



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 6 EPISODE 1 (Jan 2024)

THE DANCE OF THE REMEDIATORS

Heidi Axelsen and Hugo Moline

Heidi Axelsen and Hugo Moline discuss their installation, "Dance of the Remediators," which is currently on display at The Lock-Up in Newcastle. The installation is a response to the coal industry in Newcastle and aims to reimagine the relationship between coal and the community. The artists use a combination of structures, video works, and immersive environments to create a thought-provoking experience for visitors. They hope to inspire a sense of wonder and gratitude for coal while also encouraging a shift away from its burning and towards alternative uses. The installation was developed over a period of six months and presented some challenges, including working within the constraints of the heritage building and sourcing materials. The artists also discuss their collaborative process and the importance of community support in bringing the installation to life. They express their sentimentality for Newcastle and their desire to contribute to its cultural scene while also being mindful of the potential for gentrification. The artists have future projects in the works, including a public art commission in Western Sydney and a long-term project in the Danks Street South Precinct in Waterloo.

Tim Stackpool:

Heidi Axelsen and Hugo Moline thanks for joining us on the podcast:

Heidi Axelsen:

Thanks for having us.

Hugo Moline:

Yeah, it's a pleasure. Thanks.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, the Dance of the Remediators, this is quite extensive and there's probably quite a bit of history there. Can you tell us about the inception, your choice of location, and perhaps the story you wanted to tell? Do you want to go first, Heidi?

Heidi Axelsen:

Yeah. The Dance of the Remediators, it really come about, I think, or maybe it's been a project growing for some time for us, but it has all come together by being in Newcastle and as a a response to this place where coal is one of the foundations of this place since, well, particularly since colonisation/invasion. So that's in a way, it is quite a site-specific work. And we were invited by The Lock-Up to develop this work. And so it's been really fascinating process in adapting and creating these ideas within the context of the former police station and Lock-Up.

Tim Stackpool:

But Hugo, tell me the story that inspired this installation and ultimately how it came about to motivate you to put it together.

Hugo Moline:

Like Heidi said, it's a conversation with the place of Newcastle. If I can just put it in the context of the works that we've done before when we were living in Sydney, we did the Owner Occupy project which was looking at housing affordability. And then when we were up in the living in the Blue Mountains, we did the Plant Agency suite of projects which were looking at the relationship between plants and humans. And this mode of practice that we've been experimenting with where we look at a seemingly intractable issue like real estate and housing affordability in Sydney or the coal industry and climate change, which is so ever present here in Newcastle. Living here now, we see the bulk carriers go out. We see the trains going past us. Our neighbours work in the industry. It's everywhere.

The mode that we're operating in is looking at these things from a speculative storytelling perspective, so imagining something that could happen that would completely transform or another way of relating within this issue. And when we got the invitation from The Lock-Up, we saw it as a kind of an opportunity. And the space itself of The Lock-Up, this heavy sandstone building with incredibly heavy

history and very reminiscent of the tunnels that are all the way under the city of Newcastle, most of which are unmapped and unknown from the early colonial period, and thinking about these ideas of tunnelling and also wanting to do something that would create something different, create a space of imagination and hope within this heavy and dark space of The Lock-Up.

Something else we've been exploring for a long time is ideas of the self-built and the self-made and how people can act on the world themselves. And something we've always been fascinated by is the way children do that so naturally, particularly the format of the cubby house. So leaving these things together, we started thinking of this story of one day everyone wakes up in Newcastle, the city's never named but in Newcastle, and the children have all disappeared and they've just left a note saying that they've gone underground. And then little by little, these strange cubby house structures start erupting out of the underground and start getting in the way and tangling people up and taking over the train tracks and taking over the coal machinery.

And we're really interested in this how the soft and the vulnerable, like the cubby house, it's made of bed linen. It's not the epitome of a powerful movement, but how through accumulation and through the slow gathering of people into it can really within the story become a cocoon to transform the city and transform the industry into something else. And I guess just the other part of that was wanting to really approach coal itself from another angle.

