

allowed out to play: public space as performance space

intro

we'd like to thank the next wave festival for inviting us here to talk tonight and thank-you for all coming along this evening.

the shape of our lecture is really made up of small pockets of information & recollections - about the group, about pieces of work we've made over the last few years and about some of the learning curves we've experienced along the way that have helped to shape the kind of work we now find ourselves making. we're hoping that thru the fragments there will hopefully be something of interest and that we can perhaps flesh some things out in more detail in the q&a session afterwards.

so 2008 is pvi's ten year anniversary. its a pretty small achievement but a bit special for us and we feel v. lucky to have survived up to now and to still be making work together. we've done a few calculations and over the last decade it turns out we have made over 30 works – live events, performances, installations, interventions and video pieces. we've been mentored, worked and collaborated with some amazing people. we have amongst other things in our arsenal of supplies; three blonde wigs, a bunch of cb radios, 30 cd players, 4 mini disks, 6 camcorders, 2 blow up dolls, 5 spy cameras stitched into teddy bears, 6 silver briefcases of documented work, a healthy obsession with appropriating low level authority figures, some very old computers and a studio in an old school on the out skirts of perth.

we still find we are refining what we do and never fully feel comfortable with having to try and tie it all down into one sentence or singular artform, but if we were to summarise our intentions with our practice we would say something along the lines of wanting to find interesting ways to respond to the mess we find ourselves in culturally, politically, socially and environmentally in the 21st century and wanting to not do that in isolation, but to invite our viewer to actively participate in that exploration with us. except we'd want it to sound a bit smarter than that..

the theme of this next wave festival 'closer together' resonates strongly with us personally and in our collaborative practice. the need to explore how we connect with eachother, the spaces we inhabit, and how we engage with the events that unfold around us & affect us on a daily basis has a lot of scope for any arts practitioner and it also raises a lot of questions. for us it makes us think about what are the lengths we can go to in finding ways to connect with our audience or viewer? what are the risks involved creatively and logistically? what are the spaces we find ourselves occupying as 21st century citizens and how do they differ from that of the previous generation? how do we make work about the here and now and still maintain its resonance or shelf life?

we're going to touch on a few of these questions but are also keen to chat more about it all at the end.

[1.] getting out:

out of the black box and into the street

without realizing it, from the very beginning with the work we were making whether it was gallery based or in a performance space, we would be searching to find ways to open the windows, pick up the phone or send people outside to experience something and respond to whatever was going on at that particular time. and for us I think perhaps this was born out of a general frustration with the traditional parameters of performance & visual arts based practice as we knew it. it was also important to us arriving in a new country to find a way to connect with our audiences in a way that mattered to us both and in the process attempt to find a new audience that didn't consist of the usual theatre or gallery goer, to see how they would react to what we were doing.

so it wasn't a conscious decision to start making work outdoors but more of a shift in thinking for us about how our art-making activities needn't be confined to a particular space or artform. that the idea would always dictate the form. coming from the uk, we left the country at a time when there was a real explosion of creativity in both the performance and visual arts scene. we had the rise of companies like forced entertainment, gob squad, blast theory and desperate optimists who each looked to destabilize the role and expectations of the audience and the notion of site-specific practice. the yba [young british artists] scene such as damien hurst, gillian wearing & tracey emin, who really seemed to be shaking up the idea of what it meant to be a contemporary visual practitioner. as well as a growing public awareness of live art which was increasingly being viewed as a distinct artform in its own right. I think for us the experience of all these practitioners works provided initial stimulation and a really expansive playing field of our own to start experimenting in.

panopticon: scanning the big slab was a live performance work that was made in 2000 for piaf and was the first split-site performance piece that attempted to co-exist on the streets and in a performance space. we mounted a number of spy cameras on the city streets which were fed back to a large scale video projection in the venue and performers and members of the public would 'check-in' mid way thru the show after responding to a number of challenges that we had set them. the premise of the work was an investigation into the rise of surveillance technology in the public & private realms and the growing phenomenon of the reality tv genre. two performers each night would compete in a series of endurance based 'reality tv' style games, each time one of them lost a round, a layer of private information about them was revealed to the audience ranging from the banal to intensely personal. performers on the street would assist in these challenges by providing some of the props needed from outside, like 'dumpster diving' where we stole a rubbish bin from a house each night and performers had to try to build a character profile on that inhabitant based on the garbage they found inside. the ultimate loser in the end would have their home invaded by one of our outdoor performers who would relay back their findings via walkie talkie into the performance space each night.

