

pvi artist talk: adelaide festival – collaboration: art as a social shifter

collaboration & collusion

hi, so I'm co-founder and core artist with pvi collective. I was asked to think about our collaborative process and to talk about how it works, why it works and if making work collaboratively alters our sense of what art is. i wanted to start by putting this quote out there from tim etchells on collaboration:

“maybe collaboration is simply the process of developing new words for the strange situations in which a group find themselves.”

so I've put together some responses that outline some of our strange situations that include internal collaboration within the group and also with audiences, participants, public and peers. so i'll give a quick overview of pvi first and then go into more detail on some of the works we've made over the years that really made us think about the nature and scope of collaborative practice.

pvi make performances, exhibitions and stage interventions on the city streets. our projects are created using a process of devising through applied research and tend to be produced over a long period of time. we formed in 1998 with five members and we are now officially composed of a board of management, three core artists, a project manager, a producer, five associate artists who are based in perth, melbourne & adelaide, some occasional interns and over a dozen creative comrades who we feel fortunate to be able to call on at various times to take part in projects and maybe even reciprocate on theirs if we're lucky. it sounds a bit unwieldy but it works for us and has taken us ten years to figure out this structure is actually what we need to function. i think our general feeling is that there is strength in numbers.

to add to that collective picture, in 2008 we set up an initiative called cia studios [centre for interdisciplinary arts] which is housed in an old school on the cusp of perth city centre and is a space dedicated to research and development into hybrid arts practice. we curate and manage programs which include creative labs, artist forums and in-progress showings with the intention of building a strong culture of peer support and conceptual criticality and this year we will also house three additional artists groups whose work sits on the edges of definition in the hope that creative conversations and skills can expand beyond our own familiar clusters.

we describe ourselves as a tactical media arts group, which for us means that our work looks at tactics for the creative disruption of everyday life. if I was to take a stab at the drop dead serious heart of pvi, i would say we are a group of like-minded artists at war with the clusterfuck horrors of the 21st century which on our list would include things like social apathy, extreme conservatism and the soft tyranny of consumer culture. i would say that every artwork uses humour as a tactic and is geared towards instigating tiny revolutions. I don't know if everyone else would agree with that, but they're not all here so I kinda thought I'd just say it.

pvi have a bit of a love hate relationship with performance practice, we love the connections that can be forged between performer and audience and are constantly attempting to blur those boundaries by involving audiences more in our work so that they experience it from within. we have a strong dislike of the edifice of theatrical conventions that lead to the development of character, scripts and sets. so for us instead we seek an anti-theatrical aesthetic where applause is impossible, characters are real people and sets become the city streets.

we believe that the idea will always dictate the form. and this has seen us develop bus tours, dvd rentals, create radio broadcasts, sticker campaigns, privacy tours, tug of war competitions, community policing initiatives and more recently work with locative mobile media and augmented reality as a device for tactical intervention. we really want audiences & public to come along with us for the ride & engage with content in ways that are inclusive, provocative and activates them somehow.

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situation: 1 collaborating with each other

so we actually spend a lot of time sitting around drinking cups of tea and watching movies, but I figured that probably wasn't quite what i needed to focus on, so i've tried to draw on some of the other processes in getting work made and ive made a list that usually contains all of the following.

a fire in the belly / a research area / an argument / a compromise / another argument / a manifesto / a series of workshops / a playing of the idea out / a failure / a tactical plan / an interrogation / a recruitment strategy / a try out / a revelation / an ongoing frustration or / a lovely warm sensation of closure

so the tea drinking would fall in between pretty much all of this, i dont have any images for this section so i thought i would just insert some subliminal tea shots every now and then.

so a **fire in the belly**. this comes from an awareness that we seem to work better when we are coming from a place of anger, so in a sense there has to be this fundamental fire in the belly force behind the initial idea, something that will propel us and drives us into reacting somehow. for me it very much links to the interventionist nature of the group. the creative disruption aspect that is a playful and serious attempt at changing the landscape or the way we think about the spaces we inhabit and lives we live. i always really liked the american yippies quote about 'you need to know how to use the terrain of culture that you want to destroy.'

a research area can be multiple strands and is key to our collaborative process. it has seen us join the army reserve, infiltrate neighbourhood watch, workshop with the local police, watch every zombie movie ever made, transcribe lectures, visit every parliament house in the country to study security procedures, follow people every day for a week, absorb training manuals, political policy, legislation, legal jargon, film theory, cultural theory and learn more about our peers nationally and internationally. but research is a core activity that all contributing artists do to push the work forward.

