

## Artists' Formal Response to Michelle Dracoulis's comments on *Vent*, The Barracks, made on Facebook, September 18, 2022.

Dear Members of the Derwent Valley Arts Board,

We are writing to clarify our artistic position in the production of the *Vent* exhibition at The Barracks gallery (September 10<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup>, 2022) and to address some negative accusations about the show expressed by the standing Mayor of Derwent Valley, Michelle Dracoulis on Sept 18<sup>th</sup> via her personal Facebook page. We are aware some viewers may have found some images in the exhibition to be offensive and also wish to respond to this.

In her response to *Vent* on Facebook, Ms Dracoulis accused the exhibition of being 'blatant trauma feeding' and representing the Barracks as a 'sideshow'. Framing these effects as a partial outcome of her 'absence' after her previous stewardship of the gallery, the accusation came as a mixed surprise to us as she has been aware of the exhibition since funding was granted in 2021, and has made no inquiry as to its content or our approach prior to this. Aside from the potential benefits of being seen as protector of the New Norfolk community and its heritage sites just prior to the upcoming election, we feel the accusations against the exhibition and our approach are unfair and warrant our defence. We hope this may assist future discussions on exhibition programming at DVA and the relationship between artists, the Barracks and the community.

In support of her comments against the show, Ms Dracoulis posted a link to an e-flux article <sup>i</sup> explaining the concept of 'trauma-feeding' and how it operates in high art contexts. Situating it in a context of 'corrupt conditions in the economy of contemporary art...that cultivates practices, habits, and sensibilities that allow artists to hustle their way to success in a neoliberal economy structured by gross inequality of wealth and of capabilities', the authors explain:

By "trauma-feeding," we refer to a practice of making art about trauma that has the obvious effect of soliciting people's sympathy and, possibly, stirring up more trauma or trauma-related effects in spectators. In addition, this practice feeds on trauma, using it to generate buzz and interest, often translating into investment or into cultural capital, which amounts to almost the same. The practice feeds trauma (not just "feeds on" trauma), too, because it stirs up a sense of the world as precarious without following through in moral responsibility for what has been stirred up. The key way trauma-feeding does both of these things –

feeding on trauma and feeding trauma – is by making trauma into a consumable spectacle that adapts well to a neoliberal art market structured by extreme wealth and capability inequality and by a star culture of artists. At the same time, this consumable is parasitic on everyday moral sympathy.’

The authors go on to explain that trauma-feeding elicits ‘amoral’ modes of empathy in viewers and allows artists to create work irresponsibly without any expectation ‘to engage moral responsibility and to draw down the rising affect’.

We do not believe that *Vent* participates in a neoliberal context of art-making in the high-art economy of powerful art institutions and art markets, nor that we have blatantly exploited the traumatic histories of The Barracks for consumable spectacle, ‘stirring up trauma’ or personal gains in a supposed ‘star culture of artists’. Working with DVA as a volunteer-run organisation and as artists on a temporary grant, our approach has been informed purely by a conceptual interest in exploring a site within our community that belongs to histories of colonial asylums and how such sites intersect with the way our society perceives and understands the histories of mental health both here and elsewhere. Our methods of gathering information about The Barracks were by archival research into public records available at the local library and online, articles and books written about Willow Court, tours of Willow Court, consultation with architects and architectural plans, and reports from health departments and psychiatrists across the early and middle-periods of its development. This method of research, as well as our approach to the building as our primary subject, is articulated explicitly in the curatorial essay in the catalogue, as well as the show’s title ‘Vent’ relating specifically to its architectural features that are echoed in the framing of the works.

We object to the accusation that we blatantly mined traumatic narratives to ‘feed on’ public vulnerabilities for our own gains or publicity or that we would seek to avoid any follow up on the show’s social ramifications. Being aware of the sensitivity of personal knowledges and histories within the community, we made a conscious and informed decision not to represent or depict any specific narratives, events or individual histories that would convey traumatic experiences directly, nor to reference any patient records involving staff or individuals that we found in the records. It is not our expertise to engage with traumatised individuals or traumatic memory, nor undertake socially engaged practices aimed at concrete social labour, participatory art or outcomes as suggested by the e-flux article. We did not see this as a requirement for responding to The Barracks, but understand now that in not consulting community, we may have exposed sensitivities about

how artistic responses to the site by non-members of the local community are expected to be navigated and what kinds of artistic response are deemed appropriate with sites whose histories are tightly guarded. If by avoiding talking to individual members of the community about their experiences of The Barracks we have run the risk of being seen as negligent and irresponsible to the site's more traumatic effects, this raises important questions about how artistic interpretations of The Barracks are to be mediated and by whom, and also if they are welcome at all within the community. As artists, we would seek to avoid preventive or reactive disqualifications of 'out-group' voices and prefer methods that support open interpretations as a way of encouraging constructive exchange across different groups and communities.

