

Anglesea Phantoms – a long view review

Anglesea Phantoms was a two-week outdoor guerrilla art event instigated on Wadawurrung Country in September 2021 by local artist Pattie Beerens. Pattie intended to offset the frustration and despondency that artists felt after the multiple cancellations of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The seaside town of Anglesea was transformed into a kind of guerrilla sculpture park. By collaborating with Pattie and the local community sixteen artists enacted a choreographed performance of freedom.

The name ‘phantom’ denotes in this specific context both the artists, and the small sculptures that they placed in the world. The event functioned as a momentary shift of focus, a reprieve, and a replenishment at a time of extraordinary adversity.

Pattie Beerens’ practice is diverse, often shifting and mutating. She has described it as ‘finding public places to inhabit as art’. Working with raw clay, fibre, and other collaborators, Pattie responds to materials (including places and people) rather than attempting to control them. In the process she and her collaborators intra-act in three-dimensional ‘drawings’, woven through space in a sort of a fluid dance.

Pattie’s work does not belong in a gallery. It can be seen in the context of the sorts of conceptual, performance and process-based work that began in the 1970s in Australia with artists like Benita Ely and Mike Parr, or the ephemeral gatherings and events of Social Practice art that emerged from the 1990s. Her present work however is most aligned with the New Materialisms, a critique that emerged across the social sciences and humanities in the nineties. New Materialists like political theorist and philosopher, Jane Bennet, and Material Feminist Stacy Alaimo posit a post-humanist idea of matter as lively or exhibiting agency. They raise questions about the centrality of humans in a material world.

Pattie works with ideas of vulnerability, and experimentation as a way of being. She posits her work within the world of uncertain happenings and invites human collaborators to participate with a welcoming sense for the unplanned. *Anglesea Phantoms* was an extension of Pattie’s studio practice, where, for months, she had been thinking about and experimenting with masks, and the idea of the veil of anonymity.

Pattie’s immense intellect is always at work as she actively and vigorously engages with the world. She says:

My ethos for inhabiting place decentres the human and repositions it in an ecosystem of materials.

to be collected (clay, seaweed, branches, friends, stones)

to be grown (crystals, plants, connections)

to be entangled (plant dyes, bio plastics, alchemy, place)

to be gathered (textiles, string, wool, people, ideas)

to be treasured (stories, relations, collaborations, kin)

- to be mattering.

The phantom challenge

Anglesea Phantoms was a deftly executed project that introduced other artists to the frameworks in which Pattie works in her practice. The artist phoned local artists she thought may be interested in

collaborating one Sunday in September 2021, with a proposal. She would deliver to their door a woven ephemeral head form as the basis on which to create a sculpture. The resulting work was to be placed outdoors somewhere special to each artist, in Anglesea and its surrounds, a week later, on the evening of the full moon. The works were to remain in place for two weeks, and the artists were to remain anonymous. Only Pattie and the artist was to know where the works had been located.

With Pattie's proposal came the challenges that accompanies the production of public art: loss of self, and the relinquishing of ideas of control. Her proposal also required anonymity of the artists; and ephemerality of the art works including vulnerability to theft, vandalism, wildlife, and the weather. It also required working with a pre-determined form, mostly outside the artist's chosen practice, and with no prospect of commercial benefit. The conversations between Pattie and the artists, she reports, sometimes started with concerns about anonymity and commerce, but moved on quickly to a place of generosity, as the artists reflected on their work and what they do.

The spirit of the project was that of a gift from the artists to the community. Fifteen other artists (and Pattie herself) accepted the challenge, with a total of twelve phantoms created.

A choreographed performance

Anglesea Phantoms was a choreographed dance in seven acts.

- 1 Pattie moulds 12 loosely woven forms, of dodder laurel vine, and raw clay, coloured with food dyes.
- 2 She delivers the forms to the artist's doorsteps.
- 3 The artists create a 'costume' for their phantom
- 4 ... and place them around town in settings of their choice.
- 5 Walkers and their dogs enter the stage, in small numbers at first, then in slightly larger numbers, moving from sculpture to sculpture
- 6 The cyber commons lights up. An online conversation ensues, and a map of the works is produced
- 7 Artists lift up their phantoms and carry them from the stage.

Sites/subjects/contexts

The site and subject choices made by the artists highlight not only the awe and wonder of the natural environment, but also the unique rhythms, of this place.

