

Awkward Politeness: Public Artwork in Western Australia and Critical Discourse

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This paper aims to note several characteristics of public art in Western Australia in order to offer suggestions as to how future government commissioning of public art can insure against shortcomings of the past. However several obstacles to the research process added a second aim, that is, to critically reflect on the obstacles to critical engagement facing Western Australian public art more generally. In other words, the paper has a split focus supported by an examination of examples of Western Australian public art works: establishing a critique of obstacles to a critical discourse of public art as well as suggesting changes to the operation of public art governmental commissioning mechanisms in Western Australia.

Critical discourse concerning public art in Western Australia has only slightly shifted over the past ten years but the bureaucratic mechanisms for commissioning public art have expanded quite considerably. Although during the last decade there have been slight changes in the amount and quality of critical discourse concerning public art in Western Australia, there have been fairly extensive increases in the complexity of the commissioning processes of public art. This situation has lead several artists to take aesthetic and critical-reflective matters into their own hands, not just in terms of commissioning writing about their artwork, but also producing engaging, direct intervention as a form of public art.¹

In *Boomtown* Jon Tarry and I wrote about a video that he had made focusing on the destruction of a large house that had belonged to a Western Australian mining magnate. I mention it here because this event in local history offers insight into the aesthetic priorities of various Perth institutions. In this case a working class boy was lead to the site of mineral deposits in the outback. He mined these resources and became very wealthy. He then built a mansion in an exclusive Perth suburb modelled on the house in the film *Gone with the Wind*. When he died, the mansion was demolished. In *Boomtown* Jon and I wrote about the

¹ Several years ago the Perth-based sculptor Jon Tarry asked me to write about his sculptures (public and otherwise) because he believed that there was *no* critical discourse in Western Australia. At first the writing was informal, unpublished and centred on artwork for exhibition. Then it came to include commentary which will be self-published by Tarry (forthcoming) about work made for a sculpture park in Venice. Recently the writing has culminated in a short chapter on Tarry's video artwork in *Boomtown 2050*, a large academic review and projection of the architecture and landscape of Perth over the next forty years (Weller 2009).

magnate's house in terms of its architecture being an unchecked screen for fears and desires. I believe that public art in Western Australia often functions in a similar way.

My initial inquiries for this paper provoked some anxious responses. Most government commissioned public artworks in Perth are usually managed by one of a handful of people. When attempting to acquire images of some of their projects I received mixed responses. One interesting response was: 'no, you can't have any images, you have to experience it.' While a romantic idea, this attitude puts public artwork tend to put it beyond critique and therefore it is an attitude that also puts critical discourse on the back foot more broadly. Although this is not a physical demolition of the public artwork in question the artwork is effectively removed from the critical purview. However, I ultimately came to agree with the consultant in question, that the visual had been overemphasised in public artwork in Western Australia and that *this* had contributed to the lack of critical discourse. On one hand the refusal to provide an image stunted the discourse but on the other hand the discourse more broadly had been overwhelmingly shaped by the desire for a convincing visual representation. The desire for artworks that could be reduced to a two-dimensional image has been responsible for artworks becoming two-dimensional in all senses of the word in the past few decades in Western Australia.

Public artworks made for one camera angle often fail dismally. For example, Brian McKay's 1999 *Impossible Triangle*, an enormous artwork that sits the centre of a roundabout in East Perth, suffers from this propensity to overindulge the two-dimensional image. The optical illusion in this work is only revealed from one vantage point. From all other perspectives the massive steel structure looks exactly like that which it is: an optical illusion viewed from the wrong angle, an exclusive intellectual quip. This gives it the quality of a prop in a theatre set, an empty symbol.

McKay has a practical and intellectual mastery of the medium of steel relief (discussed below) but it does not translate into three-dimensional fabrication in this instance. The sculpture dominates its environment without providing a unique way of relating to that environment or its inhabitants. A commissioning brief that reigned in monolithic minimalist pretensions may have produced an artwork more sensitive to its site, more in the manner of a post-minimalist tradition of site-specificity. The main problem with the artwork is that it is, in fact, *in relief* and not *in the round*.

