

## Uncertain Occupations: Cultural Transports at Play

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**Abstract:** An arts practice of undertaking projects in the public domain of Melbourne Australia has been exploring uncertainty in temporary public occupation by working through tramways and pedal-powered modes of transport as its medium. By disrupting the orthodoxy of everyday forms of organisation – such as those distinguishing between possession/appropriation, artist/non-artist and artwork/audience – these projects induce an uncertainty in occupying place and position. The projects mobilise the power of occupation away from its commonly polarised concentration or fragmentation toward a distribution of power and engaged investment amongst heterogeneous participants. This ‘cultural transports’ practice works toward demonstrating an aesthetic politics enabling experience of ephemeral moments that reveal the potentiality of social relations bonded by the reciprocity of care, generosity and hope. The telling of the practice here is undertaken by tracing the elliptical lines of two projects.

### Uncertain Occupations: Cultural Transports at Play



Figure 1: *W-11 Tram: an art of journeys*, Melbourne 2007. Detail view with onboard hosts. Photo: Karen Trist

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*Khush amadeed. Welcome on the W-gerah.* You've stepped aboard the *W-11 Tram* exploring an art of journeys. Gathered aboard are the heterogeneous voices of a changing assemblage of people, and many live forms of action. There is a dynamic sense of motion and emotion at play. This tram is actually travelling repeated circles of inner city Melbourne Australia, yet you discover this strange mobile environment has every surface re-constructed and overwhelmingly embellished by *W-11* mini-bus decorators of Karachi Pakistan – *chamak patti wallahs* Iqbal, Nadeem and Safdar. Hosts of both cities welcome you aboard, whilst the conjunction of simultaneously travelling Melbourne tram and Karachi decorated mini-bus induces uncertainty as to what is going on here, or there, to where are you travelling and with whom?

In my almost-convincing official *Tramtactic* host uniform, assuming the artist's role of self-created occupation, I might tell your friend that this *cultural transports* practice creates platforms to enable mobility in the realms of human subjectivity, the social collective, the perceptual and the symbolic. But to you I'll confess that such a practice cannot speak with

one hegemonic voice. I take the role of playing host to multiple voices. I'll lead you through this practice of exploring uncertainty in temporary public occupation, a practice that works through tramways and pedal-powered modes of transport as its media. By disrupting orthodox forms of organisation – such as those distinguishing between possession/appropriation, artist/non-artist and artwork/audience – these projects induce an uncertainty in occupying place and position. The projects mobilise the power of agency away from the common binary condition of, on the one hand, being concentrated in the State or institution, and on the other hand, being fragmented amongst consumers in a capitalist free-market. The practices explored here work towards the dynamic re-distribution of power and engaged investment amongst heterogeneous assemblages of participants.

Indeed you may not be travelling by tram today, but rather, have come by bike. I meet you at the door: *Greetings! Fantastic you could come for dinner.* You arrive on your bicycle at a domestic residence expecting some kind of an event as part of the tongue-in-cheek titled West Brunswick Sculpture Triennial. I offer you a red cloth napkin and loosely fit it around your neck as we excitedly chatter. I fit the person next to you with a red cloth apron. You lead your bikes through the house, tasting a tomatoe *sugo* from the stove-top on the way through the kitchen and spill out to the rear yard. A hundred others are gathered, bikes are propped all over the place, a couple of pans on gas burners are being worked atop little kitchens integrated into two strange pedal vehicles. The scene is spiced with the colour red: all who have gathered wearing either red napkin or apron. There is no flamboyantly expressed menu and no itinerary known. It is the sense of expectation that is savoured, along with backyard fresh appetisers. Bicycle-produced sounds build as everyone returns to their trusty set of wheels until the metallic ensemble reaches crescendo and the kitchen-vehicles lead off down the drive-way and onto the inner-city street commencing the so-called 'ride-on-dinner'.



Figure 2: *ride-on-dinner (5)*, in West Brunswick Sculpture Triennial, Melbourne 2009. Photo: Karen Trist.

