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Trailblazing: public art and community in the Meander Valley

Abstract

In Tasmania at the beginning of the 21st century, tourism is one of the largest contributors to the state's economy. It is probable that a greater number of tourists proportional to local population will interact with public art in the island's regional areas than would encounter the outcomes of public and community art projects below the Loop district in Chicago or in the western suburbs of Sydney. The demographics of audiences suggest that regional public art functions in a markedly different manner to that in large cities. Through a case study of the Great Western Tiers Sculpture Trail (GWTST) in northern Tasmania, this paper, a work-in-progress within a larger project, seeks to register a challenge to the unquestioned transfer of static notions of 'public' and 'community' that exist within urban public and community art discourse to the facilitation of public art in the regions.

Many 'publics' and 'communities' can be identified, consulted, and celebrated in the placement of art in spaces administered for the people by various levels of government and professional community associations. A community's sense of ownership and investment is vital for art in public places to be accepted, to have its own stories rather than to simply interpret someone else's. Studying the processes of facilitating the GWTST identifies some of the relationships that might exist between 'public' and 'community' and which contribute to the 'regionalising' of public art discourse. Also outlined will be some problems encountered when all stakeholders in public art projects are not identified as relevant to the consultation process.

Biography

Dr Deborah Malor heads the Theory Program in the School of Visual and Performing Arts, Academy of the Arts, University of Tasmania at Inveresk (Launceston), where she also acts as the Honours and Postgraduate Coordinator. Her teaching covers research methods in the arts, themes in Western art and design with a particular emphasis on Australia, and foundation units in cross-disciplinary cultural practices. She is developing the School's relationship with the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, effectively turning Theory at Launceston into a 'hands-on' program. Before commencing at the University of Tasmania in 2000, Deborah taught at the University of Sydney in the School of Art History and Theory and the School of Architecture, and in the Design program of the Insearch Institute of Commerce, UTS. In 1999, with Dr Heather Johnson and in association with the School of Fine Art, University of Newcastle, she convened *Watch this space*, a conference on public art, for which she also edited the proceedings, and in 2000-2001 was editor, with Heather Johnson, of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*. She has undertaken a number of research projects for the EcoDesign Foundation, Sydney, and the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales.

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The Trail

Driving west from Launceston on the older rural roads, the traveller affirms a touristic badging of this part of Tasmania that has taken place over the past five years. The draft report for this initiative of the Northern Tasmanian Regional Development Board, Gateway Tasmania and Tourism Tasmania sets the scene:

The Great Western Tiers Tourist Route runs east-west from Launceston to Mole Creek via the Meander Valley Highway and Mole Creek Main Road. The route runs through a number of small, historic village centres, including the tourist hubs of Hagley/Westbury, Deloraine and Mole Creek...The dominant element of the Great Western Tiers provides a wild fringe to a valley of cultured, well tended and patchwork fields with historic feature plantings such as hawthorn hedges and coniferous windbreaks. History and culture, arts and crafts, are an important part of the experience throughout. Also a number of natural attractions such as the Mole Creek Karst National Park, Liffey Falls and Devils Gullet are accessed via the route.¹

The Tourist Route provides the structure for an arts-based tourism-driven initiative in this area – specifically at the 'hubs' of Deloraine and Mole Creek and as markers at the 'natural attractions' beyond. The GWTST of site-specific works by local and interstate artists began progressively opening in 2002 after an extensive process of planning, artist selection, and community consultation. The Trail is project-managed by Parks and Wildlife and a local Steering Committee drawn from various special-

interest groups, and resourced through the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA). In the township of Deloraine (population 2,500) seven works were selected for placement along the banks of the Meander River. Above the town, Heather B. Swann's *Spindle Women* marks the entrance to the new Visitors' Centre, the 'Gateway to the Western Tiers', the Centre also funded through the RFA. Further afield at tourist points along the Trail (all promoted as 'natural' or 'wilderness' areas) another seven works were put in place. In the village of Mole Creek (population around 230), Pacey Stronach installed a major work.

