

The Long Game

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Abstract

The Long Game explores one artwork, The Care Taker, iterated across multiple sites, as a slow and gentle resistance to current divisive political discourses in Australia. By placing a familiar domestic set in public spaces and asking participants to reveal something personal about themselves, the installation places a sense of intimacy and care in public places. Based in Social Acupuncture theory (O'Donnell, 2006) a site responsive practice produces iterations adapted to place, to engage diverse social and cultural audiences in suburban Australia. Using care, kindness and generosity as the foundations of each iteration, the artist considers how gentle transgression or activation of public space can open and connect strangers to each other, and hopefully inspire empathy and kindness which over time may contribute to social change.

Keywords: care, strangers, social acupuncture, iteration, intimacy, site responsive, suburbs, long game, empathy, conversation

To cite this article:

Goronszy D. (2019). The Long Game, *The Journal of Public Space*, 4(3), 141-154, DOI 10.32891/jps.v4i3.1226

This article has been double blind peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *The Journal of Public Space*.



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The Care Taker: The Long Game



Figure 1. *The Care Taker*, Dandenong 2017. Photographer Olivia Allen.

Have you got something on your mind?
A feeling that just won't go away?
Sit down
Relax.
The Care Taker is in.

*intergenerational mental health, because it's my lived experience
that I accept other people's ideas before mine, every time
so much time has been wasted, I didn't know the rules
being older now, I will never have housing security
nightmares, I feel so alone
our grandson is on ice
am I doing enough for the environment
the shame of our government and Manus Island
my aging parents don't speak English, and so I have no time for my own pursuits
my sisters call me names
the plebiscite means I know how my family really feel about me
I wake in the night, thinking, thinking*

that I will never be loved without conditions
if I grade up I will feel bad because my friend will be left behind
time for family, time for work
people don't understand me, and I don't know how to be different so they can
will I ever get past this grief
tight pants
mediocrity slaughters the creative soul



Figure 2, 3. The Care Taker, Balaclava 2016. Photographer Theresa Harrison.

The Long Game of Cares

In *Guerilla Kindness and other acts of creative resistance*, author Sayraphim Lothian (2018) proposes that kindness, to others and ourselves, is a radical act. Kindness towards strangers seems doubly so, and its no wonder, considering we teach the phrase ‘Stranger Danger’ to children, and never revisit or reverse the sentiment as they/we grow older. In this article I discuss one work *The Care Taker* (2016), that was iterated across fifteen locations, privileging kindness, generosity and care as a vehicle for connecting me to strangers, and also introducing strangers to each other’s real-life cares.

My practice is concerned with creating unusual arts experiences that aim to provoke conversation about our humanity. For fifteen years, I have worked both solo and collaboratively, delivering participatory installations, theatre, puppetry and performances around Australia and the world. My work explores developing an integration of rigorous design and participant freedom. This coupling of specificity and openness has been crucial in utilizing the arts within communities in recovery such as with incarcerated young people in youth justice centres (2007-2012, Liminal Lines, Parkville Youth Justice Centre and Biribi Rehabilitation Centre in suburban Melbourne), bushfire areas across Whittlesea in outer metropolitan Melbourne (2006 - 2018), all in Australia and in Minamisanriku (2011/16 with Polyglot Theatre) situated inside the Japanese tsunami zone of 2011.

The Care Taker (2016) was seeded as an antidote to Australia’s current divisive political discourse and sensationalised news reports that compound feelings of fear and alienation between strangers and neighbors alike. *The Care Taker* sits in public spaces, asking people to reveal something personal, which will then be shared with others. It is a slow and gentle resistance, a face-to-face call to action to care for the self and others. Through gathering and sharing very human thoughts of strangers, and sharing them with other strangers, the installation presents an alternative, personal narrative about people and their community. Its positioning of gentle activism in public space is part of a long game, which aims at influencing long-term change and hopefully inspires empathy and kindness.

“You really don’t realize we are all going through so much”

Through iterative practice, *The Care Taker* explores the vitality of conversation as a vehicle for uncovering and addressing social challenges located in time and place, and seeds unexpected connections that could potentially alter and recast our social fabric. *The Care Taker* as with the majority of my practice, aligns with Darren O’Donnell’s (2006) theory of Social Acupuncture, which suggests art can shift social structures and politics by repeatedly disturbing the civic sphere. O’Donnell’s theory does this by transposing theories of Traditional Chinese Medicine on the social body instead of the human body, and creating situations that, like acupuncture, ‘needle’ points of excess or deficiency, and in turn affect other points in the social body. In society, excesses and deficiencies could be characterized by power dynamics and accessibility respectively. Furthermore, it’s through repeated arts activity, or acupuncture, that impact on the larger social body can occur.

