CONCERN

STUART KOOP

For three consecutive years, Steve Bennett and Adam Croser set up a pancake parlour on the South Coast Track in the middle of the Tasmanian Wilderness. The Track runs for over 85 kilometres along the southern-most coastline of Tasmania. It's one of the most remote, inaccessible and beautiful tracks in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. It traverses sandy beaches, precipitous mountains, swampland, heathland and rocky coastline. High winds, hail, sleet and snow are possible even in summer. During heavy seas and high tides, sections of the track are inundated by ocean waves with rain falling every second day on average. It's a demanding but rewarding walk, originally cut in 1905 as an escape route for shipwrecked sailors.

Steve and Adam set up their cafe in the middle of the Track. They provided walkers with fresh coffee and pancakes served at tables lined up along a picturesque lagoon. They served about three hundred people over a two-week period each year, accumulating about nine hundred stories. It cost them each $500, their only motivations to forge some kind of community in the middle of nowhere and stay in the one beautiful spot for a long time. All they asked for in return was a story.

From their pancake stand it was six days' hard walk out in one direction to Cockle Creek, and one day's walk in the other direction to Melaleuca where a light plane could land in good weather [otherwise another five days' walk to Scotts Peak]. Everything was flown and carted in. Such hospitality under duress at the margins of civilisation, set amidst the wild and totally indifferent landscape of remote Australia, marked a momentary intersection of storylines from all over the world. Steve and Adam held things and people in place just long enough to establish relationships beyond the simple passing encounters typical of the trail, but not so long as to maintain a 'camp' [that stage before 'settlement', from which all civilisation at the frontier springs]; a wonderful coda to settlement in Australia.

Perhaps it's also paradigmatic of the perpetual search for community. The critic Kobena Mercer reckons:

> Community has come to be a keyword of contemporary life not because we all live in one but because most of us do not; it is the lack of it that makes it valued, it is the loss of it that makes it desired, it is the envisioning of it that makes it real.[1]

I'm not sure about that last point since I reckon artists need to do more than envision community in order to bring it on. But, sure, art can certainly describe community. However, recently it also seems to generate it. This is clearer when we address contemporary art according to its social aspect, where it appears in the fleeting, occasional conjunction of artists, audience, producers, manufacturers, users, passengers, contractors, employers, employees, that is, whoever is involved in the conception, design, production and reception of art, and whatever their role. From which perspective, the artist doesn't address community, as much as the artwork defines a community of endeavour around it.

This seems the predominant point of a so-called 'theory of relational aesthetics', which has been advanced here and there over the past five years by critic Nicholas Bourriaud, [also co-director of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris]. Bourriaud suggests that 'the inter-human sphere and the service industries constitute the universe to which this generation of artists refers, just as the world of consumption and industrial infrastructure did for Pop art and Minimalism.' He's talking about Rirkrit Tiravanija turning the gallery into a kitchen or lounge for audiences. He's talking about art that only works in an encounter, sometimes even a contract, with other people.

He writes:

> Artists seek interlocutors. Since the public is a somewhat unreal entity within the economy of contemporary art, this interlocutor is usually brought into the production process itself as a result of a phone call, an advertisement, or a chance encounter. The meaning of the work emerges from the movement linking the sign put out by the artist, but also from the collaboration of individuals within the exhibition space. As Karl Marx wrote, reality is none other than the result of what we do together. The relational aesthetic integrates this reality.[2]

– which is the capacity of art to bring people together, to rally them on whatever scale, to promote interaction or exchange. Which is distinct from its ability to affect people individually in large numbers and in quick succession, as happens in a museum with visitors filing past a work on display, from which the Directors conclude the public demand for and social relevance of art.

It's also distinct from simply attending some event en masse, although twice in recent memory I have sat in the bleachers with others to properly address some massive public art event, and witnessed instead an apotheosis of art. The first time, at the Memorial Drive tennis courts in Adelaide as part of the *1998 Adelaide Festival* when Ben Morieson and Danius Kesminas set alight the logos for the Festival's four major sponsors. The dramatic incineration took only minutes, simultaneously highlighting corporate support for public events and culture while magnificently destroying their effigies; a curious corporate blood-sport broadcast by one of the sponsors on the evening news.