an argument so we accept that we're not always going to agree. what happens as a result is you learn to fight for an idea or an aspect of the work that you believe needs to be there. if you cant justify, articulate or argue for it, it wont stay so arguments need to be a big part of us finding the passion in the ideas, but it also helps us ground them and given them some sense of depth and integrity. its also about picking a fight with the work itself and realising that even though its big and intimidating we slowly get to know it and find its pressure points.

a compromise is where we let go of some of the preciousness and be prepared to see an idea taken somewhere new. we feel that ultimately the ideas have to serve the best interests of the work not the individuals involved. so just because you don't like it or it makes you uncomfortable doesn't mean it goes. maybe its a reason for it to stay.

a manifesto is what we write for each artwork. it helps us have a point of view from within the work. which in turn helps us write or develop it from a certain perspective and with a certain personality. it doesnt make it into the final work usually, its just there as a reference point and way of distilling the research. its a really valuable technique for us. i've put one up here thats in-progress at the moment

a series of workshops happen in studio, onsite and remotely with other associate artists. as the majority of work is performative we need to get up and bring notes and discussions alive at a certain point. working remotely with this in mind is great when we collaborate with associates like jason sweeney who has developed amazing sound-scores from the rawest of information like random lists emailed to him and half articulate skype sessions where we cant quite say what we mean yet, but he helps us to get it by feeding

back sound and asking all the right questions. others are more formal like getting the local police in to teach us how to conduct a street patrol without getting beaten up.

play the idea out is usually taking it outdoors to see how it sits and what we can get away with .

a failure is what happens during or after this activity. it usually leads us to thinking about strategy which leads onto.

a tactical plan is our risk analysis moment, where we list all the potential things that can go wrong and try to find solutions or strategies for all of them. it wakes us up and makes us look at the work differently and not just from a practical perspective.

an interrogation is a term coined by adelaide art group unreasonable adults, which we have adopted with their kind permission – interrogation sessions are when we bring in specialists or new people to challenge where we're at with the work. at the moment that includes blast theory for our current project, 'transumer'. we're trying to do that more as we are very aware that our own comfort zones sometimes aren't being pushed as much as we'd like. i think recognising the need for provocateurs has been an important discovery for us lately.

a recruitment strategy – is about working with test audiences early on to try the ideas out, or having plants in the work, or pulling in creative comrades to join us. its when we begin to properly think about scale of involvement.

a try out is usually the first public showing which we always see as more of an in-progress experiment as for us its really the only time when we get to properly see how the work functions.

a revelation is where the work reveals itself. i think we can never fully grasp what we've made until we see it work with an audience or located in public space. seeing reactions or responses is when we get to understand the work better and realise what needs to happen to it and where it needs to go next. which leads us onto

an ongoing frustration from not having solved it

or a **lovely warm sensation**, i have to say we've never quite experienced that last one so i don't know what that feels like. but I do think that's a positive thing because maybe if your too satisfied you lose your edge? that's our theory in any rate.

so that kind of sums up the group collaborative situation, i wanted to move on to talk about a handful of artworks in a bit more detail, show some images and videos that highlight some other aspects of collaboration in our practice.

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situation: 2 collaborating with public

so collaborating with members of the public has been an interesting transition for us. we went from making work where we would just be inserting ourselves into the public domain and seeing what happens to realising that some artworks really needed a sense of collusion where actions could respond to more open contribution. these next works usually happen by invitation either on the fly or by pre-arrangement. usually its who ever's around at the time and looks willing.

the **panopticon** series is a privacy service that we offer out to members of the public who frequent areas that are surveilled by cctv cameras. it was developed originally in taipei in 2001 and had its first outing on their new heavily monitored underground rail system with us approaching people heading into a station entrance and asking them if they would prefer to keep their identity anonymous before they continue their journey.

so as you can see the work has travellers shrouded in a cocoon of domestic umbrellas and navigated to a destination of their choice, which since taipei has also evolved to included pubs, post offices, the sydney opera house, the beach, ferries, trains and shopping centres. as they are rendered virtually blind by the contraption, participants are guided via audio from cb radios by the privacy team who endeavour to try to reach the end destination at all costs. journeys that would usually take 5-10 minutes become painstakingly slow and can last up to an hour with us trying to navigate roads, uneven surfaces, public transport and security patrols. the work is recorded and later installed as a sculptural installation in a gallery space.

