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Remember Art Attack? How awesome was that show? Yeah, well, this article isn't about it, as great as it was. This article is about finding art in unexpected places. Rebecca Leaver talks to Australian guerrilla artist Adam Norton, and finds out what is so compelling about art entering the public field.

Stop and smell the bloody roses:
think, react and engage with the
spaces around you.

When Marcel Duchamp exhibited a urinal in an art gallery, the 'what is art?' question got shot to buggery. Nevertheless, walking into the confines of the four walls of a gallery still heavily informs our recognition and perception of art. It is this predictability of expectation which some contemporary artists rebel against, taking their art out of the gallery and into the streets, sneaking up on people when they least expect it. Attacking with art, if you will.

When Australian artist Adam Norton set up three camouflage army tanks around the laneways of Sydney's CBD as part of his *Tank Project* last year, the reactions of droll-suited Starbucks-sipping-office-workers as the tanks came into view were priceless, silently mouthing "What the f*#k?" as a momentary state of fear overtook them. "Is the city being attacked? Have I been so caught up in my own palaver that I somehow missed the fact that we are at war?" Or for the more cynical amongst us: "Oh, what a clever marketing campaign."

It is that moment of confusion, shock and uncertainty – which may only last for a few precious seconds – which guerrilla artists revel in creating. To catch people unawares as they take over the city, snapping people out of the hypnosis of their comfortable lives by forcing art into the otherwise mundane cityscape. In essence, guerrilla artists want you to stop and smell the bloody roses: think, react and engage with the spaces around you.

By taking art to the street, guerrilla artists are able to avoid the gallery audiences who can often be a self-perpetuating mob, scuttling from opening to opening.

"Galleries can be a little bit uninviting, especially commercial galleries," says Norton. "Usually there are some pretentious type people behind the desk and something on the walls that you don't understand at all: there is a lot of distance put between you and the work."

Accessibility to the work becomes more immediate when people stumble upon it unexpectedly in public spaces. Mark Jenkins, an American guerrilla artist, has often attracted rescue units and bomb squads with his confronting installations, which have consisted of faux dead bodies lying in a pond, or a mannequin sitting on the edge of a high building, seemingly about to jump. Jenkins' works are not easily discernible from reality, cleverly creating a heightened sense of danger. Questions of authority, ownership and legality are bound to crop up when public spaces – and an unknowing public – are employed in the artist's vision.

These ideas were hurtled into the mainstream when *Guerrilla Gardeners* hit commercial television, flirting with the glamour of danger by sending professional landscapers into public spaces to make them over, unbeknownst to local councils. The idea has its roots in a 1970s social movement where condoms filled with seeds and soil were tossed into unused spaces around New York with the aim







of beautifying urban wastelands by illegally gardening on other peoples' land.

Brought to television last year, six (at times scantily-clad), young garden activists scope out a plot of unkempt public land, sneaking in during the early hours of the morning and prettying the place up with agapanthus-filled planter boxes, rhododendrons and scrap metal sculptures. The show relied on the illegality of the gardeners' actions and every episode claimed to be 'the most dangerous hit yet' and always 'under the nose of the authorities.' There were several complaints left by viewers on the show's webpage; the complaints trumpeted the line that such illegal planting was a risk to community safety, gratuitously undermining OH&S standards. You can hear them yelling as they shake their fists: "There are rules, you know!"

But it is exactly these rules put in place to make safe, protect and reduce risk in public spaces which may have inadvertently contributed to making such spaces dead and untouchable. Fed up with the perpetual bureaucratic monitoring of these spaces in our cities, they give the CCTV cameras the finger, subverting the gaze of the station guard, the policeman and the ever-vigilant security guards.

Guerrilla art and guerrilla gardening have in part stemmed from a feeling of tedium with the predictable and stifling effects our modern preoccupation with risk and safety has on our public spaces. Adam Norton's *Tank Project* fed off the idea that we as a society push risk and danger as far away as possible and consequently don't have to deal with it directly.

Says Norton: "The west is responsible, directly or indirectly depending on what you think, for tanks being on the streets of third world cities all round the world. We have

sent our tanks there so those guys have to deal with that fear. What I was trying to do was give a little bit of it back so that we knew what it was like."

For two weeks, the presence of the tanks in the city forced people to engage with the feelings of fear and uncertainty which are bound to emerge when heavy military tanks patrol the streets of your city.

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Norton's entire approach to making art is compelling when looking at our social obsession with safety, protection and harm minimisation. As someone who is fed up with the lack of power available to individuals to control or affect the public domain, Norton has focused his art on creating objects and tools to protect himself from a world dominated by the choices and rules of others.

"For the last 20 years or so as a voter, I have seen people do everything counter to how things should be run, and make the world more and more dangerous."

Norton's beliefs are made clear through his work in creating protective objects such as the *Generic Escape Capsule*, a cupboard which is designed to be lived in for several weeks in case of nuclear attacks or alien invasions. He has also made an *Autonomous Rescue Craft*, a suitcase which doubles as a canoe (soon to be tested in Sydney Harbour - keep your eyes peeled for that one!)

Perhaps the most interesting is Norton's urban camouflage suits: six camouflaged outfits which allow the wearer to hide in a whole range of different city environments. His website showcases video clips of them in action in the style of 'Where's Wally?', where a large six foot man (Norton) eventually emerges from hiding places in and around the city.

In exercising what Norton claims to be 'a healthy dose of paranoia', he takes his artworks to the streets because they need to be tested. In doing so, he reclaims the spaces in which he feels fearful, spaces in which the existing rules and regulations provide little comfort.

"Just showing your work isn't good enough. Trying to sell it doesn't answer your personal problems. In the end, I exercise my paranoia by making these objects and by taking them out onto the street I am exercising as well as exorcising my fears in the public domain."

And making us stop and smell the bloody roses. ■■■