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## Strange new world termites have taken over RMIT's laneways

What happens when an artist and a soil scientist collaborate in public space?

Approaching the artwork's final week – exhibition on display until June 17<sup>th</sup> - come explore an unanticipated landscape.

Inspired by the darkness and complexity of the living earth beneath our feet, **Empire of Dirt** explores the notion of a constructed landscape and our role as observers and participants within the interwoven biology.

An exciting collaboration between artist James Geurts and environmental microbiologist, Distinguished Professor Andy Ball at RMIT University - *Empire of Dirt* is a site-responsive, art-science public installation and research collaboration. Wonderment Walk Victoria has funded the project. It forms part of their growing open-air gallery of sculptures and installations.

The artwork demonstrates new ways of thinking about research and our future cities landscape, emerging from innovative cross-disciplinary collaboration with the arts. This has been evidenced by the experience of Professor Andy Ball and his colleagues.

*"I think we, as humans, have become disconnected from the land. Through James' work, and the artist's eye, we get a clearer insight into what's happening in response to man-made contaminants and are able to better communicate this to the public,"* says Prof Ball, who was inspired by this project to instigate future artist-in-residence opportunities at his research centre.

Geurts, working within the context of the construction site of RMIT's New Academic Street, took a soil sample as his point of departure. *"I was fascinated to witness the diverse and rapidly evolving microscopic life of this urban soil, entombed beneath the concrete. It got me thinking about ecological tipping points and the incredible ability of species to adapt,"* says Geurts.

Inspired by the soil's architecture, he travelled to the Northern Territory, where he took 3D scans of the giant termite mounds. Just like species migrating south to cooler climates in response to climate change, Geurts' termite mound replicas now inhabit Rodda Lane, off Swanston Street. Together with a series of light box works featuring site drawings and imagery produced from the lab, the installation proposes a future, human and technology-influenced, hybrid ecology.

Emerging from RMIT's Centre for Art Society and Transformation, the *Empire of Dirt* project was designed in collaboration with a number of partners, including Carbon Arts and RMIT's New Academic Street's Urban Animators: Living Laboratory public art program, to test public art's role in bringing science and sustainability conversation to a broader audience.

Wonderment Walk Founder and Chair, Eddie Kutner, says the installation encourages *"collaborative creativity between artists and scientists to play out on Melbourne's streets for all people to interact with."*

*Empire of Dirt* is in-situ at Rodda Lane until 17 June.

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