

Arts@work Claiming Ground Conference 2005

Brigita Ozolins: Making art for libraries: a comparison of two projects

Introduction

In this presentation I am going to compare two public art projects I have created in two different libraries: one is a commission by the State Library of Tasmania for their headquarters building in Murray Street, Hobart, which I completed in 2001; the other was a self-initiated work I installed in the Morris Miller Library at the University of Tasmania in 2003. While the first is a permanent work, the second was temporary, installed for one academic year.

The story I am going to tell you about these projects is a *good* story – things went well in both cases and each project was successful in its own way. However, there were differences in how each result was achieved. I am interested in the way a project alters when the outcome is something that no longer belongs to the artist, but has become public property – and, in fact, has become public property before the work is completed. I am going to explore this by looking at the relationship between artist and client and how this impacted on the realisation of my ideas. In my case, one project altered and developed through compromise with the institution I was working for, and the other remained true to my original vision.

Before I go on to describe the processes involved in creating these works, I want to provide you with a brief introduction to the ideas that drive my art practice because these provide an important context for understanding why I have made work for libraries, as opposed to some other type of institution.

My work in context

I have a great passion for books, libraries, literature and the written word and I make art that often incorporates references to them. I am interested in how language, knowledge, information and the bureaucratic systems of the institutions that are responsible for collecting, sorting and disseminating information to us, impact on the individual. My ideas and thinking are essentially post-structural, based on the premise that language is a very powerful cultural tool that both shapes and restricts who and what we are and how we think. I am particularly fascinated by the paradoxical nature of our relationship to language and recorded information about ourselves. On the one hand, language and knowledge provide structures that enable us to express ourselves, our thoughts, our feelings, as well as enabling us to understand, to plot and to describe our place in the world; but on the other hand, these structures are not accurate reflections of reality. What I say to you may not necessarily reflect my true intentions (I may mean what I say but I may not necessarily say what I mean) and, of course, what I read in a history book may not necessarily tell me how it really was.

My interest in these themes stems from growing up in a multilingual family and from my fascination for my father's library, which included books written in French, German and Ancient Greek as well as Latvian and English. Like Borges' Library of Babel, the universe itself seemed contained within my father's books.

I convey my ideas use a range of materials associated with the institutional and scholarly practices of recording and sorting information, including books, handwriting and text, digital media, furniture, office equipment and storage boxes. I usually work in the form of installation, I sometimes incorporate performance and I particularly enjoy the challenge of creating site-specific work.

Given the nature of my practice, the opportunity to create work for a library was extremely exciting and in late 2000 I undertook a commission to make work for the State Library of Tasmania. As this was my very first public art commission, I was also very nervous.

The State Library of Tasmania: Voice

The State Library brief was to create a permanent art work around a structural column in the centre of their entrance foyer, which was undergoing a re-vamp at the time. The aim was to make work that promoted the library as a significant and active community resource while also disguising an aesthetically problematic architectural feature of the building. Of course, as well as enhancing the foyer area, the work had to be durable against wear, tear and vandalism and be easy and inexpensive to maintain. I faced a number of challenges. I wanted to create work that reflected a respect for the function of the library but also challenged ideas about our relationships to language and knowledge within a public institution. At the same time, I had to make work that could be 'read' by the public without too much difficulty but would not compromise the artistic integrity of my ideas. I also had to ensure that the client – State Library Management – were happy with the overall outcome.

Of course, when making art for a public space there is a level of compromise before you begin because you have to put the public first. Your work can't endanger them or offend them but at the same time must be constructed in such a way that it can protect itself from them, withstanding accidental as well as intentional damage.

My original proposal for the State Library incorporated digital portraits of a young boy and a young girl flanking a column of coverless books. The books represent the vastness, weight and mystery of recorded knowledge and the children's faces represent both the future and the tremendous potential of youth. Each child's face is overlaid with verbs that refer to the transformative power of books and reading and reinforce the library's collection as a living and active resource.

To protect from vandalism and facilitate maintenance, the work was to be encased in laminated glass framed in blackwood which provided a formal link to the existing use of timber in the foyer.

Although my proposal had been accepted by the State Library, at the first meeting I had with Library management it became evident that the children's faces were problematic. Some people at the meeting associated the imagery with the Holocaust. So rather than attempting to modify the images in some way, I decided to get rid of them altogether. I felt that no matter what I did to them, they would continue to evoke something negative for my client so it just seemed wiser to dismiss them altogether and work with what was left, which was lists of verbs and a huge range of possible materials. In a sense, I am grateful to the client for their dislike of the imagery because this forced me to distil my original concept to its most essential elements, which are words and books.

