

write/here

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In 2004 my friend and collaborator, Justy Phillips approached me asking whether I would like to work with her on a project she had initially intended on developing alone but had realised it was something that required significant financial backing, as well as the support and participation of a wide range of people. During a meeting she posed a question to me, 'What would happen if you could tell a story throughout a whole city, and if this story could be told in place of public advertising?' In its subtle subversiveness this question remained with me as an exciting proposition.

The initial idea was simple; we would speak to a large number of people, people from vastly different social and cultural backgrounds and ask them to reflect on their relationship to 'home' and to their community. We would then transcribe all the conversations, select short phrases that represented different experiences, through their honesty and rawness; then use these phrases on every available advertising billboard throughout Hobart for two weeks during the biannual Ten Days on the Island festival. We called the project *write/here*.

Figure 1 and 2

Of course the reality of developing the project was not so simple, and our initial cost estimate quickly rose from around \$40 000.00 to \$120 000.00. As well as financial challenges, we were acutely aware that the project – in its claim for 'community engagement' – could easily be seen as a sort of community artwork where everyone would get their say, where everyone's voice is equally valid, 'tell us a story about your life in Hobart and we'll print it on a billboard'. In this way we were also flirting with *sentimentality*; an approach I'm sometimes accused of indulging in but when I hear the word I quickly jump to justify the intrinsic critical and objective qualities of the work in question. Over three years we confronted and addressed these challenges: financially

through multiple strategies including arts funding applications, as well as extensive private business support; conceptually through progressively assessing the intentions of the project and its processes – who are we speaking to and why? While avoiding issues of overt sentimentality and categorisation of community art, we acknowledged the importance of the project's site specificity, especially in terms of temporary and social site specificity as discussed by critics such as Miwon Kwon (1997), Paul Arden (1999) and Hal Foster (1997). We were seeking stories from *our* home and as much as anything else, we wanted to learn more about the place we live and the people who live there – the project was driven by curiosity. In a way we wanted to build a conversational map of the place in which we live and work. This tendency to create a social map is identified by Hal Foster as an indication of recent approaches to site specific practice, he says:

Mapping in recent art has tended towards the sociological and the anthropological, to the point where an ethnographic mapping of an institution or a community is a primary form of site-specific art today.' (Foster, 1997a, p.185)

Using billboard-advertising space for a 'public artwork' is not new. Justy and I were conscious of other artists who have occupied billboard space to present temporary projects outside of the gallery environment such as Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer; and more recently, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Pierre Huyghe; as well as locally, Peter Burke, a.k.a. Shelly Innocence, and Lisa Anderson. Using every available billboard space throughout the city is however a new approach, and Hobart's population and geographical scale allowed us to pursue this ambition. We wanted *write/here* to infiltrate the city, to provide multiple points of access that allowed the viewer to construct their own story and experience the work subjectively. We were also interested in questioning the *form* of a public artwork, presenting a work through multiple, connected points rather than through a singular object or image. *write/here's* conversational form connects in a narrative 'formation' where different stories intersect and merge. Through a process of conversational engagement, stories, histories, experiences and information are collected and filtered. Like many works over the last 15 years, questioning the project's form was

influenced by Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relation Aesthetics*; Bourriaud asks, 'What is a form that is essentially relational?' Bourriaud expands on the notion of *formations*:

In observing contemporary artistic practices, we ought to talk of 'formations' rather than 'forms'. Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present day art shows that form only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise. (Bourriaud, 2002a, p.21)

To maximise the potential for encounter and to truly expand the project throughout the city we needed to secure every available billboard space in Hobart – this was the *formation* we were aiming for. Through working with the Claude Group, who have a monopoly on billboard advertising in Hobart we negotiated ways of securing every billboard under their control – all twenty-seven of them. This meant convincing all the businesses that reserve one year leases on the billboard sites to 'donate' their advertising space, free of charge, for a month. It was essential to the project (and to the businesses who supported us) that we confirmed every site – if one business refused and advertised during the project, their brand message would have been greatly exaggerated through the lack of competition advertising. We were also very clear that while the project would acknowledge business support through collateral material, the billboards would be free of any logos or suggestion of business support. In fact there were no visible clues that described the project as an 'artwork' *per se*. The narrative was the important aspect of the work, and we felt this should exist alone, outside of any public expectations or presumptions of what a public art project may look like.