All this very public art in the sleepy Meander Valley – but it was not to be sleepy for long. The facilitating of community consultation in public arts projects is never a totally happy process and, in the case of the GWTST, the question of community itself was challenged as works along the Trail were put in place. In the local press, torrid 'Letters to the Editor' criticised the selection and the placement of a number of the works. Correspondents pointed to a perceived exclusivity in the community consultation process. A number of 'locals' identified Tony Woodward's *Mountain Man/Man Mountain*, placed at the Meander River crossing in the centre of Deloraine, as disrespectful to the tough, Christian pioneering past of the region, and aesthetically inappropriate to its surroundings. As a result of the very public debate around this one work, Deloraine – an otherwise tourist-aware town with a significant number of artist residents and a nationally recognised Craft Fair – soon appeared to the arts industry to be populated by Anglo-traditionalists and rednecks.

The Public and the Tourist

One must understand what public and community can be before the progressive or functional nature of their relationships to the production and facilitation of 'public art' can even be guessed at. In the past twenty years, it could be argued, there has been very little peeling back of the idea of 'public+ art' to consider its meaning beyond site. That there is a need to understand what can be 'public' is not disputed and is often signalled in writing about public art, however it seems too difficult to consider further. It is simply accepted as 'a certain art practice, the results of which are to be found in, mainly, external urban spaces used freely by the general public'.² The term starts to slip when the publicness of art institutions – museums, galleries – is considered. These are public places and yet the art displayed is not in public: it is firmly enclosed in the fabric and language of curatorship. It is not enough, as Lawrence Alloway has pointed out, for a work to be in a public place to make it a 'public work' – 'if the word "public" is placed before the word "art"... then by definition, something other than art about art is being suggested.'³ Here is a refusal to strip back the taken-for-granted term, 'public', and to manage the problematic status of art in this context, to identify the 'something other than art' that creates what must be a new genre of expression, representation or interpretation.

It seems as if it is the absence of individual choice – or voice – on the part of the viewer that marks what is public, that is, there are places from which one may speak. Inside the institution there is a dominance of the professional, curatorial voice. Outside, the environment drowns that voice in its own act of continuous curatorship. That environment includes the citizenry, the community, the public. There is a new privacy – or publicness – that we carry with us, like status: we are either private or public people. This 'new' understanding seemed to emerge in the last decades of the twentieth century but in fact has been around for some while longer. Habermas cites a 1784 observation by Frederick II:

A private person has no right to pass *public* and perhaps even disapproving judgement on the actions, procedures, laws, regulations and ordinances of sovereigns and courts, their officials, assemblies and courts of law, or to promulgate or publish in print pertinent reports that he manages to obtain. For a private person is not at all capable of making such judgement, because he lacks complete knowledge of circumstances and motives.⁴

This is not *toute le monde*, the public that is the world, or humankind – meanings that have dominated English-language understanding of 'public' since the sixteenth century. Frederick II's comment illustrates an Enlightenment development of distinctions between an intellectual public and 'the world' – that is, everyone else, yet leads to the use in this period of the inclusive term, 'public opinion'. Whatever was laid open for public comment was also the subject of publicity – the publicising of public response.⁵ The world of critical judgement was laid open, but from where one spoke clearly proscribed the publicness of that statement.

Dean MacCannell has characterised a public sub-group, a mobile community that is the tourist, the *raison d'être* of the Great Western Tiers Tourist Route. The progress of this public along a trail is

marked by attractions formulated as '[tourist/site/marker]'.⁶ Rural/wilderness communities such as the Great Western Tiers will almost inevitably elect to exploit natural beauty (place) and pioneers (people). These appear as simpler and possibly more cost-effective options to creating a new attraction. Deloraine does have a created attraction, its Craft Fair (3 days and 30,000 visitors), and it is that successful step towards event-based cultural tourism that generated the idea of the GWTST. The carrying of tourists around the town and through the region by way of a series of place markers or 'interpretations' devised by artists brought art as a continuing presence to the town, rather than just to those volunteers who run the Fair and thus become a localised administration.