At our next major meeting, I showed a maquette I had built of my modified proposal and gave the library two new options: wedging the columns of books between stainless steel panels covered with raised lettering, or between blackwood panels with inlaid stainless steel lettering. They chose the first option, which was also my preference, but in all honesty, I would have been just as happy to work with the blackwood. It was this sort of decision making that was new to me and reinforced that the work was gradually becoming public property, even though I had not yet made it. My ideas were being modified to accommodate and please a client, rather than myself. I adopted the philosophy that as long as the artistic integrity of the work was not being compromised, it was best to go with the flow rather than to dig my heels in. And, ultimately, I think the final result was a better resolution than my original proposal.

The completed work, entitled *Voice* (2001), consists of a wedge of coverless books stacked behind toughened glass and sandwiched between two stainless steel panels. The panels are covered with lists of verbs, laser cut from stainless steel, the letters raised, suggesting a printing device such as a letter-press. The verbs themselves - words such as think, dream, imagine, journey, voice - refer to the transformative power of books and reading. The coverless books evoke the mystery of recorded human knowledge and, linked with the verbs, point to the unlimited potential of the written word and its ability to kindle the imagination. The juxtaposition of stainless steel and old paper, contrasted the old with the new, the handmade with the industrial, and the past with the future. The column of books and verbs physically recedes into the ceiling, suggesting a vein of knowledge that continues to flow throughout the rest of the building, playing on the idea of books and knowledge as architecture.¹ It was the architects who suggested that the ceiling be cut away around the top of the column which created this effect.

The process of reaching a mutually satisfactory result on this project was facilitated by working with a project consultant, (in this case, Rebecca Greenwood, who now works for Arts@work). I can't emphasize enough how invaluable it was to have someone who mediated between the library and me at all the major stages of the project. It reduced my level of anxiety considerably, because I knew I had someone who was advocating for

¹ As the structural column continues up into the other floors of the building, the architects who worked on the re-design of the Library's foyer suggested that my work be continued on the next two levels, which would have included the Lending and Reference libraries. Unfortunately, this project fell through due to lack of funding.

artistic integrity as well as ensuring that the State Library was getting what it wanted. In addition, Rebecca had organised a very clear written contract that outlined the obligations and rights of both the State Library and the artist. So the project proceeded in a way that enabled me to maintain an objective distance from the art work, the client and any potential problems. This was also reinforced by having a specific liaison officer assigned to me at the Library, who was their Public Relations Officer (Briony Nainby, who is now the Public Art Officer at Hobart City Council). She filtered information from Library management through to me. So as well as a contract, I had two other safety nets: two different but quite specific people to turn to assist with any difficulties that arose during the project.



Voice, 2001, State Library of Tasmania foyer, Murray Street, Hobart

In addition to this system of liaising with the client, I also had access to the Library's architects, who were redesigning the Library's interior at the time. Their knowledge and advice was extremely helpful in resolving fiddly design problems. They also played their role in the overall aesthetics of the final work by suggesting and arranging modifications to the ceiling around the column around which the artwork was built.

I did experience one interesting compromise with this project that could have got out of hand had it not been for diplomatic mediation by the Library's Public Relations Officer. It was an interesting problem because it reinforced the extraordinary power of the word in a way I had not anticipated. I spent hours developing the lists of verbs that covered the stainless steel panels. I wanted them to do three things: read rhythmically, form an aesthetic pattern on the steel surface and relate to the function of the library. This was a more complex process than you might imagine. Change one word and a domino effect results, so that all the other words have to be shifted and/or changed. Of course, all the words I chose to use in the work necessarily had to be approved by Library management and, not surprisingly, I was asked to remove certain words and replace them with others. One of the words the Library specifically wanted to see on the panels was the word *free*,

which I added. However, I had to remove the word *forgive* (rather reluctantly) because it was considered too close to the word *sorry* which was considered too politically volatile (presumably because the issue of reconciliation was particularly controversial at the time, John Howard refusing to say the word *sorry* to the indigenous community). There were some other suggested modifications to the word lists but I did not take those on board.

Voice thus involved a number of compromises that both enhanced the final outcome and potentially could have taken the work out of my hands.

Interestingly, a number of people have told me that they missed the work altogether on their visits to the library. It wasn't until they were specifically looking for it that they became aware of its presence in the centre of the Library foyer. I view this as a positive rather than a negative because it indicates that the work has truly become part of the space in which it is sited. In his article on public art, Jean-Christophe Ammann argues that public art should be both powerfully present as well as being able to 'disappear'. He says '... an artist who works in the public space must aim for the point at which his work as such is no longer noticeable...'²

CONTENT (#2)

The second site-specific work I carried out in a library was installed in the University of Tasmania's Central Morris Miller Library. Entitled *CONTENT*, 2003, it can be seen as a companion piece to the State Library commission. However, the whole process of creating this work was completely different, from inception to completion to its eventual removal.

