

ASTRA  
HOWARD

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Astra Howard, *The other [inside] II*, 2003,  
action research project, Sydney.

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artprogram

## ANZ Emerging Artists Program

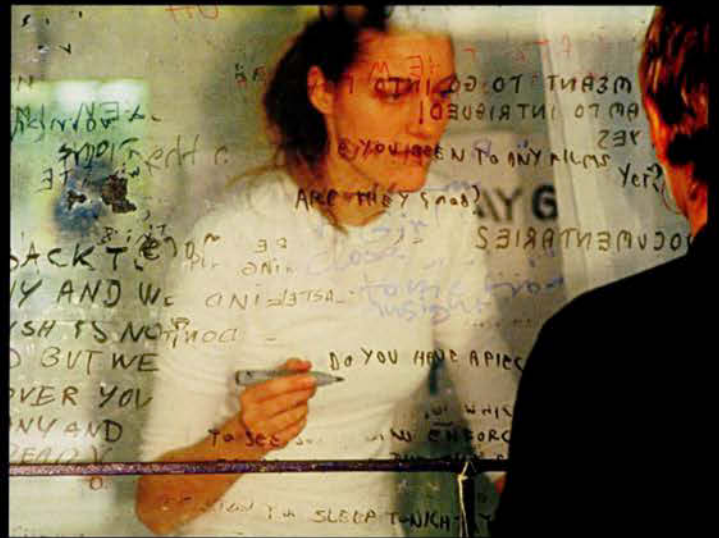
Astra Howard

Katrina Schwarz



Astra Howard

Astra Howard, *Public (private) living spaces II*, 2002, action research project, Sydney.



The fortitude and particular pluck of Astra Howard, the Sydney artist selected as the third beneficiary of the ANZ Private Bank Emerging Artists Program, might best be discerned from the cramped hours she spent inside a severe wooden box (as featured on our back cover), the day she lived inside a public phone-box or the week she was immured in a glass-panelled tobacconist shop in Sydney's Kings Cross. Howard's exercises in containment, which were staged as part of PhD investigations undertaken through the School of Design at the College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales, speak, paradoxically, to the artist's ongoing interest in and interrogation of wide open spaces.

Howard's public experiments – which she classifies as 'action research', referencing her adoption of a social science methodology that is performative, participatory and best characterised by the concept 'learning by doing' – focus on transitional urban public spaces, such as streetscapes, commuter routes, abandoned infrastructure and pre-construction sites. Positing flux as a defining feature of local public space, these transit zones become a stage and testing-lab for Howard to categorise and characterise the general experience of public space.

Noting that the qualitative experience of public space varies greatly, both from site to site and individual to individual, Howard, under the auspices of a 2002 Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship, has carried out action research in urban areas of Beijing, Paris, New York and Delhi, with Sydney serving as the base of experience.

*The other (inside) II*, 2003, an action research project captured on video and replicated as a live performance at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in Sydney ('Outside In', 8 May – 7 June 2003), saw Howard sealed within a small white box, only a bare leg and arm protruding from the impossibly confined space. Prior to its transplant to the gallery, where it seemed to invite a critique of the 'white cube' of the contemporary art space, *The other (inside)* was installed on a footpath in the Sydney suburb of Newtown and, in a slightly altered form, on the busiest thoroughfare in Delhi, India. Each site imbued the human/box form with new meaning and posed new questions about the public body and the body in public. In cosmopolitan, experimental Newtown passersby were aloof and blasé; in Delhi the alien and discomfiting site drew a large, curious throng and, to the artist's surprise, the concealed body, the enclosed space, the visible arm, white and feminine, were interpreted as a comment on the customary shrouded guise of local Muslim women. The gallery space, according to

Howard, was the one location in which, certain proprieties suspended, the audience felt legitimate and patently enjoyed touching the exposed limbs of the researcher/performer.

*The other (inside)*, in its manifold associations, illustrates the more particular outcome of Howard's action research which, in opening up the public space as a site of inquiry, is to interrogate the apparent certainty of such oppositions as public and private, stranger and local, concealed and exposed, transitory and stationary. That public and private experiences stand in variable relation to public and private spaces was demonstrated in two key actions in 2000, *Public (private) living spaces I and II*, in which the researcher/performer lived, for extended durations, as a public spectacle. Occupying a public telephone-box for twenty-four hours, and subsequently a glass-panelled shopfront for a week, Howard's action research drew out the complexities and contradictions of urban public space experience, addressing both the virtual privatisation of a public space increasingly subject to surveillance and regulation, and also the degree to which people with limited access to private space, such as the homeless, must carry out what are held to be private activities in public.

A key feature of Howard's week-long habitation of the Kings Cross tobacconist shop was the emergence of an irrepressible dialogue with the local residents. The initial scope of the project, which was to simply occupy the space, was warped and enlarged by the curiosity and constant enquiries of the area's inhabitants, a considerable proportion of whom lived on the street. Howard, in an effort to explain and respond, began to write (spontaneously and necessarily backwards) in felt marker on the inside glass panels of the shopfront. The locals returned in kind – Howard noting that the presence of a barrier, the glass wall, between researcher and public actually seemed to encourage conversation and revelation. The collected confessions and casual chit chat, the suicide notes scrawled on glass and the public airing of private stories exposed the inherent potential of public space as a site of cultural transaction and social interrogation.

This perhaps is the ultimate goal of Astra Howard's project: in calling for greater recognition of the dynamic and interactive relationship formed between individuals (the internal body) and external urban environments, Howard envisages a vibrant and vital public space – an experimental zone for people to test out their identity and to actively contribute, communicate and debate issues that concern them. A space for action and contemplation.