PUBLIC ART IS AN INADEQUATE STAND-IN FOR SOCIAL POLICY. FURTHER, ITS DEPLOYMENT AS INVIDIOUS BACKDOOR APOLOGY FOR A SOCIETY'S WRONGS — AN APOLOGY WITHIN THE POLITICALLY NEUTERED PARENTHESIS OF 'ART' — LEADS INELUCTABLY TO BAD ART. OF WHICH, THE PSEUDO-ABORIGINALITY OF MUCH OF MELBOURNE'S DOCKLANDS URBAN ART PROGRAM REPRESENTS A LAMENTABLE EXAMPLE.

GUILTY ART

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As the first batch of major commissions arise from the dust storm of real estate development, it is clear that its urban art program is born out of a number of shortcomings, chief of which is the fundamental misunderstanding that the creative hijacking of indigenous beliefs, traditions and history of the land's forefathers, by non-indigenous artists, is a way of saying sorry. Thankfully this does not characterise all of the completed commissions. A couple of projects, including Simon Perry's *Threaded Field*, respond to the contemporary urban fabric of the Docklands in a meaningful way. However, Australia's biggest investment in contemporary art [$60 million over the next couple of decades] has got off to a decidedly guilty start.

This is not to say that public art [and although the artistic program is notibly called 'urban art' with the 'public' appellation missing, I will address this work as de facto public] is unable to take part in the social life and history of a city. Merely that as an instrument of redress, its symbolic gestures do little more than perhaps help us whitefellas feel better about ourselves. What saved, for instance, Krzysztof Wodiczkos' *Homeless Vehicles* a decade ago from this fate was a self-reflexity and political engagement that actively undermined and resisted a reading of this work as part of a 'solution'. It offers no symbolic respite, rather it ridicules that empty gesture. So too in the mid 90s, Rachel Whiteread's *House* gained its strength precisely by avoiding lefty socialist rhetoric. It did not explicitly stand in judgement of the fractures in London's post-Thatcher housing policy. Though it certainly proved a potent metaphor to the good people of Bow who fought to preserve it, and lost. Its stark sculptural presence was a haiku to the human inhabitation of space, for which it did not need to presume the fallacy of social redress. Its political charge was not a thematic, but embedded in the practice.

Top: Bruce Armstong's *Bunjil* perched high and silent, overlooking the speculation of the Docklands Photo Andrew Mackenzie
Bottom: an example of what a powerful, temporary intervention can do to the face of an urban site – Ian de Gruchy's *Town Hall Transformed*, 1999–2000 Photo Ian de Gruchy

Similarly when Ian de Gruchy takes to the walls of Australia's urban landmarks, his temporary defacing of institutional architecture is intrinsically social. Projecting stark, poetic images onto defenceless facades, his response to the specifics of place and time is both transgressive and deeply polemical. Commissioned to make a large Melbourne millennium projection on the Town Hall, *Town Hall Transformed* became an opportunity for de Gruchy to team up with with Aboriginal artist Donna Brown, in creating a segment entitled *The Sea of Hands*, which successfully engaged in social history without resorting to guilty monument building. The Town Hall's grand Corinthian pilasters and columns became temporary home to a mosaic of hands of reconciliation, combined with the names of indigenous tribes meticulously etched onto the fabric of the Town Hall sandstone. No apology here, but a wilful occupation. An emphatic rewriting of an erased history. A temporary assertion of ownership only possible in the passing liberty of the night. In the realms of the public, this work utilises both the most powerful agency of cultural production – the projected image – and the radical potential of immediacy and temporality.

Compare this to the sculptural fundamentalism of Bruce Armstrong's *Bunjil*. Based on the spirit creator of the Kulin nations, which include the Wurundjeri people whose forefathers lived in and around present day Melbourne, Armstrong's fundamentalist white sculpture represents one of the Docklands' most monumental failures. Perched high on a totemic timber plinth between the east and westbound lanes of the Wurundjeri Highway, *Bunjil*'s location seems hand-picked for aloof detachment. Defying close observation and with no safe or legal way to experience it as a sculptural object [at close quarters], it can only be viewed either by the passing driver or distant tourist [from the new Collins Street bridge], reducing its apprehension to that of the purely iconic. But what is it an icon to? This *Bunjil*, which once protected the Wurundjeri people, safeguarding the land and fending off predators, has now been downgraded to the mute task of overseeing the building boom of one of the country's largest cash-cow real-estate developments. That we blithely accept *Bunjil*'s symbolic failure to protect the land and the people of the Wurundjeri and rather parade it as cultural restitution, is an act of sheer cynicism that beggars belief.

This bankrupt pseudo-Aboriginality is not the only failure of the Docklands public art program so far. It is also disappointing to see how few commissions interact with their contemporary urban context with anything approaching intelligence. The Docklands, like it or loath it, is something of an experiment that will have enormous repercussions for the urban quality of inner city Melbourne in the future. We're talking about billions

of dollars of investment in a whole new super-modern chunk of city. Maybe it's not *Blade Runner* territory, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that, given the resources and deep pockets available, the possibilities for applying the new time-based and digital technologies which are emerging as substantial drivers of contemporary art practice should have been tremendously exciting. Instead the Docklands has spawned art that owes a greater debt to the Victorian era than the cyber era.