I guess what we noticed in making this work was that for us all the interesting stuff was happening outside the venue. performers would head in and out of the space at times with cb radios feeding back into the space, members of the public would be responding to on-site activities, there was this frenetic walkie talkie chatter and sounds of the street filtering back in, on-site performers were dressed in ridiculous costumes trying to grapple with surveillance tasks, and we even had two plants in the audience who we sent out on a mission at the end of the show for the home invasion sequences, so the performance space itself became almost peripheral or incidental, and for us the sense of excitement and tension came from the action that was happening on the streets. we wanted to be out there with it and wanted to start to find a way to take our audience with us.

in terms of recurrent themes for us, it also increased our awareness of the pervasiveness of cctv cameras in the cityscape and got us thinking about how that may be impacting on the way in which people now behaved in public spaces as a result of being monitored on a daily basis.

so work that followed on from the panopticon performance was *triggerhappy: private lives public spaces* and after receiving some r&d funds which facilitated some intensive training for the group in the art of covert street surveillance, which came about thru watching a lot of spy movies. we were particularly taken by 'how to' manual on spying with this quote from an american detective stating that the more obvious you were when undertaking surveillance in public, the more likely you were to go un noticed. taking this on-board we listed all the disguises used in our catalogue of spy movies and opted for a santa claus disguise to put this theory to the test. so for this work 3 santa claus were based in the perth cbd area one afternoon and had to target an individual to monitor, track

and observe for 25 minutes. as human surveillance watchers the performers were to report back in as minute detail as possible about that individual via their cb radios, which was aired back into the perth concert hall. the reason I wanted to mention this piece is because of what happened afterwards. unbeknown to us at the time, the location of the perth concert hall was directly opposite the american embassy. commissioned a month after sept 11 the staff inside the embassy were understandably a little on edge and the site of three santa clauses running about outside that day triggered some alarm bells resulting in two squad cars and cops on foot chasing our santas up the street, apprehending them and demanding to look inside their sacks.

this piece really started to raise questions for us early on about what was happening to public space as we knew it. what exactly was permissible behavior in a park at a train station or on a public footpath? why were certain activities in public becoming increasingly scrutinized or prohibited? how much could we now get away with post 9/11 & what processes did we need to understand in order to successfully navigate the public terrain?

[2.] getting caught:

dealing with worst case scenarios

in 2002 we were part of an exhibition called 'do it' which was the brainchild of curator hans ulrich oberist and basically was an event that toured to different cities. selected a number of local artists to respond to a number of instructions on 'how to make an artwork' these instructions were set by seminal arts practitioners, people like nam june paik, yoko ono, marina abramovic, gilbert & george and your task was to interpret / respond their instructions in order to make your own work. we had the good fortune to select an instruction from critical art ensemble which was titled 'true crime' and was basically about celebrating an illegal activity. so we responded by mounting a car sticker campaign which was primarily a reaction to perth predominantly being a car based culture.

the campaign selected the three most stealable cars in australia, the ford falcon, holden commodore and mazda 626 and provided simple step-by-step instructions on how to break enter and drive away that particular car. a lot of the information was freely available from the internet and for us the work was about exploring that fine line between legal and illegal activity, so the stickers themselves were not deemed illegal, but the content was, even though this was freely available via the web.

the stickers were postcard size, transparent and non adhesive so they would leave no lasting residue. we placed them on the drivers side window of that respective car in three car parks around the city. filmed each car park hit from a raised vantage point cctv style and had members of pvi disguised in blonde wigs and shades, that were left over props from an earlier work whilst they did it. on our final hit we accidentally strayed into a government car park which resulted in us opening the newspaper the next day to an article stating that police were outraged and baffled by the appearance of a series of illegal car stickers, but that they had dusted for prints and were asking for any information from the public that could assist in their enquiries.

this was an interesting learning curve for us as even though we had rigorously researched and planned the live event and exhibition component, we hadn't fully taken into account the aftermath that could follow as a result of the action. we did however have full support from the gallery & festival who commissioned the work. they dealt with press & a number of complaints on our behalf and had their lawyers check on the legalities of the action. we did have a visit from the police who confiscated the remaining stickers and let us know that drivers of the cars if they had been stolen, were within their rights to take legal action against us. from our perspective the idea that a complete stranger walking a car park spotting a sticker, going away finding the right tools and coming back to steal it seemed highly unlikely and in some respects, we saw it as a public service to

the driver of the car to be aware of how their vehicle could be stolen, so we didn't necessarily see it as a negative act.

