Required is a shift in emphasis from a craft-based community approach to a professionally driven collaborative approach. More recently, artists have contributed to the planning and structuring of the urban environment through involvement with other professionals including architects, engineers, planners and designers through the formation of multi-disciplinary teams. There is, however, a serious political interest at all levels of government in re-establishing support for the arts —

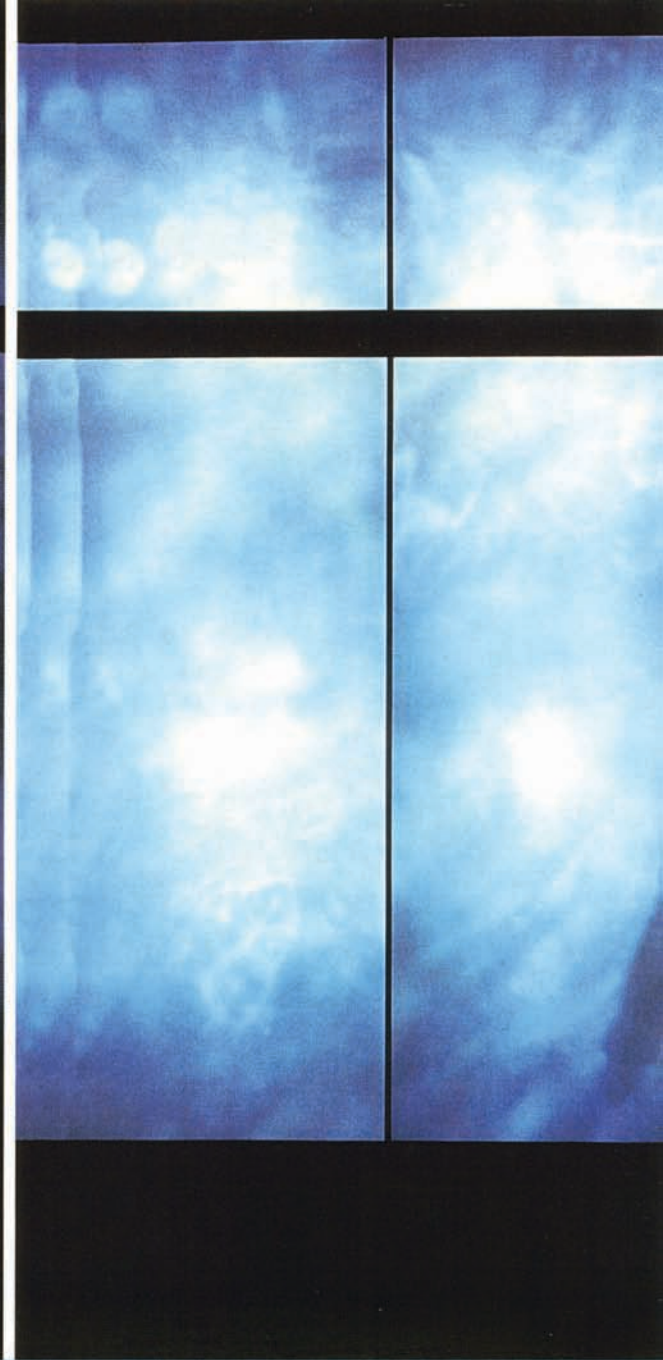
although this interest has seemed to favour the performing arts.

A number of state and local governments have public art programmes. The most advanced scheme is currently being undertaken by the West Australian government. The city of Melbourne has produced the greatest amount of work in the city, marrying the urban design division and public art practice while the NSW government recently launched its first public programme in Ultimo/Pymont by committing \$2m to art work.

A public art policy can act as a mechanism both to assist and inform in the elevation of the role of the artist as well as outline a methodology for procuring diverse, high quality professional public art. However, if this new artistic urban presence is to be successful, all the collaborators, including funding bodies, private sector participants, artists and government agencies must recognise the opportunities and limitations of the various disciplines involved. This requires rigorous team work and imagination in the commissioning of work.