Heidi Axelsen:

I think in imagining that new possible future, we've created these video works that are introducing new rituals around the relationship to coal. So there's tenderly washing the coal and burying the coal and inviting people to imagine if we did really treasure this as the material substance. And it's been quite interesting through the exhibition, people are really have said, "Oh wow, I've never realized how beautiful it is, how it glitters, how it feels, how we could reconfigure that relationship to this substance." And maybe that in some way is a little bit part of a solution going forward with climate change, like how can we reimagine our relationship to our material and physical world? But that's an invitation that we've made.

Tim Stackpool:

I wonder if I could get some clarification on exactly what we experience when we see this installation. We've talked a lot about your motivation and perhaps the story that's being told, but what can we expect to see when we visit this?

Heidi Axelsen:

When you come into the gallery, there's this flannelette bedsheets, ramshackle-type structure that you first encounter. It's quite a tactile and nostalgic-type feeling fabrics, and they're strung over these rough timber frames that are being hastily put together but quite beautifully and cleverly designed to be erected quickly and collapsed down quickly. And then that takes you through the tunnels of the former prisoner cells, and you peer in through into these different cells and viewing video works which is footage of around different scenes in Newcastle in the industrial environment. As well as there's footage there of the recent blockade at Newcastle port. And so there's these hints of what's happening now and then what's happening in the future. And then you come through to the former exercise yard and in

there is a bit of an immersive environment with misting and cooling happening in the space as well as moss growing.

Hugo Moline:

It's basically reconstructed a tunnel within the tunnel, which was part of wanting to have it as another space. So the cubby house itself becomes almost like a mega structure and a parasite within the galleries. And you have the sensation of being transported to these other places within Newcastle, which then links in to the narrative which is spoken as an audio track. Then as Heidi was describing before, in some of the other rooms, there are these almost ritualistic meditations on coal through video works, but combining with rotating elements or different things.

Tim Stackpool:

There's many different media that you're talking about here. Between the two of you though in an artistic partnership, how do you break up the roles when you're putting in an installation like this? How far back does that go?

Heidi Axelsen:

We started collaborating 14 years ago.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow.

Heidi Axelsen:

And my background is as a sculptor and Hugo as an architect. So we come at things from quite different angles but find a meeting place and also I think push our work further as a result of coming at it from those different perspectives. Perhaps my interest is quite in the materiality and the textural and also the framing of things. I don't know if that's fair to say. And Hugo also brings that expertise of visioning the structures beforehand as well as the intricate collapsible structures and these nimble forms that can be erected and taken down quite quickly. Conceptually, I guess these ideas are something that we live and breathe in our lives together as artists, but also as partners in life and parents as well and living in this contemporary condition that we live in. So yeah, the ideas are something that come about together, obviously.

Tim Stackpool:

In this case, Hugo, would I be right in thinking that The Lock-Up makes the offer, then you both go in. Hugo, you can see how the architecture can lend itself to perhaps some of the vision that Heidi has and that's how the collaborative thought comes about, or is there plenty of artistic input from you, or perhaps there's a tempering of the artistic vision that Heidi has because you have to look at the practical implications of how you're going to make this work in this space from your architectural background?

Hugo Moline:

Yeah. I think that's often the assumption that people have of our practice, but I think in some ways I've been drawn into collaborating in an artistic practice with Heidi because it's a space outside the practicalities of architecture where you're not working at the behest of a wealthy client. You're able to explore the questions. You're not just finding solutions. So I think it's actually more complex than that. And yeah, things like materiality and overall visions for things which you would maybe place in architecture are actually being provided by Heidi, whereas aspects of the narrative and conceptual structure, I'm often working on those bits. I definitely bring my architectural training to things like the designing and building of the structures, but I think it's much more of a conversation. And I think that's what's so exciting about collaborative practice is that neither one of you really know where it's going. And I think we both take turns.

Heidi Axelsen:

Yeah, also not where it's come from. That's the nature of a collaboration, is you can't really cut and slice who owns what or where it came from.

