



ON NOTICING FRANKENSTEIN

Willoh S. Weiland

The League leads me off the main drag, up an alley fissured between art deco walls hung with angular lamps like big, rich fists holding torches, saying *we are going to a quiet place*. And it's true: the whole horrid din disappears. The teenagers we'd seen yelling *you stupid old hag at the stupid old hag*; cars; cars; trash; music and all the hopeless noise that becomes apparent with **Noticing**. Because that's what you do with the League. You Notice.

At the end of the alley we Notice that it is very quiet. The bank has a lit stairwell on one side, and on the other side there is a high wall with many connected pipes climbing up it at right angles. Along one of these pipes there is a gum-line; a row of chewing gum stuck in an orderly line over one metre long. Some light green, some beige, each piece as crumpled and sweet as a baby's tooth.

The League tells me how it has been coming here, how it has been adding to the line with its own gum, how it found out through careful research that it is Richard The Bored Banker who has made the line.

A breathless pause and then we lean in...

Someone has placed a cigarette butt AT THE END OF THE GUM-LINE. Together we wonder whether it's an omen, and look around for other things to Notice that would make obvious what we should do in response. Nothing.

We have to rely on analysis. We discuss that by Richard The Bored Banker deciding to measure his life in gum-time, marking his day not by the passing of hours but by the placement of chicle on his pipe, he has found something enthralling and simple to be captivated by. We decide that this is a defiant and triumphant act of beauty.

The League says Richard told it his goal: to get his gum-line to the other side of the pipe, over one metre away. God, it's brave. Each day of gum seems so tiny against the amount of time the building can withstand.

It reveals what I had been Noticing the whole walk: how we construct things that are so much more powerful than ourselves, then spend a lot of time having to be inventive about how to control them. This precinct is very Frankenstein. And the League is out, armed with gum and humming, trying to tame it.

We decide that we shouldn't take this ciggie butt as an omen to stop, and so nestle a chewed up little nugget of gum at the end of the line, next to the cigarette butt, and head on back to the din.

*Willoh S. Weiland
Went on a walk with
the League of Resonance
on the evening of
22 February 2011.*

Dinner dates with strangers; excursions to inspect chewing gum stuck on water pipes in back alleys; groups gathered to cross the road together; chance conversations on street corners: these are among the marginal, largely invisible activities which constitute the current project of the League of Resonance. The working methods which underlie a project like this are not widely understood. This is hardly surprising: the artists of the League employ a set of processes which are still relatively novel additions to the toolbox of contemporary art.

Artists have worked in this way before. In the 1970s, conceptual and performance artists pushed against the constraints of gallery and theatre architecture, creating situations which paralleled everyday life, or wove themselves within it. In the late 1990s, Nicolas Bourriaud described the rise of 'relational' art practices that utilise 'meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people' as the material and medium (and not just the byproduct) of art.¹ Others prefer the terms 'new genre public art', 'dialogical art' and 'collaborative artistic praxis' for projects which attempt to operate within, or create new versions of, the public sphere.² Politically progressive artists and institutions are often drawn to such approaches, as they seem to offer a softer alternative to the authoritarian tradition of heavy-object public 'plop' art. For those interested in shifting art's role towards ethical social transformation (rather than merely operating as a realm of high cultural prestige-enhancement) this new set of 'socially engaged' aesthetic processes might suggest a grassroots, democratic way of intervening in the life of a city.

It's perhaps such quasi-utopian ideals that have emboldened the City of Melbourne to initiate this strange project on the corner of Elizabeth and Flinders Streets. For this project the Arts and Participation Program has departed from a more traditional method of arms length 'commissioning' and explored an approach where the production of the work is a collaborative exchange between the artists, the site and the public institution. The City council should be congratulated for taking this risk, when they could easily have chosen a more conventional approach with predictable outcomes. In speculative endeavours like the League's, the unknown is never far away. But for a council-sized organisation, risks need to be mitigated; plans known in advance; outcomes predicted. Progressive policy and artistic ideals must be balanced with a responsibility to produce safe, quality projects within legislative requirements. This complex interplay of freedoms and restraints often characterises public projects as they flow along. How should such dilemmas be navigated?

In this essay, I'd like to describe, as best I understand it, the way that a project like this unfolds over time. The League's processes stand as a case study in situated, process-based art—and since my motivation is to encourage councils and other organisations to continue commissioning such work, I want to try and sketch out the methods which they have used, and the underlying rationale for working in such a way. I will attempt to get at some of the challenges that this way of working throws up, including the thorny question of aesthetic autonomy, and the evaluation of outcomes. I hope that this methodological inspection of the processes of the League of Resonance will help outline the beginnings of a framework so that artists and commissioning bodies might have a more nuanced understanding of each other in future collaborations.

