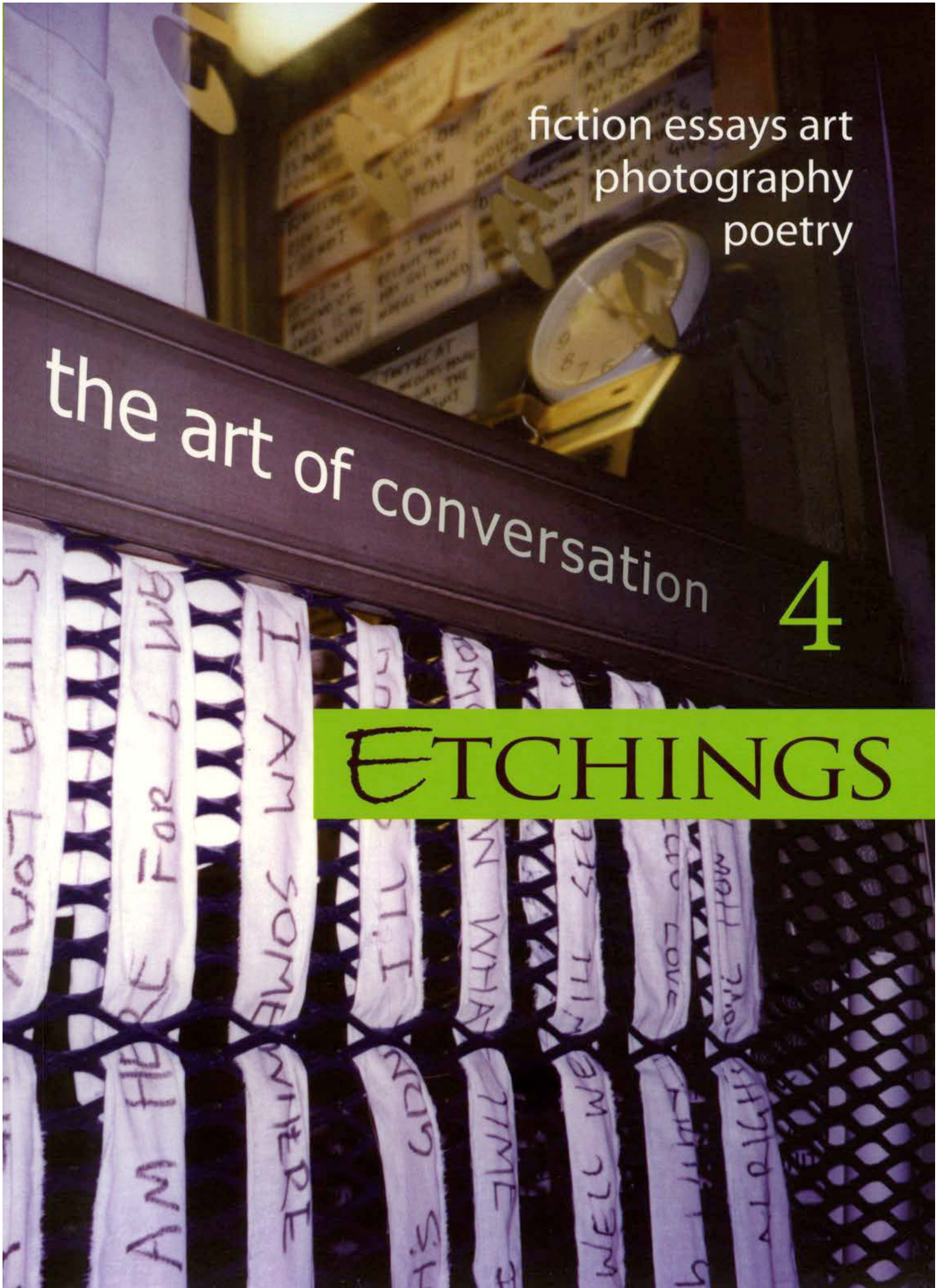fiction essays art
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the art of conversation

4

ETCHINGS

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.

The challenge for professionals in the field is to develop a sustainable model, involving sites and processes for interaction, spaces and times for listening, as well as encouraging tolerance, promoting understanding, and providing an inspirational catalyst for change. Urban conversations may have the potential to instigate new social service initiatives, more effective

urban planning, highly dynamic and inclusive community programs, and a unique poetry of place.

