

## ACT\_VISION.

### Inspiring Change and Acts of Creative Visioning

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#### Abstract

This paper takes the form of personal memoir as a reflection on art in the public domain and a means by which to re-tell the conceptual development and evolution of *IMAG\_NE*, a concrete poem and public sculpture. The concept was first developed for my Masters of Arts (Art in Public Space) at RMIT University. Initially an aid to assist my own personal creative evolution, the artwork has now toured as an ephemeral installation to communities across Australia, New Zealand, Europe and the United States of America and has been widely used as a tool to promote community initiatives and collective visioning. Joseph Beuys's theories of a "social sculpture" are drawn upon as a conceptual framework to underpin *IMAG\_NE* and its agenda to promote individual and societal change. The power of the human imagination is evoked in an ongoing conference with a broad range of sites, communities and individuals. The impact of *IMAG\_NE* is demonstrated through key examples including its appearance at numerous large public sculpture festivals and significant cultural sites. Recent developments surrounding the work's presence in the Central Coast community of New South Wales, Australia, provides further evidence of the work's importance and impact, and motivation for the continuation of the project into the post-Covid 19 pandemic era.

**Keywords:** social sculpture, Beuys, concrete poetry, public art, memoir

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Figure 1. Emma Anna *IMAG\_NE*. Image courtesy of Sculpture by the Sea Inc. Copyright Jamie Williams, 2008. [www.sculpturebythesea.com](http://www.sculpturebythesea.com)

*IMAG\_NE* is a concrete poem and public artwork that was conceived in 2007 during my studies for a Masters of Art (Art in Public Space) at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia (Figure 1). It has since become a social sculpture project that is in part inspired by the theories of German artist, activist and academic, Joseph Beuys. The story of the artwork and its many adventures and incarnations runs in parallel to the narrative of my life over the past fifteen years and is interwoven in the many changes and challenges that have emerged during this time. Like me, *IMAG\_NE* continues to mature and evolve, gathering new depth and helping to provide insights into creativity and existence. While now well-known as a public artwork that resonates on different levels for many people and diverse publics, at its core *IMAG\_NE* is a personal work, one that contains echoes of my personal history, relationships and career development. Recalling the evolution of the work must therefore take the shape of memoir, a process that sets this paper outside the domain of strict academic inquiry, and more strongly aligns it towards reflection upon the “I” / me / individual that is exulted by the artwork itself. Such a



reflection plays out in the public domain as a reminder of the public as a collective of individuals.

*IMAG\_NE* was initially created as a collage (Figure 2), and the individual letters of the poem were made up of photocopied Scrabble letter pieces with the second 'I' piece removed. These letters were stuck on top of a copy of J.R. Eyerman's image of a crowd wearing 3D glasses inside the Paramount Theater in Hollywood, an image that I found reproduced on the cover of the 1983 English edition of *La Société du Spectacle* (The Society of the Spectacle) Guy Debord's seminal analysis of consumer capitalism in the late 20th century.



Figure 2. Emma Anna *IMAG\_NE*, paper collage on photocopy, 21cm x 25cm, 2007.

The collage had been made in response to developments in my life at the time, when I was seeking clarity about leaving my managerial role in corporate design and communications and wishing to pursue independent creative practice. I read the missing “I” piece as a gateway through which I would pass as part of this evolution of self, with the presence of absence acting as a portal of opportunity, in a manner that was similar to that offered by a blank canvas. It functioned as an affirmation of sorts - a doorway into an unknown and yet to be defined future in which anything and everything was possible. I believe that this is how it continues to be interpreted by those who have seen and experienced the three-dimensional public interpretation of this initial collage concept sketch. The intimate interweaving of my personal narrative is somewhat unknown to the general public, and does not impact upon the reading of the work. However, clues to the personal footnotes are revealed through anagrams that can be made from the letter of *IMAG\_NE* - *GAMINE* and *ENIGMA* and *IN GAME* (Figures 3 - 5).



Figure 3. *ENIG\_MA*; Figure 4. *GAMI\_NE*; Figure 5. *IN GAME* / All Emma Anna, digital collage, dimensions variable, 2008.

