

Rocks on Wheels and Flying Shoes

by Rosemary Forde

Published on 28.03.2023



Mike Hewson, *Rocks on Wheels*, 2022, Bluestone boulders, bouncy bluestone (rubber-flooring), HDPE lid, 316 steel, wheel assembly, various dimensions, Southbank, Naarm (Melbourne). Courtesy of the artist.



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Trained civil engineer and artist Mike Hewson has been playing with public space. In recent years, he has designed multiple playgrounds and spaces that walk the line between sculptural installation and infrastructure. Here, curator Rosemary Forde thinks through the significance of Hewson's multi-year, City Council-backed project in relation to the local Naarm Melbourne environment post-pandemic, alongside historical and recent artworks in and about public space. Forde suggests that risk is a necessary part of civic life, and that one

increasingly supported way to adapt to our risky surroundings is play.

Guest edited by Andrea Bell.

At the Southbank Boulevard Play Space in Naarm Melbourne, artist Mike Hewson and I watch kids and their adults interact with Hewson's latest public artwork. A toddler pulls themselves up onto the first reachable foothold and launches into a free rock-climb up a sizeable bluestone boulder. A bigger kid has taken up position in the middle of the park, taken off their shoe, and is throwing it haphazardly towards rocks, above and below suspended ropes and climbing bars, watching for where it will ricochet, retrieving it, and throwing it again—each time a little harder, a little further. I notice that no one is bothering to reprimand the kid. No one is helicoptering over the toddler either. Hewson feels validated in his decision to position a foothold at tiny toddler height, and comments, “The most dangerous thing here is that kid throwing shoes.”^[01]

The flung shoe might have been a fairly low-key form of anarchy, but it made me think about the way this artwork-playground gives children—people—permission to behave in boundary-pushing ways. *Rocks on Wheels*—Hewson's title for the play space he was commissioned to design and build in Melbourne's Southbank precinct—looks haphazard. Its visual signifiers carry a sense of the temporary, as if it were DIY-built, wheeled in, and left unfinished. With its provisional aesthetic of high-vis mesh, strapping, rope, and furniture-moving dollies, it appears like a makeshift intervention. Or maybe somehow fake. However, like any piece of public infrastructure or civic space, each detail of the playground has been arduously tested, designed and proverbially jumped through hoops to meet Australian safety standards. “No one could fall here and suffer a catastrophic brain injury.” Hewson repeats this reassuring refrain a couple of times during our conversation.

The artist has received a lot of attention recently. His booth with Michael Bugelli Gallery garnered attention at the Aotearoa Art Fair in March, with modestly priced chainsaw-sculpted log crocodiles and modular paintings creating an accessible and fun

point of entry to the art market.^[02] While Hewson has a number of award-winning public art projects under his belt, this was the first time he had shown in the traditional art-world setting of an art fair back home. His journey into art has been somewhat non-traditional, as he originally trained as a civil engineer at the University of Canterbury Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha and jumped back and forth between artist and engineer for several years before committing more fully to the artistic path, completing an MFA at Columbia University, New York, in 2016.^[03]

Since then, Hewson has worked primarily in Australia, delivering five permanent public-art commissions here in as many years, each clearly drawing his experience as an engineer into his art practice. Projects in Eora Sydney, Wollongong and Naarm have all presented visual surprises, creating unexpected and somehow upside-down or wonky apparitions in urban settings: a palm tree suspended high up a streetlight pole, domestic fences and garden walls recreated as if partially subsided, huge rocks seemingly forklifted into a town mall, stacked plastic buckets supporting a water fountain.

The motif of improbable objects appearing in open space is also present in Diane Arbus' photograph *Rocks on wheels, Disneyland, Cal.* (1962).^[04] This funny, mysterious image of (possibly fake) rocks resting on low trolleys resonated strongly with Hewson and he referenced the image in his work at Southbank. In Arbus' black-and-white landscape photograph, we're unsure if the runaway rocks are part of a Disneyland ride, a Hollywood movie set, or have been abandoned in transit. Either way, they are objects that depict a deeply curious relationship between nature and human construction; a juxtaposition that Hewson's work also creatively explores and exploits. Hewson has placed individual rocks on wheels, closely echoing those in the Arbus photograph, further along Southbank Boulevard and surrounding streets, leading people towards the playground where much larger bluestone boulders are set upon small furniture dollies.

