



chrysalis seed trust



Sculpting an identity

CS ARTS

JULY 2006 - ISSUE 24

www.cs.org.nz

The place of sculpture and public art

In 2002 Slovenian artist Matej Vogrincic transformed one of the raised grass polygons outside the Scott Block in the Christchurch Arts Centre into a pond with paper boats floating upon it. It was an act of public art. The grass has not returned and the pond, dyed blue, is now established as an 'endearing piece of public art' at the Arts Centre. But one has to ask: did Vogrincic's piece capture the hearts and minds of the public because it was art, or because it was a pond?

The definitions around art have always been blurred, and that is part of the engaging dialogue. As Picasso is quoted as saying, 'art is a lie that makes us realise the truth'. Talk about art is sometimes the substance (the Henry Moore 'Sheep' sculpture for the Port Hills, the Parekowhai 'Bunnies'; Andrew Drummond's *Millennium Bridge*). The weird and wonderful edifices, sculptures, architecture, paintings and contrivances of artists, try-hards, and provocateurs are simply visual grist to the art mill.

Deborah McCormack's comment (*Art & Industry Biennial*)

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Chalice (detail), Neil Dawson, 2000, Steel, aluminium, black granite. 18m high, 1.2m diameter at ground, 8.5m diameter at top. Located at Christchurch Cathedral Square. Photo: Andrew Clarkson.



Port, Matej Andraz Vogrincic, 2002, Pond: Water coloured blue with vegetable dye, 16,400 x 13,000 mm with angled side of 16,000 mm. Boats: Coated paper, pink, blue, silver, orange and green spray paint, nylon line, ball bearings – various sizes, numbered 212. Thanks to Arts Centre of Christchurch, Hornby and Hammersley Park Primary Schools and Simon Mulligan. Photo: Chris Lea.

Below: *Joy of Eternal Spring*, Llew Summers, Concrete, 2m high x 3m wide. Located on Ensors Road, Opawa, Christchurch. Photo: Andrew Clarkson.

Sculpting an identity (continued from p.1)

Trust: SCAPE that 'public art is a celebratory thread that draws the community together' might draw too long a bow, but there is no doubt public art, particularly sculpture, builds a gracious urbanity and visualises a collective arts identity. Art equals 'culture' in most minds, a city with public art everywhere LOOKS like a cultural place; one without, does not.

Think of Paris. The Eiffel Tower immediately springs to mind as an architectural flagpole of cultural positioning. London has Big Ben. 'Liberty' thrusts her French beacon into the New York skyline and under ground over 125 artworks are strewn throughout the labyrinthine subway system. Cleveland has its Detroit-Superior Bridge, Philadelphia its 1978 *Indiana Love* sculpture in JFK Plaza, now affectionately known as 'Love Plaza', a case of an artwork renaming a public space. Examples in New Zealand include: Para Matchitt's *Bridge Sculpture*, 1993; Te Papa's meeting house/wharehau *Te Hono ki Hawaiki*, 1998, and Neil Dawson's *Ferns*, 1998 (above Civic Square) in Wellington; at the Octagon in Dunedin there's Robert Burns, 1884-87; and in Auckland there are Selywn Muru's *Te Waharoa O Aotea*, 1990, and the Sky Tower.

Neil Dawson's *Chalice*, 2000, adds vibrancy and dynamism to Cathedral Square alongside a neo-Gothic Anglican cathedral. The juxtaposition of style and materials works well: old and new, tradition and innovation. A controversial opera house design has done that for Sydney.

Along such a journey there are always works that don't quite make it. In Christchurch there is, in my subjective view: Graham Bennett's *Tribute to Firefighters*, 2002, celebrating fire-fighters; David Marshall's *Corgis on High* (Street), 2003, a quaint outdated 'sycophancy' to notions of royalty and colonialism; Terry Stringer's 'confused' *The Risen*

Christ, 2000, beside the cathedral; Peter Roche's *Circuit* (originally *Coral*) 2004, outside The Arts Centre clock tower, 'exciting and interactive, a halo of white light entwined with moving orange neon that becomes agitated when viewers step on to its beautiful glass surface'. A-huh. Looks like a man-hole cover to me. And why did Neil Dawson, one of our most talented Canterbury-based sculptors, have to have major works grace several European capitals, including the entrance-way to the 2000 Olympics, before his home town accepted a stunning work in its public square?

