

[E S S A Y]

TOUR OF BEAUTY

EVE VINCENT EXPLORES A SYDNEY ART-COLLECTIVE'S NEW ENTERPRISE IN
THE DEEPLY DIVIDED INNER-CITY AREA OF REDFERN-WATERLOO

WE sit at the foot of the Waterloo public housing towers, beside the community garden. Tower-block tenant and residents' activist Ross Smith is meant to be telling our group of twenty what it's like to live here, what it means to live here. Instead he remarks, 'Most people wind up their windows and lock their cars as they drive through Redfern-Waterloo.' I think about how I pick up speed on my bike when passing Redfern station on my way home to Marrickville. Smiling, and genuinely curious, Ross asks the group: 'Why are you here?' A few people murmur a response. I've got my jeans rolled up, my cap jammed on my head, my notebook out. Then, directly to me, he looks at me and says: 'You in the baseball cap, why are you here?'

ON 15 October 2005 I boarded the second 'Redfern-Waterloo Tour of Beauty'. The tour was the work of an arts-activist collective, SquatSpace, that has been making work about housing, urban development and gentrification since 2000. I came across them in 2002 at the annual This Is Not Art Festival in Newcastle. I find their work thoughtful, politicised and usually funny.

The tour was conceived as a way to present different interpretations of a complex place and complex issues. Tricked out in immaculate, ironic uniforms—

skinny red real-estate-agent ties, black pants and hats, white shirts—SquatSpace members hand the audience over to various local storytellers, such as Ross, at various locations. SquatSpace members also drive the mini-bus, make introductions, and quarter oranges for a half-time snack. There's no attempt to direct the tour towards a definitive interpretation. The effect is kaleidoscopic.

IN November 2004 the NSW Government passed an Act that created the Redfern-Waterloo Authority (RWA). This effectively excised an area from Sydney City Council jurisdiction, empowering Minister for Redfern-Waterloo Frank Sartor to declare any property within the authority's area as State Significant—a status that effectively exempts these sites from ordinary heritage laws. On the Tour of Beauty we drive past a few of the smaller State Significant sites: the pink-roofed Redfern Public School, purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation in 2005, and the Rachel Forster hospital. At the outset, State Significant declarations applied to the Australian Technology Park, the Eveleigh railway workshop site, the public housing estates and the Block.

Sartor, who is also the Minister for Planning, is the chief consent officer for all private development in the authority's area and has the power to acquire land compulsorily, without room for objection. Documents leaked to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in November 2004 outlined the planned privatisation of up to \$540 million worth of public assets over ten years in order to facilitate the CBD's expansion and double the area's residential population. They detailed extensive redevelopment of the Department of Housing's 23.4 hectare Redfern-Waterloo estate as part of a deliberate plan to change the social mix of an area in which many of the current residents are poor, old and on a disability support pension. The RWA has assumed responsibility for human services, infrastructure and employment policies in the area under its authority. It is not simply a new government department either: designed to run as a business, the RWA needs to make a profit on development in order to generate a budget for public spending.

So far, the RWA has released three plans for public comment that detail proposed social policies and redevelopments. The latest of these, the Built Environment Plan Stage One (BEP), was released in February 2006 and includes plans for six 18-storey office blocks in a 'revitalised' commercial centre around Redfern station.

In response to the RWA's creation, local residents Lyn and Geoff Turnbull formed a community group called REDWatch, a kind of RWA watchdog that spans Redfern, Eveleigh, Darlington and Waterloo and focuses on issues of transparency and community consultation.

Our hired mini-bus heads down Cleveland Street to Redfern. We park in Edward Street and spill out onto the footpath. We walk to the corner and stop in front of our first site of Local Significance: a blank wall.

Edward Street, Darlington, is lined with renovated terraces. The building on the corner is the Settlement, Sydney's oldest community centre. Lyn Turnbull tells us that a jumble of Aboriginal artists' tags, paintings and graffiti once covered the front of the Settlement, including something by Tracey Moffatt, until the new residents of Edward Street had it painted over.

Inside the Settlement, we spread out over the squeaking floorboards, checking out the hall, which is covered in murals, sappy poems, a giant turtle, lots of little handprints. 'The kids own this space,' says Lyn. She then tries to explain to us the complex politics of the Settlement's committee of management, in which power is split between old and new residents. Many of the newcomers, according to Lyn, don't like the rowdiness that reigns on the corner—noisy Aboriginal people acting as if they own the place. An antagonistic committee sold the Settlement for a meagre amount, but power shifted again and a subsequent committee reversed the decision. Lyn hopes the sale will not proceed.

OUT the back of the Settlement in the scrappy yard Lyn says, 'Now TJ was no angel, but ...' Later, we will stop at the fence where T.J. Hickey was impaled. The fence reads, 'Fly Angel Boy.'

