

# Eve Armstrong

## *Good Willing*

By Rachel O'Neill, in conversation with Eve Armstrong

Eve Armstrong's work has a commitment to navigating the distance that exists between people, before they even start using gestures and words. Thinking through this, I began talking to a phrase in my head: 'moral phenomenology'. This conversation looks at how Eve's work adapts to its metamorphosis. In art this is some way to wake up in the morning.

**Rachel O'Neill:** *Adaptives* was a project in which you made a catalogue featuring tools that people had invented, primarily to help them improve the use of things encountered in their daily environment. Is your work driven by an interest in the ways people must often adapt against their will?

**Eve Armstrong:** I think we are always operating in relation to something else; be it another person, an object, infrastructure, whatever. Although we can have a degree of control in terms of how we relate, many things are out of our control. My interest lies in how individuals might negotiate, and where or how an individual fits in relation to a larger structure. Often we can adapt to these situations or environments quite easily. For instance, if you don't make desired changes when you first move into a new house (basic stuff like adding shelves, painting) then you just get used to things, adapt and don't make the changes. You learn ways around them – you adapt rather than adapting your environment.

With *Adaptives*, I saw these simple objects as examples, moments when the makers had actively tried to effect change. Rather than simply accepting the object or structure as it was, they have tried to make it work for them. The thing that I found particularly interesting was how the methods used were very simple or ad-hoc. From my own experience, sometimes I'll make adjustments like those in the *Adaptives* and intend to do a 'proper' job later, but I never do. I just get used to them and adapt.

**RO:** There is a marked process of visual formalism in your detritus works. You photographed stacked cardboard boxes and garbage bags as if about to be collected for rubbish disposal, as well as further re-enactments of such all-natural arrangements in gallery spaces. These are works that I'd connect with the shock of adaptability; how easily people are able to fit into a new environment, though they might experience this as alienating at the same time. How does the "ergonomic" treatment of contradictory experience function in terms of the adaptability of your process? For example, the "cleaning-up" of the dumpsites via photographic representation or the move from the street to gallery floor? If you would formulate what I have tried to describe as aesthetic or "ergonomic" formalisation in a different way, how would you do this?

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**EA:** In terms of aesthetics I have an interest in what I call "accidental formalism". You might also think about it as an aesthetics of activity. These are beautiful arrangements that you see around, for example on the street. Like those recorded in my photographic collages, they are records of activity and appear to have a strong formal quality – for instance, piles of bricks, wood or cardboard that recall minimalist stacks or scatter pieces. These things have a very real energy – they are about the activity not the aesthetics – the activity generates the form and thinking through form gives you plenty to work with.

In terms of a "complexity of adaptability", my inquiry is two-fold. I want to engage with these rich materials that are in the world, and to also engage with sculptural or formal processes. So it's art and it's rubbish. I've seen and continue to see the detritus or rubbish in many ways, from a precise system of ordering and recycling to a strange form of public sculpture. They document the activities of a place. I'm currently fascinated by how these rubbish collections might describe a place by what it professes not to be, or what it does not want to be. With bringing these things into a gallery, sometimes it helps to make the inquiry clearer, sharpen the focus and allow for time and space to consider these ideas – not just for me, but also for an audience.

The gallery is not the only place for these things of course. I see them as pausing in the gallery. An intervention in the standard processes or cycles for these materials and objects, not a radical shift, just a nudge. For me that's where the "complexity of adaptability" comes in, finding quite light or gentle ways to adapt these materials, with methods which don't heavily alter how they really exist in the world.

**RO:** Subtle alteration is a dynamic process to think about in terms of supports in place around the work. I just recently discovered CLUBS feedback system, run by the Melbourne-based CLUBSproject, where artists receive critical discussion of their work by request. You mention that *Small Local Improvement Projects (SLIPs)* are an ongoing project and have since produced a *SLIPs Update*. There is often an imperative need for dynamic critical support for work such as your own that does not have a pre-determined deadline

of sorts. This work is most rigorous where it engages in existing misunderstandings, including concepts of self or community improvement, of experiential artistic process, and "just being available to help". Did you consider the need for greater critical support of *SLIPs* due to the complexity of the work's relation to the gallery and wider public? What kind of critical framework did you envision for the project?

