



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Creative Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2009

Public art as public conversations

Lucas M. Ihlein

University of Wollongong, lucasi@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Ihlein, L. M. "Public art as public conversations." *Harmonic Tremors: Aesthetic Interventions in the Public Sphere*. Ed.S. Rainbird. Melbourne: Gasworks, 2009, 33-44.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

• Lucas Ihlein

In his 1934 book *Art as Experience*, American philosopher John Dewey criticises the tendency of the visual arts to withdraw into the elite spaces of museums and galleries. He argues for an alertness to the aesthetic qualities in common experiences of everyday life. Dewey's examples of everyday aesthetic experience come from the bustle of the industrialised city:

...the fire-engine rushing by; the machines excavating enormous holes in the earth; [...] how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd; [...] the zest of the spectator in poking the wood burning on the hearth and in watching the darting flames and crumbling coals.¹

Dewey is not calling for the dissolution of art and a return to "simpler", pre-modern lifestyles. Rather, in *Art as Experience*, his aim is to "restore continuity" between the sanctity of the framed and refined world in which art resides, and the "everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience".² According to Dewey, the process of compartmentalisation of culture was accelerated during the era of colonial expansion, when museums began to house monuments to the glorious history of the state, as well as countless objects of plundered loot. With the growth of capitalism, the promotion of the idea that works of art are "apart from the common life" was accentuated by the private collecting of art objects – as cultural "stocks and bonds", and as evidence of the collector's superior cultural status.³

This transformation of art from a traditional activity that "intensifies the sense of immediate living" to the accumulation of objects in a space set apart from daily life means that art theory has come to (mistakenly) associate "the work of art" with physical objects. However, for Dewey, art is not simply a painting or sculpture as a discrete object. The work of art is rather "the work that art does" – in enhancing and intensifying lived experience.

An art of dialogue

Dewey's desire to re-establish the continuity between art and life resonates in recent art practice. Since the late 1980s, social interaction and communicative exchange have been increasingly employed as

1 John Dewey, 2005 (1934), *Art as Experience*, Perigree, NY, p. 3.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

aesthetic strategies in contemporary art. Some commentators see this as a move towards the creation of anarchic "micro-utopias" within a globalised economy of mass culture.⁴ In a media climate dominated by fewer and larger corporate conglomerates, the development of an art of local dialogue is a form of creative resistance. Art which creates 'do-it-yourself' communication channels enables artists and their collaborators to resituate their own lives as primary content in self-produced media systems, rather than settling for a passive role as consumers of mass-culture's packaged broadcasts. Projects which place conversation at the heart of their formal structure have been described using a range of art terms: 'relational art', 'new genre public art', 'uncollectable art', 'dialogical art', 'community-based art', 'site-specific art'. To create an aesthetic backdrop for my own projects in this field, I briefly introduce a few recent theorisations of these art practices.

Nicolas Bourriaud, in his book *Relational Aesthetics*, observes that since the beginning of the 1990s artists have increasingly been utilising social relations as both the form and content of their work. The physical forms such artworks manifest vary greatly. Artists might create "meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality".⁵ Bourriaud's "relational artworks" (his best-known examples include the work of artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Pierre Huyghe) often occur within art galleries and museums, with the institutional space being given over to a playful, temporary re-use by the artists as a site of social interaction. For Bourriaud, relational art occupies the "interstices" (or unproductive gaps) between spaces of commerce, providing the possibility for free human exchange. However, Bourriaud's synthesis of art and socialisation has been criticised for its heavy dependence on the art gallery system, which may exclude the participation of certain groups of people.⁶

By contrast, American artist Suzanne Lacy practices and advocates an art generated and presented within outdoor urban spaces, rather than art galleries. She uses the term "new genre public art". The artworks Lacy describes attempt to connect intimately to local people and places and often involve a prolonged process of community consultation:

Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art – visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives – is based on engagement.⁷

Like Lacy, critic Grant Kester celebrates projects which develop from a consultative process, in "real-world" situations. He takes Lacy's argument for an art of engagement even further, claiming *dialogue itself* as an artform. In his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and*

4 Nicolas Bourriaud, 2002, *Relational Aesthetics*, Les Presses du Réel, Dijon.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

6 Claire Bishop, 2004, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics", in *October* 110, Fall 2004, pp. 51-79; Lucas Ihlein, 2007, "Bilateral Blogging", *International Journal of the Arts in Society*, Vol. 1, No. 7, pp. 53-62.

