The limits of sociability: An exploration of the possibilities and pitfalls of participatory art

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Abstract

This thesis explores the possibilities and pitfalls involved in engaging viewer participation in art. Increasingly, many artists work in a relational and socially engaged manner, requiring the involvement and activation of the public. Yet too often, artists assume that an open call for participation will automatically result in equality and inclusion, as they instrumentalise art to create new, emancipatory social relations. I outline how critics such as Claire Bishop, however, have challenged these assumptions of openness and emancipation, exposing the aesthetic and political limitations of participatory work.

I describe how theorists Miwon Kwon, Rosalyn Deutsche and Bishop, have looked to recent theories of radical and plural democracy, particularly Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's concept of antagonism, to reveal the political shortcomings of much socially engaged art. In citing this theory, Kwon, Deutsche and Bishop urge for a more sophisticated understanding of concepts like “democracy” and “community”, that recognises conflict and friction as fundamental aspects of social relations. In doing so, they advocate a more disruptive approach to socially engaged and participatory practices.

I finish this thesis by explaining how these new theoretical underpinnings have impacted my art practice, while describing the suite of seven participatory projects I have developed for Masters. In doing so, I elucidate a number of aesthetic, political and ethical questions that have arisen during the practice-based component of this research, which are central to ongoing discussions about participatory art for both gallery and site-specific contexts.

Namely, I establish how I have sought to reconsider the ways in which I engage people and thematise the limits of participation and sociability in my artwork. By acknowledging that the selection and creation of a group of participants can produce an inability to connect and an inadvertent exclusion, I have attempted to allow for disconnection, fragmentation, friction and lack of interest to have an impact on the outcome of my participatory works. As such, failed moments of connection are as integral to the work, as are its instances of surprising engagement.
I hereby certify that, except where due acknowledgement has been made to other material, the research paper and exhibition submitted to fulfil requirements for the degree of M. Fine Art (Research) VCA comprise only my original work.

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Amy Spiers

7 November 2011
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Introduction

This thesis explores the possibilities and pitfalls involved in engaging viewer participation in art. It takes as its starting point the emerging field of socially engaged practice, here in Australia and internationally, and examines a particular tendency to instrumentalise art to create positive and emancipatory social relations. Informed by the criticisms of this field of art by critics such as Claire Bishop, I seek to expose the political and aesthetic limitations of ameliorative, participatory strategies. I feel this investigation is especially urgent as the quality of relationships produced by socially engaged art is rarely interrogated or questioned, particularly in Australia. In doing so, I have reconsidered the ways in which I engage people and attempted to thematise the limits of participation in my art.

In Chapter One, I offer an account of the League of Resonance, a participatory art project that was presented recently in Melbourne. I use this example both because this work is fairly characteristic of Australian socially engaged art, and because it can be used to elucidate a crucial misgiving I have about this type of work: namely, that an open call for participation does not automatically result in equality and inclusiveness, despite the fact that this is often assumed by the artists and arts organisations who promote it.

Chapter Two traces the rise of a “social turn” in contemporary art, which has eventuated in the “skill set” of art being increasingly marshalled to effect social change. I discuss Creative Time’s Living As Form exhibition, which opened in New York, in September 2011, and which showcases some of the most politically overt and didactic examples of socially engaged art. I consider this turn by discussing two influential champions of this type of work: Nicholas Bourriaud, writer of Relational Aesthetics, and Grant Kester, who advocates a community-based, “dialogic” art in his book Conversation Pieces.

Chapter Three starts with an account of a “social turn” in my own art practice and then outlines the basis of my misgivings towards socially ameliorative art projects. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to a crucial theoretical turning point in my research, which derives from reading Claire Bishop's trenchant critiques of relational and socially engaged art. This has led to a close engagement with recent theories of radical and plural democracy, particularly those of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. I outline how their work on antagonism has been adopted by theorists such as Miwon Kwon, Rosalyn Deutsche and Bishop, in order to reveal the political shortcomings of much socially engaged art.

Finally, Chapter Four explains how these new theoretical underpinnings have impacted my art practice. In doing so, I describe the difficulty I have had in pursuing Bishop's idea of an “antagonistic aesthetics” in the context of The University of Melbourne, which has required my participatory projects meet restrictive ethical requirements. I complete this chapter by outlining the conceptual and formal decisions that have informed the suite of seven participatory art projects I have developed during Masters.
Chapter One.

Making friends: how inclusive is an open call-out?

*It's not easy to sell friendship.*

– Sarah Rodigari

*League Of Resonance* was an ambitious, participatory art project presented in Melbourne, early in 2011. It is a characteristic example of an emerging field of socially engaged art practice that seeks to engage with specific urban sites by inviting the participation of the people who pass through them. For this reason, I begin this chapter with a discussion of *League Of Resonance*, in order to provide a concrete, practice-based example that will become a reference point for theoretical arguments I make later in this thesis.

Specifically, this first chapter discusses a common pitfall in socially engaged projects. Many artists working in this field, including myself, find their projects receive a lack of engagement from audiences beyond the usual groups of art-going audiences. Despite good intentions to attract participants from the wider public, often the best efforts by artists fail. It seems that the particular “skill set” of a participatory artist requires charming, cajoling, arm-twisting and coercing “ordinary” people to get involved in your project. After dedicating six years to making participatory work, I have begun to question whether this is the best way to engage people in art. Despite frequent assumptions that it does, it seems to me that an open call for participation rarely results in an equal representation of a site or community.

A commission

Artists Sarah Rodigari, Jess Oliveri and Jason Maling were in residence at the intersection of Elizabeth and Flinders Streets, Melbourne from December 2010 to April 2011. Commissioned by City of Melbourne Council, they were asked to creatively respond to the area as it was considered by the Council to have a “bad vibe”. Or to put it in City Council speak:

> The intention of the project is to appoint artists as an alternative method for Council to engage with the city night experience and explore diverse experiences and views. The artistic outcomes aim to provide a counterpoint to late night culture, and is designed to activate the space with positivity, romance and humour and to create a softer alternative to an area that is quickly gaining a reputation for the inverse.²

Rodigari, Maling and Oliveri’s “softer alternative” manifested in the project the *League of Resonance*, a series of gentle and playful interventions that aimed to directly and meaningfully

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¹ Rodigari, in conversation with the author, February 2011.
engage with the space and the people that move through it. As one *League* participant describes in her blog, “Jason and Jess explained how the project aimed to take seriously the idea of an area having a ‘bad vibe’ and their desire to investigate all the components of this area’s vibe”. With an upbeat and whimsical sensibility, the *League*’s website explains how they aimed to uncover “the intangible and barely perceptible” and tune into, collect and combine “the resonance of individuals: their stories, perceptions and rituals”.

One tactic they employed to encourage people to do this was to take them out on dates, a convivial strategy for collecting the stories and experiences embedded in the space. Participants were sourced through word of mouth, their website and a one-page publication produced by the *League* and distributed at the intersection, available in three editions, called *This Is Townend*. Up until March 18th, anyone who had even a passing connection with the intersection was welcomed to get friendly with the *League*. In *This Is Townend*#2 they wrote:

> If you live, work, or pass through this area please contact us. We would like to meet you, listen to your thoughts and opinions about this place. We’ll take you out for a coffee, lunch or dinner. We’ll go for a walk, and share stories about this area. The League of Resonance is just a good old-fashioned way of trying to make friends in this crazy city.

### My date

In late February, I went on a date with the *League*. Although I had only the most minor association with the site – I have caught the number 19 tram home to Brunswick and eaten a hot dog at Walker’s Donuts on occasion – Rodigari had asked me to come along as her friend and as a fellow artist interested in site-specific and participatory practices.

We met one evening outside Flinders Street Station, by two of the city’s last remaining black-and-white chemical processing photo booths. Smelling like piss and traffic, this site also conveniently faces right on to the intersection of Elizabeth and Flinders Streets. In addition to Rodigari, my date companions were Rodigari’s video camera-wielding assistant, Emma Williamson, and Melbourne-based video artist, Salote Tawale. Rodigari explained that it was the usual habit of the *League* to have singular encounters, but as Tawale, Rodigari and myself were already pals, she had seized the opportunity to have a “double date”.

Our date began with a choice: where to eat? Dinner would be paid for by the *League*, but on the condition that Tawale and I limited our eating options to the immediate area surrounding the intersection. This left us with an unappealing list of fast food outlets. We chose Pepperoni’s because, as Rodigari sagely suggested, it was one of the few places where you could also get a beer.

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Pepperoni’s is a place where the city’s late night drinkers go to buy slices of greasy pizza before heading home. It’s not a place you usually eat at sober. As Tawale and I tucked into our eating “experiences” among some depressive, unhealthy-looking diners – Tawale describing our meals as something out of *Gordon Ramsay’s Kitchen Nightmares* – Rodigari explained the rest of the night’s activities.

Pulling out an impressive display of *League of Resonance*-branded stationery, we were told that following our dinner we could go for a stroll around the block. During our walk we were asked to tell Rodigari any associations or points of interest we may have with the space, and she would note them down on an A5 map of the area. As mentioned, however, my experience of the area was limited and so my contributions to Rodigari’s map were scant. Tawale too had little to offer beyond tales of late night pizza devouring and running for trams and trains at the intersection. So it was left up to Rodigari and Oliveri – who joined us after our meal – to play the role of tour guides and to regale us with tidbits of information they had gleaned from their research and encounters with people at the intersection.

A walk down a stretch of Elizabeth Street revealed to us an overlooked 1950s mural of clinking glasses, towering above the 7-Eleven and the smallest shop in Australia – a watch repair stall where customers placed orders via a window that opened onto the street. Down alleyways off Flinders Lane we were offered the chance to go fossicking for kosher bakery treats in Glick’s dumpster bins and shown a line of chewing gum that one of the suited professionals had begun during his smoko breaks. Rodigari invited us to add to the line with a piece of gum she had given us after dinner. Walking back towards our starting point, Rodigari shone a dolphin torch to help us spot rats that scurried in the open by Flinders Street Station and pointed out the glamorous Rendezvous Hotel. It seemed out of place in a street with rodents and Dreams Gentleman’s Club. Opposite, we were shown some underground public toilets that had been concreted over to deter a gay beat that allegedly once existed there.

After a pleasant enough walk around the block, we found ourselves back at the photo booths. Despite contributing very little to Rodigari and Oliveri’s research, Tawale and I had still earned ourselves the chance to become members of the *League*. Membership, it was explained, involved receiving our very own membership card that detailed our personal connection to the intersection on the back. At a later date, we could attend a Swap Meet to meet other *League* members, collect the whole set of membership cards and exchange stories about the intersection.

