



## Redfern-Waterloo Tour of Beauty

ANNEKE JASPERS interviews SQUATSPACE

Since 2005, the artist collective SquatSpace has been running a site-specific, performative art project called the *Redfern-Waterloo Tour of Beauty*. The tour is a multi-platform, iterative work that responds to the changes currently taking place in Redfern and Waterloo under the jurisdiction of the Redfern Waterloo Authority (RWA). As an ongoing process of consultation and exchange, the tours provide a platform for the discussion of these changes from a variety of perspectives, providing participants with a first-hand experience of the local area and of the conflicting community interests the RWA's intervention both amplifies and overcomes.

The most recent tour was staged in conjunction with the project *If You See Something, Say Something*, which took place in Sydney and Melbourne throughout January and February.<sup>1</sup> *If You See Something, Say Something* examined relationships between art and social action, and was grounded in the issue of art's capacity to generate change. The *Tour of Beauty* likewise shares these concerns. In addition to tracing, revealing and publicising the environmental changes taking place in a local community, the tour also strives to generate a social and discursive space in which changes on many other levels might occur, for example: shifts in personal perspective; in the dynamic between different community stakeholders; in the

way people (both local and otherwise) might understand their relationship to place; and in attitudes towards, and understandings of, the work of artists.

The following are extracts from a longer conversation in which members of SquatSpace speak about the *Tour of Beauty* in more depth.

**AJ: The tour seems to interrogate the conventional manner in which 'artists-in-residence' engage with their local community, given many members of SquatSpace live in the Redfern-Waterloo area. How has this aspect of personal implication informed the development of the project?**

Nobody: It gives a purpose to the project, and the whole project feeds from our direct relationship with the place. The fact we live in the area means we get to see the developments and the changes firsthand. Our opinion is not a third-person opinion; we have a first person relationship with the project.

If you do a socially engaging work in your own neighbourhood then you care how people respond to it because you have to live in that neighbourhood. You're doing something that you actually have to live with. The tour is about getting involved with the locals in a lot of ways.

Keg: A lot of us have lived in Redfern for a while and so we have a strong, ongoing connection and we're drawing from what we know already, rather than going to a new place where you're only just learning about the area and where those initial reactions are what shape the residency. It allows you think about it in a long-term way.

Mickie Quick: It's about an artist-in-residence that's not an exotic one. For SquatSpace, the important thing is that the 'artist' bit disappears and it's just 'in residence'. We're doing the kinds of things local residents do anyway, like making observations about changes to the local environment.

**AJ: Could you describe some of the ways the tour has evolved in relation to your own objectives for the work?**

Mickie Quick: Strangely I think the tour doesn't evolve in some ways, or it doesn't seem to on the surface. In some strange way we almost got the formula really good really early on, and we kind of repeat it, though there are all these slight changes... We have definitely learnt that some people are better than others at telling their story and including visitors in the story.

Lucazoid: I suppose an immediate response would be that we began the tours out of complete ignorance. We actually began them because we didn't know what the hell else to do. We were so fearful of making a definitive statement in an art gallery (even though most of us live in the area)—it's such a complex thing, how do you make an artwork out of it?

On the most recent tour, we missed having Michael<sup>2</sup> at the last site and that was interesting because instead of having a speaker we had no speaker. So that meant that we were left to our own devices to have a discussion, rather than relying on the authoritative voice of the speaker. Which I think is a really good thing. After that, we talked about how we should keep that element of being left to our own devices.

This brought us in, which is important. Although we quite like the idea of being facilitators or DJs who just kind of put on the discs rather than actually take an active role, it is good to put ourselves out there sometimes. Eventually, after a year and half, we have

become a bit like authorities ourselves in a way and it's nice to be forced to...

Nobody: ...to take a position, to voice an individual presence. When we had the 'no speaker' stop on the tour we actually talked ourselves and it was very interesting when we got comments from our tourists that were questioning our underlying way of running the tours: the perception that the tours basically present developers as a bunch of fuckers.

