

You are invited to walk three times around the following things

your parents, a new born baby, a drinking fountain, an ant hill, a mountain, a living thing, a significant text, a stadium, a tree, an egg, a fruit, a fire, a lake, a puddle, a city, a globe

You will find these things in the gallery, on this map and in your world

THE WARMTH OF THE CURVE

Michelle Sakaris

Presented by the 2012 Next Wave Festival
Exhibition at BUS Projects, 673 Bourke Street,
Melbourne

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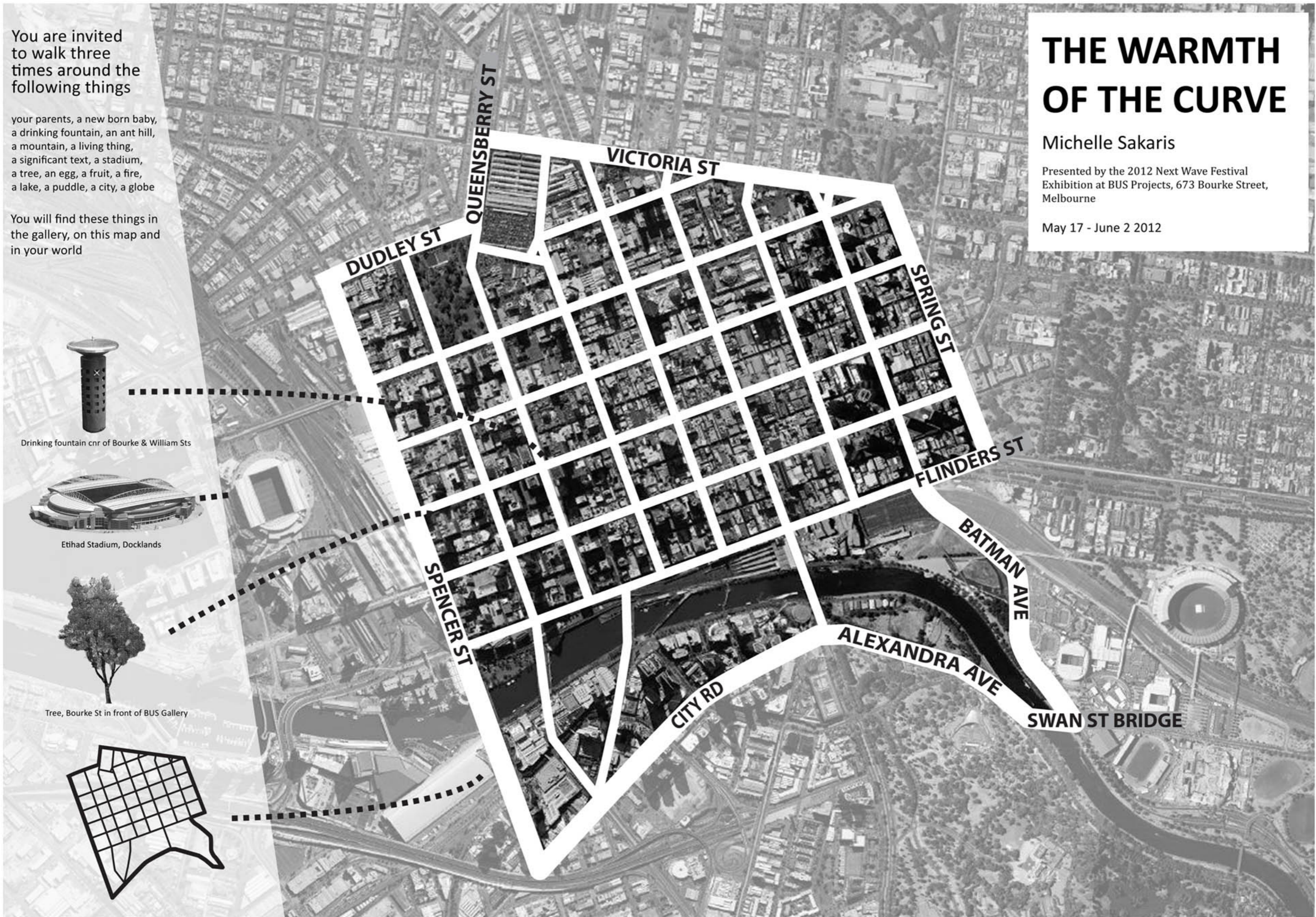
Drinking fountain cnr of Bourke & William Sts



Etihad Stadium, Docklands



Tree, Bourke St in front of BUS Gallery



The world is contracted thus: enchantment, disenchantment, re-enchantment

Michelle's Sakaris' *The Warmth of the Curve* is a work that takes as its beginning point, the ritual of circumambulation—the walking in a circle around an object considered sacred in the narratives of enchantment and practiced in many religions around the world. Sakaris' objects, situated on the gallery floor and pointed out on a city of Melbourne map are derived from the prototypes found in Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism.