When the RWA was created, journalists routinely invoked TJ's awful death in February 2004 and the subsequent riot at the Block and Redfern station. The issues were clearly linked: the events of late summer provided the impetus for an inquiry that year, which in turn allowed for a broad-ranging proposal to fix the 'problem' that is Redfern.

Conflict between Sartor and the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC), which owns the Block, seemed inevitable. The AHC has unveiled its solution to two decades of devastating smack saturation in Redfern—the award-winning Pemulwuy Project. The Pemulwuy Project, AHC chief executive Mick Mundine argues, is a social plan designed to foster community safety and Aboriginal education and employment opportunities. The sticking point is that the AHC wants to replace 62 of the 102 homes it demolished when it rooted out the dealers, and at this stage doesn't have the money to do so. (Nineteen houses remain on the Block.) Sartor is adamantly opposed to rebuilding—he calls it high-dependency housing and insists that this repeats the mistakes of the past. The BEP rezones the Block from residential mixed-use to commercial mixed-use; provides for 2000 more residences, allowing only thirty on AHC land; voids the

Block's heritage status; and raises building heights to up to five storeys.

Koori people settled the working-class suburb of Redfern, Gadigal country, during the Depression. They moved to the inner city to work as fettlers at the Eveleigh rail yards. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was another wave of migration as Aboriginal people left reserves in rural New South Wales and headed to Sydney—and Redfern. Local Catholic pastor Ted Kennedy opened his doors to them. Community and political initiatives flourished. The Block was purchased in 1973 with a grant from the Whitlam government.

The Block is now prime real estate, adjacent to Redfern station, which the state government is impatient to redevelop in order to divert train traffic from Central. It needs to do so using the controversial private–public partnership model, and needs to attract an investor. This is difficult. It's never said outright but every RWA statement implies that major developers won't build where Aboriginal people hang out.

In October 2005, Mundine summarised his relationship with Sartor:

Mr Sartor and I are in a bitter dispute over his attempt to grab control of privately owned Aboriginal land, so he can carry out his plan to profiteer on the sale of our local public assets and gentrify Redfern.

If Sartor has his way, added Mundine, 'it won't be long before we lose everything we love about Redfern-Waterloo'. Following the release of the BEP, Mundine was quoted in the *Herald* as saying: 'The ... zoning changes dash any hopes of affordable home ownership for Aboriginal families on The Block.' In a later statement he remained defiant: 'The AHC will never replace the Pemulwuy Project with Sartor's ill-considered alternative.'

WE walk from the Settlement down to the Block. It's a hot afternoon. We are conspicuous as a group, walking around the sunny streets. A few grinning blokes call out to us from a roof where they're working, 'Are you on a pub crawl?' At the Block we meet Richard Green, who launches into a rave. A Darug descendant of Sydney, Richard is a linguist who speaks indigenous languages from across the entire country, as well as a few others. Today, he feels like speaking Arabic with someone, but we're a pretty white crowd, and predictably polite. He quickly gets over his disappointment, and talks about the Pemulwuy Project and the impasse with Sartor. He concludes with a story about greed, which I have also heard from Nunga woman Irene Watson. She tells the story as follows:

In the beginning there lived a giant frog, who drank up all the water until there was no water left in the creeks, lagoons, rivers, lakes and even the oceans. All the animals

became thirsty and came together to find a solution that would satisfy their growing thirst. The animals decided the way to do this was to get the frog to release the water back to the land, and that the 'proper' way to do this was to make the frog laugh. After much performing one of the animals found a way to humour the frog, until it released a great peal of laughter. When the frog laughed it released all the water, it came gushing back to the land filling creeks, riverbeds, lakes and even the oceans. As the community of animals once again turned their gaze to the frog they realised they had to make the large frog transform into a smaller one, so that it could no longer dominate the community. They decided to reduce the one large frog to many much smaller frogs, so that the frog would be brought to share equally with all other living beings.

FROM the bus window, we take in most of the State Significant areas. Lyn Turnbull talks non-stop into the microphone, overwhelming us with anecdotes and facts. Every site, every street reminds her of something else to say. We pass Ted Kennedy's old church, which is written on with chalk: 'Crucified on every city sidewalk, the aboriginal Christ should be free in his own church, among his own people in Redfern.'

It's late afternoon by the time we pull up in Waterloo. The long, long shadows of the public housing towers fall across the grass. Two elderly Russian women with scarves tied under their chins sit on seats nearby, chatting. We sit in a semi-circle on the green.

Ray Jackson of the Indigenous Social Justice Association goes over the events of Valentine's Day 2004 when 17-year-old T.J. Hickey cut behind the Turunga block of the towers on his bike, came over the handlebars and was impaled on a metal picket fence. Ray, the Hickey family and the community maintain that police were in pursuit of TJ that morning.

