

SCAPE 2006 *don't misbehave!* brings recent developments in international art to the public spaces of Christchurch, New Zealand. Curated by Natasha Conland (New Zealand) and Susanne Jaschko (Germany), the theme alludes to the ways in which art subverts our perceptions of public space and looks for alternative and active ways of engaging with this public sphere.

SCAPE 2006 *don't misbehave!* welcomes more than forty-five emerging and established artists from around the world, selected for their ability to playfully break our assumed rules for behaviour in public space, thereby making us reconsider aspects of our contemporary existence.

The resulting artworks are interspersed around the city centre over a six-week period, including an incisive and stimulating exhibition at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu.

This is the fourth SCAPE biennial in Christchurch. It has become a major international event in the Asia-Pacific region, and part of a network of rapidly evolving contemporary arts festivals in our geographic neighbourhood. The biennial forges links between New Zealand and global artists and communities, allowing local audiences to experience international art in public space.

[www.scapebiennial.org.nz](http://www.scapebiennial.org.nz)

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DON'T  
MISBEHAVE!

SCAPE 2006  
BIENNIAL OF ART IN PUBLIC SPACE

30 September – 12 November 2006  
Christchurch, New Zealand

# DON'T MISBEHAVE!

## Public space as a site for contemporary art

Natasha Conland and Susanne Jaschko

This year for the first time, SCAPE has an encompassing thematic direction. Its title, *don't misbehave!*, is an ironic directive, and while hardly descriptive of the works in the exhibition it is a strong tonal statement that develops potency in the context of art in public space. Our discussion for thematic direction emerged during curatorial meetings in early 2006, as it became increasingly clear that our interest was in facing head-on the contingencies involved in inserting contemporary art in public space. We talked about the increasing activation of that space by artists, as well as engaging audiences in discussions on the nature of the public sphere. However, rather than seeking commentary on contemporary issues of art in public space, we were interested in art that contended with the actualities of that space, either by playing with and pushing the rules and regulations of that space, seeking intervention or alteration of it, or re-imagining it through artistic practice. Importantly, the thematic direction was also developed with a focus on site-specificity and site-relatedness during our curatorial residency in Christchurch, mindful of the conditions of inserting art into this actual locality.

*don't misbehave!* incorporates two distinct experiences through the new temporary outdoor projects and the indoor exhibition. More than half of the artists in the biennial have produced new work specifically for *don't misbehave!*. Of these, twenty new artworks draw attention to the idea of public space as a democratic and active sphere to which everybody can contribute. Sited throughout the Cultural Precinct in Christchurch, these works have been chosen for the variety of ways in which they approach public space. The temporary nature of these works provides an opportunity to think differently about working in public space, resulting in an array of non-concrete materials, light interventions and unexpected performances.

The indoor exhibition at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu draws together works focusing on behaviour in public space from a variety of positions. While not created for exhibition in public space, they reveal the experience and expectation of that space in contemporary life. Seven new works were made on site in Christchurch as an artistic response to the *don't misbehave!* theme. These works resonate with the unspoken aspects of public space and the mythological or fictional aspects of the local urban area. Still others engage with the conventions of behaviour within this and other urban areas. All works in the exhibition provide ample opportunity for reflecting upon the changing nature of this area we define as shared space, creating grounds for unruly artistic behaviour.



The following paragraphs resulted from continued discussions around these issues of contemporary artistic practice engaging with public space. Perceived as non-linear passages of thought, they outline the thematic playground on which we have built this year's biennial, and offer a context of light of which the works can be 'read' from two individual but shared points of view.

One unexpected characteristic of public space is its sense of tension. When considering public space, one might expect to be confronted by ideas of expansiveness, acceptance, liberality and democratic functioning. These are all there as messages, but they also are reminders of certain restrictions, whether they are civic or self-imposed. Partly because the mutability of public space was the theme of a documentary I made in late 2005, an instance of this strange juxtaposition of expansion and restriction stood out for me. The prompt was a documentary featuring local graffiti artists, a stereotyped begrudging elderly man and community watchdogs. What struck me about this documentary were the two intractable halves to the argument. On the one hand, we saw the graffiti artists vouching for their activity as art, not illegitimate; and on the other, a frustrated elderly man. This man painted graffiti everyday, not only on his own fence and private property, but also on public walkways. It seemed to me that despite the tendency to stereotyping these positions, the documentary captured several crucial aspects of the perception of public space. Firstly, that if individuals are to make alterations to public space it is assumed that they ought to be of some 'value' – therefore 'art' is more absolving than other kinds of activity. Secondly, that there is a contradiction in us as individuals who make up a public. The anxiety of both 'sides' – the graffiti artists and the man painting corrections – stems from the fact that ownership of public space is expressly desired, but somehow beyond our individual control.

Without making too much of this piece of television or its assumptions, it seems to me that these contradictions are at the heart of our understanding of public space. In an exhibition project that features art in public space, it is important to understand that these contradictions are not aroused through that action, but are there to begin with. The action of inserting, intervening or engaging art with the space merely activates those contradictions and tensions.

