Life X 4: On Iterating Public Art

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Iteration: Again: 13 Public Art Projects across Tasmania.

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Life X 4: On Iterating Public Art
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Separated from the Australian mainland by 140 miles of the treacherous pitch and toss of Bass Strait, Tasmania is a byword for remoteness.
—Nicholas Shakespeare, On Tasmania

Fucking internet! I can’t even move to somewhere remote where they still speak English like Tasmania.
—Douglas Coupland, The Gum Thief

Iteration:Again began as a very open brief; the second in a series of international commissioned projects Contemporary Art Spaces Tasmania (CAST) had developed called Locate/Situate. Where the first project was a nomadic performative work by British artists Ivan and Heather Morison, CAST decided with the second event to invite a curator to make ‘an exhibition of some kind’. The precise brief was equal parts joy and mild alarm: it had to take place in Tasmania and should involve at least some Tasmanian-based artists (all good) yet at the same time, I could undertake practically anything subject only to the financial bottom line (daunting). Such generous parameters, exciting for a curator used to a bevy of constraints, also seemed at the outset to be a double-edged sword: I knew little about Tasmania beyond a cursory knowledge of a few artists and a pedestrian series of factoids, and at the same time I was largely interested in working in an informed public context with newly commissioned work.

Realising quickly that a paucity of constraint was a brilliantly effective constraint, the unknown and unnamed project began with a research visit in April 2010 involving a tour of Hobart and Launceston and three days of meetings with artists. CAST had assumed (correctly) that the project was unlikely to involve gestural figurative painting and scheduled mostly sculptors, a few video makers and a significant number of artists who had worked in the public sphere. It was both the quality of the later in tandem with a palpable excitement and energy for temporary public art that indicated from these initial meetings there was a genuine capacity to build a project around this mode of practice.

Alongside these discussions, I was keen to gauge interest from Tasmanian-based curators who had worked or wanted to work in a public context. Together we conceived of a project of 13 commissions, one for each of the associate curators and six developed by myself through CAST. While the majority of projects would take place in Hobart, where most of the curators were located, two commissions were Launceston-based and two further projects (Maddie Leach and Ruben Santiago) operated between Hobart and regional Tasmania.

The curatorium model of drawing a number of curators together to work on an overarching public art project was a feature of the One Day Sculpture project in New Zealand that I had developed with Claire Doherty in 2008/9. The idea of revisiting this multi-modal approach of collaborative curatorial practice appealed for a number of reasons. On the one hand, the pan-institutional model of a range of organisations contributing commissions would help address the issue of viability and support structures. This is no small deal in a context like Tasmania where there are of course finite resources in the area of public art practice. Equally as important, the aim of drawing an assortment of curators into the project would serve...
to expand both knowledge and opportunities in the area of commissioning temporary public artworks.

In Tasmania – The Vagaries of Place and Time
The extraordinary ‘story’ of Tasmania inevitably frames the potentiality and possibility of a public art project. Through its rich, tragic and often extreme histories as a penal settlement – as a colony that had through an assortment of policies and intolerances almost eradicated the indigenous population – and, as an incredibly unique habitat that has been fought over since colonisation, the former Van Diemen’s Land is not a place to be cavalier with so-called place responsiveness. There are of course always tensions and contested terrain in every place but in Tasmania the tension James Boyce outlined in his colonial history Van Diemen’s Land between its hostile origins as a British gaol and the remarkably benevolent land itself still lingers.¹ Even as an artist or curator familiar with this place you cannot but be caught up in the complex resonances and legacies of these histories, yet at the same time their profundity has the real potential to be overwhelming.