People follow food. The 'ride-on-dinner' is a participatory arts performance event that follows relations between food, transportation and cultural change through collective action. The open invitation reads:

*Join a swarm of cyclists on a gentle rolling urban meal adventure. A slow meal journey takes a unique route through urban environments for each different 'ride-on-dinner' event, served from pedal-powered vehicles over the duration of an easy*

*early-evening cycle. This mobile event demonstrates simple pleasures in hospitality and local knowledge whilst feeling the way for more sustainable food and transport systems. Diners become co-creators riding relationships between individual human body, the temporarily collected social body and the body of the urban fabric. It is an event pedalled by anyone who wants to along with the Cultural Transports Collective, including artists, chefs, transport industry workers, performers, children, academics, good-for-nothings and you. The food is vegetarian made from local produce and offered on a donate-as-you-feel basis. First to roll up, first for dinner.<sup>1</sup>*

As the swarm of riders pedal through the central city I hear one of my apron-wearing accomplices yarning about care for the quality of food, our network of local organic growers, and how far you could ride having eaten a banana – but pity that your bananas have had to travel 2,000 kilometres north of here by truck! The colour red visibly marking and linking all participants in the swarm is evident to the street-side on-lookers thinking: *who are they and what are they doing whilst they look like they're having such fun?* Participants become self-aware of the agency they bring to the event in their curious occupation of a 'performer' role. The swarm occupies two lanes of the road next to the tram stop as we wait for a change in the traffic lights. Private cars with deep-throat exhausts rumble, upbeat pedestrians of all sizes, shapes and colours pace the pavement, and . . . an outlandishly dressed tram pulls up exuding the confident enthusiasm of a peacock. All eyes are on the tram and its changing of passengers.

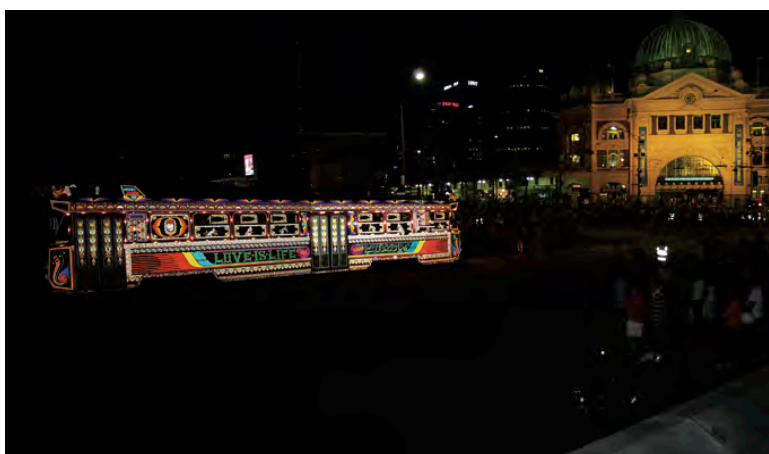


Figure 3: *W-11 Tram: an art of journeys*, Melbourne 2007. Photo: Karen Trist.

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In a climate of rising social fear and misunderstanding of Muslim cultures after the crisis of *September 11*, I had collaborated with the Pakistani vehicle decorators to transform a Melbourne tram, its sides bearing a phrase taken from the side of a Karachi mini-bus, in Urdu and English: '*piyar zindagi hai / love is life*'. My premise was to simply transpose a typical Karachi experience of travel by decorated mini-bus in an Islamic society, onto a typical Melbourne experience of travel by tram in an increasingly cosmopolitan society. Through this transposition I sought to explore what kind of space of hospitality might be produced. During the project's second season of twenty Friday evenings over 2006/07 summer, the *W11 Tram* would undertake six 50-minute laps of the Melbourne City Circle

route, starting and finishing at the city's major Federation Square, creating a dynamic, free-to-enter and mobile public space with a disarming atmosphere.