More than one hundred experimental projects were undertaken in cities as diverse as Sydney, Melbourne, Beijing, Paris, New York, and Delhi. These projects came to fruition by developing and then applying two interdependent propositions. Firstly, that an action research model could be designed and employed to provide maximum penetration into the individuals urban space experience. Secondly, that the design and application of the model could best occur within an innovative, cross-disciplinary and experimental performance-based methodology. This overall process was the key to providing new descriptions of, and insights into, the operation of public spaces and to discovering their specific qualities and conditions. The implantation of the Action Researcher/Performer directly within the researched site fuelled much lively discussion, heated debates, and even removal from sites by local authorities, revealing just how volatile exploration of these theories proved to be when tested within actual urban public spaces with their variously competing interests.

Perspective, Sydney, 1999

The Action Researcher/Performer spent extended durations of time in different public spaces around Sydney, sitting on a stool, observing silently the local scene through a suspended white frame that defined a limited viewing perspective. The public, intrigued by what other aspects of the local area might be revealed by deliberately isolating their parameters of view, stood watching the city unfold from within this frame. As they observed this real life drama play out in front of their eyes, many started a conversation with one another about their experience of living in the local area.

Visual & Sensory Analysis 1, Sydney, 1999

A large piece of paper, two metres square, was placed in the middle of a busy inner city footpath. Over a four-hour period the Action Researcher/Performer made notations, recording everything experienced on a very local scale. Passers-by enquired about what details were being recorded;

Cross Conversation, Sydney, 2000

Public [Private] Living Spaces 2, Sydney, 2000
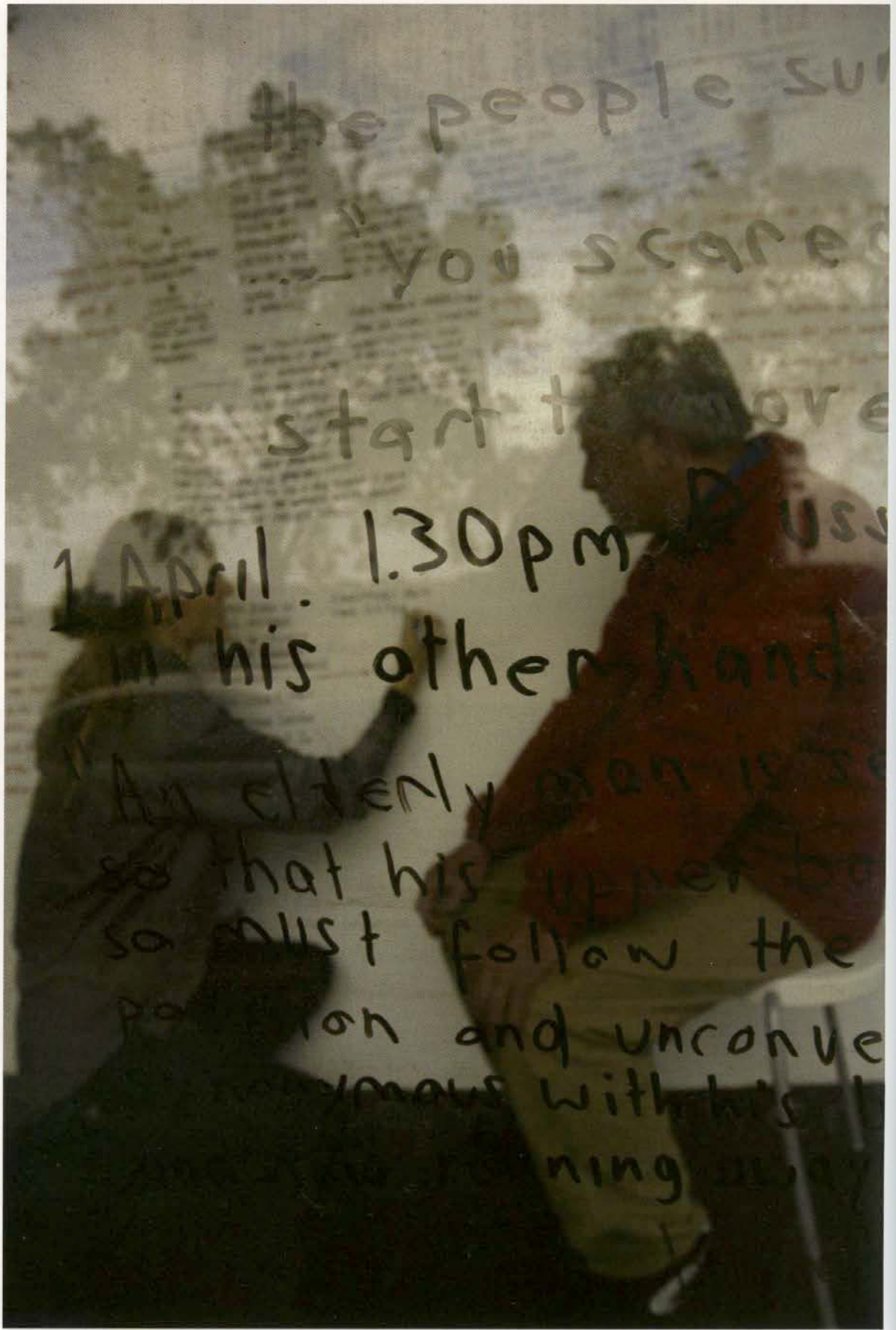