Artists working in the public sphere are increasingly reflexive in terms of responding to the specificity of places. This is partly a reaction to being more attuned to the depth and value of complex historical knowledge and an incorporation of the potential pitfalls outlined by Miwon Kwon of making pseudo-ethnographic art in one place after another.² Claire Doherty and Paul O’Neill have pointed to the contradictory pull between those seeking to establish a stable, knowable place such as government and civic authorities promoting cultural tourism, and place as a context that is always in a state of flux, an event-in-progress.³ This tension could be seen to inform all temporary public art projects and the authors outline with some precision the complex series of negotiations the curator-producer has to undertake. These include resolving their role as active negotiators in the production of artwork while demonstrating a commitment to an informed and embedded position with regards to place. At the same time the curator-producer is required to navigate a profound responsibility to account for considerable expenditure of public art funds all the while developing a project that must be both locally relevant and internationally significant.⁴

Even though the idea of neutralising place as a determining curatorial focus of Iteration:Again was both futile and foolhardy, another strategy was to establish a framework through which place might be examined as one strata of a broader thematic context. Of the range of assorted possibilities, time or duration once again wafted to the surface. Invariably a matrix or glue of temporary public art projects, temporal investigation is something of a staple in this mode of practice. Dave Beech points to this in his essay ‘The Ideology of Duration in the Dematerialised Monument’ where importantly he cautions against the employment of duration as a solution for art’s social contradictions. For Beech, there is something wrong about the way in which the ideology of duration has been keeping tabs on time.⁵ Such a cautionary note is salutary in thinking about how time might or might not function in a project such as Iteration:Again. What is clear is that simply substituting place with time as a curatorial armature does not offer an easy or ideologically neutral out to the systemic problems and limitations of making public art in a specific context.

Keeping Partial Tabs on Time
Beech does, however, offer a number of strategies or modalities to consider in productively utilising duration, each of which suggest possibilities that
are especially salient for this project. ‘Let’s think’, he tells us, ‘about delay, interruption, stages, flows, of instantaneous performances and lingering documents, of temporary objects, and permanent mementos, of repetition, echo and seriality.’

While many of these modes are present to varying degrees in *Iteration:Again*, delay, interruption, repetition and echo could be seen as front and centre issues that permeate and flavour all 13 commissions. In shaping the curatorial premise, I wanted each of the artists to think through how a highly specific time sequence (four changes over four weeks) could operate as a potentially productive constraint; one in which they could test out what it might mean to draw an audience to a public artwork at least four times over a period of just under a month. This idea of deferral where there is not a privileged point or moment of encounter but a series of moments unfolding or collapsing across space and time, functioned in part as a challenge to the idea of a static unitary artwork. Yet it also sought to challenge the artists to devise ways of activating audience engagement so that they would willingly defer a codified or at least resolved picture until the presentation of the fourth iteration.

Such a sense of delay, while potentially frustrating, or being too onerous, or simply too weird for many people, also offered artists the opportunity to draw audiences into a more fluid understanding of public artworks. In activating weekly shifts, or in some instances weekly repetitions, the artists nudged, coaxed and occasionally coerced their respondents towards a greater openness to art being an inherently fluid and process-driven activity without a definitive encounter or resolution. Central to this approach is the idea that artworks can never be complete in themselves, but are instead always provisional: enveloped in a constant programme of contingency and transition over time.

Of course these lofty aspirations have to be met by simply getting audiences motivated to engage with artworks in non-gallery locations multiple times and sometimes in multiple locations. The inherent difficulty in framing a coherent and graspable project and subsequently drawing a broad level of audience response should never be underestimated. Through a mixture of website information, commissioned critical responses posted weekly on each project and a project Hub at CAST Gallery with artists documentation and support material, we sought to offer a range of ways for audiences to access the project. The
Public Art: Learning to Love Your Niche Audience

There is a paradox at the heart of this enterprise: public art has a limited public it is in dialogue with. Public art that asks an awful lot of people, such as Iteration:Again did, certainly cuts the cake slice even thinner. The narrow and contingent audience base that runs counter to the potentially enormous audience numbers waiting to be engaged is fertile ground for the predictable criticism of elitism and art for the art world from those who expect a readymade audience (the public no less) to be inherently larger and more proactive than it often is. Relatedly, there is the suspicion of a discrete and once-off project showing up and then leaving town before the month is out, possibly never to return.

