



BOGUS ART

A policy to fund public art was a great idea.

It's a pity the resulting art is so dull **words Rex Butler**

JUST inside the doors of the new Judith Wright Centre on Brunswick St lies one of Brisbane's most intriguing yet least known works of art.

It is a concept so sophisticated it must have taken teams of bureaucrats, project managers, arts advisers and even artists months of planning sessions, meetings and consultative committees to come up with.

It is nothing so obvious as a mere work of art. Rather, in line with the latest international trends, it is more an ironic work of anti-art, as revealing of its time as pioneering Russian Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin's famously unrealised *Monument to the 3rd Communist International of 1919-1920*.

It is easy for the uninitiated to miss it as they step into the lobby, for it looks to all intents and purposes as though there is nothing there – and in a way there isn't.

It is an heroically non-functional example of Art Built-In, a policy introduced by the Queensland Government on July 1, 1999, according to which 2 per cent of the budget for all government buildings over \$250,000 is to be dedicated, in the words of the relevant policy document, to "ensuring that cultural expertise and contemporary discourse are an integral part of shaping the built environment and influencing the spirit of place".

How well I remember being shown the site by one of the young artists who had been commissioned to make a series of interactive videos for it – the idea being that, through some complex arrangement of sheets of glass,

it would seem as though the action was actually taking place in the same space as the spectator.

I recall him telling me that the engineers and architects hadn't quite figured out how to make the projector disappear but that they were working on it; that they kept on getting unintended reflections from the sheets of glass but that they were continuing to tinker with the angles.

Now, some four or five years later, there the empty screen sits, an indisputably greater work than it would ever have been as a simple trick of optics, a brilliant though inadvertent allegory of the folly, or even impossibility, of public art.

In its absence and invisibility, it continues to haunt the imagination and inspire reverie – just as Tatlin's frail glass and steel model remains a permanent reminder of the perils of making art a form of social engineering.

The only thing that troubles me when I visit the Judith Wright Centre is that this unknown masterpiece continues to go unrecognised.

So what to call it?

My first thought, bringing out the work's Dadaist heritage and in homage to Duchamp, is *The Large Glass (Definitively Unfinished)*.

Or, in lighter vein and stealing one of those light bulb jokes, *How Many Artists and Curators Does It Take Not To Make A Work of Public Art?*

But, finally, in order to bring out the memorial qualities of the work, I think I would settle with *Public Art Queensland (Monument To The Unknown Artist)*, R.I.P. 2003.

Of course it must appear churlish, not to say perverse, for an art critic to condemn a state government initiative – the brainwave of the extraordinary, poetry-spouting Arts Minister Matt Foley – that gives so much to the visual arts.

One can only imagine the Cabinet meeting – and, like any good politician, he never ceases to remind audiences – in which Foley announced that henceforth 2 per cent of the budget for all government buildings was to be spent on art.

And that, furthermore, this was a matter not of the usual token buying of paintings to be hung on walls, but of artists, again in the words of the policy document, as "integral members of the design team ... involved at the earliest stage of development".

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One can only imagine the faces of the various departmental heads, architects and builders when told that from now on they would be collaborating with artists in the construction of their buildings – although architects, at least those who wish to continue receiving commissions for governmental projects, swear that they are converts to this idea that artists have access to some apparently unique realm of “creativity” and “problem-solving”.

It is simply a remarkable act of advocacy by Foley, which shows that politicians are not always pragmatic and that politics is not only an art of the possible. The devising and instituting of the Art Built-In program is an act of passion, commitment and even, we suspect, political sacrifice.

But public art in Queensland has so far been nothing short of a disaster – and the Art Built-In policy and some of its early results give one no cause to hope that anything much will change.

To select just a few of the more glaring mistakes – and I guess I’m not expecting Christmas cards from the artists any time soon – take the table and chairs fountain at the top of the Queen Street Mall, which was commissioned by the Brisbane City Council.

First – and one must realise just how finessed, micro-managed and generally over-supervised each of these projects is – it has been under repair for some time. Last time I looked, it was in dry dock surrounded by a chain-link fence.

It’s a bland rendition of a series of everyday objects, entirely lacking in both the seductiveness and the satire of its Pop Art precursors, and not even approaching the magnificent kitsch of the stone facade of the casino opposite. It does not do anything interesting with the transparency of its glass or make any kind of humorous play on the usual public sculpture solution of running water. There is only the complete mismatch between the delicacy of its materials and the continual dull roar of its water.

Or take the aluminium hands at 175 Eagle St, believe it or not the winner of a public art competition sponsored by the builders. The hand stretching skyward – and this is probably the wittiest thing to be said about the piece – is colloquially known as the *Hopoate*, after the rugby league winger and part-time proctologist’s famous finger-pointing exercise.

