TRACKING

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with
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Trace Balla
Lynne Bird
Andrew Brown
Toby Coggle
Norm Cross
Roberto D'Andrea
Olaf Güttler
Darren (Squish) Hausler
Lizz (Sheriff) Heyes
Malcolm Just
Geoff Lowe
Mark Misic
Paul Nicholson
Kym (Pavalino) Parlis
Sarah Pears
Norberto Luis Sassounian
Laura Stuart
Katherine Twining
Hugh Waldron
Cheryl Wragg
South Melbourne Tram Depot staff
and anonymous public transport users

LINDEN
St. Kilda Arts Centre

AN ART PROJECT ON THE MELBOURNE TRAMWAYS

This exhibition presents a collection of expressions in response to the tramways of Melbourne and a speculation about its future. The exhibition has come into being through a process of articulating a fantasy of an unheard-of intervention into the streets of Melbourne. My fantasy is a *Tracking Vehicle* - a vehicle which is unimportant in itself, but one which has sustained my interest for the leverage of its possible effects.

Driven by my interest in art in the public realm, the project emerged from pondering the spatial zone which sweeps through the centre of Melbourne's streets. This space may be geographically framed by the material fabric of buildings and the tramways infrastructure. To be more precise to my interests, I have been imagining a fluidly framed body of space which extends through out the streets as if suspended mid-air. I have been seduced by contemplating how this ephemeral space of the street might accrue a trace of the events, stories and dreams which have filled it, such that this space may speak and be spoken to.

The physical qualities of Melbourne's streets currently receive much attention, for tangible things are comfortably negotiated in rationalist terms. The social space which inhabits the street - that space in which we as social beings live - is much more elusive to define in such terms. If a sense of value is broadened beyond those qualities which can be circumscribed, the pleasures of serendipity may inform a way in which our streets and our modes of transportation and communication could be dealt with so as to enjoy a deeper and more sustaining engagement with people. In an era of mass-media and telecommunications, people no longer have to travel in geographic territory to communicate, but they may choose to do so in order to experience the inimitable presence of social contact. The contemporary city is currently being challenged to nurture those qualities which make *being there* actually worthwhile.

In the process of articulating an imaginary vehicle, like Frankenstein's father, I have at various moments been delighted and horrified by the imagined consequences. In order to both enrich this area of inquiry and ground my own fantasy, over the past year I have developed a rewarding relationship with tramways workers and public transport users. A parrallel process of working has emerged out of this contact - one where the activities of speculation and consultation are enabled to conceptually inform each other. Through a variety of ways I have sought to encourage these collaborators to offer comment upon their own lives and the tramways and streets of Melbourne. This collection of impressions aims to provide some indication of real and imaginary social spaces which having lingered with people. *Tracking* explores how such impressions might be mapped onto the geographic terrain of our city, with the charm of ephemeral qualities.

PERFORMANCE CODE FOR A TRACKING VEHICLE

0.1   The *Tracking Vehicle* circulates about the metropolitan tram tracks of Melbourne twenty four hours a day, conforming to tram speeds and regulations. This is not a passenger vehicle: it is a vehicle which has no purpose other than to track.

0.2   The vehicle consists of an architecture of electronic hardware, physically dominated by large double-sided light-emitting Screens, and a structural architecture, visually derived from iconic elements of the (sub)urban landscape. The Screens of images and text span the length of the vehicle, parallel to the tram tracks, directing their pixilated light into the enclosure of the streetscape. Sound Cones are located on each side of the vehicle, projecting sounds into the spatial volume of the city.

0.3   A chance-factor-variable code programmed in the vehicle's on-board computer intelligence system determines the vehicle's Random Path of travel. Every four hours the vehicle briefly over-rides its Random Path and veers into the nearest tramways depot for the Changing Of The Driver. As the departing driver steps down from the cabin, the name of the new driver is drawn from a dynamic data-base of available depot drivers and scans across the vehicle's text screen in green light. It flashes yellow,

            flashes green, flashes yellow, scans across the screen...
            and the new driver locks the cabin door from the
            inside.

