



PHOTO: GREG FALLEN

Mural: 'Think Globally-Act Locally', 1985, Redfern, NSW. Winner of the 1985 Sir John Sulman Prize, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney. Artist team: David Humphries, Rodney Monk, Zig Monkwa, Ashley Taylor working with local community groups. Commissioned by Sydney City Council, assisted by the Ministry of the Arts, NSW

ART IN THE STREETS

Can community art improve the quality of urban life and have a beneficial effect on social behaviour? The pioneering of new frontiers of art practice by Australia's Public Art Squad indicates that it can. Text by Robyn Tudor.



PHOTO: ROBYN MONK

Hoarding mural, Stanley, Tasmania, 1986. David Humphries and Rodney Monk

ART is central to the self-concept of the Public Art Squad, a committed group of visual artists whose collective aim is to create sensitive, relevant and responsive artworks for the populace. Theirs is an egalitarian, multi-media art form intended to be seen in public places. The streets, neighbourhoods and shopping centres provide their exhibition arena. Their audience is the open community and their clients, co-workers and inspiration resource are often the local people.

The past decade has seen the outdoor environments of cities, suburbs, industrial sites, holiday resorts and regional country towns around Australia enriched by the Public Art Squad's creative touch. Festivals invite an inevitably flamboyant splash of fun. Moomba in Melbourne, the Wollongong and Orange festivals in regional NSW and the Sydney Festivals have inspired exotic floats, masks, costumes, paintings, sculptures and even a monumental, award-winning, neon-celebratory arch erected each year over Melbourne's Princes Bridge.



10th Year Celebration Mural, Sydney Opera House, 1983, Public Art Squad. Sponsored by Streets Ice Cream

The Public Art Squad is renowned for its prolific output of huge painted wall murals which have become landmarks and sources of local pride.

The murals serve as eloquent, demonstrative visual statements by numerous and varied communities about topical local issues or serious, universal ideas such as peace, ecology, multiculturalism, concern for the aged and more.

The latest burst of Public Art Squad activity has catapulted them into a previously unexplored, exciting and highly productive liaison with commerce and industry. Property developers and architects have become the new enlightened patrons of the arts, realising the significance and mutual benefits which flow from art in public places.

The recently opened, \$100 million Harbourside Festival Marketplace in Sydney's Darling Harbour complex promised the integration of inspired, site-specific artworks into the very fabric of a new building. The Public Art Squad embraced this professional challenge and knowingly accepted their critical artistic responsibility. As visual artists rather than designers or decorators they took care to assure the originality and creative integrity of



'Peace, Justice and Unity', 1984, cnr Pitt and Park Street, Sydney. Project artists: David Humphries, Rodney Monk and Ashley Taylor. Workshopped with the buildings occupants. Commissioned by Pitt Street Uniting Church



Public Art Squad Studios, Sydney, showing works in progress, 1987

the Public Art Squad throughout the project from concept development to installation of the artworks into the building.

The results are multidisciplinary, involving the work of ceramic, textile and multi-media artists, painters and sculptors. Handpainted ceramic tile murals, artist-designed terrazzo floor works, hand-painted and printed silk banners and flags, three-dimensional mobile and fixed figurative sculptures, monumental *trompe l'oeil* illusionistic paintings, lyrical welded iron entrance gates, and multicoloured schools of modelled tropical fish and flocks of parrots, transform this public retail marketplace into a showplace for art.

But is it art?

In itself 'art' is a conundrum, a puzzle or riddle defying succinct unambiguous definition. Ideas about beauty, human expression and communication perpetually shift in meaning when applied to differences in time, place, people and culture. At present the result is a provocative pluralism of



Selection of mural panels installed in Devonshire St Subway, Central Railway, Sydney. Commissioned by the State Rail Authority, NSW 1986. Project team: David Humphries, Rodney Monk, Zig Moskwa and Ashley Taylor in collaboration with Banduk Marika



PHOTO: GEOFF AMBLER



art concepts, allusive and begging contradiction.