what this experience prompted us to do was to start to factor in a risk analysis session as part of our process towards the tail end of making a work so that basically we listed out all worst case scenarios and problem-solved what we would need to do to deal with each one should they crop up. for us now its an invaluable process, it meant we became better informed, had contingency planning and could share a lot of information with producers and venues who could help facilitate some of the solutions. we joined the arts law society who provided access to free legal consultation sessions and as a result also began to become more and more interested in investigating our rights as citizens, and began to notice during what was becoming a more and more tense political climate, how some of those rights were being eroded. and from this we began to wonder how aware people were of this erosion, how visible was it? and started to frame some of our later work around this notion of involving an audience and inviting a more shared experience.

[3.] getting involved

audience / public as participant

so, in wanting to somehow find creative ways to involve people we gradually found ourselves shifting from works where we overtly observed those around us as in the *trigger happy* piece, to producing interventions that invite direct involvement from public and inadvertently provide some kind of appropriated public service for them to experience with us. and in doing so we would actually begin to challenge some of the rules and conventions of public space and start to see what is permissible.

for us the levels of engagement with the public have clearly evolved over time and in doing so our duty of care has shifted. by inviting active collaboration from members of the public for us there are now greater opportunities for direct dialogue and a more intimate engagement in a collective action, but it also means that there are issues regarding safety, liability & responding to personal limitations that we have to take into account which previously we took for granted with it just being ourselves undertaking tasks. I just wanted to talk about two works in particular here that actually involve audiences in a much more intimate way where we invite one person at a time to undertake an activity with us and document the results.

in 2006 we went to chile on a residency as part of the south project and developed a project called *resist* which was a live work documented as a video dyptich and shown as part of an exhibition of australian and new zealand artists at the museum of contemporary art in santiago.

resist aimed to test the notion of conflict in chile by inviting 7 citizens to step forward and go head-to-head with pvi in one of 7 public tug of war contests. armed with a 20 metre length of rope and seven pertinent issues to solve, we located the piece directly outside chile's notorious seat of power and site of dictator august pinochet's violent coup in 1973, the presidential palace.

so this piece was actually part of a larger body of work called '*the future belongs to crowds*' series which aimed to explore the notion of power and crowds in contemporary society, looking to see how different modes of collective behavior generate social change. for *resist* we really were keen to allow the work to be directly informed by the space and intentionally selected a public area that was both highly charged and also represented an actual site of power. at the time of our residency it was the anniversary of the coup which coincidentally occurred on sept 11th and that week the palace and surrounding area had been subjected to violent rioting, so it was an interesting time to be attempting to engage members of the public in an artwork.

so after researching and discussing possible issues that had local citizens polarized, such as low wages, the education system, the distribution of the morning after pill and the destruction of a local mountain to help ease pollution, we invited members of the public to select an issue via a *resist* playing card and then they would engage in this physical power struggle with us on the grass outside the palace. the results of each contest were documented and submitted in seven letters to the president advising her that the issue had now been resolved and we would await her response. the final video piece was installed via two large lcd screens on opposing walls in the gallery space.

what was great for us about this piece was that the rules of engagement with the work were very clear and direct and so it seemed to translate well to a foreign setting. it was playful enough to actually undertake it at a difficult site, but also had a deeper sense of critique regarding an individual's sense of ownership over a social issue that was directly affecting them. it also allowed this one-on-one relationship to develop which for us kind of imbues each action with a different character giving the work a sense of uniqueness each time we do it.

other works that follow suit in this area include a free site specific privacy service offered up in various cities around the world to individuals who frequent public spaces heavily surveilled & monitored by cctv cameras.

this work appropriates the use of domestic umbrellas as an absurd tactical privacy tool, allowing participants the opportunity for a brief moment of privacy, to walk 'freely' under the constant gaze of security cameras. individual travellers are shrouded in a cocoon of umbrellas, hooked up to a short range cb radio for communication and guided by the pvi privacy team via step by step instructions. travelers are navigated to a predefined destination in order to undertake an everyday activity which has included; catching public transport, visiting the post office, shoe shopping, walking to work and going for a paddle. so, with the loss of their sight and each participant completely reliant on us for their safety, we take things pretty carefully and each journey is painstakingly slow as passengers and the privacy team attempt to respond to any unexpected obstacles. this could be escalators, steps, busy roads, curious people or irate security guards such as the ones we came across in sydney, where we encountered problems from sydney harbour foreshore authority security guards patrolling the streets who claimed we needed a permit for our actions and threatened us with a five thousand dollar fine each if we were to take the umbrella pod out without a permit.

