
Something's lurking

Hang out with SCOUT at Takutai Square



Since it popped on the scene last year, **Takutai Square** has been a fantastic little place of refuge for inner city workers, and passersby alike. Adding payload to the vision of developer Cooper & Co to be a cultural and heritage precinct, it's **snuggled** in against gloriously restored heritage buildings, Westpac's sparkly new office building, bars and shops a-plenty.

Rhythmic and pulsing jets from the square's ground-level water fountain add a tempting aquatic tease on a hot day and are a welcome addition to the otherwise functional and noisy cityscape of the CBD. On the other side of the square, rising up eight metres tall, benevolently looms the precincts' newest cultural artifact. As overhead clouds sift silently past, traffic ebbs and flows, **SCOUT** hungrily observes. People come and go whilst SCOUT, like every good sentinel, watches protectively. With three of four sides covered in plates of steel, the pseudo segmented monolith may possibly go unnoticed, or spur desires to jump around screeching, but it's the fourth side that acts as SCOUT's money shot, a bright, **sugary cascade** of glorious colour.

Due to it's unexpected and at-first inexplicable existence, I found myself in a rather primal process of evaluation. What is this? A tall column with a gorgeous screen. Why is this? Not sure. How is it? Not sure. And so on. I imagine a toddler would seek to answer these questions with his mouth, and although I considered it, I sought to find a more grown up assessment. After a few seconds, the dreamy, slow movement on screen gave me an indication of it's M.O., and, being the age that we're living in, I had a sneaky hunch that this thing was suggesting **I interact** with it. I was hesitant, as I felt like a conspicuous muppet reaching my hand out to a freakishly overgrown digital candy bar.

Luckily for me, feedback in the form of bright white and blue particles start expanding upwards from my hand. After a minute or two, things slowly change and the sequence is different. SCOUT's a **clever little donut** and knows I'll get bored with that game so I am challenged to work out how to interact with the new sequence,

or ultimately to determine if I can interact with this sequence at all.

Sentient Correlater Of Urban Transaction, or SCOUT is the result of an 18 month project commissioned by the Britomart Arts Trust, who chose Australasian Artist **Tim Gruchy** to create something on the vanguard of modern art. And I would say the objective is achieved in this fantastic partnering of art and technology.

Tim has designed, developed and programmed SCOUT to act as a **calmative** influence on the landscape it contributes to and comments on. Based on the short story “Sentinel”, by Arthur C. Clarke, which inspired *2001: A Space Odyssey*, this work explores evolution and behaviour in our current digital world. But apart from the artistic justification, this thing looks beautiful and is also heavily **aware**, evoking another aspect of the previously mentioned movie, but hopefully a lot less menacing. It’s more like a huge **empathetic** iPhone with an art degree.

It’s many sensors effect output based on humidity, pressure, touch, the time of day, the day of the week, sunlight and other atmospheric conditions. So it will react differently depending on it’s surroundings and mood, not unlike the more organic counterparts it is designated to interact with. The subject of sentience is exemplified by **behaviour**, with senses to gather information and the ability to process the data and act on it. Tim’s aim is to present a gentle way to think about intelligence. In his words, SCOUT is “A benevolent non human entity to engage with us here in the square.”

Everything seen on screen has been created entirely in code using the aspects of mathematics that have a relationship to visualizing life. While musical components have been recorded by Tim along with music collaborator James Pinker, with the resulting soundtrack being generative more than prescriptive, so just as with the visuals, the music will avoid repetition. This **dynamism**, along with the programmed intention that it will learn and get more intelligent will help to ensure it is always different and interesting. Fantastic qualities for a permanent fixture.

Technically impressive, inside this creature are 3 servers, enough sensory input for the Mars Rover, and a multitude of electrical sockets (I was lucky enough to see under the bonnet – it was sweet). The huge screen has been custom built in China, and the whole thing has been assembled on site over the last few weeks.

Project managers Matt Smith with the team at Media Pro for the technical multimedia brawn, and Dave Bensley for construction and building have helped bring the concept to fruition. The custom built shell was designed with the help of Sydney-based architects JPW who designed the Westpac building behind said sculpture, so it fits very nicely.

This is a permanent and classic new addition to an already very impressive and useable public space. The official opening is at 4:00pm on February 21st, but you **don’t have to wait** to have an interaction of your own.

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