

The Picnic

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss a collaborative, interactive public art project called ***The Picnic*** that was performed simultaneously as an event in various locations. This paper examines relationships between conceptual art and community building practices by using ***The Picnic*** as a model of a participatory art practice that connects people, places and ideas of urban cultural activity.

INTRODUCTION

My name is Caroline McCaw and I live in Dunedin, in the South Island of New Zealand. ***The Picnic*** formed part of my studio research for a Masters of Fine Arts for which I hope to complete the thesis writing this year. I am a graphic designer, an artist working in time-based media and a University teacher as well as a student. I manage a weekly publication and I have a five year old son. I am also an activist on local and national arts advocacy and employment issues. At home I am the self-appointed activities officer. All my work activities have in common a commitment to a kind of cultural practice which aims to include the reader or viewer as a collaborator through their experience of the work.

In this paper I discuss aspects of ***The Picnic*** to describe some of the ways and means that my cultural practice takes shape.

THE PROJECT

The Picnic can be described as a multimedia art event or series of happenings during a four hour period on October 14 2000. ***The Picnic*** event was situated in four urban locations around New Zealand, with a live performance webcast from Amsterdam.

There were over 70 artists who installed new works, interactive environments, or set up games or performances for the day, all loosely based on the theme of a picnic.

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The Picnic was group negotiated conceptual art with very physically located manifestations which the audience as "picnicker" visited, in some cases identified or played with, in other cases drank tea with.

Each site worked differently. Encompassing four cities (small in international terms) and a port town, it was impossible for any one person to see every work. Some works were very temporary, and distances between the cities were large. It was even impossible to arrange for every work to be photographed; people in each city engaged with the event very differently, different cultures with different urban rules.

I was in Dunedin on the day so as a brief introduction, my description of the project starts as a snapshot of my experiences.

In Dunedin the events began at Arc Cafe, a cafe and local arts venue that also acts as a kind of meeting place for people involved in the arts community.

The cafe also offers five free internet terminals, and so created a site for exploring the picnic's digital side, a website with digital works and an online text-based environment known as a MOO or a MUSH, which loosely described the trails of works in the various cities. Each of the cities had identified public access internet for this associated online exploration.

To begin with potential picnickers gathered at Arc Cafe to watch the live webcast from Amsterdam then picked up event maps and began a walking trail through the inner city, starting with performances in an installation upstairs at the Blue Oyster Gallery. There is a surplus of inner city office space in Dunedin and the building that this cafe and gallery are housed in is otherwise fairly empty.

For ***The Picnic*** a number of artists had set up in empty rooms in the building: a nylon fabric maze, a contemporary dance, performance art and minigolf. There was also a children's event at the cafe's venue, called the Teddy Bears' Picnic which coincided with a children's birthday party that had also been booked in the cafe on that day. Picnickers spent about an hour exploring the activities in the building,

before following walking trails to find works which had been installed in public places around the inner city. A light wind had meant that some of the works had been relocated into more sheltered spots. This enhanced the aspect of discovery, and in most cases green fluorescent posters (mimicking street signs) pointed the way to help picnickers at intersections. Mostly though, picnickers themselves had to negotiate and decide when it was they had reached a picnic place or had entered the fiction.

Art as a Collaborative process

In all my work, as a graphic designer, artist and educator, I value and incorporate collaborative processes. As an arts publication designer this has taken shape by employing post-structuralist theory and methodologies, to use the written text as an open rather than closed structure, and using design practices such as collage and cut-up, to employ free-floating compositions which require negotiation by the reader, and a personal contribution to complete the relationship of “written” and “read”.

The Picnic as an art project also employed methods akin to the cultural production used by the media. We produced our own media: posters, stickers, flyers and maps, and documentation of the event and works (the only way an audience or participant could experience the breadth of all the work and activities) were produced as a book and interactive CDROM (on display at the PDC exhibition).

Both the event’s production and “consumption” were the result of collaborative processes. As curator I relied on artists in various locations to collaborate and the event was the sum of the artists (unnamed) works. Likewise the audience became collaborators, participating in enacting the concept of the event, and in the recognition of *The Picnic*, both as an event and as a collection of works.

The Picnic encouraged multiplicity and metamorphosis both within the art objects and processes and the viewers’ experiences of them. As a cultural process *The Picnic* produced conversations as a tool to help picnickers make sense of their experiences, both current and in memories.

