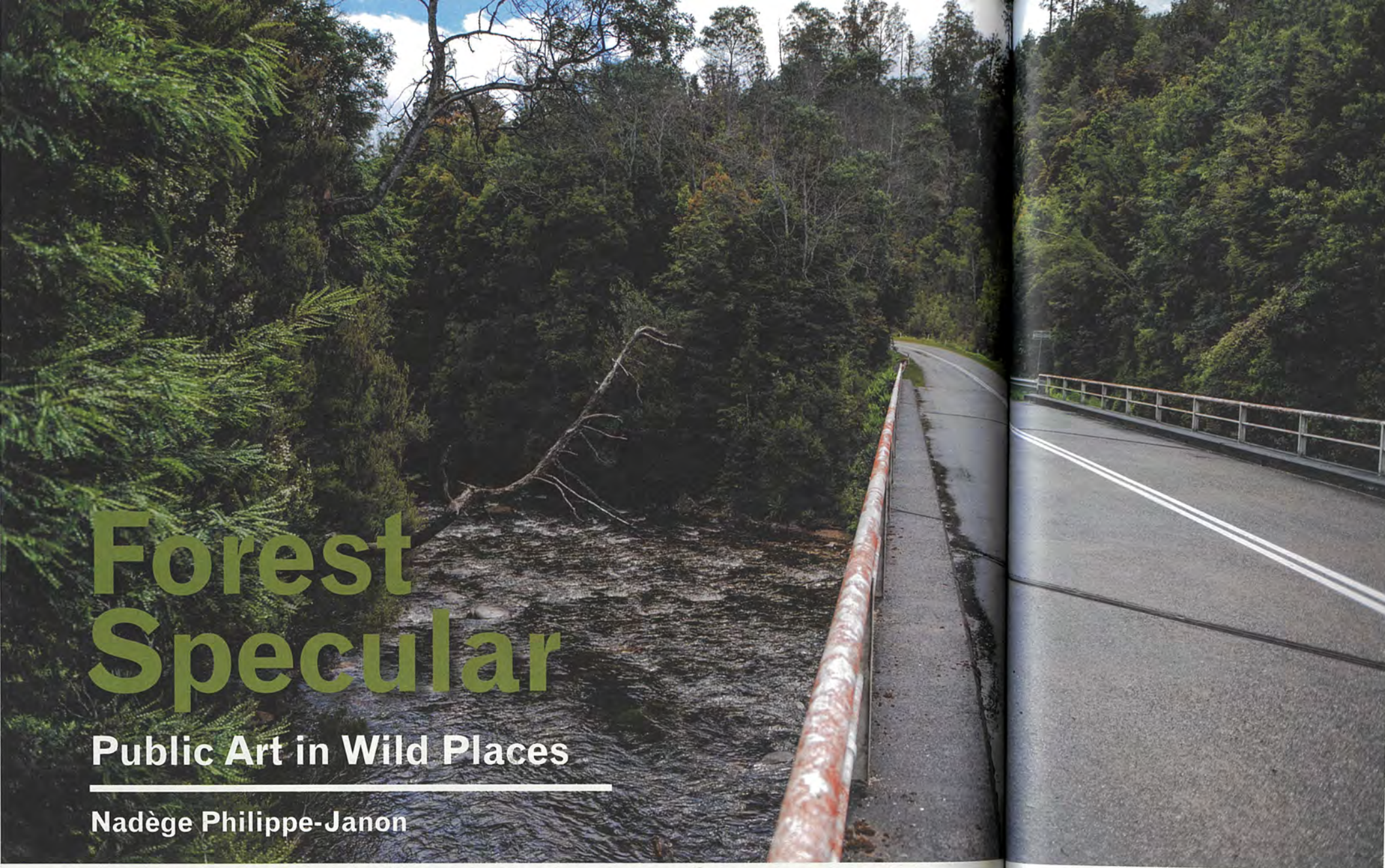




Forest Specular

Public Art in Wild Places

Nadège Philippe-Janon

Even before the global pandemic that marked 2020, celebrating the new year had already felt awkward, tinged with sadness and concern for our collective futures. To start with, last year's numerical sequence from the Gregorian calendar just sounded so futuristic that it felt like arriving at a critical point in time, eliciting apocalyptic visions of a homogenous future dominated by jellyfish, cockroaches and human-serving animals. Considering humanity has contributed to the loss of 83% of wild animals, and humans and their livestock make up 96% of Earth's biomass, such a scenario is probably not far off. As 2020 rolled in, wildfires scorched over 40 million acres of bush and rainforest in Australia and the Amazon. And beyond that, perhaps less

