

Public Art Rave: The Evolving Role of the Public Art Curator

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Generally speaking, the visual arts is not a team sport. Unlike theatre or film, visual artists work very much as individuals and establish a high level of control over their practice. This can be both a negative and positive. While contemporary art has a very broad scope of possibility and potential, artists can sometimes feel isolated and in need of feedback. At times artists are not simply creating artworks but also a context for their artworks.

In many ways this context is shaped primarily by 'artworld' discourse. Curators play a key role in generating this discourse. And like artists they work primarily as individuals. Curators are in the business of framing contemporary art practice and saying what work they think is significant and why. Again it's an open scope with positive and negative aspects. When working as an historical curator, the significance of certain artists and their works is well understood and curatorship can provide new perspectives and insights but will work largely within the established cannon. When working with living artists and contemporary practice, the context is more fluid and can be slippery and at times intangible. This is especially true in a pluralist and postmodern context where everything and nothing has validity. Curators are also used to enjoying high levels of control as the white walls and open box of the gallery space is able to be made over anew with each exhibition.

Sounding complex? Enter public art and enter the public art curator. If artworld discourse is central to contemporary practice (and for many this is debatable), public art sits left of centre – or should I say right! But with increasing interest in public art from many sectors, this relation may be shifting. Some of today's most interesting contemporary

artists are making works in public spaces. Many of the policy and funding frameworks for public art are increasingly sophisticated. And, best of all, public interest in and demand for contemporary art in general and for art in public spaces are increasing.

Public art is much more of a team sport and artists and curators have to learn to play well with others. After working for ten years as a collection/gallery based curator, I have found that working as a public art curator has involved a critical re-orientation of my practice. Both the starting point and the end point are the public realm. I feel that now I am not so much a curator of art as a curator of space. The space dictates but it also begs creative interpretation and my understanding of this potential now drives my practice – it's what I can offer an artist, a client, a design team and it's the only thing to ensure a good outcome because control is no longer an option.

There are many factors that I try to carefully consider when commencing a project. These aspects of a site form layers of significance and include: the larger urban context, site analysis, cultural and historical significance of the site, the client context, the architectural language, landscape design, the building usage, and public space functions and experience. These layers are considered thoughtfully and in concert in order to arrive at an overall curatorial vision. This vision is separate from but needs to be complementary to the overall project vision and it needs to be signed off by the client group and the design team. Often times one of these factors will become more significant than others. For example, when curating commissions for Queensland Health the client context has very high significance. In other words, what is most important about these artworks is that they will be viewed by people who are unwell and possibly distressed.



Artwork by Shane Fitzgerald for Aged Care Facility, Maryborough, Qld.



Artwork by Joe Hurst for Tugun Bypass, Qld.

Alternatively, when commissioning works for a freeway the site context takes on high significance. For these artworks what is most significant is that they will be viewed by vehicles travelling at 100km/hr. Every site is unique, every project different.

Another aspect of the challenge for developing a curatorial vision or conceptual framework is that it is open-ended and flexible – something which spurs rather than curtails artistic interpretation. This framework provides a vital platform for the commission, one which guides the artist selection process and the concept development and selection process. It is not until I understand the site that I can begin to think of which artists may be interested in getting involved. The selection process should be made up of artists with diverse practices – it's a healthy curatorial framework that can facilitate a wide range of outcomes!

When giving artists feedback on their concept proposals I find myself mostly commenting on whether I think their idea is working successfully in the site context and whether their idea is being effectively communicated. It's very rewarding to be able to contribute to the fine tuning of an artwork. Public art is so multi-dimensional that there a myriad of factors which can transform an artwork's presence. Scale, lighting, colour, materials, finishes, and so on can and should all become part of the artwork experience. People are going to climb on it, sit on it, may even sleep under it, get photographed with it, use it as a meeting point, maybe see themselves in it, nickname it, and so on – good public art plays up to these experiential dimensions, making us aware of our inter-relationship with the environment in a bigger sense. This is the space beyond the artwork, around the artwork, reflected in the artwork. Curating that space is the challenge.



Artwork by Sebastian Di Mauro for Orion, Springfield, Qld.