Firstly, the major commissions are predicated on the assumption that artworks will be taking up long term residence in fixed locations – statues by any other name. This idea of urban stasis flies in the face of just about all contemporary urban planning policy, which emphasises, rather, flux, change, growth, redundancy and reinvention as essential, undeniable qualities of the contemporary city. Confirmation of which is Melbourne's own recent history of public art, with the *Yellow Peril* finding its third resting place, unfortunately now cluttering the otherwise distilled drama of the new Australian Centre for Contemporary Art building. Other examples abound. Summers' monument to Burke and Wills has been moved four times and now sits uncomfortably by the curb side of City Square, as distinguished as a telephone booth. If this is how we treat truly impressive sculpture [Burke and Wills is surely one of Summers' greatest achievements] what hope is there for a marooned disconsolate icon? To approach new public art in urban space as if we lived in the days of Wren, Hausmann or Griffin [don't mention the masterplan] is simply not learning from the past, nor observing the potential of the present. Art like the guerilla projections of de Gruchy, as well as those of the highly successful low budget Laneways Project [initiated to take up semi-permanent presence in the city's distinctive laneways] by Melbourne City Council, respond much more dynamically to the nature of the contemporary city.

Secondly, whose vision of the Docklands is informing these commissions? I can tell you that the Docklands Urban Art Panel doesn't, of course, include a single Aboriginal elder or member of the Aboriginal community, although doubtless they have been consulted with spin and rhetoric. The panel had little engagement with other artists with hands-on experience of working within the public realm and an inadequate, virtually invisible, engagement with the public or the citizens of central Melbourne. The seven member panel included a number of suitably qualified arts professionals, a City of Melbourne representative and, of course, Michael Buxton of the MAB Corporation which alone is contributing over $10 million to the program.

What makes this so worrying is that a commitment to public art of this size, funded entirely by private investment, obviously would appear to go a long way to replacing the need for public funding of these kinds of arts initiatives. Which might satisfy the fiscal probity of Mr. Howard, but has serious implications for the long term support and advocacy of intelligent, challenging and provocative public art [or any art for that matter]. Any 'percent for art' development initiative, is only of benefit to artists or [more importantly] the public, if it commits to thoroughly transparent processes, along with collaborative and intense relationship with the sites' contemporary urban fabric, the community of arts practitioners with considerable experience and knowledge to share, and finally those people who will have to use and inhabit this space every day. The effect of large scale private development on public space has contributed, the world over, to a twenty-first century urban malaise, held in check only by the negotiation of invidious compromises. A public art program spawned by such a development needs robust advocates and rigorous processes.

Thirdly, the ostensible content of most of these projects just completed or in the pipeline display a depressing predilection for nostalgia, generally pandering to a vague, mythical pre-industrial romanticism of the landscape. Burrowing down into the sites' remote past and ancient geography with the enthusiasm of hobby anthropologists, these artists seem to have an understanding of cultural theory that stops somewhere around Claude Lévi-Strauss. Just read the list of project titles – *Blow Hole*, *Reed Vessel* and *Shoal Fly By*. Each one dutifully launched with an Aboriginal dance and the pop of champagne. Denial and guilt getting tipsy at the same cocktail party.

But it's not going to stop there. Although embargoed in its detail, there is a project in development in regional Victoria, which I feel compelled to mention. It's very, very, very big. Not unlike the *Angel of the North*, though instead of Gormley's anonymous vacuum-packed universal man, this project celebrates a particular Aboriginal group who once dwelled in the region. It will, if it gets off the ground, cost many millions of dollars and doubtless bring tourism, jobs and spectacle to an otherwise unspectacular, timeless place. Maybe it's just me being pedantic but, if this is to be a truly monumental, crowd-pulling and landmark celebration of a region's Aboriginal heritage and living culture, I have a problem with the fact that its creator is non-Aboriginal. Once more whitefella gets the gig to celebrate blackfella's cultural richness.

This kind of ongoing colonial appropriation, though hotly played out in the syntactical fencing between Bennett and Tillers, seems to be a debate notable by its absence in the world of public art commissions. I have no doubt that commission parameters are informed by good intentions and artists are doing nothing more than responding to said flawed but laudable parameters. But as an old tutor told me in first year of art college, possibly the most useful piece of advice Goldsmiths had to offer, virtuous intentions are the last refuge of the mediocre artist.

Top: One of the few projects to engage with the urban spatial fabric is Simon Perry's Threaded Field
Photo Andrew Mackenzie
Bottom: Hilariously kitsch bulbous forms, 'statues' by any other name, by Adrian Mauriks [at the front of Arkley Tower]
Photo Andrew Mackenzie