In Dunedin small crowds of picnickers gathered and on discovering new public art experiences, told stories about picnics they had been to and how the day’s event and experiences compared. Spontaneous picnickers joined in at the event, both artists and audience. It was difficult at times to tell pieces apart, which parts were nominated art works, and which parts were coincidental...just like our memories when we story tell, sampling aspects from other stories, and tales which leak into the next chapter. An example was a tent expo erected on a traffic island in the centre city which many picnickers assumed was an elaborate art environment, but really was a trade display. New Zealanders are really fond of

camping, and the tents served as an identification prompt in the same way as the works of art.

In Regards to Aesthetics

The works and artists of *The Picnic* were connected by the theme of a picnic, but one set in the streets of the city rather than the more traditional park or countryside. The works and activities therefore were a way of reinscribing urban spaces and artists relationships with each other and with potential audiences. The use of new media and digital environments further enhanced a type of relationship which may be distant yet intimate, a conceptual way of knowing through simultaneous yet geographically distant textual relations.

In the 1960s conceptual artist Vito Acconci began to infer interaction with the audience by using the gallery space as a community meeting place. Acconci said: “[By choosing to] use the gallery space as the place where art actually occurred...I was shifting my concentration from “art-doing” to “art-experiencing”: an artwork would be done specifically *for* a gallery- in other words, for a peopled space, for a space in which there are gallery goers. The gallery, then, could be thought of as a community meeting place, a place where a community could be formed, where a community could be called to order, called to a particular purpose.”ⁱ *The Picnic* literally “performed” Vito Acconci’s idea of using the peopled aspect of a gallery as site. (Although in the case of *The Picnic* many of these “sites” were shifted from the traditional gallery to the street.) The art work shifts position and register from a noun to a verb, requiring action to be complete and as a result the works also shift in ownership. For Henry Sayre there is a paradoxical experience of the (absent artists’)/work for the audience, which may be recognized as a shift in emphasis and experience from the (art) object to the (art) experience.

In this sense the aesthetic qualities of the art works were not necessarily recognized in relation to each work as a discrete art object (nor necessarily its named creator), but in how works contributed as recognition devices, both in relation to the project’s theme and in the urban context of a series of public art works.

The Picnic can also be seen as a New Zealand style urban manifestation of the Fluxus idea of intermedia, which Dick Higgins described as “work whose structures determined the textures of the spaces between media”ⁱⁱ This means *The Picnic* allowed the textures of urban habitation/experiences to be examined through the conceptual relationship of art works and performances, inscribing a way of creating social action and life activity as aesthetic terms of value.

In the case of *The Picnic* some aspects showed how this

process can be identified, even when it isn't "working" in the way it the artists intended. In Wellington, New Zealand's capital city a Dunedin artist, Layla Rudneva Mackay had flown up to install and document the event. Wellington as a picnic destination was however plagued with theft. The maps and posters which were sent by courier days in advance were all stolen, after being delivered to the wrong address. The works too were stolen quickly by passersby, and although we didn't expect them to be left at the end of the day, the speed of the theft was surprising. Layla often had to run to take a photograph in case works were stolen before she had finished setting up her camera. In other cases security guards would clean works away immediately as in the case of the works placed outside Te Papa, The National Museum of New Zealand.

Meanwhile in Dunedin some people were beginning to complain. "This isn't a picnic, this is a wild goose chase!" grumbled one woman, who nevertheless was catching the free bus to Port Chalmers to find out more. Port Chalmers is a small old settler town, still kept alive by the shipping activity. The activities here were focussed at first in the local Town Hall. Musicians played and a beach theme prevailed, and people sat in the sun, drinking beer, and trying to decide if today the picnic experience was true to their personal stories and expectations.

In both these situations whether or not the public were responding in ways intended by the artists, their experiences nevertheless involved aesthetic recognition and negotiation as well as social activity, as a result of the art event.

In terms of Interactivity

In terms of interactivity *The Picnic* as a conceptual art practice is also a very urban one, a way of reinscribing (through art actions) a social relationship with the city. *The Picnic* incites public art action, using the city as a place to reinscribe cultural action activating viewers as participants in picnic-like activities. A picnic after all is not the type of event where one can attend as an audience member alone. When one accepts the invitation to join a picnic, as a social ritual, it is with the inscribed willingness to participate in that ritual, to become a member of that cultural grouping, albeit temporarily.

