

the yellow vest syndrome – artist talk

[1.] indifference:

whilst it would be really tempting to sit and grumble about a sense of general disinterest with contemporary arts in wa. it's a soft target. but from my perspective having arrived over to perth from the uk in 98, set up the original group of five members here [who all still work together in pvi today] and putting on work in which one man and his dog would rock up to, we were left wondering where our audience were and what lengths we were expected to go to get them thru the doors, in some respects I believe that that indifference or perceived apathy about the arts in wa actually saved our practice.

and maybe I'm a glass half full kind of person, but I believe this for two reasons. sometimes there is nothing that bonds a group of people more closely together than a shared sense of acute failure. and I feel like I speak from experience on this one having endured it many times in our practice. having no one thru the doors during our initial black-box experiments where performers would often be jumping around in their underwear, inflicting mental and physical torture on each other whilst occasionally dancing and singing bad karaoke, was initially quite crushing, but what it did do is unite us in this kind of stubborn resolve to keep going. it can be incredibly liberating as a practitioner to not feel the pressure of too many critical eyes on you. you tend to dance harder when no-ones watching.

I guess the other reason I'm thankful for the disinterest, is that it shifted our thinking and our practice away from being solely located in black or white box spaces to being situated outdoors, on the streets. at the time, we felt that if the public weren't coming in, then we'd just go outside and find them. I think thru our observations of the public environment whilst outside, it triggered a deep fascination for examining the regulatory systems that we were surrounded by on a daily basis that were often so mundane or seen as commonplace that we had started to internalize and ignore them. it also allowed us to realize that intervention as a tactic in public space was a powerful medium to communicate to a broad audience. so that was a pivotal turning point for us and led us into a whole new way of thinking about and responding to the politics of site.

[2.] a syndrome or sign of the times?:

so this leads me on to consider what this response to site meant to us in a west australian context. and I would have to say that from the outset I would totally concur with george egerton-warburtons theory that if you wore a yellow vest your actions are legitimized by the assumption that your doing something productive, purposeful and legal. but in our case, I'm beginning to wonder if its 'uniform' as a whole that does this. if it's actually an innate reaction to authority figures no matter how low level it gets or in the case of the yellow vest syndrome, if its a deeply embedded sense of respect for the worker and if this 'engine room of the nation' type mentality we have in this state prohibits us from getting in the way of or challenging progress. from pvi's perspective we went thru a whole process of discovery with the concept of uniform before we quite literally donned a yellow vest in our work.

so I'm thinking that maybe the reason we spent so much time in our underwear early on is because we hadn't quite figured out what it was we should be wearing. when we were researching for a body of work that we were making on surveillance and if the pervasiveness of cctv cameras in the perth cityscape was impacting on the way in which people now behaved in public spaces as a result of being monitored, we discovered some interesting leads. one was that human operators of cctv cameras back then were required to 'ignore' people in uniform as it was assumed that their activities

were above suspicion. the other was a quote from an american private detective's website who stated that 'the more obvious you were in public, the more likely you were to be left alone'.

so we gleefully embraced both of these findings and decided to put them to the test in various works and activities out on the streets. we had santa claus, nuns, clowns, beggars, gardeners', sportsmen and nurses all strolling about un-disturbed in various projects, and not just artists from pvi but audiences were also invited to join in on these experiments. the concept of uniform was clearly still pretty loose at this stage and maybe the naughty nurse outfit from adult shop was pushing it slightly, but the theory seemed sound. a uniform afforded you a degree of freedom to explore your surroundings. then 9/11 happened and the landscape changed radically. we found our santas were now thrust up against a wall and frisked by police, with one concerned officer demanding to look inside their sacks. venues began asking us about insurance policies that we had and if audiences had disclaimers that would be legally binding incase there was an incident. people began to call the national security hotline in response to our activities that 'didn't quite add up'. so it seemed to us that this sense of creative freedom and breathing space that we discovered and were so excited about in perth, of feeling like we were able to just about get away with anything here, wasn't quite the case anymore. we had to get smarter if we wanted to keep making work outdoors, and for us we felt like we still had a lot of territory to explore. so that's where we really started to take this sense of uniform more seriously. and began investigating a tactic whereby we could perhaps imitate the cities self image of work and productivity to our advantage.

[3.] in visibility:

so I wanted to quickly talk about an experiment that we tried that directly led to the development of *reform*, which is this anti-social behaviour taskforce that we created as part of a series of works which manifests as a live street patrol in a radio broadcast performance as well as the hidden cameras screen based work on show here. and it was just a simple workshop we tried one day whereby we tested the limits that wearing a safety vest could afford us in public. the task we set ourselves was just to simply put them on and position some fencing on a busy street in the city and just inhabit that space for as long as possible until we were asked to move on or raised too much suspicion. we didn't undertake any manual labour, had no signage, didn't explain ourselves to anyone, we just stood still in that space for several hours. and to our surprise no one intervened or questioned our activity. so we decided to push it a little and would gradually try and occupy as much of the pavement as possible eventually pushing people out onto the road in order to get by us, which they did unquestioningly. so this was the trigger for us for *reform* and got us thinking about whether people just didn't care or was there something going on with this yellow vest uniform that we didn't fully understand? would people rather risk getting knocked down by a passing car than get in the way of perceived progress?

so with that experiment in mind, the next question we began to ask ourselves was how do we use this knowledge to position ourselves above suspicion or above the law even. and the answer we came up with was you become the law. I don't mean that in a judge dread kind of way, it was more about a strategy whereby you assimilate into the very thing you want to critique in order to try to critique it. critical art ensemble talk about it in terms of artists becoming parasites, which is quite a provocative term and one that alludes to feeding off a more powerful system in order to not only survive and gain knowledge of it, but to perhaps then use that familiarity to your advantage. so if we wanted to challenge some of the rules and conventions of public space to see what is permissible, we had to embrace those rules and take them a step further in order to critique them. so for this project '*reform*' and the works that have evolved out from it, we decided to heighten, repackage and appropriate 'the worker' aesthetic into a low level authority figure uniform. and the mock vigilante group, the loyal citizens underground, patrolling the streets in their hi-visibility shirts,

matching caps and knee high socks, picking up on unlawful behavior and reprimanding wayward citizens was what emerged.

and its interesting because what we honestly expected was for members of the public to be outraged by this excessive policing taking place. we would pick up on not only minor misdemeanors like littering and jaywalking but also solicitation, begging and unlawful assembly. so we were really bracing ourselves for verbal confrontations, which I have to say we have gotten in other cities, but in perth the number of times we were congratulated for our actions, by public, by police, even electronics retailer dick smith offered us sponsorship one night, which was really tempting to follow up on. but the level of compliance in response to this yellow vest uniform was to us extraordinary and a also bit frightening. so for us I think with this work we fail again as the reaction was completely opposite to our expectations, but in doing so maybe it highlights something about the state we're in, both in a geographic and psychological sense.

I feel as though our experience of donning the vest in our work opened up huge opportunities for us in our practice. in a very literal sense we found a place to hide-out in response to the current political climate, even if it was in plain sight. our paracritical nature gave us a life-source to gravitate towards and feed off. but it did leave us wondering what was this unique identity that we have here in this state, where was the wild in this west? from my personal perspective I would so love for things to get a hell of a lot wilder. I think that as a state even when other eyes turn to us we shouldn't stop dancing..

thanks!