7 Suzanne Lacy, 1995, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, Bay Press, Seattle, p. 19.

8 Grant Kester, 2004, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 190.

10 *Ibid.*, pp. 124-151.

11 For a useful Australian anthology of critical essays on the role of the artists in communicative and community exchange, see Vivienne Binns (ed.), 1991, *Community and the Arts*, Pluto Press, Leichhardt. For a provocative discussion on the role of the artist in society, see Helen Grace, 1993-99, "Interview with Ian Milliss: Before Utopia – A non official Prehistory of the Present", at www.ianmilliss.com/documents/BeforeUtopiaInterview.htm. For a critique of participatory community art projects, see Christian Kravagna, 1998, "Working on the Community: Models of Participatory Practice", in *republicart*, www.republicart.net/disc/aap/kravagna01_en.htm.

Communication in Modern Art, Kester describes a "dialogical aesthetic" at play in the work of artists like Adrian Piper, Stephen Willats, and the WochenKlausur group – foregrounding the role of verbal communication as an essential part of the artwork.⁸ Many of the dialogical art projects Kester describes strive for tangible (that is, not simply symbolic, or art-world-specific) outcomes. For instance, they might work towards the resolution of a nagging social problem, or involve the placement of artists as advisors in government policy.

Clearly, certain difficulties emerge from such open-ended art practices. Even with their emphasis on 'real world outcomes', it is often impossible to locate the "products" of dialogical or relational art projects. A physical, visible object is seldom regarded as an essential result of such encounters, and documentation of the artist's working process is obviously not the same as the activity itself. Outcomes – whether performances, meetings, events, texts, or social transformations in the public sphere – are resistant to analysis by traditional aesthetic criteria, which rely on persistent visual evidence and recognisable formal elements.

This has led to an absence of a sustained historical record which in turn has meant that artists lose the opportunity to learn from one another, and are forced to "reinvent the wheel".⁹ This is particularly a problem when collaborative, engaged processes raise prickly ethical issues regarding coercion of "participants" and the representation of others. In addition, the socially conscious nature of such practices means that they are increasingly being viewed by governments as substitutes for welfare and community outreach, services which were previously provided by the state.¹⁰ It is evident that artists need to find ways to historicise their own practices, and engage in critical dialogue in order to traverse the minefield of communicatively engaged practice. By now we are far from the safety of our studios.¹¹

The desire to reappraise the relationship between the artist, the art object and the audience is by no means unique to our moment in history. From the 1920s to the present, countless artists have grappled with ways of generating art beyond the narrow aesthetic traditions (and the commodity relation) created by the discrete art object. Many artists during the 20th century have searched for strategies to transform the audience's experience of the artwork from passive appreciation to active participation: a dialogical model perhaps more akin to conversation than lecture. Such a transformation throws into doubt the concept of the audience itself. My own art practice has been concerned with this very problem.

My conversational approach to artmaking might be clarified with two examples: *Bilateral Kellerberrin*, and (with artist group SquatSpace) the *Redfern Waterloo Tour of Beauty*. Each utilises twin definitions of 'site' – a physical site in a 'real' place, and a virtual site, on the internet.¹² These two

projects germinate in particular locations, creating a dialogical framework – through blogging, and via live conversations on local bus and bicycle tours. In each case, the 'object of art' almost seems to disappear, being replaced instead by a conversational framework, utilised by both artist and audience. The establishment of such frameworks, as an aesthetic act, has the potential to transform social life in the physical location. Furthermore, these artworks stand as a critique of the conception of art-as-precious-object, and the myth of the artist as genius. In these works, conversation is seen as an end in itself – an activity which brings people into contact, and expands the field of possible outcomes. The discursive interaction enabled and harnessed by the artwork creates a localised feedback-loop, making visible new insights into existing social relations within small geographical areas.

