

# Art conversations—failure to communicate

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Participating in *It's a new day*, a residency and exhibition project curated by Sally Breen at Artspace in 2006, presented considerable challenges in terms of how to capture or represent meetings and interactions with people encountered during the project—conversations which formed the core of our contribution, as is often the case with ephemeral, discursive, and/or socially engaged artworks. Our project *Who needs artists?* was a speculative, collaborative endeavour that attempted to engage directly with the local community around Artspace. As such it is a useful talking point to grapple with awkward questions that arise in participatory works, particularly when presented in the space of the gallery, as was the case with *It's a new day*.

In the planning for *It's a new day* Breen articulated the aims and intentions for the project as: 'seeking out the porosity of what has been ostensibly a closed building—tightly shut to the local community, many artists and audiences,' and that the exhibition invited artists to 'engage with the metaphor of community via the conceptual and physical grammar of what it means to work in convergent spaces.' In the regular planning meetings leading up to the project, we decided that rather than attempt to interpret the complex social space of the Woolloomooloo neighbourhood, we would ask people in the local community to determine the form of our residency. In doing so, they would define what the role of a visiting artist might be within their own neighbourhood, perhaps even the value of artists to society in a general sense.

We began by creating a flyer with the headline: Who needs artists? This simultaneously asked if the services or presence of artists were required, but also playfully alluded to the possibility that the response might be: Artists? Who needs them! The flyer sought responses to the question: 'If you had two artists coming into your neighbourhood for six weeks, what would you want them to do?' We listed a series of suggested activities or tasks we could offer that were general in nature such as domestic tasks—for instance, washing dishes, walking dogs, or making social visits—as well as services that required our specialised skills as artists and art educators: offering art workshops, gallery tours, photography, video editing and production.

To facilitate responses and communication, we installed a *Who needs artists hotline* in our studio and set-up a dedicated email account. We produced 500 flyers and distributed them to dwellings and community notice boards in the area immediately surrounding the Gunnery. To our surprise, the project generated an exhaustive (and at times exhausting) number of engagements with people in the area. We received about 5 phone calls in the first few days and the number of contacts and conversations we had with people grew exponentially through word of mouth. Some callers had existing events they needed assistance with, for instance, a community umbrella event on November 11 commemorating Remembrance Day, the naming of Tom Uren Place, and the saving of Woolloomooloo from development in the 1970s by the Green Bans. Other callers had an idea for an event, or something they

wanted to do, or learn. Sometimes people called just to make contact and invite us to visit. The events we assisted with included an outdoor screening in a local park of the Australian silent film *Kid Stakes* from 1927,<sup>1</sup> which was partly shot in Woolloomooloo; a tour of the John Passmore Museum of Art; brief art workshops for the Baptist Community organisation, Hope Street; and individual tutoring in video editing and professional development. During the exhibition we also initiated two events that aimed to broaden the relationships between Artspace, the local community and Sydney-based art practitioners. The first was an Artist-Curator speed-dating evening, which saw independent curators, as well as curators from major institutions like the MCA and the AGNSW, 'date' local artists by following the conventional format of Speed-dating. The other event was created in consultation with the Juanita Nielsen Community Centre's After-School Care program and involved a Cake as Art Workshop developed and facilitated by artist Natalie Woodlock.

One of the major decisions we faced in planning and realising the project was how to bring any activities or interactions with the locals, into the gallery. Collaboration often raises differences in terms of ideas and formal approach, for the most part our negotiations were characterised by considerable like-mindedness. However, the issue of documenting our project proved to be one of the points of difference. To better represent our own points of view, we'll break into our individual voices here:

## Documentation and *Who needs artists?*

**JOSIE:** For me, a major and still unresolved issue with *Who needs artists?*, for me is the role of documentation for the eventual function of transcribing the project within the gallery. This was particularly problematic due to the intentions of our project. During our residency, we did not direct members of the community to engage with our project by following particular instructions, such as participating in a performance or interview. Rather, our project was responsive and activated via the processes of listening, conversing and exchanging ideas. Including a device for documentation in amongst these exchanges (which often took place in peoples homes) would have shifted these interactions from conversations to an artist research tool. Whilst attempting to maintain an equilibrium within these exchanges, the documentation that remains of the project represents only those with a public outcome.

