

Back to the City

Strategies for Informal Urban Interventions

Edited by Steffen Lehmann

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Abstract

Within the broader context of urban renewal in Newcastle NSW, this paper considers the importance of unauthorised tactical interventions in city placemaking in the form of *laneway art*, an ephemeral public art practiced in Australia's urban centres. It takes the dichotomy of authoritative versus subversive space as the working framework and investigates the ways in which some emerging forms of public art radically re-imagine the city. Particularly, this paper focuses on laneway art in Melbourne and Sydney. I will look at how laneway art creates a subversive space within the city, often existing in a 'carnavalesque' relationship with official sanctioned culture. This paper also looks at how laneway art forms only part of a larger milieu that works across hard (physical) and soft (virtual) spaces, via the internet. As an urban cultural practice, this art suggests that the social and cultural transformation of a city can operate on a micro and tactical level, ways in which art in urban spaces can re-imagine the place of art and the art of place in the city.

This paper argues that this emerging approach to public art can be understood as engaging in the city, its spaces and channels via a mode of practice similar to that suggested in Guy Debord's idea of the 'derive' – a tactically unpredictable 'drift' across city spaces. Debord's *derive* is a radical fragmentation of the nineteenth

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century Parisian flâneur, the uninvolved bourgeois stroller, made popular in architecture and urban planning through the work of twentieth-century thinker, Walter Benjamin. Unlike the flâneur's stroll, the *derive* cuts across the arterial lines that ordinarily link the organs of the urban corpus. In this way, the *derive* reinscribes the city plan in unpredictable ways and opens it up to multiple, unstable and temporary reinterpretations.

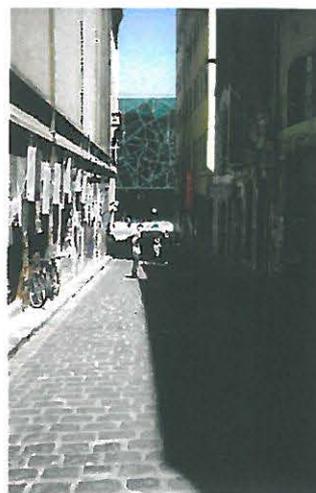
Laneway art, working often anonymously and illegally in the gaps and 'non-places' of the city, breaks open the relatively stable and sanctioned meanings of urban spaces. Laneway art is often temporary, usually political and plays wittily with the psychogeography of urban spaces. This paper considers how this tactical reuse of urban public spaces contributes productively to the development of art and culture in the city.

Keywords

Newcastle NSW; laneway art; derive; flâneur; carnivalesque.

Newcastle is a city in transition – shifting from being Australia's primary steel town and one of Australia's major industrial centres; but what will Newcastle become? Developments such as Honeysuckle and the planned renovation of the Newcastle Region Art Gallery aim to revitalise the city and its cultural life, but is art and culture in the public sphere necessarily something that can be planned? In *Not Quite Art* the recent ABC television documentary (2008), Novocastrian Marcus Westbury asks "is culture a messy, dirty thing that comes from the bottom up, refuses

to behave, is borderline illegal and breaks a lot of occupational health and safety rules?"¹ Westbury is a founder of Newcastle's *This Is Not Art* festival and former artistic director of the *Next Wave* Festival in Melbourne. The central theme of his documentary was the issue of how a city like Newcastle, a city undergoing an uneasy change, could reinvent itself as a centre for the arts in much the way as happened in Glasgow. For Westbury, art with a capital 'A' is epitomised by the proposed gallery renovation, re-invented as a Lab-designed faceted chip-off-Federa-



tion-Square. Westbury's 'not quite art' alternative to this is the activity currently circulating on the fringes of officially sanctioned art, around reclaimed post-industrial spaces, city laneways and websites. Westbury's view is predicated on a traditional dichotomy: authoritative space versus subversive space. These designations, though simplistic and not adequate for more elaborated nuanced investigation, are a useful starting point here. In this chapter, I take this dichotomy of authoritative/subversive space as the working framework for a brief investigation into the ways in which some emerging forms of public art radically re-imagine the city. Particular, I will focus on laneway art – now a fully-fledged public art sub-genre – in Melbourne (Fig. 1) and Sydney. I will look at how



laneway art creates a subversive space within the city, and works across hard (physical) and soft (virtual) spaces. As an urban cultural practice, this art suggests that the social and cultural transformation of a city can operate on a micro and tactical level, ways in which art in urban spaces can re-imagine the place of art and the art of place in the city.

