

## Memories in Motion: learning, process, history and art in public space

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*This essay presents an art project as an example of two aspects of public pedagogy. The first, is that the project critically examined how history is made, and through art-making and installation it performed an alternative publishing of history. Secondly, the art project was utilised as both a process and outcome within public space, and through this contributed to raising awareness for both participants and audience about the politics of public space. Through both aspects the project shed light on acts of public pedagogy as a process of questioning our normal relationships with history and public space. Memories in Motion was a project where learning took place within a particular public space by moving through, documenting and researching it. This learning was generated into artworks, which were then taken and placed back into that space. These actions disrupt the normal conventions of learning about history and of public space, and shift the agency of telling history and using public space to the students.*

**Keywords:** *public art, history, community, public pedagogy*

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### Introduction

Learning in public space involves moving out of the classroom, into and through another space. The *Memories in Motion* project, used

a particular physical space - the three blocks between the Sunshine Primary School and the Sunshine Railway Station - to explore the idea of history and how it is made. Art making processes were also used to reflect on and develop the students' learning which were placed back into that space as installations. These two learning processes, of action research and art making fed into one another. Both began by physically walking around the space and then returning again and again and again. My role as artist in the project was to facilitate the student's use of art to re-interpret and render their own version of history and the placing of that art into public space. As part of my art practice I am interested in how artworks by the community can disrupt the norms of public space and provide new ways of thinking about identity, history and culture.

It could be argued that history is formed by memories, but few of these memories end up being published and incorporated into the official stream of history. Whose points of view and memories are recorded for posterity, are often those who have access to the means of production of history, those with literacy, money to print, access to the means of communication and those considered to have the authority to tell the story. Henry Giroux states, 'History is not an artefact to me merely transmitted, but an ongoing dialogue and struggle over the relationship between representation and agency' (Giroux, 2004:68). Through *Memories in Motion*, the students used their own memories and research to explore the history of the space and its relationship to themselves. They wrote their own versions of local history, and through their artwork it was 'published' into public space. They became their own cultural producers (Giroux, 2004:68) and through the inclusion of their own memories, their versions became personal and local.

This model of learning in public space uses a range of forms of knowing, such as discussion, documentation, research, interview and being there. This documentation was re-interpreted using a range of actions; clay-making, drawing, painting, arranging, writing, photographing, recording, and filming. Here the artwork is a process not product. The artwork is a learning tool for generating thoughts in an open way that allows many (student) historians to speak and a diverse range of narratives to surface. The artwork demonstrated the plurality of history and an open-ended instead of defined approach. The use of public space as a place of learning and also as a place to publish their learning was part of a larger political

attempt in relation to ‘citizenship’ and ‘democracy’ and can be seen in the light of Giroux’s possibility for pedagogy outside of the classroom as ‘an attempt to explain how learning takes place outside of schools’ (Giroux, 2004:60). At the same time, by placing artwork into public space and disrupting its norms, we draw attention to the power structures that exist. For example, I made clear to the students how I asked the owners of the properties and those in charge at the train station for permission to install the artwork, and although I returned the train carriages to the school, the display at the train station was gradually removed by vandals and the wheat-pasted concrete poetry was cleaned-up by the council.

### **The project - Memories in Motion**

The *Memories in Motion* project was made by the 70 grade four students of Sunshine Primary School, in Melbourne (Australia). There was an interest in involving students with local people who had knowledge, memories and skills to share, and in the idea of immersive learning within the actual public space that was being studied. The plan was to have an art outcome which would be placed in that space to reflect the learning. The reconstruction of three stations on the local railway line, and significant changes in the physical spaces around them provided a reason to re-examine local history and how the new changes affected the community. I had an art studio in the area which enabled conversations with the locals. Many of them had expressed to me their bewilderment of the new station which had entailed a loss of an underpass which had facilitated easy access to both sides of the train line. The other side of the line is the major town centre of Sunshine. The shopkeepers experienced a decline in trade and one local character made satirical posters which claimed that the new station was a lost oil rig from the Bass Strait. In recognition of the loss of familiar aspects of the place the project sought to give attention to the importance of local history and memory and respond to this sense of loss.

The project was designed for year four students at Sunshine Primary School, who undertook a local history study as part of their curriculum. The public space to be used for this learning was the three blocks between the school and the recently rebuilt Sunshine station, which included many historical sites. The school principal applied to The Cass Foundation and was successful in obtaining a grant for the project. Local

photographer Nigel Gillies was invited to be involved. He had worked at the Sunshine train station for many years, and had an extensive collection of railway memorabilia, his own photographs of the area taken over the many years that he worked in the Sunshine station signal box and was a goldmine in terms of his entertaining stories and local historical knowledge. Two teachers, a community historian and artist began the project in term two of 2014 and the sessions took place over ten Wednesday mornings with about 70 year four students.

## **Making history**

The project incorporated the local history of the space between Sunshine Primary School and Sunshine station with students taking on the roles of the researchers/historians of this place. History was regarded as a fluid entity which was continually evolving and being made. Gathered through primary and secondary evidence it also included the recording of memories. The students documented, researched and introduced their own memories and observations to make new renderings of history. Their work was 'published' as artworks in public space and also in a book which was placed in the school and local Sunshine Library.