so the umbrella cocoon creates a lot of interest on the street, both positive and negative. and our tactic with this piece is to have a member of the privacy team whose job is solely dealing with interruptions, answering questions and attempting to handle security to enable the main journey to continue. for us this is a device whereby we directly take into account our duty of care to the participant, so that we become the buffer point between them and any potential problems. most people see the irony and absurdity in the work and just let us get on with it but sydney was an exception and the reaction was really startling at the time. for us it was indicative of an almost city specific paranoia regarding safety and security and highlighted in quite an extreme way the erosion of public space and how it was affecting different cityscapes in various ways.

we have developed other works where we try to build on this one on one relationship with an individual participant. in both *reform* and *inform*, 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 group called the loyal citizens underground whose mission is to police the streets picking up on anti-social behaviour. with *reform* audiences went out on street patrols with us and in *inform* were able to witness and tune in from the comfort of their cars as we door knocked our way

around suburbia. in these works we began to push the level of involvement by encouraging them to undertake tasks in a flash mob like fashion, these are really interesting moments and allow our audience to flip from being watchers to being watched themselves as passersby or local residents briefly observe their collective actions.

in both these works we are beginning to try to challenge the comfort levels of our audience and examine how much they want to invest in the work and from our own perspective are seeing how much we are willing to follow their lead allowing them to dictate how the work unfolds which is an interesting shift in dynamics for us and one that will take a few more works before we fully resolve it.

getting on the bus:

dealing with difficult subject matter. tts: australia

the tts body of work was made 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. tts was essentially for us one big angry scream of a piece. and it was a piece we intentionally set out to try make something seditious as a way to try to express what we saw as the exploitation and manipulation of peoples fears as a means of social control and some would argue as a guaranteed re-election tactic for the howard government.

the thought for us that we could see this manipulation happening in australia and felt powerless to do anything about made us very angry. none of us had felt particularly proficient in the state of australian or world affairs, but there was a very palpable sense of something ugly brewing in this country during 2002 and we were catching a whiff of it each time we read about the increases to anti-terror laws, saw phone-in hotlines or propaganda style campaigns about keeping the country safe, saw anti war protests largely ignored in this country, read about new anti-social behavior legislation prohibiting more and more activities in the public and endless stream of documentaries about how the world had changed since 9/11. in hindsight the world seemed utterly fucked in 2002 and we were freaked out. tts was a response to all that and it took us the next three years to work it out of our system.

just some quick background. tts stood for 'terrorist training school'. it was essentially a site-seeing terror tour of an australian city which takes place on a 22 seater bus [wired for sound and video] and the city streets at night. audiences board the bus and are invited to experience a darker underbelly of their city, one which is constantly alert, alarmed and in a heightened state of paranoia. the tour reveals architectural imperfections, embellishes on security defects and sets about subverting the comfort zones of daily life. the bus visits 5 iconic hotspots of the city whereby audiences witness and later become involved in a series of public interventions at each site.

originally commissioned for the artrage festival in perth in 2002, the work was pulled due to sensitivities surrounding the bali bombings occurring three days prior to the opening of the work. our publicity was already out and what was initially seen as a darkly comic critique of the war on terror was now believed to be utterly bad taste. the festival received complaints & threats, lost one of its major sponsors & received correspondence from the minister for culture and the arts advising the work be removed. the company received death threats on home phones, email and mobiles, found ourselves speaking to relatives of victims from the bali bombings, dealing with radio shock jocks and also criticism from the other side of the fence condemning us for pulling the work.

our risk analysis ironically hadn't accounted for an actual terrorist attack happening during the work and so we found ourselves coming out of it a bit battered and felt as though we really didn't deal with the whole situation very well. five months later with the full support of artrage we put the work

on in perth. it was barely advertised, we abbreviated the title to tts, had a strict no media policy and sold out. during that five month interim we used that time to really grapple with what we were trying to do and say with the work. we argued a lot about self censorship and agreed that if we weren't careful, our own paranoia and sense of guilt would affect the ideas we were having about the works development. we talked about how we felt about getting arrested, going to jail, having a criminal record and the prospect of never getting funded again. we brought in some on-site performers whose enthusiasm about the work as a whole as well as the interventions we were devising at places like parliament house and the bell tower was infectious. we came to the conclusion that if we couldn't all stand behind the work then we shouldn't be putting it on.

so we did it and instead of feeling triumphant about getting thru it and moving on, we all agreed that we still had a long way to go with the work. it was completely unresolved. so we applied for federal funding to research and develop it further then tour it nationally.

