

Navigating the write/here project

Neal Haslem

When Justy Philips and James Newitt installed their recent large-scale public art piece ‘the write here project’ onto practically all the billboard sites in Hobart, they created a fork in the conceptual road of the city. These boards contained fragmentary comments from within the most private spaces of the city; the bereaved parent, the junkie, the African immigrant and the average joe. write here transported the inside outside; it reversed expectations and overturned the order of social decorum. How does the population of Hobart navigate such an assault on their status quo, how might such a provocative action be mediated without circumscribing its power to communicate?

It doesn’t take much ‘strangeness’ for an inhabitant of the contemporary western city to become confused, lost or disorientated. These cities might, at first, appear chaotic and free-for-all, however in actuality they are abiding to stringent rules. These rules and structures are often revealed only when they are broken. The red billboards that sold nothing broke those rules, suddenly covering the whole city with the most private of texts, injected into the public arena, revealing shards of reality behind the carefully constructed social fabric.

The irony that an inhabitant of the city might react angrily to a work which reveals something of the trauma of teenage road fatalities, yet will be reassured by an advert for a more powerful ute or more ‘blokey’ beer, is not lost.

The artists produced 6000 printed maps to go with their project, achieving a number of effects: firstly, guiding those who would wish to see each and every site to the locations; and secondly, contextualising and legitimating the work itself. With the addition of a ‘guide’ the hitherto uninitiated public can accept the unacceptable. In one central city hotel, the artists were asked to place the maps in each of the hotel bedrooms that overlooked one of the billboards. The disorientating work – words which were considered too negative by some, could then be orientated and legitimated as ‘artwork’, the private thoughts revealed upon its surface dealt with, as one might deal with a sanctioned busker rather than a late night encounter with a beggar or lost person on the street.

One might imagine that the maps detract from the project, diluting or lessening its communicative and expressive potential. Certainly as maps they make the way ‘safe’. They allow some sense that there is reason behind the experience, that this anomaly can be successfully negotiated and navigated within the existing social context. In some way the mapping, as always, civilizes the work, and brings it back within the scope of those unwritten urban rules. Like any writing it renders the new comprehensible and allows access to the previously inaccessible.

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The artists received abusive emails as well as public praise, especially in response to the billboard which read, ‘all my friends are dead now’.

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The billboard in questions read, ‘I hate Hobart because it hasn’t got jobs’.

The project also features a website - www.writehereproject.org. This electronic site, like the map, provides a guide to this unfamiliar action, a ‘way-in’ to the project and a legitimisation through its official presence online. During the two weeks of installation the site registered over 70,000 hits. In an additional move the online site provides a response mechanism beyond the normal letter to the editor or late-night spray-can. Comments can be added against any of the boards; a secondary commentary, beyond

the installed one curated by the artists. The possibility of a discussion is broached. The project and the material of the project are thus looped back into the social fabric. The personal statements presented by the project become answerable and, in some way, responsible for their radical intrusion into the etiquette of city life.

Other mappings of the project are currently underway; the disbursement of the material of the project into alternative forms and formats. Billboard skins have been cut up and used as dust jackets on a locally published design journal, each purchaser of journal able to take this material with its snippet of text and lodge it in their own bookshelf. Several skins have been recycled into bags, bags that might be used to shop with, to carry home, past new billboards, the consumables purchased in the high street shopping mall. The private comments revealed with write/here are thus, in a multiplicity of tactics, reinserted back into social space of the city. From a short two-week period of high exposure those comments come back into the city, where they remain in consciousness, brought back through the mnemonic of shopping bag graphics, and the memory of site. Those 27 billboard sites, like old battlegrounds, once felt the blood of the city, and they will be remembered.