Figures 3, 4 and 5

60% of billboard advertising space in Hobart is used for beer advertisements – two-meter high images of beer cans litter the urban landscape. Some business were more enthusiastic than others but after the fourth meeting with J.Boag and Sons, they finally agreed to support the project and thus we were a step further towards making *write/here* a reality. Multiple relationships were being established and maintained during the planning process. At times these seemed to contradict and conflict with one another. On

the one hand we were confirming business partners and government support and on the other we were seeking out peripheral voices; voices that are not typically represented within the sphere of public advertising. This playful exchange between the language associated with business and words derived from real people and their experiences was extended into the actual aesthetic of the project. We decided to print the billboards with bright red background and white text, mirroring the visual impression left by advertising campaigns by companies such as Virgin Blue, Coke or Vodaphone. In her review of the project Tasmanian artist and writer Jude Abell notes that:

In every city, printed words tell us that to live out our dreams, we need to consume more. Even if the messages we take in through advertising do not entirely obscure the truth, they are at least a euphemism for it. (Abell, 2007a, p.36)

Figures 6, 7 and 8

We were drawn to billboard space because of the paradox of presenting very private thoughts and experiences on an extremely public platform. The private–public exchange was further extended through the viewer’s interpretation of each text; the way they would piece together multiple texts, and thus create a subjective narrative throughout the city. Private thoughts presented publicly, that would in turn be consumed and interpreted privately.

While support for the project was gaining momentum and its conceptual framework was solidifying – the foundation for its success or otherwise needed to be established through conversational engagement. We incorporated strategies including observation, facilitated conversation and writing workshops. To build the content for the project we collaborated with a professional writer to facilitate a number of workshops, advertised to the general public. After several workshops we acknowledged the relatively contrived and formal nature of the responses collected through this strategy, as well as the limited demographic representation of the participants. Reflecting on this, we decided to focus on personal relationships that are fragile, subtle or in a state of change, with the intention of revealing the micro-histories and subjective experiences that bind people into

communities and to place. We wanted to include people who were willing to share stories and experiences of displacement, isolation, belonging, incarceration, transition, aspiration, doubt, loss and depression, in order to reveal less visible perspectives on Hobart's social climate.

Figures 9, 10 and 11

After working through an extensive process of accessing appropriate community groups and individuals, we constructed specific questions and conversation topics relative to the project's background. Each encounter began with an open discussion – but we aimed to guide every conversation in a particular direction, that would contribute to the overall project narrative. Every written response and recorded conversation was transcribed into a series of anonymous thoughts, stories and memories. Ultimately the billboard texts were sourced from approximately twenty facilitated writing workshops and recorded conversations. Participants included people such as: recent migrants to Tasmania from Iran, Sudan, Sierra Leone and the Congo (in the last ten years Hobart's cultural landscape has been significantly influenced by the migration of displaced people particularly from West Africa); female inmates at Risdon Prison; clients from age-care homes; college students; Aboriginal elders; and anonymous general public submissions. One strategy involved hiring a commercial space for a day and rather than inviting people to buy products, in the form of a conventional transaction, we paid them a nominal fee for a memory or a story.

Figures 12, 13 and 14

Through engaging with these people we were effectively *smuggling* private stories into public space. Maintaining the anonymity of participants was a strategy which allowed us to work with *others* and their experiences without resorting to some form of ethnographic documentation which may have occurred if we included images of the participants with their texts, or even identified where the texts had come from. In *Art as Experience*, Paul Arden discusses the social processes used by many artists recently and the way artists use and manipulate aspects of everyday life to establish an *active* participation between artist, subject, context and viewer:

When artists break out of their role as simple producers of images and objects – which are never immune to a blunting of their critical (or even subversive) edge by consumer reflexes – they become, as it were, smugglers who give viewers the tools they need to seize control of the means used to produce the visual, acoustic and mental images of their world. The actualisation of the various levels of reality contained in daily life, a development brought about by citizens transformed into transmitters and receivers, would make such citizens veritable participants in the real. It would then become possible to move beyond passive consumption toward a shaping of the experience of the real, in close contact with its material density. (Arden, 1999a, p.93)

Figures 15 and 16

Justy and I worked individually to select possible texts for the billboards. This was an intuitive process and we wanted to read separately through the tens-of-thousands-of-words that were taken from approximately 900 responses, in order to instil our individual perspectives on the content we had collected. We were conscious that this filtering process was critical as it reflected *our* presence within the project, which was obviously manipulated to some extent. We attempted to view the stories from a critical distance, taking into account the anonymity of the subjects, so that we could select texts without relying on prior knowledge of the subject, or the context of the broader conversation. We compared our separate selections considering narrative content, relationship to billboard site and to other texts, and length of text, eventually ‘culling’ them to a final twenty-seven. Unexpectedly we had both selected the same twenty texts without consulting one another, the remaining seven were selected through quite a smooth negotiation process. Individually, the texts read like fleeting encounters or bytes of conversations, but viewed collectively (even over a period of time) they became more like a script to an anonymous story, where the viewer/pedestrian/driver becomes a chance actor – piecing together elements of a script. Perhaps some of these stories would pass almost unnoticed, some possibly staying with the viewer/pedestrian for much longer. Responses to the project were varied – generally positive but not always. Criticism of the project seemed to occur especially where a text had been viewed in isolation, a sentence from the story taken out