Bilateral Kellerberrin

In early 2005, I spent two months in the Western Australian country town of Kellerberrin. I was an artist in residence, as part of a program organised by International Art Space Kellerberrin Australia (IASKA). IASKA regularly 'imports' artists from around the world to spend time living and working in this rural community, which, numbering just 1000 inhabitants, is at a precarious point in its existence.¹² The pressures of the global wheat and sheep market have made small-scale farming unfeasible, resulting in fewer, and larger, properties, increasing reliance on machinery over 'manpower', and thus a dwindling population of workers and their families. This economic reorganisation of 'human capital' has the predictable flow-on effect of reducing 'social capital' – service and support industries, retail, health and educational facilities. All of these facts shaped *Bilateral Kellerberrin*.¹⁴

In Kellerberrin, I embarked on a rather simple daily exercise: each morning during my residency, I sat down and wrote, from memory, about the events of the previous day: who I met in the town, and what we said to each other. Social encounters and meetings took place by chance, in the "real" places of the town – the grocery store, the speedway, the street, the pub – and occasionally in private homes. My stories of these encounters were posted online each day, as a slightly delayed feedback mechanism. Through this process, the fragmentary episodes in the evolution of friendships, and the acquisition of information were (at least somewhat) transparent and traceable.

The use of ordinary sites of commerce and transit as the generative spaces for conversation-as-art-practice, in *Bilateral Kellerberrin*, acknowledges that these spaces *already* harbour rich possibilities for interaction. In a country town like Kellerberrin, conversations occur as and when people bump into each other in the course of carrying out their daily tasks. The everyday context for the exchange of information means

12 For an analysis of the multiple uses of the concept of "site", see Mwon Kwon, 2002, *One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

13 See www.iaska.com.au

14 See www.kellerberrin.com

15 Blog entry from 25 April, 2005.

16 I have since completed two more "blog-as-art" projects: *Bilateral Petersham*, (2006) which applied the conversational methodology developed in Kellerberrin to my home suburb; and *Bon Scott Blog*, (2008) which was commissioned as a 'public art project' by curator Jasmin Stephens from the Fremantle Arts Centre. See www.thesham.info, and www.bonscottblog.com.

that this exchange takes place around the edges of other activities – or is, in fact, *mediated* by those activities. The following extract from the blog is one such example of a particular interaction (and its associated reflective insight) which took place as I walked around the town:

The first thing that happened as I turned off Sewell St into Rason, was a police car pulled up alongside me. [...] He asked if I needed a hand with anything (which I think was a euphemism for "ello ello ello!") – and said he'd noticed a new face... I explained that I was an artist in residence at IASKA, just having a look around town. [...] One thing that I have noticed, in a small town, is that you can't really look without being seen. In a big city, you can wander around anonymously for hours checking out the place. But here in Keller, the only way to see the streets closely is to walk them, and to walk is to be seen by many sets of eyes.¹⁵

Furthermore, the combination of physical interaction and virtual feedback is able to sustain different voices without requiring closure. In conversations that occur on the street, as well as in fragmentary blog entries, there is no pressure for any single particular exchange to reach a definitive conclusion, achieve consensus, or solve a problem. However, this does not mean that discussion is merely trivial or mundane. The residents of Kellerberrin often displayed great concern for the social, political and environmental problems that beset a small farming community within a globalised economy. The conversations documented by *Bilateral Kellerberrin* cover issues ranging from rural depopulation to religion; mulesing and live sheep export; land use and climate change; alcoholism and mental health.

In its day-by-day, iterative structure, publicly available as a blog, *Bilateral Kellerberrin* showed how the generation of knowledge, and the establishment of social relationships, are ongoing processes in states of constant transformation.