Accepting the invitation, Tawale and I were both asked to participate in a kind of initiation process. Firstly we listened to Oliveri sing a song from the Victorian Railway Institute – a men’s club with Masonic overtones who had gathered in halls above Flinders Street Station in the early 1900s – which, I supposed, was an example of a “resonance” they had found at the site. Next, we had our pictures taken in the photo booth, to be printed on our membership card. Finally, we were asked to hum a tune into a voice recorder. It was explained that any tune was appropriate, so long as it was associated with what we felt was the resonance of the intersection. This last request seemed
baffling and nebulous, but taking inspiration from a nearby patch of graffiti that depicted a dinosaur with a speech bubble that said “So Lonely,” I obediently hummed the chorus of The Police’s song of the same name and had my photo taken.

An experimental project

At an intersection that contains a busy tram terminus and train station, a unique “pedestrian scramble” traffic crossing, adult bookshops and fast food outlets, the League responded to their City of Melbourne brief by attempting to slow down the impersonal rush of human foot traffic and urging people to look, listen and engage more attentively with their surroundings. They highlighted the overlooked and made conscious our unexamined habits and routines in the area.

I could not help feeling, however, that my date was an experience that was akin to window shopping. I was not given any genuine or thought-provoking engagement with the “vibe” of the place or the people that move through it, beyond a superficial viewing of points of interest. It occurred to me that Tawale and I were like tourists who only had other tourists, Rodigari and Oliveri, to show us around. The date gave us little opportunity to renew our impressions of the area.

As socially engaged and participatory art of this type is arguably new and experimental, it is difficult to find an adequate criteria for measuring its success. To some degree, the project was laudable. It opened up the space for non-object, process-based, site-specific practices to be supported as legitimate public art activities by city councils. It was a worthy experiment that emerged and developed over time. Although there were, I understand, occasional tensions and uneasy compromises between council desires and artistic control – which is discussed with detail in an essay by Lucas Ihlein, commissioned by the League6 – the City of Melbourne Art and Participation program and the League of Resonance artistic team should be commended for attempting such a project. As Ihlein points out: “The working methods which underlie a project like this are not widely understood. This is hardly surprising – the artists of the League employ a set of processes which are still relatively novel additions to the toolbox of contemporary art”.7

A feel-good methodology

I want to begin focusing on the League’s chosen strategy to engage participants – making friends and going on dates – with a couple of crucial observations. Firstly, the League of Resonance was a response to an agenda in the City of Melbourne’s commission, which as Lucas suggests, sought to instrumentalise art as a tool for social change at the intersection. The effect of this was, in part, to predetermine the tone of the project and prevent the League artists from enjoying complete creative autonomy. It is likely that the Council objectives which directed the project “to activate the space with positivity, romance and humour,” also obliged the League to employ a feel-good and ameliorative methodology.

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7 Ibid.
Yet, is it possible that the *League's* friendly and participatory model actually had the effect of excluding people? It is worth noting that a large proportion of the seventy members accrued by the *League* over three months were sourced from the *League* artists’ friends, family and interested members of the arts community. Which leads to the vital question: what vibes were collected during the project? Whose resonance recorded? Did *League of Resonance* only succeed in representing the area via the "insights" of just those who had an inclination to participate – a like-minded group of art lovers?

**The limits of sociability**

From my discussions with Rodigari, following my “date”, I got the impression that the *League of Resonance* did not have very much success in sourcing participants on the intersection. This might come as a surprise – who would turn down a free meal and the chance to chin wag with some amicable artists? Yet, Rodigari describes the experience of trying to involve people on the intersection as a harrowing cold-calling task that was as challenging as a Mormon’s attempt to peddle God to passers-by. In a revealing statement she claimed: “It’s not easy to sell friendship”.

Rodigari explained that it was important for the *League* to involve people who would be meaningfully engaged and invested in the project – an approach that could account for the composition of the *League*’s members. This does make sense if you require some time commitment to the artistic activities, however, I would argue that this is a big ask in an area that has been singled out for its “bad vibe”. In a space like the Elizabeth and Flinders Street intersection there is no sense of pride in the surroundings, no desire for local connectedness. It is a transitory point between more important destinations, with little reason to linger, as is demonstrated by all the fast food that is available. As *League* Member no. 52, Rakesh, is quoted as saying on the back of his *League* card, “This is a place where people just get on with their jobs, you don’t really talk to each other here”.

If the aim of *League of Resonance* was to fully represent the site, then perhaps “making friends” and going on “dates” may not have been the most suitable strategy to employ. To illuminate my point further I would like to offer another example of a participatory project that struggled to attract a plurality and diversity of participants. Some years ago, I developed the project, *Agents of Proximity*, for the 2008 Next Wave Festival with writer Victoria Stead. A localised, artist-run travel service based in the Melbourne suburb of Brunswick, *Agents of Proximity*, like *League of Resonance* aimed to explore urban space via the stories and experiences of the people who shared it. It was “an exploration of the ways in which the rituals and mindsets associated with travel can be applied to the spaces we inhabit, the streets we walk down daily, the places that we think we know”.

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8 Rodigari, in conversation with the author, February 2011.
9 “Rakesh” quoted in *League of Resonance: Swap Meet*. A publication and set of trading cards produced for the occasion of the *League of Resonance’s* Swap Meet on April 13, 2011.
In the months leading up to Next Wave, *Agents of Proximity* took people from Brunswick on travels within their own neighbourhood. These tours usually involved two participants at a time, with one person taking the other to their personal sites of significance in Brunswick. We documented the encounters through a series of postcards and the production of the publication, *Brunswick: A Travel Guide*, which we launched during Next Wave.

Our starting point was our curiosity for the area – which we both called home – and a desire to explore it in ways that moved outside the social circles and circuits of bars and cafes in which we spent our time. We specifically wanted to engage with people and places who were not usually part of our Brunswick experience, and prompt others to do the same. We tried a number of ways to attract participants, beginning with people we already knew and spreading out via word of mouth, posters and flyers. At the end of the project, however, Victoria and I both felt we had only marginal success in attracting participants. Victoria reflected on this in an essay that accompanied our guide:

> It’s uncertain to what extent we succeeded in what we set out to do. In trying to traverse the myriad subjective experiences of this place where we live, the experiment we initiated was an ambitious one, perhaps more so than we realised when we began. After months of tramping through our suburb searching for participants, we have not succeeded in moving as far beyond our own worlds as we had hoped to do. Negotiating points of disconnect, though, is an unavoidable part of navigating the plurality of shared space. Tensions and disjunctures are always present within such spaces, essential even [...] One night, many months ago we got talking to two men at the RSL on Sydney Rd. We were putting up fliers on the lamp post near the balcony where they were standing with their beers. They wanted to know what we were doing and we started trying to explain. They were bemused, mildly intrigued, but ultimately had no interest in participating in our “wanky art shit”. They did, however, talk to us at length about their experiences of Brunswick over the span of several decades [...] We would have loved to have initiated a tour led by those men, through the Brunswick they knew. But ultimately they had better things to do than indulge us in our artistic meanderings, and we couldn’t really blame them. If nothing else, the fact they didn’t participate is testament to the limitations of our own experience; our own capacity to connect beyond that which we know.¹¹

We wanted to open up possibilities for individual people to re-view and recreate the spaces in which they move. It was a nice idea, but only for people who were interested in doing so – those people who were like-minded and interested in “wanky art shit”. As Victoria observed, the barriers to human connection run deeper than the lack of opportunities to connect: “They are cultural,

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social, linguistic, emotional, aesthetic. Some of them are imposed; others are created and maintained through choice”.\textsuperscript{12}

**Supressing disconnect**

Perhaps, if the success of projects such as *League of Resonance* and *Agents of Proximity* is to be judged on the participation of an extensive number and range of people, it could be argued that more time, or perhaps more effective cajoling, would produce a "better" work. Spending longer periods in the site talking with the people who live, work and play there, may have allowed the trust and interest of a diverse range of participants to be gained. It could be argued, too, that the projects’ design and methodology could have been more attuned and relevant to the targeted sites.

The more interesting conclusion, however, is that artists – as well as funding bodies and arts organisations – should not assume that an open call for participation automatically results in inclusiveness, openness or an equal representation of a site or community. In fact these methodologies often attract a certain type of person – a like-minded coterie of individuals with a common interest in art and social engagement. As a result, the selection and creation of a group of participants necessarily involves an inability to connect and inadvertent exclusion. This is as much a part of a participatory work as its moments of surprising engagement.

This paradox provokes a specific and crucial concern. It is my feeling that many participatory projects, including a number of my own works, only structure into their methodologies the experience of connecting. They document just those people who were comfortable and eager to participate – and then attempt to claim that these contributions are a sufficient representation of a “vibe” or area.

I would argue that socially engaged works, such as *League of Resonance* and *Agents of Proximity*, essentially have their outcome circumscribed in advance. This is because they seek out positive intersubjective encounters that attempt to affirm an ideal about community – advocated by the artist – that is based on an imagined goal of a harmonious, socially inclusive society, without tension or division. As a result, what does not rate a mention are the points of disconnect – which are, arguably, as (if not more) thought-provoking and unpredictable as the moments of engagement facilitated by the work. Surely it is these dead ends and failed instances of connection that tell you a more complex and interesting story about people and places?

Although the task of involving participation in artworks is an interesting one, I argue that artists should engage people with greater sophistication. The exclusions and divisions that are inherent in any social grouping should be thematised in the work – allowing for disconnection, fragmentation, friction and lack of interest to have an impact on project outcomes. These problems outlined here will be addressed in more depth in Chapter Three and Four. In the next chapter, however, I will trace the origins of socially engaged practice and the rise of an ethical trend in contemporary art.

\textsuperscript{12} Stead, “Small Encounters in Suburbia”. 
Chapter Two.

A Social Turn: the rise of socially engaged art

*I don’t want an art that points at a thing, I want an art that is the thing.*
– Tania Bruguera

*I went from being an artist that makes things to being an artist that makes things happen.*
– Jeremy Deller

League of Resonance and Agents of Proximity are just two project examples of a wider “social turn” in contemporary art. This turn is characterised by art projects that emphasise participation, dialogue and community engagement to activate the public and address a broad range of social issues. A distinctive trend that is on the rise here in Australia and internationally, it goes under a variety of names, such as socially engaged, relational, participatory and community-based art. Critics, such as Grant Kester and Claire Bishop, have suggested that this field of socially collaborative work constitutes the avant garde movement of our day. These works take a variety of forms, some more politically overt than others, however what they all have in common is that they are artistic attempts to offer new social models of being and living together.