Three different types of artful journeys took place to explore dialogue, improvisation and hospitality, with each journey comprising a lap of the city. *'Tram Overheard'* had me invite two strangers to undertake a conversational journey of dialogue – discussing issues of mobility and migration, transportation and cultural change, hospitality and the public realm – whilst amplified throughout the tram interior. Conversationalists included writers, academics, performers and activists, with each dialogue tracing a line of dialogical thought around civic Melbourne. *'Tram Overboard'*<sup>2</sup> had me invite guest artists to lead an improvised performance journey for a lap of the city. This involved a diverse array of musicians, dancers, performers and live artists leading unique shared experiences in negotiation with the conditions aboard the tram in the city at its given moment. *'Tram Otherwise'* had onboard hosts in *Tramtactic* uniform leading a journey of cultural collisions between Melbourne and Karachi, interacting with passengers, utilising free artwork 'tickets', playing music that transported (recordings of Pakistani folk music that is commonly blasted from the W-11 mini-buses) and initiating dancing with and between a very diverse range of passengers.

The 'overheard' conversations still resonate with me. In the last Friday of the season I doubled my role from host to also be 'stranger', encountering postcolonial scholar Leela Gandhi. We were discussing hospitality and the politics of friendship. I had especially grown a moustache of dubious subcontinental style for the project's summer season. For this last night of the season I had shaved it off and replaced it with a professionally made replica, made from other people's hair, glued above my lips. With a sense of childish curiosity I wanted to experience ripping the moustache surprisingly from my face on the last of last laps as a gesture of ambivalent identity at play. For now the damn thing is holding my upper lip semi-rigid. Feels like my face will crack and the hairy thing fall off if I smile. It's tough controlling my urges to laugh. She's looking at it! Leela must be thinking there is something creepy about me! 'Come back to the conversation' I tell myself as Leela elaborates:

*...for this conversation the idea of strangeness becomes very important, and we want to maintain the strangeness between us but what we're really trying to do is find common ground, and as we talk I'm recognizing you as someone I can talk to. So, to what extent is foreignness or strangeness or the retention of those things useful for a civic or communitarian ethics?*<sup>3</sup>

Relief as my attention shifts away from my fake 'moe'. I tell of how *not* finding the familiar can be a way of liberating oneself from static essentialist conditions of place, identity or affiliation. One can be mobilised by slipping outside one's most immediate recognition, by finding ways to be present in a situation for what that moment is offering up in all its unfamiliarity. So how is it, I ask Leela, that you find friendship a useful tool for thinking and living?

*I think the concept of friendship that became very interesting to me was not friendship with those who are like you, but what I like to think of as xenophilia, of friendship towards foreigners, as a kind of politics. And often it's a kind of politics that makes you go to cleave apart from where you come from, to be unfaithful to where you are, and unfaithful to those who are like you, in order to keep your faith with those who are unlike you.*<sup>4</sup>

'*W-gerah! W-gerah! W-gerah!*' my fellow hosts chant out the doors and windows as we pause at tram stops. '*Allah Walli!*' of Karachi is chanted alongside '*Docklands!*' of Melbourne. I was beginning to recall a line of thought I'd traveled before, about disrupting orthodox forms of organisation by working aesthetically and tactically with contingency to open up creative opportunities of relationship between artists, non-artists, stakeholders and participant/audience members. By constructing inclusive assemblages of people as ephemeral participants, and by configuring artwork and participant/audience in actively co-creative and co-constituting roles in the public realm, there is a shift of position for artist and art practice that challenges object-based and theatre-based understandings of art. Call it an exploration of inter-active *response-ability* if you will, where projects have an inter- and trans-artform basis, an inter-dependent constitution of elements, involve inter- and transdisciplinary activity and often inter- and cross-cultural relations. These qualities point to a shift in our perception and understanding of mobile art forces and artistic relations, produced live, to be experienced live as the perpetual process of producing new subjects and forms.