Conversation Sticks, Beijing, 2002 (video still)
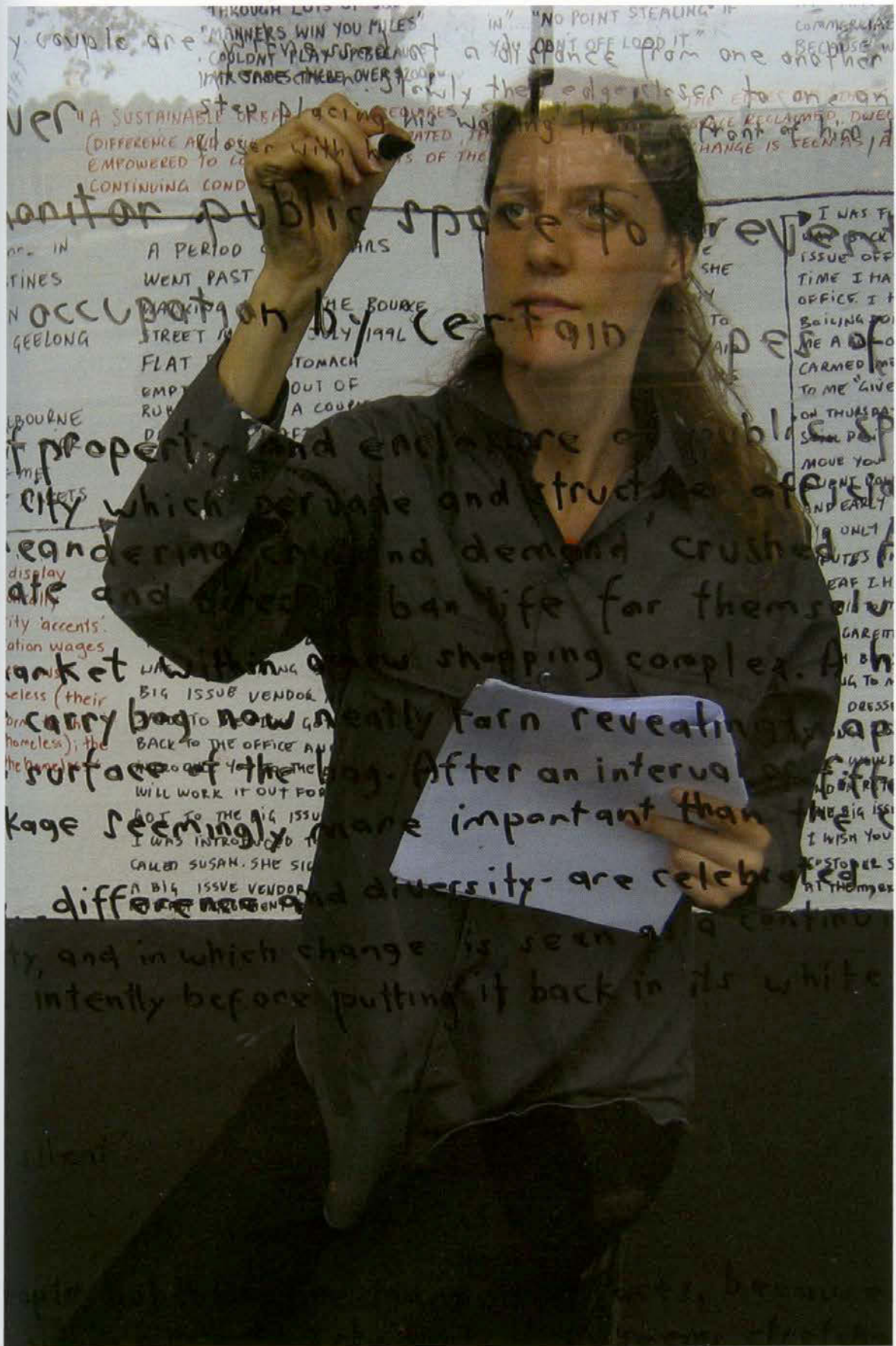
Language Tags, Bejing, 2002 (video still)