Fine art in Western cultures has traditionally been confined to painting, sculpture and architecture. Painting and sculpture have been elevated to special heights, isolated and enshrined like religious icons in the world's museums and art galleries. This process over recent centuries took art out of the homes of individuals and away from public places like churches, town halls and city squares, where it was commonly found in Renaissance Europe of the 15th and 16th centuries. In consequence, fine art perhaps lost touch with its function to enlighten, beautify and enrich the surroundings of people. Art became elitist and academic, increasingly intellectualised and self-referential. In the broadest sense, today's society has little affinity with the world of fine art. The majority of the population feel alienated, often lamenting that they just do not understand what 'art' is all about.

The Public Art Squad presents a generous, joyous and rewarding alternative by intentionally and conscientiously creating works which are accessible, relating to popular mass culture and public values. It is a different perception of visual art which emerged from the radical arts reappraisal of the 1960s and '70s that swept America, Europe and Australia. This movement inspired inquisitive, experimental art events and 'happenings' that explored an evocative equation between people, art and daily life.

In his 1971 book *Art and Life* (Praeger N.Y., p. 8) author Udo Kultermann offered this definition: "Art is the uniquely human stamp put (by people) on life; it is their way of facing and subduing the world. It is the basic form of communication between (people), the most ancient language of

Left: 'Two Sides of the Saw', 1986, Burnie, Tasmania. An Arts in Working Life project funded by the Australia Council in conjunction with the Tasmanian Arts Ministry and Australian Pulp and Paper Mills

ideas, the seed of society. Art is the foundation of human society . . ."

This is a sweeping philosophical statement which attempted to give art a fundamental social definition. Such attitudes fuelled the Community Arts developments which emerged in Australia during the 1970s and remain active today.

In 1976-77 the inception of the Sydney Festival provided a catalyst and focus for new public initiatives in the visual and performing arts. Many young and enthusiastic artists, craftspeople, educators and performers were involved. Among them were David Humphries, painter and Bob Perry, architect.

Some 10 years later in 1987-88 these two men, along with Rodney Monk, shared their vision, skill and enthusiasm through the Public Art Squad and Architecture Oceania with developer, Merlin International Properties (Australia) Pty Ltd, to set an independent 'art architecture' precedent in Australia with the Harbourside Festival Marketplace, Darling Harbour.

The professional Harbourside Studios of the Public Art Squad were established in 1987 in large open warehouse premises in William Henry Street, Ultimo. The team expanded from a core of five full-time artists to about 49 through the addition

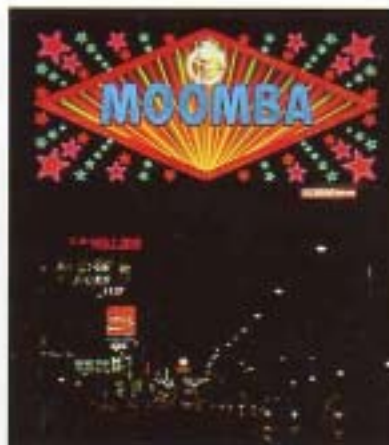


'Coral Gardens', 1984. Mural commissioned by Architecture Oceania for Whitsunday 100, Long Island, N Queensland

of support staff and the participation of numerous renowned artists working on specific project commissions. Such well-known individuals as ceramists Sandra Taylor, Jenny Orchard and Patsy Hely; with potter Thancoupie; glass artist Warren Langley; and textile designers Linda Jackson and Deborah Leser, among many others, were involved.

In just 12 months a massive, free-enterprise, two million dollars worth of original artwork was hand produced and installed in the Harbourside Festival Marketplace under the committed co-ordination and artistic direction of Humphries and Monk. The artists were given creative freedom within the 'festival' theme and their facilities, materials, working conditions, personal rights and artistic prerogatives ensured as a matter of Public Art Squad policy.

Unlike most other contractors on this major Bicentennial architectural project, the Public Art Squad met the stringent budget and completion deadlines. This says much for their commitment, professionalism and competence, and proves beyond doubt the viability and untapped potential of the visual arts industry in tandem with big business. David Humphries has a notable reputation for community art, both privately as co-founder of



'Neon Arch', 1978, Princes Bridge, Melbourne. Designed by David Humphries for 25th Moomba Festival. Winner of National Outdoor Advertising Award, 1979. Top right: Table design by Zig Moskwa for Harbourside Festival Market Place, Sydney



