

Fieldwork, A Trilogy

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Abstract

The *Fieldwork Trilogy* ran over 6 years and was intended to create a public discourse on the merits of creating public space or democratizing common areas within a high-density urban environment. The series of public interventions provoked discussion within a general public as to the purpose of public space and how to create it by ‘colonising’ pieces of the urban terrain. By using gardens (guerilla gardens) and claiming a space by the public, a place can be created within a built-up urban environment to be used by the community for leisure and other social activities. *Fieldwork I* was the beginning of a trilogy that used the public interaction to establish this ‘place’ or series of ‘places’. This was extended by incorporating the train line that ran along the Western edge of the site and became the genesis of *Fieldwork II – The Colonies*. The demand for public engagement with this version was greater and more radical and drew more passionate responses. A more ephemeral work, *Fieldwork III – Las Colonias* set up the dialogue but also highlighted a more nuanced and pre-existing culture of public space.

Keywords: public space, activism, fieldwork, guerilla gardens, urban terrain

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Fieldwork, A Trilogy

When invited to participate in the Havana Biennale 2019 I was excited by the prospect of setting up a project that would incorporate a public art project linking Melbourne, Australia with Havana, Cuba. But how could I possibly tie the two disparate cities and cultures together in an art project? This question was guided by the curatorial premise of the biennale curators that linked a suburban railway line in Melbourne known as the Upfield line and with the only electrified line in Cuba known as the Hershey Line. It was named after a famous chocolate manufacturer from the USA whose company had set up a sugar plantation outside Havana and built a village for workers to service the plantation in 1917. The town called Hershey was connected to Havana via the Hershey line. Upon arriving in Havana to identify potential sites, we discovered the Hershey Line was no longer operating. The whole premise for the exhibition was drifting sideways and the connection device had become tenuous.



Figure 1. Fieldwork - 2013/14, Melbourne. Image by Ben Morieson.

My take on this was to still find some common ground between Melbourne and Havana without relying on a railway line to forge a symbiosis. I took the project's core idea back to basics. By using public space and a public demand for greater access to public space it became apparent my earlier sunflower projects could be that vehicle to activate dialogue on 'private verses public.' This concept formed the basis of my first sunflower project titled "Fieldwork I" for my RMIT Master of Arts (Art in Public Space) research. "Fieldwork I" was a field of sunflowers in an empty private field. The space was in limbo whilst planning permits were being issued for a multi-story apartment development.



Figure 2. Alfred St, North Melbourne 2013. Image: Ben Morieson.



Figure 3. Wheatfield with Agnes Denes standing in the field. Wheatfield – A Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan. Image by Agnes Denes, 1982.

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The site was about three acres in size and surrounded by a public housing estate on one end and industrial warehouses around the sides. It was overlooked by an elevated freeway with a railway line underneath it. The site had been left derelict but had its own thriving weed ecology and a few homeless campers in the bottom corner.

My idea was to use the site for an art project that would convert a private space into a public space simply by having people drawn into the field by their own volition. Agnes Denes touched on such ideas when in 1982 she created the seminal (landscape) work “Wheatfield - A Confrontation” on a two-acre landfill site in New York. This work fell into the category of Land Art but was also an intervention that drew on community activism and volunteers to create the work. This notion of community activist acquisition has been established in suburban streets on a macro level more recently with people planting out their nature strips, or sometimes creating informal community gardens in vacant lots. I wanted to create a beautiful space that would celebrate ‘acquisition by community stealth’. By activating these spaces for aesthetic and practical reasons, the community is acknowledging a lack of public space that meets their needs.



Figure 4. Fieldwork I. 2013/14, Melbourne. Image by Ben Morieson.

The work also drew on my earlier experience of visiting Cuba in 2012 and observing the setting up of kitchen gardens in urban wastelands (Organiponicos). Ever since Russia withdrew its economic support in the 1980s the Cubans became expert in self-reliance. While these gardens serviced a practical need I was also struck by their aesthetic in the colour and design embedded in the urban cityscape. This opened up the idea of using plants as an art practice in public space.