i've got a short clip from panopticon: sydney to show

this was a typical reaction for us in sydney with each daily journey escalating in difficulty to the point of being threatened with a fine of \$5000 each by the sydney harbour foreshore authority. the panopticon series was one of the first works that made realise how cityscapes seemed to be ruled by social administration and forced us to think about how we navigate the terrain of permission. and how we get around the way that institutions can use the rhetoric of safety to cloak control. it was also the first work where we began to offer some kind of appropriated public service whereby members of the public could experience the work from within. in this case that was quite literal but what I think we were ultimately after is for members of the public to feel as though they have lived something rather than just watched it. we really enjoy the reciprocity of this work and it triggered a new body of works that took this idea of public service provider further.

which leads me on to talk about the next two artworks **resist & reform**.

both these works are part of series of live artworks we developed which look at the idea of people power in contemporary life. this particular series sets about testing different modes of collective behaviour including forms of resistance and compliance.

resist has had two manifestations as a public intervention and a live performance in a black box space. but it started off in 2006 as a public event in santiago chile, on the grounds of the presidential palace, [which was the site of pinochet's violent coup on sept 11, 1973] and the time of our residency there it also coincided with the 23rd anniversary of the coup so for us it seemed like a highly charged site at the time.

for the work we had been researching the history of tug-of-war and were interested in its origins as a legally binding contract between citizens that took place as a public action. we were interested in it's history as a kind of grass roots participatory democracy and wanted to see how we could bring a tug-of-war into a contemporary context and imagine how it would fare as a replacement for current systems of governance.

in chile we invited members of the public to resolve local issues that were receiving a lot of attention in the press and had the community divided. we had a 20 metre length of rope and seven issues to solve in one day. they included things like the use of the morning after pill, the destruction of a local mountain to ease pollution in the city and hood wearing in public.

we set up with a translator who was able to negotiate with the police and palace guards a half day presence on the palace lawn and then set about soliciting for random members of the public to step up and fight for or against one of the issues with a member of pvi taking the opposing side. we filmed and recorded each tug of war battle and then attempted to hand deliver the results to the president, notifying her that a representative of the people had resolved the issue and she was legally obliged 'under the ancient rules of tug-of-war' to address the matter.

what was interesting for us about this piece was that the ownership of the live action began to shift away from us and into the hands of random members of the public. as it was immediately identifiable as a physical activity or game it wasn't seen as invasive or intimidating. people got the humour as well so willingly engaged, but i think it was the physicality of it and competitive streak that we drew out from ourselves and others that really worked in our favour. people really wanted to win.

situation: 3 collaborating with audience

so I've made a distinction between public and audience because the next two works sit more in the realm of contemporary performance with paying audience members and we tend to negotiate that relationship very differently.

in **reform** audiences are equipped with fm radios and headphones and are able to intimately listen into conversations of performers who are posing as a mock vigilante patrol group called the loyal citizens underground [or lcu] whose mission is to police the streets picking up on anti-social behaviour. so the audience are on patrol with us and are treated as repeat offenders who need to learn good citizenry during the course of the show. the l.c.u are equipped with code of conduct cards which they refer to as coccs and they outline the fines and rules behind various misdemeanours which involve quite lightweight issues such as jaywalking and littering to solicitation and begging. ultimately the work aims to cast a humorous and cynical eye over the politics of public safety and the rules we live by.

in this work we began to push the level of audience involvement by encouraging them to undertake group based tasks in a flash mob like fashion, with audio instructions coming thru their headphones. these are really interesting moments and allow our audience to flip from being watchers to being watched themselves as passersby or local residents get to observe their collective actions.

ive got a short video clip from a showreel of reform to show.

with this work we were trying to challenge the comfort levels of our audience and examine how much they wanted to invest in being a part of it. I think with any participatory work there is the option to not get involved and you have to totally respect that and work with that in mind. what we found was with the radio broadcast coming thru direct to your headphones you feel very much immersed in the world of the work and as a result most audience members felt complicit in the lcu's activities which start off as quite surface level ridiculous and descended into much darker territory.

one interesting point in this work that would sit in the 'left over frustration' section i mentioned earlier, is a segment towards the end where we switch from the lcu targeting random members of the public to them approaching plants in the work. so a staged scripted interaction takes place with volunteers posing as either beggars or a good looking female for our solicitation sequence. and the l.c.u would take them to task revealing some strong fascist undertones to their true nature, which made audiences deeply uncomfortable. we felt that in order for us to take the work into more difficult terrain regarding what we saw as a heightened sense of social order and loss of public space as we knew it, we had to craft and

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manipulate those moments without the audience being aware that it was a set up. one of the sticking points with this work that we still haven't properly resolved is whether we reveal to the audience that these moments are staged or leave them hating us by the end of the work. we've tried both scenarios and been criticised for both for different reasons.