A fully fledged playground commissioned by the City of Melbourne, Hewson's *Rocks on Wheels* opened in November 2022. His previous works in the public realm have invited or engaged with play to varying degrees. *Pockets Park* (2022) and *St Peters Fences* (2020), both in inner west Eora, are playgrounds built using materials

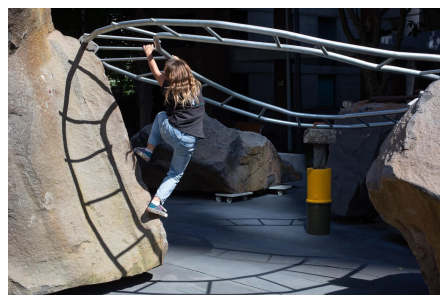
specific to their neighbourhoods; pieces of sandstone and building waste from the Council depot were recycled into the construction of *Pockets Park*, while *St Peters Fences* involved recreating walls based on photographs of previously demolished houses nearby. *Block Stack* (2019) in the outer Naarm suburb of Cranbourne, and *Illawarra Placed Landscape* (2018) in Wollongong, New South Wales, both feature living plants or trees in a wild combination with raw construction materials, such as stacked masonry blocks or large sandstone rock formations.



Mike Hewson, *Illawarra Placed Landscape*, 2018, Palm tree, carved sandstone, structural steel and other materials, various dimensions, Crown Street Mall, Wollongong. Courtesy of the artist.



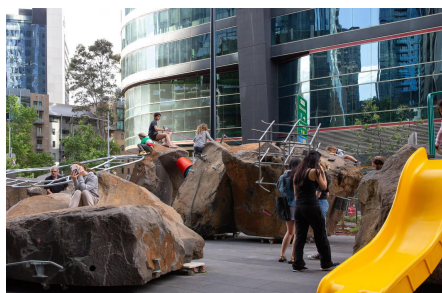
Mike Hewson, *Illawarra Placed Landscape*, 2018, Palm tree, carved sandstone, structural steel and other materials, various dimensions, Crown Street Mall, Wollongong. Courtesy of the artist.



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Engaging play or playfulness in public art and public space has become a serious business of late. Here in Naarm, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) presented an expanded programme across 2021–22 asking *Who's Afraid of Public Space?*^[05] Artist Emily Floyd has a long-standing conceptual practice rooted in the aesthetics of educational space and play. At the University of Sydney, artist Sanné Mestrom leads the Australian Research

Council project Art/Play/Risk, aiming to promote child-friendly cities.^[06] The international journals *Public Art Dialogue* and *The Architectural Review* have each dedicated special issues to the topic of play, and both emphasise play as inherently political, arguing that the act of play can be a transgressive or liberating tool in the public sphere.^[07]

This fresh attention on our public spaces, and ways of sharing urban space, makes a certain amount of sense as cities emerge from pandemic lockdowns, and communities venture outside together again. Many of us have seen our civic centres emptied, we've seen playgrounds abruptly closed; swings tied up and equipment bound with barricade tape. Naarm (in)famously endured a world-record-breaking 262 days in Covid-19 lockdowns. One effect of living through this was to see the familiar city as if for the first time, or with no sense of time; new sight lines opened, and all appeared to be in slow motion.

Artist Callum Morton's *Empty Shops* (2021)—a series of 1400 digital photographs—documents permanently closed shops and restaurants across the city. Initially taken on 5km-radius walks, then extending into further neighbourhoods as restrictions eased, Morton's images archive absence and the ruins of capitalism in crisis.^[08] The architects Simulaa (Andre Bonnice, Anna Jankovic, Bryn Murrell) created a collection of miniature 3D models titled *Design Standards* (2022), as a survey of civic furniture, utilities and monuments found along a stretch of Swanston Street in the Naarm CBD.^[09] This work reveals the overlooked, the bland and the under and over designed, creating a portrait of a somewhat arbitrary hodgepodge of objects in urban space. As with Hewson's works, it pays attention to a very localised vernacular. Both *Design Standards* and *Empty Shops* survey and reflect the details of a city back to us—its voids and its necessities.