In 2017 the follow-on project from “Fieldwork I” was “Fieldwork II - The Colonies”. It was a project that invited people to create territories of public space through occupying and colonising space with sunflowers. Up and down the Upfield line from North Melbourne station to Upfield and back, a team of volunteers placed seventy-four shopping trolleys that had been planted out with sunflowers. The abandoned shopping trolley became a mobile garden and by parking them strategically in places of high traffic along bike paths and in adjacent parkland, the general public would find them as either an eyesore or a potential artwork of beauty. Either way the sunflower trolleys questioned ownership of public space. A sign on the side of the trolley explained the project and invited anyone to take care of the garden and even take the trolley to another place of their choosing. Playing with the ubiquitous e-bike pollution, one could undo the lock by texting me the number of the trolley to receive the code for the combination lock. They were then asked to forward a pin drop of the final location for the trolley once moved that assisted me with the retrieval at the end of the project, and to note that all the trolleys were recovered.



Figure 5. Fieldwork II – The Colonies, 2017. Melbourne. Image by Ben Morieson.

The adoption of the trolley gardens and the subsequent text messaging aimed to create a dialogue between myself and the public and in some cases morphed into shared observations about public space and also the occasional off beat rants about aliens imposing their will on the people! Social media also played a role and there were chats across Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter, about the 'mysterious' sunflower gardens and what their purpose may be.

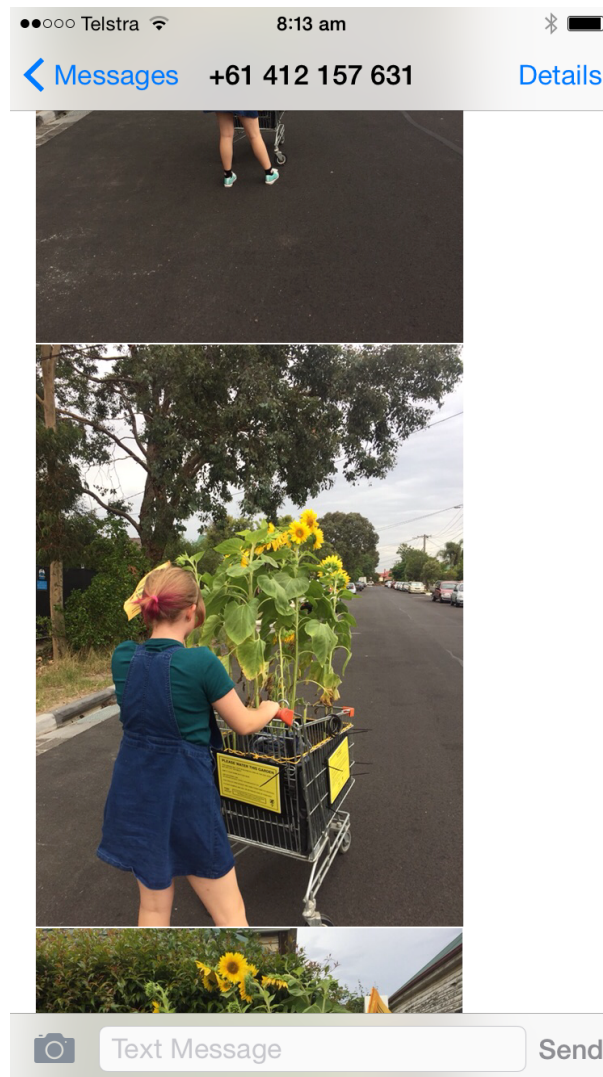


Figure 6. Text feed: Adoptee moving one of the trolleys. 2019. Melbourne. Image: Ben Morieson (phone number was my project phone).

To try and tie this idea to Havana and any notions of conflict between public and private space as an intersect between the two suburban cultures was a challenge, as they take place in two very different political and socio-economic systems. Havana is a densely populated city with a Western architectural foundation that goes back several hundred years when only civic squares and small parks were acceptable as public space. In contrast Melbourne's inner city was developed at a time when setting tracts of land aside to create large parklands for the leisure of the people was considered crucial to

the well-being of society. The geography of the two cities couldn't be more different. One crucial difference I noticed on the first trip to Havana was the street life. In contrast to Melbourne's street life, in Havana life in public space is more relaxed and interactive. People bring their chairs onto the street and converse with passers-by or their neighbours to their left and right and to windows or balconies above. The street is not just a conduit for traffic but a public space for gathering and sharing laughter, banter and arguments in the most public way possible. It was this observation that inspired the making of my film as a companion piece to the sunflower trolley concept as the second part of the work to present at the Havana Biennale.