Like the plodding – some would say cautious - civic spirit of Canterbury, public contemporary art came late to New Zealand.

In 1978 Connecticut established a state law (Connecticut's Art in Public Spaces programme) requiring a percentage of not less than 1% of the cost of construction or renovation of publicly accessible state buildings to be used for artworks for that building. It was the first state in the USA to do so. Since then, similar programmes have followed in 27 other states and 154 public municipalities. Connecticut has over 280 art works at 54 sites in 28 cities and towns. The idea works as a partnership between the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism's Arts and the Department of Public Works.

Cleveland, interested in introducing new ideas, created a public arts group to raise the aesthetic goals of that city. Cambridge City in Massachusetts has well over 100 artworks achieved through the Cambridge Public Art Ordinance (1979). Grant Banbury, of Campbell Grant Galleries in Christchurch, once described public sculpture¹ as a way of breaking down arts boundaries and building connections with non-arts audiences. Cambridge does that directly.

In 1982 the City of New York enacted its version of the Connecticut model. The Department of Cultural Affairs Percent for Art Program was enacted in law to set aside 1% of public funding of building projects to be spent on artworks². Since then more than 180 projects have been completed involving accumulated commissions of over \$26 million. The programme has transformed New York plazas, parks, community centres, schools, transportation terminals, police stations, fire brigade buildings and courthouses throughout five boroughs.

In Canterbury the Art & Industry Urban Arts Biennial presents the public with a huge range of art works across different genres in our public spaces. A few remain in public, thereby building a collection of sculptural works that help qualify the collective visual identity we project of the city.

Intriguingly, Michael Dunn's index listing for Christchurch in *New Zealand Sculpture: A History*³ lists eight buildings (mainly cathedrals), two war memorials, a public square, a shopping centre and three 19th century colonial plinth sculptures. It says a lot about other people's limited perceptions of this city's artistic and cultural identity.

In the same way that bad town planning, slums, and hideous buildings contribute to the identity of a

1 2004, April, CS Arts' interview.

2 www.nyc.gov/html.dcd/

3 2002, Auckland University Press.



place (think 'Soviet block' vs. 'Scandinavian wood construction' vs. 'Oamaru stone crib' vs. 'Las Vegas kitsch') so well appointed public artworks generate a sense of cultural sophistication. They appeal to abstract and aesthetic notions of art, beauty and culture in utilitarian spaces. As we walk to the bus stop en route to an office job in a tower block, if we pass a Speers (Worcester Boulevard) or a Summers (Aldwins Road) the experience enriches our daily life. The works nourish notions of identity, pride or embarrassment (Oakune's carrot, Te Puke's kiwifruit). As messengers of sentiments, public art plays a vital role in the visual marking of our environments, like carved gateway (waharoa) at a Maori pa site, a thrusting dragon's head (or other mystic creature) on the prow of a Viking ship, or *Christ the Redeemer*, arms outstretched, atop a Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Corcovado Mountain-top. A new apartment development in Christchurch's Cultural Precinct is bylined by it's marketing as, 'One should either be a work of art or live in one.'