It may be easy for socially engaged work to go largely unnoticed by the greater part of the Australian art world, as few of our major arts and academic institutions support the development and presentation of this mode of work – one notable exception is the biennial Next Wave Festival. Despite this, there is an increasing number of artists working in this manner and their works appear with increasing regularity in artist-run spaces and arts festivals across Australia. Possibly fuelling this increase is the significant traction that socially engaged practices have earned in the United States, where numerous exhibitions and university courses are devoted to this emerging field of practice.

Living As Form

A comprehensive demonstration of the sheer number and diversity of international projects that work in this mode was recently offered by Living As Form, a large-scale survey exhibition of socially engaged art from the last twenty years, that opened in New York in September, 2011. Organised by Creative Time, a New York-based organisation that commissions and presents public arts projects, Living As Form is an unprecedented exhibition that features documentation from over 100 projects, and is accompanied by an online archive that details over 350 cultural practices that fall within this expanded field of art.

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13 Bruguera quoted in a video created by Creative Time for the exhibition *Living As Form: Socially Engaged Art from the Last 20 Years*, http://vimeo.com/28065306.
14 Deller quoted in ibid.
Included in this exhibition is work by recognised artists such as Tania Bruguera, Francis Alÿs and Phil Collins, as well as lesser known creative endeavours by communities and activist collectives. The exhibition is deliberately provocative, with many of the featured projects posing a significant challenge to accepted modes of artistic production. Bringing together a plethora of pursuits that include social events, publications, workshops and urban interventions, many of the "works" in Living As Form, seem almost unable to be differentiated from the everyday, "non-art" activities of community groups or grass-roots social movements.

To provide a sense of the extent to which some socially engaged projects distort the definitions of art and activism in Living As Form, I will briefly describe two examples favoured by the exhibition’s Chief Curator, Nato Thompson.16 Firstly, The Roof Is On Fire (1994), a project initiated by artists Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby and Chris Johnson in Oakland, California, brought together 220 mostly Latino and African American teenagers, who represented social groups that have been portrayed as “problem youth” in the media. Sitting in 100 parked cars on a rooftop, the teenagers enacted a series of improvisational dialogues that sought to challenge stereotypes about their lives for an adult audience that included journalists and police. Another project, Palas por Pistolas (2008) by artist Pedro Reyes, collected 1,527 guns from people in Culiacan, Mexico – a city rife with crime related to the drug trade – and melted them down to make 1,527 shovels that were used to plant trees in the neighbourhood.17 Thompson, in the curatorial statement for the exhibition, defends the social goals of these practices – even if they falter as art per se – by stating:

[...] the projects themselves defy easy categorisation, and raise contradictions regarding issues of authorship, and traditional notions of art. In fact, they often have more in common with guerrilla and urban gardens, alternative economic and education experiments, and civic-minded, nonprofit organizations. Such efforts might not be described as artworks, but their collaborative spirit, investment in community engagement, and deployment of cultural programs as part of their operations compel us to consider what they do, not who they say they are [...] Nonetheless, we use the sheer scale, geographic range, and interdisciplinary nature of the work to illustrate that the skill sets of art are now among a series of complex social organizational methods meant to transform our world.18

If Living As Form is anything to go by, it seems that for over twenty years now an increasing number of artists have sought innovative models to activate and engage the public, with the hope of "transforming our world”. Wrestling art from its perceived privileged and elitist sphere and, instead, fusing it with "life", socially engaged art places an emphasis on "use" value rather than detached artistic contemplation. Challenging conventional artist-viewer relationships, socially engaged


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practices have become synonymous with an optimistic, even moralistic, notion that art can be marshaled to tackle wider social issues and create emancipatory social relations.

**Relational and Dialogic Aesthetics**

Traditional art criticism has had difficulty describing these new models of artistic activity, which blend strategies from theatre, community outreach, activism and art. Driven by process, context and duration, these works often involve ephemeral events and communicative interactions, instead of the production of an object. For this reason, much socially engaged work resists conventional exhibition display and evades the usual visual and formal readings of a work of art.

Champions of this new breed of politically engaged, socially-mindful work have made efforts to define and legitimate these practices by redefining the criteria with which we judge art. Notably in the late 1990s, Nicolas Bourriaud attempted to describe the rise of practices in Europe that were based on communication and exchange in his slight but seminal text *Relational Aesthetics* (2002).

Coining the term “relational art” to describe works such as Rirkrit Tiravanija’s pad thai dinners in the gallery, Bourriaud sought to define in *Relational Aesthetics* “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space”. In other words, rather than an artwork being a one-to-one encounter between a viewer and an object, relational art produced intersubjective encounters, where people could meet and come together to elaborate meaning collectively. Bourriaud argued that the sphere of human relations, for instance “meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality”, had become “fully-fledged artistic ‘forms’”, a valid aesthetic material and medium of art.

At the core of relational art was a political intent; the idea that “the invention of models of sociability” in artworks could help us learn “to inhabit the world in a better way”. It was Bourriaud’s conviction that relational artworks could disrupt capitalist systems of exchange by creating harmonious “micro-utopias” in the space of the gallery. In a characteristically idealistic tone, Bourriaud wrote, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist”. Bourriaud considered the art exhibition to be particularly well positioned to operate this way as it is “a place that produces a specific sociability” and “tightens the space of relations, unlike TV and literature which refer people to his or her space of private consumption”.

Another theorist who has sought to redefine the terms with which we understand the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange is Grant Kester. In *Conversation Pieces: Community and*  

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20 Ibid., 28.  
21 Ibid.  
22 Ibid., 13.  
23 Ibid.  
24 Ibid., 15-16.
Communication in Modern Art (2004), another key text for socially engaged art, Kester outlines his concept of a “dialogic art”. Urging us to consider conversation and dialogue themselves as fundamentally aesthetic, in Conversation Pieces Kester attempted to develop “a new aesthetic and theoretical paradigm of the work of art as a process – a locus of discursive exchange and negotiation”.\textsuperscript{25}

Kester echoes Bourriaud when he calls for an art practice that creates convivial social encounters between groups of people, stating “we are all too familiar with the ways in which communication can fail [...] what we urgently need are models for how it can succeed”.\textsuperscript{26} He differs from Bourriaud, however, in his support for collaborative encounters and conversations that are more politically overt. He advocates an art that takes place “among diverse communities [...] well beyond the institutional confines of the gallery or museum”\textsuperscript{27} and grounds dialogical aesthetics in an ethics of respect and empowerment, where the artist should avoid occupying a position of creative mastery.

Despite these differences, what these and other supporters of socially engaged art share is a belief that art can serve an emancipatory social function that re-humanises and re-connects a society rendered atomized and alienated by the forces of capitalism. These tendencies have been given a historical context by art historian, curator and critic Claire Bishop, who suggests “it is tempting to date the rise in visibility of these practices to the early 1990s, when the fall of Communism deprived the Left of the last vestiges of the revolution that had once linked political and aesthetic radicalism”.\textsuperscript{28} Bereft of a radical “left political imaginary” to pin their hopes on, artists interested in ethical, social transformation are forced to experiment with new models of living and create solutions to society’s ills.\textsuperscript{29}

In her essay “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” (2004), Bishop also frames the rise of relational art as a response to the virtual relationships of the Internet and globalization, “which on the one hand have prompted a desire for more physical and face-to-face interaction between people, while on the other have inspired artists to adopt a do-it-yourself (DIY) approach and model their own ‘possible universes’”.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{25} Kester, Conversation Pieces, 12.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 9-9.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{28} Bishop, “The Social Turn”, 179.
\textsuperscript{29} Bishop touches on this point in her talk for Living As Form presented by Creative Time on 18 May, 2011: “Participation and Spectacle: Where Are We Now?”, http://vimeo.com/24193060
\textsuperscript{30} Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, 54.
Chapter Three.
Claire Bishop and Antagonism: A crucial theoretical turning point

Since I’ve been paying attention, it’s become incredibly obvious how few meaningful questions people ask each other. I recommend that people try a little harder. How much do you really know about the people who you encounter on a daily basis? Try asking these people what they really care about. Show them that you are truly interested. Perhaps it will rub off on them, and they will ask you a question back. Whole complex conversations might ensue. You’ll learn things from each other, trust and honesty could develop – the world (and the art world with it) might become a better place.

– Harrell Fletcher31

All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that’s more social, more collaborative, and more real than art.

– Dan Graham32

When I began Masters I was a “devotee” of the socially engaged art described in Chapter Two. The development of this interest in my own art practice started in 2005. During the year of my Bachelor of Fine Art - Honours studies, when my artistic career had been exclusively photographic, I was made aware of relational practices as I had began photographing strangers who I found through posters and leaflets which I used to advertise for portraiture subjects. As a new resident of Melbourne, having moved to study at VCA from Hobart, I found the encounters enabled by my camera revelatory and liberating. I began to realise that my function as an artist could develop into that of a facilitator and producer of connections and relationships. During that year, I learned two fundamental lessons: firstly, the title of “artist” grants a certain licence to challenge social norms, interfere, and unsettle the familiar; and secondly, I can use this privilege to create – or at least test the possibility for – experiences and moments of interaction which might otherwise go unrealised.

This discovery was the prompt for my move away from photography, towards a relational practice that created situations and spaces that may exist outside the usual habits and patterns of social interaction. Essentially I wanted to share my licence as an artist to act out, and give agency for others to do the same. As a result, I devised The Photobooth Project for Melbourne Fringe 2006. This was my first participatory work. It involved a makeshift version of a traditional photo booth in which people could have their photo taken, but with one catch: they had to be photographed together with someone they did not know. I argued at the time, that in a political climate anxious about terrorism, which urged suspicion and fear of strangers, my photo booth encouraged people to reject their customary paranoia in favour of making rare and significant contact with diverse individuals. The work constituted an intervention and rupture in public space that had the potential to remedy people’s feelings of alienation and articulate their desire to be more involved and closer to others.

32 Graham quoted in “The Social Turn”, 178.
Following on from this project I created *Agents of Proximity* with Victoria Stead, mentioned in Chapter One. *Agents of Proximity* also set out to facilitate encounters between disparate people. Specifically, it attempted to engage with plurality and difference in our neighbourhood, and help to address our own longing – and perhaps the longing of others – for a closer-knit community. The work was also concerned with face-to-face interactions, particularly between people who did not usually have contact with one another. Stead and I professed a fascination “with the simplicity and profundity of the moment where two human beings encounter each other for the first time, and are suddenly no longer strangers”\(^{33}\), and believed it to be a valid subject and medium for art.