Leela's thoughts turn. 'We're so preoccupied with this idea of difference, I'm just starting to wonder if the idea of familiarity or likeness is probably not as important'<sup>5</sup>. Social science academics Vin D'Cruz and Michele Grossman encountered each other in dialogue aboard the tram a week earlier. They explored how Australian society was experienced as being more open for new migrants like Vin to occupy it in the 1950's compared to the current social conditions motivated by fear. Michelle proposes it also has to do with globalization.

*So much more now is coming to people, where they are. They're not having to exert themselves particularly, or having to think very hard. The commodification of difference: it's like going shopping or ordering it off a menu in a restaurant. They're no longer having to engage with difference in a way that means they are taking particular risks, and there is a sense of complacency then, about the rest of the world that has grown accordingly. The complacency that is set in now is the sense that you don't have to go to the world, why? Because the world comes to you.*<sup>6</sup>

Yet Vin wants to focus on how much *is* now happening by people filled with both hope and despair working with refugees and indigenous Australia. He wants us to 'seek out these points of positive movements of the heart.'<sup>7</sup>

How do spatial arts practices affect social and cultural movement, or *movements of the heart*? It's now easy to make an artistic shift by 'contaminating this with that' to produce a hybrid commodity product because it sells, writer Sudesh Mitra tells philosopher and dance writer Phillipa Rothfield during another 'tram overheard' conversation:

*Every form we have to begin with is already hybrid in some way at some point, and it's just that we forget that it is so. The sense of hybridity that we would want is an expert knowledge of two or three system or forms before one comes with something else.*<sup>8</sup>

In looking out the tram window I also see its surface of multiple layering reflections and recognise anew in this moment the power of collage. Mitra's 'hybridity' has me recall philosopher Jacques Ranciere on the aesthetic politics of 'collage'. For Ranciere:

*'it's this negotiation between forms of art and those of non-art that permits the formation of combinations of elements capable of speaking twice: from their readability and from their unreadability',*

leveraging that he calls:

*'a play on the line of indiscernability between the force of readability of sense and the force of strangeness of non-sense'.<sup>9</sup>*

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There is a sticker going around on bicycles since the invasion of Iraq that says 'burn fat not oil'. If you've been cycling you'll be getting hungry. Having been led by pedal-powered kitchen vehicles through a less than usual sequence of spatial passages through the city, the swarm of cyclists pull over to gather in an outdoor public space, perhaps in a dead-end laneway, beneath a road flyover, in a public park or on a pedestrian bridge high above an eight lane tollway. Your curiosity is pricked when you see another rider having removed their helmet – as road laws in Australia require all cyclists to wear a helmet – and walk toward the pedalled kitchen vehicles. I fold a newspaper lining in an origami-like manner, and by placing it inside the upturned helmet, transform the helmet to a bowl to be presented to the communal pot for a feed.

This key gesture of each rider eating out of their own upturned helmet gave initial seeds of direction and momentum to the project. It is a gesture that projected, in anticipation, some principles around which people may be gathered: pursuing simple aesthetic clarity embedded in acts of hospitality; practicing an economy of material usage and embodied energy born out of the dependency upon human power; and most importantly, exploring the qualities of surprise in juxtaposition and the potential pleasures of appropriating and making use of given conditions in unpremeditated ways. This gesture explores the simple infectious demonstration of negotiating 'play' to ride the delicate paths between believability and unbelievability, the readability of sense and the strangeness of non-sense.

There is nothing like a surprisingly good feed to lift the spirits and prompt a creative and hopeful desire amongst those gathered. Inhabiting an experience poised in the tension of sense and non-sense elevates the sensory enjoyment of eating. It is true that this event *takes place* by occupying people and environment without food-handling certification by authorities, without permits for use of public space, without street closures or police escorts, and without pre-arrangement between core hosts and participants. The event occupies the fragile conditions that enable collectivity to emerge, to swarm, to form patterns and to dissipate. I sense the digestive system is doing its work. Restful conversation abounds; time to move on.