My discussion of this sculpture is one of this paper's only direct contributions to critical discourse; the rest of the paper involves an analysis of the rhetoric and administration of

public art. It aims to identify the obstacles to placing large public artwork commissions in Western Australia into a critical discourse and in doing so finds that part of the problem lies in the structure of the system. I argue that the discourse of public art by government commission largely conditions the broader critical discourse of public art in Western Australia.

First let me contrast private commissions with government commissions. Public art commissions in Western Australia generally occur either by private or government commission. Private commissions are usually sought by architects and/or landscape architects who choose an artist or a shortlist of artists for a project whom they approach directly, in a process that can be as concise or as protracted as a single executive decision. Alternatively, commissions by state government clients are organised with the checks and balances of government policy, in particular the Percent for Art scheme, which is considerably more involved than private commissioning processes and which requires the commission be put out 'for tender'. This paper briefly contrasts these two processes and then evaluates the recent review of the Percent for Art scheme, taking into account several contrasts with a review of Queensland's Art Built-in Policy.

Public art by private commission provides an interesting contrast to public art by government commission. The appetite for private commissions of public art in Perth has increased over the past twenty years. Dorothy Erickson identifies a turning point in the 1990s:

Private sponsorship began to blossom in the 'caring 90s'. This was assisted by the State Government sponsored Percent for Art scheme, a legacy of Andrea Hull's time at the helm of ArtsWA. This not only increased the number of artists experienced in producing public art but it gave public exposure to artwork, and a confidence to commission (Erickson 1998, p. 70).

Erickson cites Brian McKay's 223-metre-long etched and painted mural for the Central Park building executed in 1991 as the eminent example of this surge in privately sponsored public art. Indeed, the artwork emerges seamlessly from McKay's practice. McKay had explored text, coded symbols and geometric abstraction for around thirty years. The Central Park mural demonstrates his legendary facility with etching *and* painting timber *and* steel. The artwork reads coherently and slowly unfolds from several distances. The artist's attention has been spread uniformly over the massive artwork to produce an even phenomenal effect from many angles. It expands organically from McKay's practice and dovetails articulately into the marble of the site. It remains a successful, if somewhat safe, example of a private commission in a corporate foyer.

The Western Australian government apparatus for facilitating public artwork called the Percent for Art scheme was established in 1989. The scheme is administered through the Department of Housing and Works and the Department for Culture and the Arts. It requires that up to one percent of the construction budget for new public works worth over two million dollars be expended on artwork. By 2003, more than 203 separate projects had been initiated under the scheme and eleven million dollars had been spent on public art (Department of Culture and the Arts 2003, p. 3). The scheme provides for commissions to go to tender and for the involvement of: the commissioning client, the building user, the project architect, as well numerous artists who are eliminated through design stages; also for professional arts organisations (advertising), a public art consultant, a representative from the Department of Housing and Works, and additional representatives from the cultural sector (heritage, curatorial, cultural) as required. *Prima facie* the scheme represents a far more bureaucratic process than private commissions.

The Percent for Art scheme is a source of pride for the (then Labor and now Liberal) state government. Sheila McHale, Minister for the Arts from 2001 to 2008, stated in 2003:

The scheme has provided opportunities for 200 individual artists, and has greatly enhanced the value and amenity of public buildings with over 400 contemporary art works commissioned... An integral part of the review process has been extensive consultation with stakeholders. Artists, galleries, arts organisations, client departments, building users, architects and project managers were all engaged in this process. I am heartened that the stakeholders highly value the Percent for Art initiative and regard it as an effective program. It is a fact that fostering creative relationships between artists, architects and design professionals has resulted in artworks, buildings and environments which are enduring, distinctive and loved (Department of Culture and the Arts 2003, p. i).

Unfortunately the former Minister's statement does not make a comparison with private commissions, so the cumbersome nature of the process is accepted as a *fait accompli*. There is also no mention of critical discourse, despite stating that public art created under the scheme is 'loved'. Setting aside 'critical discourse' for the moment, for the most part the only *discourse* around public art in Western Australia remains the *Percent for Art* discourse—one emphasising participation and transparency in their most *administered* forms. Such a discourse is geared around *potential* and cannot articulate the confines of *itself—the scheme*. Much like a reconstituted socialist realism, this scheme can give rise to suggestions for its own improvement. Paradoxically, this is also what this paper hopes to offer *in lieu* of more substantive critical discourse around public art in Western Australia, which I argue has been hemmed in by the Percent for Art discourse.