The second time was at Docklands in Melbourne for *Burnout 2001* where Ben Morieson co-ordinated eight drivers to execute choreographed, interrelated burnouts. Tiered seating surrounded the arena, and an overhead camera suspended from a crane documented the action for live webcast. Drivers came on in pairs and performed for around three minutes each [the time it takes to burn out a set of tyres]. Announcing, Morieson compared the accumulating circlework to the brushwork of Pollock, or the sensibility of de Kooning; gestures, rhythm, pulse and so on, all the formalist tropes related to squealing, smoking, burning tyres.

In both these stunning confrontations, however, the audience remained undifferentiated; passively collected in the stands, the anonymous grouped subjects of an ambiguous spectacle. And evidently it seemed the only way that contemporary art could be maintained at a genuinely 'public' scale is through such an ambivalent register. Both these events therefore, dramatically and brilliantly staged the failure of public and visual art to foster any kind of commune beyond the mere congregation of viewers looking at the same thing.

On this basis one might propose a revised form of engagement between the artist and society; a strategic downsizing in art, and a restructuring of the roles and responsibilities that have typically characterised the relationship. It seems the role of artist is no longer to 'lead', certainly not with a flag, nor even to idealise certain social values in inspiring key images, events and actions. Social realism is long-gone, as is that particular positive, illustrative role of the artist. Certainly, the impetus for a lot of contemporary art now comes from much smaller and temporary aggregates than social classes. As Saskia Bos said of her *2001 Berlin Biennale*: "it's not about the big ideological thoughts of the 1960s and 1970s, but about almost one to one relationships, about small, feasible Utopias." [3]

Emblematic here would be the workshops of A Constructed World with all sorts of groups [homeless youth, immigrant communities, people with schizophrenia] where collaborations commence with a discussion about the signs and symbols that might stand for members' ideas and beliefs. As such, their work researches the very formation or potential of community evident, or not, as the case may be, in small disparate groups, and is often a picture of conflict among groups, rather than a coherent unified representation.

Consider two recent workshops undertaken with a group of financial consultants in Philadelphia and some of the 'worst students in a failing school' in New York who, according to their teachers 'never did anything'. On the one hand, participants were privileged, successful professionals working for a leading international broker. On the other, kids far less endowed and with low self-esteem; indeed they were united only by their profound distrust of school, society and the world.

After days of disinterest and non-participation, the kids enacted a series of tableaux depicting significant life-events: as it turned out a series of violent images which left indelible impressions, such as gang murders, car crashes, drug offences. After some deliberation about presenting these in public, the images were printed in a small discrete, pocket-size publication which enabled the kids themselves to present the work when they chose, to whom they chose. On the other hand, the financiers produced several collaborative paintings representing the relations between themselves, the group, the organisation and the world that curiously, reflected organisational flow-charts. These were purchased for their company's high profile art collection and now sit alongside key works by name artists.

These are dramatically different representations rendered by different communities. They are not driven by a method or a format [and clearly there is little signature style in ACW's output]. They fall well short of universal meaning and accessibility and they function only on the basis of complex group dynamics. So their relevance to other audiences is largely exemplary, requiring a deeper understanding of the social relations that have determined them. And if – in this sense – images are coalescent social relations, then the increasing number and specificity of images of all kinds contributes to greater community involvement in the image culture, increasing the stake held by participants, converting passivity into activity.

This is a small but profound shift in emphasis with radical consequences for the definition of art and artists and public audience. It appears less like a conventional division of labour concerning making and presenting and admiring, than it does an equal and open exchange negotiated directly between people. So while I may agree to visit a gallery, or an artist may agree to show their work, we are nonetheless alienated from each other in doing so since both groups of people are often [mis]represented by another agency in-between [public gallery, dealer, writer]. Better then to deal directly with your audience and vice versa.

One of the first shows by the artist's collective DAMP involved a clothes swap with the audience, quite literally figuring an exchange of roles. For another performance, the group dressed the gathering of over 200 people in identical red T-shirts printed with 'DAMP Audience' across the front. DAMP have also used their role as artists to leverage the concerns and ideas of non-artists within the artworld through a series of exhibitions at public galleries over several years. They have presented photographic portraits of members of the outlying community, as well as video footage of the audience's favourite outlying locations. And they have often incorporated the desires and sentiments canvassed from audience members as the central messages in their work, whether they are screamed aloud by cheerleaders or written boldly across placards used in mock protest.