The gap in *IMAG\_NE* was also intended as a reference to Yoko Ono's 1971 paper postcard work *A Hole to See the Sky Through* that evokes notes of the positivity and possibility that are atypical of Ono's practice and that have re-emerged throughout the artist's career in works such as *Sky TV* (1966) and *To See the Sky* (2015). At the time *IMAG\_NE* was emerging as a concept, my research had been exploring the work of activist artists such as Ono (and consequently the work of her third husband, John Lennon). I was also drawn to and intrigued by the ideas, multiples and performance artworks of Joseph Beuys. I was curious as to how all three artist / activists used the media as a tool to promote public dialogue, activating the audiences they had attained through fame (or notoriety) to promote the peace movement and environmentalism. The work of this trio convinced me of the role of artist as an agent for social change. Performance and protest were employed by all three as creative, expressive acts with an agenda to promote varying degrees of non-violent yet fundamental political, social, economic and ecological change.

At the same time as I was undertaking this research, I had begun my own personal transformation, adopting the name 'Emma Anna'. I believed that performing this character would allow me to transcend my previous life as a corporate creative, and to overcome my relative shyness through the acting out of Emma Anna's life. Drawing upon my communications and media background, the character of Emma Anna first came to life online in the social media platform of the era - MySpace - where my profile made use of imagery such as game and puzzle motifs. The Queen chess piece

was often referenced in this work and presented as the ultimate feminist role model, able to move anywhere on the board. The game playing board was perceived as a sort of world map, with the Queen piece being able to move in whatever direction she desired (Figure 6). I found this sense of movement repeated in the Scrabble board (Figure 7) and via my exploration of Chaos Magic (Figure 8). This work was included in documentation submitted to RMIT University as part of my Masters 'research, the cover of which featured a concrete poem of a dissected compass (Figure 9) in which I defined a fragmentation, almost crucifixion, of self.

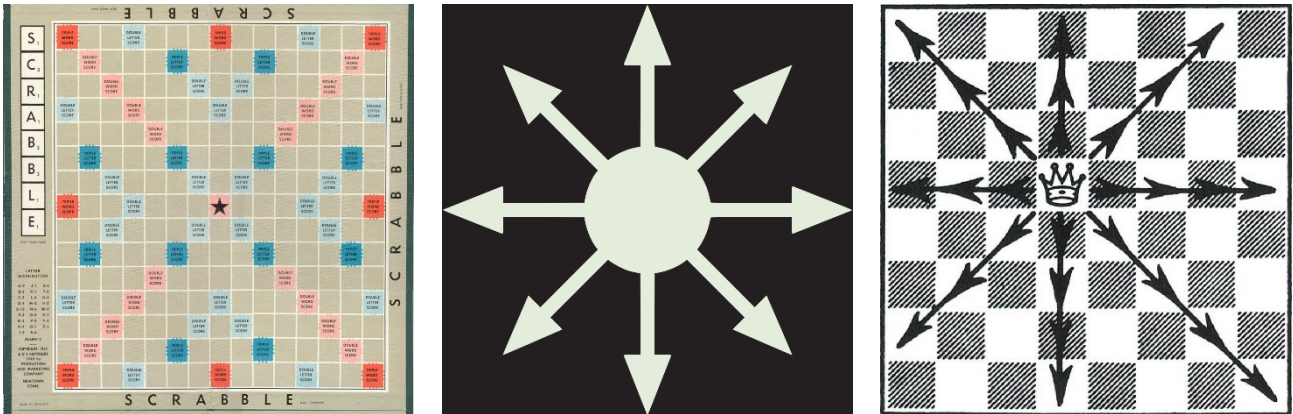


Figure 6. Queen Chess piece; Figure 7. Scrabble playing board; Figure 8. Chaos Magic sigil. All found imagery from Emma Anna development at [www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com), circa 2007.

