Placemarking
something happened here

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1.
Many private, state and city authorities have invested in public art
projects for decades with primarily permanent design and art works
dotted throughout new developments and city streets. As one
colleague recently said during her visit to Brisbane, observing the
polished, etched and cast forms embedded in the urban mesh, 'all
the public art here is so shiny and new'. While this is one person's
observation during a brief stay, perhaps it indicates that some urban
environments have reached a kind of *tipping point* where permanent
and outdoor public artwork is concerned. Its prevalence and
proliferation is noteworthy as a sequence of sites and works that
might threaten to become, as Miwon Kwon warns, 'genericized into
an undifferentiated serialization, one place after another'[1].

In Brisbane, the metropolitan environment I am most familiar with
as a 'soft city'[2], there are few text-based works in the designated
sites, public works and percentages for public art. It caused me to

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[1] Miwon Kwon, One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity. Zoya Kocur and
Simon Leung, *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*. Oxford:Blackwell. 2005. 49
[2] Jonathon Raban describes the soft city as "...the city goes soft; it awaits the imprint of
an identity. For better or worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a
shape you can live in. You, too. Decide who you are, and the city will again assume a
fixed form around you. Decide what it is, and your own identity will be revealed, like
a position on a map fixed by triangulation." Jonathon Raban, Soft City.
London:Hamilton, 1974.

look further a field for text-based public artworks, to probe the spaces for other kinds of public art engagements with word in the city. I am aware that this distinction between text- and image- based public artwork is problematic because, as I argue, there is a need to recast the image/word distinction and to explore materiality and representation in many ways. This is what artists are endeavouring to do in their experiments with word and image. They describe their works as 'artpoems', 'ground writing' and other terms alluding to hybridity and fragmentation within the field of vision: word, object and image; seeing, touching and reading; real, virtual and haptic spaces. To put it another way, I may see some words but I might not read them – they may not be immediate, legible or apparent. However, they are, as WJT Mitchell asserts "seeable, sayable, palpable"[3] and a kind of 'worded' practice of placemarking.

In looking, feeling and seeing, my filters (or antennae) are alert and I can determine that I see words or writing. I might even derive some pleasure in looking at the image of the word and how it inhabits or integrates with the space. In my passage through urban space I may be aware that there is 'some writing etched into the stonework on the ground' or that 'there is a series of words – I may not make them out as a phrase but know them to be words – painted large, in red, on a concrete wall'. It's the colour that stays with me – bright red against the bare concrete. Red, I think mirthfully, a red-letter day! Or, having kicked off my shoes in a busy city square, it's the feel of the stone and hollowed letterforms or wordforms under my bare feet or the way water pools in the recesses after rain. I may not know what these texts literally *say*, though I may have caught a word or two. To see, to feel and to read are heterogenous acts of comprehension or interpretation, not necessarily antagonistic. These works, like other texts in the city, have a visual and material presence - the spectator is

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[3] WJT Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago. 1994. 244

able to make them out as words even if they do not read or decipher those words; the reading response is subconscious, tacit and second nature.

2.

Text-based works are notable in a 'generic field' of public art, indicating, perhaps, some curatorial and project management biases in public art projects. For the most part, as Paul Carter notes of commissioning, "[it] identifies the public work of art with image-making".[4] Perhaps text artists, poets and writers are not tendering for this type of commission despite stated attempts to encourage diverse media and aesthetic experiences in public art programs. Why? Writers and text artists aren't scarce, but writing as artwork is lacking from our urban spaces. Perhaps it is a remedial strategy to mitigate the proliferation of words that coerce, label or instruct.[5] However, not all writing is signage. Or perhaps it is cautionary so as to avoid the appearance of encouraging graffiti or other subversions. Perhaps in the realm of 'visual thinking' or 'design thinking' – urban design, architecture and art - text has a persistent status wrought from that intractable history of the 'printed page'. N. Katherine Hayles contends that "literary critics have been content to see literature as immaterial verbal constructions" with only marginal interest in the literary artefacts[6]. Many experiments and inquiries by artists (in a variety of media, across artforms and for diverse contexts) have sought to 'liberate' the word from the printed page,

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[4] Carter. Op.cit.