To hang around the town, casually meeting locals and getting to know people, was not 'research towards' an art project – it was *the art work itself*. Framing 'ordinary' social interactions as an aesthetic activity, *Bilateral Kellerberrin* attempted to bridge the gap between the traditional roles of 'audience' and 'performer', offering shared responsibility to both participants in the conversation. By publishing the 'proceedings' of these conversations each day on the internet, the project enabled the conversation-as-interactive-performance to be shared publicly, developing into an archive of its own making. This online archive is itself not static, but remains open to addition, alteration and further discussion.¹⁶

Redfern Waterloo Tour of Beauty

The contested, congested south-Sydney suburbs of Redfern and Waterloo seem light-years away from the wheat and sheep of Western

Australia. Redfern-Waterloo has for many years housed a large proportion of Indigenous residents and low income public housing tenants. In the early 1970s, when substantial land grants were made for social housing, inner-city areas were not considered to be valuable space. However, with Sydney's CBD bounded on all sides except south, Redfern-Waterloo is now seen as the 'next big thing'.¹⁷ An area ignored and allowed to run down when it seemed worthless for property investment has now become the intense focus of real-estate speculation. In late 2004, the state government of New South Wales (NSW) created the Redfern-Waterloo Authority (RWA), excising a chunk of land south of Sydney's CBD from the jurisdiction of the local council, declaring it of 'state significance'.¹⁸ With this legal sleight of hand, the NSW Government can now push through commercial redevelopment plans, sell off local assets, and override existing heritage regulations, under the pretext that the land is 'too important' to be subject to the normal process of community consultation.

Not surprisingly, this heavy-handed approach to urban planning has generated great anxiety in the community. Many of the artists in the SquatSpace collective (of which I am a member) live within the Redfern area. We wanted to 'do something' about this alarming situation, but we were confounded. How could we intervene in a supposedly democratic process, when the proper channels of consultation had been swept away, and where traditional dissent seemed fruitless? The group embarked on a process of conversational research – we began meeting with local community representatives in an attempt to understand, from their own perspectives, what the RWA's actions would mean for life in the area. It quickly became clear that the 'locals' knew best about their own predicament – as artists, we could not do justice to their wealth of knowledge and emotion by utilising second-hand information in the production of an artwork *about* them.¹⁹ In fact, the paradox was that the more information we were exposed to, the more people we felt we needed to talk to, and the less we were able to synthesise a simple overall picture of the situation. One of our local contacts, architect Jack Barton, identified our dilemma as a classic 'wicked problem'. We came to recognise that the re-development plan for Redfern-Waterloo could be viewed through this lens. Wicked problems are ill-defined, have no true/false solution, and often emerge as a symptom of another problem.²⁰ When an area like Redfern-Waterloo is demarcated, by an arbitrary boundary, as being suddenly in need of 'renewal' (especially after years of neglect), centralised urban planning can create great upheaval at street level. The gap between the planners' maps and the lived experience of residents is enormous.

Rather than try to 'solve' this wicked problem, we decided to use the very process of conversation as our artwork. SquatSpace organised its first *Redfern-Waterloo Tour of Beauty* in September 2005, to investigate the

17 See Harvey Grennan, "Big plans for Redfern", *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 17, 2007, <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2007/04/16/1178696757699.html>.

18 See Bob Carr, "Premier Carr Announces 10-year Redfern-Waterloo Plan" (Media Release), October 26, 2004, reprinted at FREDWatch Website, <http://www.redwatch.org.au/RWA/statements/2004/041026carr>.

