Here we all are:
Sculpture, ingenuity and urban environments

An exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

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Abstract

This exegesis discusses a selection of artworks that consider community actions in public space and urban environments where agency, ingenuity, potential, and tension intersect. I am interested in how people living in a place, not councils or businesses, enact these "events" to more closely align spaces with their needs and beliefs. I have used a visual and sculptural art practice to attempt to sharpen our focus on these actions and consider how they might shape the future of our cities.

This project has also been informed by my experience of living in Ōtautahi Christchurch as a teenager following the destructive 2011 earthquake, and subsequent observations of the city and its ongoing rebuild.

My research is grounded in an understanding that the social and spatial structures of our cities have evolved, as advancing technology and ever-increasing privatisation contribute to an erosion of free spaces and opportunities for connection in the civic realm. I have located my practice in relation to other artists and writers whose work engages with the creation and experience of public and urban space and community, including Fiona Connor, Paul Cullen, Kate Newby, Jenny Odell, Chantal Mouffe, and Rebecca Solnit.

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Here we all are

I was a teenager in Ōtautahi Christchurch during the destructive earthquakes in 2010 and 2011, more than a decade ago. Our visual and spatial understanding of the city was jumbled, infrastructure was damaged, and most exceptionally our social and community networks were tested. It was devastating, but in many ways community-building and reorienting—disrupting our existing structures and economy in a way that allowed for new forms of agency, community, purpose, and inclusion. More recently, we all experienced this in some way as we grappled with the global COVID-19 pandemic—forced to imagine new ways of living and doing things together. I have been reflecting on the way disasters can cause us to think differently, and the ways in which we are already working to engage and connect with each other and the built environment around us.

My memory of buoyant communities and brilliant resourcefulness following the earthquake's impact is not unique. Similar occurrences have been observed after disasters internationally. Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell* documents many examples of energising and strengthening community responses after tragedy. Solnit states that although "[w]e cannot welcome disaster[...] we can value the responses, both practical and psychological", it is the very disruption to our norms and systems that carries a potential to shift our ways of acting and living (5). She writes that these enjoyable and rewarding experiences that emerge amongst the rubble of a disaster matter "as a measure of otherwise neglected desires, desires for public life and civil society, for inclusion, purpose and power" (6). Experiencing the immediate and lasting repercussions of the quakes and witnessing the potential that this disruption brought to the surface has shaped how I look at cities generally. I am more aware now of the way changing technology and ever-increasing privatisation alter the spatial and social structures of our cities, and the eroding effect this has on free public spaces and the civic realm.

Today's Christchurch[1] has been populated with shiny glass, concrete curves, and smooth surfaces—the clean lines of architects' concept drawings realised in hard materials. But looking closely, I see that much of the city is not new and shiny. There are still empty gravel lots, buildings boarded up and untouched, and makeshift structures that have been made permanent. How often do we really look closely at the cities we live in? I wonder how art might help us reflect on the way collective and community responses and dynamics play out in the public realm in 2023? Where can we see ruptures in the structure of cities, resistance to privatisation? Where can we see gestures toward a similar type of inclusion and more public way of living sometimes experienced after a disaster?