Without doubt one can never take an audience for granted by presuming there will be a small army of enthusiasts at the ready to go anywhere at any time. It takes a certain kind of person to willingly listen to commercial radio for two hours so that they might catch the first 22 seconds of a Serge Gainsbourg song. Or, to stand on a promontory in drizzling rain at Glenorchy observing in the distance an artist who has seceded and is encamped on his own island. This is one of the reasons why the biennale model/franchise is so popular in that it creates a frame by which an audience can be directed to such activities in anywhere from two to 10-yearly cycles. It is easy to skewer the biennale-type event as little more than a highly codified template for displaying a lot of art in a scattered site event, but it does have the distinct advantage of being able to nurture and develop an audience at regular intervals over time. While logic might suggest, as many artists and writers such as Mark Hutchinson, Grant Kester and Nato Thompson outline, that audience engagement takes a lot of committed building over significant periods of time, this was not a viable option in this instance. Yet counter to this model of deep and sustained connection, I would suggest that there is still real value to be gained from the short, sweet but intense approach.

With the above limitations in mind and contrary to the perception of a closed shop, the number of people contributing and engaging across the 13 projects was impressive. Whether they be marching girls, tug boat operators, the editorial team of the Mercury newspaper, or the shop attendants at Taroona Shot Tower, the number of participants who were drawn into an active and in-depth dialogue with artists significantly expanded and made this project’s audience richer. While difficult to quantify in number, it is these embedded and dynamic relationships whereby the artist directly engages with a broad range of contractors, volunteers, community groups et cetera and works directly with them to shape the project, that is a potentially profound outcome from this mode of public art practice.
Observing Maddie Leach explain to licensed Hobart aeroplane dispatcher Peter Fenton her project *Let us keep together* and why she wanted him to fly to Antill Ponds in central Tasmania to drop off a bundle of newspapers every Monday at 7.17am was quite a thing to behold. I was struck both by the care and respect shown by the artist to talk this through, and by Fenton’s attention to getting right his crucial role in the re-staging of a *Mercury* newspaper stunt from 1919.

Similarly, Lucy Bleach in her project *Homing* engaged in a dialogue with truck drivers, council authorities, concrete fabricators, a refugee support group, a well-known American diva and a group of pigeon fanciers as just some of the collaborators. While not all of these engagements are necessarily deep, two-way and ultimately game-changing, a significant number opened up a dialogue around new ways of thinking about art that were likely to be without precedent.

Bleach managed to endear herself and her project to both David Lynch muse Rebecca Del Rio, and the Moonah Racing Pigeon Club, and she has the merchandise and photo album to prove it.

Paul O’Neill’s *Our Day Will Come*, while based in large part as a temporary annexe to the Tasmanian School of Art, was in no way restricted to this audience or context. Through a carefully curated programme of events and works, O’Neill invited a further 10 European-based artists to develop projects or contribute components that unfolded diverse yet carefully nuanced meditations on the possibilities inherent in rethinking the art school model. From laughter workshops in a public park, to presentations in a night club, to weekly dinners that drew a large and evolving audience over time, *ODWC* built a plethora of connections with Hobart art students, writers, academics and anyone fortunate enough to get caught up in the array of discourse and discussions. That those discussions continued formally and informally after the caravan was packed away says plenty about the work’s continuing ripple effect.

Likewise, Raquel Ormella’s multi-modal, multi-venue project *I live with birds* brought together an assortment of publics through site-based installation, the production of zines and a series of performances. Her layered exploration of bird watching and in particular ‘twitching’ activated an assortment of responses, not the least of which was a profound isolation of sound in the form of real and virtual birdcalls. Sitting in a shelter at dusk deep in the Cataract Gorge focusing intensely on the possible call of the Nankeen Night Heron, I was struck by how, with careful framing, natural occurrences can be so affective and intimate as artistic experiences. Connecting the possibility of intimacy to a setting as sublime as the world-renowned gorge was the result of great care, audacity and ambition.

