

## to resist being a gallery wear a denim jacket

Louisa Bufardeci

28 October 2024

At work this semester I encountered a new kind of gallery space.

Typically if I want to engage with art I move towards art—that is, I go to a gallery or a museum; I pick up a book about art or an artist; I open Instagram or Pinterest. Sometimes I find art even if I am not consciously moving towards it, and this is often delightful. Like chancing upon a street performance or a mural or a captivating artwork on the wall of someone’s home; or hearing some music, a poem or a story broadcast on the radio; or noticing the cleverness in the design of a particular object. In each case the artfulness of these capture me, I understand them as art and move towards them based on that understanding. And I understand each of their platforms: the gallery, the museum, the book, the street, the wall, the device playing music, the radio and so on, as serving a particular function in relation to the art it is platforming. And that relationship is static. Not radio static, but inert static. That is, those platforms are surfaces or venues that are usually insensible to the art they put forward. They don’t speak back to the art; they don’t refuse the art. The people in control of those spaces might speak back to the art or refuse it, and the people engaging with the art might speak back to the art or refuse it, but the platform itself usually has no option to do this.

I say “usually” because sometimes it does. Sometimes the walls of a gallery are too hard to push pins into it, or the street is too narrow to fully appreciate the performance happening there, or the pages of the book are too shiny to see the words on it without distraction, or sometimes an object is cleverly designed to refuse its function. But these instances are not common and are not usually *purposeful* in relation to the platform. All this is in contrast to this new kind of gallery space I have experienced recently—one which can purposefully accept or refuse, overtly or subtly, the work exhibited there. This is badge space.

Badge space literally came to me when I was walking into work one Monday morning. It was the Acting Head of VCA Art Kiron Robinson walking towards me, but art was also walking towards me. I was not moving towards art like I usually do, art was moving towards me. On this morning badge space included an envelope, a post-it note stack and a pen. Kiron said I could write a secret on a post-it note and put it in the envelope. He promised he wouldn’t read it. The piece is called *Three may keep a secret, if three of*

*them are Kiron* by Grace Andrews. Okay. Hang on, what's going on?? Kiron explained badge space to me.

Badge space is three magnetic badges attached to Kiron's top—sweater, jacket or shirt, depending on what he is wearing on the day. At first the badges were the clear plastic kind you'd get at a conference to slip a card with your name and affiliated organisation into, but according to some of the artists who showed there, the clear plastic part was abandoned early on. As well as being the Acting Head of VCA Art Kiron is a lecturer in Photography. The artists showing at badge space are his second year Professional Practice photography students. Badge space is one of a number of opportunities Kiron gave the students to experience making, exhibiting and curating art this semester. There are two exhibitions at badge space per week with installations happening on Mondays and Wednesdays. For centuries artists have been the curators of their own and other people's exhibitions, so for Kiron badge space is an opportunity for students to practice the craft of curating alongside the craft of making art for exhibition. After installation in the morning, Kiron continues to be badge space throughout the day as he fulfils his teaching and leadership duties.

Following the work by Grace Andrews there was an untitled work by Elias Seyd—three small mirrors which any of Kiron's interlocutors could see themselves reflected in. After that was the piece *Upstanding* by Bryce Bridger which was six helium filled party balloons tied to the badges. Kiron walked around for two days with these balloons attached to the back of his sweater. Apparently he wore them to a meeting with the Director and the Dean. He said he felt like it was difficult to be taken seriously. Perhaps this was when he realised that this gallery had agency. The next work exhibited at badge space was by Isabella Mesiti. On the front space was a cheap print out of a picture of a chicken on a colourful rainbow background with the text "I love chickens!", and on the back space another picture of a chicken with some text and a QR code inviting the viewer to donate some money (presumably to the chicken?).

The following exhibition was *Bowman* by Mila Medic. It comprised three large and long (down to the ground) fabric bows made to reflect the style of Pierrot, the 17<sup>th</sup> century commedia dell'arte figure. Mila was thinking about Kiron as a person when she conceived of this work, not as a gallery. She wanted to "add" to Kiron, to make *him* more glamorous. Now the artwork is more than merely site specific, it is personal. The site is no longer Kiron's tops but Kiron himself. In this sense it's not just about the location, history and physicality of the site so much as it's about the gallery's personal fashion sensibility. Kiron's fashion sensibility has informed the design and production of Mila's artwork, and its exhibition is always in relation to that aspect of the site. This probably couldn't be said for the other works which could have been exhibited on any person's tops functioning as badge space.