As an integral part of the learning, excursions of walking around the space between the school and the station were used. Historical sites were viewed and discussed, including the signal box where Nigel worked, the first cinema (the start of Village Cinemas), the site of the old municipal offices, the Masonic Hall, City Place where the original rail crossing had been and the new station. The space was documented as the children walked through the area, thinking about what they remembered, what they learnt, what they saw and heard. These utterances of history were recorded in many ways, photography, drawing, writing, film, audio, discussions, making digital documents and presentations. There was also an excursion to Ballarat on a V-line train in order to experience using the station and train.

*...Motion becomes a metaphor for learning in a new way; documenting, walking, doing, thinking and discussing as they move through the space transpires into a knowing. The space impacts on them as they move through it. They interact, touch the space, talk about it with others, shout, jostle and meet the locals...*

## The artwork process

The art process utilised this documentation and transformed it into a series of interpretations using clay to make words, texts and imagery. These were assembled, curated collaboratively by the students and glued onto some plywood train carriages and installed in the public space between the school and the train station in five different locations. A wheat paste-up of concrete poetry was installed onto a wall in the park between the school and the station and the students' reflections of the project were collaged on paper trains, laminated and installed on the station concourse. The artwork was a presentation of their learning, but it moved back outwards into public space.

Community members do not usually participate in the field of public art. They are instead the audience for public art. Along a similar trajectory, community made art does not often get placed into public space. Jane Rendell in *Art and Architecture: A place between*, describing two types of art, suggests that public art is usually designed to solve a problem and is object-based, whereas artwork made by an artist is more free from the parameters of public art, is more process based, but needs to engage the audience. She imagines public art practice should be a place between these two things and she calls this work *critical spatial practice* (Rendell, 2009: 8,9,17). *Memories in Motion* occupies this same place of 'critical spatial practice', moving into the site where process based art practice and public space meet.

*Memories in Motion*, engages in a public pedagogy both through its concern for learning within a public space and its intervention of placing the learning outcomes back into the site of learning. The role of art in this project is to reflect and process learning about the history of the place but also to communicate this with others. To move into the space, to 'talk' about the space to the people who travel through it. The students' artwork becomes an historical document in two ways. First of all their textual and visual rendering of history was published in public space for people to view and secondly the artwork placed in public space became another historical event. This history was open to read in a number of ways and provoked questions such as: *what is this about?* and *what is it doing here?*

It was a useful and important act to place the students' work back into

the site. The artwork placed into public space became something to have conversations about. A destination for families to go, to find their children's work and to discuss the content. Rendell says we could say that art is functional in providing certain kinds of tools for self-reflection, critical thinking and social change. Art offers a place and occasion for new kinds of relationship 'to function' between people (Rendell, 2009:15,16). In this context the project also had something to say to the locals about placing community generated artwork into the space. The art was a disruption of the normal way that people would encounter their own history or the artwork of children. Because it was created locally and by locals, it created local conversations.

*Art is the expression of an individual or, if the process has been a collective one, an expression of a community. Democracy, social justice and civil society all depend on the individuals who make up the community and their ability to speak their hearts and minds. Often community-based arts projects involve members of communities who are acquiring the skills and/or confidence to tell their own stories, with their own voices. (Community Partnerships work guide, Arts Victoria, 2013:15)*

This project critically engaged with public pedagogy by using the artwork to enact citizenship within and beyond the school, using public space as an educative arena and by performing an alteration to the dominant social discourse about how we receive history and the norms of public space (Sandlin et.al 2011, from Sandlin's five domains of public pedagogy).

### **Process in public space**

It is not often that an artist gets the time to explore making art with the community in an organic manner without a designed outcome of an art object. The *Memories in Motion* project was designed as a learning process and the art-making part of this as an organic development. The outcome specified in the grant application was an artwork installed into public space which would reflect the learning. This freedom of not having a pre-designed outcome is very rare in community projects where usually the artist is engaged in order to make an art object. It means that the process of researching and the making the work could take precedence over the final object and its aesthetics, emphasised in past movements of

dialogical art and community art, and more recent movements of social art, new genre art and relational aesthetics.

*All art posits a space between the artist and the perceiver of the work, traditionally filled with the art object. In new genre public art, that space is filled with the relationship between artist and audience, prioritised in the artist's working strategies (Lacey, 1994:35).*

Involving communities in the actual making of public artworks gives priority to *process*. If process is allowed to be the important part of the journey of the artwork and its final destination is not prescribed, then the process becomes more of an open enquiry. It also follows that at certain stages there will be choices or options for the path to deviate and the work to change shape. New Genre public art considers process important because it allows a stronger relationship between the art and the audience to be developed. Joanne Sharp points out that 'new genre public art' 'focuses not on the end product but rather emphasises the importance of the process through which people become engaged in the production of the work' (Sharp, 2007:277). When local people become involved in the process of making art it also produces a greater connection with community and the conversations, research and exploration deepen the outcome of the artwork. Another effect of giving precedence to process is that more voices and variables are included, thus it becomes more difficult to find a consensus or conclusion. Perhaps the final artwork is not cohesive or traditionally aesthetic, but it is valued for its plurality of meanings, complexities and layers.