I think the conclusion that we came to is we're more interested in having audiences who are with us and behind the work than never coming to see another thing we do again. its interesting as we always strategised for what to do if an audience member intervenes during these moments, but to date no-one ever has and in some respects i think we always wished someone would. i think for audiences to be faced with that responsibility is a big dilemma and having spoken to audiences afterwards its something that they carry with them.

situation: 4 collaborating with comrades

so feeling part of a larger network of like minded artists or comrades and being able to call on their expertise, skills and knowledge has been fundamental to us developing as practitioners and as a group. I think doubly so given our geographic location of west australia. one work which really identified to us that we had the capacity to expand to include a much bigger pool of peers was terrorist training school or tts australia.

the tts body of work was made in 2002 in reaction to anti-terror legislation and the growing politics of fear we seemed to be living under, with threats of terrorist attacks around every corner post 9/11. it was a piece that tried to express what we saw as the manipulation of peoples fears as a means of mass social control.

tts was a site-seeing terror tour of an australian city which takes place on a 22 seater bus and the city streets at night. audiences board the bus and are invited to experience a darker underbelly of their city, one which is alert, alarmed and in a heightened state of paranoia. the tour reveals architectural imperfections, embellishes on security defects and situates local artists in the city streets to undertake interventions which are viewed by audiences as we drive thru various sites. the bus visits 5 iconic hotspots in each city whereby audiences witness these performative moments and later become involved in a series of public actions themselves at a designated site. we toured this work in 2005 but i wanted to show a clip from 2002 with the original version in perth.

what was crucial for us in developing this work for touring was a realisation that we needed local on the ground knowledge and support in order to create these site-specific interventions in other cities. so we contacted artist groups that we knew in each city and asked if they would be prepared to collaborate with us on devising these components. we also then pulled in volunteers and other peers as on-site performers and ended up with what amounted to a small army running around the streets and co-devising these moments which became some of the most succinct moments in the show.

I think that the generosity that was shown to us at each city and investment that was made by everyone in trying to pull off this work, really impacted on us personally and professionally and made us realise that collaboration on this scale helped us to create something that was bigger than ourselves. and re-enforced for us a move towards a sense of a shared ownership with a work. which i think a lot of our works allude to but never quite get there.

and so i thought i would end with a new collaboration that is quite pertinent given the theme of this series of talks and really takes this shared ownership to a new level for us thanks to the creative comrades we're working with, panther, who are a melbourne based live art duo. the collaboration is called **the agency for collective action** and its still evolving with a recent residency in jogyakarta indonesia in 2009 thanks to the south project and hopefully a live show in perth later this year.

the agency aims to investigate through performance and public intervention ways in which we can activate disparate groups of people to undertake a series of shared actions. in jogya we set up outside the sultancy in a public square called the alun alun and invited members of the public to undertake a series of shared actions with us in response to four provocations. these provocations were:

- > are you prepared to accept the slow death of the planet?
- > are you prepared to let the world move on without out you?
- > are you prepared to be equal?
- > are you prepared to be political?

these provocations came about thru community consultation sessions asking people to identify what mattered to them and what they would be prepared to do to fight for the things that they hold most dear. it saw us collectively howl at the moon, commit to an endurance activity of communal silence and stillness, empty our wallets and re-distribute our collective wealth and burn an effigy to president sby's perceived bad luck.

what was interesting for us about this project is that it seeks out via subtle agitational means a commitment by all involved to take a stand and act upon it together. some of the actions worked and some were really disastrous, but the aspirational intentions behind it and the two very different sensibilities of both groups, panther with their beautiful poetics and pvi with well wishing we had the beautiful poetics of panther, generated a work where there was a shared responsibility and a feeling of all being in it together even if it is an impossible challenge and doomed for failure. i think that is how collaboration alters our sense of what art is. it provides an accumulated knowledge of a space or each other. or maybe it is just another strange situation that a group of people find themselves in

thankyou.