One work sheds light on the history of resistance to development by environmentalists in the Anglesea Heath and the Otways. These campaigns coalesce every year or two in response to constant development pressures. Located in the Edna Bowman Reserve, this ground-level work told the story of the day Edna lay down in front of a bulldozer to prevent the flattening of the remains of the Moonahs, *Melaleuca lanceolata*, on the south bank of the river variously known as *Kuarka Dorla*, Swampy Creek and Anglesea River. Ninety percent of Coastal Moonah Woodlands in Victoria have been cleared, and the remainder are under threat from weeds and development, according to the website of the 50-year strong ANGAIR (Anglesea, Aireys Inlet Society for the Preservation of Flora and Fauna). This work can also be seen in the context of a recent world-wide movement that

highlights the ‘connections between people, plants and place’, with the Australian journal ‘wonderground’ doing so brilliantly.

Another poignant piece draws attention to the Bass Strait as a site of hundreds of thousands of immigrant journeys. The caged heart hanging in a tree at Loveridge Lookout was made by a local Irish immigrant artist. Lisa Hannigan’s ‘Song of the Sea’ from the soundtrack of the Irish animated film of the same name was linked to the work via the attached QR code and brings a keening sense of yearning for family and friends across the sea in Ireland. The work reminds us of the maritime history of this treacherous coast, and its status as the most important shipping route in Australia before the incision of the Suez Canal. The sometimes tragic and terrifying stories of early sea voyages are not often told in the idyllic atmosphere of everyday life in a beach resort. Talk of the ocean’s swell is often heard only among surfers searching for ‘a wave’. The 2021 awarding of the rich ARI Historical Novel Prize to local author Jock Serong’s book ‘The Burning Island’ is a recognition of the importance of these stories and memories embedded in this place. The novel illuminates the brutal interactions of seafarers, sealers, and the First Nations inhabitants of the forgotten Bass Strait islands.

On a lighter note, the humorously jarring placement of the Elton John phantom in a grove of flowering grass trees beautifully mashes together a sense of reverence and life’s everyday absurdity. We value not only nature but also our air pods on our daily walks and bike rides.

In ‘normal’ times, the slowed down pace and proximity to friends allows for the relaxed rhythm of small-town social life. Two artists honoured the customary catch up for a coffee by placing their phantoms outside their favourite local cafes. Along with the rest of the world, Anglesea mourned the loss of community interaction during lockdown.

Public art, public space, and the pandemic

In an age when monolithic cultural assumptions are no longer viable, permanent monuments and sculptures seems less valuable than temporary public art projects that respond to place and circumstance.

Temporary projects like Anglesea Phantoms involve playful wandering and social interaction in public spaces. Actions such as this bring attention to the possibilities of communal, often non-commercial spaces and have proliferated around the world during the pandemic. Urban play has assumed a significant role as a low-risk, therapeutic form of interaction in an era of social distance.

Focus on the local intensified during the pandemic as individuals’ movement was restricted. Our social lives have adapted, when walking with a friend was the only face-to-face option. Anglesea Phantoms participants repeatedly commented upon their renewed connection with local places as well as coming to know local places for the first time.

Cyber commons – the start of the conversation

The close relationship between public space ‘in real life’ and the digital commons and our constant oscillation between the two, has been accentuated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There was a rapid uptake of the Anglesea Phantoms project on the much-loved Anglesea Life Facebook page. This well moderated page has sanctions on political content and regular posts of

sunrise and nature pics, along with the usual events and lost keys and proved a fruitful site for the project.

The event was designed to be a surprise for the local community and Pattie expected that word would spread through Anglesea Life. As opposed to promoting the event through the local Facebook page, Pattie invited artists to 'let it be a community-led work'. It is usual now to share on social media immediately after an artwork is installed to encourage audiences to participate, and Pattie's intentional disruption of this norm proved uncomfortable for some artists.

Social media, though, was a part of the project, part of her preferred mode of capturing engagement and 'seeing what happens'. As Pattie said this 'could have gone either way'. The conversation proved to be overwhelmingly supportive and non-judgmental. Pattie likened the social media conversations to intermission at the theatre, 'when the networking and conversations happen'.

Part way through the project a real-life intervention happened that produced brief outrage, in among the celebration of Anglesea Phantoms. One of the pieces was removed from the Greater Otways National Park by a Parks Victoria employee a few days before the project's end-date. The Facebook conversation about the intervention was useful in that it started many safe real-life conversations around the strict rules that govern this specific type of public land.

To engage with the community anonymously (including on social media), Pattie set up Anglesea Phantom Instagram and Facebook pages, as well as a website with maps and links. QR codes were added to each of the artworks, allowing a multi-media dimension with artists using music, videos, images, poems, and stories to add richness and depth to their works. Pattie saw the cyber-driven content of Anglesea Phantoms as being 'more about the stories of connection with place and each other than about the art-works'.

Anglesea Phantoms was emphatically local. It was able to shed light on how the well-being of this little community (like all communities) relies on connection. It provided a low-risk space for social interaction within the limits of public health orders and honoured our most important shared connections - with place and with other life forms.

Sally Groom is an emerging arts writer most interested in experiential visual and performance works that nail a mood or shift perception.