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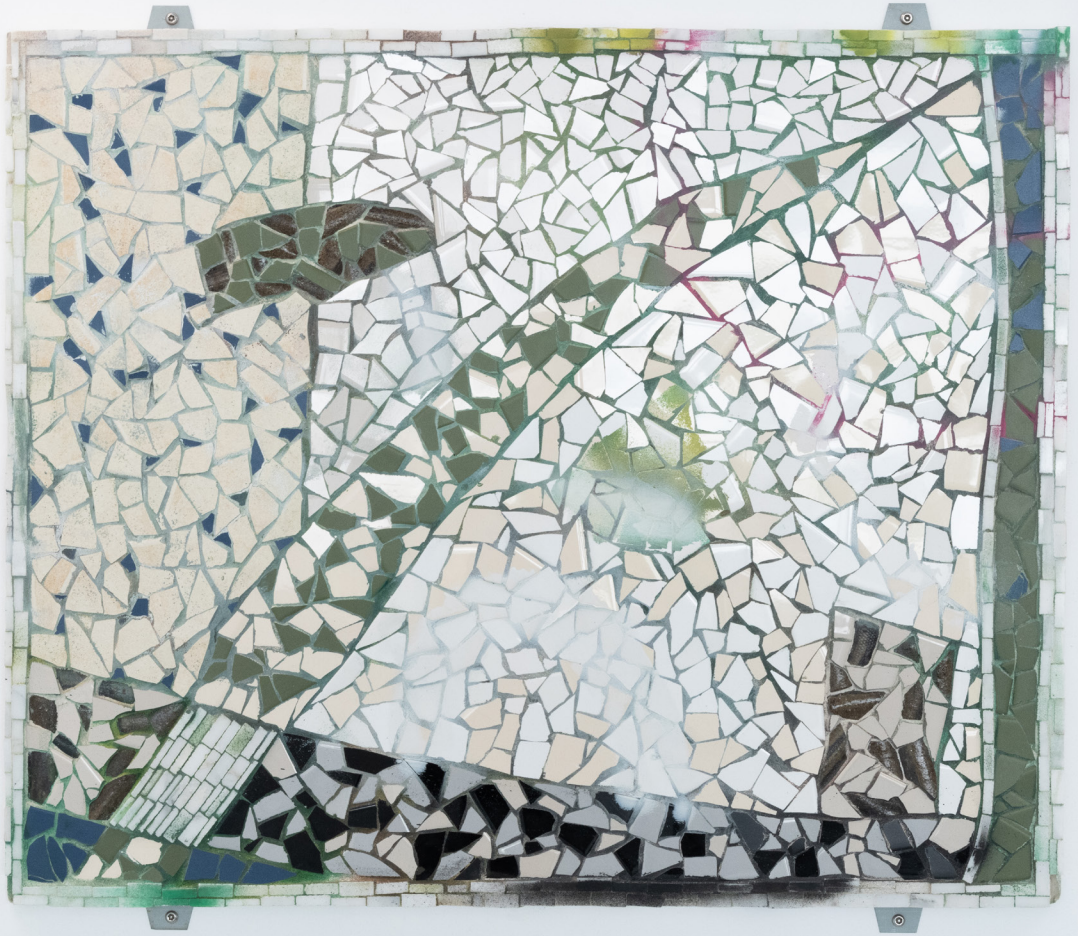
1. I have used both Māori and Pākehā place names throughout this document. The Pākehā names felt more appropriate where I discuss the built, colonial environment.



↑ Fig. 1. *Shoe Tossing*, 2022.

Slow battles

↑ Fig. 2. A selection of images from @flippingskateboards on Instagram

I live in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington now, and I spend a lot of time as a pedestrian—I document instances of engagement, ingenuity, potential, and tension as I walk. I have collected these instances or "events" on an Instagram account, @flippingskateboards, to serve as a kind of archive or reference guide for the aesthetic language I draw upon (fig. 2). Together the events illustrate a collective engagement, a mass of small dents into the surfaces of our urban environments and public spaces. Sometimes they are humble adaptations or interventions that improve, connect, or alter—objects left free on the roadside, a DIY ramp over the gutter, a pothole infilled by a neighbour. Others are incidental, accumulations over time by many people's actions, the build up of a patina or wearing away of material—layers of paint peeling back, stickers or chewing gum amassing on the same lamp post. Others are antagonistic or political, gestures made to prove a point, make a statement or share a belief—vandalising an election hoarding or tagging a wall. Despite the breadth of these strategies and the reasons for them, they all demonstrate some kind of community action—tweaks made by people living in a place, not by councils, businesses or organisations. It is this broad field of events that I am drawing from, echoing and rearranging to form my artworks.

Most days I pass through Pukeahu War Memorial Park, near

the university campus, and watch it buzzing with skaters. I have followed the media coverage over the years about the struggle between them and the council, who deem it inappropriate behaviour for the memorial space (Crossland). I have always admired skaters' audacious appropriation of the features offered in the public realm despite resistance from property owners and management. Some of my earliest works in this project aimed to memorialise this repurposing of public space, lifting it from what many consider to be a nuisance to something celebrated. I chose to render these scenes, of skaters jumping over borrowed road cones and grinding on the edge of concrete steps and park benches, in mosaic using a range of interior tiles—freezing their movements into flattened cartoonish images

Mosaics have held my interest for a few years now, as I have become increasingly aware of the ways they have been used within public and community spaces throughout time—from Byzantine churches to Roman bathhouses, and modern state buildings to humble community projects. Favourites of mine include four large panels made in a messy collaboration at my Ōtepoti Dunedin primary school, each depicting a portion of the local environment on the harbour—Hereweka Harbour Cone, fat kererū, the lush bush on the surrounding hills—constructed from ordinary tiles, old crockery and found materials (fig. 3). Second, in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, James Turkington's 1957 untitled Parnell Bath's mural. Which, with its panoramic scale with elegant athletic bodies swimming across the surface, is a beautiful example of the type of mosaics that were for a time built into many public buildings in New Zealand in the middle of last century, but have since fallen from popular use.

