

Touch This Earth Lightly: a participatory environmental art project

Bridget Nicholson shares her experience of presenting work to a new audience

Touch this earth lightly is a national environmental art project designed to collect people's stories about their relationship to place, land, and the environment. The project has been going for five years across the country, from remote places like Kalkarindji in the Northern Territory to inner city Perth and, recently, suburban Melbourne. The process involves people through the use of clay to create a pair of personalised shoes. The clay is moulded to the foot, capturing the essence of the person. Simultaneously the person is engaged in conversation about the nature and sensibility of their relationship to land and the natural world. The conversation is recorded.

In June 2014, Art in Public Spaces Officer for the Knox City Council Jo Herbig commissioned me to work with the Knox community to collect stories (and shoes) for an installation to be held at the Stringybark Festival in October 2014. The festival was approaching its thirtieth year and has been evolving from a more commercial enterprise into one which explores more fully the concept of sustainability and its understanding within the community. The installation was designed to be presented in a black box, providing a place and space for Festival-goers to be immersed in local stories pertaining to their environment. Stories were collected from the community in the two months leading up to the event and used to create the installation. Over the course of the weekend, people were also invited to participate by having their story recorded (and their feet wrapped in clay).

The result was a tribute to the resolve of the Council to present contemporary art in this new environment. The black box built into a corner of the indoor basketball court at Rowville Community Centre presented the stories and shoes of 94 people. Numbers were limited to five at a time to encourage immersion. Audience members donned wireless headphones and sat amongst the shoes while images collected from the Knox Historic Society, Museum Victoria, and other imagery, were projected onto the walls. Most surprising were the children, perhaps intrigued by the headphones, who sat, listened, and watched for the full 5½ minute loop. More than 1000 people visited the installation over the course of the two days and a further 20 had their stories recorded to be used in future presentations ... far beyond expectations.

Working with the public is always rewarding but also somewhat scary as you don't know what is going to happen and where you may be led. In this instance the diversity and sheer quantity of people who experienced the installation was uplifting. The concept that contemporary art is inaccessible and irrelevant to everyday life was clearly debunked. There are obviously many more ways in which art can find a place to function in the public arena.

www.touchthisearthlightly.com