The NSW State Coroner's Report into Deaths in Custody and Police Operations 2004 set out to establish whether or not Hickey was being pursued by two police vans. The police maintain that while they saw Hickey on his bike, he was not a 'person of interest' to them that morning. The police officer at the centre of the allegations, Senior Constable Hollingsworth, was excused from giving evidence to the coroner. All officers involved sat down together to produce a written account of events after Hickey had been taken to the Sydney Children's Hospital by ambulance in the morning. He died late that night.

While seemingly unimpressed with the 'defensive' testimonies of key police witnesses, the coroner consistently accepted the police's version of events, and regarded conflicting accounts as unreliable. He was satisfied that it was a 'freak

accident'. Ray Jackson is far from satisfied. The community maintains that the bike the police submitted as evidence was not the bike TJ was riding that morning. They also have unanswered questions about the procedure after police found TJ, impaled. Why did officers call first for police 'back-up' rather than medical help? Why did officers fail to follow normal procedure in impaling incidents: leaving the victim to be cut off under medical supervision?

We sit there on the ground, listening to all this quietly. Looking up I can see different-coloured curtains in the hundreds of tower windows. I can hear the Babushkas chatting, whirring pigeons, the whoosh of traffic.

Ray has his back to the fence and we sit facing it. The fence is made of a wall of bricks and atop that, metal palings. 'RIP Bruz.' Scraps of black material are tied to the palings. 'RIP TJ.' Faded plastic tulips are jammed into the cracks between bricks.

'Fly Angel Boy.'

WE walk across the lawn to Ross Smith. When he asks me why I'm here, I mumble something about wanting to discover the particular meanings places hold for people who live there. He nods, and asks someone else.

I haven't been in Sydney very long. When friends from Melbourne ask me how it's going, I say, 'It's interesting.' It's the extremes that interest me: extremes of pretension, of wealth on display, of self-expression; and extremes of marginalisation, disadvantage, violence and racism. I'm increasingly interested in the particular kind of bureaucracy-administered violence and dispossession that redevelopment here involves. And I am interested, as I have been everywhere, in the intricacies of everyday life and the rich, particular meanings of place—historic, social, personal.

Ross says that whatever else you want to say about the public housing estate, 'people say hello to each other here'. He talks of a proposed shift towards shorter leases and a change in eligibility criteria, which would see the estate transformed from a close albeit poor community into mere crisis accommodation. Initially, Sartor planned to demolish the high-rises, then changed his mind. Their future will be determined in the second stage of the Built Environment Plan. There's speculation that the open space around them will go.

Ross invites us to take a look at the community gardens. While most people grow vegies, someone has planted their patch with irises.

In fading light, we stand beside a fountain in the deserted quadrangle of a swanky apartment complex called Crystal Waters. We're not sure what suburb we're in. Pockets of this area are sometimes called Redfern East or Moore Park in order to

distinguish them from Redfern proper. Someone has glad-wrapped a notice to a pole, which I think is innovative: this notice won't fade. It's a list of things for sale:

- Ikea leather sofa
- Ikea bed and mattress
- Ikea shelving unit
- Ikea computer desk
- Ikea coffee table
- Ikea knives (set of 4).

We attract the attention of two security guards who, suspicious, do a loop to check us out.

Afterwards we speak with Stella Downer, who owns a gallery on Danks Street, a precinct our tour guides describe as a 'little piece of Paddington in Waterloo'. Do we really imagine ourselves—mostly white, mostly middle class, mostly artists—as outside the gentrifying process?

I'VE started to ride my bike *slowly* through Redfern—for research. I rode past Lyn Turnbull. She was sitting on a chair pulled into the middle of the footpath on Abercrombie Street outside the Aboriginal Legal Service. She was laughing and talking through the open door to someone inside.

I've done some walking, too, and I notice more on foot. Down by the Technology Park someone has got to the concrete before it's dried. In it they've etched half a flag. A hastily drawn line runs through the circle of the sun. The words BLACK POWER have been smeared over, but they're set into the path.

Nearby there's a small shopfront, with a display board that announces: '\$5 billion plan to redevelop Redfern! \$27 million to redevelop Eveleigh Street precinct! [The Block.] Be a part of the Redfern Renaissance!'

There lived a giant frog, who drank up all the water until there was no water left in the creeks, lagoons, rivers, lakes and even the oceans.

NOTES

For more information on SquatSpace, see <www.squatspace.com>.

Thanks to Lucas Ihlein, and to Irene Watson for permission to quote the frog story from her 'Buried Alive', *Law and Critique*, no. 3, 2002, p. 253.