**Generosity projects**

Fresh from *Agents of Proximity*, it was in late 2008 that I began this Masters research, starting out with a topic very different to the one on which I have settled. The original proposed project was dubbed: “Art at service: An investigation of socially engaged, multi-disciplinary art projects that connect individuals and communities to tangible goods and services that they might need, enjoy and benefit from”. I set out to answer the following questions: how can art be an effective exchange? How can art overcome the barriers of human connection and facilitate new opportunities for dialogue and exchange? How might art projects successfully involve people from beyond the traditional milieu of gallery and art audiences, and create spaces and opportunities where anyone might feel comfortable to speak?

What I had in mind when I proposed this topic were “generosity projects”, a term coined by Ted Purves in the book *What we want is free: generosity and exchange in recent art* (2005). *What we want is free* investigates a trend in which artists make an exchange between themselves and a specific audience the central element of their work. It discusses the potential of projects that employ an artistic use of gifts and services. Just as *Agents of Proximity* opened up possibilities for people to experience new encounters in Brunswick through a localised travel service, I also wanted to invent other opportunities for interaction and exchange that responded to the needs of individuals or communities. The aim of my original Masters proposal was to query, and in some part remedy, the physical, emotional and psychological remoteness we may experience with one another, and investigate the barriers that keep us disconnected and apart.

As mentioned in Chapter One, however, I had misgivings about this method of working after unsuccessful attempts to attract a diversity of participants. I had started to doubt the efficacy of open call-outs and the unquestioned assumptions behind claims that socially engaged art could achieve democratic, social inclusion and help repair deteriorated social bonds. After a number of years making participatory work, it seemed to me that the moments when people refused to get in my photo booth, declined on the offer to tour their neighbourhood with a stranger, or had an unsettling exchange as a result of an interaction I had facilitated, said something far more telling and complex about the social world we inhabit. I felt, however, that *The Photobooth Project* and *Agents of Proximity* failed to speak of these experiences, and only celebrated and documented the meetings they achieved.

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\(^{33}\) Stead, “Small encounters in suburbia”.  

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The urgency of my doubts was only compounded as I began to witness a plethora of projects emerge, like *League of Resonance*, that celebrated connections and aimed to produce a cosy intimacy between participants.34 Since 2006, as I began exclusively dedicating myself to participatory work, I noticed a predictable formula of works that emphasised immediate, live, one-on-one interactions between people, particularly in festivals like Next Wave and Melbourne Fringe.35 The general idea of these works seemed to be that you could make a better world through blithely chatting with strangers – despite the fact that, as I pointed out in Chapter One, these interactions rarely were encounters with genuine “others”, but meetings between a like-minded group who easily identified with one another as art lovers. It was my feeling that such projects merely excelled at suppressing the contradictions and barriers involved in human interaction.

A crucial turning point

The watershed moment came when I began reading Bishop’s trenchant critiques of participatory art. Bishop, with the publication of two controversial essays “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” (2004) and “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents” (2006), has been one of the most vocal critics to expose the political and aesthetic limitations of relational and socially engaged work. Bishop’s arguments resonate with my own misgivings, and offer an alternative way of evaluating participation in contemporary art, beyond the socially ameliorative imperatives expressed by Bourriaud, Kester, Purves, Thompson and other supporters of socially engaged practice.

In her seminal essay “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, Bishop takes a probing look at the political claims of relational art. Although agreeing that *Relational Aesthetics* was an important first step in identifying tendencies in recent contemporary art, she expresses a concern that the criteria with which Bourriaud wants us to evaluate open-ended, participatory artworks are not just aesthetic, but political and even ethical. Bishop points out that Bourriaud asks us to judge a work by what positive social models it creates, yet fails to examine or question the quality of relationships produced by relational art.

> When Bourriaud argues that “encounters are more important than the individuals who compose them,” I sense that this question is (for him) unnecessary; all relations that permit “dialogue” are automatically assumed to be democratic and therefore good.36

Bishop goes on to usefully observe, in “The Social Turn”, that advocates of socially engaged work seek to extract art from the “useless” domain of the aesthetic and fuse it with a goal-oriented activist tradition that works to effect social change. This has resulted, however, in didactic and

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34 Some other recent examples include Jason Maling’s project *The Vorticist* (2007-10) and Charlie Sofo’s *B.E.D* (2010). To read more about these projects, see an article I wrote for un magazine 4:2: Spiers, “Intimate encounters with the public”, 27-31.

35 For a discussion of this rising phenomena see Schwartzkoff: “The phenomenon is so popular in Britain the Battersea Arts Centre has dedicated a festival to one-on-one performance. In July, more than 2000 people flocked to the venue to be touched, sung to, danced with, angered, comforted or terrified by a stranger. A second festival will begin next month. In Australia, experimental venues and independent festivals have begun dappling their programs with intimate work.” “Small shows, big impact”, 10.

36 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, 65.
simplistic artistic practices that prioritise “social effect over considerations of artistic quality” and “aesthetic judgments being overtaken by ethical criteria”. Bishop writes:

But the urgency of this political task has led to a situation in which such collaborative practices are automatically perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance: There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond.

Bishop makes it clear that she is loathe to see contemporary art fall into a didactic means-over-ends paradigm, in which well-meaning artists – “activists who reject aesthetic questions as synonymous with cultural hierarchy and the market” – renounce their authorial control in favor of giving voice to project participants. Bishop is scathing in her criticism of this self-sacrificing gesture which she claims can result in art that “ultimately becomes inseparable from the community arts tradition” and rehashes “predictable formulas of workshops, discussions, meals, film screenings, and walks”.

Over the course of this research I have come to agree with Bishop, who is concerned that the socially engaged work supported by Kester demonstrates a lack of commitment to the aesthetic. I would also argue that her criticisms could be extended to work championed by Thompson and Purves as well. Bishop asserts that this sort of work reflects “an inflexible mode of political correctness” that rejects “any art that might offend or trouble its audience”.

Instead, like Bishop, I am interested in art that does not necessarily make the "correct" ethical choice, which attempts to “think the aesthetic and the social/political together.” I am sympathetic to Bishop when she advocates a tougher, more disruptive approach to “relations” that resists an easy fusion of the social and the aesthetic. For this reason, I would defend ethically challenging art – such as Santiago Sierra’s “Workers Who Cannot Be Paid, Remunerated to Remain Inside Cardboard Boxes” (2002) – which manipulates or unsettles its participants in order to create an effect in the viewer. Such art does not offer simplified and moralistic social solutions, but instead presents critical and disarming insights into human relations. Central to this radical shift in my thinking is a sense that art should do more than affirm a viewer’s sense of self, that it should instead unsettle habits of thinking, so we can gain new perspectives on our condition.

Informed by incisive texts by theorists Miwon Kwon and Rosalyn Deutsche, as well as Bishop, I am increasingly more suspect towards projects that aim to create positive social encounters, which result in the participant feeling more comfortable about their identity and their relationship to

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37 Bishop, "The Social Turn", 180.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid, 181.
42 Ibid, 182.
43 This work of Sierra’s is described by Bishop: “In his exhibition at Kunst-Werke in Berlin, viewers were confronted with a series of makeshift cardboard boxes, each of which concealed a Chechnyan refugee seeking asylum in Germany [...] since it is against the law in Germany for illegal immigrants to be paid for work, the refugees’ status could not be announced by the gallery. Their silence was exaggerated and exacerbated by their literal invisibility beneath the cardboard boxes”. “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, 78-79.
other people. Although they write with different emphases across the discourse of politically engaged and site-specific art since the 1960s, the common link between Deutsche, Kwon and Bishop is their interest in new theories of radical and plural democracy, specifically antagonism, which expose the political shortcomings of much socially engaged art. In the following pages I will outline these three theorists’ views on antagonistic political theory, which reveal how socially ameliorative projects may reassure and affirm their participants, but only by concealing the exclusion of friction and conflict.

The contested concept of democracy

Deutsche, Kwon and Bishop all identify that a democratic rhetoric of “openness” and “accessibility” has been increasingly mobilised by the art world to justify creative social interventions, with terms like “community involvement” and “public participation” regularly invoked by artists, councils, arts institutions and funding bodies. Attached to this rhetoric is a prevailing optimism that social harmony and unity are fundamentally possible, and that participatory, socially engaged artworks can provide models for how they can be achieved. Against this, Deutsche, Kwon and Bishop argue – albeit with different focuses – that this optimism is based on the incorrect assumption that the task of democracy is to reach a consensus and to settle conflict, rather than sustain it.

In Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics (1996), Deutsche points out that democracy is, in actual fact, a contested concept. She refers to recent debates where certain left-political thinkers, such as Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Etienne Balibar and Jean-Luc Nancy, have sought to renew theories of democracy. There are two central grounds for these reconsiderations. Firstly, it is impossible to eliminate difference due to irreducible divisions within society, including class, gender, sexuality, culture and ideology. Secondly, it is argued that the aim of achieving complete social unity is totalitarian. As a result, political theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe have suggested an alternative to prevailing consensus-oriented perceptions of democracy with their theory of antagonism, which contends that tension and conflict is an essential condition of a democratic society. Bishop usefully summarises this theory in her essay, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics":

Laclau and Mouffe argue that a fully functioning democratic society is not one in which all antagonisms have disappeared, but one in which new political frontiers are constantly being drawn and brought into debate – in other words, a democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased. Without antagonism there is only the imposed consensus of authoritarian order – a total suppression of debate and discussion, which is inimical to democracy.

44 Deutsche’s Evictions (1996) is specifically focused on public art of the 1980s and 1990s, while Kwon’s One place after another (2004) traces the development of site-specific, community-based art since the 1960s. Meanwhile Bishop’s essays “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics” (2004) and “The Social Turn” (2006) are concerned with relational, socially engaged and participatory practices from the 1990s onwards.

Quoting Mouffe and Laclau’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985), Deutsche describes antagonism as “the ‘experience’ of the limit of the social”.46 In other words, society will never reach any comfortable completion or be fully inclusive of difference. However, Deutsche asserts that this impossibility of society should not be taken as “an invitation to political despair”, but rather as the starting point “of a properly democratic politics”.47 She writes:

> Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence. The threat arises with efforts to supersede conflict, for the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its exclusions are taken into account and open to contestation.48

Taking my lead from Deutsche, I would argue that artists and supporters of socially engaged art, such as *League of Resonance* and *Agents of Proximity*, continue to “associate public space and democracy with the goals of building consensus, consolidating communities and soothing conflicts”.49 Yet theories of antagonism pose a significant challenge to those who remain convinced by the utopian possibilities of social harmony and cooperation. A condition of living in modern, mass urban societies is that we are often faced with otherness that we cannot relate to or subsume easily into unified visions of society. As suggested in Chapter One, we are limited by our own capacity to connect beyond that which we know. Socially engaged art, by presenting a scenario that tries to reassure viewers that society might be free of division, actually suppresses difference and denies the real and essentially conflictual character of communities.