On this day, Kiron's fashion sensibility actually worked against Mila's piece. Perhaps it was a refusal of her critique of his style, or perhaps it was the gallery refusing the art. The weight of the long bows combined with the thickness of his denim jacket was too much to sustain the attractive force of the badge's magnets and the bows kept falling off. Was the denim jacket (as gallery) resisting not just the artist's fashion critique but also the art and hence its own role as a gallery space? This kind of agency—the capacity to make a decision (wear a denim jacket) to resist being a gallery is likely unique to badge space. It goes without saying that we must always think twice about the apparent neutrality of the gallery space, but perhaps in that vein we must also think twice about the less apparent agency of the space itself. Kiron's agency as a gallery space is evident in his choice of clothing and in his capacity to act (or not) as the gallery's invigilator. Hopefully later in the day, when it had warmed up a bit, Kiron took the jacket off and attached Mila's art to his t-shirt.

Following Mila Medic's exhibition was Mila Woodward's three matchbox-sized dioramas, precariously attached to Kiron's chest and upper arm, titled *Miniature badge space badge space*. And after that Ashley Nguyen showed *Cupid*, a regal looking cape with a large plywood bow and arrow which seemed to flout the need for the badges at all. The next work was by Cinoo Lee and Samuel Jones titled *I'm too contemporary to tell you* and featured a large paper peter pan collar, each side adorned with a gaffer-taped mini-banana (an homage to Maurizio Cattelan's 2019 piece *Comedian*) and two large paper buttons, one with an image of a Jeff Koons balloon-dog sculpture and one with a cut out of the soon-to-be-installed eight-foot kangaroo sculpture by New Zealand artist Michael Parekowhai. The next exhibition at badge space was *You Rock, I Rock, We Rock* by Tamara Chichaeva. It was three rocks of different sizes hanging with cotton threads from each of the badges. I saw one of the rocks abandoned in the photography studio. This piece was too much for the gallery space as well. And the final exhibition was by Paige Stanley. It included a pair of well-worn toddler-sized sandals and an equally well-worn label that said "THE BOY FROM NOWHERE."

Kiron takes care of the works in badge space and explains them carefully to anyone who asks. Cinoo says the space of badge space is one you can interact with. Interacting with the work is one thing—writing a secret and popping it in the envelope, taking a look at yourself in the mirror, donating to a chicken—and interacting with the gallery (or its invigilator) is another. Perhaps ultimately there is more of the latter than the former, because with a barely perceptible sigh Kiron tells me that he gets asked about badge space everywhere he goes—on campus and off campus. So now I understand the denim jacket as resisting not just exhibition but also constant invigilation and probably exhaustion. While there is a long history of artists resisting the gallery—often through the dematerialisation of their work, I don't know about a history of galleries consciously resisting artwork. At first I thought badge space had the radical appeal of artist-run

initiatives and backyard galleries, but I think it takes deinstitutionalisation to a whole other level.

Today my goal is to write this review of badge space and its radical potential in a light-hearted manner. However tomorrow I might do further work thinking about the agency of the gallery space and the deinstitutionalising potential of such agency. The word 'deinstitutionalisation' comes from the practice of shutting down institutions that housed people diagnosed with mental illnesses. What does it mean to apply this word to art galleries? And I might think about badge space more in terms of the "dispositif" which comes from the French historian Michel Foucault and refers to the combined and relational forces that exercise power. And while the question of art's autonomy could also be unpacked it is this question of resistance against artwork by galleries that I think will be exciting to research and think about further.

I love this wild new exhibition space! While it gives students the opportunity to think creatively as artists and curators, it challenges the ideas of what a gallery space is supposed to be and do. It allows for a resistance against itself as a gallery space and, of course, it means that art can finally come to me!

Thanks to Kiron Robinson, Cinoo Lee, Samuel Jones, Camille Robinson, Mila Medic and Inez Martorell for sharing information on badge space with me.

Images:































