

Place, Practice, Politics

Esther Anatolitis

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The First Peoples of Australia are the world's oldest continuing culture. Their sovereignty has never been ceded. This book was written on the lands of the **Boon Wurrung, Bunurong** and **Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung** people of the **Eastern Kulin Nation**. Some of the work it draws on was written on the lands of the **Gadigal** people of the **Eora Nation**, on **Wangkatja** lands, on **Ngunnawal, Ngambri** and **Ngarigu** lands, and on the lands of the **Dja Dja Wurrung**. I honour and respect your Traditional Owners and Elders past and present.

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Introduction: Where to Live, How to Live, How Best to Live

Place, practice and politics are what define us.

Where to live? How to live? How best to live?

These questions can ground us deeply – but they can also unsettle us profoundly, exposing the conflicts at the very heart of who we are.

Our relationships to home, neighbourhood, society, environment and country are complex, especially at their most intricate intersection: the civic space. What agency do we have in the situations where we contest ideas, make decisions and create our culture? What collaborations are we complicit in? What do we passively condone? What futures are we designing by default?

What are we just too busy to participate in – what escapes our attention? What relies on that distraction? How can we incorporate an active civic engagement into our professional and creative practice – into our everyday lives?

The world keeps taking shape around us.

As our work evolves, distant decisions shape our lives. And if it's not our voices shaping our future, it's somebody else's:

somebody with the resources and connections to pursue specific interests rather than the public good. Probably a lot of somebodies. Most likely, right when we're in the middle of getting on with everything that keeps us too busy to think through all the consequences.

Artists, architects and designers are in a unique position to shape our culture. It's what we do. It's all we do. Yet despite all the

ways we create and communicate compelling work, we're not inspiring meaningful engagement with the civic realm, nor are we leading by example. We're not prominent in our national conversations, despite the many ways in which we create those public spaces.

In Australia, as in many parts of the world, this has been a time of significant political change. Greatly valued cultural institutions have been undermined or dismantled. Hateful voices have been legitimated. Disadvantage has deepened. Under the cover of pandemic response, all of this has accelerated, further eroding the civic realm across public media, academia, social safety nets, arts and culture. And we've all been even busier, desperately focused on working out how to get through at all.

This little book is not offered as a memoir, nor a personal reflection, but rather, as an incomplete record of work focused on unknown publics and unknown futures, of wanting to be more political at a time when things keep getting in the way.

It chronicles two decades of contributions to a broad set of public discussions, from a range of different standpoints – from leading small non-profits in the arts, independent and public media, as well as academic and creative work in architecture and design. Alongside my professional obligations, I've remained committed to civic engagement as its own set of duties, essentially interconnected.

With only a little discrimination, I have brought some pieces together for the first time, integrating and annotating to situate them once more in that day-to-day juggle for primacy – and then, jettisoning that imperative, creating instead a whole new set of relationships.

This effect can be jarring, but everyday life is jarring. Taking leaps across spatial, creative, professional and political work, this is an unsettling text. Distractions become key focuses as the political comes to fore – and as the impossibility of the politically neutral position once again becomes devastatingly clear.

Most unexpectedly, this also creates a hospitality: a private environment made public for the purpose of welcoming us back in, treating me like a stranger to be re-aculturated, and you as my guest in this tentative space.

Among those selections there are also critical pieces about art and its value. Creative works; projects; lists; critiques; reflections. Because we cannot remind ourselves often enough about the value of art in our lives. And maintaining a creative practice is always an exercise in disciplined engagement.

So which is the primary practice and which is the minor? The very question is a violence. Let's dismiss it. After all, what are the culture wars, if not that very question? The deliberate reframing of what we value; the attempt to delegitimise that value; worse, to weaponise it. To co-opt, to undermine, to attack. To relegate as minor.

And yet, at the same time, the culture wars are always inadvertently empowering – a political own goal. They recognise art's great power to make our hearts leap from our chests into collective strength. Nationalism fabricates this cultural unity – or at least, it tries its best to propose the myths and symbols that might constitute a nation. And it always fails, because it persists in underestimating the collective strength that can only come from diversity. Actively creating our own culture, and living comfortably with its uncertainties, its interstices, its generative tensions. Every attempt to confect cultural unity fails, no matter how “one and free”¹ it might dictate us to be.

This work is offered as a handbook for integrating that engagement into our daily practice. It includes tactics for finding the language, the outlet, the moment. Exhortations that pin the ineffable value of contemporary culture onto a specific industry or political issue. Moments of articulation that can stimulate active participation, active engagement, active citizenship.

Because what truly grounds us the most are the very tensions that unsettle us – and unless we engage them directly, we will continue to jeopardise our place, our practice and our politics.

It's one particular perspective, of course, one embodied in queer feminism. A Melburnian perspective, a Greek-Australian perspective. A private citizen with a public ethic – one that draws on millennia of philosophical enquiry and political debate.