↑ Fig. 3. One of the St. Leonards School Mosaics. c 2005. St. Leonards School, Otepoti, Dunedin. Photo: Kim Macintosh

↑ Fig. 4. Tagged hedge in Newtown, 2022

→Fig. 5. James Turkington, Untitled mural at Parnell Baths. 1957, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland

These examples demonstrate that as well as for their material practicality and design potential, mosaics have often been used to establish and reiterate uses and values of a location and community—whether it be environmental or religious imagery, or depictions of thriving industries. I am drawn to them because of the way they have consistently been employed to help build or reiterate community identity and cohesion. Although today it is much less likely for us to see a mosaic commissioned or created in a public space—especially as advances in technology have brought about more economical ways of decorating public space. These more affordable often digitally printed or laser cut designs which have become prevalent, often feel anonymous and impersonal. They don't as easily carry the value, esteem, and bespoke qualities of a mosaic. The early works in this project came from considering how mosaics might be used in 2023 if we were still investing in them—to help us think further about the shifting values held in communities and public spaces.

There was something interesting about the contrast between the fluid movement of skaters and the fixed form of the mosaics I was making, however, these works felt limited in their ability to enact a complex consideration of the dynamics at play in public spaces. I wanted to make work that engaged more with the antagonism in the situations depicted—with other ways that people challenge and criticise the economic and societal structure that produces these spaces. As Chantal Mouffe writes, antagonism is a necessary and inevitable element of democratic order (XII). Its presence "asserts that negativity is constitutive and can never be overcome", it allows for pluralistic views within society and resistance to hegemonic frameworks (130). I began making mosaics surfaces to paint

over—thinking of my observations of graffiti on urban surfaces, another strategy often used to criticise existing systems, to express dissatisfaction, and to broadcast opinion.

Turkington's mosaic is stained green in patches, where tags have been cleaned off the gritty surface but have sunk into the plaster (fig. 5). I have watched council workers scrubbing writing off walls with a rag, usually leaving a smeared stain on the wall or surface. I watched a woman spend days using an electric sander to remove a tag from the exterior of her high wooden fence, leaving the tag instead rendered in a distorted sanded pattern rather than in paint. Tags are often painted over, "buffed", usually in a slightly mismatched or altogether wrong colour, creating a patchwork. They can be written over with other tags or left to slowly degrade. My favourite was a bright red tag sprayed onto a freshly clipped hedge (fig. 4). After the first time it appeared, it was gouged out of the hedge leaving a slightly bare patch. When it reappeared just a few days later, it was left to slowly grow out over a year.

I constructed and grouted a mosaic surface, then applied and removed layers of spray paint to build a more complex and mottled surface. Sweeping, squiggling, or circling a couple colours at a time—then, removing some of the paint while it was still wet, or by applying acetone with brushes and rags. Sometimes I cleaned it away completely, leaving pigment only in the grouted areas, or I left a film of paint over the glazed areas. I used strategies such as attempting to remove just one of the colours to generate a range of densities and opacities of colour. I took to the surfaces with a wire brush, sandpaper, or a chisel to further degrade and add texture to the paint. Some tiles I painted before the mosaic was assembled—effectively sanded back as I scraped grout across the surface.

Applying marks, and removing them again, press against each other—a fight between expression and dissent, and order and maintenance. This back and forth speaks to public/private boundaries and norms that exist to fortify them. Although I have been using spray paint to evoke the graffiti I photograph, I am not trying to make graffiti myself. In a compressed timeline within the studio, I can produce surfaces that echo the slow battles played out between various taggers, maintenance workers, property owners and citizens, building up and holding a similar friction within the contained surface of the artwork—but there is no real antagonism as I work against myself. Works like *Shoe Tossing* (fig. 1) instead respond to these contested surfaces, by imagining this friction (like the tag on Turkington's mosaic) as an expected response and part of a mosaic in 2023.

↑ Fig. 6. *Puddle/pothole (green)*, 2023

↑ Fig. 7. *Puddle/pothole III,* 2023

Puddles and potholes

The *puddle/pothole* series of mosaics take this graffiti-inspired strategy as a starting point (fig. 6–9). I tried to push them beyond mimicking what we see in the street, into their own distinct language. I worked over them with more and more layers to build up a patina. The surfaces have rough, matte and scratched areas, and smoother glassy patches. Some pieces shine or poke through and others sink back into the swampy field. They hang flush against the wall—screwed in with steel brackets that poke out above and below. To me, their installation resembles the way a sign or a noticeboard might be attached to a wall. I felt like I was making paintings but in the gallery they don't seem to sit comfortably in that category. They are heavy, rough, sculptural and knotty.

Separated from the complexity of the outside world by the white walls of a gallery, these dense surfaces might invite a close and alert way of looking—slowing viewers down from the fast-moving and selective attention usually given when we move about on the street. These works might need time to be understood, to make sense of their unfamiliar surfaces—a gallery audience is far removed from the real life places and people who inform these works.