[5] While outside of the scope of this essay, there have been many ephemeral works and projections including the *Time of the Signs* series curated for the Livid Festival by artist Craig Walsh as well as other independent artist works in a variety of media including electronic. However, it also should be noted that there have also been few attempts to integrate media-based and locative work in urban or public space developments although there have been some experiments.

[6] N. Katherine Hayles. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 2002. 19

recasting its autonomy as image and object.[7] Mitchell describes these as *imagetexts*[8] and as indicative of the 'pictorial turn', which is:

> a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies and figurality. It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (deciphering, decoding, interpretation, etc) and that visual experience or "visual literacy" might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality.[9]

This, as WJT Mitchell explains further, "has implications for the fate of reading, literature and literacy" and means we are "working through contradiction interminably",[10] ever mindful of representation and its technologies. In Walter Benjamin's ideas about language, a distinction is made between the expression *through* language and expression *within* language – or instrumental and poetic uses of language. In communicating in language, as Kathrin Busch explains, "a very particular type of meaning emerges in the expression or in the manner of speaking and this meaning in no way has to match the content of what is being said."[11] For Benjamin, as Busch outlines, "the form of speech can produce a completely different, independent and above all latent meaning … and it is in

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[7] For examples see Simon Morley, *Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art*. London: Thames and Hudson. 2003

[8] Mitchell defines imagetext as "composite synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text." Op.cit. 89n

[9] WJT Michell. Op.cit. 16

[10] ibid. 418

[11] Kathrin Busch, 'The Language of Things and the Magic of Language:On Walter Benjamin's Concept of Latent Potency'. Translated by Mary O'Neill. *Translate*. http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/0107/busch/en. Accessed 5 February 2007

poetry that this becomes particularly clear".[12] As observable in the works of Tipping, Moody and Carter, there is ultimately something untranslatable and indeterminable in poetic speech as "something else beyond the named content is given expression, something akin to a mood or an atmosphere that is neither semantic nor communicable at the level of word meanings, something that cannot be wholly translated into a meaning."[13] Benjamin writes about the 'language of things'. It is precisely because these 'things' (art objects) are worded that we can find ourselves surprised: "the language of things refers to the manner in which we are addressed by an object. This appeal or claim on our attention itself defines the act of speaking."[14]

Words, it is said, materialise thought, and writing, in turn, materialises speech. But words are also the material of writing. Writing, like most inscription, can also be contingent on its media or material. As William J. Mitchell proposes "literacy did motivate the development and proliferation of products – such as rectangular sheets or papers, scrolls, books, and billboards – that serve the primary purpose of efficiently and fairly neutrally carrying text".[15] In terms of mediation, a gallery, a book and a website prepares us for what it does or is as a technology, but urban space is less defined or contained in its mediation. According to William J. Mitchell, "the vast web of intertextual relationship that we continually navigate in our intellectual and cultural lives is inextricably interwoven with the physical objects and spatial relationships that constitute the city. Acts of use and textual production and consumption cannot be separated neatly into functionally distinct categories, but should be understood as parts of the same system of meaning."[16] A city is a physical entity

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[12] ibid
[13] ibid
[14] ibid
[15] William J. Mitchell. Op.cit. 10
[16] ibid. 11

that mediates and public artworks become embedded or mediated therein as part of the fabric of the city.

There are many prominent text-based works in Australian cities and this essay looks at three – Richard Tipping's *Watermark*, Sebastian Moody's *Built Under The Sun* and Paul Carter's *Nearamnew*. Each arise from artistic investigations of site, not as a mapping of it but as a physical *marking* of it that materialises some aspect of the site's history, archaeology or other significance through representation. This marking takes varying forms – sculpture, painting and etching.

3.