Westbury's *Not Quite Art* focuses on the small circuit of Hosier Lane and Rutledge Lane, which connects Flinders Street and Flinders Lane in Melbourne city centre. From the Flinders Street end of Hosier Lane, the fragmented glass fascia of Federation Square looms (Fig. 2). The contrast is stark and not coincidental – something which I will return to shortly. Laneway art has grown in the dark crevices of other Australian cities too. In Sydney, laneway art has developed a stronghold in recent years in the southern end of Newtown and St Peters, with its focal point being May Lane, a block away from Princes Highway, the nation's main orbital road. Unauthorised mural painting was popular around Newtown in the early

1990s, the best known and most visible being the 'I Have a Dream' mural on King Street.² Present laneway art, however, takes a very different approach. Artists working with laneways are semi-anonymous, often known by short graffiti tag names, such as Angel, Doll, Gonzo and Deb. Stylistically, laneway art is driven by the expediency and ephemerality necessary with the inherent illegality of urban graffiti, and much of its visual coding derives from graffiti. Of course, aerosol spray painting forms a core, followed by other speedy modes of execution; large stencils are increasingly used, as is collage using existing print media or photocopied graphics. Because of its strong mass-culture influences, visual aesthetics and stylistic signature are a central in laneway art; quite unlike the austere and minimal tendencies that have dominated canonical and sanctioned contemporary art found within galleries. Whereas much contemporary art is predominantly conceptually-driven practice, this art has inherited a more pointedly pop-cultural focus. Much laneway art is also abstract or non-representational, but nonetheless drawing on graffiti aesthetics (Fig. 3). Typically, the content of laneway art works on witty image-play, often rich in irony and references from across culture. The work of overseas graffiti artists, such as Banksy, has been profoundly influential. Laneway art is often politically cynical, leftist or anarchist, taking up positions in the centre of mass culture and everyday life but adopting a 'fringe' posture.

While the aesthetics of laneway art are a rich area for investigation, of most interest here is the ways in which this sub-genre of public art intervenes in the functioning of the city. Laneway art is practiced in the interstitial spaces, the gaps, crevices and in-between-spaces of the city, behind the shops, between the houses, amongst the wheelie-bins (Fig. 4). To understand how this practice subverts city spaces, we need to consider what these spaces mean within the broader picture and practices of the city.

A modern city is not simply a functionalistic aggregate of spaces; it is the complex interplay of meaningful lived places – shopping malls, main streets, side streets, civic buildings, office blocks, museums, train stations. A city is the physical expression of discursive power, in the Foucaultian sense, and the



social, political and psycho-geographical meanings of a city result from the systematic physical manifestation of the production of knowledge. Through the bureaucratic regulation and policing of space, the city organizes and produces *places*.

From the late nineteenth century, the chaotic expansion of many European cities was tamed by civic planning into public places for the new middle class, who enjoyed surplus leisure time and wealth. The popular figure of the 'flâneur' fitted into the newly ordered city space. The flâneur was the leisurely middle-class stroller, for whom the city streets became a bourgeois place of comfort and familiarity, a 'homely' space outside of the home. The flâneur is imagined as someone content to be taken where the streets would lead, along paths most trodden – never the alleys and laneways. Of course, the flâneur is a convenient archetype, the subject of Baudelaire's literature, Caillebotte's paintings, Benjamin's theory and much more since, but it does give us a general sense of the social meaning of the places and channels of western cities in the late nineteenth century.

It is against the archetype of the 'flâneur' that Guy Debord in the mid-twentieth century targets his 'Theory of the Derive'.³ If 'flânerie' is wandering in bourgeois city space, the 'derive' is literally a 'drifting' across spaces. As Debord says, "the derive entails playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects; which completely distinguishes it from the classical notions of the journey or the stroll."⁴ While the flâneur is amenable to authorised and designated places, and is drawn from place to place along the main channels of the city, the derive is a tactical contradiction of the city's places and channels. Unlike the flâneur's stroll, the derive cuts across the organization of the city; furthermore, it rejects the premise of organization. In this way, the derive reconfigures the 'body' of the city as a Deleuzian *Body Without Organs*; in other words, it mixes the city, randomizing place, opening it up to ephemeral reinterpretations, subverting the uniform purpose of the space and creating lines of flight. Debord intended the derive to be a challenge to the sanctioned places and authorized channels of movement in the city, as an anarchic rejection of the bureaucratic ideology that sanctions places – as a way of ripping up

the pavement to reveal the beach beneath.

Laneway art literally inscribes the tactic of the derive. By growing like a mould in the gaps between sanctioned places, between the city's channels, in the margins, the 'non-places' that frame authorised and designated places, laneway art fragments accepted psycho-geography and subverts the authority of the city's channels of movement. In the days before extensive sewer systems, Australian laneways were historically the places where the 'dunny man' would access outhouses to empty out foul toilet pans; they are the places of scavenging cats, wheelie-bins, drug deals, illicit sex and graffiti. Laneway art critically activates these non-places, these abjected channels, as a tactical intervention in the practices of the city.

In Hosier Lane, Melbourne, laneway art engages the traditional cultural monolith of Federation Square in a 'carnavalesque' relationship, in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense of the term⁵ – it is an unauthorised travesty of the 'official' culture of Federation Square. Federation Square is a unequivocally defined place of (capital 'A', capital 'C') Art and Culture, with its austere aesthetics, permanency and bureaucratic sanctioning; Hosier Lane, directly across Flinders Street, with its wildly colourful, constantly shifting Dionysian aesthetics, its spontaneity and chaos, seeks to pervert the authoritative corporate identity and place of Federation Square – from across Flinders Street it beckons 'hey you, across the road, come in here and see what's *really* happening in the city'. (Fig. 5)

But what makes laneway art any different from any other traditional-radical response to authoritative officially-sanctioned art spaces, from *Dada* and *Fluxus* to 1990s *grunge*? One fundamental difference from previous art is the active interfacing of the 'hard' public space of the physical place and the 'soft' public space of the internet. Often laneway art is peppered with the website addresses of individuals' Myspace, Facebook and other social networking, blogging and content sharing Web 2.0 sites (Fig. 6). For example, one web address written on top of graffiti in a Melbourne laneway leads to a with photographs of the urban cityscape of Melbourne and, appropriately, images of the laneway in which the web address was found. The physical places that laneway art creates



are one dimension of a more complex subculture, for which the internet is a central element. Often the seemingly ephemeral work in the laneways lives on more enduringly on the web. For example, the art in May Lane, St Peters, is documented at www.mays.org.au by May Projects, which records and loosely catalogues past images from May Lane and runs a curated program of laneway art on panels in May Lane.

To think of this interface of hard and soft space as plain old intertextuality is to miss the point and not see what is interesting here. The websites, the laneways, the social networks, the blogs and the Myspace pages are all practices within a broader re-thinking of the cultural spaces of the city and, in turn, of the psychogeography of the city itself. It is beginning to emerge that the city is no longer a matrix of physical spaces and their aggregate social layers – those spaces are now extended into very active virtual dimensions, forming new lines of connectivity that are not bound to physicality. And the hyper-textual structure of the web means that the wander through the online extension of the spaces of the city can be extremely fragmentary.

The social cityscape is also refigured within this. Through these subverted hard and soft spaces, creative subcultures thrive, driven out of social networks, rather than institutionalized cultural activity. Social and cultural activity become blurred, so that cultural participation is enmeshed unselfconsciously within social life, rather than a conscious decision to participate in capital 'C' culture. In practical terms, this means cultural activities are not necessarily delivered in conventional spaces or treated as a rarified art and cultural events. Driven by social networks and not boards, free of constitutions, AGMs, annual reports, audited financial statements, accountability, commitments, guidelines and codes, these creative subcultures forsake the certainty and stability in favour of creative multiplicity of chaos. This is not to suggest that investment of cultural infrastructure is not desirable or important; but it is one method of developing art and culture with certain types of outcomes. In the reformulation of Newcastle from an industrial to a cultural centre, we should not underestimate the influence of those things that might



seem expedient and temporary, but which have an enduring impact.

Images

Laneway art in Hosier Lane and Rutledge Lane, Melbourne (Photos: K. Messham-Muir, 2007).

References

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- Hamilton, Paula & Ashton, Paul, 'On Not Belonging: Memorials and Memory in Sydney', *Public History Review*, Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney, Vol. 9.
- Art in Theory 1900 to 1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Harrison & Wood, Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- 'Banksy' and 'D-Face' are subversive and celebrated East London based Guerrilla (graffiti) artists, keeping their real identity hidden. See: www.banksy.co.uk or www.artofthestate.co.uk

Endnotes

- 1 *Not Quite Art; The art show that believes there is life outside the galleries*, <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/notquiteart/>, accessed 3/1/2008
- 2 Painted in 1991 by Andrew Aitken, Juilee Pryor and members of a group known as *Unmitigated Audacity Productions*, Hamilton, Paula & Ashton, Paul, 'On Not Belonging: Memorials and Memory in Sydney', *Public History Review*, Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney, Vol. 9, p.32
- 3 Debord, Guy, 'Writings from the Situationist International', *Art in Theory 1900 to 1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Harrison & Wood, Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, p.696
- 4 *ibid*
- 5 Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Dr. Kit Messham-Muir, Sydney | Newcastle

Kit Messham-Muir is a lecturer in Fine Arts at the University of Newcastle, with specializations in art history and museology. His research focuses on affective responses to objects and spaces. He has also worked in the area of government arts policy and cultural grants with *arts NSW*.

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Editor and

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