**The ideal of community**

In *Evictions*, Deutsche stresses that it is in fact extremely dubious to view the plurality and strife that characterise much of the public as problems that we must find procedures to reduce and eliminate.50 What these theories make clear is that socially engaged works, such as *League of Resonance* and *Agents of Proximity*, are in fact driven by a homogenizing tendency that is predicated on the exclusion of those who hinder or prevent their realisation of a vision of social harmony. Kwon suggests in *One place after another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2004) that such homogenizing and unifying tendencies can result in “a kind of ‘soft’ social engineering” which actually defuses, rather than addresses, community tensions.51 Kwon’s objection to site-specific, community-based work – which I argue can be extended to what has become widely-known as socially engaged practice – is that it is driven by an “ideal of community”. To illustrate this point she cites the words of feminist social theorist, Iris Marion Young:

> The ideal of community privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one’s understanding of others from their point of view. Community is an understandable dream,

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47 Ibid.
48 Ibid., 289.
49 Ibid., 282.
51 Kwon, *One place after another*, 153.
expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another, relationships of mutual identification, social closeness and comfort. The dream is understandable, but politically problematic, I argue, because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly to exclude from their political groups persons with whom they do not identify. The vision of small, face-to-face decentralized units that this ideal promotes, moreover, is an unrealistic vision for transformative politics in mass urban society.\footnote{Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference", 300.}

I find the above Young quote particularly useful in situating my reservations about socially engaged art. It suggests that there is a problem with the intimate scale to which much of this field of practice desires to relegate society. As Kwon suggests, the strength and seductiveness of this dream of community ”rests on its promise of a ‘good society’ that can counter the experiences of social alienation and disassociation (and accompanying social problems) that characterise life in contemporary urban mass societies”.\footnote{Kwon, One place after another, 149.} However, the small, face-to-face immediate interactions favoured by socially engaged and relational art are attached to a fundamentally “nostalgic fantasy of a pre-urban existence that is assumed to have been without alienation, mediation, or violence”.\footnote{Ibid., 149-50.}

Continuing her reference to Young, Kwon writes:

Moreover, ”the desire for social wholeness and identification” through mutual affirmation, closeness, and reciprocity as expressed in the ideal of community obscures the extent to which it ”generates borders, dichotomies, and exclusions.” As such, the community ideal partakes of the “same desire for social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism on the one hand and political sectarianism on the other.” In short, the ideal of community finds comfort in the neat closure of its own homogeneity.\footnote{Ibid., 149-50.}

What this point suggests to me, is that projects like League of Resonance and Agents of Proximity, by documenting harmonious meetings and concealing points of disconnect and friction, do not acknowledge the extent to which they exclude the people who threaten their ideal vision of community. In doing so, they are implicitly motivated by a desire for social uniformity and a xenophobic fear of difference.

Kwon suggests that as the artistic, political, and ethical pitfalls of socially engaged practices become more visible and theorised, this necessitates a major reconceptualisation of ”community.” Taking her lead from French philosopher, Jean Luc Nancy – whose best known work The Inoperative Community (1982) makes the polemical claim “there is no communion, there is no common being, but there is being in common”\footnote{Luc-Nancy quoted in One place after another, 153.} – Kwon advocates an art that reckons with the impossibility of community, that “unworks” community.\footnote{Kwon, One place after another, 155.} By this she means, community is always a work in
progress, not a final state that can be reached. Kwon supports art practices that recognise and grapple with this fact. She writes:

The challenge, then, is to figure out a way beyond and through the impossibility of community. This is not to invoke a transcendent plateau from which one will find a new synthetic resolution free of contradictions. Quite the contrary, it is meant to suggest the impossibility of total consolidation, wholeness and unity – in an individual, a collective social body like the “community”, or an institution or discipline – and, perhaps more importantly, to suggest that such an impossibility is a welcome premise upon which a collective artistic praxis, as opposed to “community-based art,” might be theorised.\(^58\)

In other words, the challenge Kwon directs to socially engaged projects is that they must reveal the conditions and contingencies involved in the creation of particular social relations. The collective artistic praxis that she advocates, involves a provisional group, aware of the circumstances of its creation, “performing its own coming together and coming apart as a necessarily incomplete modeling or working-out of a collective social process”.\(^59\) Importantly, it requires a questioning of the exclusions that the group itself performs to fortify its own identity. In short, Kwon recommends the productive possibility of uncertainty, where “only a community that questions its own legitimacy is legitimate”.\(^60\) In this regard, she echoes Deutsche, who endorses a consideration of “the productive role that can be played by disruption, rather than consolidation, in the construction of identity, a disruption in which groups encounter their own uncertainty”.\(^61\)

What I have described in this section is the political theory of antagonism, which exposes the dubious suppressions of difference that occur when artists are motivated by a coherent and harmonious ideal of community. In citing this theory, Kwon, Deutsche and Bishop urge for a more sophisticated understanding of concepts like “democracy” and “community”, that recognises conflict and friction as fundamental aspects of social relations. In doing so, they advocate a more disruptive approach to socially engaged and participatory art.

\(^{58}\) Ibid., 154.
\(^{59}\) Ibid.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 155.
\(^{61}\) Deutsche, *Evictions*, 322.
Chapter Four.  
Towards an antagonistic aesthetics: Seven participatory artworks

But the barriers to human connection are not only found in the borders of nation-states or the lack of communication and transportation technologies; they are often deeply rooted in the local. They are cultural, social, linguistic, emotional, aesthetic. Some of them are imposed; others are created and maintained through choice. In a globalising world replete with discount airlines, email, Skype and Facebook, it can be easier to cultivate a relationship with someone 50,000 kilometres away than with your next door neighbour.

– Victoria Stead62

While Tiravanija celebrates the gift, Sierra knows that there’s no such thing as a free meal: everything and everyone has a price.

– Claire Bishop63

In this last chapter, I will describe how the new theoretical underpinnings, described in Chapter Three, have influenced the suite of seven participatory artworks I have developed during Masters. Though my practice remains concerned with communication and involving the participation of people, since gaining an understanding of antagonistic theory the direction of my exploration has shifted. Instead of trying to provide comfortable sociable models for people to interact with one another, as I did when I began Masters, I want to expose the barriers and exclusions that become apparent when we try to gather together. I am more interested in raising provocations, rather than in providing social solutions.

As I have mentioned, Bishop urges artists to not feel compelled to make the “correct” ethical choice. She argues that artworks that produce a “bad effect” in the viewer or participant have a valid poetics that is aesthetically and conceptually arresting.64 Bishop is more excited by artists who set up relations that emphasise the role of dialogue and negotiation, marked by sensations of unease and discomfort, rather than belonging and affirmation. Such work reflects an “antagonistic aesthetics” which acknowledges the impossibility of a harmonious society and “instead sustains a tension among viewers, participants, and context”.65 In doing so, Bishop defends tough and arguably unethical works by controversial artists like Santiago Sierra, Christoph Schlingensief, Pawel Althamer and Artur Żmijewski.66

As a result of reading Bishop’s lucid and polemic arguments, I have become interested in exploring participatory strategies that produce a “bad effect”. However, this has been quite challenging to do in an academic institution. A factor hampering my ability to investigate this line of inquiry has been

62 Stead, “Small encounters in suburbia”.
63 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, 70.
64 For a good discussion on this see: Bishop, Trauma, Antagonism and the Bodies of Others: a dialogue on delegated performance; Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”.
65 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, 70.
66 For an example see: Bishop, Trauma, Antagonism and the Bodies of Others: a dialogue on delegated performance.
The University of Melbourne's requirement that researchers receive approval from an ethics committee before engaging in research with human subjects.

**An ethical dilemma**

The chair of the Victorian College of Arts Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG), that assessed the six human ethics applications I submitted so I could begin the practical research for this project, is Barbara Bolt. Writing with Kate MacNeill, in a recent RealTime article, “The ‘legitimate’ limits of artistic practice” (2011), Bolt accurately identifies that many researchers feel the need to self-censor in order to get their artistic proposals approved by the university's human ethics protocols. This, MacNeill and Bolt argue, creates a worrying situation in which artists do not engage in "cutting edge" research that the university should be supporting. Despite the fact that researchers are often inspired by the contemporary artistic avant-garde – that Bolt and MacNeill suggest include artists such as Sophie Calle and Marina Abramovic, but I would add Santiago Sierra and Artur Żmijewski as even more challenging examples – the ethically suspect practices of many renowned artists would have difficulty receiving sanction from the university's ethics committee. Bolt and MacNeill write:

> Contemporary artists and those in the academy who are both influenced by and aspire to emulate many of these avant-garde practices are faced with a contradiction. While individual freedom and unrestrained creativity are at the heart of art training, the legal and institutional frameworks within the profession and educational institutions are likely to be just as concerned with risk management and compliance. The Statement on Ethical Conduct specifies that all research involving humans must be conducted in accord with the following principles: the research must have merit and integrity, be designed and conducted according the principle of beneficence (maximise benefits, minimise risks to participants) and be in accord with principles of justice and demonstrate respect for human beings and animals. Research involving human subjects and animals is submitted to a university ethics committee before a researcher is given the authority to proceed with a project. These committees may require changes to a project’s methodology or reject it altogether if they feel it conflicts with ethical protocols.

All six of my human ethics applications were eventually given permission to proceed by the HEAG. It is worth noting, however, that there was some self-censorship of my proposals before submission to the committee, which I was advised to do by my supervisor and the Research Higher Degrees staff who assisted with the applications. With the ethics committee's focus on "risk aversion rather than management of risk" it was felt necessary to make the projects less risky or confronting for the participants to ensure I received rapid approval from the HEAG without complication, although

68 Ibid.
it reduced the antagonistic goals of my research. As stated in the article by Bolt and MacNeill, this is not an uncommon experience:

A recent survey undertaken at the University of Melbourne suggests a level of anxiety on the part of artists-as-researchers. From the responses, particularly from amongst practice-led researchers, it emerged that researchers believe that the ethics protocols, processes and procedures in universities operate as a silent regulator of conduct and a subtle determinant of content in creative arts research [...] Further, it was revealed that some students self-censored merely because they thought their project would not get through the ethics process: “The mere mention of these considerations [the ethics guidelines] is often enough for the student to self censor.” From these observations it could be argued that through its very stringent processes of ethical regulation, the university ethics procedure introduces limitations that work against “cutting edge” research and mitigates experimentation at the heart of practice.⁶⁹

As the writers mention, this raises interesting questions about how ethical regulation impacts not only on what audiences are able to view and experience, but more specifically on what artists can do. As socially engaged and participatory art increasingly becomes the subject of academic research it is worth highlighting that the human ethics process required by researchers could seriously limit the capacity of exploration.