It was not until early 2008 that I conceived of the idea to make *IMAG\_NE* in three-dimensional form, and for Emma Anna to similarly come to life as a performance in the “real-world”. The opportunity to do so came through Sculpture by the Sea (SXS), a large outdoor exhibition of over 100 one hundred sculptures and installation works that is staged on the spectacular Bondi to Tamarama coastal walk-in eastern Sydney, Australia each year. The idea of *IMAG\_NE* having the potential to activate social sculpture was one of the motivations that led me to propose it for inclusion in the exhibition. Having harnessed the power of *IMAG\_NE* to activate my personal transformation into Emma Anna, I hoped that it could work for other people in similar evocative ways, to promote thinking, critique, inspiration and to fire up the power of the human imagination. My artist statement in the exhibition catalogue declared, “imagination affords us poetic sanctuary in an often-hostile world” (SXS, 2008). Despite the relative simplicity of *IMAG\_NE*'s supporting structure and letter forms, the processes of making and installing the piece for its initial exhibition at SXS provided many new challenges, including the idea of installing the work on the edge of an elevated cliff above a pathway. This position perfectly aligned the word / work with the horizon line of the Pacific Ocean and the sky. The limitless potential of the human imagination was evoked by this site, and was part of its ultimate success and the public's appreciation of the work in this first setting. On a very limited budget, and a steep learning curve, I was overwhelmed to be announced the winner of the Art Gallery of NSW's Site-Specific Prize at the exhibition opening, for the project to receive extensive

press coverage, an outpouring of feedback and appreciation from the public audience, and later, invitations to exhibition the artwork at Sculpture by the Sea Cottesloe (Western Australia, March 2009) and Sculpture by the Sea Aarhus (Denmark, June 2009).

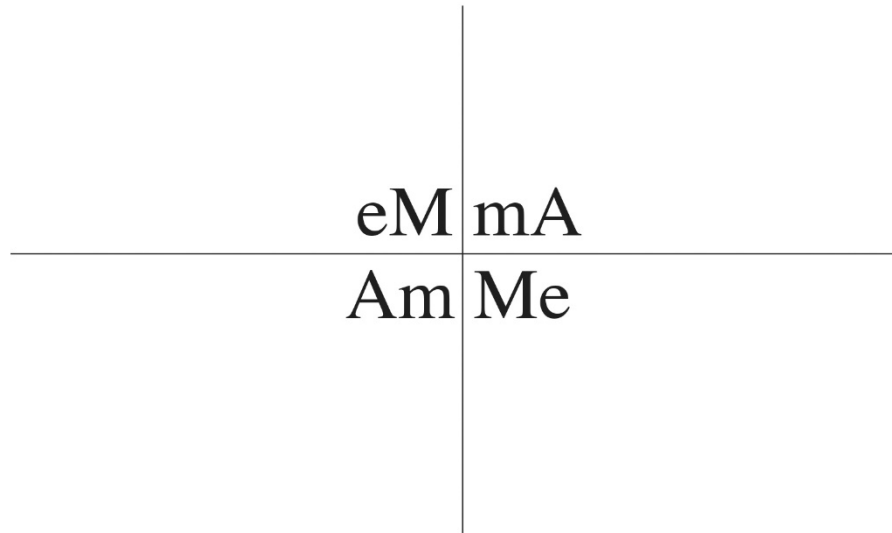


Figure 9. Emma Anna, eM / Ma / Am / Me cover to tangible visual record submitted to RMIT University MA (Art in Public Space) program, 2007.

I spent a large part of 2009 with the work in Denmark where it was one of several Australian works presented as part of the inaugural SXS exhibition. A European version of the Australian show had been commissioned by the Danes as a means of uniting the cultures of Denmark and Australia as a tribute to the Australian-born Crown Princess Mary. Following the conclusion of the show, and the acquisition of *IMAG\_NE* by a local collector, I spent several months in Germany where I was able to observe many of Beuys works in person, notably the outstanding collection of the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin.