Watermark is located at the Brisbane Powerhouse, next to the Brisbane River (image 1). Set in a bold three-dimensional italic sans serif font, half of the word 'flood' stands upright *in* the ground. It looks like it is partially submerged in the surrounding concrete, as if the path has risen like floodwater and the visible portion is the mere 'tip of an iceberg'. In a way it has, like a rising tide of concrete and riverside development. The meandering river twists and turns, the city taking shape around the haphazard bends and land forms. *Watermark* is set against the backdrop of the river's usually slow waters and makes reference to the devastating flooding of the Brisbane River, flooding that was exacerbated by the land filling of former swamps and natural drainage systems along the river's banks in the earlier days of white settlement. In the 19th and 20th century, the city experienced major flooding several times, notably in 1893 and 1974. In his artist statement, Tipping comments on anxieties about future flooding. In these times of 'extreme weather events', whether drought or flood, the anxieties are possibly well founded.

Perhaps it is the fire-truck red that sounds a warning. Or is it a directive? Perhaps that warning is, given the relationship between flooding and development in Brisbane (now ameliorated through

various mitigation measures), that without environmental care, there could be dire results. According to JL Austin language is not only used to state facts, but also to perform actions: words can be enunciative or performative. He identifies 'performatives' whereby "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of the action – it is not normally thought of as just saying something".[17] The word flood is both a noun and a verb. If I emphatically cry out the word 'flood!' am I beseeching or ordering? Or am I sounding a warning? Flood in this context is descriptive or interrogative rather than imperative or demanding.[18] Part of that interrogation is in the titling of the work, *Watermark*, which, as the artist states, "means both a mark showing the height to which water has risen, and a design impressed into paper which is visible when held to the light, guaranteeing authenticity." Here Tipping has, through wordplay, brought the word *back* into 'touch' with paper. By unravelling and multiplying the words, we are able to make (*poiesis*) a virtual matrix of meaning and association.

The text stands out from the watery background as if overlaid, "erasing the difference between image and text".[19] While printed words are flattened or pressed onto the page, this word is 'freestanding', as if jutting out of the concrete. Manufactured from sheet steel, the material references the industrial history of the site as a former power station in the early 20th century. There is often a veneer of children playing on the letterforms, which must present just the right scale and challenges for climbing and leaping. Thus for all the weight and solidity of this work and the issues it evokes, Tipping has imbued liquidity and lightness through exchanges. There is fluidity in meaning and levity in wordplay. There is a carefree undoing of the imposing threat of flood (or environmental

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[17] J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, J.O. Urmson, ed. New York: Oxford University Press. 1962. 6-7

[18] WJT Mitchell describes Robert Morris' Slab in this way. Op.cit. 259

[19] WJT Mitchell. Op.cit. 244

disaster) in the way that children climb across the curves and planes of the sculpture, scaling the lofty heights of 'd' or sliding over the arc of 'o'.

Richard Tipping. *Watermark*. 2000. 12 m length 1.40 m high and 1.20 m. Photo: JM John Armstrong

Built Under The Sun is painted on the concrete embankment of the train line behind the Brisbane Convention Centre, running along the border of South Bank Parklands (image 2) and hovers over a vacant block. The work was commissioned for a 2003 ephemeral public art project, *Art Built-in South Bank*. It is described in various reviews as a poem and, at five syllables, it's potentially the first line of a haiku spread across the city. Having completed a number of smaller anonymous text projects on public walls, *Built UnderThe Sun* was one of Moody's earlier commissions. His previous smaller scale works were distinctly rough and awkward in appearance, obviously hand painted. For this project, the artist was provided with a budget and

employed professional sign writers. As Chris Handran writes, "this gave the work not only billboard scale, but also a commercial finish".[20] In design and advertising arenas signage of this scale is referred to as 'supergraphics', an additional layer of image and word across the built environment, overwhelming buildings and spaces with their sheer presence. As Kwon proposes:

> The appropriation of site-specific art for the valorization of urban identities comes at a time of a fundamental cultural shift in which architecture and urban planning, formerly the primary media for expressing a vision of the city, are displaced by other media more intimate with marketing and advertising.[21]

In this context, the words are charged with a *graphic* (imaged) sensibility that weaves into the three dimensional and architectural space: It fills the space.