But it would be reductive to assume Covid-19 is the only reason for this recent reframing of our relationship to public space. Over the past few years social activism has also ruptured cities and drawn sharp attention to how we choose to configure public space. Grassroots movements to remove monuments and statues of historical figures whose legacies are no longer celebrated have broken out in South Africa, the United States, Great Britain and

elsewhere (including Australia, albeit via less riotous methods).^[10] These movements to reclaim and collectively re-author public space demonstrate an understanding of the power of placemaking stories and community identity which are held by art and urban design.

The politics of public space have been made visible and palpable in these art and protest contexts. Such moments can be seen as case studies supporting theorist Chantal Mouffe's argument that "public space is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted."^[11] This might seem an overly serious discourse when discussing a public art-playground. But play is a means to participation. It creates access points for engaging people in challenging experiences or ideas. And, as artist and academic Cameron Cartiere points out, the "playground is often the first space that a young child might experience outside of the family home."^[12] The crucial question then becomes, how might that formative experience of public space and social interaction unfold?

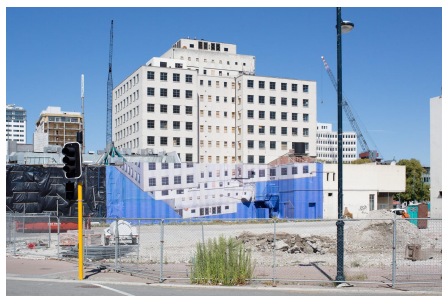
For Hewson, art's current turn to the public sphere and play might be something of a coincidence. His first public works were made a decade ago in the devastated red zones of post-earthquake Ōtautahi Christchurch. Using his engineer credentials to gain access to cordoned-off areas of the city, Hewson installed large-scale digital prints on the exteriors of earthquake-damaged buildings, most of them awaiting demolition. His *Homage to the Lost Spaces* (2012) series aimed to return a sense of community; of the life and vibrancy that was once active within buildings now half exposed and beyond repair. Incidental personal photos taken in interiors became monumental reminders of moments of past lives, so recent but so untraceable.

Hewson's Ōtautahi works were a form of farewell to these buildings, but also encouraged people to see the city from new perspectives, noting that the odd, half-ruined urban scape was "suspending the building(s) in time."^[13] Photographs of the city from this period bear the hallmarks of disaster and construction: cyclone fencing, barrier tape, orange cones, vacant space, rubble, displaced building materials and rocks, scattered bricks, weeds growing in the gaps, sunken walls, folded-over lamp posts, temporary bracing, exposed steel beams. That this description

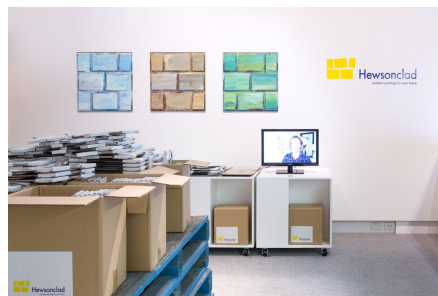
reads almost like a list of materials in a Mike Hewson artwork is perhaps a sign of the lasting impact of the earthquakes on the artist. He acknowledges that “the sense that everything was temporary never really left me.”^[14] The solidity and supposed permanence of the built environment was upturned by the brute force of a natural disaster.



Mike Hewson, *Government Life Suspension*, 2013, digital print shrouding structure slated for demolition, 25m x 8m x 7m, corner Gloucester St and Oxford Terrace, Ōtautahi (Christchurch). Courtesy of the artist.



Mike Hewson, *Government Life Suspension*, 2013, digital print shrouding structure slated for demolition, 25m x 8m x 7m, corner Gloucester St and Oxford Terrace, Ōtautahi (Christchurch). Courtesy of the artist.



Mike Hewson, *Hewsonclad V1.0*, 2018, Pallet of packaged Hewsonclad tiles, sample tile assemblies, marketing video, wall vinyl, various dimensions, The Physics Room and The Ashburton Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artist.



Mike Hewson, *Illawarra Placed Landscape*, 2018, Palm tree, carved sandstone, structural steel and other materials, various dimensions, Crown Street Mall, Wollongong. Courtesy of the artist.