The Other [Inside], Delhi, 2003 (video still)

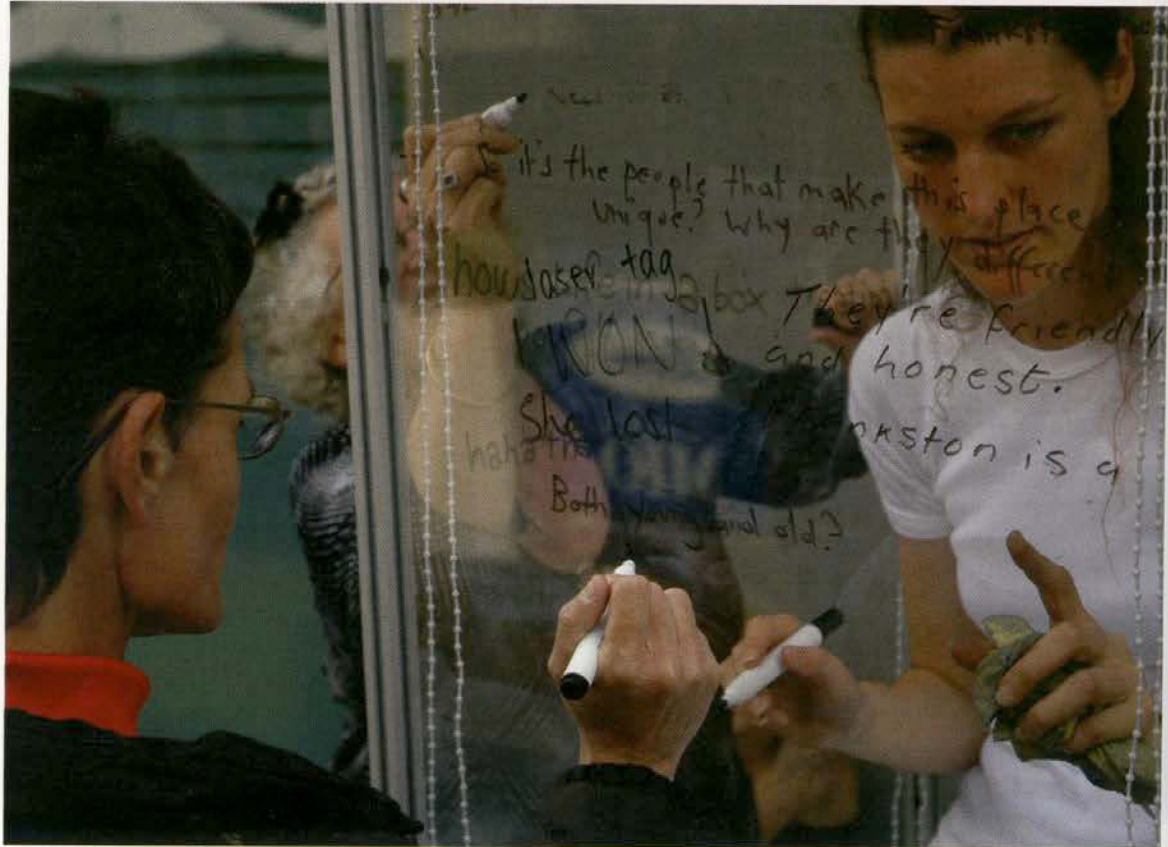*Street Stories 1*, 24Seven Gallery, Melbourne, 2006 © Catherine Acin

