

8 Soft Architecture and Invisible Mending

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People travel to cities to achieve their ambitions and live out their dreams. London, Paris, New York, the litany is endless, Bombay, Taipei, Tokyo — these cities are the repositories of histories, memories and reveries. To live in the city of our choice means that the experience of that city will be implicated in all our decisions — as occupants we become part of the metaphorical body of the place. We do not eradicate this connection by leaving the city, because our understanding of how we walk the streets, of how we may greet our fellow residents, is born of the habitual experience of our home spaces.

Lawrence Durrell describes the city of Alexandria as a multi-faceted, ever changing organism to which he is irrevocably connected:

How long had I been away? I could hardly compute, though calendar time gives little enough indication of the aeons which separate one self from another, one day

from another; and all this time I had been living there, truly, in the Alexandria of my hearts mind. And page by page, heartbeat by heartbeat, I had been surrendering myself to the grotesque organism of which we had all once been part, victors and vanquished alike. An ancient city changing under the brush strokes of thoughts which besieged meaning, clamouring for identity; somewhere there, on the black thorny promontories of Africa the aromatic truth of the place lived on, the bitter unchewable herb of the past, the pith of memory. I had set out once to store, to codify it (perhaps it was hopeless?) for no sooner had I embalmed one aspect of it in words than the intrusion of new knowledge disrupted the frame of reference, everything flew asunder, only to reassemble again in unforeseen, unpredictable patterns. (Durrell, 1960, p. 9)

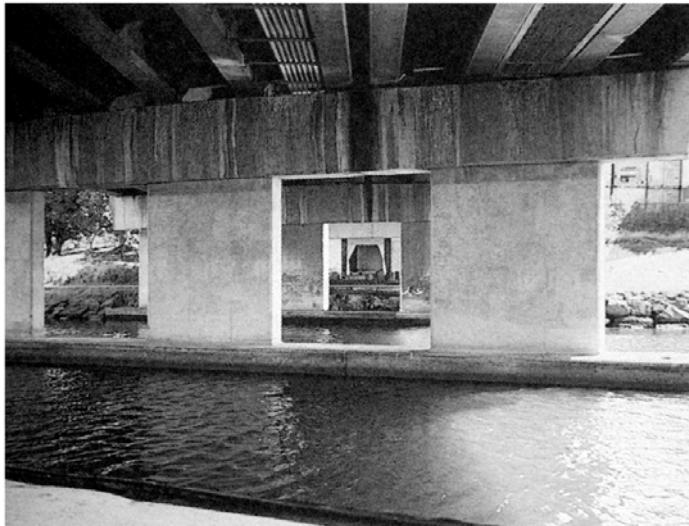


FIGURE 8.1
Hide, construction and process,
Anne Graham, 1998, Melbourne.
Photograph: A. Graham

The social spaces through which we live are not only physical spaces — made up of concrete, corrugated iron, glass, wood, tarmac, bricks and mortar — they are also made up of the less tangible spaces between houses, across streets, bus stops, park benches and the relationships that develop among people occupying these shared spaces. These small local networks link into the wider relationships of districts and cities. (Figure 8.1)



FIGURE 8.2
Hide, construction and process,
 Anne Graham, 1998, Melbourne.
 Photograph: A. Graham

Social space is not an empty arena within which we conduct our lives, rather it is something which we construct and which others construct around us. It is this incredible complexity of social interactions and meanings which we constantly construct, tear down and negotiate. And it is always mobile, always changing, always open to revision and always potentially fragile. We are always creating, in other words, not just a space, a geography of our lives, but a time-space for our lives. (Massey, 1995), (Figures 8.2, 8.3)

Cities are sites of constant change. They reflect the daily flow of commuting populations, the slower flow of architectural and political fashion and the waxing and waning of the economy. This condition of flux is necessary — the sweep of each generation of occupiers inevitably makes its mark and describes its identity on the surface of the city. The more long-term flows of the land and waterways provide the spatial boundaries which impact on the possibilities of our inscriptions, rather like the way boulders affect the flow of ants in a termite city.