Because of the complexity of the process, I've tried to lay it out in a diagram (*overleaf*), which begins long before the project is initiated, and ends... well, perhaps *never*. Here's the basic sequence: first, a 'problem situation' is defined by the city council.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE: IN LEAGUE WITH THE CITY OF MELBOURNE.

Lucas Ihlein, March 2011

In this case, it's the particular piece of land at the junction of Elizabeth and Flinders Streets. The site's 'problems' include its perceived visual unattractiveness, as well as an unacceptably high number of pedestrian accidents and nocturnal anti-social activity, largely due to excessive alcohol consumption. (The members of the League, putting this into their own terms, describe it as the site's 'bad vibes'). The location is thus earmarked for further study. Funding is secured, and diverse approaches are mooted. These include a traffic survey (undertaken by Vic Roads); ethnographic research to discover the prevailing uses and perceptions of the site; and a proposal to develop an art project. The City of Melbourne's Arts and Participation Program argues that an artistic, collaborative approach might offer a depth of research not available to the more conventional methods described above.

The process of engaging artists takes some time. Through a limited 'expression of interest' process, a collection of project proposals is reviewed and one is selected, in keeping with a published set of evaluation criteria. The Arts and Participation Program 'values excellence and innovation in art making' and 'high artistic integrity'. However, criteria for evaluating excellence, innovation and integrity are difficult to explicitly describe: I will return to these issues later on. The brief accompanying the call for expressions of interest is quite complex: 'The City of Melbourne's Arts and Participation Program uses art to engage with communities and influence the development of the city's culture.' It involves appointing artists 'as an alternative method for Council to engage with the city at night and explore and interpret perceptions and realities of the night experience.' These statements evoke the instrumental use of art as a tool of social change, and from an artistic point of view, this raises doubts about the potential 'autonomy' of any resulting project.

The initial proposal that the Arts and Participation Program selected for the intersection was based around an interactive sound installation that later evolved into The League of Resonance. The project was selected on the strength of its proposal to 'develop and deliver a work that is informed by the community and stakeholders of the site [...] activating the space with positivity, romance and humour'. How will it do this? Precisely by the three core members of the League of Resonance spending many long hours on-site, engaging in chance encounters with passersby, residents and workers, and allowing whatever happens to evolve from these encounters. The sorts of social skills which are deployed in this method of relational art include wit, patience, and conversation, accompanied by the careful crafting of body language and attentive listening. In the case of Jess Olivieri, Sarah Rodigari, and Jason Maling, such competencies have been acquired over many years of performative art practice. Appropriate to the carrying out of the project brief, these now take the place of more traditional art-making methods such as painting and drawing.

By the time the artists actually begin work on-site, many months have passed in negotiations with council. One challenge when contracting a process-based artwork is the clear representation of the aims of all parties involved. A 'contract' provides a framework for the negotiations, and attempts to mediate a common ground between expectations, adaptability and outcomes. From the council's perspective, the contract needs to reflect its aspirations, and ensure that the resources being provided are allocated and utilised in line with its institutional obligations. The artists, for their part, must ensure that the contract reflects a realistic degree of creative 'capacity' or room to move; however, the nature of responsive art practices can make it impossible to guarantee specific outcomes. The 'work' has yet to reveal itself, and at the contract stage it is often only ▶

a set of proposed strategies. The way that the Arts and Participation Program has chosen to work in this case is by *collaborating* with the artists, rather than operating at arm's length. This unique contractual stipulation does not mean that each activity the League wishes to incorporate into the project needs to be discussed and approved in advance, but nor does it mean that the council simply rubber-stamps every idea the League proposes. The process is more difficult: working towards shared goals through discussion and negotiation. While this is a laudable approach, consensus is by no means a guaranteed outcome, and for the artists this deliberative process can be a challenge to long-held ideas about 'creative autonomy'.

Once on-site, how do the artists work? First, an initial idea (perhaps generated by a preliminary visit) is tentatively tried out. The social and material 'field' within which the idea is executed includes at least three entities: the area's local folks; the council as project stakeholders; and of course the geographical location itself.³ The impact of this first attempt is noticed, discussed among the artists, and reported back to council. Further ideas arise as a result of the situation feeding back into itself as the artists reflect upon what has occurred. New ideas for actions are then attempted within the field (which has now shifted

only in delimiting the identities of those involved, but in determining the nature of the collaborative relationship between them. Moreover, all these identities—artist, curator, institution and community group—are in the process of continuous negotiation. At the very least, their respective roles and actions need to be understood in relation to one another.⁵

If it's true that the 'behind-the-scenes' collaboration with the council forms a large part of the project, then I could perhaps expand the League's list of artistic competencies to include: the ability to communicate at a bureaucratic or 'professional' level; the negotiation of satisfactory deals, and the focus of mind to read and write lengthy contracts. As I've already suggested, such a multi-headed approach to art-making—art by committee, if you like—throws into doubt the much-prized romantic idea that artists are creative practitioners who operate with unfettered 'freedom'.

Is this a problem? Only if the myth of unmediated artistic autonomy is perpetuated in relation to the activities being carried out in the streets, and in the City of Melbourne offices; and only if these actual methods of production are swept under the carpet. To me, this obfuscation would represent a significant missed opportunity. For the artists,

Bourriaud, N., 2002, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les presses du réel, Dijon, p.27.
 'New genre public art': Lacy, S., 1995, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle; 'dialogical art': Kester, G., 2004, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles; 'collaborative artistic praxis': Kwon, M., *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002.
 The field in which the project emerges breaks down into many more entities. For example, the local population cannot be so easily grouped into one single category—nor can the council, which consists of many employees and departments, each with its own agenda and interests. The artists themselves constitute a part of the field, increasingly so as the project evolves.
 My characterisation of this spiralling feedback system is indebted to the influential research of Donald Schön. In particular, Schön's observations on 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action' offer a useful model for understanding the (usually unacknowledged) process of learning during collaborative problem-solving. See Schön, D., 1983, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Temple Smith, London.
 Kwon, op. cit., pp.141-142.

WATCHFULNESS

Joseph Priestley 2011

Joseph Priestley has been working in a backpackers' for the past three years and has experienced the early morning oddities of Flinders and Elizabeth streets innumerable times.

The clock tower watches, or so it is perceived to. It is a centrifugal point of governance and watchfulness, with a face that gazes downwards and tells only one immutable story. The narrative of time tells us where and what we are.

One could guess that a clock tower is built like a clock tower should be, by young men in overalls in another time, when the air in the city would have been clean and the sunshine wholesome. The first monuments of a civilisation are instantly historical and memorialised in black and white. Cast up into the air on slabs of cool stone, a solidity marked out in the rigid, squared corners. Four round faces set in four equally sized squares; it can tell the time in four directions, as if speaking with four voices in unison that are all the same voice. It must have started sometime. At some point it ticked its first tock and signalled it's first hand-stroke on the wheel, and set us in motion with the time.

And this place under the tower, that place where time takes place? A thoroughfare for the cosmopolis in transition. An ever-constant horde of people walking impresses on the others here to do likewise. Would anyone ever stop at anytime and gaze back up and ask, *why do you remind me? I can see that the sun has risen. Do you think that I would do nought if I knew not the time?* But why would this occur, if it should?

It is the briskness; the way a person can hold themselves still when waiting for a green light. The straight line strode upon with purpose. It is being pedestrian. The directional hand of a clock ends with a triangular point upon which walkers are determined to stride. And with equal judgement we observe each others' walks.

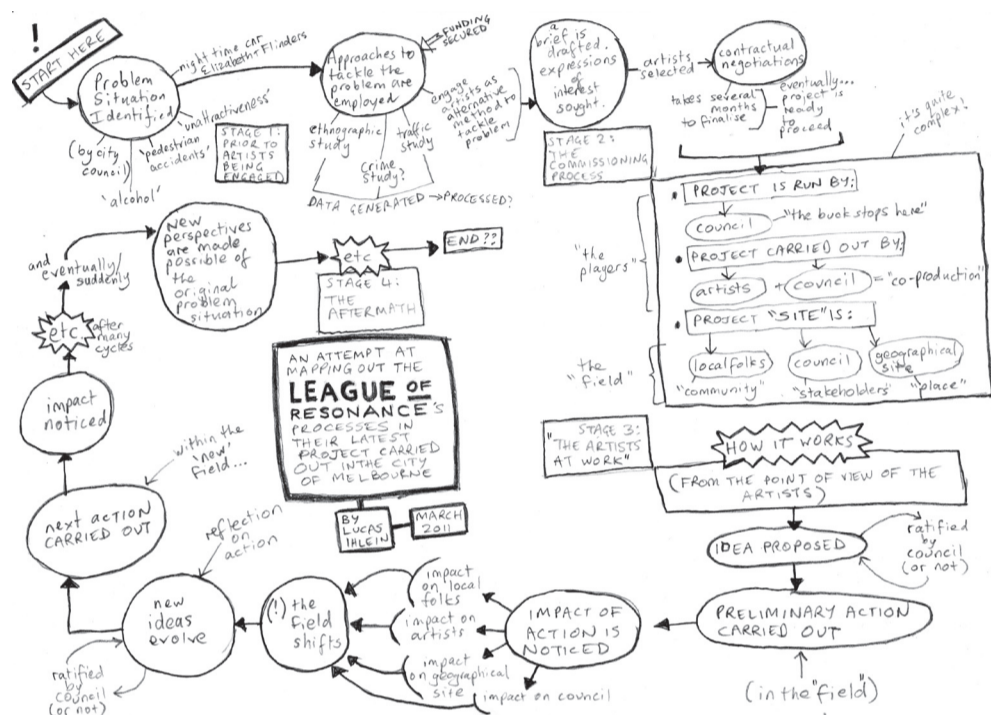
I see that you are doing as I do here. We are pedestrian together, moving with purpose, because it is the time of day to do so.