Street Stories 1, 24Seven Gallery, Melbourne, 2006 © Pram Pillai

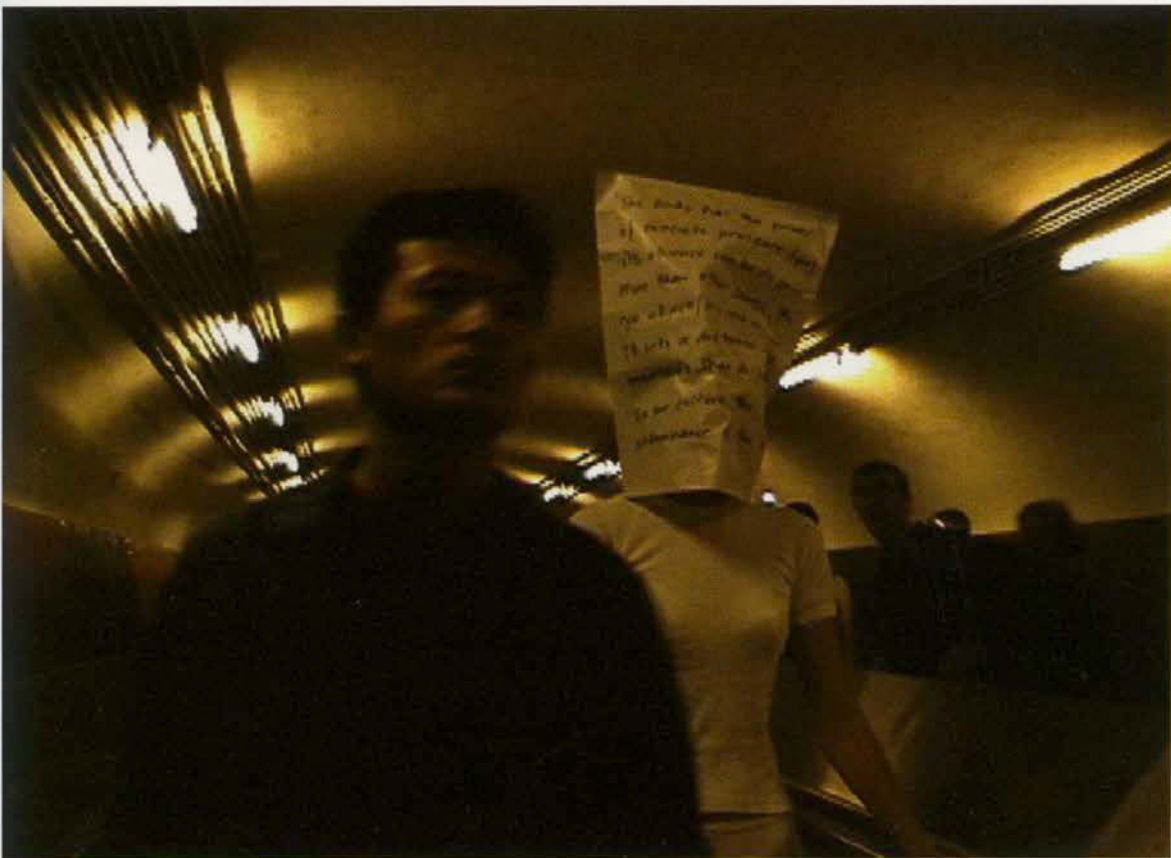*The Surveillance with Public Intent Vehicle,* Brisbane, 2007 © Louise Doble

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

PaperBag Talk, Paris, 2002 (video still)

PaperBag Talk, Paris, 2002 (video still)

CITYtalking, Melbourne City, 2006 © Greg Sims

CITYtalking, Melbourne City, 2006 © Greg Sims

CITYtalking, Melbourne City, 2006 © Greg Sims

Bin Bodies, Paris, 2002 (video still)

Subway Sense, New York, 2002 (video still)

homeless people and buskers took up residence on the research paper; a business owner offered a cup of tea encouraging the recording process to continue. Surveillance cameras, mounted on traffic lights nearby, soon focused on the project. The police arrived, telling of complaints, council regulations and threatening a possible arrest. Responding in silence, writing on a number of pieces of paper, the Action Researcher/Performer debated the content of her findings in order to validate her position to stay.

