



Man sights an object in space: Norma Redpath's approach to public art

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The passing, on 12 January this year, of one of Australia's most significant public artists has to date attracted so little comment as to belie the formidable reputation she once commanded.¹ In the 1960s, Norma Redpath OBE (1928-2013) was considered by the likes of Bernard Smith to have few Australian peers in terms of the assurance and power of her work and her conversance with 'an international idiom'.² In little over a decade (1964-75) Redpath completed eight public commissions, two of them in Canberra, including her most ambitious realised work: the *Treasury Fountain* (1965-9). While Redpath's public works are regularly cited as exemplars of their kind, the ideas underpinning their site-specificity remain almost entirely unknown. Now, as Canberrans take stock of their urban environment and the public arts policies that have helped shape it, it seems opportune to critically examine Redpath's ideas and approach to public art and to consider the ways in which she responded to 'site' and its public engagement.

In 1969, after five years spent working on the *Treasury Fountain*, Redpath set forth her approach to commissioned sculpture:

Working as a creative sculptor in designing for a specific site, as in commissioned public sculpture, is a twofold problem – That is, to hold to the mainstream of one's past and future creative development and at the same time satisfy the space-scale functional requirements of the site ... The first must satisfy the demands of a personal discipline, the second must define without doubt the position, general form and



1/ Treasury Fountain, Canberra, 1965-69; bronze, 3.7 x 2.6 x 4.0m; photo: David Wilson

2/ Norma Redpath supervising the Treasury Fountain installation, 1969
All images this article of work by Norma Redpath; unless otherwise indicated, images courtesy the artist's estate and Charles Nodrum Gallery, Richmond



1/ *Fragmented Arch*, 1967, bronzetto, artist's proof, 11 x 23 x 14.5cm

2/ *Study for Fragmented Arch*, 1967, brush and ink on paper, 16.3 x 24cm

3/ *Sheltered Space*, c. 1962-63, bronzetto, 12 x 15 x 10cm



final scale, also fixing methods and function where relevant. The forms and scale to be in correct relationship, either to integrate with, or a counterpoint to, the architectural mass or feature detail. Function to be considered in terms of scale and form-type in relation to traffic movement ...³

Each site was the sum of its physical parameters. For Redpath, a site was invariably an architect-designed building, the scale and proportion of which dictated the necessary size of the artwork, as did the work's position within or near that building. She also took into account practical issues such as how a relief sculpture was to be fixed to a wall and from which angle her work would be seen by the building's occupants or by the passing 'traffic' – both pedestrian and vehicular. This pragmatic approach was characteristic of a pro-integrationist stance, the integration of art and architecture being a widely discussed matter in postwar Europe, North America, and – to a lesser extent – Australia, where, in the 1950s and '60s, the Society of Sculptors and Associates in Sydney and the Group of Four and Centre Five in Melbourne made repeated overtures to architects for greater collaboration.⁴

The *Treasury Fountain* was designed with the knowledge that it would be viewed from all angles, including from above, as it is clearly visible from the windows of the surrounding Treasury buildings. The buildings' architects (Fowell, Mansfield, Jarvis and Maclurcan) designed the rectangular form of the pool, leading Redpath to opt for two distinct elements – one at either end of the pool – that would lend an asymmetrical balance to the courtyard. The two sculpted elements were entirely consistent with Redpath's oeuvre, developing her personal formal language. They were clearly conceived as visual counterpoints to the rather austere façades of the surrounding three buildings that constitute the Treasury.

Redpath's conception of the site as a physical location aligns her with what Miwon Kwon has identified as the earliest generation of site-specific artists, emerging in the late 1960s, for whom site was 'defined primarily as an agglomeration of the actual physical attributes of a particular location ... with architecture serving as a foil for the artwork in many instances'.⁵ Kwon's 'first generation', however, excluded modernist sculptors such as Moore, Calder or Noguchi; while Redpath's work superficially has more in common with these modernists than with, for instance, the non-material works of Robert Barry (included in Kwon's 'first-generation'), the desire to tailor a work for a particular location speaks of Redpath's concern for integration, while also fitting Kwon's category of early site-specific art.

This concern extended past a mere awareness of bricks and mortar. A handwritten note, dated 1968, demonstrates a metaphysical cognisance: 'Man sights an object in space for visual equilibrium and physical balance to help him establish his identity in scale with his surroundings'.⁶ This might be described as a sort of feedback loop: object, sight, judgment of scale, adjustment of the body in relation to the object, adjustment of the perception of self, sight, object. Sculpture, by its very 'thingness' and three-dimensionality, is of course the perfect human proxy, allowing us to project our own sense of scale onto its form and thereby locate ourselves in a given space. Thus sculpture can mediate between the viewing subject and the built environment.

Redpath's concern for the way in which people position themselves in relation to an object or a building derives from an interest in the embodied subject who moves around, through, or under an object, and uses a variety of sensory stimuli including vision and touch to understand both the object and their location in space. The parallels with Merleau-Ponty's conception of embodiment and the phenomenological concerns of the minimalist sculptors of the sixties are clear. However, Redpath arrived at this way of thinking through her reading of Jungian psychology with its emphasis on individuation, that is, the holistic integration of the conscious mind with the personal and collective unconscious.⁷ Redpath concluded that archetypal man-made forms such as the arch, the column, and the portal gate could, when introduced in a modernist cityscape, help to orient and reintegrate the alienated viewing subject with his or her contemporary surroundings.