Artists responding to places of disaster can be a means of shared processing and opportunities for transformation. American artist Paul Chan’s *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* (2007) brought the Beckett play into relation with the devastated streets and communities of the post-hurricane city. Chan visited New Orleans a year after Hurricane Katrina and recalled that “every street corner I saw looked like the backdrop of every staging of *Godot* I’d ever seen.”^[15] The resulting art project, however, was in part an activist strategy: Chan saw the act of bringing artists and the

people in New Orleans together to produce a play as “an experiment in using art to organise a new image of life in the city.”^[16]

This idea of picturing an alternative future life in cities could also apply to Hewson’s work—the aesthetics of the temporary remain prevalent in his public works. The colour palette of high-vis contrasts with the greys of bricks and boulders, while organic matter pops through in odd places. In works such as *St Peters Fences* and *Block Stack*, everything is placed at the wrong height or on an unruly angle. One of the cabbage palm trees in *Illawarra* is placed close to the ground on a horizontal angle and becomes public seating for visitors to the pedestrian mall; it creates an image that echoes news footage from the aftermath of floods and hurricanes.

Hewson’s dual position as an artist and civil engineer gives him a unique perspective to respond to urban challenges. He’s also not embarrassed to be seen as a playground designer. To the contrary, he wants to bring serious conceptual art into public life, and recognises that people will visit a playground more often than they’ll go out of their way to visit an art installation.^[17] In other attempts to eschew the art world’s systems of circulation, the artist created *Hewsonclad* (2018), a system of modular brick-like paintings designed and packaged with a click-clack system so that customers can purchase as many as they like and make their own arrangements.^[18] Hewson initially pitched this product to Bunnings, in three colour options and a low price-point, hoping to infiltrate the DIY home décor market. Bunnings didn’t go for it, but it’s a brilliant idea, designed to skip the art market and put art directly in front of people.

Similarly, when conceiving of the Southbank Play Space, Hewson negotiated with the Naarm Council Department of City Design, not the lesser-funded arts and culture team. His ideas were championed by then Director of City Design Rob Adams, the long-serving city architect commonly credited with Naarm’s frequent “most liveable city” accolades.^[19] Hewson was employed by the City of Melbourne as a contractor, developing and then building *Rocks on Wheels* for almost five years, a model that served the artist better than most public art commissions would.



Mike Hewson, *Rocks on Wheels*, 2022, in progress. Courtesy of the artist.



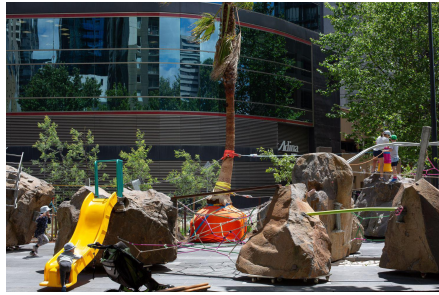
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Many twentieth-century artistic experiments in playground design saw artists make modern and replicable pieces of play furniture, such as Richard Dattner's *PlayCubes*™ from 1969, Jim Miller-Melberg's *Saddle Slide* (c.1960) and play sculptures by the company Creative Playthings. These mid-century innovations sought to “elevate the child” and followed the pleasing formal lines of modern sculpture.^[20] Less aesthetic attention or craft may have been applied to the brightly coloured plastic climbing structures that sprang up in penned corners of 1980s McDonald's restaurants, but it is this style of playground that children have become accustomed to over recent decades. Naarm-based artist David Cross has described the experience of the common contemporary playground as sadly “ubiquitous, site neutral and ambivalent to the creative agency of the participant.”^[21]

In contrast, *Rocks on Wheels* is a one-off site-specific installation, resonant to its location. Like a true artist, Hewson was finishing the work on the day it opened to the public, adding gems and miniature toys to the nooks and crannies of rocks, as unexpected

treasures to reward close attention and exploration. Visiting the playground, I forget I'm a stone's throw from the heavy city arteries of City Road, Kings Way, the M1 and the West Gate Freeway. Landscape planting and the placement of the tall bluestone boulders do a good job of shielding the traffic from view. On one visit, a child is peacefully perched on top of a boulder reading a book.