Two Perspectives, Sydney, 1999

Curious to know how many perspectives there could be about any one site, two Action Researcher/Performers placed two ten metre long pieces of paper along the same city footpath. Over a two-hour period they progressively recorded directly on the paper surface their surprisingly different observations for the public to read. Members of the public commented on the notations, and offered their own opinions from their experience, themselves inevitably being cast into the local and live script.

Public [Private] Living Spaces 1, Sydney, 2000 (front cover)

To better understand the changing nature of public space over extended durations of time, the Action Researcher/Performer took up silent residence in a phone booth for twenty-four hours. Recording in a notebook the dynamics of the local scene, these notations were then used to transform the architecture of the space over the research period. Numerous threats of violence were directed at the Action Researcher/Performer, by locals unable to accept the reason why she was spending such an extended period of time in that particular public realm. The project revealed how certain spaces demand particular codes of behaviour and conversation, and how people become public property when they locate themselves in a stationary manner within a public space for any length of time.

Public [Private] Living Spaces 2, Sydney, 2000 (page 102)

The Action Researcher/Performer spent an entire week in the shop-frontwindow of a disused tobacconist space with a 270-degree view of the

local area, at the entrance to Kings Cross railway station. She observed and recorded continuously. Locals and commuters knocked on the window to find out what was happening. The Action Researcher/Performer responded silently, by writing in reverse on the glass with a whiteboard marker. Crowds of people wanted to participate and have their say made public. Businessmen talked to buskers, street workers to students, and homeless people to academics. Whiteboard markers were distributed among the public so messages could be written on the outside of the window in response. The site was alive with debate—social, political, environmental. The most personal, the universal, the mundane, the profound—everyone had something to say. Suicide messages, love notes, repeat visits each day. Some people stayed for hours, long into the night, describing the scene as much more interesting than television. A homeless man wrote:

> *When you are on the streets, you can disappear yet still be visible. People tend to look through you, they are aware of your presence but avoid eye contact as this can be a prelude to direct verbal communication. In public space (for me) time generally just seems to have no relevance. It's either day or night, a particular meal time or just hungry, hardly anyone on the street wears a watch.*

Cross Conversation, Sydney, 2000 (page 101)

Conversations overheard in city public spaces were recorded by the Action Researcher/Performer and then rewritten onto individual pieces of paper, which were placed within small bottles filled with water and sealed with a cork. The Action Researcher/Performer then offered these preserved public narratives back to passing pedestrians on a busy inner city footpath.

Pedestrian Passages, Sydney, 2001

Three Action Researcher/Performers walked around the city, wearing portable whiteboards attached to their bodies. As they ventured into different public space environments they recorded on each other's boards what specific elements of difference and intrigue they had witnessed along

the way. The public read these ideas with interest, often also adding their own thoughts to the dynamic narrative, opening up each site to new conversations and debates about place.

Stranger Danger, Sydney, 2001

The Action Researcher/Performer was positioned within an isolating white cage located in the middle of a very busy inner city pedestrian thoroughfare. On the outside of the barrier signs were attached reading 'stranger danger'. The Action Researcher/Performer offered passing pedestrians lollies out of two white paper bags. In accepting the offer, interested passers-by were encouraged to engage in a discussion about the apparent strangeness of strangers. That is, the fear of 'the other', the person unknown or different to themselves, the passer-by in the city. The range of discussions between different members of the community exemplified the point as the Action Researcher/Performer revealed how these fears could be challenged and overcome through conversation.