The students involved had most likely never had any of their writing or artwork in public space. The artwork created a disruption of the normal patterns of public space. By being inserted, it created a dialogue about what it was, why they were in public space and also why it is usually absent.

### **Politics of public space**

We could learn in public space, walk through it, talk about it, live in the houses within it, but can we place our learning into that space? Can we add our own stories to that space?

*Some art educators effectively create an intersection between the space of public educational institutions, despite their limitations, and public spaces beyond school grounds and university campuses. Their pedagogy leaks from the classroom to the streets and town square. (Duncum, 2011:348)*

Though publicly owned and used, schools also represent the private. The local community does not easily see what goes on in a school. But by placing the learning outside in a public space, ideas that are expressed by children in the classroom can have a new agency in being seen or heard outside in their community. Ideas other than what we see in public space (advertising imagery and the urban landscape) can be an expression of our culture. Art made by community members has something to say about culture, belonging, history and how we know ourselves and each other and these things are not often represented in public space.

### **Multiple voices, play and restlessness**

*If there is such a practice as public art, and that in itself is debatable . . . . . then I argue that public art should be engaged in the production of restless objects and spaces, ones that provoke us, that refuse to give up their meanings easily but instead demand that we question the world around us. (Rendell, 2009: 8,9)*

The process-driven practice of *Memories in Motion* provided a sense of play. Paul Duncum suggests that the pleasure of play is a tool that needs to be used when addressing issues such as social justice and placing or critiquing public space.

*. . . a playful pedagogy engages students' own values and beliefs, exposes them to the critique of their peers, and through the process of making art also provides a means for them to further work out their understandings in a way that has the potential to be empowering (Duncum, 2011).*

Duncum (2011:360) says 'many forms of community, environmental, and activist art are playful. They play with ideas; often in a transgressive way, they entertain possibilities.' This project afforded the space to play, and so the outward expressions of the children's learning journeys were playful artworks, paste-ups of their concrete poetry, train carriages



jogging along fences and train collages at the station. Handmade, drawn and sculpted works alive against the functional, ordered and straight lines of the suburb. Alive with the writing and imagery by children. Our acts of installation conjured an acquiesced space between the power of ownership and control of public space and the illegal acts of graffiti. Ephemeral installation imagines a place in between where community members can contribute to the public landscape. It can challenge learned assumptions about our role in changing public space.

We wanted the students to understand that there are many histories of a place. By prescribing value to their own versions of history and presenting them in public place, we endorse the idea of a multitude of ways of knowing about our culture and who we are. The artwork undertakes two roles; to present student's interpretation of the history of the place and also visually move into public space in order to share these alternative and personal histories. Duncum says, 'First, the use of a public site is also a sight. It is inherently visual' (Duncum, 2011). The artwork is firstly encountered as a sight, which is its visual sense and then also it becomes a site, a place which might have other meanings in the context of the use and ownership of public space. The sight/site speaks to the viewer, telling them there can be a place in public space for expressions of history by the community, particularly young people and their ideas.

## **Conclusion**

*Memories in Motion* is an example of how public space can be used to represent and celebrate the process of learning. But also this project challenged learnt assumptions about our role in public space. In this project art was used to open the field of enquiry and to broaden the student's understanding of history, instead of narrowing it down and shaping it into a singular historical narrative, challenging ideas of who writes and makes history.

This approach contains agency for community members to use their own voices and the opportunity to shape their own meanings from the past and present of a place. Re-interpreting history and presenting it in public space signifies a disruption of the normal conventions of history and of public space. By placing community made artwork into public space, we entertain the possibility that this space might be used more often for

the learning and expression of the community about its own culture and history.

How we bring learning into public space and acknowledge the way that public space affects our learning and understanding of who we are raises questions not only for teachers and artists but also for the inhabitants of and those in control of public space.

*Later that year I was sitting an exhibition in the same area. I had curated an exhibition of photographs by a local character, Desmond Johnson, whose work documented local places from the 1940's. I looked out into the street and saw a horde of children coming towards me. It was the 70 year four students, out on their fifth excursion into their 'Memories in Motion' space. They had gone to see their reflections, which were on display inside Sunshine station. What a joyful coincidence and meeting! They noisily streamed into the exhibition, witnessing yet another historical moment and another example of how history is made by a community member, and then steamed out the other end and shunted off towards their paste-up of concrete poetry and other sites to re-read their own history in public space.*

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Memories in Motion book is available for download as a pdf on this link: <<https://app.box.com/s/tv8cjn1zageyh256g5vr5ux5z8q3wxy8>>

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## About the Author

**Debbie Qadri** works as an artist in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne. She makes collaborative artworks with communities and schools, mainly ceramic murals. Her current research interest is about Communities making their own Permanent Public Art and she is undertaking a PhD at Victoria University in the School of Education. Debbie also has a personal art practice and exhibits and publishes under the name of Debbie Harman.

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