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'Whoever does not get moving learns nothing, Yes, depart, divide yourself into parts' says Michel Serres<sup>10</sup>. There are many forces of contemporary culture that might seem to want to hold us and have us align to a prescribed line of practice, whether that be acting as consumer of given production; as disciple of disciplinarity; as possessor of *certain* knowledge of things; as spectator of spectacle; as occupant of an occupancy now available. Yet we can't underestimate the co-optive power and transformative appropriations that so-called consumers – or 'passengers' or 'guests' – bring to that which arrives produced, to that which precedes us as a given, as an inheritance, as a place. There is an increased ambiguity in domains of cultural production and consumption that make complex the experience of this occupancy.



Situated participation in the creative arts is commensurate with a contemporary tendency toward the dissolution of firm distinction between art and audience, the active and the passive, the built and the lived, the occupancy and the occupant. Duchamp pointed to this reciprocity in the creative act.<sup>11</sup> Performative dimensions of art practices explore the contingency with which social encounters can take place in increasingly ambiguous cultural settings. An engagement in the performative moment explores the inter-dependant and co-constituting relation between the conditions for experience, or pre-occupation, and the event of experience as an occupation of subjectivity in *becoming*.

The everyday kinesthetic experience of moving about in our lives in the public domain remains a mode of experience where engagement with forces beyond our own productive and consumptive agency can be readily felt. The motion of kinesthetic transport entwines in strange relations with the emotion of felt, remembered and imagined carriage. We move, and are moved, in an enfolding of motion and emotion, of effects and affects. Modes of transport offer sites and situations of public encounter where occupancy is called into question and dynamic forces of relation are brought to play. When aboard a tram I am aware of the ever-changing assemblage of a community temporarily brought together, moving alongside across differences. Ah, but how riding my bicycle can deliver an incomparable sense of agency amongst the complex urban social fabric!

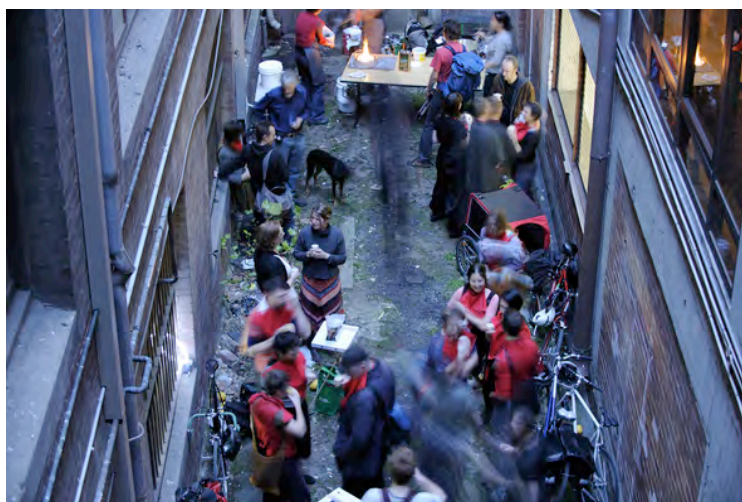


Figure 4: First course of *ride-on-dinner* (4), in 'Urban Interior Occupation', Craft Victoria Gallery, Melbourne 2008. Photo: Karen Trist.

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Each 'ride-on-dinner' project is initiated in relationship to a partnering group, organisation or event that has its own momentum, to which the dinner project rides alongside and offers its own act of hospitality.<sup>12</sup> The host-guest relationship typically structuring social situations of hospitality is shifted by the experimental gestures of the ride-on-dinners in attempts to have all individuals engaged with their own agency as it affects collectivity. Upon first encounter at a ride, the core Cultural Transports Collective hosts fit either cloth napkin or apron to arriving participants. Those who receive an apron are marked in the same way as the core hosts, signalling an authorisation of participants to slide back and forth between roles of guest and host. As the marking of participants as either guest (napkin) or host (apron) is arbitrary, the distinction between the two social positions and their conventions are called into question and given the potential of play.