While resolving these questions is outside the specific focus of this thesis, it is important to emphasise that the artworks I have developed for Masters do not test participants as much as they may have, as I was unable to address the full scope of “antagonistic aesthetics” due to the constraints of the University. Nonetheless, Masters has been an intense period of artistic experimentation and risk taking. Where I have been limited in disturbing or discomfiting my participants, I have still remained informed by antagonistic theory, and sought to address the aesthetic and political limitations of participatory work.

I will now discuss the series of participatory artworks I have developed during Masters, which are based on a set of artistic encounters that produce failed moments of connection, as much as opportunities for surprising engagement. As with any creative and practice-led research, I have sought to strike a balance between theoretical imperatives and intuition, as I experiment with participatory models in and outside the gallery.

**Layers of reception**

Pervading my inquiry into participatory practices have been crucial aesthetic considerations. One of the early concerns that arose during this research was the challenges involved in displaying and documenting participatory projects based on an interaction or communicative exchange. In response to Bishop’s criticism of the formulaic and formally uninteresting nature of much socially

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⁶⁹ Bolt and MacNeill, “The ‘legitimate’ limits of artistic practice”.
engaged art, I wished to implement strategies for participation that thoughtfully engaged people in projects, without sacrificing the critical and aesthetic focus of the artworks.

I was particularly interested in how an artistic act of direct communication or exchange among a small set of participants might be engagingly documented and offered for exhibition to a broader set of viewers. This was in response to projects, such as League of Resonance and Agents of Proximity, that, in my view, often failed to offer a resolved or adequate sense of the work to viewers who were not direct participants. I sought to address this challenge by thinking through the way a participatory work is received in different contexts, while integrating into the process a visually formal means to communicate the experiences of participants.

**Sob Stories**

*Sob Stories* (2010) is the earliest work in the suite of Masters projects I will discuss. Although it was devised before I had any real grasp of antagonistic theory, *Sob Stories* was originally devised for a public art festival. As such, it is a good example of a work that addressed several layers of audiences, while attempting to tackle the aesthetic and social together.

I first presented *Sob Stories* at Tiny Stadiums Festival, held in the Sydney suburb of Erskineville over the first week of March 2010. Roving Erskineville Road, I approached people in the street with a simple request: recall a time you have cried in public and write the story down on a handkerchief. In exchange, they would be mailed someone else’s handkerchief contribution to keep handy for future tears. This provocation was surprisingly popular, perhaps because the experience is common to many, and people readily divulged happy and sad tales of public crying without much arm-twisting.

Tiny Stadiums, helpfully, allocated to me the local deli’s shop window, facing the street, in which to hang the handkerchiefs collected as I went. This makeshift installation provided a talking point in Erskineville. Passersby were able to read the stories and gain insight into the private feelings of people in the neighbourhood, even if they had not offered a story themselves. By the time the festival was over, people were making a point of coming back to the deli window regularly to read the new handkerchiefs as they were added, as well as to ask me if they could make a contribution themselves. By the end of the week I had collected over 100 stories.

*Sob Stories* involved two sets of audiences at Tiny Stadiums: Firstly the initial consenting participants who engaged in the exchange, as well as the incidental audience who witnessed the project’s evolution in the deli window. However, I was also interested in sharing the handkerchiefs – their cute, floral and colourful designs jarringly contrasting with handwritten stories of private alienation, distress and sudden emotion discharged in public space – with a wider array of viewers beyond Erskineville. As a result, I painstakingly photographed all the handkerchiefs before they were posted on to the participants, so that the work could be experienced through its documentation via exhibitions and blogs.
This has presented a series of challenges. As the work shifts audiences and modes of reception – from my one-on-one interactions on the street with participants, to the installation of the handkerchiefs near the site where they were collected, to the moment when participants receive a stranger’s hanky in the mail, to the experience of viewers seeing documentation of the handkerchiefs in a gallery or website – the emphasis and meaning of the work shifts also. In Sob Stories I made a deliberate decision to explore the effects of reconfiguring and mediating the original work for the detached, contemplative space of a gallery. As a consequence, what has resulted is, arguably, a different work.

The formal, almost forensic, photographic documentation I made of the handkerchiefs, in my reckoning, barely transfers a sense of my direct exchanges with the Erskineville participants, which were at times intimate, confessional and moving. Instead, Sob Stories for the gallery involves a considered selection of the thirty “best” handkerchiefs. Arranged on the wall side by side, they seem to have an estranging, uneasy tension as each individual, private story competes for value.

In Bishop’s talk that accompanied Creative Time’s Living As Form exhibition, she suggested that the better socially engaged projects do plan for these multiple, concentric layers of reception.⁷⁰ I would argue after the experience of Sob Stories, that it is important to anticipate each audience, and address each one with the same amount of rigor and intent. In practice, however, achieving this is difficult.

Though it may be argued that to mediate the “authenticity” and immediacy of the original exchanges is to sacrifice the work’s integrity – that the work is ephemeral, taking place in the moment, and then is lost. This could be tied to a broader discussion about performance art and its documentation. Instead, I believe it is worthwhile embracing the characteristics and particularities of each site or mode of reception. It might not be possible to retrieve a sense of the “authentic” initial experience for viewers who did not participate in it, however the estranging, distancing quality that occurs by putting documentation of an encounter in a gallery can itself be employed to make a different, perhaps more critically interesting, work.

**In and outside the gallery**

The way art operates in and outside of the gallery is a question that has frequently come up during my research. I originally made public and site-specific work in order to have the chance to directly interact with a diverse spectrum of people and social groups, particularly people outside of what might be considered the conventional milieu of art and gallery audiences. The risks, unpredictability and surprises that ensue when engaging people in public sites is the definite appeal of making work outside the gallery. However in the university context, this has created a difficult minefield to negotiate with the human ethics committee. As a result, I have at times made the pragmatic decision to work in the gallery in order to minimise those risks and fit within the institutional constraints of The University of Melbourne.

⁷⁰ Claire Bishop, “Participation and Spectacle: Where are we now?”.  

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While I remain committed to inviting a plurality of people into my work it has been useful to make work for a gallery environment so I can feel free to experiment with participatory models. In addition, this has helped me to appreciate the differences in making art for both site-specific and gallery contexts, as each has unique capacities. In this respect, Meeting Point (2011) is another good example of work that operates differently in and outside the gallery. Meeting Point was initially conceived for a gallery situation, however, it was also presented in a public context at the 2011 Tiny Stadiums Festival.

**Meeting Point**

Meeting Point involves a red light-box sign with white text that simply reads “Meeting Point”. It is suggestive of the signage you would see in public spaces, such as airports, which are used during emergencies. It also acts as a physical landmark under which people can arrange to meet. As such, it was my intent for Meeting Point to act as both a benign and menacing beacon, a nebulous directive for viewers to interpret as they wish. In this work, the invitation to participate is mostly indirect and metaphorical. Although it could be adopted as a landmark for people to meet each other, my main intention was to invite people to contemplate the kind of people they wish to find underneath the sign and the contingencies that are required in order to connect with them.

The Tiny Stadiums curatorial team, however, felt that the sculptural object alone was not enough for a festival focused on participatory and performance art, and as a result I decided to activate the sign with an added interactive element. During the festival, Meeting Point was mounted in a disused shop window on Erskineville Road, and underneath it I taped signs that asked passersby to describe meetings – real or imagined – that could take place there. Although this activation was a success – in so far as it resulted in lots of participation and conversations under the sign – I felt that it had taken away some of the work’s ambiguity and fixed its status as celebratory, rather than questioning, of the act of meeting. A review of the work in runway magazine, by Melanie Oliver, confirmed this:

> Amy Spiers’ work presented, quite literally, the ethos of the festival: a red lightbox sign that read ”Meeting Point”. At night it beaconed from a disused shop window and before the festival I noticed people gravitating towards it like moths to a flame. I imagine inner-west friends liaised from this spot, or new acquaintances and conversations were forged beneath its benevolent glow. However, when Spiers attempted to activate the sign during the festival (asking for responses to specific questions taped onto the window), it lost the possibility of its ambiguous and unpredictable use. It is hard to tell if the requests to meet people’s dogs, grandparents or attractive young women sparked any interesting exchanges – for me, it was the nebulous potential of an unplanned, unlikely meeting that made me linger on this corner slightly longer than intended.71

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71 Oliver, “The Tiny Stadiums Festival”, 78.
Ambiguity and poetics

Although, it was never my aim that any “interesting exchanges” actually took place at Meeting Point during Tiny Stadiums – I had only meant to encourage people to consider what was necessary to enable acts of meeting – I do agree with Oliver’s contention that the work had lost some of its “nebulous potential” as a result of the interactive element. On reflection, this experience only makes me further committed to participatory works that act on a more critical and ambiguous level. This is in direct opposition to the didactic tactics of much socially engaged art, of the kind lauded by the Living As Form exhibition, which celebrate harmonious dialogue among communities and convivial intersubjective encounters.

It is my feeling, that often the gallery presents itself as a more suitable place to communicate analytical and subtle ideas. For example, in a gallery it is possible to have a contemplative distance in relation to Meeting Point, as it is removed from its original context as public signage, offering the viewer a renewed and reframed relationship to such signs. In this regard, the gallery context allows the nebulous and questioning nature of Meeting Point to be foregrounded and considered – an effect that is less easily achieved outside of the gallery.

As mentioned, this shift from working outside the gallery to inside has been precipitated by a commitment to the development of a particular aesthetic sensibility, as a result of reading Bishop’s critiques of socially engaged art. It also reflects a strong desire to infuse my work with a poetic and minimal formalism – with an emphasis on simplicity of gesture. This desire is inspired by the work of artists like Felix Gonzales-Torres and Roman Ondak. In the work Spit Chain (2011) it is possible to see these artists’ influence most acutely.

**Spit Chain**

In January 2011, I was commissioned to produce a work for the show, Vague Possibilities, at the South Australian School Of Art (SASA) Gallery. The show was loosely focused on works inspired by relational aesthetics and sought to turn the gallery into an experimental zone of engagement. The project I proposed was *Spit Chain*, a work that involved 1000 pieces of gum made freely available in the gallery, accompanied by instructions that asked viewers to chew a piece and place it next to another piece of gum on a temporary perspex wall installed in the gallery.