SJ: Looking at the present definitions of public space, it struck me that there is not one that really considers the heterogeneity of this particular space. The definition I found most intriguing was at the same time the simplest, and to me perfectly illustrated the dilemma of public space and its definitions: public space is always surrounded by private space, it exists only in this duality. Unlike most definitions, this characterisation accentuates neither the debatable issue of free accessibility nor governmental ownership – both of which can equally be seen as a criteria of public space. Instead, it highlights the interface between private and public spheres, and thus evokes a true and helpful picture of a fluid space with permeable boundaries that cannot be understood as an abstract, isolated and disconnected space.


During this year's soccer World Cup in Germany, the permeability between private and public space was on display in a way that is not often seen. In dense urban environments, people turned their private spaces – backyards, gardens and living rooms – into public viewing venues that anybody could join. Even those who did not own a projector proved inventive, placing their televisions on their windowsills, turning them around and providing seats on the pavement for passers-by. Flags from almost all participating nations fluttered on balconies, were attached to cars and hung at windows. What became obvious at this particular moment was that people (still) feel the urge to connect themselves to the public and to engage with a partly unknown community. It also brought back the idea of public space as a space for socialisation, a meeting place, and demonstrated strongly that public space is much more than the square or the park; public space is wherever people actively open up private space to the public.



While *don't misbehave!* responds to the site in which it inhabits, cannot claim intimacy with that site. The curatorial position does stem from local insight as neither of the curators are local to Christchurch. Our curatorial response was, however, sensitive to the constructions of place: official, fictional, mythological and personal. A response, consciously or not, guided a certain amount of artistic position, with several of the newly commissioned works for *don't misbehave!* dealing directly with these recognised constructions of locality. In addition, local participation has been sought through many of the project proposals. Emil Goh's *Mapkin Christchurch* is the result of observation and conversation with local inhabitants about the way they individualise their city; Kah Bee Chow's *Afterlife (V.H.)* mapped a shortlist of sites known locally as suicide sites; Sriwhana Spang's *Strip* is inspired by the resonance of the Avon river within the central city – its very Englishness infused with Balinese psychedelia; Allan's *Tales Illustrated* utilises community offerings of crimes and misdemeanours within the central marketplace; Mladen Bizumic's *Why Heaven Knows* is a play on the name of the cathedral city, built on super flat plains with an ever-present sky. Even Simon Denny's *Feels within wheels* borrows its preliminary structure from the iconic Cock Fountain in the Botanic Gardens. Martin Creed's *Work No. 101*, a line of trees and shrubs in the city plots, also aligns with the founding of the Garden City, while making sly reference to the legacy of Public Art's relationship to forms of public garden and monument. A row of native and imported trees also cleverly evokes Land Art works famously characterised by Joseph Beuys' 1982 tree planting. By association, it also reveals some of the tensions of public art as noted by Klaus Bußmann's famous statement, "Better to have no art than bad art in public places, better just to plant a few trees."




SJ: On the surface, Christchurch is a tidy and picturesque city. In comparison to European metropolitan cities where graffiti and squatted buildings are commonplace, where people dress in experimental ways and express highly individual lifestyles in urban space, Christchurch impresses by its virtual 'non-urbanity'. *don't misbehave!* alludes to this; but more than that, it is an investigation into what site-specificity means in times of globalisation, and what impact that has on the relationship of an artwork to its site. Several projects in this biennial have been realised before in other cities around the world – such as Otto Karvonen's works, *Here Will Open* and *Urban Space Occupation Kit*, Choi Jeong-Hwa's *Happy Happy* and Inges Idee's public space intervention *Dein Problem / Your Problem*. Repeated and recontextualised in Christchurch for *don't misbehave!*, these works take on a local aspect – not just because of their new situation, but also revealing fresh meaning under the responsive gaze of a new audience. *Urban Space Occupation Kit* has been conceived as a series of minimal performative interventions in public space, all executed in the same way but by different participating individuals in various European cities and now in Christchurch. While not site-specific in the traditional sense, the individual responses of puzzled passers-by and the architectural and urban designs of the chosen sites influence each realisation of the work immensely. Looking at the *don't misbehave!* work in the context of Karvonen's global series, *Urban Space Occupation Kit* reveals Christchurch's specifics, such as the high percentage of transient visitors of Asian origin and the frequent occurrence of construction sites on local streets. The twofold title of *Dein Problem / Your Problem*, an installation featuring what appears to be an abandoned car pumping out music at high volume, alludes to an earlier installation in Berlin, during which it was taken over by kids from the neighbourhood. The same project in Christchurch has so far caused a variety of quite different responses – it has been almost towed away by the local authority, had windows smashed and the stereo stolen. Projects such as these can be understood as seismographs sensitively tracking tensions in the local community.