While undertaking *Who needs artists?* I had concerns about aestheticising our community contact, conversations and residency outcomes in order to present the project in a gallery context. In recent years, I have come across gallery manifestations of projects that centre on the outcomes of social engagement. Whilst representing a specific social experience, many of these projects shared an underlining template that attempts to 'flesh out' the physical dimensions of the gallery space with photos, transcripts

Facing Page: Josie Cavallaro & Anne Kay, *Who needs artists?*, 2006. Photo: Silversalt Photography.



and video footage from the project's encounters. For me, viewing such exhibitions is a bit like trying to interpret a stranger's family photo album. A worthwhile exercise in generating and satisfying curiosity? Yes. A connection to the project and its situation? No, not really.

The exhibition component of *It's a New Day* was scheduled immediately after the residency period. Since our project was centred on social engagement, we really didn't have the time to resolve or challenge the obligation of presenting *Who needs artists?* as part of a physical exhibition. We did, however, utilise the exhibition space to activate and host events that created new intersections between local communities and Artspace, such as Artist-Curator Speed-dating and the Cake as Art Workshop. For visitors to the exhibition, the gallery manifestation of *Who needs artists?*, failed to communicate the intentions, processes and diverse actions that defined this project. What remained on view for the exhibition was a scrapbook of our process and engagements, an enlarged calendar of activities, and furniture that was used during the aforementioned events within the period of the exhibition. Once again, a work that centred on social engagement failed to communicate with the gallery visitor encountering the project for the first time.

**ANNE:** Initially, I assumed we would record aspects of the project with video or photography, which would then form part of the exhibition. Josie raised concerns with this approach, and we attempted to find other ways to present our project in the gallery. At one point we toyed with the idea of inviting participants to document activities with supplied disposable cameras and involving them in the installation of the images. In the end, we decided on an evolving wall calendar and a mobile stack of furniture and equipment for the scheduled gallery activities. The calendar, intended as a timetable of gallery events, was to include photographs from any of the artists or events in *It's a new day*, with an accumulating bank of images developing throughout the exhibition.

Having installed these elements, however, we realised we were not offering the same clarity to gallery visitors about the project as we did in conversations with participants, so we compiled the reference materials we had collected in the studio into a 'scrapbook' presented in the gallery. I also contributed to Lisa Kelly's blog ([www.its-a-newday.net](http://www.its-a-newday.net)), which audience members could access through the Artspace Reading Room, in an attempt to elaborate a sense of the project's breadth.

In retrospect, perhaps we should have opted out of the exhibition and simply worked outside the gallery, because the manifestation of the work in the gallery was—to put it bluntly—pretty boring. Or we could have invited local residents into a participatory environment that would have included other gallery visitors, but in the 7 weeks we had in the area this wasn't possible. It took us all the allotted time just to make connections in the neighbourhood, and when we did it became clear how disenfranchised the nearby residents were from what went on within the gallery.<sup>2</sup>

Photographic documentation of participatory projects when presented in a gallery can only ever present a partial view of situations with spatial, temporal and experiential dimensions. The differing and possibly conflicting experiences and points of view

of project participants are difficult to capture, even video or film must necessarily be edited and constructed by the artist.