A clear inspiration for Spit Chain is Gonzales-Torres’ candy piles, such as *Untitled (Placebo)* (1991), which are exquisite in their formal minimalism, combined with an innovative interactive element that invites viewers to take and eat the candies. It was original participatory gestures of this kind that led Bourriaud to consider Gonzales-Torres a crucial forerunner of relational art, dedicating a whole chapter to him in Relational Aesthetics. It has been pointed out to me in a recent studio critique, however, that the beauty of Gonzales-Torres’ candy piles is that they have an ideal weight that degenerates as visitors take the candies, alluding emotively to death and loss – most significantly the death of Gonzales-Torres’ lover, Ross, from AIDS. As such, Spit Chain differs from

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72 Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, 49-64.
the candy piles because it is generative, asking its participants to take the gum and make something with it.

In this respect, *Spit Chain* takes its cue from Slovakian artist Roman Ondak’s *Measuring the Universe* (2007), a work which also evolves as participants assist in its creation. For this work, Ondak took the domestic custom of recording children’s heights with a mark on a wall and turned it into a participatory event, with attendants marking visitors’ heights, names and the date of their measurement on the gallery walls. Referring to its original presentation at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York, the MOMA website describes the gallery “beginning as an empty white space” which over time, “gradually accumulates the traces of thousands of people.”

Like *Measuring the Universe*, *Spit Chain* was also concerned with measuring scale. I wanted to record the presence of numerous gallery visitors, with each piece of gum acting as an anonymous trace of each bodily presence and illustrating the flow of passing human traffic. Furthermore, I was inspired by public gum walls around the world, such as Bubblegum Alley in San Luis Obispo, California, and wanted to replicate the appealing and repulsive effect they induced. The aim was to consider, once again, meetings and connections in a conflicted way and to highlight in a figurative manner the feelings of attraction and repulsion that can occur when we get too close to others. The idea was that the gum would amass into a visualisation of a repugnant, impossible network where everyone was connected metaphorically by their saliva.

The work was installed in SASA gallery for a month, with some unexpected but welcome results. Firstly, the work emanated a sickly, sweet smell of bubblegum that permeated the whole gallery. Secondly, each visitor would take a piece of gum as they entered and chew it as they viewed the other works, finally adding their gum contribution to the allocated perspex wall. There was something enjoyably perverse and bodily about watching people chew their way around the exhibition and then gingerly place their spit soaked wad on the wall beside someone else’s. Finally, the biggest surprise was that instead of amassing a chain of bubblegum blobs as I had expected, *Spit Chain* developed into a cooperative drawing, with people using their gum to create, alter, or erase vulgar images that included smiley faces, penises and text. This unexpected interpretation demonstrates the risky and unpredictable nature of inviting unrestricted participation to a work. In this case, I am happy to relinquish artistic control and retain an open model, as I am interested to see how future incarnations of *Spit Chain* will be interpreted and changed by participants.

**Delegated performance**

In her essay “Outsourcing Authenticity? Delegated Performance In Contemporary Art” (2009), Bishop outlines characteristics of today’s participatory practices. She identifies a shift away from the body art of the 1960s and 1970s to the participatory art of recent decades in which authenticity is “relocated from the singular body of the artist to the collective authenticity of the social body”. She writes:

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74 Bishop, “Outsourcing Authenticity”, 111.
Performances produced by visual artists have shifted in the last decade. Instead of artists using their own bodies as the medium and material, with a corresponding emphasis on physical and psychological authenticity and oppositional transgression, as was the case in the 1960s and ’70s, today's artists do not necessarily privilege the live moment or their own body. Rather, they engage in strategies of mediation that include delegation, re-enactment, and collaboration

[...]

In the works of these artists, performance is delegated – or, to use more managerial language, 'outsourced' – to other performers. These people may be specialists or nonprofessionals, paid or unpaid, but they undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time in a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following their instructions.75

Bishop goes on to explain a number of contemporary artistic projects in order to elucidate her theories about delegated performance, and while doing so she makes a distinction between the varying levels of participant agency and artistic control:

This leads me to a provisional definition of the difference between live installation and constructed situations. The former will follow, more or less accurately, the effect anticipated by the artist: the actions of participants are to a large extent circumscribed in advance, the emphasis is on form, and unpredictability is minimised – as with actors performing a play. The constructed situation, by contrast, knowingly courts the risk of failure: its form and procedure are dependent upon actions that unravel within a set of partially supplied coordinates, and which may not even materialise.76

Bishop asserts that the "best" works are, to her mind, the ones that court failure and exacerbate risks, in which participants have a certain level of freedom to surpass the artist’s, and subsequently viewers’, original expectations. I would support this assertion, although throughout this research I have experimented with different models of viewer collaboration with varying levels of artistic control and participant agency. I believe that one of the main reasons I work with delegated performance is to willingly test failure and unpredictability. In this respect, 'Cause baby, you're a firework is a work that may not give participants full agency, but just as in Bishop's idea of a constructed situation, the work can unravel unexpectedly beyond the initial set of instructions.

'Cause baby, you’re a firework

Taking its name from the song, Firework, sung by Katy Perry, 'Cause baby, you’re a firework is a participatory project that asks participants to cast aside inhibitions – with assistance from a little alcohol – and sing with abandon to popular tracks played through earphones on their personal music player. Participants are largely sourced from friends and acquaintances and are usually pop song enthusiasts. In its early stages, the project was originally named the Dutch Courage Choir and

75 Bishop, “Outsourcing Authenticity”, 111.
76 Ibid., 119.
choirs of up to twelve members actually performed live in front of large audiences at events held in Melbourne, Newcastle and Sydney. For me the most compelling aspect of this project – either in the studio or in live performances – is that I cannot predict how it will eventuate as participants respond to each pop song, singing and dancing more passionately or meekly, depending on their levels of extroversion and pleasure.

The concept takes its inspiration from video works by Gillian Wearing, such as Dancing In Peckham (1994) and My Favourite Track (1994), which also focus on situations of abandonment and loss of inhibition. Writing about Wearing's My Favourite Track – a work where Wearing asked people on the street to sing along to their favourite track with their earphones in – Juliana Engberg writes:

> Most of us have sat next to some unaware person bellowing out a track which is pumped through their body through earphones. Invariably, these in-the-moment people have sufficiently detached themselves from the external world by virtue of their heightened interior status so that they are totally oblivious of their own loud, and sad to say, often very bad singing [...] When we watch and hear Wearing’s singers belting out their favourite song, we are simultaneously amused and excluded. Such exclusion promotes a kind of hostility or aggression within us. We are denied the pleasure of really experiencing this reverie, and are delivered only the antisocial by-product, which is inferior vocalisation.

In the case of 'Cause baby, you’re a firework, the viewer is confronted with a whole ensemble of singers enjoying a heightened interior status that they are denied the opportunity to join. What’s worse is that the inferior vocalisation is compounded by the fact that the singer’s personal music players are ever so slightly out of sync, turning the song into a cacophonous distortion of the original. The best aspect of 'Cause baby, you’re a firework is that as participants allow themselves to be overcome by the blaring music, they take part in an experience that is both communal – they can see the others singing passionately to the song, even if they can’t hear them over their music player – while at the same time retreating into a singular fantasy that involves singing their favourite pop song to an audience. This dual state increases the participants’ possession by the song, as they feel supported by the group and retreat further into their own private singing reverie, while intensifying the viewer’s exclusion.

'Cause baby, you’re a firework may also invite comparisons to Phil Collins' the world won’t listen (2005-07), a video trilogy produced in Bogota, Istanbul, and Indonesia that depicts fans of The Smiths singing karaoke-style to the band’s popular songs, or similarly Candice Breitz’s Queen (A portrait of Madonna) (2005), in which Madonna fans sing the entirety of Madonna’s album, The Immaculate Collection. I would argue, though, that what sets my work apart from Wearing’s, Collins’ and Breitz’s is the fact that it gathers together a group of fans to bliss out to their favourite songs collectively, in a heightened state that is both shared and individual.

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77 Engberg, Gillian Wearing Living Proof, 14.
For me, an interesting proposition is that this work gets close to reflecting Kwon’s idea of an “unworked” community – mentioned in Chapter Three – as a provisional community performs “its own coming together and coming apart”. In my view, 'Cause baby, you’re a firework negates the notion of a coherent social body – quite literally – as singing, atomized individuals slip in and out of identification with the rest of the choir, while deliberately provoking and aggravating the viewer’s exclusion.

One Last Goodbye

Using a different participatory strategy, I have also made instruction-based works that arguably offer reduced chances for spontaneity and surprise. In works like One Last Goodbye (2011), participants respond to a set of text-based directives in the gallery with relatively little agency.

One Last Goodbye is a project in which participants are invited to smoke one last cigarette in the gallery via a sheet of text on the wall. Accompanying the instructions is an ashtray and a video of myself smoking one last cigarette. Participants are asked to leave the finished cigarette butt in the ashtray, alongside mine, as a visible trace of their participation. In addition, viewers who do not wish to partake in their last smoke are asked to leave donations of cigarettes for the participants who do.

The work, particularly, addresses a very specific social group, smokers or former smokers, who know that by giving up cigarettes you reluctantly say goodbye to a community and all its associated social customs. Any smoker will tell you that cigarettes are one of the few social devices that allow you to approach strangers with no qualms to ask for a lighter, or other smoking related paraphernalia, and for this reason I like the idea of a work that laments this loss. I also enjoy that the work operates with or without participants – the ashtray sits in anticipation of activity – which may erupt occasionally and quietly in the gallery when someone lights up. Whether the participants really commit to their last cigarette is not important, as what the work emphasises is the performance of the gesture.

Although One Last Goodbye is in my view one of the more experimental works in the suite, it is an instance where participants are asked to perform an aspect of themselves live in the gallery, a concept that I am keen to explore further in the future. In addition, One Last Goodbye, like Spit Chain, 'Cause baby, you’re a firework and even Sob Stories, focuses on anti-social behavior. While it was not an intentional decision to employ unsociable characteristics in most of the projects, perhaps in trying to contemplate the limits of sociability I was drawn to habits and conduct which divides, alienates and annoys.

One Last Goodbye is another work in the series, like Spit Chain, that also employs very minimal materials. In this regard many of the projects take their cue from conceptual art and rely heavily on text and instruction. The minimal exhibits are intentional, as I draw inspiration again from artists

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78 Kwon, One place after another, 154.
79 This is the intention at the time of writing, however, during the work’s assessment I may not have permission to allow people to smoke in the gallery. This is still under negotiation.
such as Ondak and Gonzales-Torres. However the dominance of text in the series does not seem ideal and remains a consideration I plan to address in the future. That said, while *Say Nothing* (2011) and *Jumping with Michelle* (2011) are the two most text-heavy of the works, I believe they are the two strongest participatory provocations in the series. These last two pieces I will now discuss, and explain how they come the closest to reflecting my antagonistic goals.

