ETC

Platform: Refractions of a Non-Place or Learning not to Ride on Time

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INTERVIEW

MELBOURNE

PLATFORM : REFRACTIONS OF A NON-PLACE OR LEARNING NOT TO RIDE ON TIME

Along with Richard Holt Andrew runs the Melbourne based curating body and space – *Platform. Platform* consists of two locations in pedestrian underpasses at train stations in Melbourne at Spencer Street and in the Campbell Arcade beneath Flinders Street. It is the longest-running of the crop of artist-run spaces that have emerged in the 90's which also offers an interesting alternative to traditional forms of public art and as such has garnered a respected reputation for presenting site-specific projects.

The following questions attempt to ascertain where *Platform* place themselves in the art arena of Melbourne, how they situate themselves politically and what social dynamics exist is running a public art venue in Melbourne, Australia.

This text is an e-mail interview/conversation between DX Raiden and Andrew Seward.

DX Raiden : *When you began exhibiting artists work through* Platform *where did you aesthetically and socio-politically situate yourselves in regard to the artist run and commercially run white cubed spaces ? Directly following from this question: has this position changed ten years down the line and if so, how and why ?*

Andrew Seward : Richard Holt and I began exhibiting work at *Platform* at Spencer Street Station, Melbourne in 1990. At the time we were both doing a part-time painting course at RMIT. In those days, painting was still quite revered aesthetically and probably for that reason, as most students do, we reacted against painting by making installations. As you know in an installation the *context* is often what's being addressed in some way whether it's a context of space, time, politics, place, the gallery or whatever. We were interested in the shifts that would occur to the meaning of an artwork if it was placed outside it's normal (i.e. the gallery) viewing context. This is by now a pretty common strategy to address issues of value, etc., in art, but at the time it was a very exciting possibility for us because in addition to looking at issues of I suppose what you would call *semiotics* in art, we were also addressing issues of audience and public art which up to that point for us meant either nineteenth century equestrian monuments or varieties of modernist sculpture.

The idea of a program of exhibitions, in other words running *Platform* as an artists-run space came a little later : at first it was just R. Holt and myself renting these cases and sharing them with our friends. The difference between then and now I think is mainly that *installation art* of one sort or another has become very much *de rigueur* in contemporary art, so we're finding that *Platform* is an important vehicle for artists to work through a broad range of ideas this mode allows. Some days I think I've seen about all that can be done with these cabinets; other days I am amazed and inspired that so many variations on the same themes can continue to be played.

DX : *Art in galleries is less prone to censorship than in public spaces, often because of the simple fact that an audience chooses to cross a contingent threshold when they walk into a gallery. Public art spaces are liable to many more civil pressures, which posits spaces such as* Platform *amongst a mesh of public, corporate, aesthetic and ideological pressure points. Having to answer to a wider range of interests than a gallery makes you more accountable in some respects and yet you are situated on a periphery of art practices by not being a white cube. Do you find that as a public art space,* Platform *has to be aware and cautious about what it exhibits ?*

A. S. : Yes, *Platform* does have to be aware and cautious about what it exhibits. The reason for this is that there are four main groups of *stakeholders* in the spaces we operate apart from ourselves and the artists. They are the public who use the spaces as a transport link, the City of Melbourne who own the spaces and grant us money to run the program, the railway station staff and local traders.

We are very careful to keep all of these stakeholders informed of our activities. This is important for the smooth running of the project and is also a common courtesy. Richard and I, as the coordinators, are *accountable* in aesthetic terms for what we exhibit and a lot of our decisions are based on common sense. We have never felt the need to adopt *camouflaging strategies* because we have a proven policy that if an artwork mounts a clear and sensible argument in a skilful way then it is generally defensible even if certain people find it objectionable.

The important thing with managing work that is potentially controversial or otherwise *difficult* in any artistic context is that all the stakeholders are brought into the loop of information sharing. Sometimes, work has to be modified before it is exhibited but I can honestly say changes of this sort have improved the