At one *ride-on-dinner* it was a delight to experience almost a hundred cyclists in the happenstance repetition of riding in circular motion on the Yarra river's gravel edge, echoing the diametre of a Ferris wheel turning in the night sky above us, until after a few minutes that seemed an eternity, the swarm spun outward to cohere into a new direction of motion. With my stomach satisfied by local organic food cooked up on pedalled vehicles I feel all the more connected with my body, this temporarily collected social body and the body of the city. I'm kinaesthetically enamoured in such a fleeting moment determined by none of us, yet produced by all of us in an unspoken moment of creative collaboration.



Figure 5: Aboard *W-11 Tram*, Melbourne 2006. Photo: Karen Trist.

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Are we looking to be gathered together by big narrative ideas of creative arts movement and social movement that have a sense of certainty, comfort, longevity or outcome? The projects of this *cultural transports* practice explore relationships between transportation, public culture and an aesthetic politics of mobility. They are oriented toward enabling platforms, processes and direct experiences involving assemblages of people, rather than representations, to create new conditions for particular types of aesthetic encounters grounded in the ordinary and everyday, yet triggering engagement with the extraordinary contingency of life. Forces are multitudinous aboard the *W-11 Tram* or amongst a swarm of *ride-on-dinner* cyclists. Making conditions for forces to remain at play fosters the possibility for desires to *live* change to rise above desires to possess something as a sign of change. This experience is of desire as a freedom acknowledged, pursued, played with and lived with, not that of a freedom simply to be attained. It's these moments of live contingent occurrence that challenge and extend our modes of assimilation and have us participate in a re-distribution of the multiple regimes of drive, organisation and structure in our lives.

Journeys remain a simple register of experience that links the extra-ordinary with the ordinary and mundane, integrating the actuality of life and art, the social and the aesthetic into utterly embodied modes of actually living out the inhabitation of contemporary conditions. The work of a *ride-on-dinner* or *W-11 Tram* project seeks to create platform



conditions of social relations, trust, and allied forces that enable the potential of transporting moments to occur, accumulate and give rise to a potential groundswell of movement. This is the multi-layered task of net-work, of weaving net-like conditions that bring art-to-life and life-to-art in ways that activate movement in the relation between entities. It is the unveiling of potentiality embedded in reality, the way that people create what anthropologist Ghassan Hage calls 'utopic moments' in everyday life to help themselves live on. Not the grand idea of all-encompassing Utopia, but rather a minor 'utopia', says Hage 'is the moment that tries to play the game of shifting what ought and might be into the dimension of what is, moving it along the way'.<sup>13</sup> Conservative forces may wish to proclaim, protect and occupy what 'reality' is, whilst a hopeful politics seeks to engage fluid potentiality to elicit moments of inhabiting what might be, or ought to be a dynamics of irresolvable openness. This practice of *cultural transports* works to trace lines of aesthetic politics where uncertainty resides in a perpetual condition of negotiating motion, emotion and play, and so enabling experience of ephemeral moments that reveal the potentiality of social relations bonded by the reciprocity of care, generosity and hope. Participants encounter each other situated together with the provisional links enabled by the platform of the project, each participant potentially aware of their agency that assembles and disassembles themselves as individual contributors to an ephemeral collective. Perhaps the utopic moments of greatest potential are simply those where the very afforded potentiality of movement is embodied in its becoming, as the unpremeditated tracing of an improvisational path greeting the unknown in all its irrepressible surprise; that is, in the ongoing formation of subjectivity.

