

# Art & Encounter 2014

## Beyond Audience Development: why do artists engage publics in participation?

A new annual symposium, *Art & Encounter* is aimed at generating public discussion and rigorous debate on key issues of practice for socially-engaged, participatory and live art today. Presented by Amy Spiers and James Oliver, the Centre for Cultural Partnerships in association with Footscray Community Arts Centre, and the Art, Social and Spatial Practice research cluster, Faculty of the VCA and MCM, University of Melbourne.

*Art & Encounter* is for artists and artist researchers who work in the expanding field of participatory and socially-engaged art, where artistic action is commonly practiced to intervene in the social. Each of these symposia will focus on a theme and provocation as their departure point, with keynote responses, enabling a broader platform for discussion and workshops that reflect on the cultural, social and political dimensions of art in the public realm.

There is now a burgeoning field of artistic practice occurring beyond the walls of theatres and galleries, opening up new modes of public participation, dialogue and engagement with the arts. Increasingly, art institutions, festivals and funding bodies embrace participatory and live art practices, celebrating the way they broaden accessibility to the arts and make art more relevant to society at large. In Australia, the broad arena of public and participatory art practices are experiencing a heyday, with the term “live art” and “socially-engaged art” now regularly appearing on arts festival programs across the country.

Experimental forms of participatory art do draw in new and seemingly diverse audiences. Artists, however, are also wary of aligning their practices with the marketing imperatives of audience development, with the rhetoric of “new audiences” easily equating to “bums on seats” that address the “box-ticking” and “bottom lines” of managerialism. Of course, Australian participatory artists do share a concern for bringing contemporary art to new audiences, forging new relations and bringing diverse publics together to share meaningful experiences. Nevertheless, it is problematic that participatory arts are so easily championed for pragmatic ends, aligning sociality with economic goals. Is there an unresolved tension where the critical practice implicit in participatory art might not sit so comfortably within a neoliberal consensus on development for the arts?

In *Art and Encounter 2014*, we launch the annual symposium by thinking, “beyond audience development” and asking, “why do artists engage publics in participation?”

Organisers Amy Spiers and James Oliver will invite artists and artist researchers who work in the expanded field of participatory art but align themselves with a range of disciplines (from contemporary art and community art to live and socially-engaged arts) to address these concerns. Speakers will be asked to chart their art historical and theoretical allegiances, their motivations for working in a participatory manner and their concerns and desires for the future of these kinds of art practice. The aim is to produce lively and constructive debate, locating the points where practices that might look outwardly similar actually diverge.

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