This thinking is ambitious, but also relieves the pressure on the artist to produce a dynamic shift in place with one artwork, and instead locates each encounter as one

amongst many that must occur over time. As this gentle work of transformation needs time, the visiting artist will probably not witness the change. It's slow, but importantly, the generation of ideas and reflection comes from the people within place, sitting subtly alongside more agitative activism and campaigns.

Contemporary art and the suburbs

The Care Taker privileges suburban public locations, rather than major inner-city streets, to engage people going about their everyday business, and also to connect with less artistically engaged community members. When I refer to 'less artistically engaged' community members, I am referring to the desire and means to seek out and consume contemporary arts, which is a judgment I am knowingly making. This judgment has been informed by my childhood growing up in suburban Western Sydney, where movies and popular main stage musicals were our arts experiences¹; and years of presenting public art experiences across cities, suburbs, towns and remote communities. I never tire from the questions:

Why is this art?

Do you have a job?

Are you from council?

I still love seeing arts presented inside institutions and in the inner suburbs, but if audiences are full of artists and institutional subscribers, I ask: who are the arts for? There is nothing wrong with presenting artworks to a familiar audience, but it leaves me unsatisfied as both an artist and audience member.

I explain my dissatisfaction through a Social Acupuncture lens. To broaden access and participation in the arts, we must reach the larger society, which means finding ways to engage any ordinary person. It's essential, not only to include their voices in the arts, but by placing arts experiences in public spaces unfamiliar with them, we can challenge assumptions about contemporary arts², and boost contemporary arts literacy. From here, we can build new audiences for contemporary arts, and create deeper accessible arts experiences. Another long game, I know.

Concurrently the suburbs are a powerful point of departure that artists and the arts industry can benefit from through critical exchange on artworks in this environment, and further, to do so requires an adjustment in expectations and evaluation methods. I propose that by being site-responsive when presenting participatory encounters in suburban public spaces, we enable an in-depth, integrated and accessible practice to be developed, which can engage diverse social and cultural audiences in Australia.

Participants in suburban *The Care Taker* interactions revealed intimate and personal 'cares' to a stranger in full view of the public eye, suggesting people are very engaged

¹ Statistical information gathered by both Australian Bureau of Statistics (2014) and Australia Council of the Arts, National Arts Participation Survey (2017) concerning audience participation in the arts in Australia is limited by being concerned with ticket sales through major ticketing providers. Findings show the highest attendance being cinemas, music events and festivals. Attendance of contemporary, independent arts and culture, or art experiences without a commercial marketing output is absent.

² The National Arts Participation Survey (2017) found 43% of people over 15yrs in metropolitan Australia agree that the arts "attracted somewhat elitist or pretentious" people.

and interested in intimate arts experiences. Perhaps by profiling arts experiences in the suburbs, and their ability to investigate content beyond statistical comparisons (Kjaerulff, 2018), we can contribute to providing alternative concepts of place.

The Care Taker

The Care Taker is a live art, participatory series of installations creating an atmosphere of care, intimacy and community between strangers in public space. It is multiplatform; a public art installation, with exhibited crowd-sourced content; a site-responsive concept that can adapt to meet the conditions of an environment; and a research project to create new public art installations.

Sitting with comfy lounge chairs and a small rug, the Care Taker invites people to share a care with her, particularly one they'd like to be free from. The 'cares' are written down as the participant speaks, read back to them, assigned a catalogue code and the exchange concludes with a receipt for their care. Anonymous and uncensored, people speak uninhibited about topics affecting their lives. Being a stranger is meaningful, as it asks people to connect with someone they don't know, and in turn, may provide other connections beyond the familiar.

*This is better than seeing my psych
A knot has loosened
I've never said this out loud before³*



Figure 4. Exhibition of Cares, Arts Centre, Melbourne 2018. Photographer Bryony Jackson.

³ Participant responses.



Figure 5. Exhibition of Cares, Arts Centre, Melbourne 2018. Photographer Bryony Jackson.