**EA:** One of the reasons for my project was to try to set up a structure that would investigate and open up critical dialogue around the work and other similar practices.

I had some questions in mind around the artist's responsibility when working in a participatory way, including ways in which art might offer a productive method to work with social concerns. *SLIPs* are a direct response to this. It's difficult with projects like *SLIPs* because so much of your energy is taken up just trying to make the project work, so that's when an external critical framework is great. You're right, as an artist there is a tendency to do it all yourself – to try to action the project and have a critical component present. Each project might require a different critical framework. *SLIPs* was interesting in that it's closest or primary audience wasn't really the art community but pockets of different people within the community. Obviously, someone who has participated in the project might have quite different discussion points than those who are looking in on the project. Both are relevant and interesting.

**RO:** There seems to also be an internal process of coming and going in *SLIPs*. When moving between spaces with different agendas and concepts of social site, often the less-than social aspects of such spaces are reflected. Understandably, institutional spaces, galleries and community spaces foreground a functional social environment to inspire participation and attendance. How do you think it is possible to construct an approach or re-approach that maintains its friction in relation to such aspirations?

**EA:** I guess as an artist you have to decide how you want to operate within these spaces. You just have to hold strong to your own way of doing things. I'm interested in finding ways to work within or extend a structure. Rather than knock it

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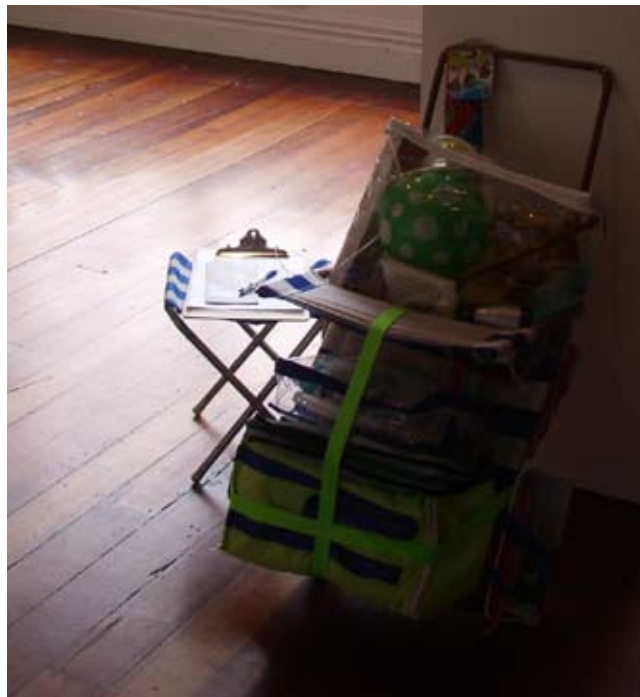
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down I'll tend to adapt it to suit my needs. For me that was part of what *SLIPs* was about – this focus on an individual's interpretation of what would benefit a community. I think artists should do what's right for the work. For *SLIPs* I focussed on the process because there was already too much to do. The gallery space didn't get as much attention as the space outside it, which was right for the project but also problematic. In consideration of the short residency timeframe, I wanted the residency to work primarily for me as an artist and for the immediate participants. That was my call.

**RO:** Yes, interactions in the gallery and outside of its general parameters do not always thrive on their relative adversity to each other – as definable foe or opponent. It's never simply gallery vs world. Your work more specifically engages with how a viewing public assumes their roles as participants in various viewing situations. Does your work deliberate on a concept of naturalisation – is there, for example, a specific aspect of public interaction your artwork aims to keep intact to show how resilient certain interactions and responses are?

