

URBAN CONVERSATIONS

THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF
RESEARCH INTO THE PARTICIPATORY CITY

ASTRA HOWARD

Strangers, face-to-face. No words spoken. In the middle of a city, often alienating. Yet it is an intimate meeting, personal, somehow profound. A man approaches, inquisitive, stops for a moment and begins to read. He is addressed by Astra Howard, the Action Researcher/Performer, wearing white to distinguish herself from the otherwise greyed out urban public space environment. Encapsulated within a tall, transparent, specifically designed communication booth, she addresses passers-by via a silent narrative, a dialogue written directly onto the surface of her enclosure. 'Is she speaking to me?' Other people gather around: 'She's writing backwards, it must be a social experiment. Yes, I have something to say about that.' Identification with unknown others through this unusual form of public and private discussion opens up an urban environment to new forms of community consultation. 'I feel like the entire city is in your enclosed booth and I am trapped out here in the lonely world'. Conversations spill onto the pavement and wander down the street into shopping malls and private residencies; debates begin between otherwise disparate, and sometimes desperate, individuals. Friendships develop, based on a shared local knowledge, a renewed familiarity of site-specific thinking, responding and feeling.

Numerous questions emerge through this interactive self-evaluative process of public discourse about the city, about oneself and one's home. The

consistent presence of Astra Howard, the Action Researcher/Performer, across all sites, provides a measure to compare the idiosyncratic elements. In this sense the Action Researcher/Performer acts as a transducer of sorts, feeding information backwards and forwards to members of the involved public. Theoretical positions about the city are communicated, probing for a local psyche; prevailing views are challenged, data is accumulated, narratives of the city rewritten and re-engagement with the often disenfranchised citizen achieved.

The form of observation inherent to the Action Research/Performance projects has intent and is focused on the detail, the specific, the otherwise unseen. However, this directive gaze is not aimed at social or political identification and classification for the purpose of exclusion, that is, a surveillance of seeking difference, as a means to detect the unwanted other. Rather, the projects harness and feed on diversity, the unpredictability of social interaction, when members of a diverse community who would otherwise not have the opportunity to speak to one another come together and respond as partners in an inclusive yet challenged whole.

Often, citizens take ownership of the work they are engaged with, discussing the aims and objectives with others who pass by, encouraging them to interact, and spontaneously looking after the safety and security of the conversation vehicles and their occupants. Members of the investigated participatory community describe their genuine interest, enthusiasm and satisfaction in being apart of the exercise, this new-found democratic right to have their voice heard, even acknowledged as a legitimate and valued contribution to an expanding social matrix of the city. The uncovering/discovering of local 'truths' and the personalisation of place by the Action Researcher/Performer and locals alike becomes a restorative process of community capacity building. So much so, that where conversation projects have been instigated, citizens do not want the work to end.

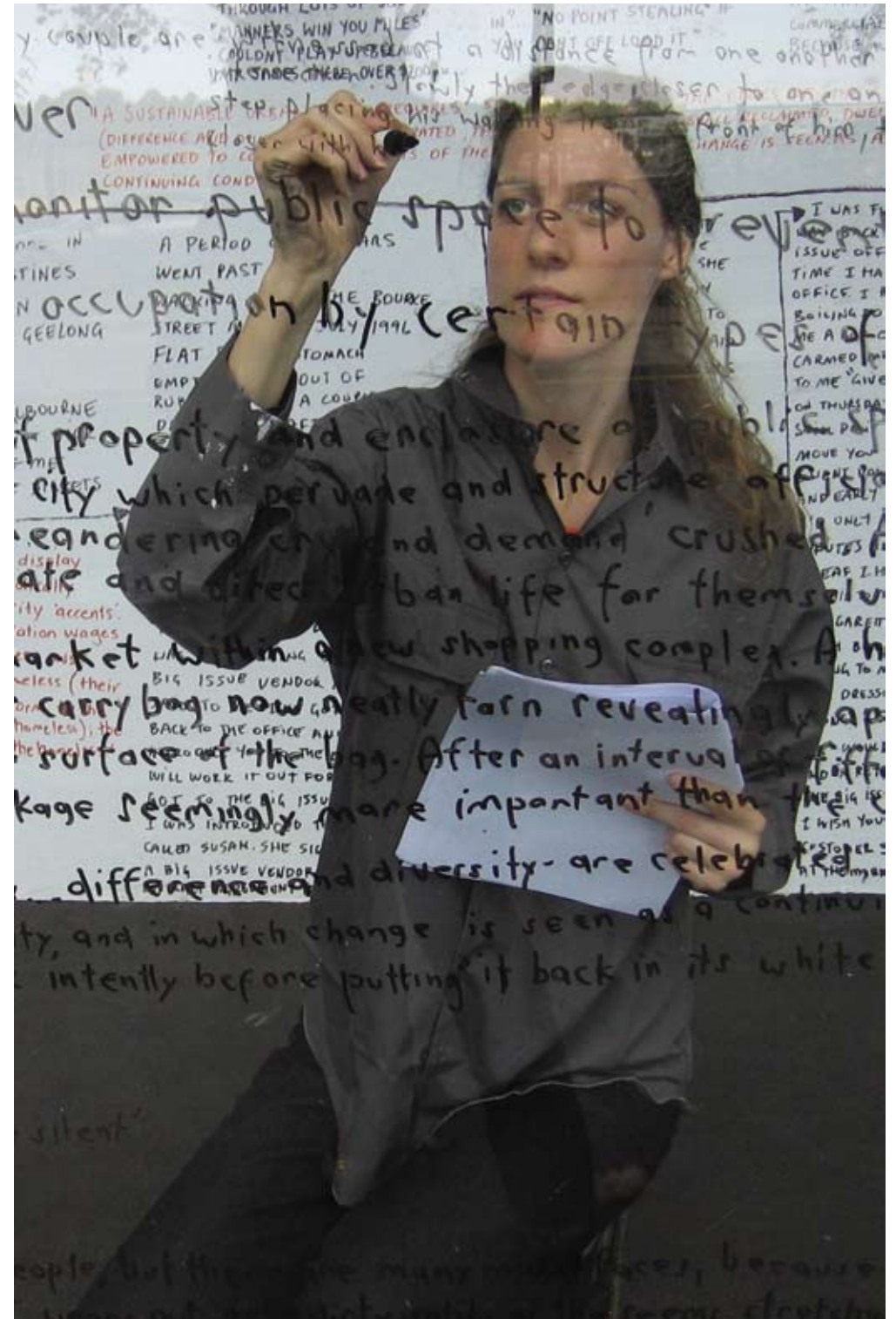
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The Surveillance with Public Intent Vehicle, Brisbane, 2007 © Louise Doble



The Surveillance with Public Intent Vehicle, Frankston, 2007 © Alex Murray



Street Stories I, 24Seven Gallery, Melbourne, 2006 © Pram Pillai