

## **Strength in numbers—life outside the studio**

Dr Debra Porch and Andrew Forsyth

### **Abstract**

*The paper, Strength in numbers—life outside the studio, is by the authorial team of Andrew Forsyth, BA Fine Arts Honours candidate and Debra Porch, Senior Lecturer, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane. The paper is presented as a conversation between the two authors to discuss the nature and importance of practice-based learning as a vital process in visual art. The authors are focusing on the collaborative project Papyrus, completed in September 2006 by seven sculpture/intermedia students from Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.*

### **Introduction**

Historically visual art disciplines and practices have been learned through studio-based teaching. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century emerges, so does the interest and importance of wider perimeters of visual learning, experience and achievement. The nature of the 'studio' too has shifted—in many cases it now takes the form of a digital camera, computer or other more portable device to ooze creativity through. Once the prominent issue surrounding 'studio' space centred on just that—physical space. Space now can be the office or room that portable multi-media equipment is plopped in. The physical space is temporal. Creativity is not fixed by location or architecture. The infinite amount and availability of creative information services have opened doors that one never imagined possible 30 years ago. The availability and (appreciation) for industry expertise has also shifted—visual artists can create and then commission a select or even total of their outcomes to be manufactured by industry. Thus one's expenses are no longer wrapped up in the physicality of space or equipment, but expounded through other means, including the ever-present internet.

This paper, *Strength in numbers—life outside the studio*, is by the authorial team of Andrew Forsyth, BA Fine Arts Honours candidate and Debra Porch, Senior Lecturer, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, Brisbane. The paper is presented as a conversation between the two authors to discuss the nature and importance of practice-based learning in visual art. The authors are focusing on the collaborative project *Papyrus*, completed in September 2006 by seven sculpture/intermedia students from Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.

### **Studio-based learning vs. practice-based learning – is there a difference?**

#### **The beginning of the *Papyrus* project.**

Seven final year sculpture/intermedia students were offered the opportunity to 'create an artwork' for the Brisbane Writers Festival – the work was to be outside, temporary,

collaborative and of course completed with no real funding. And – somehow to be conceptually related to the writer's festival—books, poems, text, authors.

The Brisbane Writers Festival has been the premier literary event in Queensland for over ten years that has showcased national and international writers. The annual event invites the general public to meet established and emerging writers who take part in panel discussions, book launches, interviews and more. The festival covers a broad range of topics on writing that includes fiction, history, fantasy, children's literature, poetry and playwriting. In 2006 the festival took place on the Cultural Forecourt at South Bank and ran from September 14<sup>th</sup>- 17<sup>th</sup>.

Note: Information on the Brisbane Writers Festival can be found at <http://www.brisbanewritersfestival.com.au/>).

Thus the first big question was if this project would be of interest to the students—or would the consensus be that each student prefers to continue with their individual studio-based work?

**Practice-based learning: a conversation between Debra Porch, lecturer and Andrew Forsyth, Honours candidate.**

*Debra:*

As I remember, the discussion with the students and myself canvassing the positive possibilities and negative aspects of this collaborative project lasted over five hours. The key important debates that arose from discussion with the students were:

- 'Collective ownership' of creative work or individuality vs. collaboration (group consensus) in relation to the conceptual, creative, and materiality of a collaborative project.
- No tangible experience of creating a visual work collaboratively.
- No tangible experience of conceiving or installing a visual work outside of the studio base.
- No tangible experience in working with an outside industry partner, such as the Brisbane Writers Festival.

Thus the discussion seemed to focus back to the reality that the students were mainly accustomed to the learning and teaching experience being centred on studio-based activity. Can you add to this Andrew?

*Andrew:*

The organic process of creating the work for the Brisbane Writers Festival started as a brainstorming session at the intended site. Many ideas were discussed and value was given

to these ideas brought forward. This method on my part and presumably the others was made comfortable because of a shared working environment that the seven of us had experienced.

Possibly, a supportive factor for this process could have been the critique component that all of us undergo as a part of the studio practice. This critique section of the University course allows for discussion and debate not only of your own work but also of your fellow students. This enables any and all to put forward their suggestions. There was risk involved in the undertaking of this project that it could turn out as unsatisfactory, (too many cooks spoil the broth) but there was enough trust that we all respected everyone else's work and this project was a new path of discovery.