It's also a commitment. A public commitment to the future we are creating together right now, you and I. In writing this, I am making a commitment to you, and you to me. It doesn't matter that we don't know one another. You already know that reading is not a passive activity. You're going to flip forward and back, scribble your notes, follow threads, begin recognise them in your own day-to-day, and find your own voice. Perhaps you too will be in a position to make a personal commitment to the future we design together.

Together, let's recognise those moments of decision we are always facing about where and how to live, and how best to live – let's recognise them as generative moments from which to act.

Where, for you, is that action?

Where is your place? What is your practice? How, why, when are your politics? Would you recognise them if you saw them?

There's no ideal, restful time; no equilibrium from which to act. We don't have to wait.

We can act from a place of imbalance.

We can unsettle our equilibrium to ground our actions.

Unless we can make that small commitment – to question, to participate, speak, to share – then the bigger things won't change.

Engagement as an Ethic and a Practice

What does the Australian Research Council's Engagement and Impact framework have in common with the Bauhaus? This was the framing question of Engagement, the 2019 Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools Conference, offering a productive way to contextualise social, intellectual and political engagement within the most impactful creative legacy the world has ever known.

My keynote spoke of the formative time I spent at the Bauhaus two decades ago, working with a globally engaged interdisciplinary team on design-led solutions to complex C21st problems, and also of my recent return visit, assessing a legacy not of design objects but practices and methodologies. I spoke of engagement as an ethic and a practice, asking what the artists, designers and citizens of the future need from all of us right now:

A PIVOTAL TIME

Right now is a pivotal time in Australia's history: a turning point for social cohesion, the environment and democracy, demanding an active and engaged public – while instead our prime minister prizes as model citizens the “quiet Australians” and “quiet shareholders” who aren't interested in “Canberra bubble” questions, don't express their values through “indulgent and selfish” advocacy, and aren't “complaining about their rights.”²

Of course, anyone who claims a politically neutral position is in fact making a politically radical claim: that the model citizen is unimaginative and uncritical, subdued and inert.

Afraid of what we make possible, politicians undermine our ability to conduct work that's in the public interest, attack our expertise and ridicule our achievements.

It's no surprise then that confidence in politicians and trust in democracy is in perilous decline, as has been characterised

authoritatively by the Grattan Institute, Ipsos and the Museum of Australian Democracy, and there's even a Parliamentary Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy investigating what's at stake for Australia's future.

Politicians and parliaments are trailing artists, designers and academics who are at the forefront in confronting the most pressing questions of our time.

We need artists, designers, architects, planners, academics, scientists and policy-makers working together with rigour and with urgency.

We need creative education to offer activating glimpses into the histories and the futures that frame this urgency. Just like the political conscience that framed the cross-disciplinary work of the Bauhaus, we need to cultivate a generation of resilient makers with the resourcefulness to create a confident future. We need to engage well beyond our immediate communities, and we need to make that engagement a shared ethic, a daily practice.

HOW MIGHT YOU TAKE ENGAGEMENT AS ETHIC AND A PRACTICE INTO YOUR RESEARCH AND YOUR TEACHING?

Sometimes when things seem the most insurmountable, we feel the need to make drastic changes to our lives – to change something really big – when in fact the most profound changes are made at the smallest scale. Breathing. Eating well. Exercising. Reflecting. Talking to one another. The healthy daily practice that gives you focus and resilience. Critiquing your ethics and examining your practices.

Engage first with yourself, and then with the world. Fit your own oxygen mask before helping others.

Give students the professional practice tools they need to engage meaningfully with the world. Make sure that students graduate not only as artists and designers, but as workers and citizens who know how to navigate the industrial landscape that's make or break for their work.

Include arts and cultural institutions, community organisations, unions, workers, the media, think tanks, industry bodies and other civic actors in your thinking and in your work. Welcome the voices that aren't in the room – First Nations first. Consider ways of engaging with disabled people, people of cultures and genders different to yours, people from regional areas – ways that are much smaller than say an ARC Linkage.

Make daily media engagement a part of your research practice, articulating the relationship or dissonance between your work and what makes news. Incorporate functional media literacy as part of your teaching. Triage and debrief on your media consumption and political engagement as part of collegiate daily practice.

We need to get better at articulating the impossibility of the politically neutral position, so that we're ready to argue against it when it's used against us.

Actively orient students and colleagues to the civic aspects of their work. Nurture criticality in multiple modes, across multiple discourses. Artists and designers create public work. We need to make sure that they're conscious and critical of their own role in determining what future publics are capable of.

And lead from where you are. So that you're teaching artists and designers – but nurturing future citizens. You're researching art and design – but nurturing future democracy.

WHAT'S AT STAKE IF WE FAIL?