palpable yet more devastating, lurks the growing list of catastrophes facing our environment. Problems too numerous and entwined to go into here, but always there in the background, a dark and constant whisper in your ear.

Shortly after bringing in 2020, fabricator Stuart Houghton, Alexandra Hullah and I installed a public artwork along Tasmania's Franklin-Gordon River to commemorate the Franklin Dam protests of 1983. Each arrest made over the course of the protests is represented by over 1300 individually hand-pressed convex mirrors. Born from my attraction to the importance of the Franklin Dam story, *Forest Specular* was my first public art work, and the first time that I've had to rely directly on the help and support of many others to bring a work to life.



FRANKLIN
RIVER

Ten years ago, just coming out of art school, feeling unemployable, and facing what I'd kept dramatically referring to as 'The Abyss', I was gifted a palm-sized booklet titled *The New Rules of Public Art*. Public art doesn't need to look like public art, the booklet suggested. It shouldn't predefine a community, it could create a community, it could be ephemeral, it could interrupt, it could be powerful in its subtlety and lightness. Despite the irony of its title, the booklet had me seeking and sometimes struggling to find examples of interesting and engaging works of public art.

As I searched for opportunities, public art commissions regularly appeared, precise location predefined, accompanied by a flowery list of aims and a checklist of parameters, often asking for way-finders, entry point markers, dividing screens and facade embellishments. Rarely are artists offered the time and opportunity to get to know a place, to consider the potential to disrupt or change, or to determine what kind of work might be

pertinent to the architecture, environment and inhabitants. Public art is frequently an afterthought. I'm still figuring out what I want from public art, and what it can achieve, but the commission for the Franklin–Gordon Wild Rivers National Park stood out as an opportunity worth pursuing, albeit connected to a tourism initiative. It raised questions about wilderness and our relationship with it, and I wondered at the point of having an artwork imposed onto such a beautiful wild place, an ecosystem already a monument to its own survival.

While 2020 was tragic for many, with repercussions we are likely yet to predict, the lockdown-imposed pauses on our relentless daily pursuits opened brief windows into the resilience of this planet. Murky waters cleared in Venice, shy species were emboldened to communicate and interact more frequently, the dramatic reduction in noise pollution meant less stress for many organisms including marine life, and animals previously considered nocturnal roamed freely in daylight. In spring, I noticed that the fledgling ducks and native hens at my workplace, which was no longer a constant thoroughfare for people and cars, had much greater success at survival.

What links these events is our absence. Caring for the environment is often assumed to be synonymous with leaving it alone, as if it were a separate entity. This may be true to the extent that many humans are not currently living harmoniously with their environments, but this perceived separation can also be damaging, and is perpetuated by the concept of the 'wild'.

Defined as a place untouched by humans, wilderness has long been recognised as a primarily Western fabrication, one that cuts a potentially harmful opposition between humans and environment. Colonial attitudes deny our own animality and inherent connection to wild places, creating a hierarchy of humans over nature, and branding Indigenous peoples as savage and uncivilised. Taken to extremes, this division has allowed us to treat certain people, ecosystems and other-than-human animals appallingly. It can create a strange and complex relationship with 'nature', and lead us to forget that we are part of it.

The western forests of Tasmania, often described as pristine and 'untouched' wilderness, have a rich cultural history that further contradicts the narrative of wild places. Located along the Franklin River are the kutikana caves that were significant to the success of the campaign to save the Franklin. The caves hold an abundance of physical traces of palawa people that lived in kutikana, and tell fragmented

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stories of the southernmost human communities on Earth.