A review of the Percent for Art scheme in 2003 suggested some improvements. The review *Integrating Views: A Review of the State Government's Percent for Art Scheme* (Department of Culture and the Arts 2003) produced 16 recommendations. These are available in the report in their entirety, but those relevant to this paper are paraphrased here:

- Update the scheme to recognise aesthetic excellence.
- Stimulate curatorial assessment and critical analysis of commissioned artwork.
- Art Coordinators appointed to the panel should conduct a curatorial and critical assessment of commissioned work since January 2004 on a project-by-project basis.
- There should be greater transparency, accountability and equity in the implementation of the scheme.
- A periodic audit of existing commissions should be conducted and a database and inventory established to complement the existing image archive.
- The levels of advocacy and promotion of the scheme should be increased.
- The types and forms of commissioned artwork should be expanded.
- Planned and actual higher education courses dedicated to public art should be appraised.

These suggestions for improvement are varied. While many are administrative such as archiving and attempts for greater transparency, there *is* a clear intention to improve the quality of art and to raise the tenor of both the artwork and critical discourse. However, it seems to arise from the desire for greater archiving and historicising of commissioned artworks. This is because the recommendations seem to pressure Art Coordinators to expand their role to include critical analysis. Overall, although the suggestions are ambitious they are quite vague and fall well within the discursive ambit (re)produced by the Percent for Art discourse.

A comparison with the recent Keniger report provides an extrinsic point of reference. From 1999 to 2007 the Queensland Government operated the Art Built-In policy ('the policy'), a similar scheme to the Percent for Art scheme. The policy was evaluated in 2006 in an independent report by Professor Michael Keniger, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) of University of Queensland.² Report outcomes relevant to this paper are paraphrased here (Keniger 2006). The report identified several weaknesses which echo those found in the review of the Percent for Art scheme but also goes substantially further toward a resolution. It cites (paraphrased here)

² Keniger's study was directly assisted by the appointment of an Expert Reference Group. This group met five times throughout the policy evaluation and gave submissions to Keniger. Keniger also received submissions from artists and the general public who were invited to attend focus group sessions.

- A lack of consistency in adherence to the policy across government departments.
- Criticism of the quality of public art conceived under the policy.
- Inexperience and resistance from some clients.
- A problematic core focus on art built-in on a project-by-project basis.
- A lack of flexibility suggested in the original policy document and few examples of innovative practice.
- Little done to achieve a strong educational program to support the achievement of high quality public art.
- Bureaucracy and compliance processes that are too demanding causing the conceptual quality of the art to suffer.
- The consultative and management processes worked against the quality of the artworks to be produced.
- The process of selection was insufficiently transparent.

The Keniger report includes the keen observation that public artwork is fundamentally weakened when conceived as an afterthought of the design and building processes. Thus it emphasises artistic *autonomy* and the central role of artists in the overall design and building process. The report includes an emphasis on the potential for organic extension of the artist's studio-based work and the ability for a proposed artwork to have a meaningful relation to its site.

The report also suggests that the lack of an overarching vision for public art in the state is problematic. It links the lack of a critical context for artwork to a lack of relevant education and makes policy partly responsible for addressing this. These findings imbue the Keniger report with great significance for the West Australian Percent for Art scheme. The following summary of its recommendations are even more pertinent. The suggest:

- That Government adopt a more adventurous stance and encourage significant public artworks through seeking the highest quality outcome in each case.
- That an overall annual budget allocation be made for public art to be drawn from the capital works program and the projected transportation infrastructure program to enable greater certainty in the planning of public art.
- That the pooling of funds for public art should be adopted to facilitate greater flexibility in the application of the policy.
- That curatorial oversight be provided by a Curatorial Panel for Public Art to be chaired by a Government Curator reporting to Arts Queensland.
- That education and mentoring remain core objectives of the public art policy.

- That the administration processes governing public art projects be reviewed and revised to ensure that effective, timely and purposeful administration is provided.
- That the processes for the selection of artists and related professionals be reviewed in detail so as to achieve greater transparency.
- That the overall body of artworks representing the outcomes of the policy be recorded and featured in publicly accessible media, such as on a website and in supporting publications.
- That in order to achieve excellence the most able artists be appointed in each case and that interstate and international artists be invited to submit expressions of interest for significant public projects.