Following Habermas's line, those private people are the critical public who decide what is the face of the Great Western Tiers. This contemporary public and those who became public through their pioneering activities are also integral to the idea of the tourist attraction. This idea is one promulgated by MacCannell, who considers that public behaviour, as a visible part of a society and its structures, is a tourist attraction, along with the scenery, monuments, industry, shopping malls and museums.⁷

Herein lies one of the difficulties for artists involved in site interpretation, or site-specific public art. No matter how remote the site it is impossible to edit out the human interaction that brought the artist to the point of interpretation. The public is inevitably going to arrive and take the chance to be critical, leaving a Habermasian *publicité* as the only tangible dialogue with the work. Sometimes this position of involved public is expressed in tangential but revealing ways. In February 2003, after Woodward's piece was installed, a religious statue on a large cenotaph incorporating graves of early settlers in the grounds of the local Catholic school was demolished on order of the Catholic Education Office. This authorised destruction attracted much 'public' comment:

It's a sad irony that the statue of Jesus, at a time when the world needs symbols of peace and hope, could be bulldozed without a thought. The irony exists in the unprecedented public outcry against another public statue that mars the tranquillity and vista of the Meander River, but seems to have fallen on deaf ears while it defiantly sits here like a giant purple ulcer. This thoughtless act of vandalism and breakdown of communications is a real blow to the people of Deloraine, whom I'm sure would generally find a statue of Jesus to be a reassuring presence.⁸

The complexity of Woolcott's response to this double vandalism – of cenotaph and riverbank – is such that the final sentence of this 'Letter to the editor' gains strength from its ambiguity. Here a person who has become public and of the wider community – that concerned with, if not resident in, Deloraine – pulls out an international plea from an activity dealing with local history, personal aesthetics and small town politics.

Although some of the works in the GWTST may carry politics *sotto voce*, none come close to being considered 'new genre public art'.⁹ This is art for unproblematic sensory participation. In fact, the managers of the project seem to see artists as just one group of facilitators in the planning of the Sculpture Trail, if the following example is taken seriously. When sample copies of the Trail brochure were sent to artists in November 2002 the accompanying letter from Parks and Wildlife was addressed to 'Dear Tourism Operator'. Rather than simply believing this was indicative of the level of project management, I would suggest this address placed the artists as managers of their sites, as being responsible for the clear interpretation of the area as a centre of arts, of culture, not just at the moment of installation, but continuing. And it's the continuity that is characteristic of all but the most ephemeral examples of public art that pulls me around to the character of its publicness.

Tourists will keep coming; a changing, critical public will continually negotiate the works of art on the Trail. Conversely – and this is the point that appears to have been missed by organisers of the Trail from the beginning – there is a continuing human presence that is the community: people who are in dialogue with the works on a regular basis. To repeat, Deloraine is neither Chicago nor Sydney. For most of the regional population who use the town as the hub of service (shops, hospital, schools) the riverside sculptures are there every day. These works cannot disappear into the canyons of a city, but must attract the gaze at every opportunity.

The Public and the Community

Whatever happened during the selection process of this project, the voice of the community of Deloraine and the Great Western Tiers could only come from the critical public after the event. Certainly there was no chance for artists to meet directly with the community or its representatives.¹⁰

Pacey Stronach's experience at Mole Creek was an exception to this, as I will explain shortly. There was a significant bulwark of committees between the community and the works – but here a 'Frederick II case' seems to have been in operation. Those members of the public on committees became, de facto, of the administration and, in doing so, emphasised the privateness of other citizens. Of course, to the institutions of government, the committees were the community. This ambiguity of enmeshed terminology and function parallels that of 'public' in community-based public art discourse.¹¹