Tim Stackpool:

I was thinking that perhaps that's where the magic happens, because the obvious way in which people might consider you operating in is not the way it actually happens. And for that reason, you come up with these unique structures and these unique messages. But in that sense, in terms of this particular work, the Dance of the Remediators, where were your challenges? First of all, Heidi, with you, where did you feel that perhaps you had to make compromises where things weren't going to turn out the way you'd hoped to, and perhaps some of those surprises that turned up that you felt really actually nailed the message for you?

Heidi Axelsen:

I guess the challenge, there were a couple with the space itself. It's quite a large Warren-type space that you discover through all these different cells, and we really had the ambition that we wanted to make the work immersive so that it did encompass the entire space. So I guess there was that, the anxiety that we wouldn't be able to do that in such a way. But I think we overcame that with the formation of the structures that open and collapse and how we could grow that through the gallery.

I would say there was a bit of apprehension around the trying to address this issue in another way and talking about coal in this place, which it is such an important industry here for Newcastle. It really underpins so much of the economy and people's livelihoods. And so there was a bit of awareness that we were working with an issue that is sensitive, that also exciting to shine a new perspective on it. That in itself, I think, was something that we worked our way through.

There's one of the cells is an installation of a video work of a waterfall where there's this incredible mossy landscape that the waterfall is trickling over. And in that gallery in front of the video projection installed this rotating pile of coal, so the shadow is swirling on top of the projection. And that in itself was the kind of work where we couldn't really conceive it before it was actually in the space. And the walls of the cell itself have this weird mossy-like graffiti original paint all over the wall. So it just all came together in this way that you can't anticipate until you're in there and doing it, but yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

And how about putting this together? Coming into the holiday period as it was, a lot of people clock off. Did you have difficulty getting, I guess, tradies or other people to help you do the installation? Was that a challenge too?

Heidi Axelsen:

It was more the juggle of our time availability just in the lead up to Christmas, being parents of young children as well with school ceremonies and Christmas parties and all of the stuff that the juggernaut of the end of the year. So producing this work at the same time was quite a challenge.

Hugo Moline:

I think what Heidi was talking about with the main anxiety being how do you talk about coal in this place of such polarised connections to it and try to have a fresh conversation. And at various points in the process, I was worried that we would be hated for demonizing coal, but then at other points I was worried that we would be hated by celebrating coal. And really we were trying to do something altogether different. So far it feels like people have understood the nuance of what we're trying to do and the fresh way of honouring coal as a way of letting it rest.

We always knew that The Lock-Up itself had the challenges of you can't fix to a lot of the walls because they're built heritage. And so architectural challenge and joy for me in this project was coming up with this fairly simple tripod structure that was flexible enough that we could work it in different ways within that existing space. And another part of the surrounding the main part of the structure before it goes into the tunnel are a series of photographs of the structure erected in different configurations in the industrial landscapes of Newcastle which feed into the narrative as well. So we'd had a go at making it and of it blowing over in the wind and of the court security, people coming and questioning us and having follow-ups from the police and those challenges out in the field.

Tim Stackpool:

From a practical side though, how long did you have in The Lock-Up? Because it seems as though you had to develop on the run a little bit. Did you have much time to be able to do that or did you have to do a lot more work in your studio and then bring it in and then adapt it once you got on location?

Heidi Axelsen:

We had two weeks roughly broken up with other commitments to do the installation in The Lock-Up. A lot of it was developed in our studio beforehand and through making models, prepping all the structure, gathering all the materials. But altogether, we, I guess, started conceiving the ideas about six months ago, which is when we were invited for the commission.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow, okay. That's a pretty quick turnaround, I would think.

Heidi Axelsen:

Yeah. Yeah, it was.

Tim Stackpool:

Did that put pressure on perhaps the opportunities that you have to sit back and think about this artistically and work out your messaging? I guess you do have to have a deadline. I do understand that, but would you preferred a little bit longer?

