Projects
John Vella
BESTPRACTICE

Curator
Jane Stewart

John Vella, B. 1969, Sydney, Australia.
Lives and works in Hobart, Tasmania.
www.johnvella.com.au

Wk 1
17 September, Saturday, Salamanca Market stall, Hobart.
18 – 24 September, daily, helium balloon vouchers released across the Hobart CBD.

Wk 2
25 September, Sunday, Presale (cutting).
26 – 28 September, Monday – Wednesday, Presale (viewing).
29 September, Thursday, Wholesale.
30 September, Friday, Setsale.
1 October, Saturday, Saleaway.
All events at 146 Artspace, Hobart.

Wk 3
2 October, Sunday, Presale (cutting).
3 – 5 October, Monday – Wednesday, Presale (viewing).
6 October, Thursday, Wholesale.
7 October, Friday, Setsale.
8 October, Saturday, Saleaway.
All events at 146 Artspace, Hobart.

Wk 4
9 October, Sunday, Presale (cutting).
10 – 12 October, Monday – Wednesday, Presale (viewing).
13 October, Thursday, Wholesale.
14 October, Friday, Setsale.
15 October, Saturday, Saleaway.
All events at 146 Artspace, Hobart.
**Curatorial Statement**

Jane Stewart

*BESTPRACTICE* harnessed familiar marketing tools to the question of cultural value. Over the four weeks of *Iteration:Again*, John Vella reached out to the general public using devices commonly employed by promotional companies such as a brand identity, helium balloons, the lure of something ‘free’, amped-up spruikers, a market stall, street signage and fliers.

These methods created their own spectacle as they took action in and around the *BESTPRACTICE* shop/warehouse/gallery. Every morning for four weeks the artist would tie helium-filled balloons throughout the city to be sought out or accidentally discovered. The balloons were key: printed with the *BESTPRACTICE* logo and instructions describing how they could be swapped for an original Vella artwork if brought to the ‘gallery’ at a specific time.

The project circled around the artist’s ‘new’ body of work that comprised circles (10 centimetres in diameter) cut from 100 or so original Vella artworks spanning the past 16 years. For three consecutive Sundays, the artist hole-sawed one, two, then three circles from his own works, laying them out for sale over the following five days. Prices escalated each week, encouraging buyers to get in quick. The circles that didn’t sell within the week were given away to those who brought a balloon to the gallery on each Saturday.

For years, Vella’s practice has involved a persistent questioning of systems: hierarchical, commercial and otherwise. His dramatically irreversible re-use of his artworks, which have significant commercial value, is confronting in a world where physical art is often sanctified.

However, what some might perceive as sabotage, the artist sees as opportunity if not value-adding.

Increasingly, Vella’s works and projects are embroiled in a process of artist-led reinvention, reconsideration and mutation – his entire oeuvre is an evolving palimpsest richly matched with the changing nature of the *Iteration:Again* brief.
BALLOON VOUCHERS WILL BE DISTRIBUTED THROUGHOUT THE CITY OF HOBART FOR THE DURATION OF BESTPRACTICE AND AT A LOCAL MARKET DURING WEEK ONE.

OVER THE FOLLOWING THREE-WEEK PERIOD CIRCULAR SECTIONS WILL BE HANDCUT FROM HUNDREDS OF ORIGINAL CIRCA 1996 – 2010 ARTWORKS BY JOHN VELLA.

THE NEW CIRCULAR WORKS WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE FOR VIEWING, SALE AND DISTRIBUTION IN THREE DIFFERENT WAYS.

WHOLESALE
PURCHASE THE ENTIRE COLLECTION FOR ONE FIXED PRICE

SETSALE
PURCHASE INDIVIDUAL ARTWORKS OF YOUR CHOICE

SALEAWAY
BALLOON VOUCHER HOLDERS MAY RECEIVE A FREE ARTWORK

WHILE THE SIZE AND NUMBER OF AVAILABLE UNITS WILL REMAIN THE SAME EACH WEEK, PRICES WILL DRAMATICALLY INCREASE.

THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE FREE BUT SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO PAY FOR THEM

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

WEEK ONE
17 SEPT – 24 SEPT
SALAMANCA MARKET, HOBART

146 ARTSPACE
146 ELIZABETH ST

10AM TO 4PM
PREVIEW (CUTTING)

9AM TO 5PM
PREVIEW (VIEWING)

9AM TO 5PM
WHOLESALE

9AM TO 5PM
SETSALE

10AM TO 4PM
SALEAWAY

SAT 17/09 BALLOON ‘VOUCHER’ STALL
8AM TO 3PM

WEEK TWO
25 SEPT – 01 OCT

SUN 25/09
VIEW THE CUTTING PROCESS LIVE

MON-WED 26-28/09
VIEW THE WORKS

THUR 29/09

FRI 30/09
GUEST SPRUKER
11:30AM TO 1:30PM

SAT 01/10
GUEST SPRUKER
11:30AM TO 1:30PM

PRICES

$5,000 FOR COMPLETE SET
$100 PER UNIT
FREE ARTWORK WITH VOUCHER

WEEK THREE
02 OCT – 08 OCT

SUN 02/10
VIEW THE CUTTING PROCESS LIVE

MON-WED 03-05/10
VIEW THE WORKS

THUR 06/10

FRI 07/10
GUEST SPRUKER
11:30AM TO 1:30PM

SAT 08/10
GUEST SPRUKER
11:30AM TO 1:30PM

PRICES

$10,000 FOR COMPLETE SET
$200 PER UNIT
FREE ARTWORK WITH VOUCHER

WEEK FOUR
09 OCT – 15 OCT

SUN 09/10
VIEW THE CUTTING PROCESS LIVE

MON-WED 10-12/10
VIEW THE WORKS

THUR 13/10

FRI 14/10
GUEST SPRUKER
11:30AM TO 1:30PM

SAT 15/10
GUEST SPRUKER
11:30AM TO 1:30PM

PRICES

$20,000 FOR COMPLETE SET
$400 PER UNIT
FREE ARTWORK WITH VOUCHER
Critical Response
Kylie Johnson

12.10pm Saturday 17 September, Salamanca Market

Hobart’s Salamanca Market is a bustling and eclectic mishmash of stalls competing for the attention of a meandering crowd. I have come to see the first iteration of John Vella’s work BESTPRACTICE. I spot a single black balloon tied to a rock placed in the middle of a wooden trestle table with a stack of slick black information cards. In stark contrast to the stalls that flank it, BESTPRACTICE is very sparse. There are no crowds of people clambering for free merchandise, just a woman looking perplexed as she reads the card. At first glance the stall seems unmanned, but then I see Vella fixing a balloon to the hydrogen cylinder at the far end of his designated area. The balloon reads: ‘BRING THIS BALLOON TO 146 ELIZABETH STREET, BETWEEN 12 – 4PM ON SATURDAY OCTOBER 8 OR 15 FOR YOUR CHANCE TO COLLECT A FREE PIECE OF ART BY JOHN VELLA. FIRST IN BEST DRESSED – ONE WORK PER PERSON – BESTPRACTICE THE BEST THINGS IN LIFE ARE FREE.’

The vast majority of people walking by do not read the text on the cards or the balloon. Without reading the texts, there is very little to enlighten the shoppers on what, if anything, is being offered at this almost empty stall. Vella has intentionally positioned himself and his work smack bang in the middle of Tasmania’s most popular weekend market. He isn’t playing the market’s game, but is being deliberately evasive. Instead of hawking his wares, he stays in the background whenever possible. A low-key persona is thought-provokingly at odds with his generosity of the offer of free artworks. Over the next half hour I witness: a boy stand uncomfortably at the table wanting to take the balloon but unsure of the protocol (he walks away empty-handed); a woman read the balloon and then take it from the rock (Vella replaces each balloon); several people use the stall plot as a shortcut to a grassed area beyond; a few people ask Vella what it’s all about (he directs them to read the balloon); and two women – obviously in the know – enthusiastically taking a balloon each and commenting excitedly about redeeming it for a free John Vella artwork.

Depending on where you sit, BESTPRACTICE at Salamanca Market could be an intimidating and uneventful stall or a smart and playful eschewing of art market hierarchies. It’s a provocative and very considered first instalment that suggests Vella is publicly questioning his role (art maker and promoter) and his artworks’ ‘value’ and importance in the world.
BESTPRACTICE Moves into 146 Artspace, Elizabeth Street, Hobart

Since John Vella’s market stall last weekend, black and white voucher balloons have been appearing all over Hobart, tied to bike racks, posts and public sculptures. Vella has moved BESTPRACTICE into 146 Artspace, Elizabeth Street, the Tasmanian government arts funding body’s gallery. Vella is using the gallery as an active workspace, pop-up shop and a place for talking about the project. Spread around the space are all the works he made from 1996 to 2010 which are not secured in public or private collections. Each day of the week, for the remainder of Iteration:Again, the artist embarks on an elaborate series of activities: Sundays are Presale (cutting), where Vella cuts pocket-sized circular portions from past works; Mondays to Wednesdays are Presale (viewing), where the space is open to visitors to view works laid out on the floor and leaning against walls; Thursdays are Wholesale, where the artist offers complete sets of cut-out circles for sale and Fridays are Setsale, where an energetic guest spruiker, working on the street in front of the gallery, encourages people to enter the space (which they do), talk to the artist and buy a portion of work (which they are also doing). The spruiker returns on Saturdays for Saleaway, where lucky balloon holders can make the exchange for a free portion of a work of their choice. The riddle (and there is always a twist with Vella) is that the complete sets and individual circles perversely go up in price every week. Complete sets sell for $5000 – $10,000 – $20,000 and individual circles increase from $100 – $200 – $400.