Mickie Quick: Well, it's certainly more complex than that... To a point the tour allows you to come to that opinion yourself, but I certainly understand how it could seem like it's set up to be very anti-developer, because that's what our own individual opinions happen to be.

**AJ: One of the things I've been thinking about lately is the relationship between some types of socially engaged art practices and the idea of the parasite, particularly in terms of the process of co-occupying, and correspondingly the creation of an alternative 'position'. In this sense the parasite can act as an agent of disruption in existing systems. The other aspect of parasitism that springs to mind is mimesis, and mimicry as a subversive strategy, which seems pertinent to SquatSpace's parody of the tour format. Is the idea of the parasite an appropriate model for thinking through the way the tour functions?**

Keg: It's symbiosis in a way. Maybe it's not so essential, but the project does feed back into the local community, for example, we've made friends with our speakers over the tours and the information we gather is shared so that other people can get involved with other little struggles happening in Redfern.

Sr Joan: It widens their networks and ours too.

Mickie Quick: There's definitely similar mimicry in a way. Like this mapping project (SquatSpace's contribution to *If You See Something, Say Something*) could be an RWA project to try and get something for their Annual Report or something like that—a few images to splash around. There's definitely a similar style, a social research thing... I don't know if it's obvious that it's different, but one of the things Ross Smith (a regular speaker on the tour) always goes on about is that one of the features of Redfern-Waterloo is that it has been prodded at by all manner of anthropologists and social workers. We seem to be doing a similar thing, but it hasn't got that icky agenda. Definitely, well hopefully, we have a more clearly beneficial agenda.

Lucazoid: But we don't really know what that agenda is, do we.

Keg: Maybe that's the point. Maybe we're not doing it for a particular reason.

Lucazoid: I think the point is that the parasite is something that comes from the outside and latches on to something, and this links into the question about being an artist-in-residence. Arlene TextaQueen talks about this in her article in the *If You See Something, Say Something* newspaper. Her clearest point is that she regards the portraits that she does of people as '...a whole special lucky experience of knowing the people I draw and I share. I don't feel like we are finally shouting our voices to the world. I mean, haven't we been shouting to each other? And we are the world.'

So it's not this separate idea that there's this artist standing aside

Above left: The Tour Minibus. Photo: Ali Blogg.

Above right: The *Tour of Beauty* project in *If You See Something, Say Something*. Photo: Peetsa Inamoto.



from the world and then yelling at the world that it should change. What she's saying is 'we take responsibility for the fact that we actually are part of that world', that we're just as much part of it as everybody else. And I think that's something that artists struggle with a lot, because we see ourselves as separate, and as subaltern and marginalised. But at the same time we're privileged. There's something pretty humble about the *Tour of Beauty* project, because it has no clear outcome, it's constantly evolving and we don't really have a clear idea of where it's going—it's a bit woolly in that way.

**AJ: How does SquatSpace reflect on and evaluate the outcomes of the project?**

Mickie Quick: At the end of a tour I feel on a real high, and the day is full of a new set of histories and stories that keep enriching the project. We end up at the pub reflecting on what new, magic thing has happened. Every tour seems to have something new and interesting that ends up generating great conversation at the pub afterwards.

Sr Joan: Which is why it's so much better than those organised types of tours, because they usually follow a formula in order to be successful, whereas ours is unscripted. The format is more open, not so much to criticism, but to feedback. In a gallery it's just so hard to achieve this.

Nobody: In galleries feedback is often masked by the 'aura' of the artwork. People think 'maybe I didn't understand it'.

Lucazoid: We have had feedback that we've acted upon. Like one person said 'it's a really amazing tour but you're over-representing one particular point of view'. What led us to finding Jenny Munroe

Above: Ross Smith on the *Tour of Beauty*. Photo: Mickie Quick.  
Facing page: Jack Barton speaking on the *Tour of Beauty*. Photo: Ali Blogg.

was that someone said 'well, you know, you need a woman's voice down at The Block' and then we actively went out looking for one. It's not as if you ever come with a perfect final model.