Bogus (public) art



WENDY Mills, *On this Auspicious Occasion*, in Queen Street Mall: ‘a bland rendition of a series of everyday objects’. Sebastian Di Mauro, *Chat*, in Eagle St (cover): ‘too small, cast in an inappropriate material and misplaced’.



SCOTT Redford, *ROCK*, in Roma Street Parkland: ‘delicately balanced pile of brightly coloured letters’.



MERV Muhling, *The Crocheted Doyley*, Roma Street Parkland: ‘the outhouse perched on the edge of the lake’.

It is too small, cast in an inappropriate material and misplaced on a barren and wind-swept stretch of road. It is ultimately no different from the thousands of other sculptural monstrosities that have been indifferently plunked down without any consideration of their environment, which is the very thing that the whole “consultative” and “collaborative” nature of public art was meant to avoid.

Or take the outhouse perched on the edge of the lake in the Art Built-in project at the Roma Street Parkland.

Though I suppose going for the now officially sanctioned style of camp vernacular – think the closing ceremony of the Sydney Olympic Games – it is simply vulgar and out of place, matching neither the English garden conceit of the rest of the Parkland nor the stainless-steel architecture surrounding it.

All the artists here would undoubtedly excuse themselves – they were working for a “public” context in which their work had to be “accessible”; certain decisions were forced upon them by committees, by the constraints of the budget – but good art does not belong to the realm of exigency and compromise but rather testifies to something like aesthetic “necessity” or “rightness”.

READ the Queensland Public Art Agency’s website, with all of its talk of “appealing to a wide range of people regardless of age, gender and cultural background” and of “engaging, innovative and experimental art for all Queenslanders”, and you just know that what’s really at stake is an art of the lowest common denominator, of what will get past the committee vote by offending the fewest number of people.

It is an art that does everything possible to ensure that it will not fail and thus, by the iron law of artistic creativity, nothing is more certain than that it will.

Agreed, the scheme is a much-appreciated form of subsidy for artists, but it’s the kind of fictitious labour, along with its bogus rhetoric of “mutual obligation”, that characterises all such “work for the dole” schemes.

And its “public” character means that the work must be shared around, that no one is ultimately allowed to make qualitative, aesthetic decisions as to who should be commissioned and who not.

Public art – almost by definition – can neither embody the singularity nor make the claim for universality that lies at the heart of all great art, but must aspire to an immediate, crowd-pleasing generality.

It is not impossible that public art might have all three together, but it would re-

quire a mastery of the rhetorics of the mass media (without it having any of the mass media’s real resources and rewards). The true model for successful public art today would not be anything like traditional high art, but something more like advertising, pop songs, movies, TV shows: recognisable without being formulaic.

On the evidence so far, only a handful of artists currently working in public art have any idea how to achieve this delicate balancing act.

Scott Redford makes the stand-out piece of the generally bland Roma Street Parkland: a delicately balanced pile of brightly coloured letters spelling out the word “ROCK”.

Richard Tipping’s similarly alphabetic *FLOOD*, half-submerged in a sloping wall of concrete on the river at the Powerhouse, is likewise successful in speaking to a contemporary audience.

Both works are funny, pitched in a

modern up-to-date idiom and comment successfully on the particular histories and uses of their locations – bet the commissioners didn’t know that Redford was referring to the homosexual liaisons that go on in the Parkland between otherwise in-the-closet men with his reference to Rock Hudson – but without being anything like as serious and po-faced as “site-specific” installation.

There is a subtle pun, in which the work of art echoes its architectural surroundings, by Rodney Spooner in the Queensland Government Building in George St.

There also are a number of video works by Craig Walsh that, while owing a little too much to the American artist Tony Oursler, are successfully able to compete for attention in a public space that is defined as much as anything by the three-minute video clip.

IF THERE is a future for public art – and it is a possibility countenanced by the policy document – it lies not in permanently installed but in temporal works. And if we are to invent a viable public art for the 21st century, it will look like nothing now found in museums but more like those moments when people truly do occupy public space: sporting events, dance parties, demonstrations and marches.

I’d rather have – this should be right up the minister’s alley – a huge Times Square-style billboard scrolling lines of Australian poetry than any number of our works of public art.

Or a ballet or a Shakespeare play done with loudspeakers staged by our City-Cats with spectators looking on from the Victoria Bridge.

Or fruit arrangers from the Ekka recreating Matisse’s *The Red Room* in the Mall using oranges, pears and apricots.

Or I’d put passers-by in a video booth and tell them they had five minutes to tell the story of their lives, with the results to be shown on video screens around the city.

Of course, there’s not much chance of this happening, with our official art and its policy so timid, so cautious, so apologetic, that it wouldn’t dare compete with the real public art of our time.

Perhaps it would be better to have no public art at all than an art the public couldn’t care less about.

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