



Turning artists into subcontractors

The Artworkers Alliance

An enormous pair of demonstrative hands, one lying supplicant the other pointing metaphorically skywards as a physical reminder to 'look to the heavens' past the encroaching skyscrapers at the over-reaching great sky, is the latest addition to the Brisbane CBD streetscape.

Created by Queensland based sculptor Sebastian Di Mauro and modelled on the artist's own hands, *Chat* is an example of a public artwork, one of three commissioned for Consolidated Properties at 175 Eagle Street, that is successful on many levels.

It is common to see passers-by walk right up and gently touch the palm of the hand pointing upwards, or nestle in for a photograph. In this case, the artist's touch is both literal and suggested, a reminder that art *can* connect with community.

Public art is enjoying a high profile all over Australia, with the unprecedented revival of interest in sculpture in Australian contemporary art circles, a condition dubbed 'sculpture-it is' by Ben Genocchio, National Art Correspondent for *The Australian* at the recent sculpture symposium held at Gold Coast City Art Gallery.

Queensland continues to enjoy economic growth, an offshoot of which is an increase in capital and public works spending through State Government's Art Built-in Policy, which determines that two percent of a public building's total budget must be allocated towards public art.

Artworkers Alliance, a Queensland based organization that connects artists with opportunities, advice and professional exchange, offering a referral service that can be accessed by commercial and public clients alike, has found itself playing an active role in the commissioning of public art works, and was directly involved in the commissioning process for 175 Eagle Street.

Artists pay a nominal annual fee to join the organisation and as part of their membership they may elect to be part of the artist referral service. Artworkers is not an employment agency, rather it actively promotes the skills of artists to a broad range of clients from schools, architects, and urban planners to government who contact the organisation with a specific brief, often not entirely sure what they want or need and unaware of the artistic possibilities available to them. Artworkers works closely with clients to develop a brief, talk through budgets, timelines and contracts, offer curatorial advice and match individual artists to projects.

Increasingly Artworkers is playing a more educative role in running professional development programs for artists in the form of seminars and practical workshops facilitated by industry professionals that seek to introduce artists new to the commissioning game to the processes and risks involved in creating and presenting public art. The organisation has actively sought to assist artists by giving them the skills required to get the most from Art Built-in and more recently the Brisbane City Council's one percent Public Art Policy.

Because while an artist may have been practising professionally for some time, applying for a significant commission with big dollars and high expectations for a public outcome attached is a whole new ball game, and requires a certain degree of pragmatism, as well as an understanding of policy and the vagaries of business. Thus into the mix public liability issues, visionary architects, a specific brief with a tricky time-frame, dealing with project managers and working collaboratively to realise a project, and an artist needs to have a certain degree of business savvy and sustainable creative energy.

As CEO of Artworkers, Renai Stoneley points out, 'Public art provides artists with exciting employment opportunities. It offers diverse projects that are often dynamic and culturally broad, however, as a relatively under-developed art practice in Australia it is crucial that we support artists in the development of a technically sound and skilfully managed public art practice.' In other words, any art policy is only as good as the artists with the training who can take advantage of a unique arts-friendly political climate. For more information or to find an artist for your next public art project visit <http://www.artworkers.org/>.

Alison Kubler is Curator of Public Programs at the Gold Coast City Gallery.

above: Sebastian Di Mauro *Chat* 2002, aluminium, 235 x 150 x 40 cm. © Sebastian Di Mauro, 2002/licensed by VISCOPY Ltd, Sydney 2002.