We understand that making art exploring difficult subjects such as trauma, loss, grief or other unsettling emotions that are central to researching mental health and institutional histories, is not without risk of unsettling viewers of all kinds and experiences. All art engaging with affective mechanisms and powerful symbolism navigates this terrain to varying degrees, and it is impossible for artists to predict audience response, however protective or anticipatory we may be in selecting subject matter. When responding to a site such as The Barracks with historical equipment and materials still at the site, it is impossible for us to know which materials or objects may cause offense to particular viewers or whether some are out of bounds for interpretation. In the case of The Barracks the affective dimensions of the building itself generated and informed our response, in conjunction with information we encountered in publicly available records. *Vent* was never an investigation into trauma per se, but a much broader inquiry about how asylum spaces can reveal aspects of our culture that have failed to support the health and wellbeing of our communities, and produce effects counter to very purpose for which they were built.

We did not expect the community would be unmoved by the exhibition, but we also did not expect to be charged with exploiting community vulnerabilities and causing harm, or that the work would encounter the possibility of censorship due to audience sensitivities. We sought to balance the risk of engaging with a sensitive site with what we believe to be a sensitive installation, responsive to the surfaces and textures of the building as it stands today and creating a subdued and quiet atmosphere in which to view the work and encounter the character of the building. This was intended to create a space of quiet reflection, not of 'consumable spectacle', a space in which audiences might encounter the building as a living entity or subject. We wanted to provide viewers the opportunity to reflect on the phenomenological and material character of the building and its many, multi-layered histories, how they are still alive in public consciousness. *Vent* was never about

one particular moment in history but about the complex evolution of various institutions of care at the site, topics to which Helen Norrie's essay and the titles of Amanda's works carefully allude. As artists interested in unconscious spaces and the manifestation of psychological phenomena in material culture and forms, we were interested in exploring the site through reference to unconscious processes, the unstable nature of memory, uncanny repetitions that can sometimes attend traumatic memory and how such processes might be explored through reference to the architectural form of the building. The premise of 'Vent' as a metaphor for exploring instabilities and liminal spaces, underpinned our intention for site-response to be open-ended, a means of enabling discussion and reflection as viewers encountered different takes on particular features and different modes of representation and interpretation. We do not feel such an approach operates within a closed system of art experiences that leave the questions unchallenged, but on the contrary, allows space for interpreting social and historical sites (in this case architecture) in new ways and exploring new sites for conscious thought. The catalogue essays explore such questions about the role of art in such spaces and how they might be navigated.

It is because The Barracks is not a fully repurposed building or gallery that it appealed to us as a unique space where we might explore, via subtle modes of institutional critique, the slippages between contemporary art gallery and old asylum. Amanda's *Blind Windows* perhaps comes closest to this mode of inquiry inviting viewers to consider the ramifications of visitors coming to look at art within a space that still clearly contains elements and materials belonging to past medical practices and the potential uncanny or strangeness of such conjunctions. Disused and decayed buildings have an affective impact that is well acknowledged in contemporary thought as they evidence the passing of authority and outdated practices, reminding us of cultural and social decay. In a culture and time where the impacts of trauma have finally begun to be acknowledged in many social groups, we suggest such buildings can tell us much about our systems and failings, and that these are worthy of artistic engagement and thought.

If there was an expectation that The Barracks building only be responded to via socially-engaged, practices, or that there were requirements governing our response to some of its more unstable, unsettling elements and histories, this was not made apparent to us. Such an approach would have positioned us within a set of expectations and circumscribed artistic and social practices responding to the representational politics of the community and its ownership of the site. Such positions were not our intention, nor our interest, as we had clearly proposed the exhibition as an investigation of the building that would draw on conceptual, metaphorical and poetic approaches to its spaces and

histories via painting and installation. Although we were responding to The Barracks as a specific local site, we were also aware the themes we were exploring about space, suppression, surveillance, discipline, concealment, health, medicine and power were universal and relate to many asylum sites and the treatment of mental health patients throughout the world. We did not intend to usurp the voices of those with direct experience of the site for our own personal or political gain, but rather to provide a space where the site might be seen as having its own role to play in providing a space in which these voices alongside others might be heard. We have sought to provide a space that allows viewers to make their own associations within a constructive symbolic field. If this serves as a conduit for community discussion this is a welcome outcome of the exhibition.