Beuys theories around social sculpture, along with his crafting and distribution of multiples, aligned with my thinking about how *IMAG\_NE* could be used to promote individual, collective and ultimately societal change. For Beuys social sculpture was “predicated on a process of self-transformation: all individuals should see themselves as artists, shaping their loves according to the principles of sculpture in order to renew society from the ground up”. Further, “the creative capacities and the unconditional freedom inherent in human thought are at the heart of his expanded concept of art” (Gaensheimer et al, p. 14). Beuys created art for philosophical analysis, for education, for ethical guidance and perhaps for spiritual evolution. “Through his work and deeds, Beuys radically expanded the concept of art by linking it with all processes in society, because to him everyone was an artist. All individuals were called upon to place their own creative powers at the service of society... creative abilities were the real capital that would bring about a community of people working toward the common good” (Laschet in Gaensheimer et al, p. 11). Beuys’s ideas around the notion of “social sculpture” and “the wound”, have all been considerations of my own determining



of - and activity to correct - a fundamental sickness that I believe is a trait of contemporary capitalistic societies. Ultimately Beuys was motivated by a deep-seated sense of responsibility for humanity; “I have come to the conclusion that there is no other possibility to do something for man (sic) other than through art”.

Beuys made great use of “the multiple” as a form by which to spread his message. Works such as *Capri Battery* (1985) and *Felt Suit* (1970) allowed collectors to possess a physical manifestation of Beuys’s thinking that act, in many ways, as talismans. *IMAG\_NE* also works as a multiple, a status attained through the multiple representations of the work that have been derived from in situ photography and the consequent distribution of this imagery via online social media platforms. Over many installations (perhaps more than 100 different sites over its almost fifteen-year history), *IMAG\_NE* has expanded its impact via an archive of online memories uploaded by its public audiences. It is captured, souvenired, reviewed and used to enrich individual lives outside and beyond the initial engagement with the physical work (Figures 10 and 11).



Figure 10. *IMAG\_NE* in situ at Federation Square, Melbourne, 2009 / Photography Emma Anna.

Figure 11. *IMAG\_NE* in situ at the National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2015. Image courtesy of National Library of Australia.

Many people who have experienced the work have contacted me to express how important it feels to them, and have placed their record of connection with the work in personal shrines, on fridge doors, and in workspaces. In more than one instance I have been approached for permission for the word / work to be tattooed onto a person’s body. *IMAG\_NE* initially drew upon my experience creating within social media, in MySpace. It emerged in tandem with Facebook’s great growth period and reached a new level of multiplicity via the sharing of imagery of the work on Instagram, and the ubiquitous smart phone technology that has radically evolved in the fifteen years since the work first appeared. Photography of *IMAG\_NE* and the public sharing of imagery on social media has taken on the form of a memory making multiple, an expansion of Beuys’s ideas in the era of digital information technologies. Like Beuys, I find this power of expanded messaging beyond a singular object important to my work. As Beuys

explained in relation to his multiples, *"I'm interested in the distribution of physical vehicles in the forms of editions because I'm interested in spreading ideas"*.<sup>1</sup>

Following Beuys's definition of social sculpture, the act of thinking becomes a creative and potentially revolutionary act. The change and awareness that Beuys desired could be activated by the creative processes of the individual mind, *"thinking is not only the world-knowing but also the world-creating principle"* (Gaensheimer et al, p. 120). *IMAG\_NE* seeks to activate the potential for social sculpture in exactly the same way. The experience of viewing the work translates into a process that activates the imagination; it is an unavoidable consequence of viewing an artwork that also functions as a concrete poem. The occupation of the missing "I" spot by the physical body, is proof that the more conceptual aspects of this work – the implication of the power of the individual to affect personal and collective transformation – have been understood and appreciated, at least to some degree, by the public. *IMAG\_NE* is a small mark in a bigger picture. As Suzanne Lacy states, *"social change doesn't happen through a single person (in general), and it certainly doesn't happen through a single art project. It happens through collective activity of many, many people working in many ways to push the ball up the hill in the same direction"* (Gaensheimer et al, p. 39).

The transformative nature of *IMAG\_NE* is clearly evident in the way it has brought radical change into my own life, and in its potential to do so in the lives of others. It is a deceptively simple, yet potentially revolutionary artwork. It no longer feels like my creation, but my responsibility to share its power with the world. Its continued resonance with individuals and communities continually amazes me, and makes me believe that if enough people can be turned on to the revolutionary potential inherent in the act of imagining and of creating alternatives, thoughts and visions, then the power of this work is a potent tool for the change I would like to bring about. As activist Angela Davis states *"I've always recognised my own role as an activist as helping to create conditions of possibility for change"* (Gaensheimer et al, p. 83). I came to understand that it would become my job to keep *IMAG\_NE* present, and with an active - almost performative - public life.