Heidi Axelsen:

Well, we actually were really fortunate in that soon after we were invited, we had a residency lined up at the Museum of Loss and Renewal in Italy. And so we had a period there in the residency to purely just work on the ideas and the thinking behind the whole exhibition. So that period of time when you can disconnect from all your ordinary responsibilities in life and really just focus on the ideas is just priceless. So I think that really helped, and that has often been the case in previous works of ours where we've had this opportunity to step out and really reflect on the bigger ideas and pictures we're looking at.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, great opportunity. Now, Hugo, going back to what you said about coal, the message that sometimes people take is that perhaps you might be recognizing coal for what it is, or perhaps on the other side, not wanting to recognize coal and move on from that. What message do you think you've left with people or what message would you like to leave with people regarding coal and the fact that you really can't erase it from Newcastle?

Hugo Moline:

Hopefully what we've left people with is a sense of wonder and gratitude for this material, which is hundreds of millions of years in the making, is the work of countless generations of plants to create this incredibly stunning and beautiful substance, that that substance has history, going back to the Awabakal people in this land. Of course we acknowledge all of the damage that's been done in the mining of it, but also communities have grown up around that and labour movements have grown up through those industries. The city that we're living in from its very inception, from the naming of it after another coal town in the far north of Britain, it's so linked to this substance. And to feel that wonder and that gratitude and let that be a cause to now let that substance rest and move on to other things.

Tim Stackpool:

So it's a recognition of the history which is impossible to ignore, but it's time to move on. It's time to reinvent. But there's no possibility of forgetting or in fact leaving it because it's still part of the output of Newcastle.

Hugo Moline:

And as I was talking to a material scientist who's been very heavily involved in decarbonizing industries, her main point was it's not coal. It's the burning of coal that's the problem. Coal can still be a very valuable feedstock for all kinds of materials, from carbon fibre to types of polymers. And so it's the burning of this wonderful thing that needs to stop.

Tim Stackpool:

It has great properties, but depending on how it's managed, it has plenty of evil as well.

Hugo Moline:

Yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

This is a big job for both of you, I think. Are there other collaborators that perhaps we should give some credit to?

Heidi Axelsen:

Well, there's The Lock-Up itself for providing the space and also the invitation for this. And The Lock-Up is an amazing experimental art space. I think that that exists itself is really important to acknowledge for the ecosystem of the arts in New South Wales, I think, and beyond. Then in itself in the making of the work, it's more about all of the suppliers and networks that we've formed in the making of it. There was Round 2 Timbers where we sourced all the recycled hardwood of cuts. There was all the op shops where we sourced all the flannelette bedsheets.

Tim Stackpool:

Yup, great.

Heidi Axelsen:

There was the technical staff at the University of Newcastle who helped us with printing and with video editing and that kind of thing. And obviously people who also helped care for our children while we did all these extra bits and pieces to create the work.

Hugo Moline:

The people who sold us the coal was an interesting-

Heidi Axelsen:

Oh yeah, absolutely.

Hugo Moline:

... relationship.

Tim Stackpool:

Oh, yeah. How did you source that?

Heidi Axelsen:

The coal itself, we found a coal transport company based in Carrington, and they basically sell the coal that is not deemed good enough to export. Them in themselves were a really awesome group of guys who helped us get three, about... What was it? Two-thirds of a ton of coal delivered to The Lock-Up, which then we hold into the gallery space and now is being distributed through visitors coming in the gallery. And they invited to take coal with them away and bury it.

Tim Stackpool:

Right.

Heidi Axelsen:

And I really appreciated the conversations that we had with those guys. They were like, "Oh, what's this exhibition all about?" And explained it, and they're like, "Oh, so you're working against us?" And I'm like, "Oh, not really. We are trying to appreciate what this substance is." And so there was just this really great dialogue that happened, and I really appreciate the openness and positivity that people have brought to the whole exercise.

Tim Stackpool:

And Hugo, it feels very industrial and there are plenty of artists and artist installations that deal with the industry. Is this something though quite different for the pair of you to work on?

