Introduction

Postgraduate studies in Art in Public Space, RMIT University School of Art encompass three nested programs – Graduate Certificate in Public Art, Graduate Diploma Art in Public Space and Master of Art, Art in Public Space. These programs include a range of study options from independent research, work integrated learning through to direct course work.

The teaching program is supported by a practical research cluster bringing together a broad group of practitioners from across a range of disciplines, exploring new concepts and practices in the field of Art in Public Space. Research has been actively supported by Industry partners including government, private and community sector organisations.

Furthermore, both teaching and research have been combined in the development of a range of work integrated learning models including an active on site workshop program outlined in the following text.

RMIT Art in Public Space is creating a unique practice in the School of Art based on three interrelated aspects. The enrolment selection process, the studio practice and the relationship with what could be called the industry sector. It is unique in that it provides opportunities for students to work in public space on actual projects.

Enrolment

The breadth and depth of practitioners’ experience who enrol in the postgraduate program are as diverse as the fields encompassed by visual and performing artists and professions of the built environment. From painters, sculptors, printmakers and photographers, to writers, poets, performers and set designers, to architects, industrial, interior and graphic designers, to arts administrators, policy writers and community cultural development workers, to time base, new media and sound artists, the selection of candidates for enrolment deliberately brings together a seemingly disparate, cross-disciplinary group of practitioners into a program that emphasises their contribution to the construction of the practice of public art. This is
based on extending the idea of what public art might be and who could be engaged in it.

The involvement of overseas students in the program complements the broad cross section of participants from inner city and suburban Melbourne, interstate cities and rural centres.

Industry Sector relationships

The association of the program with bodies and individuals who manage or create public spaces in and around Melbourne is also central to providing opportunities for students to experiment and realise works in the field so helping shape contemporary art practice through their engagement.

These relationships have led to projects with local government bodies including Melbourne City Council\(^1\) and the adjoining municipalities of Moonee Valley\(^2\), Moreland, Darebin\(^3\) and Yarra, authorities such as Docklands and Vic Urban, representative bodies such as the Victorian Trades Hall Council and individuals and companies such as Marianna Hardwick Design and various architectural studios.

Interstate and international connections in Queensland Australia, Turkey, China and Italy provide the additional opportunities for students to realise works in a cross-cultural setting.

Studio practice

\(^1\) Image 1 illustrates the work of RMIT Public Art student Sahra Stolz - Up Periscope, Westwood Place, Melbourne, City of Melbourne Laneway Commissions, 2002-2003. Installation in historic drainage of Melbourne

\(^2\) Image 2 illustrates the work of RMIT Public Art Student Marynes Maria Ines Avila – Memory. Flemington Housing Estate, City of Moonee Valley, 2007. Packaged thongs on abandoned swimming pool site. 4m in diameter

\(^3\) Image 3 illustrates the work of RMIT Public Art student Clair McCraken – Archaeological Dig, abandoned Civic Square, Northcote Town Hall, City of Darebin, 2006. Archaeological excavation and documentation of findings of the proposed civic square site 1.5m X 0.8m X 0.4m

\(^4\) Image 4 illustrates the collaborative work of RMIT Public Art students Holly Ingeleton and Johnny Pavlatos – Overdetermination, abandoned Civic Square, Northcote Town Hall, City of Darebin, 2006. Sound installation and concrete poetry. 1.8m X 1.8m X 0.3M
The current studio practice stems for an earlier, symbiotic engagement with the urban fabric through the City of Melbourne Environmental Commissions. These commissions were awarded in a competitive environment over three consecutive years to postgraduate candidates from RMIT, working with university staff as mentors, to create temporary works in the Melbourne City Square. The initial project of this consecutive series of commissions was Louise Lavarack’s evocative ephemeral work from plastic bags collected from the streets of Melbourne entitled Cloud of Bags. Anthony McInneny engaged the entire Public Art class of 2003 in the on site construction of a work entitled Square Water and changed both the scope and size of the commission. Karen Abernethy’s work “A Simple Life” changed the notion of a temporary public artwork creating a semi permanent work that has found a second life. Transposing the techniques developed in the execution of Square Water by Anthony McInneny to the studio workshop has been instrumental in creating a multi faceted learning environment. Through the pooling of the diversity of skills, knowledge and experience of students through an exchange of ideas in collaboration with industry sector representatives, participants have developed actual projects in neglected or latent public spaces in and around Melbourne.

5 Image 5 illustrates the work of RMIT MFA candidate Louis Lavarack – Cloud of Bags, Melbourne City Square, City of Melbourne Environment Commissions, 2002. Mild steel frame with plastic bags 6m X 3m X various
6 Image 6 illustrates the work of RMIT Public Art student Anthony McInneny – Square Water, Melbourne City Square, City of Melbourne Environment Commissions, 2003-2004. Polyurethane membranes encasing bottled water over concrete pipes. 5 X 1.4m X 6.4m X various heights
7 Image 7 illustrates the work of RMIT MFA candidate Karen Abernethy (supervised by RMIT Public Art) – Simple Life, Melbourne City Square, City of Melbourne Environment Commissions, 2005. Timber, timber telephone pole, photovoltaic cells, 7m high X 2m X 1.4 X 1.6 (house)
8 Image 8 illustrates students from RMIT Public Art constructing Anthony McInneny’s Square Water on site in the Melbourne City Square, City of Melbourne Environment Commissions, 2003-2004. Polyurethane membranes encasing bottled water over concrete pipes. 5 X 1.4m X 6.4m X various heights
Conclusion

Moving into public spaces necessitates an acknowledgement of the spatial and raises questions around the nature of public space itself. How does working in this environment transform art practice and how might art practice transform these spaces? and what contribution is being made to the practice of public art through such an exploration?

The reciprocal relationship between the industry sector representatives administering public spaces and the public art program serves to simultaneously inform and transform the practice of the administrator and that of the artist. The capacity to both respond to site and generate the opportunities for new works instils a confidence in the artist to work as a professional in the built environment and a trust in the administrator in the intrinsic quality of art.

The scope of responses to these opportunities is always greater than anticipated from both sides of the art making and commissioning/authority relationship. It is through the open ended invitation underpinned by trust and creativity and a capacity to work collaboratively through practical, administrative, artistic and aesthetic considerations, that the practice is extended and participants create the foundations for traversing from studio practice to public space.

This program delivers a number of unique learning experiences, artworks and new opportunities for future projects. It is not uncommon for new works to be generated from these on site workshops and this sometimes leads to whole new programs of works. This in turn feeds back into the program to develop the enrolment, studio practice and industry sector relationship cycle.