### **Practice-based learning: the process**

*Debra:*

The project could have taken the format of each student working individually, and consequently a range of individual pieces would have been the final outcome. However, the challenge of working collaboratively is what the students decided to embrace for the Writers Festival project. The main challenges then became:

- The process of developing a creative concept relating to the Brisbane Writers Festival that could be tangibly constructed, installed and dismantled on the outdoor site of the Cultural Forecourt at Brisbane's South Bank parkland.
- To extend communication skills in respect to working honestly and openly with each other as individual artists—thus being able to express ideas and make decisions on the development and final decisions of the creative work. Also the confidence in being able to express and challenge each other's ideas.
- To be very cognisant of deadlines that would need to occur during the 9 weeks in relation to the construction, installation, dismantling and documenting the project.
- To obtain an awareness and understanding of the public site for the work and then develop a coherent visual work that could fulfil the groups' intentions.
- To create a work that was suitable for the established health and safety guidelines of the cultural forecourt site. This also meant creating a public visual work that could be somehow 'vandal proof'.

Andrew, there are some pivotal aspects in relation to the project and how the focus of 'practice-based learning' emerges through it all. Can you elaborate on some key points, the first being the importance of the project in extending one's knowledge base?

*Andrew:*

Initially there was the motivation in the acquiring of new skills and knowledge. Added to this it became evident that the group displayed an ability to move laterally with its thought process. When one suggestion was made, like word association, new ideas were spun out of the previous idea. Then in the process of construction, artists had their own idea as to how something could be constructed. This resulted in new forms and an ownership of the work by each artist through their respective contribution. The ending was a product of gestalt; the outcome was greater than the sum of individual skills allowed.

*Debra:*

There was also the importance of 'trust' that became significant. The seven individual artists were no longer focusing on their singular concerns, but respecting and embracing wider ideas and paradigms of each other's visual practice.

*Andrew:*

Working in a shared environment a greater sense of adventure was developed. There was greater license to do different things because the group offered a safety net to untried ideas and creations. There was an unsaid value of group members' skill and knowledge that was born out of respect for each other's practise and this gave courage to all team members. Motivation was engendered through Debra, which brought the groups momentum to a tipping point.

*Debra:*

Yes – that was all evident, however the individual students still seemed to fall back into what their individual knowledge and strengths of studio practice were, and then venturing out to extend their knowledge base. Can you comment?

*Andrew:*

Venturing into uncharted territories gave rise to people retreating to tasks that were familiar to enable the process to progress. Levels of contribution varied and each participant was extended equally by that level of input, the more each student put in the more they got out of it all.

*Debra:*

So the big question, how did the process of consensus or process of deciding the conceptual framework for the final work eventuate?

*Andrew:*

Communication with consensus was a guidance system most often used. After the original discussion on what was going to be created, four components were decided upon and in the end, only one was seen through to fruition. Group decisions were made to edit any outlying suggestion. Things were filtered out due to constraints, such as, short time frame, cost of construction and the limitation of resources, amongst others.

*Debra:*

The question is then of course how the collaborative process of developing and employing a feasible methodology to construct the work came about. For example, how did the idea of using single book pages and beeswax come about?

*Andrew:*

Originally, the idea of coating the pages in a resin was suggested, as the project would culminate in an exterior work and be weather resistant. That idea was furthered by the use of beeswax, amongst several other proposals. Testing of ideas was undertaken which resulted in just the two methods of resin and wax to be used. There was the generous donation from the University of Queensland Press of 200 books that also directed the group's effort in the formation of this artwork. Now we had more pages than we knew what to do with. Indeed, by the end of the first phase of dipping the pages in wax we had an excess of pages. There was previous talk of creating pillars from the books and near the end of completing the construction I took it upon myself to stack the pages and paint them with the beeswax to create towers of gothic forms. This is another example of the organic growth of this public artwork.

*Debra:*

Whether the finishing of individual studio-based work, or the collaborative work for the Brisbane Writers Festival—deadlines and 'time' are critical.

*Andrew:*

Time management of this project was a critical factor. There were many tasks involved, not only in this artwork, but also in relation to the other subjects that each student had embarked upon. All the students were in their final year and were experienced in time management. Concerting their efforts to get the job done was borne from this project.

*Debra:*

*Papyrus*, the site-specific and the ephemeral work made for the Brisbane Writers Festival was an experiment in practice-based learning. How did *Papyrus* develop as a practice-base learning project? One of the significant outcomes was that *Papyrus* seemed to have a life of its own in relation to the changing nature of the work, particularly in relation to the natural elements of rain, etc. Andrew, can you discuss the decisions made while in the studio and away from the studio. Such as not being able to install the work as planned because of the health and safety risks...

*Andrew:*

Originally, the work was going to be strung between two six-metre high plinths that are twelve metres apart. Much time was devoted to the installation, yet no trials were done. On the day of installation with only a moderate breeze, it was soon discovered that the idea for the suspension was fraught with danger. A solution was discussed and utilised where the work was to float in the water and secured between the two plinths. Throughout this entire project, everything was discussed and allowed to progress organically. No participant was too precious to prevent the realisation of this work. That is not to say that all students put in the same amount of effort. There were many challenges throughout this process when some could not see a direct benefit to themselves individually and their effort flew north for the winter. As a group, we decided it would be best to let it slide for now. We were all mindful of the heavy workload that each of us was bearing. Although, because of this little if any future help was available to the wayward participant.