Pedicab Passages, Beijing, 2002

In Beijing, the Action Researcher/Performer wrapped cycle rickshaws in white semi-transparent material and attached a series of candles inside. Local students were positioned within the canopy with a bottle of ink and a brush at hand. Other students took turns peddling the rickshaw around the city. The candles were lit, and over the course of the evening the students wrote in Mandarin directly onto the canopy material about their experience of living in Beijing. The rickshaws transformed into mobile narrative lanterns, inspiring a trail of interested pedestrians keen to read the development and outcome of the script.

Conversation Sticks, Beijing, 2002 (page 102)

Stationed at a disused food stall in a local Beijing market, the Action Researcher/Performer asked the public questions about their experience of the city. She did this by attaching on a stick numerous individual cards, each with a different Mandarin character, in a similar manner to skewering

pieces of meat. As the participanting locals took each card off the stick the questions were revealed and the conversation began between the Action Researcher/Performer and the participants.

Language Tags, Beijing, 2002 (page 103)

White cardboard tags with English and Mandarin words inscribed on them were progressively pinned onto the bodies of the Action Researcher/ Performers. As locals crowded around to read the accumulating narratives, they too became involved in the script, by having words and elements of the script attached to themselves as well. By the end of the story-telling process the Action Researcher/Performers and the participating locals were completely covered with an armoury of silent conversation.

Metro Insights, Paris, 2002

In a similar vain to buskers and beggars utilising the Paris Metro as a source of communication and enterprise, the Action Researcher/Performer sequentially revealed conversation cards to commuters traversing between carriages throughout the underground system of the city. While the Action Researcher/Performer remained silent during the progression of the narrative, commuters responded very enthusiastically, keen to engage with the Action Researcher/Performer and to continue the discussion as she exited the carriage.

Paperbag Talk, Paris, 2002 (page 107)

The Action Researcher/Performer wore large white paper bags over her head and positioned herself in a range of notable tourist sites, commuter zones and suburban precincts across the city. On the bags a variety of texts was inscribed, communicating theoretical and personal positions on the experience of the city. Silent, statue-like in her composure, the Action Researcher/Performer built up a reputation of appearing and then disappearing again day after day in new and repeated locations.

Bin Bodies, Paris, 2002 (page 110)

The ornate cast metal containers of public garbage bins in Paris have been removed by authorities to discourage the planting of terrorist bombs. Instead, garbage is now collected and exposed in luminous green plastic bags attached to metal circular frames on the footpath. For this particular project, the Action Researcher/Performer created figures out of the same green garbage bags and installed them on top of the bin frames across the city. Strangers, the down and out, and elite of Paris began to have conversations around and about these gene-like characters that appeared to have grown from the city refuse.

Subway Sense, New York, 2002 (page 110)

The rectilinear pattern of the iconic sidewalk ventilation grates of the New York City subway replicate the grid formation of the city's streets. The Action Researcher/Performer walked several streets of the city, noting down an image, conversation, or event at each intersection. These observations were then transcribed onto strips of paper, which were attached, fluttering in the air, to the metal ventilation grates, at positions corresponding to their experienced location within the grid of the city.

The Other [Inside], Delhi, 2003 (page 103)

In India on a busy street, an arm appeared through a small hole in an enclosed box, presenting conversation cards in English and Hindi to the throng. The cards introduced theoretical issues about life in the city and encouraged sometimes sympathetic, sometimes hostile conversations among the locals.

Street Stories 1, Melbourne, 24Seven Gallery, 2006 (pages 104/105)

Sellers of the street magazine *Big Issue* in Melbourne were invited into a large shop front window space (24Seven Gallery) to tell their stories. Overlays of text, theories of the city, interweaved with local encounters progressively mapped onto the glass and walls, became a flow chart of lives. The normally silent voices of the disenfranchised sellers, who experience

homelessness or long-term unemployment, formed a narrative of the city:

> *My family grew up in an ordinary working class suburb. After I finished school, I went into the insurance industry for thirteen years before getting sacked. In my life I only had two good friends. It was not because I was nasty or hard to get along with. Soon I will be moving into my own unit, I hope. I will then retire as a Big Issue vendor. Everyone has got to die.*