We watch others walk and the way they walk. We deny the possibility of becoming hunchbacks despite the weight of structures built over us. The epiphanies of height and fortitude add little grace to our postures and poses. And is it not strange that the body erect on two feet is judged by how straight it can be? Who knows the measure of my steps better than me but a clock? Why do others 'get in the way'?

You stopped me! Can you not see I am in transition? Please, you interrupted my straight line and made me curve!

Does one pensively contemplate the long-term effects of being forced to curve? Is it so that the in-exactness and lack of precision have detrimental effects on our walking being? Why do we never ever get to the middle point of a crossing and forget which way we are going?

There are those who know the secret of how to change time. Like a waft of smoke, they can blot out the moment and make it their own. You will often find them standing in your way.



as a result of the first action) ... and so the process goes. It is *emergent*, in the sense that the overall 'shape' of the project cannot be known in advance, and only becomes evident after many iterations of this process.⁴

What, then, could be the eventual shape that the project takes? At the very least, what emerges is a changed perspective of the original problem situation. The 'bad vibes' of the corner of Elizabeth and Flinders are seen in a new light (or, to use the language of the League of Resonance, these vibes are *heard and felt* in a new way). Whatever this new perspective might be (and at the time of writing, the project is still too much in progress to know), it is only intelligible by understanding the processes that have gone into its generation. In other words, the 'findings' of the project cannot be separated from its idiosyncratic 'research methods'.

For this reason, I want to suggest that, as indicated by my diagram, the 'project' does not begin at the finalising of the contract, but rather at the very origins of the council's identification of the problem situation. Establishing the artistic brief includes liaising and fostering internal relationships with many key departments. The list of stakeholders is not limited to artists, local residents and workers. The keen involvement of the council and its employees at every stage in the decision-making and execution of the project must be acknowledged. In this way, the project can be seen to be not only an investigation of the 'vibes' on the corner of Elizabeth and Flinders, but also, crucially, an exploration of the process of bureaucratic negotiation between artists and council. This, I believe, has not been sufficiently foregrounded in the project so far, at least insofar as it has been presented to the public. As Miwon Kwon argues of such projects in her book *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*:

[W]ithin the community-based art context, the interaction between an artist and a given community group is not based on a direct, unmediated relationship. Instead it is circumscribed within a more complex network of motivations, expectations and projections among all involved. [...] critiques of community artists need to be qualified by the recognition of the central role that institutions and exhibition programs play not

but there are bound to be many others:

First, by the quality of experiences generated near the corner of Elizabeth and Flinders Streets. Are they delightful? Horrid? Irksome? Do they shift my consciousness of the ordinary? And how can I know the answers to these questions, except via direct experience?

Second, via the documents left behind (or fabricated) from these experiences. Do they evoke (what we imagine to be) the 'vibe' of the original project? Do they have aesthetic (formal, material) qualities in their own right which make them an integral part of the project? Do they bring the project to life again, even long after (or far away from) where it began?

Third, we might judge the quality of the project by the transformations it has made 'in the field'. What sorts of new relationships have been formed? What new habits created? Do locals, artists and council employees have a new perspective on the original problem situation?

Finally, from the point of view of relational art practices, I think it's important to appraise the project based on the potential, upon reflection, for a deeper understanding of the processes essential to the work itself. Do artists, council employees and locals have a new grasp on how these kinds of projects operate? Can they identify the anatomy of interaction which goes into its making? How would the players embark on another, similar venture in the future? In other words: what has been learned from this experience?

Lucas Ihlein is an artist who has for over a decade initiated and collaborated in socially engaged art projects. His Ph.D, entitled *Framing Everyday Experience: Blogging as Art*, deals with the ethics and aesthetics of locally-situated relational art practice. For his research in this area, he was awarded the 2010 Alfred Deakin Medal for best doctoral thesis in the humanities, by Deakin University, Melbourne. He lives in Sydney and lectures in Media Arts at the University of Wollongong.

For those wishing to explore this subject further, related texts by Ihlein include: 'Complexity, Aesthetics and Gentrification: The Redfern/Waterloo Tour of Beauty', in *There Goes The Neighbourhood*, edited by Keg de Souza and Zanny Begg, You are Here, Sydney, 2009; and 'Public Art as Public Conversations', in *Harmonic Tremors: Aesthetic Interventions in the Public Sphere*, edited by Sarah Rainbird, Gasworks, Melbourne, 2009. These papers can be found at Ihlein's website, <http://lucazoid.com/bilateral>