In 2010 I was commissioned to create a new version of *IMAG\_NE* for the City of Greater Dandenong (COGD) in suburban Melbourne. An appreciation of the importance of public art in that community was being buoyed and supported by the tireless work of Jenny Pemberton-Webb and Grissel Walmaggia who seeded my mind with the idea of continuing *IMAG\_NE*'s pop-up adventures, with a version to be made for the City that would be relocated to four different sites over the course of two years. The work (Figures 12, 13 and 14) was integrated into various community building initiatives over its time in the community. It proved so popular that it was re-commissioned four times, resulting in an eventual decade-long relationship with local residents and visitors, demonstrating the importance of public art advocates in local authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Beuys cited at <https://www.intuitions.httpdot.net>.





Figures 12, 13 and 14. Emma Anna *IMAG\_NE* for the City of Greater Dandenong, 2010 - 2020. Courtesy of the City of Greater Dandenong.

“Woundedness” or a sense of “missing-ness” within *IMAG\_NE* is not something that is generally spoken of or observed, despite the obviously absent “I” piece. I attended the Melbourne Social Sculpture Forum’s *Show Your Wound* symposium at RMIT University’s School of Art directed by Ian George, Dr Wolfgang Zumdick and Beuys protege and Director of the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University, Professor Shelley Sacks. Participation in this forum further emphasised my connection points to the work of Beuys, and I empowered me in my efforts to evolve my experiment in social sculpture using *IMAG\_NE* as the key. At the symposium I met the Colombian artist and academic Fernando García Vásquez, who’s ongoing miniature painting series *Nudes* also interrogates notions of absence (Figure 15).



Figure 15. Fernando García Vásquez, *Nude (after Bosch)*, oil on panel, 16cm x 32cm, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

Through my relationship with Fernando, I began my own relationship with his native homeland of Colombia. Over the past decade we have created and managed the cultural centre La Casa Verde, a site for experimental art, thinking, activities and

creativity in Barranquilla, Colombia, that we perceive as its own form of active social sculpture. The hexagon within the La Casa Verde visual identity is an allusion to Beuys, and his love of bees (Figures 16 and 17). Monies received from the touring of *IMAG\_NE* help fund this initiative.



Figures 16 and 17. Emma Anna, Visual Identity for La Casa Verde Barranquilla, 2015.

As I evolved a life in two cultures, my thinking continued to connect to Beuys's ideas of the multiple through the public space pop up concept. In Australia, *IMAG\_NE* toured up and down the East Coast of Australia from 2012 - 2016, with a highlight being its appearance at the National Library of Australia in 2015, and as part of the Dax Collection exhibition *Reverie*, in 2012. In New Zealand, *IMAG\_NE* was commissioned for the City of Christchurch's reconstruction program following the devastating earthquake of 2011 and used as a tool to inspire and uplift locals during the reconstruction phase. Many initiatives were developed around the work for this particular realisation of *IMAG\_NE*, with direct feedback sought from local residents recovering from the impact of the devastating earthquake (Figure 18).

