

Bianca Hester

Text for Australian Centre for Contemporary Art 'rewind series' regarding the exhibition: *please leave these windows open to enable the fans to draw in cool air during the early hours of the morning* from 2010.

– Leave the windows open....

This project involved marking out an arena for action. This action was distributed across a range of registers including the sculptural, spatial, institutional and social. Physicality was acutely asserted through the presence of sculptural elements such as a cinder-block wall, a sandstone boulder and ten cubic meters of dirt. At the same time that materiality was emphasized, one major concern was to solicit change by initiating interruptions involving bodies both human and non-human who were invited to activate or perform the work, intermittently. This was in order to set the whole project into motion and position change-fullness as the work's subject.

The work become different each time it was engaged depending on what was going on (or not), who happened to be present, or which invigilator was hosting. We've learnt from the 60's and the associated 'performative turn' in much contemporary art that this is the case for all artwork, that the social context of perception effectively co-produces the work. From this perspective, art is not determined in advance, but emerges perpetually through processes of encounter. This inevitably depends on how you come at it – and according to your position. This makes it a really slippery situation. I wanted this work to exaggerate and 'exhibit' this slippery process.

There was an indeterminacy built into the structure of this work which allowed for the possibility of relationships within it to be set into motion, opening the work up to the possibility of an ongoing process of negotiation. This negotiation took place between all involved: including its audiences, invigilators, the invited performers, the curators, and myself.

As a consequence of this, the work became an ever-changing situation demanding a constant 'tending'. Like a garden, which calls out for compost, light, heat, water, pollen, seed – this project was not a thing to finish that could then be walked away from – but a complicated (and at times intensely

challenging situation) which provoked persistent engagement, re-thinking, negotiating, experiment. I think this occurred because of the informality that was built into it, an informality that opened the work up to processes and encounters unforeseeable in advance. This approach was emphasised by the sign posted near the threshold of the project that stated "ACTIONS WILL OCCUR INTERMITTENTLY".

This sign emphasized an ambiguity between the artwork and its support – what was and wasn't the art object, what the audience could and couldn't do, what might or might not happen. This was not set in advance but required negotiation. Some people negotiated in lively and experimental ways, others more quietly, or passively. It doesn't matter how - because by simply being present, one enters into the process of bringing the work into being.

As the exhibition continued, inscriptions of actions that charted bodily engagements had been accruing steadily upon a range of surfaces in the form of skid marks on the floor where cyclists had ridden, blue scuff markings where a metal hoop had been rotated along the stretch of a white wall, and residues of mud and manure from a horse who entered the work now and again, gracing the situation with his earthy smell and energizing presence. The work accumulated traces and these traces became a kind of score for future action – provoking further responses that involved audiences (and other artists) to elaborate some of the work's latent potentialities. At the end of the exhibition the interior was thoroughly permeated with traces of processes that worked to test the limits of the work and its architectural support, in turn.

This project has had a significant impact on me. It has brought the question of an 'ethics of engagement' into the forefront of my thinking and practice. I've come to understand that the opportunity for making work is a gift – a gift of space, time and engagement in order to test out what's possible for how we might experiment with co-producing space and therefore our social and institutional relations. What this project provoked was to experiment with being 'open' to forces, energies, processes and challenges that are unforeseeable in advance – to occurrences that emerge within the pulse of a situation or which enter into the frame from the outside, unexpectedly. However, to allow the outside to enter in, an opening must first be fashioned. A metaphoric door or a window needs to be left ajar. Elaborating this idea, In the essay *Personal*

Support: how to care?, Jan Verwoert discusses the painting of Saint Jerome by Niccolo Antonio Colantonio and Lorenzo Monaco, depicting Saint Jerome removing a thorn in the paw of a lion who has happened to enter into his study. Verwoert's observation is that the most poignant gesture offered by Saint Jerome is not the performance of care enacted by the thorn's removal, but the fact that St Jerome left the door of his study open *in the first place*, and was then compelled to deal 'with what came in' (Verwoert, *Personal Support*, 172). In asking that the windows be (both actually and metaphorically) left open, we are also committing to taking responsibility for hosting what enters. For me this is about an ethic of response, suggesting a *commitment* to being responsive no matter *what* happens to enter – no matter how different or unsettling this may be to the plans that we fashion in advance. In committing to responding, what gets affirmed is the willingness to firstly encounter, and secondly to grapple with that which enters, even when we are uncertain, and most likely radically unprepared.

The opportunity to develop this project and to come to terms with what it demanded has had a significant impact on me and continues to inform my working processes. This is especially so in relationship to considering an 'ethics of entanglement'. As an artist, I acknowledge the opportunity and responsibility for experimenting with how (public) space might be co-produced and therefore our social and institutional relations.