'Children of the Billabong', 1984, Casuarina Swimming Pool, Darwin



Oceania Fountain, Crystal Galleria, Harbourside Festival Marketplace, Darling Harbour, Sydney, 1988. Concept development team: Architecture Oceania, Public Art Squad; sculpture by Doug Hurr; world painted by Garry Andrew. Commissioned by Merlin International Properties



Model for kinetic Acrobatic Sculpture and murals for Harbourside Festival Marketplace, Sydney; P.A.S. Studios, 1987



Zig Moskwa and Nurell Kearns working with models in P.A.S. studio. Banners and sculptures for Harbourside, Sydney, 1987



Painted sculptured birds, La Paloma ceramics and murals showing the range of items produced for Harbourside Festival Marketplace in P.A.S. Studios, Sydney, 1987

Right: Detail of one of the characters from The Acrobatic Sculpture for Harbourside in P.A.S. studio, by Zig Moskwa, 1987. Banner by Stacey Pollard

Below: Hand-painted silk banners for Harbourside Festival Marketplace in P.A.S. studio. Project artist Stacey Pollard, 1987



the Public Art Squad with Rodney Monk in 1978, and as Policy/Project Officer, Community Arts, Division of Cultural Activities, Premier's Department, NSW State Government 1978-83.

Humphries trained as a painter during the late 1960s at the National Art School, East Sydney Technical College in Sydney. In 1969-70 he organised a number of highly acclaimed, *avant-garde* art performance events or happenings, called 'environments', at Sydney's Cell Block Theatre titled *Alexander Nevsky's Homecoming* and *One Way Ticket to Sunshine*; and *Noah's Ark* at the Workers Education Association building, Wollongong; which involved groups of artists interacting with their audience. Art critic Daniel Thomas reviewed the first of these events and drew the comparison with the wrapped works of the environmental sculptor Christo, noting the transience of such happenings and observing that: 'The exhibition as a whole becomes more important than the individual objects in it, and eventually the artist becomes as much a dramatist as a painter or sculptor.' Transience and theatricality are equally characteristic of the mural art which was to follow. Subsequent travels overseas on a Study/Travel Grant from the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts broadened Humphries' experience. He gained a Postgraduate Diploma in Arts Administration from The City University, London, 1974-75; and researched public and community art programs during 1976, on the lower east side of New York. This reinforced his alternative value system for art.

The nature of the art alternative which Humphries and many others pursued is complex. The art object, such as a painting, became less important than the process of creation, while the traditional rarefied, egocentric role of the artist was replaced by the anonymity of working within a team. Amateurs were welcomed and encouraged to participate alongside the trained artists, providing an earthy significance to the artworks. A certain humble naivety which may have accompanied some of the early performances and later large murals, lent a genuine freshness and authenticity to the works which strongly appealed to the average people - the chosen audience. As a celebration of the primitive, the virtually unvandalised survival of many murals in public places is testimony to their success and public acceptance.

Writings from this period describe the shift in art

perception: 'Art, instead of being an object made by one person, is a process set in motion by a group of people. Art's socialised. It isn't someone saying something, but people doing things, giving everyone (including those involved) the opportunity to have experiences they would not otherwise have had.'

Comparing community art with performance, Humphries emphasises the group dynamics of public participation in the planning and execution of murals and the visibility of painting in public places, which generally turns the process into a type of street theatre. Part of the stimulation of this work is the intense and often ongoing human interaction it generates. He says, 'These projects are very theatrical. You are performing and interacting with all sorts of people . . . people are watching you all the time.'

With *Peace, Justice, and Unity*, Pilgrim House, Sydney, half the inner-city workers, shoppers and visitors watched the execution of this giant three-part mural in its highly visible location, the corner of Pitt and Park Streets in the heart of the central business district. This was a community project executed in 1984 for the Pitt Street Uniting Church with the support of the Sydney City Council and Office of the NSW Minister for the Arts. In this case the physical danger of working high off the ground on scaffolding on the external wall of a skyscraper prohibited community involvement in the painting process. However, the church and city communities were extensively involved through the workshoping of ideas in concept development, designing and approval stages of the work, while thousands of Sydneysiders eagerly watched the daily progress of the painting.

Similarly, the 1983 *Tenth Anniversary Opera House Mural*, executed by the Public Art Squad for the Opera House Trust along the Circular Quay approaches to the Opera House, was painted by teams of high school students and watched by the public on and around Sydney Harbour.