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Two hours later on that last *W-11 Tram* journey and the *High God People*, a group of Melbourne visual and sound artists, join a singer of Sufi songs and a tabla player to fill the tram with rich sounds and gestures for the very last 'tram overboard' lap of the city.<sup>14</sup> Rain has suddenly dumped down on the hot and muggy Melbourne evening. Soaked passengers join those already aboard and heavily perspiring to make the visceral qualities of our bodies more intensely felt. There is no grand single spectacle when riding this *W-11 Tram* or pedalling the *ride-on-dinner*: there are multiple partial glimpses and many particular experiences unique to every encounter. I grab the hairy animal moustache-thing above my lips and tease it from my skin, place it in a small zip-lock plastic bag and pin it to the breast of my uniform. '*W-gerah! W-gerah!*' A few moments later I'm asked 'didn't you have a moustache?' As my finger points to that thing on my shirt-breast I get a look of confusion, then shrieks of surprise: equally horrified and delighted. I am, after all, interested in practicing a dynamic engagement with the ongoing formation of subjectivities. Time to move on. Ah, you've missed your stop you say? Not to worry, we're moving through circles.

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> See: [www.ride-on-dinner.net](http://www.ride-on-dinner.net)

<sup>2</sup> The title 'tram *overboard*' is a wink to the Australian political controversy 'Children Overboard' involving 'public allegations by Howard government ministers in October 2001, in the lead-up to a federal election, that sea-faring asylum seekers had thrown children overboard in a presumed ploy to secure rescue and passage to Australia.' An enquiry 'later found that no children had been thrown overboard, and that the government knew this prior to the election. The government was criticised for misleading the public and cynically "(exploiting) voters' fears of a wave

- of illegal immigrants by demonising asylum-seekers".' Source: <  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children\\_overboard\\_affair](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children_overboard_affair)> accessed 29 May 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> unpublished transcripts from the event documented at [www.tramtactic.net/W-11/2007/05/departure\\_20\\_leela\\_gandhi\\_mick.html](http://www.tramtactic.net/W-11/2007/05/departure_20_leela_gandhi_mick.html)
- <sup>4</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>6</sup> unpublished transcripts from the event documented at [www.tramtactic.net/W-11/2007/03/departure\\_19\\_vin\\_dcruz\\_michele\\_1.html](http://www.tramtactic.net/W-11/2007/03/departure_19_vin_dcruz_michele_1.html)
- <sup>7</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> unpublished transcripts from the event documented at [www.tramtactic.net/W-11/2007/03/departure\\_17\\_sudesh\\_mishra\\_phi\\_1.html](http://www.tramtactic.net/W-11/2007/03/departure_17_sudesh_mishra_phi_1.html)
- <sup>9</sup> Jacques Ranciere, 'Problems and Transformations in Critical Art', in Bishop, Claire (ed) *Participation*, Whitechapel and MIT Press, London/Cambridge Massachusetts 2006; p84.
- <sup>10</sup> Michel Serres, *the Troubadour of Knowledge*, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser & William Paulson, University of Michigan Press, Michigan 1997; p7.
- <sup>11</sup> Marcel Duchamp 'The Creative Act', in Battcock, Gregory (ed) *The new art: a critical anthology*, Dutton, 1973.
- <sup>12</sup> By working in specific relation to each group, working with that group's purpose for gathering and their immediate environment, the project brings a heightening resonance in relation to the social, circumstantial and environmental contexts through which it occurs. The project first emerged as part of a community-based Pedal Powered Vehicles Workshop that I hosted at RMIT University, from which the first kitchen vehicle infrastructure was developed. Subsequent dinners have taken place as part of a forum on sustainable transport, a gallery exhibition event with research group Urban Interior who undertook an 'Occupation' of Craft Victoria gallery in Melbourne, and most recently as part of a Sculpture Triennial.
- <sup>13</sup> Ghassan Hage 'The real, the potential and the political', Tsoutas, Nicholas (ed) *Knowledge+Dialogue+Exchange: remapping cultural globalisms from the south*, Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney 2005; p69.
- <sup>14</sup> This event is documented at [www.tramtactic.net/W-11/2007/05/departure\\_20\\_shoaib\\_safi\\_hi\\_go.html](http://www.tramtactic.net/W-11/2007/05/departure_20_shoaib_safi_hi_go.html)