of context. One popular hotel complained to the Ten Days on the Island management about the project because half of their hotel rooms looked out to a billboard that read, 'I hate Hobart because it hasn't got jobs'. The other side of the billboard wasn't visible from the rooms, it read, 'I love Hobart because it has enough food'. One week into the project we distributed maps to the hotel and to retail spaces throughout the city which located all the billboard sites and included a short synopsis of the project. On receiving this the hotel management withdrew their complaint and expressed their support for the project.

Figures 17, 18, 19 and 20

write/here attempted to capture the fleeting, subjective and fragile relationships that exist between people and place. We wanted the project to remain truly temporary and site specific, we were not interested in 're-staging' the billboards in another context, in another city. Since removing the billboards they have either been sold to architects or individuals for use in private space, or cut up and turned into handbags (as a strategy to help raise additional funds). While the billboards have been removed, the stories, memories and experiences remain in the public conscious. The *write/here* book also represents a lasting record of the project and serves as a permanent document of the conversations, people and processes that defined the project, locating its local relevance as well as its (recent) art historical context. Since the removal of all the project the beer advertising has returned but perhaps with a heightened public awareness of its perpetual presence in the city.

Figure 21

REFERENCES:

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Kwon, Miwon, 'One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity', *October*, Vol. 80 (Spring 1997), pp. 85–110

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS:



Figure 1: *write/here*, 2005-07, production still from conversations/workshops



Figure 2: *write/here*, 2005-07, production still from conversations/workshops



Figure 3: *write/here*, 2005-07, installation view



Figure 4: *write/here*, 2005-07, installation view



Figure 5: *write/here*, 2005-07, installation view



Figure 6: *write/here*, 2005-07, installation view



Figure 7: *write/here*, 2005-07, installation view



Figure 8: *write/here*, 2005-07, installation view



Figure 9: *write/here*, 2005-07, production still from conversations/workshops



Figure 10: *write/here*, 2005-07, production still from conversations/workshops



Figure 11: *write/here*, 2005-07, production still from conversations/workshops



Figure 12: *write/here*, 2005-07, production still from conversations/workshops



Figure 13: *write/here*, 2005-07, \$1 story shop, project documentation



Figure 14: *write/here*, 2005-07, \$1 story shop, project documentation



Figure 15: *write/here*, 2005-07, process documentation



Figure 16: *write/here*, 2005-07, process documentation

Sent
Trash (Purge)

From: jon jones <jonjones0001@hotmail.com>
Date: Mon, March 26, 2007 9:16 am
To: info@writehereproject.org
Priority: Normal
Options: [View Full Header](#) | [View Printable Version](#) | [Add to Addressbook](#)

gee good to see thaat more money is wasted on shit, try having a depressed kid who see's the billboard at the corner of sandybay road and hampden road, all my friends are dead, so should I! you didn't have to take some one to hospital cause they tried to kill themself! Fuck man, if thats what you call art these days, you better come and have a look at the craps I have been taking, they have a beautiful texture and almost look like something reel

sad and sorry

Advertisement: Chat with 1000s of Sexy Singles right now
<http://a.ninemsn.com.au/b.aspx?URL=http%3A%2F%2Fflavalife9%2Eninemsn%2Ecom%2Eau%2Fclickthru%2Fclickthru%2>

[Download this as](#)

[Delete & Prev](#) | [Delete & Next](#)
Move to: 

Figure 17: write/here, 2007, email response

Sent
Trash (Purge)

Date: Wed, March 28, 2007 10:33 am
To: info@writehereproject.org
Priority: Normal
Options: [View Full Header](#) | [View Printable Version](#) | [Add to Addressbook](#)

Hi Justy & James

I'm writing to let you know that I think that your billboards are great. I think that they are the best example of public art that I've ever seen. They are original and thought provoking and although the boards are plain, they are pleasing to look at.

I'm a College teacher and I have a writing class. Your boards provide me and my class with wonderful examples of 'show not tell' in writing, a concept that students often find hard to grasp, so apart from anything else, the boards have been a valuable teaching aid. They have sparked a lot of interest in the 17/18 year old students in my class.

Thank you for providing the public with something different.

Regards

Sue Ball

Send instant messages to your online friends <http://au.messenger.yahoo.com>

[Download this as a file](#)

Figure 18: write/here, 2007, email response



Figure 19: *write/here*, 2005-07, installation view



Figure 20: *write/here*, 2005-07, installation view



Figure 21: *write/here*, 2005-07, installation view