Humphries equates the role of the Public Art Squad with that of a theatre or dance company: 'It's a bit like doing an opera or a play . . . we deal with our public art projects like productions or shows. Our ability is to put the whole machine together from the funding, to the local authority approvals, co-ordinating and facilitating community involvement; providing artistic and technical expertise, to publicity, lectures and follow-up . . . a whole event.' Consequently the Public Art Squad has an identifiable style and approach which stems from the orchestration of diverse talents and skills of the assembled artists. This may be correlated



Silk screened banners designed by Bruce Goold for Harbourside, P.A.S. 1987



David Humphries



Rodney Monk

with that particular character one would expect to find, for example, in Sydney Dance Company or NIDA productions. It is a team effort with shared credit, where individual artists often remain intentionally anonymous.

Rodney Monk brings to the Public Art Squad overt theatrical experience, having been trained at the Wollongong Institute of Education in Theatre and Drama during the early 1970s. He has promoted a strong educational philosophy for the Public Art Squad. This has seen them eagerly involved in schools and university projects; lecturing in art colleges; unemployment, youth and community training schemes; adolescent work experience; handicapped initiatives and corrective services community rehabilitation for delinquents. Over many years the Public Art Squad has demonstrated a commitment to the artistic enrichment of all cross-sections of the Australian community. Willingly, they have shared their expertise in publications such as *The Mural Manual* (published by the Arts Council of NSW) and the video *Making a Mural* (produced in conjunction



Aboriginal artist Thanacoupe working on large ceramic planters in collaboration with Lino Alvarez of La Paloma Pottery, Public Art Squad studio, 1987. Bottom left: Completed planters in situ at the entrance of Harbourside Festival Marketplace, Darling Harbour, Sydney, 1988



with the NSW Department of Education, Resource Services); along with other resource kits produced by the Northern Territory Department of Education and the Craft Council of NSW.

In this capacity they have cultivated a mature understanding of visual resource, social dynamics and how people respond to their environments with respect to art. Identifying the recurring and changing symbols, images, and ideas which motivate the Australian people, they have developed a visual approach using realistic imagery, often with a strong narrative, positive spirit, bold colours and patterns, which has wide appeal.



Night-time Mural, South Pavilion, Harbourside Festival Marketplace, 1987. Artist team: Garry Andrews, Rodney Monk and Zig Moskwa



*Detail from Night-time Mural shown across top of page.
Right: Sandra Taylor's ceramic tile mural on the spandrell, South Pavilion, Harbourside Festival Marketplace, Sydney.
Below: Detail of panel from mural*



'We shape our environment and our environment shapes us' is an often-quoted Public Art Squad motto. This recognised, they have been repeatedly sought out by local and state governments and community groups to improve the physical and hence social and psychological environment of localities under stress.

In 1986, the *Devonshire Street Subway Murals*, in Sydney's Central Railway Station, were commissioned by the NSW State Rail Authority of the UTA in an endeavour to solve a problem.

Humphries explains: 'The Devonshire Street Subway was a hideous and rundown graffiti environment where people behaved in an anti-social way. It was not a safe place. By introducing art into the subway you change that environment and it actually changes the way people behave there.' He has been proved right. The carefully chosen images combine ecological respect for the natural environment, through landscape, with the whimsy, escapism and entertainment of the circus, which included familiar images of trains from the past and present. Survival against all odds demonstrated public respect for the artworks. The subsequent beneficial modification of subway behaviour patterns is powerful evidence of the value and effectiveness of art as a tool for public welfare. Parallel histories are true for other Public Art Squad community projects. In 1980, *The Crescent* mural, Annandale, Sydney (Leichhardt Municipal





Day-time Mural, South Pavilion, Harbourside Festival Marketplace, 1987. Artist team: Rodney Monk, Zig Moskwa and Garry Andrews

Council commission), took another unpleasant graffiti environment and gave the local people the opportunity to make a visual statement to thousands of daily motorists concerning the impact of the arterial commuter highway on their residential environment. For this project the Public Art Squad was presented with the 1981 Civic Design Award by the NSW Institute of Architects.

