

STATION

Re-negotiating with signs

Speaking with Nadia changes the way I feel about my city. We're not talking about Parramatta specifically, but it's a case in point. The place I live is deep in a phase of major construction, and traversing it is a constantly shifting negotiation with bollards, hurricane fencing, temporary road markings and hoardings. Looking through Nadia's eyes, I start to see it less as a series of inconveniences and frustrations, and more as an ecosystem of signs and signifiers: a web of communication taking place through objects. I see Morse code in lane-line dashes and traffic light dots; I am struck by the pleasing geometry of give way, stop and parking signs.

For vehicles, these symbols are legally enforced, but as a pedestrian there is more leeway. Agreements and understandings are tacit, and less likely to be sanctioned. Bodies can be pliant and non-compliant, and there is a choreography of chance, desire and individual decision making to the ways that we negotiate space. Temporary barriers like witches' hats or barrier boards are unfixed and provisional, and we decide whether to take heed of their guidance, skip around them or even move them into new configurations. Becoming more aware of this reciprocity can change our relationship with the world.

Nadia describes this back-and-forth as an "extended touch" between those who put marks or objects in space, and those who encounter them. Thinking about the humans behind the inanimate structures of urban spaces gives a kind of aliveness and intimacy to these interactions. The workers who placed the barriers or painted the road markings – who maybe cursed at that wonky edge or unforeseen splash – will never talk back, but there is the impression of a dialogue. Markings or objects remain in place, speaking for them. If we respond by playing, questioning or even just closely observing, we alter the tone of the conversation. Rather than being restricted and dictated to, we begin to collaborate.

At first, Nadia's sculptures and objects seem like the genteel relatives of their rough and ready referents out in the real world. But the objects on the street – although carrying traces of their own individual lives in scrapes, dents and fractures – have the uniformity of the mass produced. Nadia's objects, on the other hand, declare the presence of the human hand. The edges of thick lines fade into fuzzy, scoured mirror surfaces. Ridged reflective tape is cut carefully enough to generate surprising optical effects, but it is the minor irregularities that reveal the extent of labour involved. Perhaps the most important distinction between these art objects and their utilitarian counterparts is that rather than directing us, Nadia's objects offer us fragmented reflections of ourselves and our worlds.

Barrier boards consist of two welded A-shape structures held in place by a long narrow panel, and are generally used to indicate a closed lane or even reserve a parking space. It's a deliberately provisional arrangement, whereby neither steel 'A' would stand up without the board between them. The parts are mutually sustaining, much like the tacit agreements we enter into with the signs, objects and invisible hands that shape the streets we walk. In re-creating this style of mass-produced barricade with great care and reverence, Nadia draws attention to its peculiar aesthetic features. There are gentle curves, square sections of uneven heights at the tops of each 'A', and unexplained holes cut into the steel. Welded and polished by hand, the functional becomes beautiful and oddly precious.

At this point, we are starting to see the world as Nadia does. We are paying attention to the details, and thinking about the hands that made the things we encounter. This style of observation can remain one that we reserve for objects in a gallery. Or, like Nadia, we can carry this care and curiosity with us out into the world.

Rebecca Gallo, 2020