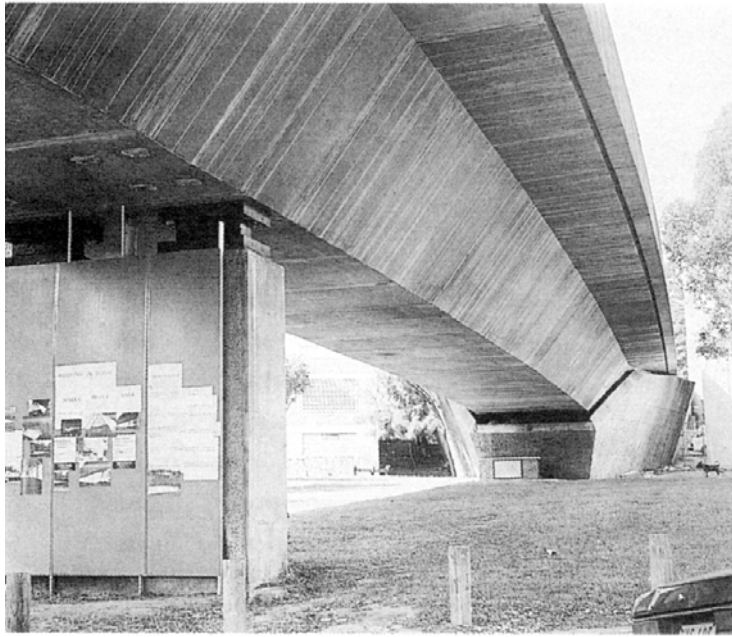
This ever-changing evanescent space of the city offers many opportunities for artists to interact with audiences of many kinds. Monumental public art work will continue to find a place, but the public in eastern Europe have quite determinedly shown the world how temporal these monuments to heroes and egos may be. With the advent of bodies such as the Public Art Development Trust in the UK and the National Endowment for the Arts in the USA the acceptance of temporal, site specific work has grown. It is understood that projects may have a period of research, a period of activity and then a slow break down into diverse community responses. The organic process of the work responds to the organic life of the city.

This interest in the phenomena of space, place and temporality is reflected in the work I have presented in various city sites from 1992 to 1996. The work produced in this period deals with place, not the secure places designed for commerce or comfort, but what Stephen Willats terms 'lurky' places in cities, which are generated accidentally. The spaces below freeways, between buildings, underneath office blocks, or on the rooftops of high rise buildings.

These 'other' spaces are described by Stephen Bann in his discussion of the work of Stephen Willats: '(space-s) between frontiers: a neutral place, a locus whose characteristics are semiotically negative, whose specificity consists in being neither the one nor the other, neither this edge nor the other'. (Bann, 1993, p. 25)

Bann describes contemporary 'neutral spaces', as the no-mans land between frontiers '... and the paradoxical possibilities of freedom that flower from sudden shifts and displacements of the bounding edge'. (Bann, 1993, p. 25)

The most famous example of this in contemporary times is the Berlin Wall — many artists now occupy and work in this once contested zone. The wall between the United States and Mexico still stands and has inspired many artists to



top: FIGURE 8.3
Walla Mulla Park, tent structure
and performance, Anne Graham,
1992, Woolloomooloo, Sydney.
Photograph: T. Marshall

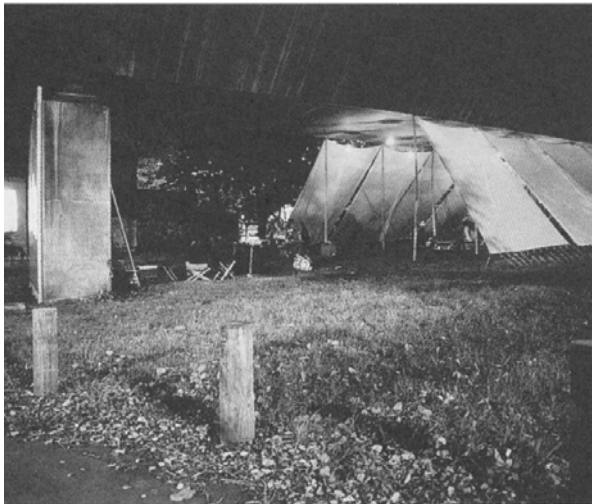
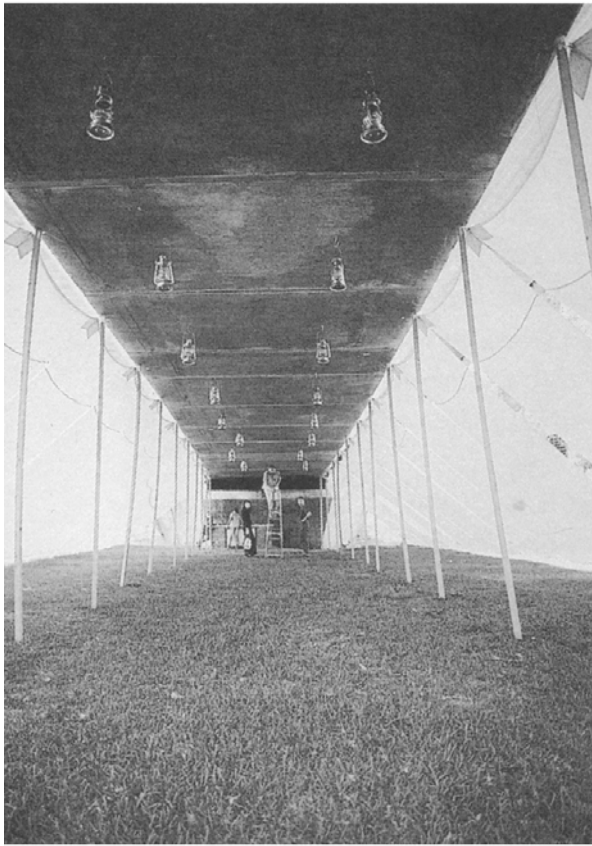
respond to its brutal presence, in particular The Border Art Workshop in Los Angeles. The Border Art Workshop is an established group of artists, writers and other participants in community activities. Working around a fixed membership, the Workshop integrates collaborations from all areas of the border communities of Tijuana/San Diego.

These spaces are not just an expression of the broad movement of the power of politics, they also offer the possibility of expression of the 'imaginative reality which is engendered in the neutral space within or beyond'. Bann explores this notion further in discussing Stephen Willats project *The Lurky Place*. Willats, a British artist who lived in Berlin in the 1970s, was responding to the wastelands which remain in the interstices of the urban environment, in particular a piece of land in West London known locally

as the 'Lurky Place'. The 'Lurky Place' for Willats was a place whose significance was completely open. It was a place of utopian possibility. The 'Lurky Place' was reached through a hole in the fence and Willats made a work there titled *Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers' Camp*. The 'Lurky Place' was a wasteland behind the Avondale housing development. Pat Purdy, the daughter of one of the residents on the estate, introduced Willats to the significance of the wasteland and to the 'lurky' places or camps where glue-sniffing took place. Willats isolated objects used in the 'lurky' place and identified them as transformative and powerful in their new role. For example, in *Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers' Camp* Willats represented a can of Evostick glue which was transformed from its positivistic, determined function of constructing things as given by society, into an agency for an anarchistic freedom and the self-organisation of a community. This transformation was achieved by the transportation of the object (the can of Evostick) from a new housing estate to an adjacent wasteland by young residents, where the rituals of sniffing glue became the rationale behind building camps and other group activities.

Willats understands the building of the glue-sniffers' camp and other transgressive social acts as important and creative.

Some of the most direct expressions of counter-consciousness that have concerned me, are those left as visual signs, messages about identity and community made on the surfaces of buildings, often recorded as rough, spontaneous marks and gestures straight onto the concrete, symbolically destroying, or at least subverting, its determinist message. What is denounced as an act of vandalism by the authorities I consider as creative acts of counter-consciousness, made to form and cement community. For these acts are rarely carried out by the lone individual, but rather are agents, catalysts for group behaviour. These creative marks are the signposts, the points of reference, the displays made by groups of residents for one another. As such these marks express the fundamental need for society, the need to stake out a territory, to state an identity inside the anonymous concrete, subverting its authoritative message. (Willats, 1987, p. 3)



top: FIGURE 8.4
Walla Mulla Park, tent structure
and performance, Anne Graham,
1992, Woolloomooloo, Sydney.
Photograph: T. Marshall

above: FIGURE 8.5
Walla Mulla Park, tent structure
and performance, Anne Graham,
1992, Woolloomooloo, Sydney.
Photograph: T. Marshall

In my work I am interested in discovering how it may be possible to alter the normalised experience of the world and offer the audience an experience of this area of sheer possibility. When I am looking for an appropriate site in the city for my work I enter into a dialogue with all aspects of the space. These aspects include the histories of the site (often made immediately evident through naming), the official and unofficial uses of the site by its inhabitants, and a more formal sculptural response to the architectural and geographic features.

Sites in the city have a whole range of users. For some the site will not exist, it will be a passageway between destinations, a place of no importance. It is necessary for the work to present this transient audience with a loophole, a way into a different experience of the place. For others the site may be a meeting place, where social gatherings and rites occur. To negotiate a place for artwork in this loaded space takes time and sometimes cannot be done, and should not be attempted. To attempt a long term installation or performance piece in a city site means that the artist must occupy the site for some time, must ‘live’ in the place, it must become a temporary home. All of the normal requirements for living need to be accommodated, such as toilets, running water and shelter. If a site offers all these features it will almost inevitably be occupied. It is necessary to respectfully and diplomatically locate a place and purpose for the artwork in this occupied space.

In 1992 I worked for eight consecutive weekends at Walla Mulla Park in Woolloomooloo, near the harbour in central Sydney, as part of the Working in Public Project: ‘a project designed to integrate art into the urban environment and to examine the problems inherent in such endeavours’. (Barratt-Lennard, 1992, p.1), (Figure 8.4)

Walla Mulla Park is a small patch of wasteland dissected by the South Sydney overpass. To one side of the park are Housing Commission homes with lots of young families, in front of the park is the Matthew Talbot Hostel for homeless men, behind the park is a laneway littered with hypodermic needles, to the other side is a gentrified warehouse, home for designers and architects. Tourists pass by on their way to and from Kings Cross. These various populations do not normally mix, they do not form a community, their activities are distinct and separate, they are oblivious to each others needs.

To work in this place — where very different economic spheres rotate around each other without colliding, and where the art of ignoring others has been perfected — offers the challenge of trying to capture an audience, but also the security of knowing that in this place you could do anything, even drop dead, and the chances are no-one would notice! Competing with street action, ‘real life’ only works if you can offer some transformative magic — the place and people must generate an atmosphere that transcends the mundane. (Figure 8.5)

At Walla Mulla we erected a long narrow tent supported by the structure of the overpass. The fabric of the tent created a soft underworld below the heavy concrete bridge. At night the tent would glow with the light of kerosene lamps. We cooked food and the smell of cooking and kerosene seemed to act as a magnet for the local inhabitants. The smell also operated as a trigger for memories of circuses, camping holidays, the Second World War, the bush, memories of other places and other times. We projected films onto the wall of a neighbouring cafe and this seemed to add to the air of unreality — the tent space became a performance place and the audience became the performers. One evening a string trio appeared and played for us, another night two girls danced erotically through the space. It seemed as if this space offered an opportunity for fantasy, a gap in the concrete, like Steppenwolfe's Magic Theatre. (Hesse, 1965), (Figure 8.6)

The creative ways that the occupants negotiated these different sorts of home spaces became apparent. The presence of my installation seemed to offer the opportunity to recognise the:

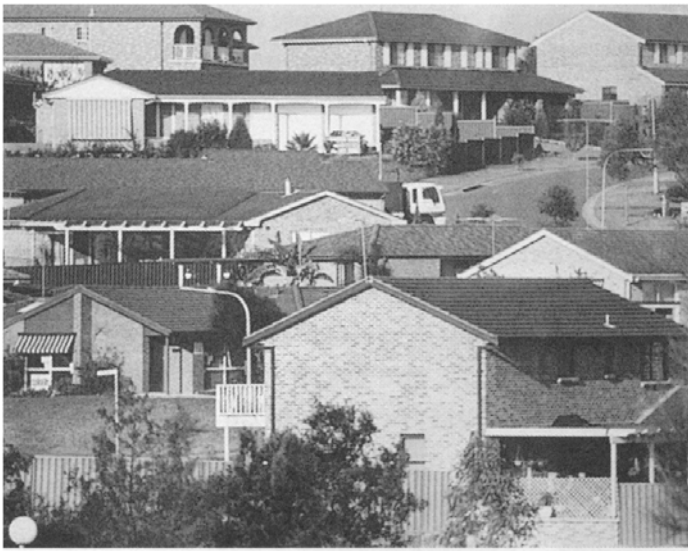
... unrecognised producers, poets of their own acts, silent discoverers of their own paths in the jungle of functionalist rationality, consumers produce through their signifying practices something that might be considered similar to the wandering lines (*lignes d'erre*) drawn by the autistic children studied by F. Deligny: 'indirect' or errant trajectories obeying their own logic ... The trajectories trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop. (De Certeau, 1988, p. xviii)