19 See Mickie Quick, "More than a Sum of its Parts?" *NAVA Quarterly*, March 2006, pp. 10-11, pp.10-11.

20 See Khisty, G. J., 2000, "Can Wicked Problems be Tackled through Abductive Interferencing?", *Journal of Urban Planning and Development*, Vol. 126, No. 3, pp. 104-115.

disjuncture between the RWA's plans, and the current lives of local people. The tour is now an ongoing regular project. 'Tourists' are transported by mini-bus, or travel en-mass by bicycle, to places of local significance. They are greeted by a 'local', who speaks briefly – and often passionately – about the place and his/her connection to it. Members of SquatSpace, acting as 'tour guides', facilitate discussion with each speaker. The tour visits several "endangered" sites in the area: Aboriginal housing at The Block, community centres, government assets to be sold off, and Public Housing Towers. We also visit locations which indicate one possible future: a burgeoning blue-chip art gallery precinct, and new private apartment developments at the eastern end of the suburb.

For SquatSpace, a conversational approach to public art practice represents an opportunity to declare that it is OK *not* to have all the answers. To extract material from a local context and transform it into an art object would seem to create a metaphorical 'full-stop' in what is actually a dynamic and constantly evolving situation. By bringing curious colleagues and residents along with us, the *Redfern-Waterloo Tour of Beauty's* conversations-as-art allow the area's extremely complex social ecosystem to be seen for what it is: a work in progress.

By creating a dialogical framework, rather than authoritatively speaking on behalf of others, we break open the smooth surface of knowledge, allowing it to emerge, live, through conversation. Our 'tourists' take on an increased responsibility as collaborators in the generation of provisional and complex truths. After each tour, SquatSpace uploads reports, information, links, and photographs onto our website. Importantly, rather than exploiting a local political situation for the production of a gallery-based artwork, the group has, in fact, produced a network of relationships.

Bilateral Kellerberrin and the *Redfern-Waterloo Tour of Beauty* take up the challenge presented by Dewey's art-as-experience polemic. Not content with the model of the artist as creative loner preparing artworks in the isolation of the studio, then presenting them, complete, to the outside world, these artworks represent a new model: public art as public conversation. Each directly engages with the world, utilising (where needed) the tools and methods drawn from other communicative disciplines, as well as the 'ordinary' practices of everyday life.

An art of public conversation need not withdraw into the sanctity and disconnected architecture of an art gallery – conversations can be relayed, and replayed, into the very spaces from which they originate, as well as finding new channels of continuing conversation on the internet. In this way, they avoid the retreat to sanctified space, which Dewey criticised in 'high' art. An 'art of engagement' using ordinary communicative and performative situations (even something as simple as conversation) can question the traditional opposition between artist and audience, often

caricatured as active versus passive. The audience may then become collaborators in the making of the artwork. In initiating such projects, artists may begin to model new forms of democratic self-organisation. Through the interdisciplinary processes of collaborative engagement, an artwork might begin to question existing patterns of social relations, and offer new ways of learning not offered within single disciplines.

Artworks which emerge from communicative situations between people constitute a critique of existing art distribution systems, which ordinarily rely upon the relations of commodity and connoisseurship. The more artists initiate projects of this nature, the more the definition of art itself will shift. Art will increasingly become known as an open-ended set of techniques for social engagement and interrogation – as well as the lived experience of the resulting aesthetic encounters.

In both *Bilateral Kellerberrin* and the *Redfern-Waterloo Tour of Beauty* the 'work that art does' is to allow collaborative knowledge to emerge through conversation in contested places. In neither case is social interaction used merely as an 'aestheticised' form – socialisation is not the latest in a long line of ordinary objects transformed, as ready-mades, into 'Art'. Nor does 'Art' disappear altogether. The conversations which constitute these projects do not blend seamlessly into the humdrum of everyday life and politics. Rather, public art as public conversation emerges from an existing situation and utilises the traditional tools of aesthetics: framing, focusing, structuring experience and dramatising life. The 'results' (if you can call them that), while far from visible, are nevertheless tangible: embodied as they are in continually developing relationships and personal narratives. An art of public conversation can become a local resource in its own right, feeding back into the very earth from which it springs.

This paper has developed from: "Bilateral Blogging" (2007), *International Journal of the Arts in Society*, Vol. 1, No. 7, pages 53-62; and "Art as Situated Experience" (2007), in *If You See Something Say Something*, www.ilyouseesomethingsaysomething.net/squatSPACE.htm.