

A dollar for your thoughts

Tania Doropoulos

If a resident of Hobart happened to be walking along Bathurst Street on 16 December, 2006, they might have noticed a new commercial business. Signage painted on the shop front windows read: 'Need extra money for your Christmas shopping? \$1 for your thoughts. Today only. 11 am – 4 pm. www.writehereproject.org' And if that resident – a customer – entered the store, rather than exchanging money for goods in the conventional sense, it would have been possible for him or her to have earned one dollar, by selling a thought or story to the proprietors of the store.

In March 2007, artists James Newitt and Justy Phillips staged the exhibition component of their three-year project *write/here*. For ten days (to coincide with Tasmania's Ten Days on the Island) the artists occupied every advertising billboard space in Hobart – replacing existing advertisements with text phrases. The phrases, reflections of Hobart by the community of Hobart, articulated a selection of the local community's relationships (both private and public) with its city. Considered as 'part community event, part temporary public art project and part media intervention,'¹ *write/here* established itself in twenty-seven different sites and became the first billboard-oriented art project to inhabit all of the billboards of an entire city.²

The above mentioned 'One Dollar Story Shop' was one of the initiatives the artists developed in order to acquire material for their project. Over a period of more than two years, Newitt and Phillips devised multiple strategies, held numerous events, and engaged a vast population of their local community in order to obtain the collateral they required for their ambitious billboard project. The artists targeted specific social groups, including students, new migrants, prison inmates, aged care home residents, Indigenous groups and refugees, as well as creating a forum for anonymous public submissions. The project's main purpose was to create a platform for discussion about Hobart's social environment. Through sites usually dedicated to advertising, the artists subverted Hobart's familiar tourism-attracting image into confronting realities about the social conditions of certain groups within the community.

The ambition of *write/here* required significant financial support in order to execute the artists' proposed billboard rentals. Embarking on a number of fundraising initiatives, the artists began to work in tandem: connecting with and collecting material from people within the community, which would inform the content of the billboards, and connecting with and collecting sponsorship from others within the community, in order to fund the project. Financial support was sourced from the public and private sectors, in both conventional and inventive ways.

In addition to the One Dollar Shop and the public anonymous website submission forum, the artists held numerous writing workshops, conducted interviews, and had extensive discussions (which they recorded) with groups of people within the broader community of Hobart. The artists then began the process of selecting and editing the vast amount of conversation-material, until they arrived at the twenty-seven key phrases that would be translated into their billboard format.

1
From the 'About the project' section of the *write/here* project website. www.writehereproject.org

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The artists worked with the signage company Claude Group to secure every billboard under their management. Even though the Claude Group manage billboard advertising in Hobart there were still a few billboard sites the artists weren't able to occupy – including several privately owned, and two extremely large-scale sites.

Reflecting on *write/here*, I was reminded of a Mau Wal³ project, *Inside and Outside the Tube*, 1998, where, through workshops, the artists collected stories from people existing in a migration centre in Switzerland and created a public sound art project. Stories of people's journeys – from the moment they left their homes, until the moment they arrived in the migration centre – were collected by the artists over a period of time and, after a selection and editing process, were then installed in the many public pipes/tubes located all over the city of Zurich, where the project was located. The artists, together with their local collaborators, located the recordings in pipes at key public sites, such as post offices, supermarkets, police stations, schools, train stations and trains. One of the pipes even contained a recording device that would play messages back to the audience (participants were able to speak into this pipe to hear their own words played back to them, rather than just listen to words spoken by someone else). Projects like these engage local communities in particular ways, and Newitt and Phillips, and Mau Wal, bring new audiences to contemporary art and create environments where art is less exclusive and more accessible. 'The role of art is not to educate, nor heal, nor organise, nor even change anything. Its role is a little more abstract than all that. I think it is to communicate, of reaching people, of promoting states of spirit that redefine the state of things.'⁴ These site-specific, locally oriented art projects infiltrate the consciousness of a place with a subtlety that could be likened to viral advertising, but without a commercial purpose.