As I painted I was thinking of the potholed surface of the old roads that make up parts of Te Ara Ōtakaro Avon River Trail in Christchurch. The trail runs through the residential red zone, a huge ribbon of land deemed unsafe to rebuild on following the quakes. Parts of the trail have been developed into manicured and designed parks, but the section near my family home remains rough, wild and sprawling. The stormwater grates have long been stolen and scrapped,

↑ Fig. 8. *Puddle/pothole (blue),* 2023

↑ Fig. 9. Detail of *Puddle/pothole III,* 2023

←Fig. 10. Wooden drain cover in the residential redzone, Richmond, Christchurch, 2022

some since replaced with humble wooden covers (fig 10). Lost and abandoned items roll around like tumbleweeds and the unusual rhythm of trees and shrubs give away old property boundaries. The area feels abundant with risk and with energy and potential.

The old roads were patched and filled so many times while the last residents lingered, in the years before all the houses were cleared. Now, more than a decade on, the potholes have grown lively and textured. Different layers of asphalt and gravel have cracked and slumped, making space for accumulations of dirt, moss and pollen—something made with one intention that has transitioned into something else. These works go further to hold some of that wild and untapped potential, space for new things to happen, rather than freezing and memorialising one moment or an image. Some of them are even those same skater mosaics, painted over until they became unrecognisable. Like the water, moss, pollen and debris in the potholes themselves, the mosaic surfaces have become lively—their own little habitat or hub of activity.

↑ Fig. 11. Patchworked road in the residential redzone, Richmond, Christchurch, 2022

Rack Focus

Fiona Connor produces detailed reproductions, including the ephemera, wear and tear, materials and marks, of real-life objects like venue doors (from her Closed down clubs series) or her ongoing series of bulletin boards from various communities and organisations (fig. 12 & 13). Connor's work produces what has been described as a "rack focus", where our attention is drawn from a small and particular detail and then expanded back out "to the larger context of the material history and the mess of social transactions that produce it" (Holte). In the exhibition environment, the smallest details become curiosities and cluesm Mundane flyers and notices provide insights that might help us learn where and who these objects come from—seeds to provoke our consideration of the people or communities that exist around them and produce them. In the gallery, the surface of a run-of-the-mill notice board can act as a map of much wider human interactions and productions, at least for the audience of the gallery.

In some ways what Connor does by shifting our perspective to ordinary things corresponds to my experience immediately following the most devastating February 2011 earthquake. The familiarity that we have with our environment, which we generally take for granted, is thrown completely out the window when it is physically shaken. Some changes leapt out immediately, objects suddenly and clearly out of their ordinary places and configurations. I don't remember many of the rubbish bins I pass but I do remember one from that day, on its side in the middle of the road like it would roll away down the street; I remember the uncanny feeling of seeing the spire of the cathedral lying on a step near my feet. Other changes are more like a "spot the

↑ Fig. 12 and 13. Fiona Connor, *Community Notice Board (Fernwood Market).* 2022, Costal Signs, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. Photo: Alex North. Courtesy the artist and Coastal Signs.

difference” game. Were those cracks always there? Had that church already fallen or did it happen just now? The world around is drawn suddenly into sharp and disorienting (or reorienting) focus. The gallery has the potential to engender focus by directing our attention.

I was interested in applying the techniques I had developed for mosaics to a three-dimensional form (fig. 14–15). The first bollard artworks I made are formed around the thick Paper Core inner of a carpet roll—waste collected from a local carpet store. Encrusting the tube with broken tiles in an improvised pattern and then treating the surfaces with paint and abrasives, the sculptures carry an extension of the language that appears on the pothole mosaics.

Jenny Odell’s 2019 book *How to Do Nothing* examines the way public spaces are built around commercial interests and productivity, often without users being aware of this. She references a phenomenon of “scripted” or faux public places, described by Eric Holding and Sarah Chaplain, as places that appear like a public space but where behaviours and uses are directed, supervised, constructed and orchestrated (14). The examples given refer to commercial spaces, for example, shopping malls where it may appear we are free to roam and do what we like, but in reality, the environment has been constructed to promote consumerism. Although bollards don’t script our behaviour in terms of commercial activity, they are another architectonic strategy used to choreograph our movements through space. Their form might speak to this scripting, and more broadly the predetermined uses of public space that are more and more pervasive in cities.

↑ Fig. 14. *Bollard I* and *Bollard II*, installation view in Castle Mall, RM Gallery. Photo: Max Fleury

↑ Fig. 15. *Bollard I*, installation view in Castle Mall, RM Gallery. Photo: Ardit Hoxha

My intention was to toy with the primary function of bollards, their ability to dictate and choreograph our movements on the street—to keep cars, people, and spaces apart. I imagined the rich textures and the "script" of a gallery environment might draw viewers in and up close rather than repelling them as a bollard usually does. I wanted to create a friction between being there to be looked at and being something to be navigated around. Without cars to stop or any particular purposes to delineate, they are sculptures rather than barriers. In the gallery, they can be fragile and vulnerable, and ask for our care and concern—unlike a bollard in the street, made to withstand great forces. We are more likely to look closely and ask: Why have these materials been combined? What is this object asking of me? Whether for better or worse, and whether we think about it or not, tools like bollards in the street influence the way all of us live and interact with the world around us. These questions initially raised in the gallery space might be carried with us outside into the street to help consider more closely the ways we cultivate these spaces and exist in them together.