The 1985 award of the 'Sir John Sulman Prize' for painting, conferred by the Art Gallery of NSW on the Public Art Squad for its mural *Think Globally, Act Locally*, Redfern, Sydney (Sydney City Council commission), represents artistic recognition of the highest order. Art in the streets, of and for the people; and the alternate quest for a broader artistic relevance has been recognised and accredited by the art establishment.

Over 60 Public Art Squad murals and numerous multimedia and sculptural commissions during the past 10 years have touched every State of Australia in addition to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea. The scope of their achievements is truly remarkable in terms of commitment, integrity and success.

The present and future for the Public Art Squad represents the expansion of an independent, professional business collaborative of visual artists, administered by artists, sharing the rights, privileges and responsibilities of contracts and commissions. The Public Art Squad strives toward professional self-sufficiency by establishing their credentials in



Detail of Jenny Orchard's ceramic tile mural situated in South Pavilion, Harbourside

Left: Detail of Bird Sculpture painted by Zig Moskwa, 1988

Below (l to r): Banners by P.A.S. team, fabrics designed by Linda Jackson; Sculptured doors and terrazzo floor designed by Bruce Gould; Banners by Debora Lazer, Crystal Galleria, Harbourside





'Vision of the Concept', mural commissioned by Tom Hayson for the Turning-of-the-Soil ceremony at the Harbourside site

Below: Harbourside today, shows how P.A.S. creativity has given a building that special ambience of spirit and joy which makes it a popular place for the people of Sydney

the private sector, living up to the great pressure of expectation in productivity, skill and artistic integrity; as exemplified by the Harbourside Festival Marketplace experience.

The goals of the organisation remain unashamedly idealistic: 'To celebrate joy and peace through universal creativity.' The stated purpose of the Public Art Squad, amongst other concerns, is to: 'Create art to improve the quality of life and the human environment by the integration of creative expression; to provide a work environment, facilities and professional income for teams of artist visionaries; and to create a stimulating public atmosphere where art becomes part of everyday experience involving all people in the creative process.'



PHOTO: ROBIN BEECH

Their company aim is to remain artistically conscientious, financially independent and prosperous for the ongoing security and freedom of their artists and the betterment of society. Toward this end Monk comments, 'We want to be perceived and understood as a hard-nosed, competent business with a beautiful philosophy.'

This is undoubtedly an unusual and lofty way to speak about contemporary art. However, at a time of international economic instability, when Australian government funding, support and sponsorship of the arts is being rationalised and curtailed, it is gratifying to witness the strength, conviction and self-confidence of the Public Art Squad.

During 1988, with the Harbourside Festival Marketplace project, they have opened up a new arena for art expression in the private sector, where enormous potential exists for artist commissions in future architecture, and corporate resources are bountiful.

Around the world artists, craftspeople and administrators eagerly look to the enforcement of 'percentage for art' policies and laws in new building approvals to provide adequate, non-governmental, ongoing income and support to artists. The recent American Craft Museum exhibition 'Architectural Art: Affirming the Design Relationship'² explores American initiatives and has aroused much international interest. Comments by Tanya Harrod, titled *Embellishing Architecture*,³ observed that in America, 'There is a sense of work being done on a far larger scale (than in England). Far greater trust is reposed in the artist-maker collaborations and there is a sense of making architectural and art history.'

In Australia, the Public Art Squad is active in the forefront of international 'art in architecture' developments. Through their own initiative and tenacity they have successfully realised significant architectural commissions, which augurs well for the future of the visual arts industry in this country. That they have concurrently maintained small unpretentious community mural projects, such as the Department of Housing 'Neighbourhood and Tenant Resource Development' initiative, in the stressed outer-Sydney suburb of Mt Druitt, substantiates their benevolent, altruistic assertions. The Public Art Squad's permanent core of artists include Zig Moskwa, Suzanne Holman, Stacy and Philip Pollard, with David Humphries and Rodney Monk. It is a team augmented by periodic project collaboration with many other talented individuals. They have earned recognition and congratulations for their achievements in bringing the joys of art to average people, and for exploring new frontiers in art practice. The Public Art Squad deserves to reap the rewards of continued success and future prosperity.

Robyn Tudor

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NOTES

¹ Musician John Cage, *A Year from Monday*, Middleton, USA, 1967, p. 151.

² Catalogue, *A Discourse in Architectural Art*, 1988.

³ British Crafts magazine No. 93, July/August, 1988.