0.4   The *Tracking Vehicle* acts as an independent repository for the cultural life of Melbourne; a living museum accumulating a dynamic Digital Memory Bank of recorded images, text and sounds generated for particular sections of streetscape. The on-board computer intelligence system processes data from a variety of sensors enabling the vehicle to undertake its travel with a reflexive awareness of its location, immediate streetscape and its own performance. The vehicle's intelligence system is programmed to bring forth particular Tracks of images, text and sounds in specific relation to the streetscape through which the vehicle travels, such that the emitted images, text and sound behave in coded relationships of synchrony with the location of the vehicle and the speed of its movement. Unlike the cinematic form of film, the change and movement of images, text and sound is not restricted to one linear sequence, but is able to traverse multiple trajectories through its repository of digital Tracks of coded correspondence to sections of streetscape. The vehicle's intelligence system selects, processes and emits these tracks through the real-time processing of Performance Codes.
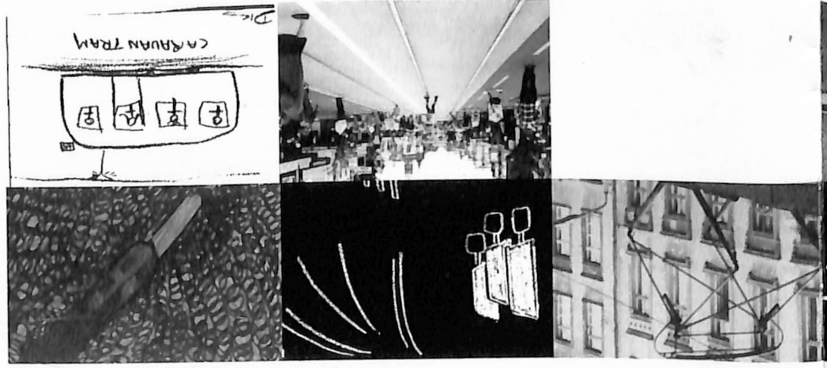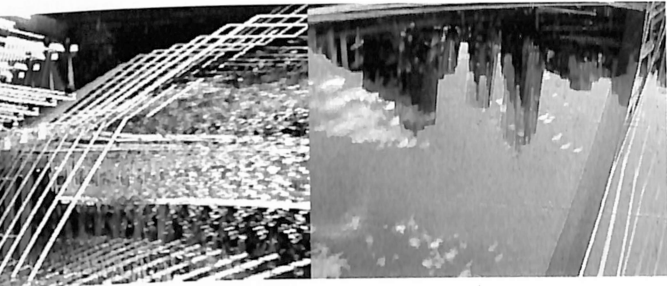
0.5   As the vehicle undertakes its Random Path of travel, text scrolls along the screen in direct proportion to the vehicle's movement, as though the passing vehicle brings into being words of illusionary spatial body that are statically suspended in the street air.

0.6   Images emitted by the vehicle's Screens undergo transformations of scale, type and speed of movement relative to the vehicle's travel speed and location. The speed of moving image constantly shifts in an inverse relationship to the vehicle's travel speed. At slow travel speeds, the emitted images move quickly - when the vehicle travels quickly the images move slowly. Images freeze on Screen as the vehicle passes through the intersection of streets, carried across the perpendicular street with ritualistic appearance, establishing a collection of ephemeral vistas attached to particular viewpoints within the city. As the vehicle roams the metropolis, images are stretched around street corners with a visualised exaggeration of concentric force, and shifted in scale in response to the width of the adjacent street and the depth of its built facades.

0.7   The vehicle's Sound Cones distribute sound laterally into the city, punctuating adjacent architectural volumes with resonance. Acoustic traces of past inhabitance and the interventions of musicians tune architectural volumes like instruments, folding sound back into the street. Laneways abruptly echo, utterances are recalled and stories muttered at tram stops and intersections as the vehicle wraps the city with reverberating nuances blurring the distinction between body and city.

0.8   The *Tracking Vehicle* acquires digital Tracks of imagery, text and sound corresponding to particular streetscapes through two parallel processes of generation. On one side is a Process Track which collaboratively generates image, text and sound through a reliance upon re-constructing the significance of particular places and streetscapes through community consultation and archival research. The other Process Track enables the speculative expression of artists commissioned to produce Tracks in correspondence with particular streetscapes. The Process Tracks remain parallel, over time generating multiple Tracks for each section of streetscape from which the vehicle may select, process and emit.

0.9   The *Tracking Vehicle* interacts with the interior space of the city; the city as it is inhabited, remembered and imagined. The vehicle articulates a language of space and time, a digital form of expression in dynamic interaction with the city. Its unpredictable movement and ever-changing accumulation and emission of imagery and sound relays a montage of historical events, collective memories, narratives and fantasies as though representing the unconscious of the city's dwellers; promoting experiences of the city not readily accessed in everyday life. An encounter with the vehicle is an unpredictable moment, never grasped in totality, only remembered in its absence. The vehicle's Tracks acquire a residual significance through their recurrent emission at particular places, building a form of ephemeral social architecture; an architecture of memory, imagination and fantasy.

Michael Douglas
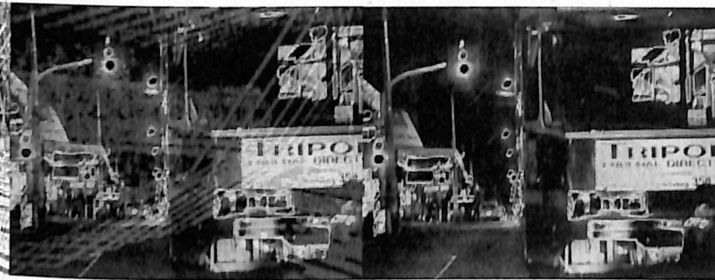
TRAMS AND ART

One of the best known renderings of a Melbourne tram is Albert Tucker's from his series *The Night Images* (originally *Images of Modern Evil*) from 1943-47. The image, from May 1945, shows two abstracted female forms (those paranoid, masculinist forms of Tucker's that will later evolve into fleshy starfish) dimly illuminated by the searching lights of an oncoming no. 6 tram. The bodies are naked and sprawling trackside. The tram approaches threateningly. It looks like a W class car and the no.6 – to those who know – runs city to Malvern.