Art gallery audiences come to the space open to an experience that may be confronting. Contrastingly, the street is often perceived as a place that should be convivial, where conflict and confrontation is undesirable and unwelcome (although as Mouffe has written, absolutely necessary), but where we encounter a more varied selection of people and beliefs. When I refer to these observed public space events in the gallery, are they positioned in competition or opposition with their real-world counterparts? What is being lost by isolating them from their outside context?

On Cashel St

There is a church with a dried up well

On Cashel St

Here comes that man talking to himself

On Cashel St

There's a lonely walker pacing day and night

On Cashel St

You can hear the pissheads as they stumble by

On Cashel Street

Here we all are, yeah, here we all are

(Transistors)

Castle Mall

↑ Fig. 16. Installation view of *Castle Mall* with *Drummond Street* in the forground, RM Gallery 2023

Castle Mall, is a play on Cashel Mall (also known as Cashel Street)[1]. It is the main walking/shopping street in central Christchurch and the street where my inner city school was located before the buildings were damaged and then demolished. By changing the name Cashel to Castle, I hoped to invoke an image of both grandiosity and ruin, a kingdom and its debris. Juxtaposing the urban environment with a sense of history. The exhibition brought together various works, including a few of the *puddle/pothole* mosaics, two mosaic bollards, an edition of stickers, and a large tiled sculpture emulating the form of a park bench.

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1. Castle Mall was exhibited at RM gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland from 1-24 June 2023. Further documentation at rm.org.nz/bena-jackson/

↑ Fig. 17. *Bollard II* and *Puddle/riser*, Installation view of Castle Mall, RM Gallery

Cashel Mall is also home to a site known as Hack Circle (or simply "the hack"), where until 2009 there was an open and casual amphitheatre. The tiered levels of semi-circular paving and grass made an informal place to gather, to perform, to be with or near others. It was suitable for busking, picnics, a game of hacky sack, or a quick lunch. Not just a free and open landmark to meet friends, but a place where you were likely to share space with others doing the same. The tiered seating meant groups could mingle or separate in organic ways. The layers each formed a stage, a step, or a seat. This mix of people and uses also created tensions and overall disagreement about what behaviours were appropriate and desirable. The site was beloved by some teens, seen as a place of warmth, acceptance, friendship and connection. Others saw it as scary, with rumours of grooming, drug trafficking and violence.

The amphitheatre was removed shortly before the earthquake during a redevelopment of the mall, a decision that was met with much protest by young people and students who believed the council was doing it to combat their loitering in favour of commercial interests in the area ("Reclaim Public Space")[2]. Despite this, and a campaign by the council to find a new name for the site, the intersection remains known as "Hack Circle" even on the council's website ("Hack Circle", "'Hack Circle' Needs New Name."). The hack, and its associated lore, has served as a useful reference point for a broader dynamic of contested social/physical spaces at play throughout this project.

I wanted to make a sculpture that gestures towards many possible uses, that does not define its own purpose—it exists to be repurposed. A small nod to the old hack circle, capturing the potential held in these open-purpose spaces, when we leave things to develop as they will. I repurposed an older sculpture, a low tiled platform, by building a frame structure which allows the heavy object to hang on the wall. Jutting out, the form of *Puddle/riser* echoes something like an electrical metre box, or perhaps another mysterious kind of defunct utility (fig. 17). The kind of things we pass by daily without really considering their existence. It no longer has the immediate possibility for engagement offered by the previous sculpture's step-like arrangement. The front face frames a large "pothole" mosaic. On the wall, it might serve as a sort of framed painting, a shelf for small objects, a gazing pool.

The sculpture *Drummond Street* (fig. 16) took the formal elements of the hack as a starting point and drew from an unusual bench design I pass here in Wellington on a daily basis. Roughly the dimensions of a common bench, the freestanding platform was clad in the same flooring tiles. The top surface incorporated several materials: the tiles, a small inset mosaic, and several lengths of rounded timber beams. I thought these varied materials could suggest additional uses, such as a series of small platforms or a podium. On reflection, the form of this sculpture seemed more aligned with a conventional park bench and didn't travel as far in terms of evoking imaginative functions. In my view, other elements of the exhibition were more successful in connecting to the ethos of the hack; eliciting a sense of loose autonomy over public spaces.

