

## PUBLIC ART RAVE: Plonk versus Integration

### Beth Jackson

Public art is often critically nicknamed plonk art. This label is now almost a cliché. Like a good nickname it does immediately capture the essence of a problem or condition. And like a good nickname it sticks. It's the lingering persistence of this tag that makes me want to confront it once and for all ... if only! I suspect it's a term that's never going away.

But that said, on examination of the term, it belies a complexity of issues.

The term plonk immediately calls to mind that other phrase 'art for art's sake'. That somehow the artwork is dominated by artform concerns and an art-centred language, rather than achieving an accessibility and interpretability. Furthermore, a piece of public art is considered plonk if it could be placed anywhere and has no specific relation to site.

In this sense then it is really gallery art that should mostly be labelled plonk, as artworks are bumped in and out of the anonymous context of this white-walled no-place. But is this actually fair? Do we really believe that artists have given no thought to how their work is positioned in relation to the viewer, what kind of viewing experience they are effecting, and how the content they are communicating is being expressed through form, material, scale, symbolism, motif, and so on. Sure some artworks tread a well worn and predictable path, relying on established presentation formats while others mix-up and even break these standard rules of engagement, but I firmly believe that all art exists as both material object and viewing experience. Sometimes it's the seemingly predictable works that take you by surprise and make a lasting impression while the very clever works just make you work too hard and get themselves dismissed.

I believe that art for the public realm really does need to declare itself as art. The gallery environment automatically accords this status – so much so that many installations now go beyond what would be recognisable as art in any other context (perhaps this is truly site-specific for the gallery!). In the public realm, art has to compete with so many layers of built form, visual media, infrastructure, signage, not to mention crowds and traffic, that it cannot take being noticed, let alone considered for granted. Of course, this can be a good thing, an opportunity for subtle and intriguing interventions like the breathing wall work *As it appears...* by Beth Arnold and Sary Zananiri (1) in one of Melbourne's inner city laneways.

Artists do need a startling, strong, and unique vocabulary to establish an artwork's presence and engage an audience in the public realm. And public art needs to be artist-driven, to develop its own language, a thoughtful and compelling language which is different to the languages of architecture, urban design, fashion, popular culture, landscape design, and so on. It is this difference as well as its complementarity that gives public art its *raison d'être*.

That said, the need and the challenge for public art to be unique and site-specific is very real. Artists really do need a keen understanding of the built environment and how public space functions. This knowledge feeds the creative process. The need to engage in creative and collaborative dialogue with built environment professionals.

But can one take the anti-plonk argument too far? Can public art be so integrated that it dissolves into urban design and built form and is lost. Is that a bad thing? Robert Owen's collaboration with DCM architects in the creation of Webdock Bridge (2) is often cited as an outstanding example of integrated art.



(1)



(2)

But for me the success of this work is not simply that the artwork is integrated into the architectural design, but that the bridge itself has become an art object. The work owes as much to large-scale installation art (artists like Christo), as it does to a language of formal abstraction and built form design.

Of course architecture can be equally criticised for being plonk (though this is rarely heard). Most architecture is conceived in the white walled studio or the virtual no-place of the computer with not enough attention being paid to site and social context.

I suppose I really do appreciate both sides of this debate. Two of my favourite artworks in the Melbourne Docklands fall at opposite ends of the plonk spectrum. Virginia King's work *Reed Vessel* (3) is situated within a wetlands area and is a profound example of site-specific public art. Its sensitive form is integrated with a boardwalk structure so that the artwork forms a shade shelter on the journey. Water runs down the shelters edges, literally oxygenating the wetlands, becoming part of its ecosystem. Poetry inscribed on these walls provide a meditation, deepening the viewer's connection with the site. The iconic form of the boat vessel balanced on top of the structure like an inverted net provides beauty and aspiration, linking the work and the wetlands to the sky as well as to times past.

The other work which I greatly enjoy at Melbourne Docklands is Emily Floyd's large Black Bunny (4) precisely because it is plonked in the middle of the road. Its surreal quality is head turning. It is literally a traffic black spot, an abandoned toy discarded by a careless child, or perhaps deliberately if absurdly placed and instructed to wait by a more serious and organised child. It makes me smile.



(3)



(4)