In my mental mapping of Brisbane, I unconsciously equate the text with the slogan of a prominent demolition company whose advertising proclaimed, "all we leave behind are memories". This is troubling because, despite the allusion to aphorism and ahistoricity, Moody's work makes no claims – it leaves nothing, it takes nothing, it erases nothing - and retains passive expectancy due to its ambiguity. The blankness of the statement and the concrete wall cause me to subjectively examine the broader environment, to pivot and consider the city that surrounds, envelops me. It's in this uncertainty and open-endedness that freedom and exchange flows. Sally Brand stresses "what is important … when encountering Moody's work among the city's landscape of advertising slogans, is

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[20] Chris Handran. 'Art Built-In South Bank'. *Artlink*. Vol 23 No 1.
http://www.artlink.com.au/articles.cfm?id=2445 Accessed 3 December 2007
[21] Kwon. Op.cit. 46

the priceless freedom of choice that they wish to provide … [I]n his practice Moody seems to continually seek to conserve the reader's free will in this increasingly authoritarian society."[22] We are free to make our own meanings with this material, perhaps radically so.

Art Built-in South Bank was an ephemeral public art project. All the works were removed after two months – all except Moody's. Despite the intent of ephemerality, it has been absorbed into the material and flows of the city. It remains on the railway wall, overlooking a building site. Yet, this escape from removal is only fleeting and the future is precarious. Vines overgrowing the wall and across the words threaten to overwhelm the work in much the same way the 'supergraphics' have overwhelmed the architecture. In the meantime, the ground below has been fenced off and is being readied for another construction project. While Moody's work may remain in place, it is likely to be hidden from view, lost in the shadow or footprint of a new structure. Like Tipping's *Watermark*, Moody's work is also performative. It's not simply making a statement or naming, there is a performance unfolding ever so slowly. Something of this site is yet to appear and Moody's poem seems to be calling to it.

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[22] Sally Brand, 'Sebastian Moody'. *Real Time* – Scan 2003.
http://www.realtimearts.net/rt57/moody.html Accessed January 3 2007

Sebastian Moody. *Built Under The Sun*. 2003. 3.5 metres high, 27 metres long. Photo: JM John Armstrong

Nearamnew (2003) is a sandblasted groundwork in Federation Square, Melbourne, that Carter describes as 'ground writing'. There has been extensive documentation of this work including an exhibition and a monograph[23]. The artist's own writings about the development of this work and the collaboration with Lab architecture studio make the design and thought processes available. As a critic and scholar, the experience of Carter's practice is one of multiplicity that traverses visual, material and textual thinking in which theory and practice are inflected in critical-practice. At the core of the work are Nine Federal Visions that are etched and in relief across the hill-and-dale topography of the irregularly shaped plaza. The visions arouse many histories - Indigenous, environmental, colonial and post-colonial - associated with the site

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[23] Paul Carter, *Mythform: The Making of Nearamnew at Federation Square*. Melbourne: Miegunyah Press. 2005

"to place in memory many thanks that had been forgotten".[24] It sought to lay the ground or, more appropriately open the ground, for new forms of sociability which might arise from the thought and imagination that wandering (the peripatetic) induces.

The texts, described as 'concrete poems', are formed of 'word shards', fragments that promise no immediate comprehension, unfolding over time and crossing other texts. There are movements within movements in *Nearamnew*. The movements are not hasty but slow. The texts are cut in to, out of a composite of geometries, pathways of unfinished journeys, and shapes that might be fragmenting as we read. A force moves the words and letters as they cross, interlock, stumble over and fall across each other. A single word might stand out from the rest. As spoken word, it could be described as a cacophony, a convergence and collage of many voices.