2. The extensive Wikipedia entry on Hack Circle is a testament to its role in the central city during its heyday https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hack_Circle

I borrowed a song lyric, “Here we all are”, from Ōtautahi “garage punk” band Transistors for an edition of stickers which were available to freely take throughout the duration of Castle Mall (Cuppa Jarra Brossa) (fig. 18.). *On Cashel Street* was released in 2015 and lists various activities and happenings witnessed on the street, where one of the band members was flatting at the time, including such things as: “here comes that man talking to himself”, “my bike was stolen before my eyes”, and “there is no house that’s left unlocked”. The song ends with the repeating line, “On Cashel Street, yeah, here we all are, here we all are” (Transistors). I love that the song treats this somewhat gritty or treacherous image of the city with an element of affection or connection—reiterating that the street is a place for everyone. The line celebrates the street as a place where there is a forced propinquity to people who you might not otherwise interact with, a foundational attribute of a thriving public space and building block of community life.[3] The attrition of these spaces, through the likes of interests of the private sector, regulation and surveillance by government, and gentrification wears away at this fundamental platform for community life. (Ng, Delaney et. al 6)

A small chant repeated throughout the city streets, the stickers advocate for a lively and challenging public realm. My intention was to bring a more ephemeral layer to the otherwise fixed and heavy installation, evoking some of the more transient and changeable layers of matter we encounter on the street. I like that they can be unpredictable—stuck both impulsively on the nearest surface (someone visited my show one day and stuck the stickers all over the artworks) or with much consideration (my friend Jack carried a sticker with him to Melbourne and stuck it on a lamppost where it “felt right”, he’s now in Albania—keeping an eye out for the right spot to stick another, which he found lurking in his pack). I like to imagine that although a lot of the stickers would promptly be lost, forgotten, removed, or damaged, there might be a few that exist tenaciously for a very long time, spreading their message.

↑ Fig. 18. *Here we all are,* installation view in Castle Mall, 2023

3. “propinquity” conveys a stronger sense of closeness than “proximity” and can also be used to describe kinship (Merriam-Webster). I’ve borrowed this word from Michael Sorkin who, in his introduction to Variations on a Theme Park, describes propinquity as “the very cement of the city” (xi)

Pedestrian/possibilities

Aside from the disruptions to our visual and spatial understanding of the city, the earthquake caused disruptions to the infrastructures that we took for granted. It limited the places we could access and the services which typically allow us to go about our days. Many of us had no electricity or running water for a few days, and we all had a closed-down city centre for a few years. This interference forces a type of resourcefulness, innovation, and provisional approach to making things work. Suddenly, the resources around us take on a new value with their potential to fulfil immediate needs—could this_____ become a _____? With some crude cuts, Dad turned the white lawn chair into the seat of a long drop (fig. 19). The dormitory rooms of a boys' residential school on the other side of town, with single beds and little dividers, became my school's classrooms. We find new potential and greater value in things that have been there all along—when we can't easily replace or buy something new we must find other, often more environmentally sustainable, ways of doing things. When I walk and when I make, I try to carry this type of thinking with me.

↑ Fig. 19. Blair Jackson, photograph of an improvised long drop in Ōtautahi Christchurch, 2011

Since Castle Mall, I have been thinking more about how my sculptural practice might operate more lightly and fluidly. Partly because making mosaics and very heavy sculptures is physically demanding, and partly because I want the work to be more aligned to this adaptable, responsive mode. As an exercise in this way of working, I made a more provisional series of "bollards" (fig. 20). Unlike the crafted mosaic forms, this series is entirely makeshift—humble objects made relatively quickly from materials I had on hand, assembled in an intuitive and much less labour-intensive way. I used bits and pieces gathered from my studio/the street/the university campus and workshop, and reconfigured them to make something

that might in some way be a bollard. They won't stop a car from crashing into a building, but they will direct our movement around a space. Things that might seem familiar and ubiquitous—a heavy water container, concrete formed in a bucket, offcuts of pipes and metal and timber—can be rearranged into new objects with some different potential, and preventing the need for additional consumption of materials.

↑ Fig. 20. Test installation of *Assembled bollards,* 2023

This relates to the ambition behind détournement, a technique championed by the Situationist International (SI). Defined broadly as "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble", détournement can also translate as rerouting, or hijacking (Debord and Wolman). Established in the late 1950s in Paris, and led by Guy Debord, the SI aimed to instigate some sort of revolution. They wanted to critique and make changes to the perceived lack of control ordinary people held over their everyday lives, which were growing "increasingly atomised and privatised" between the commutes, office jobs, prefabricated houses of contemporary living (Waxman 89). By using strategies like détournement to integrate play, spontaneity, and art into the fabric of everyday life, the SI demanded greater autonomy and agency over everyday life, and engagement with the city around them (Waxman 89). Henri Lefebvre further contends that "[d]étournement assumes that space (the edifice, monument, or building) possesses a certain degree of plasticity." (98). He argues that a "hardened" or set function restricts and prevents détournement, and that détournment happens in an in-between stage—the transition—when one established use fails and a space (or perhaps an object) becomes available and receptive to new uses (Lefebrve 98). This explanation feels like exactly what I am trying to describe experiencing after the earthquake—where the set functions of almost everything around us were thrown into disarray, opening them to a new set of possibilities.