Problematic as it is, the term 'wild' is difficult to escape. Perhaps it could describe a place that is not outside of us or untouched by us, but a delicately balanced ecosystem that we have responsibility towards.

While I strongly believe these ecosystems have a right to exist without consideration of how they impact humans specifically (there are, after all, billions of other-than-human lives to think about), any concern for the wellbeing of humanity should involve concern for 'wild' places, as these are inextricably intertwined. Beyond their significance in providing healthy ecosystems, clean air and clean water, wild places connect to something within ourselves.

While looking back at the history of the Franklin Dam protests, I watched a 1994 episode of ABC documentary *The Australian Experience* covering the conservation campaign. One of the campaign's strategies was simply to show people how beautiful and special this part of the world is, and rafting trips were organised for federal politicians to experience the Franklin–Gordon first-hand. The power of the campaign's strategy is captured in an interview with Norm Sanders, the leader, at the time, of the Australian Democrats. Having just navigated the river, Sanders appears on the verge of tears, and speaks emotionally to the camera – 'I'm gonna fight. I wasn't really into this fight before but I'm gonna fight and I'm gonna save it. By God, I'll save it!' At another point, a reporter questions a blind man about his motives for protesting, implying that his inability to see the forest should limit his desire to preserve it. We don't need to see these places for ourselves to fight for them, but when life is busied by trying to pay bills, looking after one's mental health and commuting to and from work, perhaps the first-hand 'seeing' helps.

The mirrors used in *Forest Specular* try to capture the spirit and philosophy of the conservation campaign: multiple reflective surfaces make the ever-shifting surrounding environment an integral part of the work, letting the forest





‘speak for itself’¹. It’s important to remember the protesters’ perseverance and willingness to fight in what is one of Australia’s largest examples of civil disobedience. It’s also essential to recognise the thousands of years of prior human interaction with this environment. The 1300+ mirrors represent the number of people arrested in the protests, and serve to place the viewer within the landscape. The form of the sculpture is based on a worn river rock located at the site, and is also a nod to *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin*

¹ A phrase used in relation to the Franklin River campaign by Bob Brown – former Greens party leader and conservationist, a key figure in the success of the Franklin Dam campaign.

River (1980) by Peter Dombrovskis – a now iconic image that was instrumental in bringing the Franklin–Gordon to the awareness of the wider public.

Environmental crises require broad and swift action, but we generally aren’t programmed to respond to such ostensibly slow-moving disasters in this way. With many people already struggling to keep afloat in their lives, it’s a burden that can’t be taken on by all. There are many people – people who require no special traits but only the capacity to do so – who are fighting for change, but we also need policy-makers and those in power to make the changes we desperately need. I don’t know whether *Forest Specular* can

do anything that a worn river rock can’t, but if anything I hope the strangeness of its presence on the verge of a national park might prompt a moment of pause and contemplation for the ‘nature’ seeker. The Franklin Dam story is a reminder of the amazing capability of people power, and gives me hope when the alternative can feel like accepting defeat. It’s a reminder that people care about wild places, not just for practical purposes or lofty pursuits of unspoiled wilderness, but because wild places are a part of us all. ▼



Nadège Philippe-Janon is an emerging artist based in nipaluna/Hobart. She often critiques anthropocentric relations with the more-than-human world while straddling the intersections of science, nature, culture and personal narrative. Past projects have included responsive multi-media installations, harnessing the sun’s heat to melt metals, attempting non-human perspectives via sms sexting, and casting off on the Tasman sea in a handmade boat.

Forest Specular, 2020
Stainless steel, 2.2 x 1.5 m, 1300 convex stainless steel mirrors
Fabrication by Stuart Houghton
Installation by Nadège Philippe-Janon, Stuart Houghton and Alexandra Hullah

Images by Eden Meure

Forest Specular is a public art commission for the Western Wilds Journeys project under the Arts Tasmania Corporate Art Scheme.