



Paula Dunlop

Attachment

2024

Glass beads, grout, fibreglass mesh, adhesive; extant algae and lichens on brickwork

Paula Dunlop's 'Attachment' is a permanent public artwork for Metro Arts and the West Village precinct. The title of the work alludes to three attachments. The first is the obvious one: the small, coloured glass beads that Dunlop attaches to three sections of exterior brickwork in Factory Lane that houses Metro Arts. The second attachment is harder to detect, but it was the starting point for the work: an algae and lichen, which are the living microorganisms also attached to the brickwork. The third attachment is a social one: the heritage Peters ice-cream factory buildings that her work responds to have been a backdrop for community-building, as well as production and commerce.

'Attachment' draws on processes and materials familiar to the artist's work in jewellery, most clearly in her use of glass beads. Glass beads have been manufactured for as long as glass has (since at least the 2nd millennium BC in Europe) and have always been a significant object of global trade, intensifying with European colonisation of Africa and North America.¹ Like the Peters factory, they represent the meeting of different cultures and practices under global capitalism, reminding us that it is people, not just products, that are circulated throughout the world and find new communities of belonging.

Dunlop's jewellery practice is exacting and highly resolved; she hand weaves minimalist glass beaded forms based on repeating patterns and ordered geometry. She is highly sensitive to her materials and the directions they suggest for her work. Outside of her jewellery work, Dunlop makes a point of avoiding predetermined forms and predictable sequences. Following a lineage of twentieth century experimental practice, Dunlop is interested in chance as a starting point for new work—a strategy associated with as diverse movements as *Musique Concrète*, *Dada*, *Surrealism*, *Fluxism*, and *Systems Esthetics*.

Development of the work began with the artist's close observation of a dark growth or discolouration of the brickwork following the drip line of the building. The building managers had complained of a persistent mould, but the artist's enquiry with the Queensland Herbarium pointed to a species of terrestrial algae and lichen.² The growth of these microorganisms appears to follow the pattern of water seeping from the hard landscaping above the brickwork. This led Dunlop to speculate about the passage of water through the landscape over time: the way water once travelled in creeks and springs, and perhaps is now attempting to flow through the built environment, despite efforts to control it. In 'Attachment', the artist uses these chance markings as the form for her bead mosaic. To Dunlop, these discoloured marks on brick are not the ugly stains that reveal a new building's failure to deal with water ingress, as building managers may view them. Instead, they are now something more like 'algae drawings', as good as any human-generated abstraction.

The work is intended to guide visitors down the laneway that houses Metro Arts. The laneway is a marginal space of a major commercial development, also housing bins, building maintenance signage, and abandoned shopping trolleys. Heritage factory buildings are joined together by a new brick structure along the lane, where the Metro Arts theatre and bar reside. The architectural mission for the new building is to disappear. It is an odd fortress-style construction that could be mistaken for a retaining wall, with decorative parapets along the top of the brick walls that serve no other purpose than to trick the eye into seeing it as congruous with the surrounding heritage buildings. 'Attachment' becomes part of the mixed materials, temporality, and functions that already reside in this space.

Dunlop's practice is always preoccupied with process, and the process for this work resembles a multistage conservation project—or at least, it does for someone like me with a background in cultural heritage. From her observation of algae and lichen growth, Dunlop took a tracing, much as an archaeologist would document engravings on a rock shelter. Then, with the help of a stone mason, she excavated shallow sections where the algae and lichen were growing. Another tracing was taken from these depressions. She then used her tracings to create pattern pieces for the glass bead mosaic that sits in relief. With the precision of a conservator, Dunlop has attached each small bead to a flexible tiling substrate following a diamond mosaic pattern, painstakingly nudging them into place with a pencil tip. She has then fixed the tiles into the corresponding excavated area using an adhesive and translucent grout. Guiding the process are numbered pattern pieces that map out the pattern direction, colour changes, and points of connection with the precision of her dressmaking training. The last step in the artist's process is the reintroduction of the site's microorganisms. This final 'field work' sees Dunlop mixing local soil with carbon and sugars, which she paints into the grout with great care in order to feed the lichen and algae.

In the timeline of plant succession, lichen comes before land plants. The fact they can live on a brick tells us how the pioneering lichen has helped transform a once bare mineral landscape into grasslands and then forests by breaking down rock into soil that can sustain root growth. We can observe something similar in the way Dunlop has approached 'Attachment'. In her first intervention, the excavation, the artist speeds up this slow decomposition process by grinding down the bricks. Her second intervention, the glass bead mosaic, reintroduces a mineral to the brick in the form of silica. Her final intervention, the application of soil microbiology, ensures this process of plant succession continues.

What Dunlop has produced is a clear departure from the conservation sensibility that her process might suggest. While a conservator aims to restore the original condition without showing obvious signs of intervention, Dunlop's project is more lyrical, like a pair of white socks darned in metallic red thread to proudly announce what has been 'repaired'. In doing so, she draws our attention to the question of what belongs and what doesn't in this heritage setting. Dunlop's work engages only the newly built elements of the precinct that do not share the heritage status of the original factory buildings. Heritage significance from a Western perspective has been tied to the idea of 'intact fabric', or the qualities of integrity and authenticity that underpin heritage value. Algae and lichen symbolise a potential threat to heritage integrity, just as the artist's intervention symbolises a threat to heritage authenticity. By drawing attention to the microorganisms, the artist reminds us of the dynamic relationship between the built and natural environment: to the building manager, the lichen sits out of place, but of course as Dunlop reminds us, lichen is very much of this place.

Madeleine King

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1. Corning Museum of Glass, 2013, "Life on a String: 35 Centuries of the Glass Bead" <https://whatson.cmog.org/exhibitions-galleries/life-string-35-centuries-glass-bead>

2. The lichen found in this work is the product of a relationship between two organisms: fungi (which need to consume carbon) and algae and/or cyanobacteria (both of which photosynthesise to produce sugars—a form of carbon). This relationship is described as symbiotic, but there are some interesting power dynamics. It's unclear if both organisms benefit or if it's a more parasitic relationship. If it is indeed mutually beneficial, it may not be a completely equal partnership if the fungi is effectively farming the algae for its own consumption.



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