In her 2004 essay 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', contemporary art theorist Claire Bishop offers a critique of Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* through a comparative study of four key artists. On one side of her study she positions Rikrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick (two of the key artists Bourriaud references in *Relational Aesthetics*), and on the other side she positions Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirshhorn. Essentially, Bishop's main argument is that where Tiravanija's and Gillick's practices fail to exist within any definite context, the works of Sierra and Hirshhorn specifically relate to, and challenge, the social orders of the sites where their works are situated. Rather than make an attempt to attain a kind of 'microtopia' through relational art projects, Sierra's and Hirshhorn's art projects embody what Bishop refers to as 'antagonism', or tension.⁵

This issue of context is especially important to *write/here*: the artists are not visiting their chosen site of practice (i.e. they are not artists-in-residence, engaging with a community/town/city in order to create a work), but live and work within that community. Their living place becomes their workplace, and they are privileged with all of the observations and knowledge of the locals with whom they are working. This work, then, develops as organically as it does conceptually, with a sense of necessity built into every aspect, simply through the daily observations by the artists of their home town.

At biennales around the world there is inevitably a commitment by many artists to comment on, incorporate, or engage directly with the sites at which the exhibitions

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Mau Wal is the collaborative name of Brazilian artist Mauricio Dias and Swiss artist Walter Riedweg, who have been working together for almost fifteen years. Their projects explore the lives of groups of people living on the borders of mainstream cultures (such as immigrants and prostitutes), or on literal, physical borders. Dias and Riedweg embark on conversations with people, as individuals and as members of social groups, striking up conversations in different parts of the world, with the intention of capturing experiences or 'states of spirit'.

4
Spoken by Mauricio Dias in the documentary *Mau Wal: Translated Encounters*, dir. Fabiana Werneck and Marco Del Fiol, 2002.

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'These artists [Santiago Sierra and Thomas Hirshhorn] set up "relationships" that emphasize the role of dialogue and negotiation in their art, but do so without collapsing these relationships into the work's content. The relations produced by their performances and installations are marked by sensations of unease and discomfort, rather than belonging, because the work acknowledges the impossibility of a "microtopia" and instead sustains a tension among viewers, participants, and context. An integral part of this tension is the introduction of collaborators from diverse economic backgrounds, which in turn serves to challenge contemporary art's self-perception as a domain that embraces other social and political structures.' Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110, Fall 2004, p. 70

are located – and to incorporate this into their projects. Sometimes these gestures seem tokenistic, at other times, authentic. As biennales recur through time, layers of tokenistic and authentic site-specific gestures are stacked on top of one another. Criticism of these temporary gestures has been especially prevalent in the last few years, as the biennale model is called into question, scrutinised, analysed. For example, the recent *documenta 12* curators made a case in point of connecting invited artists with the community of Kassel through a structured, monthly community meeting. In a lecture delivered at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, in February 2007, co-curator Ruth Noack, discussed *documenta 12*'s curatorial rationale as being specifically opposed to notions of artist-as-tourist, and so the curators devised strategies in which to avoid the possibility of token gestures. By contrast, because of the relationship Newitt and Phillips already have with the city and community of Hobart, their gestures have an inbuilt authenticity.

In their brief, Newitt and Phillips chose to specifically engage with certain social groups from within the community: recent immigrants to Tasmania from Iran, Sudan, Sierra Leone and the Congo; inmates of Risdon Prison; clients at nursing homes; college students; Aboriginal elders.⁶ They were concerned to address the lack of public voice within these targeted groups. For a brief moment – ten days – these locals were given a very bold, public voice, through the artists' project. Risking the possibility of alienating certain members of the community, Newitt and Phillips no doubt had to consider the community more broadly when selecting phrases of text from their collection of stories. Perhaps through the method Bishop coins as 'relational antagonism', the artists successfully provoked a re-consideration of the social order of the local community, by the local community.⁷

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From the *write/here* project website www.writehereproject.org
Also from the website: 'The project was not a "community artwork" per se but it did seek to give a voice to particular communities and individuals that we either sought out, or were approached by.'

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'This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposing that which is repressed in sustaining the semblance of this harmony. It would thereby provide more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one another.' op.cit. p. 79

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Email correspondence with James Newitt, 2007.