The case of Mole Creek differs in that community consultation did take place. Losing an on-going stoush with the much larger and politically-savvy Deloraine for the Visitors' Centre to go with the badge of 'Gateway to the Tiers', Mole Creek was temporarily mollified by a considerably larger grant than other sites for its street sculpture. An independent facilitator, Rebecca Greenwood, was assigned to Mole Creek. Although the selection of artist Pacey Stronach had been made by the Trail Steering Committee the work was locally devised. Greenwood liaised first with the Mole Creek Progress Association, a group not necessarily considered representative by the descendants of the pioneers who still work farms and forestry around the town. It took only two meetings with the Association and 'one to one meetings with various residents who expressed strong interest' for Greenwood to realise the level of factionalism existing in the community.¹² From this point all publicity regarding meetings was distributed through post office boxes: a guaranteed one hundred per cent strike rate as there is no roadside delivery at Mole Creek. A survey drew many positive suggestions that informed subsequent meetings held by Greenwood and Stronach and which were attended by a wider community representation. The model of the proposed work was exhibited in the post office and the supermarket. Even if not totally happy, the community could hardly say it was uninformed or not consulted. Community involvement gave this critical public investment in the work, the work relates to its site, to some extent in ways sensible only to the community, and its sophisticated use of local materials appeals to both locals and tourists.

Unlike the cargo cult arrival of the works at other sites, Stronach was accessible to those who would become the work's most constant public as he worked at Mole Creek. People talked to him about the work, and even those who were initially disinterested or negative became interested or involved.¹³ The Mole Creek sculpture has, therefore, a more intensive or complete claim to publicness than others in the Trail. Stronach is adamant that community discussion is a necessity in any public project. He recognises that some artists may feel public 'interference' could compromise a final work: yet he does not believe this to be so.¹⁴ Placing himself and his process into the public realm has also led the private individual to become the public critic. Is it too much to suggest that publicness on the part of the artists, not just the art, be part of any public art brief? Cathey Billian has addressed the possibility of artists being involved in ephemeral interpretive processes along a trail or around a specific site, quoting Jim Baker's identification of work that might be 'quite private and not meant for public consumption, even when done in public spaces'.¹⁵ Billian extends Baker's example to public art generally, stating that it is artists who must take the initiative in addressing their private art in the public('s) space 'without creating controversies that continually erupt in the public realm'.¹⁶

The Trail of the Text

What has become particularly apparent during preliminary research is the lack of thought on public art in rural/wilderness areas in critical texts. Sara Selwood, in *The benefits of public art* briefly addressed 'Arts in Rural Areas' providing a tiny exception to the rule that public art away from the cities is generally thought about in urban terms.¹⁷ It is usual for even the wilderness to be constructed from the city – or the car park, a point recognised in site images sent to artists in the Sculpture Trail's 'Expression of Interest Information Package'.¹⁸ Almost every site was represented by an image relating to a road ('View of Liffey Falls Upper Car Park', 'View of Main Street of Mole Creek') as well as of the 'attraction' itself.

The restorative, reflective aspects of community art, often dealt with in texts on 'placemaking', are not the driving concepts behind the GWTST – indeed the making of place becomes a tourist activity in this space. The artist monograph is almost an industry, particularly relating to environmental art (consider the Andy Goldsworthy output) but for the new field that is the trail, or the tourist marker, the art is often subsumed within other disciplines. The urban nature of the trail is revealed most clearly by Patricia Phillips' revival of Kevin Lynch's 1960 evocation of city paths that 'serve as predominant circuits and vantage points where people construct memorable visions and associations of the city'.¹⁹ Public art was later added to create a narrative for the trail, extending its audience beyond the local to the tourist.

Some intimation of how a non-urban public art discourse might develop was given in Alexander Wilson's *The culture of nature*.²⁰ Wilson did not specifically deal with public art but with the idea of the trail itself, an appeal to the automobility of the modern tourist, encountering both the National Parks of Appalachia and Dollyland through the interchangeable frames of car window and interpretive panel. The trail was also the subject of a special issue of *Public Art Review* in which artist Cathey Billian glossed the Lynch/Phillips position but encouragingly recognised that 'artists and design teams...find themselves at the intersection of communication and a broad range of aesthetic concerns'.²¹

Conclusion

In August 2003, along the GWTST, two works were not in place. One, at Devils Gullet, had been subject to public discontent to the point where it was 'removed'. That removal is becoming part of the folk life of the community that uses Devils Gullet, however until the legend is distanced from the management of the project it is better recognised, enticingly, as eloquent comment on community involvement.²² In Deloraine, the petition for the removal of *Mountain Man/Man Mountain* continues to circulate: Council is talking of a review of placement of the riverside pieces and there is a push for this process to include 'community consultation'.