On the basis of live audience numbers Bethany J Fellows’ *Hobart Illumination Project* was a distant last. You could count on two hands the number of participants who sat white knuckled and incredulous while the artist drove her modified vitamin D emitting Land Cruiser through the streets of South Hobart at dawn each Saturday morning of the project. Yet this performatively intervention into the lives of sleeping South Hobartians impacted well beyond the few of us who braved both the elements and the palpable sense we would be beaten senseless by an enraged citizen. Her ‘benevolent’ prescription for overcoming the lack of sunlight in this suburb brought about by the towering impact of Mount Wellington, was to drive the streets at a painfully slow speed and shine light where it does not ordinarily shine into people’s houses. Accompanying this dawn patrol was a blasting – and I mean blasting – soundtrack of
sunshine-friendly pop hits from Dolly Parton to Nina Simone.

While the initial articulation of the work had a limited audience, to say the least, the audience will not doubt continue to grow as the sleeping Hobartians slowly discover in years to come at social gatherings the source of their Dolly Parton hallucination one frigid morning in September/October 2011.

**Time and Time Again**

It would not be a curatorial premise worth its salt if certain artists did not try and mess with it. Fiddling with dates, times, beginnings and ends is one thing but for a small coterie of artists, the bigger prize was to neuter the premise of revisiting or re-staging the work four times. What would happen, they asked, if there were no discernible transitions (additive or subtractive shifts) but a constant and sustained repetition of action or event. Marley Dawson and Chris Hanrahan responded by staging the same event, an amateur motocross competition over successive weeks. Their petrol frenzy *MCR* on the roof of the Museum of Old and New Art had a different winner and a surprising array of thrills and spills each week, but the premise was fundamentally the same. Replete with grandstands, flash signage and a commentator who could talk under wet cement, the project spoke to the pleasures of devotion to weekend racing as an entertaining skilful yet largely vernacular activity.

Anthony Johnson took this even further with his work *Eclipse*, where he staged a very short bus journey each Saturday afternoon. Given little more information than a time to turn up to CAST, the audience were ushered onto a luxury coach and effectively driven around the block before being deposited again out the front of the gallery a few minutes later. Exactly the same thing happened in the following weeks, creating a perception that the work was a public art homage to John Cage and Samuel Beckett. While the subtle shifts in time, weather and audience marked each iteration, it was only towards the final weeks that the full measure of the artist’s project was comprehended. Bit by bit, the staggering scale of the work was recovered by perceptive audience members who began to forensically assemble fragments of activities taking place on the journey by an assortment of ‘performers’ doing everyday actions and activities.

Toby Huddlestone signalled his intentions very clearly in titling his work *Interruption:Again*. Part tongue-in-cheek salvo at the curatorial premise and part interrogation of the alignment of public art and popular modes of information dissemination, his project staged a series of actions and interventions across radio, television, newspaper and the postal system. Like Johnson’s project, the seemingly simple announcements each week delivered internationally via email belied an astonishing level of organisation whereby the Tasmanian audience were given instructions as to how to ‘find’ the work. But to do so you had to search for a small line in a newspaper, or a fleeting colour bar flashing in the blink of an eye during a television broadcast. Such tiny interruptions into mass media and information dissemination systems required significant levels of patience, visual and sonic dexterity, and a forensic determination to pick the needle from the often turgid and banal haystack of popular media.

**Delaying Tactics**

In specific ways, the curatorial premise with its iterative focus required a certain level of delay to operate within and across each artwork. By stipulating the necessity of some kind of transition every week, artists were encouraged to keep their works open and necessarily unresolved. Having
to stage in some way the deferral of closure or completion placed a particular onus on process privileging fluctuations and shifts over time at the expense of a definitive and stable dénouement.