In 1993 at the Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial, in Melbourne, I also worked with temporal structures. I made fourteen small tents, rather like the tents phone companies use to cover holes when repairing cables under the street. I enjoyed this reference to passageways and systems beneath our feet, suggesting an entry to the underworld. (Figure 8.7)

We moved these tents to a different location in Melbourne every night for two weeks. We were reminders of a lost tribe. At this time images of the Kurds,

FIGURE 8.6
Streetlight, tent structures and performance, Anne Graham, 1993, Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial, Melbourne. Photograph: A. Graham





top: **FIGURE 8.7**
Minchinbury Housing Estate,
Minchinbury, Sydney.
Photograph: A. Graham

above: **FIGURE 8.8**
Hypothetically Public, the old
winery, Minchinbury Estate,
Anne Graham, 1993, Minchinbury,
Sydney. Photograph: A. Graham

displaced in the Gulf War, were flashing across television screens. Small, square army tents, used to house victims of war, recurred as images of disaster and homelessness on movie and television screens and as newspaper photographs. These tents also found an echo in the army encampment, and many of the first colonial images of Australia portray neat compounds with lines of tents outlined against the bush.

Our audience were mainly locals who came upon us by chance. We offered food, conversation and sometimes a film. The nature of the audience depended on the choice of location, and the locations were chosen because they had some shelter, a tap and a toilet.

The locations were chosen to cover a range of different possibilities — at Catani Gardens, St Kilda, the Kings Cross of Melbourne, we inadvertently set up our camp on a gay beat. At Gertrude Street in Fitzroy we set up in the local drug dealing depot. Our soup was welcome in both of these places! It is cold in Melbourne on the street.

Occasionally we would be asked by people what church we belonged to. They thought we were some kind of charity. People from countries with more street life had no problem just joining in, eating, watching the movie, and wandering among the tents. Children especially were attracted to these small tents. The populations

changed with the time of night — the drug deals were early, next came the families walking out with their children after dinner, families from Vietnam, South America, Chile and the Pacific Islands. Later came the students who had been to evening lectures, a very exotic collection of nationalities in this part of Melbourne, including young people from Eritrea, Zaire, and Ethiopia. It was strange to generate a warm, friendly, active communal space underneath a block of flats renowned for their inhospitality, violence and squalor. We were welcomed in all of the locations that we operated in. We had good conversations which would often focus on the location, the normal pattern of use of the space and our disruption of this normality. Our presence awoke memories, particularly for some of our visitors who had fled their home countries for political reasons and could not return.

In Sydney, the next work in this series was *Hypothetically Public* curated by Jennifer Barrett. Several artists were given locations in western Sydney and asked to propose a work which responded to the place and its inhabitants. (Figure 8.8)

The project sets out to articulate some of the many contradictions of public art and the way it may be interpreted by a diverse range of communities, government authorities, arts and cultural workers and the private sector. We believe that more

consideration of these contradictions can encourage a more critical discourse to be developed between the various professionals and communities involved in this practice. (Barrett, 1993, p. 5), (Figure 8.9)

The location for my work was the Minchinbury Housing Estate in western Sydney. To one edge of this ordered place is the old Minchinbury Winery. This building is quite derelict and stands out in its disorder amongst the neat gardens and houses of the estate. My first task was to meet the residents of Minchinbury and find out what they felt about this supposed ‘eyesore’ in their midst. I visited every house on the perimeter of the winery, and asked the inhabitants what

would they like to do with this place?