Her prototypes include: a sacred stone, a sacred book, a fire, a pile of food, an image of a deity, a baptismal font, a cow, an altar, a tree, a building, a hill, a city, a mountain, and a river. Many of these objects are relatively small and only take minutes to be walked around while others require many hours or even years. All the objects the artist has placed in the gallery or stand in situ on the street, are in dialogue with the specific objects of *enchantment* found in these diverse traditions whose ceremonial rituals vary in detail but all offer to the believer an experience of the sacred if not a share in divinity. In a thoroughly *disenchanted* world however these objects are contradictions to the rationalism we live by. Consequently we see the worlds of *enchantment* and *disenchantment* divided along an un-bridgeable chasm. For the artist however, this is a space in which to creatively dwell. It is in this space between enchantment and disenchantment that Sakaris introduces her set of objects and their circumambulation as a form of *re-enchantment*.

In the practice of circumambulation, extracted from various traditions and their associated objects, the artist has found a means by which one can shift the way we orient ourselves toward things. Sakaris' invitation to circumambulate her in situ city objects and gallery objects is a generosity associated with relational art that here offers to gallery visitors participation in the making of her work and experience a "magnification" of objects that is no less the re-enchantment of things we encounter in the everyday world. Ordinarily, we experience the world as an interconnected whole, where individual things, tree, water-fountain, stadium, withdraw into the hurly burly of the city, and go unnoticed, unseen, unsought, concealed. They stand ready to make an appearance when we need them. What kind of appearance would it be if we had no need of the objects we encounter and how would we engage with them?

Walking around an object with no other intention, but the walk, inverts the order of things and launches a moment of de-centering in which we find the object of utility or aesthetics displaced to the centre as the subject of our walking comportment. Walking in a prescribed circle has the effect of feeling drawn by the gravitational force of the object, and as we are pulled into the orbit of the object we are drawn into an unfamiliar relation with it. Circumambulating a commonplace object, involves an engagement with it that does not strictly accord to our familiar use of things as the way we use them when we have a need of them. In walking three times around an object we lose a normative focus and engage with it in a manner we are not accustomed and one that is incomplete and unfamiliar. The experience however can only be

momentary and contingent on the duration of the object's circuit; and like all re-enchantment we experience it in the knowledge of disenchantment and therefore it can only be a type of enchantment that is provisional.

An originary Hindu story of *pradakshina* circumambulation, tells of Shiva's request of his two sons to circle the world three times. One son immediately set off with his peacock and took decades to complete the journey while the other, Ganesha, walks three full circles around his parents, Shiva and Parvati, stating that his parents constituted the world. Ganesha, "the remover of obstacles", by his contraction of the world, establishes the importance of the circumambulation rituals common throughout the subcontinent. Most circumambulatory rituals reflect Ganesha's contraction of the world or its circumscription by a correlation of objects that stand in place of another. This is essentially a way of relating to the sacred bodily and/or by way of metaphor. Sakaris applies the logic of metaphor in her selection of objects as correlations and Ganesha-like contractions of the existing prototypes she finds in a variety of religious practices. Her singled out rain puddle, water container or drinking fountain all come to stand in as correlates for the baptismal font or the sacred river. The drinking fountain is at once a world contracted thus, and a metaphorical contraction of the font or the river.

The relation between Sakaris' objects and the prototypes echoes the relation between the circumambulating participant and selected commonplace object; in as far as she locates her objects in the orbit of the prototypes. In a manner of speaking the commonplace objects of everyday life are imbued with the significations of their prototypes. Some objects of circumambulation in their original religious context are in themselves metaphorical contractions of larger worlds, as is the case of food piles that come to represent in Hinduism the circumambulation of the Govardhan hill that in turn is the natural form of Krishna. Metaphorical objects defer their own identity by conferring it to another. While their own meaning is to be found in an other, the act of circumambulation inspirits the object to "remain" itself—that it need not be valued instrumentally, but valued intrinsically as a thing in itself and not as a means to an end. To complete a circle around an object makes the object complete without recourse to anything extrinsic or outside the circle. On the circular fault line Sakaris' work asks the question, what it is for something *to be* and *to be itself*? The circumambulated object of which this ontological question is asked is contained within the particular frame of relation and therefore cannot be answered independent of the relation. Circumambulated objects, the objects inspirited to be themselves, are however anything but themselves; as hard as we may try, and despite our attempt to let something stand for itself we create a new object—an object of relation that includes the circumambulator and the circumambulated.