I threaded a heavy steel pipe on top of a metal base that had been floating around my studio since last year (fig. 21). It made the structure taller and seem more substantial. I then used some leftover

burgundy paint to add a few stripes. On top of the pole, I placed a one-eyed hand puppet that had surprised me by emerging from a free trundler bag I found on the roadside one day. I wanted to produce an object that has the sense that there is a logic to it beyond what is immediately apparent—as though it made sense at one time or in one context to someone. The arrangements or constellations of objects feel charged with potential and capacity for meaning.

Encountering the sculptures of Paul Cullen, Melissa Laing suggests that "every element is engaged in an unspoken purpose, constantly accruing meaning" (103). His puzzling combinations of familiar items carry a mysterious logic, like unfamiliar instruments of science, or tools for some unknown use. *A Garden* was presented on the 6th floor, outdoor sculpture terrace at Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand in 2009 ("A Garden"; fig. 22). Ordinary objects like a street lamp, cinder blocks, and a few vividly coloured constructed "rocks" were arranged across the terrace. Some parts lined up with the existing structures of the space, and other items crossed lines in the ground and interfered with the grid ("Artist Paul Cullen"). Bits of hose attached to skeleton frames of benches and tables make them seem unfinished, or perhaps leftover from some event. As a constellation of objects, they suggest no distinct purpose but a myriad of possible past and future uses, implicating them in some broader imagined narrative and purpose. Instead of telling us how the space should be used, these items ask us to decide how we could use it, or what types of activities it might facilitate.

Many of the events I photograph for @flippingskateboards attract me because they too have this feeling—that at least at some

↑ Fig. 21. *Assembled bollard (puppet)*, 2023

point the adaptations were deemed necessary, helpful or logical even if it is not immediately apparent why. They help to align public space more closely with the functions of a community, with daily life, and with actual needs. Through repeated adaptations and layers of alterations as a result of being in public, it is possible to observe the functions of both materials/objects and spaces shifting from what their original purpose may have been. Making bollards was a way of practising some of these strategies myself—commandeering these events from the street, plucking something curious, enchanting and humble from the gutter. They are formed from an active thinking through of the things I have been photographing, and the ways communities and individuals often rearrange and customise the places they frequent. By producing spaces (like Cullen's *A Garden*) or objects (like my *assembled bollards*) lacking this fixed functionality, are we able to create conditions that enable or encourage acts of détournement? Or to encourage a greater connection and a more engaged vision for the materials and spaces around us?

↑ Fig. 22. Paul Cullen, *A Garden*. 2009, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington. Photo: by Michael Hall. Courtesy of Paul Cullen Archive and Te Papa.

The Water Cooler

The social landscape in Christchurch was reshaped by the earthquakes too. The family with the artesian well in their backyard piped its endless flow out onto the street—our neighbourhood suddenly had a communal well, a water cooler to gossip around. People in the thick of it jumped in to provide first aid, a hug, to dig through rubble for survivors. We met neighbours for the first time as we dug liquefaction from the driveway together. It was a time of connection and support, of banding together, where connections are forged between people out of necessity and out of a desire for comfort and connection.

To Wellington-based writer and curator, K. Emma Ng, the slow erosion of the city's public services over the last decade, including the closure of public buildings like the central library and town hall, and the disappearance of post offices from the street, has become increasingly hard to ignore. Aside from the primary functions of these places being affected, this erosion has worn away at the social fabric of the city, as these places served secondary and tertiary functions as places for social encounters—"When the public realm diminishes, we lose the trusted spaces that act as settings for spontaneous encounters – both affirming and challenging – with strangers and acquaintances." (Loss and Looking Ahead). This loss also means we are poorly equipped to participate meaningfully in processes of consultation and development of the public realm, such as the recent Draft Spatial Plan here in Wellington. Ng believes that one of the most important things we can do is work "to develop our long-term capacity for collective imagination, as well as our ability to debate and articulate our ambitions for the public realm". (Loss and Looking Ahead).

Glory, by Max Fleury and Anna Brimer, both exemplifies a provisional approach to making and engages warmly in rethinking how public spaces might be used and their potential to bring people together (fig. 23 & 24). The casually filmed moving image work follows the artists as they collect materials from the op shops around Wellington's central suburb of Newtown. Fleury and Brimer then haphazardly arrange the materials into a series of "fountains" in a grey asphalt courtyard area between the public library, a playground, and a public toilet. As if we were on the street too, we overhear snippets of the artist's conversation, those of other pedestrians, and the increasingly interested chatter of kids on the playground as the artists manage to spray water further and make more elaborate fountains. We see glimpses of curious onlookers and perplexed passersby, who are faced with the unusual scene of two people taping a cutting board to a drinking fountain, or watching water drip from a tap through a handbag filled with dumbbells. The video, rather than earnestly proposing a design for a fountain, feels to me more like it's asking why not—why not a fountain here? Why not these materials together? Why not two people in a public space stacking a chair, a plastic crate, and a silicone baking mould to see what happens? The work is simultaneously invested in the space, the materials, and the community.