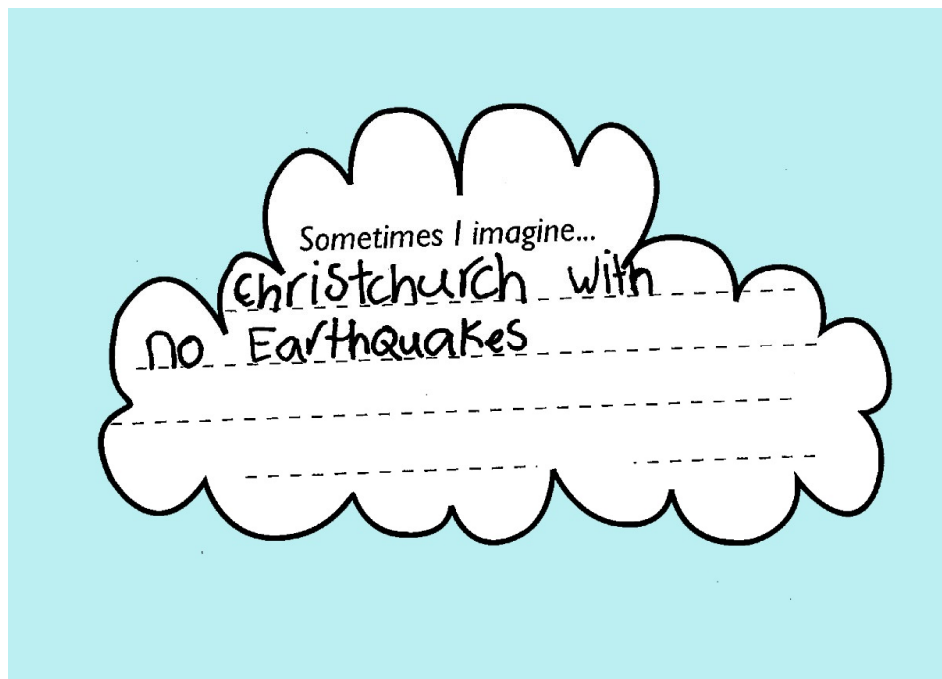


Figure 18. *Sometimes I imagine...* public contribution to anonymous wall installation at Christchurch City Library in support of *IMAG\_NE Christchurch*, 2012. Image courtesy of Christchurch City Council, New Zealand.



The touring model developed to support *IMAG\_NE*'s ongoing adventures addressed local government concerns over commissioning of permanent artwork and the constraints of local government budgets. *IMAG\_NE* was modular, easy to install and the costs associated were minimal - these were required as a means of financing repairs, freight and installation costs in order to keep the project moving from one place to the next. In the many communities where it emerged, *IMAG\_NE* was often anchored to the promotion of community initiatives, program launches or as framing reference for picture-perfect landscape backgrounds. For me the nature of the work continued to evolve as it popped up in multiple locations, just like the imagination itself, with ideas jumping from one place to another. From approximately mid-2012 onwards I began receiving interest in commissioning the work from communities in the United States with the work touring to Florida from 2014 - 2016, and permanent acquisitions commissioned by the City of Santa Clarita, California (2019) and the City of Port St Lucie, Florida (2021).



Figure 19. *GALAX\_A* in situ at Plaza de la Paz (Peace Plaza), Barranquilla, Colombia, 2017 / Photography Emma Anna.

During this time I began working with other 7-letter words leading to an expansion of the initial project that I now call WORDPLAY.<sup>2</sup> These word / works have included *IMAG\_NE* ('GALAXY' in English), developed in conjunction with Fundación Circulo Abierto (Open Circle Foundation) in Barranquilla, Colombia (Figure 19) as a means of promoting children's literacy and most recently, *MAGIC\_L*, which will continue to resonate as a symbol of hope for the recently flood-ravaged community of Mullumbimby in Northern New South Wales, Australia.

The backstory to these multiple installations of *IMAG\_NE* contain a million other anecdotes, tales of the people who assisted the transit or installation of the artwork, mishaps and saving graces, and connections with community members and photographic records of the work that have all embedded themselves into the narrative and history of the artwork. One of the most recent testaments to the power of *IMAG\_NE* is a recent chapter that has emerged from the community of the Central Coast in New South Wales, Australia in which the potential of the work is bought to the fore again and furthers my interest in this work as a tool for community activism.