The art historian Christopher Uhl remarks the painting's 'integrated pictorial surface':

the varied intensities and colours of the lights set up a vibration between foreground and background, and give to the inky blackness of the latter an indeterminate depth.

This painting by Tucker and its trite, formalist elaboration by Uhl is a perverse place to begin a discussion on *Tracking* since Michael Douglas' project is, in most respects, completely opposite the work of fine art. But to begin here will prove an important point: drawing the tram out of Tucker's 'indeterminate depths', undoing the joint work of craft, fine art appreciation and time which has helped seal the tram's fate in the canvas' resin. Let's say that the no.6 is now a new line and that we are rerouting an old piece of track to an imagined, utopian terminus; beyond the Malvern sheds and beyond the celebrated impressions of any single artist.

Of course, it's the conceit of all high art to impose an aesthetic on the interests of others. In *Night Image*, the interests of tram enthusiasts are doused by the dark pallette of Tucker such that the tram's precise class, rather than the work's pictorial depth, becomes the real 'indeterminate' *and* crucial issue. *Tracking* begins here first of all, in the assumption of alternative values: the values of the gunzel for whom details are everything, the values of drivers, conductors and passengers who travel the tramways, and the values of all the people involved in discussions, interviews, and workshops which comprised the consultative phases of the *Tracking* project.

Indeed, we are more interested in the class of tram than the 'haptic' space of Tucker's painting. But to stop here would have been too short a trip, simply replacing a connoisseurship of art with a conoisseurship of trams (a simple exchange which begot the painted tram in the 80s). *Tracking* also elaborates the complex potentials of the Melbourne tramways beyond their routine and common designation as transport. From the outset, aesthetics have been secondary to the primary aim of generating stories and discussion about Melbourne's tramways. As a community or collaborative project, *Tracking* honours the lived experience of Melbourne tramways and represents this experience as a kind of research into the ceremonial potential of public transport.

So there's no question of taking the car instead, or catching the train, since the project pursues the singularity of trams. 'Melbourne is the only major city of the English speaking world world to have retained its tramway system in tact.' (Or put another less skewed way, Melbourne has the fourth largest tramways system in the world.) The origins of the project lie in this simple, oft-stated fact. The motive for the project is perhaps bound to the extinction of trams elsewhere in Australia and the world and the drastic depletion of W class cars and conductors in Melbourne over recent years. The *Tracking Vehicle* envisages the renovation and extension of the present capacity of Melbourne tramways, but not to save connies or to protect extant tracks. Rather, for many more speculative reasons such as the unique experience of social space which trams provide, the recombination of social classes which they assist, the ritual of public procession and parade which they embody, and the geographical definition of community they provide.

This ulterior, lived experience of trams proves their elaborate social purpose beyond mere transportation (and many more than commuters have an opinion on trams). These potentials of the tramways converge in the imaginary *Tracking Vehicle* described by Douglas and sketched in the video by Douglas and Lawrence Wallen; a curious projection of trammie fantasy and urban design. The *Vehicle* does not take passengers. Rather its only purpose is to reflect the community it traverses in meaningful (primarily audio-visual) ways. It winds its way along the seams of the city, stitching the urban fabric together with a combination of image and sound, imbricating social geography with individual stories and experiences. At this basic level the *Tracking Vehicle* seems like the soul of a Melbourne tram – an apparition of the immediate public experience of trams – wrought by fancy, expertise and social conscience into a proposition about the city we live in.

Could it be true, can it be realised? While certain tendencies in digital representation, computer programming and even artifical intelligence circumscribe its possibility, I prefer to think of the *Vehicle* as a tram which has died and gone to heaven (which, incidentally, is the spectre which initiates and continues to haunt Douglas' idea). Like the utopian propositions of former avant-gardes (the Situationists' on walking (dérive) or the Futurists on driving) the *Tracking Vehicle* is most successful as a radical or alternative cipher of ordinary transit; a concept which reveals some of the extraordinary potential stored in everyday life. It is perhaps everything about the tram but travel.

Stuart Koop

TRACKS
WERE ~~EXISTED~~
BEFORE TRAMS
WERE INVENTED.
FIRST MADE OF WOOD,
LATER OF STEEL.
IN ~~ADVERSE~~ ~~WITH~~
WEATHER CONDITIONS
THEY CHANGE SHAPE.
AFTER A WHILE
SOMETIMES TRAMS
JUMP OFF THE
TRACKS

TRACKING
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