We feel the comparison of Amanda's images to images of abused children on the walls of Ashley Detention Centre<sup>ii</sup> made by Michelle Dracoulis to be highly offensive, inappropriate and irresponsible, particularly given the current stage of the Royal Commission into Institutional Child Responses to Child Sexual Abuse in Tasmania. Having carefully avoided depictions of traumatic treatments or incidents, we are shocked and dismayed by the articulation of such an image by someone in a position of power and the apparent lack of understanding the impact of such an image on the community or her own participation in sensationalist modes of exploitation for personal gain. Amanda's works clearly do not depict traumas enacted between people, nor do they depict specific acts of violence pertaining to an institution, nor do they 'represent' in a literal sense human behaviours of any kind. The comparison is highly offensive for these reasons as well as a profound insult to members of our community currently undergoing distress relating to the Royal Commission, as well as to artists and art organisations whom Ms Dracoulis appears to align with the immoral and criminal activities of the perpetrators. It is profoundly upsetting to us as artists that such damaging comparisons have been made by someone who is artistically trained and would appear to have respect for artists in other ways, and that such associations have been made in relation to this exhibition. We understood the generous support of Derwent Valley Council in the marketing of the show in its final stages of preparation, as support of our approach to the site and a sign of encouragement for artists of all kinds in the community and are deeply troubled by Ms Dracoulis's apparent disregard for this support in her comments. It is regrettable that Ms Dracoulis did not consider approaching us with her concerns as professionals, before releasing her comments on Facebook, a platform which lends itself to inflammatory public comment and other potential harms.

We hope that *Vent* may be a space for many voices to be expressed and for the voice of The Barracks with its long, rich, multifaceted history to be encountered in ways that viewers find

meaningful. *Vent* is but one exhibition in a program of exhibitions at DVA that we hope will continue to support different approaches to the Barracks through a variety of mediums. We invite the community to engage with the works in a way they see fit and we are happy to be part of any discussion about the exhibition and the meanings of the works in the future. We are aware that art does not play the same role as history, and neither does affect have the same consequences as trauma. We sought to position *Vent* somewhere between these categories to explore different tensions and thresholds of understanding and permission, inviting viewers into the quiet and affecting rooms of The Barracks, to reflect on the role of power and participation in such spaces and the ways in which some boundaries may be seen or perceived, and others may not at any given time. Amanda's representation of her own body and the Barracks buildings in the works, and our invitation to viewers to activate the frames/vents are formal devices for exploring these themes. If this approach has unsettled some viewers, we regret any distress or discomfort *Vent* may have caused.

We welcome the inclusion of advice at the entrance to the gallery for the remainder of the exhibition advising of the sensitive nature of the images for some viewers. We remind viewers and gallerists of the agency of our audience to participate in opening and closing the vents as they see fit.

Dr Eliza Burke and Amanda Davies

September 22, 2022.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2019/09/17/trauma-feeding-why-its-not-okay-to-exploit-trauma-in-art/#:~:text=1.,trauma%2Drelated%20effects%20in%20spectators.>

<sup>ii</sup> 'I find this exhibition disturbing in the extreme. After working carefully with many artists in my 12+ months of running and building the reputation of this gallery – which is situated on a very sensitive site – I feel as though my absence has opened the way for the blatant trauma feeding that I had so carefully avoided. I love this site and am very protective of those affected by it, both living and dead. It is not a sideshow and all stakeholders on site should be treating it's stories with deference and dignity. Be warned, these works have the potential to be triggering.'

<https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2019/09/17/trauma-feeding-why-its-not-okay-to-exploit-trauma-in-art/#:~:text=1.,trauma%2Drelated%20effects%20in%20spectators.>

(Posted Facebook: September 18, 2022).

'I have met both artist and curator although I am not intimately acquainted with either. I believe that both are sensitive and have integrity. The onus in this instance lays with the organisation who has taken possession of a very sensitive site and has not explained the importance of sensitive and abstract representation. Staff and ex patients still reside in our region. There are families now that are contributing to the Royal Commission into institutional child abuse. I can only hope that a few decades from now artists are not being allowed to hang interpretations of children being buggered on the walls of the Ashely Detection Centre.'

(Posted Facebook: September 18, 2022)

After a comment posted on Sept 21 referencing the offensiveness of the above wording from another FB user and a request for it to be changed, Ms Dracoulis amended her comment to:

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'I have met both artist and curator although I am not intimately acquainted with either. I believe that both are sensitive and have integrity. The onus in this instance lays with the organisation who has taken possession of a very sensitive site and has not explained the importance of sensitive and abstract representation. Staff and ex patients still reside in our region. There are families now that are contributing to the Royal Commission into institutional child abuse. I can only hope that a few decades from now artists are not being allowed to hang interpretations of children being abused on the walls of the Ashely Detection Centre.'

(Posted Facebook: September 21, 2022)