

LOOKING AT THE BILLBOARD

Gavin Malone and Lee Salomone

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One of the themes Walter Benjamin proposed in his 1928 essay *Der Flaneur, Das Passagen-Werk*, is a vision of the city as an interior or house where the neighbourhoods are like different rooms, and the advertising signs are like pictures on the walls of a living room.

Whilst the use of billboards is well-known, the opportunity for a large number of artists to resolve a work on the scale of a billboard in an urban everyday street environment is a challenge.

Looking at the Billboard developed from recognising an opportunity; two six metre by three metre billboards at Aroha Tce, Forestville, an inner suburb of Adelaide, had been under-utilised and negotiations with the owners, Australian Posters, led to them being made available for a year at no cost for use as a public art space. Approaches to the Contemporary Art Centre and the Experimental Art Foundation provided in principle support for the concept, which made negotiations for further support from other organisations easier. Acting as facilitators but not curators we established guidelines for the project: open to all but with an emphasis on emerging artists, a one month period for each work to enable reasonable exposure but provide maximum participation, each artist responsible for the concept and implementation of their own work.

To assist with overhead costs, financial assistance was sought and gained from the Art for Public Places Program (SA) and a Pat Corrigan Artist Grant. As the billboards face the Adelaide to Glenelg tramline discussions were held with the State Transport Authority to assist with the promotion of the project to the tram commuters, a major audience, with over a million passenger journeys each year.

Submissions for use of the billboards were invited by word of mouth, letters of invitation to artists whom we knew might be interested and an advertisement in the art magazine, *Broadsheet*. There was a very positive response and the space available was soon fully subscribed. There being no curated theme or infrastructure support such as materials, ladders etc each artist has the challenge and responsibility of resolving the work and the level of resources required. Thus participants can apply for external funding and sponsorships if the scale of the work so demands or resolve it within their own resources.

The cost of hiring the billboards would have been more than \$5000 for the year, prohibitive for most artists. Gaining access for a month or so as an individual would also be difficult, thus the communal format of the project has enabled a broad participation. Costs associated with openings of exhibitions have also been avoided. What is planned however is to have an exhibition 'closing' in the form of a street party where all the works will be projected onto a billboard and a wide audience invited to attend.

The process of producing public art from a personal concept can often be complex. In this project it needn't be so. One artist sought donations of unused house paints through an article in the local newspaper. His materials were items that might otherwise have been dumped and his costs were his time only. Other artists are choosing to seek financial support from funding organisations, not only to provide for material costs but also provide an artist's fee. The project itself was not structured to make payments to artists for their work, but artists can use it as a vehicle to attract fees. The small general grants provided for a communal public liability policy to protect artists, something which for an individual would be prohibitively expensive.

The project enables artists to be aware of and negotiate the requirements for making public art outside of the gallery and brings to the fore issues such as public liability, the need for local council approval for certain activities and the physical process of taking a personal idea into the public domain. It was necessary to draw up a "Conditions of Use" agreement to make artists aware of issues such as violation of copyright, public obscenity etc., to be aware of rights and obligations in public practice. A hassle perhaps but all part of art practice in contemporary society. One of the aims of the project was to devolve the responsibility of creating a new work each month to the artists, enabling them to develop a wide range of contacts, activities and skills for the presentation of their art through

their own effort, e.g. the seeking and negotiation of sponsorships, organising public exposure of their work through the popular and arts media etc. As co-ordinators we are documenting the individual works with the intention of making a small booklet, copies of which will be lodged in appropriate institutions to provide a permanent record of the project.

Looking at the Billboard is a stepping-stone for many, including us, to build experience and confidence to further pursue art practice, to gain exposure, make contacts and, for some, to gain financial income. It is also making a contribution to maintaining a healthy and viable art scene in our own community, providing work and engaging audiences outside the gallery.