Vella spends much of his time in the space talking to people, either to those specifically there to experience the work or those who wander in off the street. While most conversation operates as polite enquiry, some relates specifically to Vella’s concerns: what does an artist do when they have made more work than the market can initially consume? How long should an artist archive their work, waiting for interest from curators and collecting institutions? By breaking something up are you sharing it among more people or destroying it? Is selling through a commercial gallery the best way to distribute work and/or generate an income from making art? All are significant areas of enquiry within contemporary art practice and fertile ground for discussion.

My BESTPRACTICE Souvenir

On Saturdays visitors to BESTPRACTICE can redeem their balloon for ‘A FREE PIECE OF ART BY JOHN VELLA’. They are invited to walk through the amassed artworks and choose a circle that sits beside its parent work having been previously cut in Presale (cutting). Once a circle has been chosen, participants are ushered into an adjoining office to discuss the ‘next step’ with the project curator, Jane Stewart. They are asked to read and sign a contract providing Vella with the rights to a photo he is about to take of the participant holding the chosen circle while shaking the artist’s
hand. The participant is also asked if they are interested in being placed in contact with other people who have acquired a circle from the same Vella artwork. Both of these questions lay the foundation for Vella to continue iterating *BESTPRACTICE* well after *Iteration:Again* ends.

I have my *BESTPRACTICE* circle sitting on my kitchen table. Since I went through the process of obtaining my ‘free artwork’ I have spoken to people who are very happy with their circular ‘artworks’. They have their circle because of an interest in the conceptual nature of the project or they have chosen specific circles based on an admiration for the parent work. The mass of redeemed balloons pinned to the wall at 146 Artspace and the crescendo of images of the artist posing with ‘artwork’ recipients on the wall in the CAST information hub, reveal the level of interest in *BESTPRACTICE*. The images look deliberately staged, the same backdrop, the artist always shaking the recipient’s hand, the artwork always held prominently in the foreground. I’m in a photo, looking awkward but happily playing my part. So what has changed for me since then?

The dilemma comes from my personal connection with the original artworks, specifically a great fondness and nostalgia for many that Vella is now destroying. I obtained my circle because I loved the work it was cut from, but I have come to realise that by having the circle I am implicated in the original artwork’s demise. My circle sits on my kitchen table as a reminder that I didn’t try to purchase the parent work when I had the opportunity. And while mourning the death of a familiar old work, I’ve been lead astray – focusing attention on the decoy object rather than on the performative artwork.

By walking into 146 Artspace, Elizabeth Street on Saturdays to redeem a voucher balloon for a free John Vella artwork, you become an active participant in *BESTPRACTICE*. The ‘free artwork’ operates initially as bait; a prop around which the performance functions and, ultimately, as a relic of the event.

### Close of Business Saturday 15 October 2011

At the close of business, John Vella was left to transport back into storage the carcasses of old, damaged works and the remaining new relics from *BESTPRACTICE*.

While the work was centred on commodified exchange, it was also about the intimate exchange between people and the practice of being an artist. Vella gave away bits of his work – a generous act and a fun marketing strategy to tempt the audience. The stuff of *BESTPRACTICE* was simultaneously a distraction from, and the props for, his performance as an artist engaging with his market. To get beyond the decoys and connect with the performance took me a few return visits interspersed with quiet times of reflection. The great strength of the work lay in the close proximity of the artist to his audience. Vella nurtured a complex range of
relationships with all who crossed the threshold. It was this act of generosity that made the work so compelling.

Every person had a part to play. Official performers had scripted roles – the accomplice circle cutter, the curator, the spruikers, Arts Tasmania venue staff, et cetera. And visitors improvised performances while negotiating the space – taking part in conversations with the artist, curator and each other, by choosing a BESTPRACTICE circle and redeeming their balloon and entering into a contract with the artist. Ultimately BESTPRACTICE was a richly layered, collaborative performance undertaken by the artist and a surprisingly wide-ranging group of audience participants.

Of course woven through the layers of BESTPRACTICE were Vella’s personal concerns: being an artist approaching mid-career status, and the battle between the cultural versus monetary value of what he produces. By laying all of his unsold past work out in such a theatrical and irreverent construction, he gently goads us to reflect in often surprising ways on his practice specifically, but more broadly on the profession of being an artist.