These recommendations suggest the means by which the Queensland scheme could come to lead public art commissioning processes in Australia. The report recommends making the key shift to the creation of a cost centre in the state budget from which public art expenditure will be drawn. This mechanism frees artworks from some of the constraints of being tied to the budgets of individual projects, easing the aesthetic-financial pressures that can erode an artwork when projects run over budget.

The Keniger report recognises several problems of the public art commissioning process. The pressures on the aesthetic of public artworks result from a wide range of entangled imperatives arising before, during and after the design and construction phases. The artist often has to complete an architectural function or mend an architectural dysfunction, giving the artwork the character of an architectural flourish which the artist's practice may not be equipped to accommodate. The relevant criteria for evaluating the artwork become blurred, criteria on which critical discourse depends. Is the public to evaluate the artwork's ergonomic relationship to space, its ability to dovetail into the architect's concept, or its contribution to the realm of public art? Critical discourse around public art in Western Australia currently has to be keenly aware of the different imperatives and limitations which are placed on each artwork, but often the commissioning brief shuts both the public and art out of the public art equation. A state curator as recommended by the Keniger report would possibly be able to play a role in ensuring that the tone of the debate is raised and the aspirations of all are kept in perspective. The Keniger report suggests that artists be allowed more *autonomy* and have more *responsibility* towards the vision that is outlined for public art, presumably by the curatorial panel, and it also mentions the centrality of education. These are directions that would benefit the Percent for Art scheme.

Public art in Western Australia generally falls safely within the guidelines of the relevant brief, but ironically it is the artist who is poised to recognise the danger in this safety. Andra Kins has written about this issue and the problem in confronting it:

At this point in time there is need for critical debate, for people to review and write about the artworks, to discuss what are appropriate evaluation criteria and to explore links with architectural criticism. Why is this not happening? ... Perhaps, because for a long time we have all had to 'be careful', to comply with the culture of advocacy initiated by the Public Art Taskforce. We can only ever advocate, otherwise someone in some government department or treasury will think that we are spending too much money on all this art and it will all be lost. Perhaps we need to press for legislation? We are always kept on the back foot. It is time for us to 'come out', to have a healthy dialogue about public art, to review the results to date (1998, p. 76).

This call for critical discourse was made in 1998 and unfortunately, critical discourse concerning public art in Western Australia has only marginally increased. Fortunately, artists as well as the public have taken it upon themselves to address this stagnation by engaging in various artistic interventions.

There seem to be two dominant conservative aesthetic forces in public art in Perth: defensive monolithic minimalism and aspirational nostalgia, and both have been the subject of artistic interventions. The aspirational preference can be seen right across public art in Perth, including the 2007 installation *Elisa* by WA sculptors Tony Jones and Ben Jones, also known as *the Bather at Crawley*, a 1940s-style bather poised to dive off a wooden platform. While this is an example of public art at its most nostalgic, reactionary and conservative, it is also a site of public reclamation. Passers-by frequently dress up *Elisa*: placing a surgical mask on her face during the swine flu epidemic or a yellow jersey during the *Tour de France*, to name just two instances.

Another example of artists who breathe life into ossified public structures is the AC4CA group, which reclaims minimal monumental structures. The Fremantle-based group, which includes Trevor Richards, Alex Spremberg, Andrew Leslie, Jurek Wybraniec and several others began intervening in public space with large wall-paintings in 2001 out of a perceived need to create a less structured and formalised interaction with the public, more in the tradition of the Concrete Art group. Their efficient and stealthy way of working is in direct contrast to the bureaucracy and administration of the Percent for Art scheme.

These intervention-like public artworks breathe life into the public art realm in Perth. They provide signs of life by outstripping the ossified discourse. By going beyond the Percent for

Art scheme and attempting to create a new and direct language they shift the paradigm. The challenge is to imagine how the mechanisms in place for the commissioning of public artwork by the government could *entirely* reframe the approach of the past, and this is an area of urgency and importance for further study. The discursive process of analysing, reporting and adjusting the current mechanism may in fact not provide the paradigmatic shift required to exceed the self-fulfilling Percent for Art *discourse*.

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