NC: *don't misbehave!* has a strong voice. As a figure of speech it is unauthored and therefore reminiscent of the kinds of impersonal authority common to civic spaces. It is also parental, ironically depositing art and its audiences to the role of misbehaving and unruly children within a regulated sphere. Although the role of artists as outsiders, delinquents and irrational others was common to the modern era, certainly it is uncommon within the territory of Public Art, which almost by categorisation meets with a degree of civic consensus and authority. On the other hand, because Public Art is beholden to larger authorities, it arguably highlights a dynamic existing in all forms of artistic realisation. The interesting point of departure for a biennial of art in public space is that it touches on issues paramount to public space – resource consents, public authorities, planning approvals, civic processes, commercial, public and private property – yet its motivations are impermanency. The artists and artworks in *don't misbehave!* respond to the norms of public space, while conscious that their work does not need approval in the long-term. It is responsive without needing to withstand change – either physical or social.

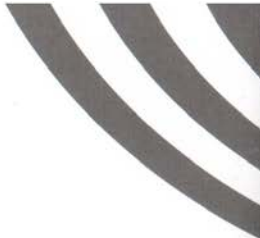
In responding to the opportunity to make temporal interventions into public space, we chose to include a number of performance-based works that require immediate participation and integration with their locality and audience, and disperse when either the audience or artist departs. While sculpture parks and walkways continue to bloom, *don't misbehave!* provides an opportunity for much needed biennial revision of some of the motivations that prejudge a particular kind of artistic practice in public space. It allows art to misbehave within those conventions, while remaining open enough to see what arises. It is not an antagonistic agenda, but rather an attempt to give licence to artists and audiences to work differently within the parameters of public and urban space. Inevitably, future biennials will continue to question the interest and validity of dialogue with this public.





sj: While the term 'art in public space' (Kunst im öffentlichen Raum) became commonplace in the late 1980s, art historians cannot agree who introduced it for the first time. However, the term quickly spread because it was useful as an antithesis to 'Public Art' and the German term 'Kunst am Bau', the latter specifically describing art commissioned for new public buildings and dating from gloomy times in German history of the twentieth century. Today, 'art in public space' is a catchphrase that embraces all artistic practices taking form in public space, be it performance-related work, painting, installation art, new media art or sculpture. As much as these practices differ in their processes and results, in most cases they share a common feature working within urban public space – a challenging environment to artists, provoking individual responses to its complex construction as representative, historic, social and political space.

Contemporary art often seems to be responding to dysfunction, in particular to the absurd and useless, revealing the contradictory and the obstructive in a constructed world. Artists choosing public space as a site for production and presentation of their art not only reflect and comment on the nature of a particular space, but also draw our attention to possible alternatives of dealing with it. *don't misbehave!* picks up on these alternatives to a conventional understanding and use of public space – especially those artworks and projects that are conceived to temporarily live in the streets, parks, squares and public buildings of Christchurch, and which suggest to us a less restricted and more active involvement with public space. These artworks interpret public space as dynamic, in which they become integral parts. For six weeks they appear in the city as physical and ephemeral interventions in order to invigorate our ways of thinking about public space.



NC: Over the last ten years we have seen an interest or return to participatory practices of the 1970s. One characteristic of this new participation is that where activism was a strategy in the past, it is now used as a tool for engagement without invoking a political terrain per se. Therefore, art in public space has again become an interesting platform for trialing engagement, ostensibly due to its ability to address art's widest public. However, what we see right now in moving through so-called relational form is a re-interest in material evidence. Of the artists in *don't misbehave!*, it was apparent that even through minor intervention there was a quantifiable interest in the formal properties of the work. Even in its lack of visibility, participation was accepted as part of the behaviour of art in public space. Strategies were there less to enthusiastically engage audiences, than to lay bare the basics of encounter. Rather than consider the nature of 'art in public space', these artists were interested in the potentiality of that space along with its glaring parameters. While in the museum we arguably still protest for art's freedoms, by contrast the interest in public space stems from its very obvious restrictions and conventions, thereby allowing for a certain kind of problem solving, both formal and conceptual. After all, art does not function in order to engage, it explores that function. In other words, its usefulness is not solely in its engagement. Today, where aspects of public space seem so apparently in malfunction, this territory has the greatest possibility for the exploration of the latency of art.

SJ: Public space as a natural site for art production and presentation is popular with contemporary artists for many reasons. However, public space is not simply an alternative to gallery space – as proved by a couple of *don't misbehave!* artists who locate their artworks in both spheres, thus taking utmost advantage of their prevailing conditions. Urban public space is complex, enormously dynamic, highly constructed and controlled, and as such it challenges artists come up with concepts that can compete with, and even exploit, the specific environment.

It is often assumed that one of the prevailing motives for working in public space is the search for a new audience – but an unprepared and uninformed public audience is tricky and easily missed. Art critic Paul Ardenne sceptically stated that “the public perceives less the conceptual dimension of the artwork but its quality as spectacle which it is offering”. While Ardenne is understandably concerned about public perception of art in the context of the role of public institutions governing public space, public perception seems to be of less interest to artists working in public space. Even if an artwork placed in the open space of a city is seen by more people than it would be in an art institution, it still involves an individual process of perception. Through the artwork, the artist does not communicate to a mass of passers-by but with each individual – even in cases where a mass experience of the artwork is intended. With this in mind, city councils and committees involved in furnishing urban centres with public art might do better to consider more closely the dialogue generated by an artwork at the level of the individual instead of trying to assume the general public's reaction to it, which often appears to lead to some choices and examples of seeming public enchantment.