The responses to this question were rich and varied, and I discovered that this ruin represented a host of possibilities and flights of imagination reflecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of the Minchinbury dwellers. The ruin was not ‘a monument to pseudo-memory’. (Guillaume, 1986, p. 439) It was so old, ill-defined, wrecked and featureless that it offered the opportunity for people to superimpose their own real memories and histories upon it. (Figure 8.10)

The winery was a ‘Lurky Place’. It clearly fulfilled the needs of the local people by representing a disruption in the sanitised order of the estate. (Wright and Bond, 1984)

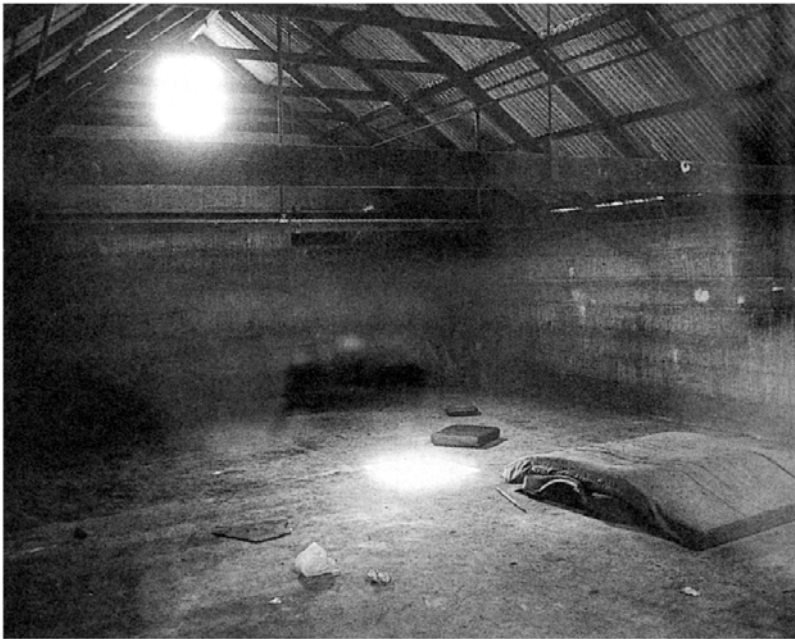


FIGURE 8.9
Hypothetically Public, ‘Lurky Place’ inside the old winery, Minchinbury Estate, Anne Graham, 1993, Minchinbury, Sydney. Photograph: A. Graham

If it is true that the grid of ‘discipline’ is everywhere becoming clearer and more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures ... manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them only to evade them, and finally, what ‘ways of operating’ form the counterpart, on the consumer’s (or dominee’s?) side, of the mute processes that organise the establishment of socioeconomic order. These ‘ways of operating’ constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organised by the techniques of sociocultural production. (De Certeau, 1988, p. xiv), (Figure 8.11)

The experience at Minchinbury points to the value of non-prescriptive sites — these ‘nowhere places’ that are necessary because they can be all things to all people from all cultures, and provide the screen on which can be projected the images of memory and imagination. Characterised in this manner the housing estate can be viewed with new insight. The meandering pathways between houses are seen as tracks of deviance on the immaculate lawns. Similarly, additions to the ‘perfect’ homes, render them at the same time ‘odd’ but identifiably different. The creative urge to alter, to mark, to make one’s own is as eminently visible in the suburbs as in the city centre. (Figure 8.12)

right: **FIGURE 8.10**

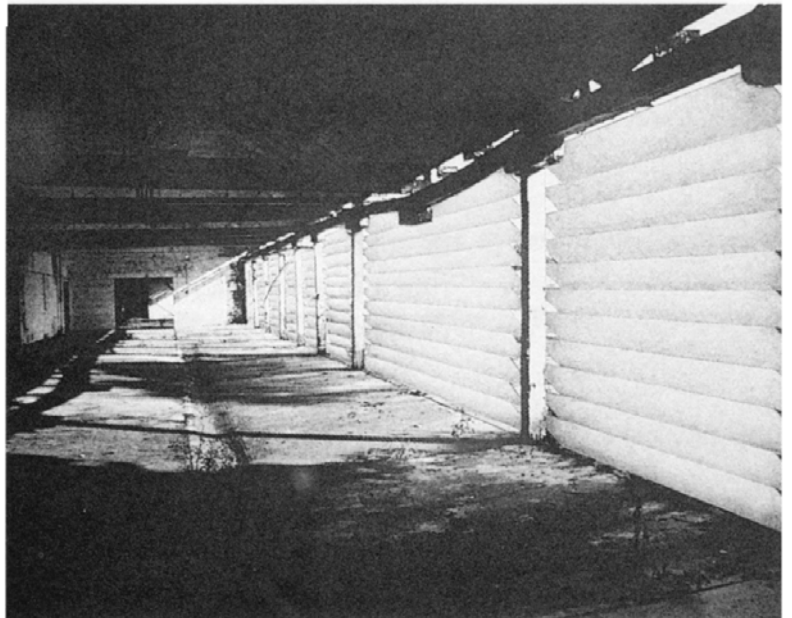
Hypothetically Public, local residents in 'Lurky Place', Minchinbury Estate, Anne Graham, 1993, Minchinbury, Sydney. Photograph: A. Graham