To return to the *Treasury Fountain*, it now becomes apparent that the two bronze elements are doing more than simply contrasting with the surrounding architecture. They are in fact compensating for the arid late-modernism of the buildings by introducing the archetypal form of the arch. The arch, however, is but a ruin, with two disparate elements that remain, and ribbon-like jets of water extending towards each other in a futile attempt at reunification. This reading departs from previous interpretations, including James Gleeson's rather idiosyncratic vision of a naval battle and Ken Scarlett's comparison to primordial rock forms and antipodean predators.⁸ In 1969 Redpath wrote of her interest in 'a type of form indicating an invisible but nevertheless "felt" progression in space, an extension from an inner core, beyond the physical dimensions of the sculpture'.⁹ The fragmentary forms of the fountain leave little doubt as to the aptness of this statement; the water serves to extend the bronze elements beyond themselves, into space, attempting to link the forms, although the opposing jets of water ultimately never meet until submerged in the pool.

Where Redpath's formal language of the 1950s and early '60s derived largely from the Australian landscape, from the mid-1960s onwards it increasingly borrowed from and fragmented elements of classical architecture. A series of capital heads on columns of steel or spun cement formed the basis of three major commissions: *Suspended Column* (1968-71) for the Reserve Bank in Brisbane; *Flying Capital: the Sydney Dattilo Rubbo Memorial* (1970-74) for Melbourne University; and *Extended Column* (1972-75) for the ANU's School of Music. This last column is the most intimately related to its architectural site, both in its adoption of the ram horn as a symbol of the ancient origins of music and in terms of a morphological kinship with the Brutalist building's materials and structure.

Columns, arches, doors, gateways and caryatids continued to occupy Redpath into the 1980s, as evidenced in her draft manuscript, *Ideas and Images, Theatres of the Mind* (1985). In this she illustrated eleven series of ideas for potential development, each conceived as public work on a monumental scale. Her accompanying text set forth her ideal conditions for public commissions, based on her considerable experience of negotiating with commissioning

corporations, government agencies and universities, and adopted an unmistakable Jungian language:

... the ultimate success of a public work depends on the extent the 'originators' have been able to provide suitable framework to allow the depths of human psyche to be plumbed and needs placated (the 'collective unconscious' and the associated 'archetypal imagery').¹⁰

Unsurprisingly, some of the projects in *Ideas and Images* harken back to ancient standing stones (menhirs). Titled *Ecce Locus* (or 'Here is the Site'), this series of simple vertical forms was intended to draw attention to the viewer's bodily presence in a particular place at a particular time, regardless of the works having been designed in advance of an actual commission. The title derived at least partly from her reading of architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz, particularly his *Genius Loci, Paesaggio Ambiente Architettura* (1979). Interest in prehistoric stones and the rites associated with them was not unique to Redpath; many of the land art projects of the 1970s, as outlined in Lucy Lippard's *Overlay* (1983), were attempts to reconnect with communities via the *genius locus*, while vanguard modernists such as Brancusi and Moore had similarly been absorbed by the potential to recreate something of this aura through abstract form. In Australia, in the early 1960s, Clement Meadmore was similarly preoccupied with menhirs, however 'site' was of little interest to him, unlike Redpath's approach which was not only site-oriented but attuned to an embodied experience of both object and site.

1. Redpath's death garnered two obituaries and a small memorial notice erected beside her work, *Dawn Sentinel*, at the National Gallery of Victoria. See Ken Wach, 'Australian sculptor who was enamoured with Italy', *The Age*, 23 January 2013, p. 14, and Jane Eckett, 'Sculptor carved a niche in world art', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2-3 February 2013, p. 17.
2. Bernard Smith, 'Norma Redpath', *The Age*, 15 October 1963.
3. Norma Redpath, 'Notes on Approach to Commissioned Sculpture', 1969, artist's personal archive.
4. Redpath was a founding member of the Group of Four (1953-55) and Centre Five (1961-73); see Jane Eckett, *Renewed vows: Centre Five and the post-war remarriage of Melbourne sculptors and architects*, Australian Institute of Art History, Melbourne 2012.
5. Miwon Kwon, *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2002, p. 3.
6. Norma Redpath, 'Untitled note re work', single page typescript, June 1965, with handwritten addendum dated 1968, artist's personal archive.
7. As evident in *Norma Redpath: Ideas and Images, Theatres of the Mind, preliminary draft*, self-published, Melbourne, 1985.
8. James Gleeson, 'A masterpiece in water', *Sun Herald*, Sydney, 6 April 1969; Ken Scarlett, *Australian Sculptors*, West Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1980, p. 545. My reading of the fountain's 'fragmented arch' is supported by two unpublished statements by Redpath, in 1964 (the year before she was invited to submit a design for the fountain) and '65, the latter acknowledging friend/supporter Gordon Thomson's comment that the broken arch was 'right for this age'.
9. Norma Redpath, 'Notes on Approach to Commissioned Sculpture', 1969.
10. Redpath, 1985: p. 7.

Jane Eckett worked with Norma Redpath in 2010-11 as part of her current PhD thesis (University of Melbourne) on Centre Five, the group of seven sculptors that Redpath co-founded in 1961.