**EA:** Well, I guess you can relate it to processes of naturalisation in the sense of adaptability. Actually I have often referred to my structures (be they objects or otherwise) as "adaptable support systems". I came to this name because I am interested in creating open structures. Not so open that they sit on the fence, but open in the sense that they consider their fallibility or other potentials. At the very least they consider or are receptive to external influences. How can you not be?

Processes of collaboration also tie into ideas of naturalisation and adaptability for me. The word collaboration generally has a positive connotation "oh it's collaboration, it must be inclusive and good". But I want to make work that explores and articulates the complexity of collaborations. How do we come to collaborative decisions? My work looks at an individual in relation to a larger community or society. How can an individual have agency, and work within a community too? There is potential for so much richness within that basic interaction. It's always give and take. Things are always gained and lost.



**RO:** Naturalisation is a process that *SLIPs* engages with – less as a method of deconstruction but more as a provocation to an attitude of relentlessness that is inherent in deconstructive method. Your work process, however, does utilise deconstructive avenues since you tap into blurry undercurrents guiding what is visible. Ideas around Relational Aesthetics come to mind here, though not just for obvious reasons that would link your work directly with the strategy's emphasis on human connectivity over a structural pre-programmed model. Your work more specifically engages with restlessness in human interaction, restlessness that isn't necessarily constant or particularly "social". But instead a parallel to the exhaustive human connectivity I've just mentioned, in terms of the relational paradigm. Restlessness – as your work opens onto the dynamic of hope – that a person might follow through to a new point of space or interaction that copes with the strain of loose-ends, altered conceptions of past and future, most significantly a metamorphosis that recognises its productive fallibility. Does your work engage with the strain of endeavours by citizens or viewers to live up to the ideal or requirement that stresses always making the best of the situation, of being constantly aware of responsibilities associated with one person connecting with another?

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**EA:** The process of decision-making fascinates me. The idea of “making better” or “making improvements” seems ingrained. Renovating, upgrading, increasing productivity, working smarter...

“Better” is always changing too. There’ll probably be a “better” version of “better” tomorrow. Which is great if you have a product to sell because you can always bring out the next “latest” model, but difficult if you’re trying to make improvements in a less commercial context, in places where you want to make a more lasting improvement.

In *SLIPs*, The Arlington Community Gardens was one project with the potential to investigate these ideas more thoroughly. The Arlington gardeners are basically trying to contribute something positive to the local community. By rescuing and replanting plants, taking care of an overlooked reserve and trying to engage locals in being part of this project too. However, the immediate community surrounding the gardens, primarily those in the sprawling Arlington flats aren’t that involved. Maybe it’s because they don’t know they can be, as many do not speak English. Maybe it’s because they don’t want to be. Maybe it’s because the land is not exactly premium – it’s pretty boggy down the back. I’m sure

all of these apply. It’s a complex situation. I wonder if the immediate community will want to take some ownership in the gardens, since they didn’t generate the idea themselves. At the same time, if the Arlington gardeners overwhelmed themselves with all these doubts then nothing would happen and the reserve would be even more under-utilised. At the end of the day, I think improvements are really about hope and possibility.

**RO – in conclusion:** In the *SLIPs Update* Eve states: “I was interested to see if good intent could carry a project.” Morality is a very unfashionable terminology, though ethics has become a versatile expression for the monitoring and greater politicisation of human relationships. I sense Eve’s practice as a whole challenges the compatibility we now share with ethics. By this I mean that there is a moral phenomenology at play in her work that does not simply set out to administer the values on which we should rest, or relentlessly fulfill our ethical quota. Instead, a relentless desire to do good collides with restless intentions (time, space, responsibility and ethical fallibility) that don’t have as yet a reputable character to fall back on or justify the desired outcome or hope. This is how Eve’s work begins to adapt to its metamorphosis – to adapt its good intent.



Eve performs in The Real Hot Bitches dance troupe during the SLIPs community soccer tournament