

Abandoned Objects

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For *We Try This At Home*, Saskia Beudel uses one of the artworks of *Try This At Home*, an installation by Slow Art Collective as a catalyst to explore the lives and histories of discarded objects.

By Saskia Beudel

As *Try This At Home* curator, Margaret Farmer describes, the Slow Art Collective (Tony Adams, Chaco Kato and Dylan Martorell) use abandoned objects left by local residents for council pick-up to present an installation made from household refuse and repurposed discarded items. During an artists' talk held at Object in early October, members of Slow Art Collective commented that the alleyways and laneways along their chosen foraging route were almost disappointingly clean. Pickings were lean. These bare laneways suggest the efficacy of council pick-ups, or perhaps, more utopically, social habits less inclined towards designating particular items as 'waste'. There's an irony here, of course, that with less waste on the streets aesthetic possibilities diminish.

A memorable element of the installation is two spherical glass light shades threaded with speaker wire. The glass forms are suspended aerially among other strays—corks, seed pods, a basket ball, bottle tops, leaves—like low-tech Calder mobiles. Wired to an old pram laden with found objects in true 'bag lady' style, the glass spheres suggest some kind of aural transmission emitted from the detritus. But just what these emissions might be—music, cadences, muttering, crackle, hum—remains a mystery. The glass 'speakers' are mute. Nevertheless, they hint at the range of stories discarded objects and entities might, and inevitably do, tell.

A couple of days after Slow Art Collective's talk I cycled along the lower reaches of the Cooks River, wanting to see for myself some of the waterways I'd begun reading about. Not far from Tempe, an open concrete stormwater drain fed into the river. At this juncture a metal grille fence has been erected to trap rubbish that would otherwise enter the river and eventually flow into Botany Bay. Within the fence's confines were numerous plastic bottles bobbing about, creating a logjam, along with occasional cardboard cartons used for fruit juice. Where could all these bottles have come from, I wondered? They're an index of a more stubborn presence on streets and in parks and gardens than the cleaned-up alleys reveal.

Further downstream, I reached my destination: the point where the Alexandra Canal meets Cooks River. Here, waste and discarded elements lie deep within submerged sediments to form what a briefing note from the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) describes as 'the most severely contaminated canal in the southern hemisphere'.^[1] Scale shifts from what are called 'gross pollutants' (bottles, cans, paper, plastic) to solubles, oils, grease and particulates. Contaminants of the Alexandra Canal include heavy metals, oil and grease that may be petrol based

hydrocarbons, high levels of faecal coliforms (bacteria), and high nutrient loads which encourage algal blooms.[2] In the ‘contaminated sludge’ lie stories at different cadences—like those hinted at by Slow Art Collective’s glass speakers.[3]

Historian Grace Karskens eloquently articulates one of those stories: the influence of Sydney’s physical environment on the shape of the early town. Because the Europeans were a maritime people, ‘water was their element’, she argues, so during the earliest years of the colony, towns, villages and most settlements were coastal, or on rivers. By the 1820s, though, the pattern of farming and grazing lands ‘echoed the funnel shape of the [Cumberland] plain’s [arable] soils precisely’.[4] Conversely, she explains, the surrounding sandstone country encircling the plain was avoided. So too were the Lachlan and Botany swamps south of Sydney. ‘The early Europeans found this region unpleasant and difficult, and feared swampy ground as sources of disease’. At first, this region—where the Alexandra Canal now lies—was avoided by settlers. But gradually from the 1820s, and more intensively from the 1850s, ‘noxious industries moved out to these “wastelands”, harnessed their waters and used the streams as waste drains’. Once the Botany and Lachlan swamps had been drained the ‘area became the most heavily industrialised and polluted in Australia.’ There are obvious stories, then, of the legacy of nineteenth century industrialisation in the Canal’s ‘contaminated sludge’.

Chaco Kato defines one of Slow Art Collective’s objectives as being: ‘art which develops “horizontally” rather than “vertically” by slowly circulating and connecting from place to place, people to people’. Of equal concern is ‘art that is not just “Slow” in speed and laid back, but art in geological time’.[5] What might this mean—‘art in geological time’? Art that acknowledges its place within deep time not just within the time frames we more commonly think of as ‘historical’? [6]

[1] EPA cited in Alexandra Smith, ‘Promise of Little Venice Washed Away’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 April 2008, <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/water-issues/alexandra-canal-a-threat-to-nearby-residents/2008/04/25/1208743249028.html>> accessed 1 November 2011

[2] Allen Jack + Coltier, *Alexandra Canal Masterplan: Water, Access, Landuse, Heritage, Landscape*, 2000, p. 27.

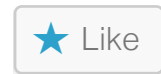
[3] The term ‘contaminated sludge’ is from Allen Jack + Coltier, p. 27.

[4] Grace Karskens, *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney*, Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 2009, p. 20.

[5] <<http://www.chacokato.com/about-slow-art/>> accessed 3 November 2011

[6] As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, ‘The discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience.’ However, the current crisis of climate change, he argues, challenges ‘the grasp of historical sensibility’ because it raises anxieties and uncertainties about human finitude. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, Winter 2009, p. 197.

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