As a riposte to employing spectacle and a ‘fixed’ location as go-to devices for temporary public art, David Clegg sought a more complex navigation of place specificity and time. His project failurespace was located in a series of unannounced dropped photographs on the streets of Hobart and on a tumblr blog site. Precisely where the sound recordings of ambient street noise and overheard conversations were drawn from was not recoverable in the images or text, which offered a similarly partial and elliptical sense of locatedness. These daily postings became over time a rich but elusive documentary archive of the sites and sounds of Hobart framed as composite fragments. Clegg employed a method of delay, of offering only clues and cues, which required the participant to both imagine and build stories that might potentially connect or align the assorted pieces. Unlike Johnson, whose use of delay built a tension that for many led to a kind of dénouement, Clegg’s system continually deferred the possibility of narrative closure.

James Newitt’s gesture of secession from Hobart/Tasmania/the world in general highlighted the allure of removing oneself from political, social and geographic systems of organisation and control. While the act itself of promoting, celebrating and ultimately leaving the terra firma of Hobart for an ‘island’ in the Derwent River estuary was a temporary one, My Secession Party spoke of a quasi-utopian aspiration for leaving the world behind. His action, while clearly only an interlude of a few weeks, functioned as a delay, a period in which we might reflect upon whether secession is an activity for libertarian cranks or is a latent aspiration we share in a world of constant and occasionally oppressive social navigation and necessary compromise.

Ruben Santiago also kept the idea of narrative closure firmly in check in a project that charted the history of lead mining in Tasmania. Working between the mining town of Rosebery in the states northwest and the Taroona Shot Tower in suburban Hobart, Santiago examined the complex mechanisms by which the meanings of lead mining and production are embellished and neutralised in the formulation of olde worlde tourist attractions like the Taroona Shot Tower. With its Devonshire tea and faux-historical recreations and artefacts, the Tower formulates a largely benign and mythologised version of mining that is challenged and redirected by the artist’s strategic and carefully measured interventions into the site. Yet the added components were not didactic or overt but functioned to push the seamless Shot Tower story slightly off its axis.

Fictive Spaces – A Book in Four Chapters
Although many artists chose an additive or reductive process over time, from the outset the curatorial brief suggested a potential to respond to the iterative programme from a narrative or chapter-based perspective. Seeing the potential to develop a story over time, Voice Theatre Lab with their work Two Houses chose to work in one of the first thoroughfares in Launceston, now a mall. At the entrance to this civic plaza two opposing buildings representing different eras and value systems formed the backdrop for an experimental staging of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet. Using live performance and pre-recorded sound broadcast from the colonial building (Macquarie House), VTL staged and re-staged different thematic aspects from the tragic tale of the Capulets and Montagues.
John Vella’s *BESTPRACTICE* was less fictive than a humorous if barbed meditation on the minefield of mid-career artist status. Created as a carefully programmed series of events and activities that evolved over time, Vella sourced every artwork he had made that was not in a private or public collection and turned the Arts Tasmania gallery, 146 Artspace, into a workshop/display space. He proceeded to drill a uniform hole in each sculpture, painting or photograph thereby producing a limited edition miniature collectible. Accentuating an artistic persona that suggested equal parts vanity and neurosis, this act of destruction curiously brought about new objects to be sold, or if you had managed to grab one of his promotional balloons scattered across Hobart, you could exchange it for an artwork. The whole enterprise was full of manic energy from the cutting itself to the marketing and promotion featuring regular spruikers on the street pitching the project as a once off opportunity to buy the work of a leading Tasmanian artist at bargain prices.

Remote Control – A Conclusion of Sorts
Remote control is not necessarily about distance. Having grown up only a few hundred kilometres north across Bass Straight in Melbourne, Tasmania was always close by but at the same time a veritable world away. My father’s cousins and aunt lived in Hobart and I grew up expecting to one day visit them at Sandy Bay, but prioritising places with brighter lights, I never did. The ‘Apple Isle’, as my gran fondly described it, existed in my mind as a place where reliably good Australian Rules footballers came from and the home of exotic animals (one as rare as the Loch Ness Monster!). Somewhere between these barely formed mythologies and the random grasping of uniquely Tasmanian facts (the homosexual law reform only happened in 1997) was my knowledge/comprehension of the southernmost Australian state. Like the fashion designer who accidently left Tasmania off the map of Australia that adorned the 1976 Olympic swimming apparel, until *Iteration:Again* I had chosen to overlook the former Van Diemen’s Land in a way I have since learned Australians often do with New Zealand.