Cares offered are generous and personal, ranging from world issues, to everyday life. Unlike a counselor, the Care Taker does not give guidance, and in this way cares for herself. The collection of ‘cares’ is exhibited for others to read, making visible the inner worlds of ordinary community members. Viewers find resonance, surprise and connection with the collection, and it offers a unique insight into people, located in time and place. For example, by writing the cares onto the window of a vacant shop, they became ideas hanging in space, requiring you to focus in-between yourself and the empty room behind the window, appearing almost transparent. At the same time, the reflection of the reader in the window acted to frame the care within that person’s face and body, making them somehow complicit in the content. This reflection extended to mirror the street and created a psychological atmosphere, of viewing our world, with a floating overlay of the collected cares. It offered the possibility that the cares may belong to anyone yet were explicitly linked to all of us under a public façade. The effect was poetic and added layers of possible readings to the artwork.

reading this makes me feel not so alone in my worries⁴

By placing a comfortable and inviting lounge chair installation on the street, I critique existing seating, provided by councils along footpaths and in public squares, that discourages striking up a conversation with strangers. Public seating is scarce, often uncomfortable, metal, unsheltered, cold and unwelcoming, limiting its use.

⁴ Audience response.



Figure 6. Exhibition of Cares, Balaclava 2018. Photographer Theresa Harrison.



Figure 7. Exhibition of Cares, Spotswood 2017. Photographer Sharyn Brand

Opportunities to sit and relax face to face with others are at cafes or restaurants, highlighting the consumerist delineation of public space. *The Care Taker* installation is perfectly positioned to sit within these spaces as a transgression of social norms and intended use of space questioning: Who is allowed to linger and connect in public spaces?

For accessibility across demographics the simple ritual and the Care Taker's role are designed to allow multiple entry points for participants to engage in the work at their own pace. Some know what they wanted to say immediately, whilst others, sit

contemplating for some time before revealing their offer, and a few people need to have a chat about other things before they can share their care. Some cares are a few words long, while others take up the whole page. Some people laugh as they speak, others are quite serious. Each experience is unique, highlighting the importance of the practitioner's openness to the individual participants.

To date fourteen iterations have been presented across Melbourne's suburbs and outer metro area, with one inner city location outside the iconic Art Centre Melbourne. Sites included footpaths, pop-up parks, festivals, shopping centres, libraries and inside a perspex cube. Design elements such as costume respond to the site, upscaling for particular venues and events, or casualizing to suit the community.

Iterations in response to site: Bus of Care and The Grounding

Being located temporarily in the site, rather than tied to the site has allowed iterations to be site responsive, while keeping the integrity of the works aims. This was especially important in two iterations; *Bus of Care* (2017) inside a bus at outer metropolitan Melbourne, Hurstbridge, and *The Grounding* (2018) at the regional extreme arts walk Mountain to Mouth. Each of these iterations departed significantly from the original iterations by being self-navigated installations. I took care while creating each of these to remain true to the original aims of the work, without the direct conversational aspect.



Figure 8. *Bus of Care* 2017. Photographer DanGoronsky.

Firstly, on being awarded a Nillumbik Shire Living in Landscape artist residency located at Hurstbridge, I was asked to consider including the Metro Community Bus in *The Care Taker* project. Due to access, the passengers, mostly octogenarians, were generally overlooked when it came to arts experiences, artworks and residency focuses in Nillumbik Shire. I was excited by the challenge to address this social deficiency through a form of Social Acupuncture (O'Donnell, 2006), and began by dressing the bus interior

with colourful crochet blankets as a gift to the participants to create a sense of feeling cared for. *Bus of Care* gently introduced the passengers and bus drivers to the bus as an arts space and exposed an unknown desire for artistic encounters in the passengers and drivers. This created an opportunity for conversations and imagining of future projects on the bus, between the passengers and council workers.



Figure 9, 10. *The Grounding* 2017. Photographer Theresa Harrison.

Secondly, Mountain to Mouth is a biennial 80 km extreme arts walk, beginning with a morning ritual ceremony in the YouYangs mountains and ending with an evening ritual ceremony the following day, at Barwon Heads, via the river mouth. Local Indigenous Wathaurong people lead the ceremonies and were collaborators in the event with Artistic Director and ritual artist Margie Mackay. Along the 80 km, nine artists are curated to present commissioned artworks, called Walking Circles. The event sees up to 200 walkers travel the distance. *The Care Taker: The Grounding* was the ninth Walking Circle site and welcomed walkers and visitors over two hours.