However, user reviews of the park on Google Maps include a few complaints about the location—parents noting air pollution from exhaust fumes and fears that the playground is not adequately fenced from the road. Southbank, at the edge of the CBD, is home to Crown Casino as well as major arts institutions—the ABC, ACCA, the Arts Centre and National Gallery of Victoria are all situated within the densely populated neighbourhood, as is the Victorian College of the Arts campus. In coming years, the area will be developed into an even more coherent and substantial arts precinct with the construction of The Fox: NGV Contemporary as part of a \$1.7 billion Melbourne Arts Precinct Transformation project.^[22] Hewson's substantial \$2.4 million project becomes small fry in the context of this construction plan. But it is hopeful, and fitting, to see an artist entrusted with the delivery of what is essentially a piece of infrastructure in this neighbourhood.

Rocks on Wheels was initially met with further concerns, until everyone was reassured that the bluestone paving was in fact rubber soft-fall surfacing, and that, despite appearances, the wheels wouldn't move anywhere—they were securely pinned into concrete foundations. Writing about Hewson's *St Peters Fences* playground, Cross notes a similar use of risk and "perceived precarity", observing that "the artist pre-empts how much of a driver danger is to the young person navigating obstacles and conquering fears of falling."^[23] This presentation of risk and challenge without real danger creates the push and pull between artwork and audience, playground and child: no one will fall and suffer a catastrophic brain injury, though they might be hit by a flying shoe. This dynamic gives creative agency to the child and empowers them to establish an individual experience with the work.

As Hewson points out, we are all conducting miniature risk-assessments every day. Children, especially, need novel opportunities to practice this; to learn their own limits, their strengths and capacities. Hewson is not the first artist to champion the importance of risk in this context. More than fifty years ago Niki de Saint Phalle defended her monster slide, *The Golem* (1972), arguing “scary things are good because they help children conquer their fears.”^[24] Scary things are also inescapable. While a *Golem*-esque monster might not be as terrifying as it once was, contemporary life is carried out against a backdrop of an environment under threat. From flooding, earthquakes and bush fires, to hurricanes and dust storms, the material world around us is subject to both sudden and incremental change. We could all benefit from increasing our level of tolerance for unexpected environments, uncertainty, challenging scenes and altered realities. Hewson’s playgrounds might help us start to find beauty, fun and the capacity to adapt in such spaces.

That *Rocks on Wheels* is an artwork enables it to creatively break with playground norms and empower unstructured play. That *Rocks on Wheels* is a playground enables it to defy the distancing effects of traditional art institutions and empower genuine participation. Hewson’s work is not a representation of play, rather it is played with and on—the creative act of interpretation embodied daily by a raft of small, clambering, creative agents.

Footnotes

01. Mike Hewson in conversation with the author, 21 February 2023.

02. “Megan Dunn on Art: Looking at Crocodiles,” RNZ, 18 March 2023, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/2018882336/megan-dunn-on-art-looking-at-crocodiles>

03. “Artist Bio,” Mike Hewson, accessed 18 March 2023, <https://mikehewson.co.nz/bio>

04. Diane Arbus, *Rocks on wheels, Disneyland, Cal. 1962*, printed later, gelatin silver print, 34.6 × 48.5 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/306301>

05. “Who’s Afraid of Public Space? 4 December 2021 – 20 March 2022,” Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, accessed 18 March 2023, <https://acca.melbourne/whos-afraid-of-public-space/>

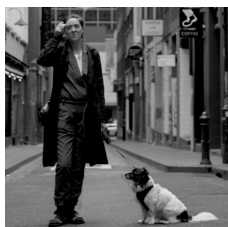
06. “What Role Can Public Art Play in Creating Intergenerational Cities?” Art/Play/Risk, accessed 18 March 2023, <https://www.artplayrisk.com.au/about>