I think the thing that Keg said about feedback is interesting because part of the reason we were so trepidatious about working with Redfern as the subject of an art project, is that it's such a contentious area—how can you possibly have something to say about it? But one way that you can is by owning your own personal experiences in relation to it, and this tour actually gives all the people that come on it their own personal experience that they own that they can talk about with authority and don't have to tiptoe around.

**AJ: If You See Something, Say Something was specifically focused on researching, archiving and publishing as key methodologies for artists—processes that are clearly linked to the concept of pedagogy. In what way does the *Tour of Beauty* examine ideas about the hierarchies inherent in pedagogic practices? And how does it aim to reconfigure the approach to pedagogy that's pervasive in museums and galleries?**

Nobody: We try not to actually 'teach' anything, but rather have the people teach themselves. The whole idea is to present the situation as it is via the voice of other speakers, and let the tour participants make up their own minds. So we try not to be teachers.

Mickie Quick: Absolutely. I feel that when it comes to politics and 'wicked problems' like Redfern, people are uneasy about being preached at by any particular group with an agenda, and somehow our way of learning—of learning *with* our guests—doesn't have the objective of us wanting them to learn a particular thing. There's so much that's open-ended about the tour; we really do allow people to learn for themselves.



Nobody: We do act as facilitators to keep the content of the tour on track in terms of addressing the issues, which could be seen as pedagogical in that it is directing the conversation, trying to maintain a tight narrative.

Lucazoid: And I do think we have somewhat increasing confidence to be able to intervene in those ways with our speakers as we go along. We also hope that our 'tourists' feel free to do this at any time anyway, which they often do. So *we're* learning—in a pedagogical sense—about what people want to hear about as well. It's not just completely passive, like a curriculum that is already set. The learning part of the tour is not actually just about the information presented, it's about being present and experiencing these intense moments of exchange in a real place. Also, because it's amateurish, it gives a sense of accessibility, and sometimes the tourists end up contributing as speakers because it's not so intimidating and doesn't position the teacher as some sort of special person; they're just a normal person who is fallible and human and so on.

**AJ: The project seems to articulate quite a unique point of convergence between current discourses concerning public art, relational aesthetics, and the relationship between art and politics. How does the tour navigate between these frameworks?**

Keg: It's definitely possible to talk about the work in this way, but I don't feel the need to go into that, or to speak about it in that 'art language' because the tour is not an art tour per se. We don't pitch it as an art project.

Mickie Quick: In a way I do think about it. The work is so public, we really are aware of what the tour bus looks like and we know that it's operating in an open public space as a kind of performance... We just hate talking about it as art, don't we! I mean, the word that I like in that question is 'public', public spectacle, public activity...

Lucazoid: But I think from the point of view of art people, the tour does have something to contribute. Definitely there is an implicit critique of the way that art objects are dumped and left to fend for themselves in public space, that aren't site specific.

**AJ: For *If You See Something, Say Something* SquatSpace also contributed a map project to the exhibition at Mori Gallery. Could you talk a little about the relationship between the map project and the *Tour of Beauty*?**

Lucazoid: The mapping project grew out of the *Tour of Beauty*. We were looking for a way that people could do their own tours, utilising the network of local connections we've been developing. So we had a notion to make a customised map and podcast you could walk around with. But we wanted to make the map a bit richer than just the individual nine or ten sites we visit on the tour, which is why we decided to open it up for wider contributions. We have no idea how we might collate and incorporate the maps people have completed so far, but in any case, this mapping project seems to have taken on a life of its own, beyond the DIY tour idea.

1. [www.ifouseesomethingsaysomething.net](http://www.ifouseesomethingsaysomething.net)

2. Michael King, who often speaks on the tour at Crystal Waters, a new private housing development on the eastern edge of Waterloo. Michael's particular focus is on civic space, citizenship, urban aesthetics, gay politics, and gentrification.