CONTENT was both self-initiated and self-funded. The idea for the work began to develop on my visits to the Morris Miller Library as a PhD student. Every time I walked through the entrance foyer, which features an in-built 6.5 metre long display cabinet that usually exhibits rare or unusual items from the Library's collection, I thought about what a perfect location it was for a site-specific work. However, unlike the 2 weeks it took me to develop the proposal for *Voice*, it took two years before the idea for *CONTENT* was realised. I had considered hanging large, text-based, digital images inside the cabinet or displaying books of my own choice with cryptic labels attached, but rejected these ideas as too contrived. I thought about the function of the library and how I could question that function in the most minimal way using the basic components of a library – books and words. One day, I walked past the cabinet and saw it filled with ripped books overlaid with the word *CONTENT* (or *CONTENT*).

I approached the Public Relations Officer at the Library and presented her with my idea accompanied by a description of the concept and a digital mock-up of the work I created with the aid of Photoshop. This was passed on to the University Librarian, who met with me briefly on site and agreed to allow me to create the work in the Library's foyer. He also explained that another art work by Ewa Pachuka's, made of mock sandstone, was going to be installed in the foyer permanently around the time I would be setting up my

² Jean-Christophe Ammann, 'A plea for a new art in the public space', *Parkett* 2, 1984

work. Initially, this was a concern because I was worried about two large art works competing with each other in a fairly small and limited space, but as it turned out, Pachuka's work and mine complemented each other aesthetically and conceptually rather than clashing.

So to create *CONTENT* I simply went ahead and did it. There were no modifications to my original design; there was no discussion about the relevance or otherwise of the text that dominated the work; I didn't have to consider the impact of potential damage and vandalism to the work in the same way as with the permanent commission for the State Library, and the work was relatively easy to install.

CONTENT transformed the display cabinet into a type of architectural dig, completely filling it with deconstructed books that suggested geological strata of information. I employed signwriters to cover the display windows with a vinyl film that resembles etched glass. The letters *CONTENT* were then cut from the film, turning it into a giant, frosted glass stencil through which the tattered spines of the coverless books were visible. The work thus appeared like a window into the architectural foundations of the building. The aim was to play with the multiple meanings of the title of the work, the stencilled word *CONTENT* shifting between noun and verb. This word was juxtaposed against layers of ripped and mended book pages - the literal content of the display - which metaphorically evoked the structural foundations of the library. Thus, on one level, that content referenced the knowledge, history, culture and authority of the university, but, because there were no clues to the titles of the books, the actual content was denied. The books became, in a sense, contentless.



Brigita Ozolins, *Content* (#2), 2003, Morris Miller Library, University of Tasmania

CONTENT was exhibited in the library for most of the 2003 academic year. When I finally had to remove the work, because the library had decided that they wanted to continue offering the display cabinet as a temporary exhibition space to University departments, it was with a certain sadness - I felt that it had 'disappeared' into the site to such a degree that it had become part of the architecture. In fact, while I was removing the work, many library users stopped and said they were genuinely surprised and disappointed to see the work go because it had become such a familiar and welcome aspect of their visits to the library. In this sense, *CONTENT* had become a personal as well as public signifier of the Library to those users.

Conclusion

Voice and CONTENT are both projects that took place in libraries but the process of working on each was quite different. While the State Library project was resolved through a process of compromise, I believe the result was just as successful as realising my own vision without any interference and this is because the compromise was well-managed. However, I knew that the work in the University library was temporary, so I didn't have the same anxieties as with the commission. Permanent work has to stand the test of time and the wear and tear of being in a public space for many years to come. Thus the artist also needs to feel a certain level of confidence about the potential future of the artistic integrity of the work. Of course, as the University project was both self-funded and temporary, I felt a different sense of responsibility towards its outcome. It was an experiment that happily worked well rather than a contract I had to fulfil.

While Voice and CONTENT are different, they are linked by a personal and conceptual commitment to making work about our relationship to language and to the institutions that are responsible for collecting, organising and disseminating information about ourselves. But as well as this, I think there is an unwritten social commitment that underlies the process of making art for public spaces. Conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth, who has created many site-specific public art works, reinforces this idea. He states that one of the greatest challenges the artist faces when making public art is to make it appropriate to its context while at the same time accessible to a non-specialised audience. He believes that the artist has a responsibility to provide a level of attainable meaning but in doing that, should not compromise their problematic as an artist.³

The most significant lesson I learned from making the two art works I have discussed came from the State Library experience. This is because the project involved a degree of compromise; was technically and aesthetically more complex to resolve, and because it is a permanent rather than temporary work. What I learned is that it is good to keep an open mind and to not be afraid of taking on board the ideas of others - ultimately, they may direct you to resolve a project more successfully. Of course, at the same time, you have to be clear about where to draw the line because in the end, your name does go on the work. Last year I turned down a commission for this very reason – the compromises I would have had to make moved too far from the artistic integrity of my original idea. In the end, a commission has to keep three lots of people happy: the client, the public and the artist.

Brigita Ozolins, 2005

³ Joseph Kosuth, 'Public text', in Matzner, Florian (ed), *Public art: a reader*. Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2004, p 189