The sunflower trolleys along the Upfield line back in Melbourne was an ephemeral intervention as is much of my previous public artworks over thirty years of practice. Over that time, I began to document the process and outcome with photography and film and with each project, the film took on more significance. I have a parallel career in the film industry, and I integrated this interest into my artworks. In many cases the documentation would form the basis of alternative exhibitions, in gallery situations and quasi permanent artworks. I approached a filmmaker, Aaron Cuthbert, to work with me and together we made a series of films that included showing the process of distribution of the sunflower shopping trollies and then interviews with a selection of people who adopted a trolley and engaged with the work. On camera we discussed the role of public art and public spaces and their interaction with people, and this was interwoven with images of sunflowers and the process of making the artwork. My thinking was that by using films for both the Melbourne and Havana projects, I could set them against each other at the biennale to create a visual dialogue between the two situations.

"Fieldwork III- Las Colonias" created in Cuba, was made just prior to the opening of the Havana Biennale 2019. Earlier, on a reconnaissance in Havana the year before, I had made contact with several people who would help me realise this. Rachel Vallada was a former journalist with great research credentials and Victor Nunez a film maker who worked on science shows for a local TV network. But, my idea of making a film in the Cuban situation was fraught with bureaucratic hurdles.



Figure 7. Storyboard and location in Havana. Image by Ben Morieson.

My film concept was inspired by a film I had watched as a child. This French short film delivered with a 16 mm projector on a white vinyl extendable screen in a school hall was called 'The Red Balloon'. It was a beautiful story with no dialogue that I remember, of a boy who had lost his balloon and the camera tracked him as he pursued it through the streets of Paris in the 1950's. It was a vehicle to show Paris post WWII and the poetic photography celebrated the architecture and layout of the streets and the people that inhabited the public space of those streets.



Figure 8. Fieldwork III - Las Colonias, Havana. 2019. Film still, by Ben Morieson.

The 'balloon' became sunflowers drawing the attention of people in the street. The sunflower had fortuitously and coincidentally a quasi-religious significance in Cuban culture. My idea was to employ three bike transports which are commonly used to deliver small loads through the narrow streets of Old Havana. I organised the growing of a batch of sunflowers on a local Organipónico (a govt sanctioned collective market garden that services the local community and amenities such as hospitals and schools) that I had visited on a previous visit to Cuba.

The film followed these bike riders as they rode through the streets with a small garden of sunflowers on the back of their transporters. My concept was that by having people see the flowers they would be drawn into conversation about the event we were staging. We set up cameras in strategic positions and followed the riders who stopped occasionally during the journey. At every stop people came forward to talk about the flowers and their beauty, but also the importance of gardens and open space in a city. This dialogue was recorded and used in the film as a series of conversations about the streets and the utility of public space in a crowded neighbourhood.



Figure 9. Fieldwork III – Las Colonias, Havana. Members of the public in conversation with the riders about the sun flowers. Image: Ben Morieson.

We filmed two musicians from the Cuban Orchestra playing a classical Cuban piece called *La Bella Cubana* by Jose White. It was recorded in a church that was famous for its devotion to the sunflower as an icon associated with a female saint and I used it as the score for the film. The music guided some of the edit as we used the melody to create the timing for some of the shots. It was both melancholy and upbeat in places and suited the action of the cyclists as they rode at different paces depending on the terrain.

The two films from Melbourne and Havana were placed together on display in Casa de Asia, a museum dedicated to art from the Asia Pacific. The films were subtitled in English and Spanish respectively and timed precisely to loop simultaneously. The context was similar but the terrain in each situation was completely different. However, the sunflowers in the films managed to tie them together and help identify a universal conversation about the utility of public space and navigating the private/public discourse that prevails in that conversation.



Figure 10. Fieldwork III – Las Colonias, 2019, Havana. Image: Ben Morieson.

Reference

Fieldwork project: <https://www.facebook.com/fieldworkmelbourne>

Ben Morieson Art: <http://www.benmorieson.com.au/artwork.html>

Fieldwork III – Las Colonias: film link <https://vimeo.com/696850906>