Street Stories 2 – Doing the Rounds, Sydney, 2006-2007

An LED screen was installed on the outside of the Rough Edges Community Centre in Kings Cross, so the public could gain insights into the extraordinary social history, the hidden narratives of that community. The public stopped and engaged with the centre and its clients. Screens have since been installed in a number of other homeless shelters around Sydney. One woman's story:

> *Kings Cross is where I used to live, where I used to shoot up and work. It was not the best time of my life, far from it. I wish I could change how I got here but I cannot. My family said I was a mistake and so I was kicked out when I was twelve years old, so I had to make my own way. Homelessness is not something that anybody wants and I would never want it again.*

CITYtalking, Melbourne, City of Melbourne Council, 2006

(pages 108/109, back cover)

Supported by the City of Melbourne Council Laneways Commission, a mobile booth for urban conversations was transported across the city of Melbourne. The booth was set up so that the Action Researcher/ Performer, a laptop and an intercom system were positioned on one side, and a member of the public engaged in a conversation with the Action Researcher/Performer on the other side. As the conversations unfolded, they were typed into the laptop and sent to LED screens on the outside of the booth for passing pedestrians to read:

> *My experience is that nobody wants to know, none of the ruling class wants to know. People are dying in the gutter and it is hidden. I am lucky*

to be here, to have survived and now be able to speak about it. I need a voice. I am so distressed. I do not know how I have the strength to walk half the time. They take away your personality.

Found in Translation, Sydney, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, 2007

A second mobile booth, more theatre-like, was set up in Sydney, utilising uniformly grey painted soft toys to voice the stories of the homeless in the city:

In my life a lot of important things have happened. Life has been quite confusing. I've had four near death experiences. That is, being diagnosed dead and being brought back to life. A particular incident occurred to me when I got trapped in a house with a bike club and they ended up beating me up and putting me in a boot of a car. To realise how finite our lives are, it gave me a new appreciation for living.

The Surveillance with Public Intent Vehicle, Sydney [Artspace, 'Publicity', Performance Space, 'Nighttime #3'], Brisbane [Office for Seniors, Department of Communities, QLD Government], Adelaide [CACSA, 'Publicity'], Gosford [Brown's Cows Art Projects], Frankston [White Street Project, Frankston City Council], 2007 (page 106)

A third, transparent mobile booth toured to different locations around Australia. The Action Researcher/Performer was enclosed within the cubic vehicle, which enabled written communication/urban conversations to occur around her on all four Perspex surfaces. In a project commissioned by the Queensland Government, Department of Communities, Office for Seniors, the Action Researcher/Performer was asked to generate discussion and explore public perceptions about ageing and in particular to examine common myths and misconceptions about older people. A female tourist in her 20s from England had this to say:

I think a lot of people don't realise that old people have experienced feelings and emotions just like our own all their lives. It seems they are just put in a box. From falling in love, breaking up, war, raising children—all these things make them wiser than us. I only have one grandparent, she is 87

years old, blind and almost deaf and lives alone. She doesn't let this bring her down as she has her family.

These Action Research/Performance projects highlight a range of techniques that can be utilised to generate new means of communication between members of the public. They also provide a series of methodologies that can be used as a tool to understand better the variety of experiences individuals have with their city. Many of these test scenarios have continued to provide a dynamic forum for discussion in public spaces between members of the community who would otherwise have little opportunity to express themselves or share their ideas, feelings, and beliefs with others. What has been shown through these projects is that the qualitative experience of public space certainly differs from site to site and from individual to individual; and it is this multitude of variables that has inspired the development of the projects in the first place, to better understand and critically analyse the ways in which cities are designed now and into the future.

Note: Some of the images are video stills, hence their reduced quality in print.

ASTRA HOWARD is an Action Researcher/Performer working predominantly within public city spaces. She has completed a PhD centred on facilitating communication via performance-based interventions. Her most recent solo works have been commissioned by the City of Melbourne, the Frankston City Council and the Queensland Department of Communities. Astra also works in a crisis accommodation centre in Sydney, designing and facilitating educational programs and professional services for the homeless, marginalised and disadvantaged community.

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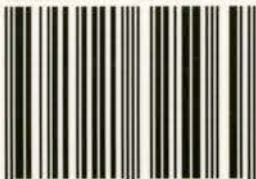mike lubow
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