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Miwon Kwon, 'One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity', *October*, Vol. 80. Spring 1997, pp. 85–110 Kwon also states: 'Which is to say the site is now structured (inter)textually rather than spatially, and its model is not a map but an itinerary, a fragmentary sequence of events and actions through spaces, that is, a nomadic narrative whose path is articulated by the passage of the artist.'

the *write/here* project, through a few key billboards, presented the community of Hobart with comments on the social problems that exist within the community: issues of migration and integration, isolation, depression, etc. In order to assemble the (often) confronting messages without overtly directing the work's reception, the artists considered its disjointed nature, and investigated the notion of suggestion. 'Early on I spoke about the idea of the billboards being elements of a kind of "script" and the viewer/pedestrian/driver would become a participant in that script by piecing together random billboard narratives as they discovered them. Perhaps some of these stories would pass almost unnoticed, some possibly staying with them for much longer.'⁸ The physical navigation necessary to experience this script/narrative could be compared to the spatial experience of the Internet with *write/here* 'structured as a sequence of movements and passages',⁹ in this sense the artists employing a strategy that could be easily navigated by an audience already adept at receiving and interpreting information in this way. As subjects of the digital age of information, we are used to navigating our way through a sea of information, in order to extract small fragments which we piece together to form a story.

Artists have used techniques of advertising for protest and political purposes – especially since the 1980s – and billboards, in particular, have been a key site for

public art production. Although large in scale, billboards offer artists subtle ways of integrating art into the public arena and they enable artists to reach vast and diverse audiences. Consider, for example, *Untitled, 1991* – a billboard work executed by Felix Gonzales-Torres in twenty-four locations in New York City in 1992, in conjunction with the exhibition *Projects 34: Felix Gonzales-Torres* at the Museum of Modern Art. The project was probably not even read as a work of art by most of the audience it engaged, however sometimes it is the more subtle gestures that achieve the most lingering impact. In the words of contemporary art curator Nancy Spector: ‘Gonzales-Torres’s goal as an artist involves infiltration rather than destruction, intervention rather than total subversion.’¹⁰ In mimicking the aesthetic conventions of advertising campaigns, *write/here* was such a project. The bold white typeface on red background utilised all of the conventions of advertising, with the subtlety lying within the content of the text itself – the concept communicated through the repetition of an identical aesthetic covering every billboard in one place.

In another style referencing the work of Gonzales-Torres, *write/here* cleverly fuses the personal with a collective consciousness and played with an intimacy brought forth into the public arena. Because of the constant risk of sentimentality and nostalgia, the artists were able to maintain tension through the work’s bordering of a private/public space. Again, Spector’s discussion of Gonzales-Torres’s work could be applied here, as *write/here* too, ‘produces a multivalent narrative in which the intimate and communal are fused.’ She continues: ‘Described in spatial terms, this narrative takes the form of a continuous journey in which one travels away from the self-as-referent to the social-as-mirror and back again. In the process, the ideological boundary dividing the two terrains is gradually exposed and, in time, eroded.’¹¹ Whether connections were made by the audience between the many billboards of *write/here*, or even if the audience understood the billboards to be a work of art at all, the text message operated in the subliminal way advertising does, and would be destined to remain somewhere within the public subconscious. In this sense the private, after having entered the public realm, would retreat back into the private, after having been influenced by its public stage.

Following the ten-day installation of *write/here*, the artists continued to develop fundraising activities and generate financial support from both the public and private sectors. So, rather than being considered an exhibition or end-point of the project (usually associated with visual art), *write/here* continued all the way up to the publication of this book, and perhaps beyond. Interestingly, this extra funding was always intended to be used specifically for the production of some kind of ‘record’, in order to position the project within an historical context – whether art historical or for the local history of Hobart did not necessarily matter. The point here is that the documentation of the project’s billboard manifestation (performance) was for this archival and referential purpose, rather than its re-production for a market, or re-staging. The project therefore remains a truly site-specific encounter. An entire section of Miwon Kwon’s influential essay of 1997, ‘One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity’, discusses the contradictory nature of the documentation and re-installation of ephemeral, site-specific