The Picnic through creating art trails through urban spaces encouraged artist and audience alike to participate in a Situationist derive-type experience which became a new way of experiencing relations with the cityscape.

My experiences of the event have led me to reflect on the

idea that community-building practices which result from interactivity are probably more successful in person-to person situations rather than through the media of connected computers, but once again, media-like relations have popularised a type of relationship (between people in different locations, sharing and understanding or "reading" of signs) which *The Picnic* as an art event sought to utilise. A community is "called to order" to enact the works, which became an empowering activity, providing a sense of possibility and exchange.

Nick Stevenson introduces the concept of cultural citizenship which is participatory and open to critique. "The power to name, construct meaning and exert control over the flow of information within contemporary societies" begins at a local level. He asserts that we should seek to form an appreciation of ways in which "ordinary" understandings become constructed, as a way of reclaiming the production of culture.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the Dunedin Railway Station a group of winged and feathered performers built a small fire in the foyer and began brewing a huge pot of tea. A number of tourists gathered around and waited for the tea to warm, Japanese tourists who had arrived by train, and senior citizens who had waved friends off at the bus waited and chattered together, while butoh dancer "Seagull Monkey Horse" and several musicians, settled lightly to entertain them. Real seagulls gathered outside on the Railway Station lawn to squawk at life-sized seagull models made out of slices of white bread squashed and moulded into seagull shapes. Eventually the performers and tourists were all able share together in the social ritual of drinking tea.

But I am telling you stories.

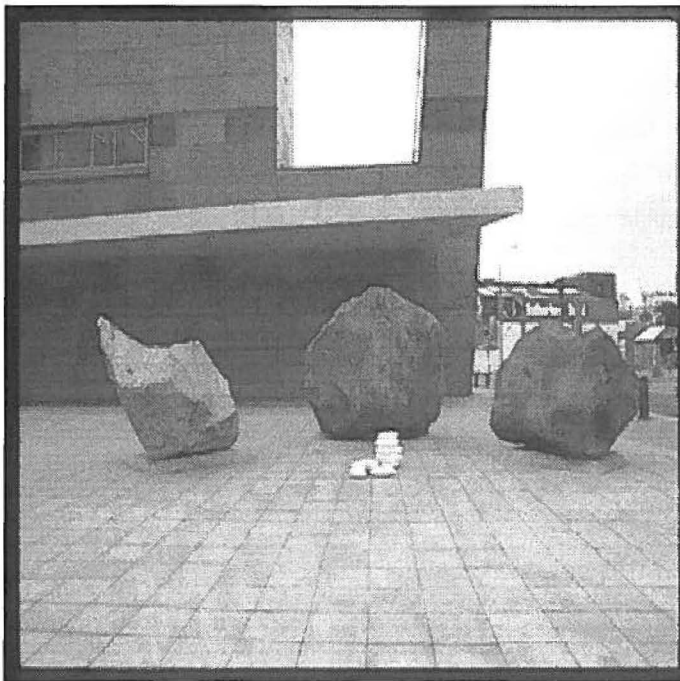
The Picnic was a sprawling and uncontrollable storytelling machine, and no matter who you talk to from the estimated audience of over 1000, you are bound to hear a tale which is quite different from any other.

In conclusion, *The Picnic*, through the use of conceptual and installation art practices, created an event which required participation at numerous levels, both conceptually, through active identification and through storytelling. The cultural actions produced by the event may be ongoing, enabling a rewriting of similar activities in urban spaces, and reproduced through conversations by the many audiences who participated, and through their activities "completing" the works.

ⁱ Sayre, Henry, M., The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970, University of Chicago Press 1989

ⁱⁱ Friedman, Ken (ed) The Fluxus Reader, in Part 2 Theories of Fluxus 'Zen Vaudeville: A Medi(t)ation in the Margins of Fluxus' by David T Doris p91, Academy editions, 1998, Sussex, UK

ⁱⁱⁱ Stevenson, Nick (ed), Culture and Citizenship Sage Publications, London UK, 2001 (from the Introduction by Nick Stevenson)



Litter (polystyrene rocks) by Douglas Kelaher, outside Te Papa, New Zealand's national museum, Wellington.



Space Lounging (live webcast performance), a Loop & Empress Production, Amsterdam.



Tea Party (interactive performance and installation) by Pipi and friends, Dunedin Railway Station, New Zealand.



Picnic Signage (fluorescent green posters) by Caroline McCaw, identifying directions and exhibits, New Zealand.