*Jumping with Michelle*

Firstly, *Jumping with Michelle is* a work that began as an open call-out on my blog in early 2011. The request was simple: “Can we jump together on your trampoline. If you have a trampoline, or know someone who does, contact me”. After the call-out was featured in a Next Wave Festival newsletter, I was approached by journalist Penny Mondra, who wrote about the project in the Wednesday arts section of *The Age*. The article received one single response from Chadstone resident, small business owner and mother, Michelle, who emailed me to say I could jump on her family’s trampoline. Although I did receive other offers to jump with friends, Michelle ended up being the only respondent who was outside my social circle. For this reason, I decided to make the work just about her.

The trampoline is symbolic of a particular lifestyle and social group – people who own houses in the suburbs and have kids – and I was conscious that as an inner-city living, “creative” in my late twenties whose family lives interstate, I was rarely in the habit of spending time with such people. As a consequence, the purpose of the trampoline call-out was to insinuate myself into “ordinary” family homes. I liked the idea that although the provocation was relatively innocuous, it still required trust from Michelle to invite me into her private backyard. There was also something absurdly civil and formal about the way we negotiated the terms of the encounter. Even once on the trampoline, we had to take care to ensure that we jumped with the correct timing and rhythm. Despite the gentleness of the provocation, there was a shared sense of vulnerability that was dynamic and responsive.

In deciding on the final form of *Jumping with Michelle,* I wanted to demonstrate this negotiated space of tension, as it said something about the complexity of inviting participation in artworks, and even more broadly, in building relationships in life. As a consequence, I have decided to exhibit a video of Michelle and I jumping together, alongside documentation of all our email exchanges and text messages, as well as the human ethics application I submitted to have our encounter approved by the University. The work ultimately becomes about the testing of trust, and the social inhibitions and conventions that must be overcome for people to spend time with one another.

*Say Nothing*

*Say Nothing* also asks viewers put their trust to test in order to participate, in what is the most provocative work in the series. In this project, participants are asked to write their mobile phone

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80 Spiers, A human project (blog), http://amyspiers.tumblr.com/.
81 Mondra, “Count to 7 Billion”, *The Age*, 23 March 2011.
82 Ethics approval to do this is still pending at the time of writing.
number on the gallery wall, with no other identifying personal information. In exchange, they must take a note of the number that was left by the participant before them, and then cross it out with a black marker. Only one phone number should be available on the gallery wall at a time. The participant is then instructed to call the number when convenient, and say nothing. On answering the phone to this silent caller, the receiver is also directed to not exchange any words. Instead both participants are asked to spend a little time on the line together, hanging up when either decides they’ve had enough. The aim is to create a private one-on-one experience that is meant to frustrate the participants’ desire to connect with one another. There is no documentation of the calls except for the effaced numbers on the gallery wall.

*Say Nothing* is an instruction-based work that is heavy on text in order to communicate a fairly involved idea. Although on face value participants are not given a large amount of autonomy, there is plenty of opportunity for participants to act out within the supplied coordinates. For this reason, it was almost denied approval by the human ethics committee. In their objection to the work, the HEAG noted:

> The HEAG has significant concerns about the future implications for participants in this project. They commented that it appears to have been designed in good faith but that it could turn out badly for participants. The ethical principle of beneficence is key here as there could be significant issues should someone take another person’s phone number and use it for purposes other than those outlined in the project that could have very problematic consequences. It is extremely difficult to ensure that there will definitely be no harassment of participants by other participants – this is a risk that is difficult to control or manage.\(^3\)

In response to this, it was my argument that the leap of faith required to participate in the work was exactly its purpose, and so to mitigate the risks and unpredictability of the work would be to destroy its design. The point was that the work tempted failure and exacerbated risk in a temporary, largely anonymous, artificial interaction that would not usually occur in real life. Participants consent to enter this exchange, beguiled by the provocation, with no guarantee that a good interaction will result. The encounters are unthreatening and civil only if everyone involved chooses to be so. The work is structured to test the limits of trust and sociability, where meaning must be negotiated and arrived at together.

Despite the HEAG’s reservations, I was subsequently able to go ahead with *Say Nothing* due to an administrative loophole which deemed the work technically not “research” because I was not retaining any “data”. Fortifying my resolve to go ahead with this work, despite the convoluted nature of the instructions and the reservations of the HEAG, were responses from participants in trials of *Say Nothing*, such as this:

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\(^3\) Katy Greenland, Research Higher Degrees Officer, and Barbara Bolt, in email correspondence with the author, 26 July, 2011.
I made the call to the number and it was indeed a very interesting experience. I think due to being a little bit nervous about sharing silence with a stranger, I played some Indonesian Gamalan music in the background. I think we were on the phone together for about 3 minutes, and I could faintly hear them breathing and some peoples' voices in the background. I was imagining what they were thinking of the music I was playing, and how long we would last on the phone. I felt awkward with the silence, but a good awkward, and I reached a point where I had to hold back laughter I think because I found I became quite nervous. It was really quite special sharing a silence with a stranger over the phone, it was very intimate, and after the call finished I felt somewhat elated, had a bit of an adrenalin rush and had to have a cigarette and thought maybe I should call random mobile number [sic] more often!84

I like that Say Nothing is a difficult, conceptual work where even I am not privy to the outcomes. All that is available to myself, and to the casual viewer, are the traces of participants' numbers on the wall. Resembling toilet door graffiti, those traces are both innocuous and loaded. Putting your mobile number on the gallery wall for all to see raises many types of questions about ethics and sharing private information, as is demonstrated by the HEAG’s reaction. I think this is part of the strength of the work.

Another strength of the work is its enigma. I was told in a recent studio critique that the traces of numbers and the accompanying instructions in Say Nothing strongly evoke an imagined sense of the silent calls, even if the viewer decides not to partake in the experience. In this respect, I think the work succeeds to address the problem of relaying a one-on-one experience to a broader audience, by negating the very possibility. The silence and non-documented nature of the calls suggests something powerfully enigmatic, even to the non-participant. Even the viewers who do not participate are implicated in the provocation of Say Nothing, producing an intriguing effect, as the viewer realises they do not possess the trust to become involved.

Say Nothing and Jumping with Michelle compel their participants to take a leap of faith in order to test social conventions. In doing so, I would argue that both projects try to reflect what Bishop deems as the better kind of socially collaborative art, that which she describes as requiring “intelligence and imagination and risk and pleasure and generosity, both from the artists and the participants”.85 Taking her cue from psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, Bishop states such art “does not derive from a superegoic injunction to ‘love thy neighbour’, but from the position of “do not give up on your desire”.86 In other words, artists should not feel constricted by friendly urges and ethical choices when inviting participation, but follow their “unconscious” desire. To create interesting, critical and thought-provoking artworks, at times may necessitate murky ethical choices and a challenge to presupposed social mores, so that habitual ways of understanding human relations can be problematised and transformed.

84 Claudia Gleave, trialed participant, in email correspondence with the author, 1 March, 2011.
85 Bishop, "Socially Engaged Art, Critics and Discontents: An Interview with Claire Bishop", 205.
86 Ibid.
**Conclusion**

This thesis has raised many more questions than it has had the scope to answer, as participatory practices raise provocative problems concerning aesthetics, ethics, politics and the fundamental function of art. What I have aimed to convey, instead, is the profound shift in my thinking that occurred during the course of my Masters research. The implications of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of antagonism, and Bishop’s advocacy for an art that teases out contradictions and tensions – rather than resolve them – have had a significant impact on how I conceive and create participatory work.

I acknowledge that there are many things I have not been able to address. For instance, this thesis does not come close to representing the multitude of artists I researched – which include Paul Ramirez Jonas, Harrell Fletcher, Aleksandra Mir, Katerina Seda, Jens Hanning, Tino Seghal, David Horvitz and Laurel Nakadate – who employ a range of participatory strategies which cover the full spectrum of ethical and aesthetic positions. Neither does this paper mention French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s text, *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), which challenges prevailing presumptions that spectating is passive, and for this reason, is increasingly cited in discussions on participatory art. In addition, while I am greatly influenced by Bishop’s criticisms and the goals of antagonistic theory, I do not wish to claim that my artwork adequately reproduces the disruptive effects advocated by the theoretical arguments discussed in Chapter Three.

What I have attempted in the suite of projects developed for Masters, however, is to question and frustrate a desire for uncomplicated relations, and in doing so demonstrate an antagonistic – rather than ameliorative – intent in my work. While I remain sympathetic to socially engaged art practices, I am less convinced by the motivation behind many projects in this field which seek to create positive human relationships, and affirm utopian and harmonious ideals about society. Instead, I seek to engage people in more subtle, critical and open ways. By acknowledging the intricate barriers to human connection, I have attempted to allow the limits of sociability to be evident in my work and give rise to more complex questions about the conventions of social interaction.

What these experiments in participatory models have achieved, combined with my new theoretical underpinnings, is provide me with a fertile grounding for a future in participatory art practice. I would hope this would lead to the creation of more ambitious artworks, both in and outside the gallery, that begin to reflect the “relational antagonism” endorsed by Bishop:

> This relational antagonism would be predicated not on social harmony, but on exposure of that which is repressed in contriving the semblance of this harmony, and thereby would provide a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to each other.  

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87 Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, 79.
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This requires some trust. It involves two phone calls with unidentified people and should occur only between consenting adult participants. There is no documentation of the calls. To participate, do the following:

1. Take a note of the phone number that is written on the gallery wall.
2. Then use the black marker provided to cross it out and replace it with your own. Only one number should be available at a time.
3. Call the number when convenient. When the person answers, say nothing.
4. When the receiver hears no reply they will realise that *Say Nothing* has commenced. This is their cue to say nothing as well. Neither of you are to exchange any words. Spend a little time on the line together.
5. Stay on the line as long as you wish. Either of you can choose to end the call by hanging up.

* Your mobile phone number will be on public display in the gallery. You will receive a phone call from an unidentified person. The project requires you to take full responsibility for any unforeseen or adverse consequences that may result in your participation. Consider this before participating.
* The receiver might not answer the first time. They may hang up immediately or you may get their voicemail. Try calling again or leave a silent message on their voicemail.

On Sunday, 4 December 2011, I had one last cigarette.

Smoke your last cigarette.

1. Go outside. Light up and smoke the cigarette to the butt.
2. Leave the butt in the ashtray below.

Alternatively, leave a cigarette here so that someone else can smoke one last time.
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