Hugo Moline:

We've always been really interested in and appreciative of people who make things. We started our collaborative practice together in Parramatta, working a lot with communities of makers, often quite old-school people making things like air conditioning ducts and things like that. We would incorporate their practices into our public artworks. So it's something we've really been interested in, drawing those practices into the high art space. For example, a duct maker from Western Sydney whose meticulous Pittsburgh seam jointed creations were put on display as part of a city of Sydney Laneway Art festival. And we're really interested in how the making of things can bring people together in these really interesting and unusual configurations of relationships.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. I was just thinking this morning, actually walking back from dropping my car off for a service, how there are so many people that think they don't have an appreciation of art or they're not artists or they're not creative. And yet you've just nailed it there talking about these trades people who are

meticulous about the finish of their work, and they truly are artists as well. They just don't recognise it within themselves.

Hugo Moline:

Yeah, massively.

Tim Stackpool:

Newcastle has tried to transform itself, and in many ways it has. There was a time when the Lonely Planet guide told tourists, backpackers that Newcastle was the place to visit because of that harbor front development that's there. And also the beaches are fantastic, and access on the light rail is terrific down Hunter Street there, did get hit hard by COVID. In terms of the reinvention, Heidi, first of all with you, you are contributing to that with this artwork and a development of artistic practice in Newcastle, but you are living there in Newcastle now. Do you have a sentimentality for it to reinvigorate how Newcastle is viewed?

Heidi Axelsen:

I definitely have a sentimentality for it. It's a beautiful place. It's also magic, I think, in ways with the combination of the strong industrial history and the incredible coastline and on the edges where you can find untouched pockets of fern land and rainforest. So yeah, it's got a magic to it, for sure. And it really also, I think, punches above its weight in terms of culture. There's so many practicing artists and architects here, and it's a really alive place.

Tim Stackpool:

And Hugo, you've moved down from the Blue Mountains a couple of years ago, still hoping for that Newcastle Art gallery to open there in the middle of the CBD. But for you too, are you feeling as if Newcastle has got a lot more to offer, or do you think it's a bit of a hidden gem now in terms of artistic practice?

Hugo Moline:

I'd echo everything that Heidi said. We are new to the place. I guess I just have some reservations about being the vanguard of gentrification of Newcastle as well because it does have really its own culture and identity. And somehow how you can have both, I guess. Things that are beautiful here can be maintained while also providing more opportunity for cultural makers and for traditional makers, I guess, to all have a place within the Newcastle that's emerging.

Tim Stackpool:

That's always the danger, isn't it? And it's seen everywhere where perhaps artistic types, if I can call people like you that, move into areas, change the cultural perspective on a location. It becomes very attractive then and the gentrification kicks in. I guess that's what you fear most.

Hugo Moline:

Yeah, exactly. Yeah, because then you lose what's special about the place, and ultimately the artistic types can't then want to remain there.

Tim Stackpool:

It is that perennial problem, isn't it?

Hugo Moline:

Yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, the Dance of the Remediators, this installation runs till February 11th. Obviously you are working on something else for after that. What's coming up for the two of you in collaboration?

Heidi Axelsen:

Yeah. We've got a few things in the pipeline this year. An exciting public art commission in Western Sydney, which is great because with us going back to our roots, as well as we're still working on a long-term project for the Danks Street South Precinct in Waterloo. But that's where we've developed this, I guess, long-term durational public artwork. So that is also continuing in some form.

Tim Stackpool:

So the future's looking pretty good for you both.

Heidi Axelsen:

Yeah, it's interesting how things develop over time and boil, simmer along, and then become something more.

Tim Stackpool:

It's a remarkable installation, the Dance of the Remediators. And I wish sometimes that a podcast could have pictures to go with it because it is all about the art that you create. And yet we've had this enormous conversation about the philosophy of industrialization, how you've actually realised that in The Lock-Up, using a space which was never, ever designed to be an artistic space and yet over the past decade or so has transformed itself into that, I think it is yet another remarkable installation that the two of you have put together. And the story that you're tried to tell, although it's not ambiguous, can be considered that by so many people who come to visit it. Not sure what to take away, but you certainly have strong views on what they should take away. And I really do appreciate your time on the podcast.

Heidi Axelsen:

Thank you. Thanks so much for having us.

Hugo Moline:

Yeah, thanks.