07. See *Architectural Review*, “May 2021: Play,” <https://www.architectural-review.com/digital-edition/may-2021-play> and *Public Art Dialogue* 12, no. 1 (2022), <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rpad20/12/1>
08. Callum Morton, “Voids,” *Art + Australia* 57, no. 2 (2022), https://artandaustralia.com/recent/57_2/pp24/art-design-cities.html
09. *Design Standards* was exhibited at Cathedral Cabinet in July 2022 and has also been featured in the recent exhibition *Melbourne Now*, 24 March - 20 August 2023 at the National Gallery of Victoria, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/melbourne-now/artists/simulaa>.
10. For a discussion of the Australian context, see Suzannah Henty, “In the Soil That Nurtures Us: A Certain Death to the Colonial Myth,” *Index Journal* 4 (2022), <https://index-journal.org/issues/monument/in-the-soil-that-nurtures-us>
11. Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agnostic Politics,” *Atlas of Transformation*, accessed 18 March 2023, <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/p/political-environment/artistic-activism-and-agnostic-politics-chantal-mouffe.html>
12. Cameron Cartiere, “Play Sculptures: Public Art in the Playground,” *Public Art Dialogue* 12, no. 1 (2022): 5–23.
13. Charlie Gates, “Artist Says Goodbye to Condemned Building,” *The Press*, 24 January 2013, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/christchurch-earthquake-2011/8219310/Artist-says-goodbye-to-condemned-building>
14. Mike Hewson, “Playing with Risk: The Dangers of Thinking Safe,” TEDx Sydney, 28 October 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_oDofXXxvE&ab_channel=TEDxTalks
15. “Paul Chan. *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*. 2007,” Museum of Modern Art, accessed 18 March 2023, <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/1/221>
16. Paul Chan, cited in Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London & New York: Verso, 2012), 251.
17. Mike Hewson, quoted in Kate Hennessey, “‘You Can’t Escape Danger’: The Artist Making ‘Risky’ Playgrounds – and Splitting Opinions,” *The Guardian*, 14 November 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/nov/14/you-cant-escape-danger-the-artist-making-risky-playgrounds-and-splitting-opinions>
18. “Contemporary Art: Redefined,” Hewsonclad: Modular Paintings for Your Home, accessed 18 March 2023, <https://hewsonclad.com/>
19. “Melbourne, Australia’s Most Liveable City!” Study Melbourne, accessed 24 March 2023, [https://www.study-melbourne.vic.gov.au/news-updates/melbourne-australias-most-liveable-city#:~:text=Released%20by%20the%20Economist%20Intelligence,infrastructure%20\(100%2F100\)](https://www.study-melbourne.vic.gov.au/news-updates/melbourne-australias-most-liveable-city#:~:text=Released%20by%20the%20Economist%20Intelligence,infrastructure%20(100%2F100))
20. Cartiere, “Play Sculptures,” 2022: 10.
21. David Cross, “Unfettered Actions: Sportification, Playgrounds and Public Art,” *Artlink* 41, no. 2 (2021): 97.
22. “The Transformation,” Melbourne Arts Precinct Corporation, accessed 18 March 2023, <https://artsprecinct.melbourne/the-transformation/>.
23. Cross, “Unfettered Actions,” 2021: 98.

Biographies



Mike Hewson is a visual artist with a background in structural engineering and heavy-civil construction. His award-winning projects pioneer new ways to merge conceptual art projects into the public realm. Hewson works to prove we can, in fact, do things that are considered untenable in a public setting. Each project aims to catalyse fresh conversation about how the bureaucratic and managerial aspects of power are shaping our public lives, asking if we like that shape or if we'd like to consider other options. He has completed five large-scale public art commissions in Australia, many of them are sculpture-park-cum-playgrounds. Hewson received a Bachelor of Engineering (Hons) in Civil Engineering from the University of Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand, in 2007 and a Master of Fine Arts (Visual Arts) from Columbia University, New York, in 2016. mikehewson.co.nz



Rosemary Forde is a curator and researcher based in Naarm Melbourne, with a focus on localised contemporary art histories and discourse in Australia and Aotearoa. Her curatorial practice encompasses exhibitions, editorial projects, public artworks and pedagogical programmes. Since 2022 Forde has been Curator with Artbox, an artist-led company developing projects in public space. She also teaches at the Victorian College of the Arts and completed a PhD in Curatorial Practice in 2018. rosemaryforde.com



Andrea Bell is an editor, writer and curator based in Ōtepoti Dunedin with an interest in art's relevance to time and place, furthering contemporary art discourse through writing, exhibiting and publishing. Andrea is a former editorial board member of *un Magazine* and *Hue & Cry* Journal. Her writing has been published in *The Art Paper*, *frieze*, *Art Monthly Australasia*, *Vernacular*, *HAMSTER*, *Art Asia Pacific*, and *Art New Zealand* among other publications. She has curated exhibitions in Aotearoa and Australia and was most recently Curator Art at Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena. Andrea completed a Master's Degree in Art Curatorship at the University of Melbourne in 2010.