Nearamnew is placed under our feet at a scale that necessitates making time to stop so as to adopt a posture for reading (sitting, kneeling, crouching, standing). It is embedded in a public square where we can walk and, as Carter describes, perform the work in a mixing of reading and treading. However, also unlike the work of Tipping and Moody, this work is 'missable'. Jennifer Rutherford observes that we can easily walk over it and not notice it - if we continue to walk, we cannot read. She likens this to Poe's purloined letter, which hides by being present to view,[25] perhaps like history itself. While much history is not spoken or acknowledged, this does not make it lost. The scattering of the nine visions causes readers to find their way, adopting postures that aren't natural for public space: kneeling on the ground to make out the fragments or curiously

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[24] ibid. 41

[25] Jennifer Rutherford, 'Writing the Square: Paul Carter's *Nearamnew* and the Art of Federation'. *Portal*. Vol 2 No 2. 2005. 4.
http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal/article/viewArticle/94 Accessed 4 January 2007

'wayfinding' around the visions, an important and vital concept for Carter. We are required to navigate both the public space and the words simultaneously – a path, a labyrinth, a promise.

Carter writes with some reverence for the aesthetic quality of the stone and he writes of its voice and force. Patterns, as Carter says, emanate from the stone itself rather than as print on the page. He addresses the work in a physical language with descriptions such as "in some places the letters are grooved into the stone. The canyons of shadow they form look like a miniature city viewed from the sky."[26] He describes the new forms that are created when letters and lines collide. He further states: "In this, writing was not simply placed in public space (like signage or advertising). Rather, writing was treated as an environmental element, encountered as one might come across a puddle, a discolouration of rock or a field of exposed fossil."[27]

4.

William J. Mitchell describes a third layer (or wave) of public space that remade Australian cities in the second half of the 20th century: the redevelopment of pragmatic and utilitarian infrastructure for the purposes of urbanism - urban amenity, animation, profiteering and renewal. Around the three artworks, the sites have been or are being remade or rendered unrecognisable (from what they were before). This is felt as a loss and necessitates some kind of marking – marking history might be a different action to representing history. The artworks could be considered dis-locative or re-newed as 'minor' places[28] or histories (in the same vein as Deleuze and Guattari's

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[26] Carter. Op.cit. 26
[27] ibid. 35
[28] Miwon Kwon. op.cit. 46 She says 'site specific art can lead to the unearthing of repressed histories, provide support for greater visibility of marginalised groups and issues, and initiate the re(dis)covery of "minor" places so far ignored by the dominant culture'

formulation of 'minor literature'). It seems that *Nearamnew* literally crosses this territory, reterritorialising as it goes.

Carter describes public art conceived as a means to authorise the present as "a kind of historical safety valve. Commemorating all manner of threatened or disappeared heritage it acts as an epitaph, decently burying that heritage in public."[29] Identity or specificity existed prior to the artwork rather than, in part, wrought from the artwork's presence. In the inevitable change that results from urban development projects, public artworks transport, assimilate or reveal some part of the 'before' into the 'after'. One of the objectives of *Nearamnew*, according to Carter, was to contest "the cult of immaculate origins characteristic of most foundational works of public art".[30] This contestation is also evident in Moody's and Tipping's works as placemarks. To inscribe or mark the city with *imagetext* presents both a challenge to, and complicity with, the remaking of the city today within the broader scheme of urbanism, architecture and urban design. As inflected urban space and fabric, these works by Tipping, Moody and Carter transverse image, writing and object and are articulate through the 'language of things'.

In urban design, while sites are assigned (sometimes left over) for remembrance, revelation or reference (in the guise of artworks), there is rarely any place in these developments for relic or ruin. Representation and erasure travel hand-in-hand in some of these undertakings. The trace is not always apparent in rehabilitation. Because of the referentiality and embeddedness of these works to/in their locations or sites, they are place-bound both imaginatively and physically. They mark place through a double helix of revelation and

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[29] Carter, op.cit. 18
[30] ibid. 5

obfuscation, not to apprehend or confuse history. Marking is not literal. It is a mark in passing.