centre: **FIGURE 8.11**

Hypothetically Public, winery intervention, Minchinbury Estate, Anne Graham, 1993, Minchinbury, Sydney. Photograph: A. Graham

below right: **FIGURE 8.12**

Hypothetically Public, winery intervention, Minchinbury Estate, Anne Graham, 1993, Minchinbury, Sydney. Photograph: A. Graham



People will still be obliged for a long time to accept the era of reified cities. But the attitude with which they accept it can be changed immediately. We must spread scepticism towards those bleak, brightly coloured kindergartens, the new dormitory cities of the East and the West. Only a mass awakening will pose the question of a conscious construction of the urban milieu.

The basic practice of the theory of unitary urbanism will be the transcription of the whole theoretical lie of urbanism, detoured (diverted, appropriated) for the purpose of de-alienation: we constantly have to defend ourselves from the poetry of the bards of conditioning — to jam their messages, to turn their songs inside out. (Wodiczko, 1988, p. 43)

The winery, in the middle of the housing estate at Minchinbury, by its accidental destruction had become an ‘aesthetic-critical interruption’ in the place. It seemed that the people of Minchinbury had ‘detoured and diverted’ the strategies of the State and of real estate architecture by responding to the ruin of the winery, the black heart, the ‘Lurky Place’ which made a necessary gap in the formal organisation of the place.

To conclude, my aim as an artist working with critical public art could be described as neither a happy self-exhibition, nor a passive collaboration with the grand gallery of the city, its ideological theatre and architectural social system. Rather, it is an engagement in the strategic challenges to the city structures and mediums that mediate our everyday perceptions of the world. It is an engagement through aesthetic-critical interruptions, infiltrations and appropriations that question the symbolic, psycho-political and economic operations of the city. (Wodiczko, 1988, p. 42)

My work attempts to ‘bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of discipline’. (De Certeau, 1988, p. xiv)

Each of these installations became a response to, and communication with, the users of the specific locations. The users of the space were the audience but they also became the creators of the pieces. The gap between art and life and artist and audience is deliberately blurred in these works.

Art that is rooted in a ‘listening’ self, that cultivates the intertwining of self and other, suggests a flow through experience which is not delimited by the self but extends into the community through modes of reciprocal empathy. Because this art is listener-centred rather than vision-oriented, it cannot be fully realised through the mode of self expression: it can only come into its own by dialogue, as open conversation, in which one listens to and includes other voices. For many artists now, this means letting previously excluded groups speak directly of their own experience. The audience becomes an active component of the work and is part of the process. (Gablik, 1995, p. 83)

The works in this series all operate outside of a gallery context and offer the opportunity to interact with new audiences in a ‘non-art’ situation:

For the meaning of the work to be conveyed, its presence in public is essential. It is not art for public spaces but art addressing public issues. This art is dependent upon a real and substantive interaction with members of the public, usually representing a particular constituency, but not one that comes to art because of an identification

or connection with the art world. Such work must reach those for whom the artistic subject is a critical life issue. This work deals with audience first: the artist brings individuals into the process from the start, thus redefining the relationship between artist and audience, audience and the work of art. It departs from the position of authority over and removed from the audience that has become the hallmark of twentieth-century western art. It reconnects culture and society, and recognises that art is made for audiences, not for institutions. (Jacobs, 1995, p. 54)

In this series of works the audience are no longer detached as passive observers, they are not divorced from the production of the work but actively involved in the creative process of formation and definition. It is in this expanded notion of 'public art' that the use and occupation of space functions as the main support and subject of my work.

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