As the quotes that began this response attest, Tasmania is something of a go-to reference for things remote. Paul O’Neill framed an entire issue of his zine series for *Our Day Will Come* around remoteness and what this might mean at a given time to a group of people in Hobart in September/October 2011. From love letters to considered theoretical positions on the topic, the zine offered a surprising array of textual and artistic responses that sought to unpack and in certain instances dérivé the meaning of this term. Amid a range of complex perspectives, I was struck by a very simple and seemingly straightforward story told by Olivia Bowman. She recounted:

> How a man named Graeme once told me something that someone told him: “a human being is a network of conversations.” Perhaps remoteness is not having those conversations that help make us human.⁷

With a little over a year’s hindsight, I realise that conversation was one of the fundamental components of *Iteration:Again*. This was in part a response or even an over compensation for making art in a place or series of places that are collectively often framed rightly or wrongly as remote. The unusual mixture of international visitors and locals embedded tightly for a month no doubt played a part as well. Of course remoteness is complex, romanticised and above all highly relative, but the project more broadly pushed artists, curators, writers and the cavalcade of participants, to consider what it might mean to be located and...
to make temporary artworks on an island south of the Australian mainland.

Even if the artists on the whole chose not to preface this idea or condition in the commissions, or to position locality as a principal driver of concern, an awful lot was said about looking outwards while always traversing the precariousness of insularity. It is perhaps a curious distortion at the heart of *Iteration:Again* that the gnarly chestnut of remoteness framed in an assortment of ways from provincialism, to seclusion to the more enticing idea of escape was discussed *ad infinitum* but not significantly enacted in artistic forms.

Discourse in its many permutations was the other side of the project that perhaps erroneously takes a back seat to all the compelling images and stories that make up the basis of this publication. Mick Wilson’s notoriously engaging, boozy and boisterous Tuesday night dinners, a part of the curriculum of the *Our Day Will Come* school, live on only in a few grainy and haphazard pictures that capture too many people slumped in too few chairs arguing and postulating as if their lives depended on it. They are only fragments now but I distinctly remember the sentiment expressed that ‘we never usually talk like this, about art, locality, each other’s work’. That in itself is not apparent here in these pages but it was and is no small beer.

As the beautifully ragged *Iteration:Again* troupe rolled out of town just shy of a month after it arrived, it left behind a mixture of excitement, annoyance and to my mind quite a lot of loose ends. For some, these frayed tendrils constituted a lack of precision, a chaotic quality, that belied a problematic enterprise. The fact that no one, including the curatorial director, saw the entire project added fuel to the perception that *Iteration:Again* was definitively incomplete: a series of partially experienced fragments impossible to tally and reconcile. Yet even these partial threads left dangling could at the same time be grasped and engaged with as ends in themselves, provisional pieces of a bigger system with their own complexity and resonance. Experiencing even two iterations of one project might be enough to challenge audience members to consider what it could mean to temporarily occupy, negotiate and reveal specific locations and contexts over time.

More is better, richer even, but this transition across one week is still capable of affecting a shift in thinking and experiencing in unexpected places and times.

With a mixture of forensic research, occasional physical risk, storytelling, insane logistical coordination, just the faintest whiff of spectacle and an idiosyncratic timeline, the artists collectively pushed against the grain of so-called public art. In challenging audiences to rethink where art is produced, what its parameters might conceivably be, and why it might be a good idea to return to a work over and over again, the assorted practitioners nudged us to consider art and life as elusive components in a potentially thrilling, if always uncertain, accord.

4. Ibid., p. 3.
6. Ibid., p. 325.