So, to the age-old and hoary question of what the public wants [social relevance], DAMP have countered with a retinue of demands straight from the horse's mouth, among them, as follows: All the boys I want, a boat to go sailing, job satisfaction, a new bike, more buses, freedom, and a chocolate iced donut that doesn't repeat. And in all their endeavours, they have returned the favours of patronage through explicit agreements, sending you flowers or taking you out to tea, or painting what you want them to in return, but not ever through assuming the public good in what they do as artists. Which is the problem with most public art.

A common graffiti around town by animal rights activists reads 'stop animal experiments'. That generic phrase was altered slightly and painted across a prominent mural in St. Kilda to read 'Stop mural experiments'. Of course it all turns on the alliteration between mural and animal; just as animals have been subjected to wanton experimentation for the good of society, so too, the public was subjected to the bold palette and figuration of civic-minded artists. The public didn't ask for it, they didn't vote for it, most probably didn't want it, but they got it anyway, like lab rats, courtesy of well-intentioned artists and commissioners with an unshakeable belief that art was good for people.

So what does the public want? I reckon the truth lies in further research by artists in the wake of public art and events, or rather in their margins; exactly in the myriad interactions of people with art and in the continuing research and responsiveness of artists. Indeed, somewhere in the background of *Burnout 2001*, collecting smoke in small glass vials, and selling 'donuts' from their ice-cream van, were members of the teacher/student collective Pedagogical Vehicle Project. [4] Dressed in their trademark white lab coats, they embodied, or play-acted, such pretensions to audience research, researching different, multiple audiences for art. In the spirit of Lube-mobile ["we'll come to you"] the group attended various public events providing a dubious service in order to prove [or disprove as the case may be] art's social utility.

Annagramafon involved the group spelling out anagrams of the word pedagogical at a local football match. Where one would expect to find team colours and players names along the boundary line or behind the goals, their banners spelt out unrelated and inconguent phrases. At Melbourne's annual agricultural show, the group led livestock in the grand parade on the central arena and awarded their own prizes. And at a concert by the rock group Slayer, they provided fans with a photo opportunity next to diminutive cardboard cut-outs of the band.

From the outset these interventions are proposed as some kind of free public service, as if art had a purpose. Yet the benign, doubtful service provided in each case is most often regarded as a hostile, threatening action and the group is regularly moved on by police and security staff. In the real public domain it doesn't matter that you're an artist; the distinction between artist and audience is irrelevant.

For example, here's a photo by a seven year old kid from Vietnam called Qui, part of a photographic project 'Special' for new arrivals at the Western English Language School in Melbourne. [5] He's been in Australia a year. It's a picture he took of a jigsaw puzzle his Uncle gave him of New York City including the twin towers, which are no longer standing. He can't speak English well, but he can haltingly explain what happened on September 11; it's what makes his puzzle now remarkable [that and the fact that he did it all by himself].

World events trickle down in unusual, fascinating ways for everyone, and collective experience is often easily eclipsed by a profusion of singularities. This is one of the most profound images I've seen in the last few years for all sorts of reasons, and it's not by an artist. Which is not to say art is irrelevant but that the scale of its import is reduced, its sphere of influence no longer aggrandised as it once was. It competes for social relevance with the views of everyone in the audience, everyone in the world.

While artists regularly fail at social engagement, and a few might succeed, what remains irreducible in any attempt is of primary importance: 'concern'. Principally, as I reckon it, concern is the basis for a changing mode of leadership for artists and for the arts, commensurate with similar changes in business and political behaviour. The leader then, according to management theorists, is no longer at the front, but more in the middle, forging community, sustaining a vital sense of it. Perhaps the leader is even at the back, a 'servant leader' as Robert K. Greenleaf espouses, catching everybody up, making sure no-one is left behind, setting up a temporary camp in the middle of nowhere.

Notes
1. Kobena Mercer, *Imagine All the People: Constructing Community Culturally, Imagined Communities*, [exhibition catalogue], ed. Richard Hylton, London: South Bank Centre/Cornerhouse, 1995
2. Nicholaus Bourriaud, 'Relational Aesthetics', *Berlin Biennale*, Oktagon, 2002
3. Saski Bos, *Berlin Biennale*, Oktagon, 2002
4. A Victorian College of the Arts elective run by Danius Kesminas and Callum Morton
5. Kids were taught the rudiments of photography and asked to record what was 'special' about their new 'home'. The project was co-ordinated by Julie Spencer and conducted by Nicola Loder. It included exhibitions at Gabriel Gallery, Footscray Community Arts Centre and the Immigration Museum, Melbourne, as well a publication