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Artists Jenny Turpin, Michaelie Crawford and Anita Glesta all agree that many pieces of public art are didactic objects that are unresponsive to their site or location. In contrast, they describe their own work in the public realm as 'site specific installation art' or as 'environmental art', thus drawing meaning from its context.

Jenny Turpin and Michaelie Crawford's work often has an ethereal, innocent and evocative quality — that of touching the earth lightly. They work collaboratively and often as part of a design team. Their work is site-specific and, in varying ways, involves water and other ephemeral materials and processes of nature.

In the bowels of the Downing Centre law courts — the old Mark Foy's department store building — is their most recent public art work 'Tank' in a forty metre long tunnel that connects to Museum Station in Hyde Park South. As part of the tunnels restoration, the Attorney General's Department commissioned Jenny and Michaelie to conceive an installation within a given architectural and heritage framework comprising floor to ceiling height panels and windows.

Initially, they envisaged a physical encasing of the tunnel. On further investigation, they began wandering through the tunnels below the city, learning of Busby's Bore, the Tank Stream, laws that encode water, and the manifestations of water in the city.

With a process similar to their previous occupations as art researchers, they revealed



unexpected stories about the encoding of nature and the imposition of political boundaries on substances, such as water and light. Their elusive qualities are expressed in the watery light of the windows that run the entire length of one side of the tunnel and contrast with a palimpsest of legal texts in the small display cabinets opposite. The installation is an experience of luminosity that engages the passer by with the tunnel as a place to stay rather than a transit corridor. The celebration of light and water appears to extend the physical structure of the tunnel into a virtual world of the city.

'Tank' contrasts the poetics of a place with the investigation of place which Anita Glesta explores through her environmental art. For Jenny and Michaelie their role is to catalyse greater balance in people's lives in the city by involving people with nature. They do this in a strategic way, recognising that, by providing access to the universal and almost literal elements such as water and light, they provide a





conduit for people to access their own physical place. By drawing on the intuitive within themselves in the process of responding to a site, they let a place speak to them.

Anita Glesta's work in New York evolved from painting into sculpture. Over the years, the main thrust of her work has been the dynamic of how people interact with their environment. This often manifests in works that require the physical participation and interaction with the viewers.

Her interest is twofold — firstly, re-examining the role of the artist and the artist's contribution to development of critical thought, and secondly of the contribution that artists can make in developing awareness of the landscape. This makes their role a political one, by breaking down the walls of the gallery and freeing artists to integrate ideas with actual situations.

In New York, Anita chose to work outdoors in an urban context. Recently in New York City, artists have begun to claim leftover public spaces to develop their work in response to funding cuts from the federal government.

Her recent piece, 'Eco of Faraday Wood', is sited in the Royal Botanical Gardens in Sydney. On a gentle slope, the composition comprises an arrangement of untreated, cut logs supported by square steel frames. As if to counter these provocative tree parts, are symbols of growth — garden beds of rubber tyres full of saplings, grasses and other plants. As a composition, it is quite brutalistic, while her approach to the scale of the components has a tension with the scale of

the Gardens and the Australian landscape that she so appreciates after the confines of New York City.

The piece seems to be confronting us with questions about growth and decay while, at the same time, enticing us to participate — the trees we harvest with such abandonment are part of a larger, fragile ecology that seems remote from our urban living. People sit on the logs, trying to spin them, not letting other people touch them — claiming the piece in a similar way that the sponsors supporting the project were doing.

All her sponsors appreciate the participatory nature of Anita's process. They supply and advise her on the materials, engineering and construction. Anita involves them all and like the work itself, this interaction is an insight into what makes her work appeal; to talk to people, objects need to be accessible; this she does particularly with the selection of materials and drawing on their tactile properties.

For Anita's, Jenny and Michaelie's environmental art, the type of collaborative process is distinct for each project and yet follows similar principles. If collaboration is the final representation, product or form of an integrated and balanced exchange of ideas, then all these projects reflect this process with varying degrees of success.

This reflects alternative roles that artists can fulfil. Jenny and Michaelie believe that the role of artists has been evolving and this contemporary role needs to be reflected in the educational process as well as the collaborative one. 