Whatever the outcomes for the Great Western Tiers Sculpture Trail, some trailblazing critical thinking on the public engagement with art in the regions is required when considering new contexts for art practice, and as a re-evaluation of who art's critical publics might be. Like Lucy Lippard I worry about the loss of 'the small picture' if urban discourses are continually imposed on regional (public) art.²³ The investment of a regional community will always be 'whole of site', that is of a township or wider locality, rather than that confined by a touristic trail, or other constructions drawn from the urban field. The local and tourist audiences of regional public art have widely differing needs and expectations and the challenge to the makers, curators and commissioners of public art is to conform a way of working that reflects that audience, no matter how difficult it may be to shed the terminology and practices derived from urban public art.

¹ Inspiring Place Pty Ltd, 'Great Western Tiers Touring Route: Draft Development Plan', in Section B of, 'Draft Northern Tasmania Regional Touring Strategy', Launceston: Northern Tasmanian Regional Development Board, Gateway Tasmania and Tourism Tasmania, 2003, 1

² Lawrence Alloway, cited in David Harding, 'Public art. Contentious term and contested practice', in David Harding with Pavel Büchler, eds, *Decadent. Public art: contested term and contested practice*, Glasgow: Foulis Press, 1997, 11

³ Alloway in Harding, 'Public art', 11

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge: Polity, 1989, 25

⁵ Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, 1989, 26

⁶ Dean MacCannell, *The tourist: a new theory of the leisure class*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, 44

⁷ MacCannell, *The tourist*, 39

⁸ V. Woollcott, 'Destruction of statue', (Letter to the Editor), *Examiner*, 12 February, 2003, 9

⁹ Suzanne Lacy, 'Cultural pilgrimages and metaphoric journeys', in Suzanne Lacy, ed., *Mapping the terrain: new genre public art*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1995, 19-20

¹⁰ Wayne Hudson, pers. comm.

¹¹ Miwon Kwon, *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002, 94

¹² Rebecca Greenwood, 'Progress Report November 2001. Sculpture for Mole Creek', typescript, 2001, n.p.

¹³ Pacey Stronach, pers. comm., 2003

¹⁴ Stronach, pers. comm..

¹⁵ Cathey Billian, 'On the nature of trails: a meander', *Public art review* 12:1, 2000, 30

¹⁶ Billian, 'On the nature of trails', 30

¹⁷ Sara Selwood, *The benefits of public art. The polemics of permanent art in public places*, London: Policy Studies Institute, 1995

¹⁸ DPIWE (Department of Primary Industries, Water and Environment, Tasmania), Parks and Wildlife Service, 'RFA Great Western Tiers Interpretation Project Arts and Crafts Program: Sculpture Trail Project. Expression of Interest Information Package', 9 February, 2001

¹⁹ Patricia C. Phillips, 'Approaches to a path', *Public art review* 12:1, 2000, 13

²⁰ Alexander Wilson, *The culture of nature: North American landscape from Disney to the Exxon Valdez*, Cambridge/London: Blackwell, 1992

²¹ Billian, 'On the nature of trails', 25

²² By 10 September 2003, staff at the Visitors' Centre, Deloraine, had heard that the Devils Gullet work had been 'put back': this has not been confirmed at the time of writing. The second work not yet in place was destined for Rotary Park on the Deloraine riverfront.

²³ Lucy R. Lippard, *The lure of the local: senses of place in a multicentered society*, New York: The New Press, 1997, 292

This first foray into the project has been greatly assisted by the generosity of Rebecca Greenwood, Wayne Hudson, Siobhan Reid and Paccy Stronach.