A hybrid of readymade, performance, installation and relational art, the *Warmth of the Curve* deflects the usual problem of contemporary art whose audience is left guessing on how to engage with it. Particularly problematic are the equivocal objects of art extracted from the world of utility, the readymade, presented in such a way as to be asking us to tarry a while, to bring a reflective attitude and maybe make an interpretation. In a manner of speaking they ask that we convert the sensual experience into *conversation*. For Sakaris, the sensual experience is

extended in the performative circuit, and what we end up in converting into conversation is something more visceral, less cerebral that includes participation in the object of circumambulation. Following the artist, our performative action, shares in the sacramental that not only consecrates things but also the relationship between an object and a participant.

In this very action Sakaris raises fundamental questions concerning the nature of the artwork. Her open invitation to whomever wishes to participate in the circumambulation of an object implies that the work is essentially performative, as her video demonstrates. Consequently it must be asked whether the work is at one level, incomplete unless there is a circumambulation of the objects on the gallery floor and those in situ in the vicinity of the gallery and pointed out on her map of Melbourne. If no one walks around any of the objects is her work incomplete? In the knowledge of the invitation to walk around an object, it would seem that even imagining the implied circle around each object or the thought of walking around one indicates a viewer's intent. At the level of intent, the intention *not to* walk is the flip side of the intention *to* walk, an intention nonetheless that puts the object at the centre of thinking even for a very brief moment.

As pointed out earlier we experience the world as an interconnected whole, where individual things, water, bread, egg, apple, gas cooker, withdraw into the shadows of our everyday world until we "call" them out. "Worlding" permits the conception of things as an interconnectedness of relation, where one thing contiguous with other things forms a "world"—this can be said of the city of Melbourne, which Sakaris invites us to circumambulate. However, if the objects of our everyday worlds are "worlded", then Sakaris de-worlds. She has "de-worlded" a selection of objects belonging to the same world and given that these objects are correlates and "contractions" of traditional objects in circumambulatory ritual, she doubly "de-worlds". In proposing that we circumambulate the city of Melbourne, the artist gives us a way of experiencing the potential scale of de-worlding by entering into relation with it not as a conceptual composite of parts but as a unified entity treated no different to its drinking fountains, trees, or Etihad stadium. One may protest at the conception of a "world" as possibly being a physical unified object when it is primarily a concept. This is however what Sakaris permits us to do when we consider circumambulating Melbourne. The city is taken to be a singular entity that is a unified object and while it is constituted of many parts it is no less fundamental and not reducible to its parts. Once we permit ourselves to think of aggregate entities as unified objects we are confronted with the ancient problem of the aggregate. At what point in the regress of relations, that can infinitely expand or contract, can we put up a boundary, physical or imaginary, to corral a relation to a single discrete entity or unified object. We ignore the celestial clustering of hydrogen and oxygen atoms, the trickle of water into creeks and rivers and the reservoirs they feed, and instead we begin with our experience of the drinking fountain. We stand with the fountain on the footpath of a street, located in a street block, in the city, and stop ourselves from pondering relations ad infinitum in a network of parts that only cease at the end of all relation-making, beyond the reaches of space probes and *Voyager*. The fact is we impose "city limits" to fundamental entities, but not everything is as

fixed as Melbourne's City Circle tram route, a tourist entity determined by a circuit of tram tracks. The line of containment while it is determined by necessity, is a line that shifts now and again as the need arises.

Sakaris' work brings our attention to one other way of thinking about "worlds" that is very real and tangible. We understand specific "worlds" when we say "my world", the "world of science", or the "world of religion". While there is something distinctively different between the abstraction "the world of religion" and the place, "the city of Melbourne", there is a sense in which they are the same as when we refer to Melbourne, as a fundamental entity consisting of many parts. The "world of religion" while being a context for a way of conceiving the world with ideas of divinity, sanctification, prohibition, celebration, founding history; it is also a "world" with its specific objects—temple, church, Torah, baptismal font, Black Stone, cow, Mount Kailash, Jericho. By extension we may then speak of the world of the ritual object. More specifically we may speak of a world of objects in contiguous relation, such as the world of the drinking fountain. My world however includes the drinking fountain whenever I am in need of it. In the relation between two beings our worlds overlap to form a new provisional entity that exists when I am thirsty. Similarly, all objects can be thought instrumentally. By this way of thinking all things are said to exist in a world through human "worlding" practices. In our "everyday world" most of the things with which we are surrounded by exist for their usefulness. In contrast, in the "world of religion", things may exist for their intangible and metaphorical value. The objects of religious circumambulation, which Sakaris identifies as prototypes, fall in this category. Her "de-worlding" is the invisible picture frame that allows us to focus on the things themselves by excluding all else and converts their relational network of parts to white noise. De-worlding diminishes a thing's worlding relations by momentarily disregarding or bracketing-out the contextual environment and a thing's instrumental value; a disregard for a thing's "fit" in a network and its usefulness. The object de-worlded we sometimes call enchanted ritual object, sometimes re-enchanted art object.

Evangelos Sakaris, 2012

Evangelos is the artist's father and is currently a PhD candidate at Melbourne University (VCA), exploring the transubstantial object.

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