Sarah Drechsler, Samantha Menzies. Platform 2. 1999.
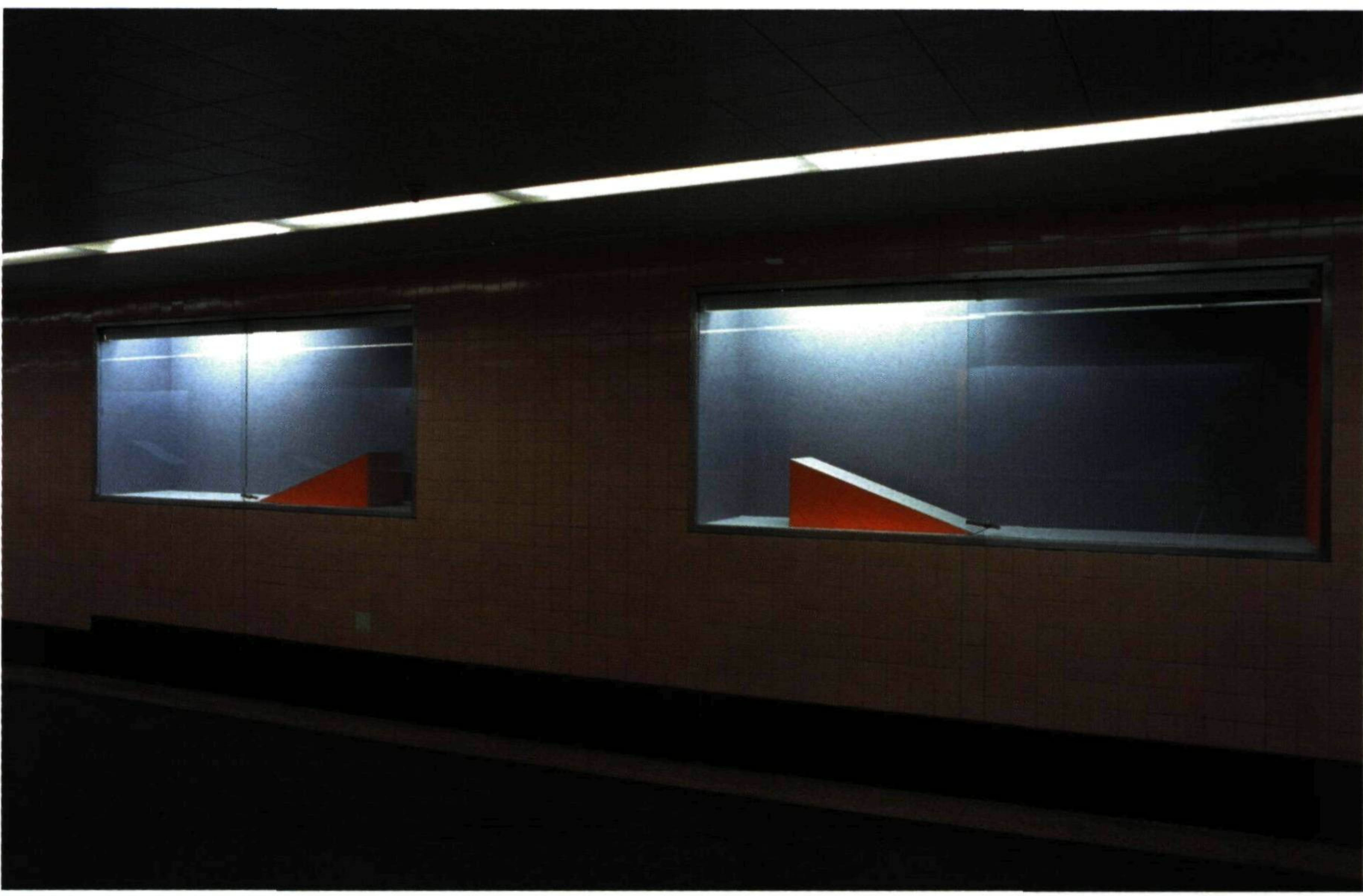
Andrew Seward, On the verge. Platform. 1999.

Richard Holt, Andrew Seward, Address. Platform. 1996.

work and the artists in general have made richer work for the effort of understanding processes beyond that of normal studio based work.

Christo used to say that the process of negotiating his projects through interminable bureaucratic structures constituted the *Art* of his work. As art I don't find this type of administrative work particularly interesting but I think it is very important that artists *own* the consequences of their aesthetic actions.

Some artists don't believe that creative action in the world needs justification. These people need either to spend a few more years at art school or shouldn't have started there at all.

DX : *The majority of public art has traditionally been conservative theoretically speaking. Obviously, there are a number of exceptions such as Wodiczko's projections, Christo's wrappings and Daniel Buren's work for instance, all of which envelop social and political critique, some more subtly than others.*

Have Platform *ever found it necessary to harbour camouflaging strategies for promoting problematic public art, and if so can you tell us what they have been ?*

A. S. : Now, as to the idea that public art has *traditionally been conservative theoretically speaking*, I would say that this depends a little on your point of view these days. A few years ago writers on public art began to invent pejorative expressions for the varieties of art we commonly identify as *public*. Phrases like *plonk art, the turd in the plaza* or *the hero on the horse* for example. At the same time, we began to hear about so-called *new genre* public art which in contrast to *plonk art* was process based, ephemeral, *theoretical* and sort of communist. Richard and I took a lot of inspiration from the descriptions of this type of art provided by writers like Suzanne Lacy at the beginning of the 90's. However, they are also ideas that in general have more of a pertinence to the place they originate from, i.e. North America and parts of Europe rather than Australia. Our enthusiasm for *new-genre* public art has continued to wane as these ideas become more received rather than radical. In this country we have again *caught up* too late with the Northern Hemisphere and students here can now enrol in university courses about art and public space. New ideas often tend to be overstated; but what this means for *traditional* public art is that it can actually be enjoyed by viewing it through different screens rather than desperately trying to come up with an oppositional alternative to it. (The idea of *alternative* is in any case an enabling artistic myth that sustains many practices well and truly beyond their use-by date.)