*Debra:*

The final big questions—what were the significant practice-based outcomes, were these centred on working in a group with a specific direction and focus, particularly as the issue of ‘trust’ was ever-present.

*Andrew:*

An interesting outcome of the project is the formation of a public art collective, called *Sovereign Space*. Out of small things great things grow. The earlier collaboration demonstrated the ability of several members to work together on projects that are usually the domain of individual artists. Being an art practitioner can be an arduous pursuit, I am not saying it will be any less, just that there is strength in numbers.

*Debra:*

And the challenges that practice-based learning presented?

*Andrew:*

With practice-based learning, challenges may come from the work being too esoteric—this being that without external references the work can become very self-involved. Another challenge is not to stagnate. Then again, another challenge could be you run the gauntlet of recognition in the art world. People find it hard to appreciate things that are not in some way referenced to their world of knowledge.

Something important is also the challenge that 'group' work presented. For example, learning to 'let go', because there is joint ownership of the project, and thus one can never be sure that the work is finished. Someone is still adding something to the process of the project.

And then there is the duality of preciousness and ambiguity. You want the work to soar and there is heartfelt pride in seeing it to fruition. Yet because there is shared ownership and the process was organic, you can never hold on to anything too tightly.

*Debra:*

There is a significant outcome of this practice-based learning experience that I wish to add. The public art collective, *Sovereign Space* that grew from the *Papyrus* project, became involved in the wider Griffith University Business Innovation program. This program assists and rewards business ventures of student groups across Griffith University. The group methodically worked through the construction of a business plan and future business ventures in the area of Public Art. The group, (the first from Fine Art at the university to compete), were one of the final six groups out of the original 39 that were competing for the final prestigious award. This in itself convinces me of the importance and influence that practice-base learning carries in creative practice.

Andrew, can you conclude by expanding on the significant outcome of practice-based learning that is reflected in the public art group *Sovereign Space*.

*Andrew:*

The group is strongly committed and at weekly meetings we discuss the range of possible options. These options include the current construction of a website, and applications for numerous grants that include the Creative Sparks grant that is offered through the Brisbane City Council and Arts Queensland.

The application for this grant was researched and edited in consultation with a qualified grant reviewer and our chosen mentor, artist Sebastian DiMauro. *Sovereign Space* operates within an eruditely democratic process and each participant gains via a diversity of strengths. The consequences of organisational decisions are easily examined, debated and improved.

This grant application prompted other possibilities for exhibiting the collectives' work. Through a successful quest for a letter of support from the Brisbane Riverfestival, we were made aware of a new component to this year's festival. This new addition to the Riverfestival, *Luminosity*, compliments our original idea for the Creative Sparks grant. We have since been given the possibility of being involved in *Luminosity*, which will incorporate video projections at various sites around the Brisbane River. The group has recently been offered a month exhibition, (August) at Portside in Brisbane. Portside is an initiative of Artworkers Alliance, a peak advocate body for visual arts in Queensland.

We are currently developing proposals for the Swell Sculpture Festival, Currumbin, QLD, and Sculpture by the Sea, Bondi, NSW. These submissions are currently in research and development stages. As typical, project submissions require many hours between development and completion, yet what remains pivotal for the group is knowledge through experimental learning. (Or as Confucius (circa 450 BC) stated, "Tell me and I will forget. Show me and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand".)

Recently the group produced an exhibition for Orientation Week at Queensland College of Art. The collectives' core set of values include:

- To promote socially responsible and meaningful environmental creative work.
- And to improve the quality of art in public space.

Sovereign Space aims to play a major role in shaping cultural markers that raise design standards in our cities, urban areas, and commercial and residential buildings to enrich the cultural landscape of Brisbane and beyond.

### **Biographies**

Dr. Debra Porch is a practicing artist and Senior Lecturer in Fine Art, Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. Debra has exhibited nationally and internationally, and has received awards and grant funding including, the Australia Council, the NSW Ministry for the Arts, an Asialink artist residency in Hanoi, Vietnam, and the Art Gallery of NSW artist residency at the Cité Internationale des Artes, Paris. In 2005 her work was commissioned by the State Library of Queensland as part of the project *Sufferance: 100 Years of Women's Suffrage in Queensland*.

Andrew Forsyth is currently completing a BA Fine Art Honours degree at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University. His practice encompasses sculpture, installation and video. Andrew is also a founding member of the recently formed Brisbane based public art collective, Sovereign Space.