Projects like *Glory* might appear slight, I believe that they have the potential to help us strengthen our collective ability to imagine, debate and articulate a new vision for our cities. I have been thinking of this lighter way of making, these borrowed techniques,

↑ Fig. 23 & 24. Anna Brimer and Max Fleury, screen captures of *Glory,* 2019. Courtesy of the artists and Circuit Artist Moving Image.

as “propositional”. This term is one I have borrowed from Dr. Ryan Reynolds, co-founder of the initiative Gap Filler in Christchurch following the earthquakes[1]. Reynolds over time has shifted the way he frames these projects, preferring the word “propositional” over “temporary”, asking whether such provisional constructions can go on to influence and impact the more significant or permanent design of public spaces (168). Although these propositions aren’t as direct as Gap Filler’s, these artworks celebrate and draw attention to the more bespoke or made-to-measure way of doing and being that already exists within our streets.

I frequently pass by a small DIY ramp built just beneath someone’s mailbox (fig. 25). Formed into an organic shape from fine concrete or cement, a loose grid of glass marbles is embedded in the surface. I would guess it might have been installed to help with wheeling a pram or a trolley up the small step, but the addition of the glossy marbles brings a joyful vitality to this otherwise prosaic and functional device. Inspired by this structure, I proceeded to embed marbles in a layer of clay at the bottom of a bucket before filling it with concrete. Overturning the bucket after it had set, and scraping away the layer of clay left me with a sandcastle-like form crowned with little glass jewels (fig. 26). I tried to carry some of the sweetness and peculiarity of the ramp into my object, a kind of proposal for a different treatment of the surfaces in our public spaces.

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1. Gap Filler initially brought temporary, DIY initiatives to the public in spaces between remaining buildings, (perhaps most famously the Dance-o-Mat, an outdoor dance floor with a coin-operated washing machine-sound system).

← Fig. 25. Cement ramp on Lavaud Street, Berhampore, 2022

↓ Fig 26. *Assembled bollard (marbles),* 2023

Instead of characterising her works as site-specific, Kate Newby describes them as having “an abundance of local detail”, a phrase which she borrows from Maggie Nelson (Kraus 132). I like this phrase too for the way it emphasises references to specific and small observations from the environment—overlooked and specifically local curiosities that she mines for art making. Newby often draws from unique features of the cities in which she works to shape her artworks, and her connections to local suppliers and materials that make her installations unique to the places they are made. As part of her show *YES TOMORROW* (2021) at the Adam Art Gallery, Newby arranged multiple clay half-barrel tiles into a gutter down a slope near the gallery. The tiles mimic those of deep gutters found all around the city, except they were formed with squares of wet clay draped over the thighs of numerous participants in a series of workshops leading up to the exhibition. She had heard tales of tiles historically being made this way, and realising this 45-metre installation pushed the technique to its “furthest extent” (“Turning Galleries Inside Out”). Residents of Wellington were literally moulded into this artwork disguised as infrastructure.

← Fig. 27. Kate Newby, *Rob Duncan Megan Daniel Margaret Lynn Samuel Deb Nico Marilyn Sarah Henry Mieko Kate Ruth Mike Briana Justine Grace Romesh Josefine Madison Nerissa David Nina Gabrielle Dayle Isabelle Ana Lilith Christian Ruby Sophie Millie Michaela Loretta Laura Christina Alison Olly Miriam Fred Lise Hazel Simon Mia Anita Caroline Anna Prak Nadya Alba Xander Flavia Emma Stef Areez Bella Rachel Kirsty Kate Nicola Emerita Tim Megan Ruby Fina Felixe Ella Eva Ben Julian Bena Huhana Max Lily Tina Rose Bill and Teresa* in Yes tomorrow, 2021, Adam Art Gallery, Wellington. Photo: Ted Whitaker. Courtesy of the artist.

↑ Fig. 28. *Free lemons,* test installation, 2023

For me, gathering used and found materials has offered an opportunity to activate community networks in ways that align with Newby's approach. There is an active community Facebook group in my neighbourhood which has been the source of many of the tiles and other materials I have used. I visit local op shops, the tip shop, garage sales, and find piles of free things. I have put requests out to my friends, or on my Instagram account—now people message me when they break their favourite salad bowl, wondering if I will want it for mosaic. I have met my local scout group, neighbours, and friends of friends. By trying not to source new materials perhaps I can more ably foster some of the social encounters and community networks that Ng discusses, and that we experienced after the earthquake. I believe that if we are more engaged in the production of the shared environments and infrastructures around us, we will also be more engaged with each other. The foundation of my practice is ambition for public spaces and a civic realm that are better for people and comminities—so that we might have a more engaged and resilient society.

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