As the initial touring of *IMAG\_NE* in Australia wound down in 2016, the work was acquired by the Central Coast Council with an understanding of a lifespan in public space of two years. This public work had continued to live on in the community beyond my prediction of two years. In late 2021, I was contacted requesting my authorisation to decommission the artwork, and also seeking costings for a new, permanent version. In February 2022 *IMAG\_NE* was removed from its location (Figure 20) and replaced somewhat ironically with a Council authorised sign that explained its absence (Figure 21). I was instantly made aware of its new status via messages that I began receiving from local community members who were outraged that Council had removed the work. A petition was started at [www.change.org.au](http://www.change.org.au)<sup>3</sup> by local residents addressed to Mr Rik Hart the Administrator of Central Coast Council demanding, "Mr Hart, start listening to the residents and rate payers, overturn the Council's decision and bring back OUR *IMAG\_NE* sculpture now!"<sup>4</sup> The petition eventually garnered over six hundred signatures. During its tenure in the local community *IMAG\_NE* had become a very well loved and cherished object, with demands to "bring it back!"<sup>5</sup> and "reinstate what is a local landmark and 'institution'."<sup>6</sup> This reflected the community's sense of ownership of the public domain and being cut out of major decision making such as the de-commissioning of a local sculpture.

At the time that this drama was unfolding, a friend of mine alerted me to a possible Japanese translation of *IMAG\_NE*: "ima in Japanese means now, and g-ne... vanished!"<sup>7</sup> This opened new possibilities for responding to this situation that often occurs in the public domain where there can be a lack of priority given to art projects as an ingredient in community wellbeing. A new public work incorporating the concept of "vanished" has been proposed. The experience bought to light for me the grey area that surrounds this work public works. I had provided the work to Council at minimal cost but no parameters had been set around the work's future decommissioning.

<sup>2</sup> Instagram @emmaannawordplay.

<sup>3</sup> Online community petition at [www.change.org.au](http://www.change.org.au) / <https://bit.ly/3usNnTM>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Adam Broinowski at <https://www.facebook.com/iamemmajanehancock/> 18 February, 2022





Figure 20. *IMAG\_NE* in situ at Tascott foreshore, NSW Central Coast region, 2020.  
Courtesy: Therese Elsey Photography.

The impact of *IMAG\_NE* and the potential community reaction following its removal had been underestimated. Now, with the artwork gone, my only hope is that it can be reinstated in a timely manner in order to address community concern over its absence. *IMAG\_NE* has been a vehicle for my ongoing research at the intersection of public art, social sculpture and a curiosity about the revolutionary potential of the human imagination. Its proven impact upon individuals and communities makes it a powerful statement work. Its multiple readings continue to expand in parallel with the political and social zeitgeist, which is perhaps why it has proven so enduring. It is a tool for change and healing, and could once again prove its worth as we collectively re-emerge from the challenges of the global Covid-19 pandemic. My task at hand now is to fill in the blanks on the story behind the work, which may well take the form of a narrative book, of which I have given you but a sketch.

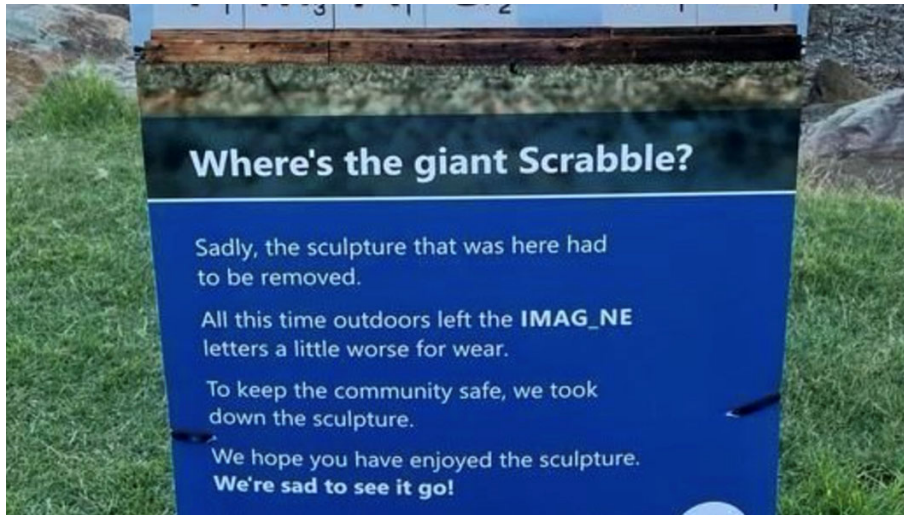


Figure 21. Council signage replacing *IMAG\_NE*, Tascott foreshore, February 2022. Imagery sourced from [www.change.org.au](http://www.change.org.au)

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