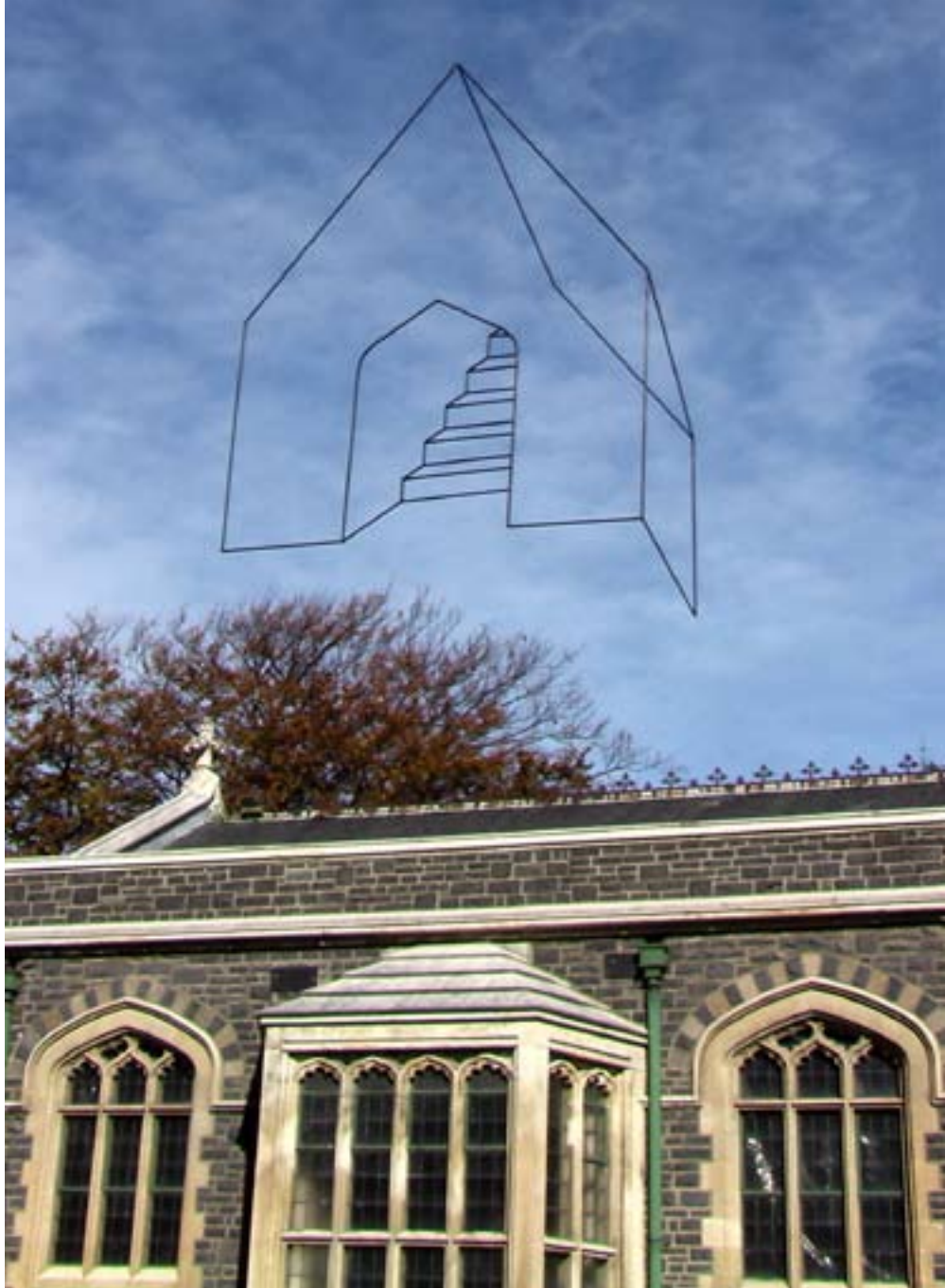
Public art contributes to collective identity, like local crime, language, food, custom, geography, and weather. After three years, the glass fronted structure in Montreal Street has become an iconic part of Canterbury identity and sense of place. This is despite the controversy that raged over both the release of council funds and the final choice of design for the Christchurch gallery. Indeed, it is arguably one of the reasons for the disquiet over falling door numbers.



Perhaps this 'paradigm shift' is about drawing more of Christchurch inside an already loved part of its life and community fibre.

John Stringer
Arts Advocate

Right: *Echo*, 1981 (installed permanently 1991), Neil Dawson, Carbon fibre tubes and stainless steel wires. It is suspended 8 metres above the North Quad of The Arts Centre, and measures approx 2m x 2m x 2.5 metres. Photo: Andrew Clarkson.



Blue, 2000, Bill Culbert, 100 m glass tubing pumped with argon gas/mercury vapour mix. Supported in place by stainless steel rods. Located at the Christchurch Convention Centre, Kilmore Street. This landmark work received damage in a snow storm and is due for repair later in 2006.