The provocation to the walkers was: 'The Care I would like to leave behind is...'
The venue, The Grand Caravan, was a 1980's Millard caravan with the floor covered in soil. As the day progressed, the soil became an ephemeral map of the participants and the mingling stranger's footsteps.



Figure 11, 12. *The Grounding 2017*. Photographer Theresa Harrison.



Figure 13. *The Grounding 2017*. Photographer Theresa Harrison.

Cares as research: Self Serve and Freedom is a Moment

Two iterations were in residency format where an artistic response to the 'care' collection was created drawing from visual and theatrical art forms. Responding artistically to themes emerging from place, I used a holistic approach seeking integration between the cares, materials, form and site. Ephemeral materials and encounters sharing properties or metaphor with the content were researched and explored. *Self Serve* (2017, Dandenong) and *Freedom is a Moment* (2017, Hurstbridge) artworks offered further moments of reflection, conversation and connection after *The Care Taker* installation was gone. They were also my final gift to the communities for having me. In *Self Serve* people could take one of four specified periods of time. In this iteration time is free for whoever takes it, and challenges passers-by to offer themselves a moment of care. It is presented on price tags to critique consumer industry of care and subtly draws attention to the cost of time.



Figure 14. *Self Serve* 2017. Photographer Dan Goronszy.

Freedom is a Moment drew on my long practice in shadow puppetry. Shadow birds challenge physical limitations by appearing to make a daily journey from parkland over the wall of the courtyard, and into the offices that join it at the other end. The viewer may respond by remaining distant or stepping out into the sun with their own shadow mingling with that of the birds. Responding to the clouds and earth's orbit around the sun, the shadows, like cares, are sometimes visible, dark and defined, while at other times, a spectre that passes when we look back, maybe to return the next day, solid, or gone altogether.



Figure 15, 16. *Freedom is a Moment*. Photographer Dan Goronszy.

The Long Game Continues

Stranger Danger itself seems a dangerous concept worth our interrogation and our resistance. *The Care Taker's* popularity, both in the sharing and reading of cares, was a welcome surprise, suggesting a broadly shared desire to connect with strangers about personal topics. It gathered and shared information about previously undocumented real-life issues, present in time and place. People were surprised, moved, shocked and sometimes saddened by reading others 'cares'. Through its various iterations, the installation deepened my practice, and my understanding of how one artwork may be site-responsive and engage people from incredibly diverse demographics. Empathy and

kindness were present often, and potentially a ruffle in the social fabric has been made, contributing to the long game of social change.

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Dan Goronszy creates unexpected arts experiences that provoke wonder and conversation about humanity and the world. She is a multi-disciplinary artist and collaborator drawing on participatory installation, puppetry, design and physical theatre. Dan works with governments, festivals, schools and community organizations throughout Australia and the world to share arts experiences in a variety of settings. She is a long-time core member and international touring artist with Melbourne's Polyglot Theatre. Dan's public installations invite people to reveal themselves. This can be seen in several works undertaken in central and suburban Melbourne, Australia such as *The Care Taker* investigating intimacy between strangers at the Arts Centre Melbourne (2018), *Hobsons Bay Art In Public Space Festival* (2017), and in *Nilumbik Public Arts Residency* (2017); *Bedsheet Ghost Party* making children visible by making them invisible at *The Lost Lands Festival* (2018) *Abbotsford Convent* (2016); *Blood.Sex.Tears. Women of The World* (2017), *Geelong After Dark* (2016) and *La Mama Theatre, Melbourne* (2016); and *The Launching Board, Fawcner and MoreArt* (2015) and *Darebin* (2016).

Further interstate and international highlights include: *The Waterhole: Galapagos Islands*, giant puppet theatre after Graeme Base for Melbourne Zoo's *Neon Playground* (2019); *Future Postal Service, Commonwealth Games Festival* (2018), *Regional Arts Victoria tour* (2016), *Perth International Festival* (2015) *Federation Square* (2015) and *Arts Centre Melbourne* (2015); *Food Security Training at Alice Desert Festival* (2014); *When Claude Met Roxy* tri-state tour and sell out season *Brisbane Festival* (2013); *Pigeonhole at White Night* (2013); and *My Strange Pet* for ABC3 (2009). Dan received a Master of Arts (Art in Public Space) in 2018 from RMIT University.

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