DX : *Areas of the World Wide Web have established themselves as public spaces that have been culturally ratified by the presence and actions of said public in those digital landscapes. Overtly political projects such as Retmark's digital guerilla games with corporations, Electronic Disturbance Theatre's FloodNet tactics and Mongrel's mischief dealing with xenophobia and class issues are amongst the most effective projects which have gained strong public support and critical attention via the web. Given that the legal policy surrounding web work is still nebulous (and detourable given the effective use of tools such as remote servers) in many areas of information production and dissemination, it means digital tracts which Henri Lefebvre might have called* liminal spaces *are produced. Rendered through a sociological lens, the notion of the* liminal space *reads as an area where the norms of cultural contract are fractured which in return gives rise to previously uncoded forms of deviant behaviour. (Here also look at the writings of authors such as Hakim Bey, Saskia Sassen and Teyssot's architectural rewiring of Foucauldian ideas on social power relations.) Do you think such fertile and functionally dissonant spaces exist in the concrete landscape ? If so, where, and do you have any ideas as to how these ideologically similar landscapes in concrete and digital realms contest, compromise, and construct each other ?*

A. S. : I am afraid that I can't comment specifically on the projects you mentioned about the WWW. However, I understand the question about whether *functionally dissonant* spaces exist in the concrete landscape. When we talk of the *public sphere* we tend to mean the activities of people either in physical motion in the built environment or, as has been proposed more recently, through networks of media and information

technology. (You noted this in your recognition in the question that the WWW is a type of public space.) However, living in an urban environment, we sometimes forget that the sphere of human activity is actually encompassed by processes of a more significant nature. I would like to propose to you an idea of the *public sphere* that includes the many realms of non-human life that we actually depend upon if not for inspiration then certainly for survival. Because most of us choose to ignore our place in a larger network of existence you could say that the weeds that grow in the cracks in the concrete or the falcons that live at the top of city buildings or the wild foxes in the parks represent perpetual *forms of deviant behaviour* because they are a reminder of the orders of experience beyond anyone's control – anywhere.

DX : *The anthropologist Marc Augé counted the railway station as being a prime example of a non-place – " If place can be defined as rational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational or historical or concerned with identity will be a non-place... The airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilise extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself. "*

Thus non-places become a set of spaces which can be seen to have loosened themselves from the foundations of Baudelairean modernism and re-encrypted the city under the cloak of super-modernism. Augé goes onto claim that advertising signs and display units within transit vectors (such as airport lounges and railway stations) are the windows through which spatial identity is refracted and ultimately replaced. Double exposure desire positioning images (the adverts) in a feedback loop. In this way the viewer psychologically invests more heavily within the dynamic of the inverted advert when in a non-place, a space which has to relinquish personal ties with the individual to consequently serve the mass public.

Given that Platform *exhibit through eighteen advertising cabinets in a railway station underpass, where do you situate* Platform *in the notion of non-place ?*

A. S. : I think that the main thing that Marc Augé offers is an informed and meaningful account of contemporary varieties of space. Many good-willed people have a particular horror of space because it is understood to be *empty* or *meaningless*. *Place* is often understood to be the opposite of *space*. *Place*, it is said, is where relationships between people form and things happen. *Community Art*, a persistent variety of public art, makes a dialectic of *place* and *space* to justify some of the ugliest forms of human visual expression. This sort of art (as with *plonk art*) is, nonetheless, quite interesting for what it says about the fears of some people that *civic* life and *values* as we know them are slipping away.

There is always an element of abstraction, representational convention or a set of shared assumptions in visual art whether it's figurative or not. This is one of the main things that art offers us today : a way of thinking through the proliferation of images that surround us in daily life. This is something that artists like to talk about because including art in a conversation about all types of images helps to reinvigorate the dialogue about art. However, I think that most people do, in fact, understand the process of looking at images, advertising or otherwise, in a non-place even though they may not be interested in articulating what they know. People understand because we learn to look through the act of looking itself and it's actually enjoyable to do. You can't be duped in this environment because if you don't understand what you're looking at, which includes where you're looking at it, then you just don't understand. In this sense *Platform* is simply a mechanism to play and have fun with the ways most people come to develop their responses and movements through particular types of urban space at the end of the twentieth century.

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