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Nancy Spector, *Felix Gonzales-Torres*. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1995, 2007, p. 100

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Ibid, p. 54

works. In the section, 'Mobilization of Site-Specific Art', Kwon states: 'Contrary to the earlier conception of site specificity, the current museological and commercial practices of re-fabricating (in order to travel) once site-bound works make transferability and mobilisation new norms for site specificity.'¹² Kwon identifies numerous problems arising from this 'norm', including issues of authorship and authenticity, and cites an incident of re-production of works by Carl Andre and Donald Judd for an exhibition at Ace Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1989. The documentation of *write/here*, through a publication of texts and images, ensures the artists' authorship of the project, as well as the project's authenticity, without necessitating a re-staging or objectification. It also maintains the project's delivery and reception as 'experience' – of the moment, not to be re-lived – and is therefore truly ephemeral. In this regard, *write/here* should be considered a performance, gesture or action, rather than an exhibition.

In the 27th (2006) Bienal de São Paulo: *How to Live Together*, curator Lisette Lagnado included an installation by Felix Gonzales-Torres. One of the works included a stack of blank white sheets of paper. During the opening events, and continuing through the first few days of the exhibition, the audience took sheets of the blank white paper and crafted them into origami cranes, masks and miniature objects. These white paper objects began to fill the space in which the project was located and created a moving, changing artwork. The project, although reproduced through documentation, could never be translated or replicated to an audience that was not there to experience the work while the Bienal was on. *write/here*, in the same way, possesses this inability to be translated to another audience, a remote audience, at another time – simply because the participation of the audience is directly linked to the work. Perhaps it is these gestures (that are driving so many art projects today) that enable artists to affect audiences in ways static artworks cannot. The re-telling of these projects, in the nature of storytelling, becomes the clear communicative tool in explaining the project to another audience. In commenting on his famous project *When Faith Can Move Mountains*, 2002, Francis Aljys states: 'this story is not validated by any physical trace or addition to the landscape. We shall now leave the care of our story to oral tradition...'¹³ The recent performance-influenced project by curators Philippe Parreno and Hans Ulrich Obrist for the 2007 Manchester International Festival, *Il Tempo Del Postino*, is another way of approaching this momentary, physical experience-oriented art project, and makes evident the fact that artists and curators are continuing to investigate this kind of art practice in full force.¹⁴

Perhaps it is the seeming anti-commodifiable nature of projects such as these that make site-specific, ephemeral public projects appealing to the artists working within this area.¹⁵ In a reaction not dissimilar to the backlash that was experienced in the 1960s – when Minimalism rebelled against the easily packaged art object of the market-driven art economy – relational practices more than likely begin here. (Even so, funding and investment in these projects is far from non-existent despite the seeming lack of profit potential, as has been demonstrated with *write/here*). At a time when art fairs have become critical spaces of contemporary art practice, attracting high-profile curators for their commissioning projects, relational art practices maintain some sense of art's non-commercial critical credibility within a largely commercialised industry. Or perhaps localised, site-specific art could be considered an attempt, through a series of gestures, to reclaim the cultural and social identity of a local community in an increasingly globalised world.

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Miwon Kwon, op.cit. p. 97

13
Francis Aljys on his project 'When Faith Moves Mountains: 1000 Words', *Artforum*. Summer 2002.

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'Going against the grain of institutional habits and desires, and continuing to resist the commodification of art in/for the market place, site-specific art adopts strategies that are either aggressively antivisual – informational, textual, expositional, didactic – or immaterial altogether – gestures, events, performances bracketed by temporal boundaries. The "work" no longer seeks to be a noun/object but a verb/process, provoking viewers' critical (not just physical) acuity regarding the ideological conditions of that viewing. In this context, the guarantee of a specific relationship between an art work and its "site" is not based on a physical permanence of that relationship, rather on the recognition of its unfixed impermanence, to be experienced as an unrepeatable and fleeting situation.' Miwon Kwon, op.cit. pp. 85–110

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Bourriaud has already raised this point in *Postproduction*, his follow-up publication to *Relational Aesthetics*.