I think for us the learning curve was about sticking together as a group and standing our ground. we realized how passionate we were about this topic and about still making work together as a collective. I think that when you make work that you know is going to be contentious you've got to be prepared for it all to go to shit, you've got to be prepared for people to give you've hard time, you've got to be really clear and precise about your intentions with the work, you've got to know your facts when your being interviewed, you've got to make sure you have support from people around you whether that's a venue, funding body or family and you've got to toughen up and not be afraid to say what you think, because if you do that, it shouldn't really matter what happens next..

getting together:

connectness – establishing networks

in recent years it's been increasingly important for the company to travel, I think once we spent that initial time figuring who we are, what we do and building that group history, we needed to get out, to have new experiences, meet new people, collaborate and make work outside our familiar surrounds and it has certainly impacted positively on our practise. national and international residency opportunities have also played a significant part over the years. it's only on a residency far away from your home town you can really switch off from your everyday life and for once just concentrate on making the work. we've done an asialink residency in taipei undertaking the first version of our *panopticon* privacy service, and more recently new zealand as well as the stint in santiago, we're also off to singapore in july.

over the years we've been lucky to have attended the *alchemy* master class run by anat in brisbane in 1999 and the hybrid performance master class *time place space* in wagga wagga in 2002. each of these gave us brief but intensive mentoring, skill sharing and most importantly opened our small world up to other interstate artists working in the sector. from our studio in perth it's been very important to have connections and awareness of this arts community and for it to expand over time.

to be realistic, it's not like we all regularly talk, post blogs or directly email, but it's there when it's needed. we do regularly collaborate with jason sweeney of unreasonable adults. we first met him at time place space and he has since been a regular collaborator. also thru the making of tts we established a fantastic network of practitioners who were generous enough to collaborate with us in the various cities we visited, most of whom we still try to stay in contact with when we have a new project that may be hitting town that needs input.

wanting to nurture these networks further, advocate for our sector and bring artists closer together and do something about perths remoteness is an interesting challenge. and its one that we have

started to address more directly in the last year or so. this year as part of our annual program we're organising a national symposium on hybrid performance practise in perth and will mount a season of short performance works by australian artists as part of this initiative. it's turning out to be a lot of work to organise, but the line up is taking shape and the potential of bringing a mix of emerging and established artists together to talk about new artistic practise and show new works is really exciting and we're really grateful to all the artists involved for being so enthusiastic about contributing to the event. we're hoping the initiative will have a long term impact on all involved and that possibly new collaborations or connections may emerge between people as a result.

also, a combination of being in the right place at the right time and perth being boom town at the moment has meant an extraordinary segway development for us. we've been fortunate enough to secure funds to set up and launch an initiative called the centre for interdisciplinary arts studios, or cia for short.

a few years ago we were very kindly picked up by the department of culture and the arts and provided with a studio space in an old school on the cusp of the city centre. after a year in the building, making work and seeing potential in opening the building up fully, we approached dca with a business plan to set up a hub for artists that aimed to nurture local artists and groups alongside national and international practitioners, allowing them a space in which to exchange ideas, engage in critical debate, share skills and experiment with new artistic practices.

they provided some seed funding and the cia studios initiative is now open for business, providing research and development spaces to all artists with a focus on hybrid performance. there are five studios available for a mixture of long and short term residencies. there's a sound recording studio and a large workshop space. alongside this, there are resident local companies including hydra poesis, sic and ourselves. sharing the building with these artists, supporting each other, sneak peaking at what people are getting up to and chatting about our various practices & problems is really positive and our vision for cia is slowly taking shape.

cia studios is also hosting two 3 month long residences from interstate artists later in the year funded by ozco's inter arts office self initiated residency grant. there is also a week long creative lab organised for local emerging performance artists on the horizon specifically dealing with conceptual development of ideas which will be facilitated by uk based experimental performance group the pacitti company. so, things seem to be on a roll here, a bumpy one at that, but things are rolling and we're hoping they will continue to for a while to come.

thanks very much that's all we've got tonight so we'll leave it there, we'd love to hear from you guys if you have questions?