The meaning of photographs can be mobilised, and opened out so that it is possible—particularly when they are contextualised by a written text—they become an illustration of an idea, or an authoritative, one-dimensional project account.<sup>3</sup> Alexander Alberro, discussing the recording of conceptual art in the 1970s, says, '... records not only validate and affirm but also fix or freeze meaning.' For Alberro, records refer to 'legal documents, catalogues, artist statements, preliminary models, schemata, photographs, sketches, maps and the like.' In ephemeral artworks such as performance and conceptual or participatory artworks, the 'records,' particularly the photographic records, can take on a life of their own. Subsequent exhibitions of the photographs and reproductions in art magazines, artists' monographs and art history texts, not only fix the meaning of these works, but have in the case of photographic documentation of some 1970s practices, come to stand in for the work: not only as the exchangeable commodity, but to be mistaken over time for the artwork itself.

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## Conclusion.

For *Who needs artists?* we were wary of using forms of documentation for these reasons and hoped to be able to bring something more immediate or direct to the exhibition component of *It's a new day*, but in the exhibition we weren't able to achieve this.<sup>4</sup> Our discussion here aims to encourage a rethink of the presentation and representation of projects where conversations are the artwork. The current conventions used by artists and curators have cut and pasted the documentation strategies developed in response to conceptual and performance art practices, onto socially engaged projects. Photographs, videos or other records or traces of conceptual and performance works become iconic replacements for the works themselves. When photographs and other records are used to represent socially engaged projects, they are even less appropriate considering the multi-dimensional nature of such conversations. They are only traces and need to be recognised and acknowledged as such. Even blogs, a more recent possibility for project documentation, are discursive and do afford a fitting opportunity for discussion and alternate positions about the project to be presented. However, at this point in time, blogs don't always capture a wide cross-section of participants or the audience. So, while we have not managed to resolve these questions we hope that raising them here might contribute to considerations of these kinds of practices and how they are discussed and represented.

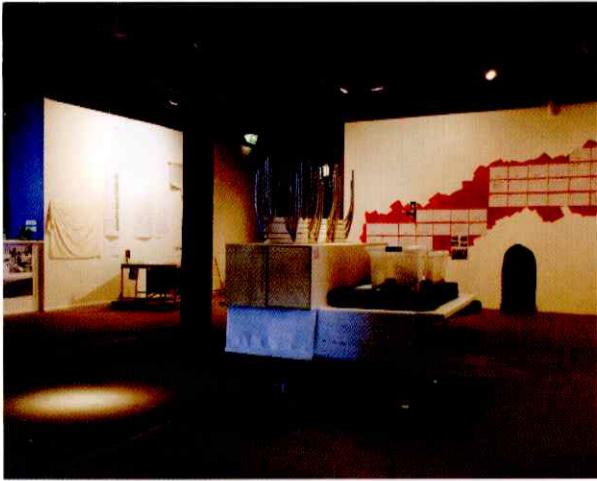
1. Written and directed by Tal Ordel.

2. Interestingly, many of the residents spoke very fondly of the Gunnerly when it was a squat for artists from the 1980s to 1992.

3. I was prompted to think about how relational projects are presented by artists from Lucas Ihlein's comments at a feedback session for *It's a new day*, when he raised the issue of how artists 'narrate' these kinds of projects.

4. Projects of this kind may need considerably more support and resources for the artists over a sustained period of time if they are to be more than glancing, superficial encounters. Although, we were much better off than many artists on this occasion, with the Artspace artist's fee and materials budget, possibly the most generous in Sydney.





Above left: *It's a new day* (Installation view, works from left to right): Lisa Kelly, *From Scratch*, 2006; Josie Cavallaro & Anne Kay, *Who needs artists?* 2006; The Wild Boys: Trevor Fry, Richard Gurney, Tim Hilton, Installation, 2006. Photo Silversalt Photography.

Above right: Josie Cavallaro & Anne Kay, *Who needs artists? Artist-Curator Speed-dating event*, 2006. Photo: Jane Polkinghorne.

Below: Josie Cavallaro & Anne Kay in collaboration with Natalie Woodlock, *Who needs artists? Cake as Art Workshop*, 2006. Photo: Josie Cavallaro.