



astra  
and the ventilation  
hypothesis

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**Performance art makes me uncomfortable. Whenever I encounter it I maintain a significant distance between the artist and myself. My interest, fascination, curiosity and admiration are typically overcome by a strong fear that I may be somehow expected to participate, to 'perform'. So, it is with sincere amazement that I view images of Astra Howard's Action Research/ Performances (AR/Ps).**

There do appear to be those that perhaps share my unease (pictured averting their gazes in the background) but there are oodles of images of Astra accompanied by engaged onlookers and eager participants. Through researching Astra's work, intentions, images and available participant responses I have realised that if you get close enough you find an artist that offers her participants far more than she asks of them. She offers something we all crave... emotional expression.

Emotional expression is about overt manifestation of your emotional experience. When your displayed emotions match your felt emotions, you've achieved emotional expression. Recall a day when you've had an angering/disappointing/exciting encounter and the thoughts are stomping/writhing/dancing about in your mind. Typically, your response is to eagerly gush the details of your emotional experience to the first (usually appropriately selected) recipient. You vent. If all went well then your vent was greeted with sufficient nods, respectful silence and/or brief, but supportive interjections such as 'really', 'wow', 'that's amazing' or 'how dare they!'.

What if they didn't seem to listen?  
What if they trivialised your emotional experience?  
What if they were critical of the intensity of your response?  
What if you decided it wasn't appropriate to share your thoughts?  
What if self-disclosure makes you uncomfortable?  
What if there just isn't anyone to vent to?

What happens to you if, that day, those emotions remain unexpressed?

What if for days, months, decades they continue to be unexpressed?

This concerns supporters of the *ventilation hypothesis*. They argue that if you are able to vent your emotions, particularly negative ones, you will experience a vital emotional release. Conversely, if you can't or don't vent, those unexpressed emotions can linger, draining energy and causing potential psychological and physical damage.

This is a rather widely accepted belief with a lot of cultural and therapeutic support.

Many of us would also support the notion that the expression of emotions such as anger, sadness, grief, loss or fear is not only good for us, but often necessary, if we are to cope or move on. We often feel that if we articulate the emotion, it will somehow alleviate the intensity of the emotional experience. Phrases such as 'if you let it out you'll feel better', 'a problem shared is a problem halved' and 'just tell them how you feel' all support the ventilation hypothesis. Venting also has clinical research endorsement. The inability or unwillingness to vent has been found to have some substantial, and surprising, effects. Many have maintained that, broadly, it is actually crucial to the development and maintenance of our social interactions, psychological well-being and physical health. Empirical studies, particularly those by Pennebaker and associates, have more specifically demonstrated that both verbal and written emotional expression have positive physical and psychological benefits including; decreased ruminations of related experiences, lower levels of fatigue, improved tension levels, stronger immune functions, improvements for moderate to severe asthmatics, a decrease in pain for sufferers of rheumatoid arthritis and even improved academic and employment functioning.

So, vent.

If only it was that easy.

While there are many advocates of the ventilation hypothesis there are others that argue that there are limitations to this theory that threaten to undermine the validity and benefits of venting. Many of their concerns are addressed in the 'what ifs' listed previously. If the recipient fails to sincerely listen, if they are dismissive or respond with criticism or if sharing your thoughts makes you feel anxious, then you actually are at risk of heightening your experience of negative emotions.

What if these limitations could be minimised, or even overcome?

**Astra Howard OPPOSITE AND BELOW:** *Feeling Cities Public Contact Vehicle - Sydney 2009*, from *The Stranger in the City: Testing Identity & Anonymity*.





What if there was a woman, wearing white, who lived in a glass-fronted Kings Cross tobacconist – a woman to whom you could vent your sorrows by simply writing them on the glass walls of her home. She doesn't ask for your contact details or your credit card number. She doesn't judge you, belittle you or chastise you. Instead she read your words and sincerely, gently, reflects them.

This woman exists. Well, she did during her *Action Research/ Performance* titled *Public (Private) Living Spaces II*. For an entire week Astra Howard lived in her very public home. As *Action Research*, Astra's intention has been to develop vehicles, sometimes literally, that encourage an increased understanding of the public spaces that she inhabits. Individual projects take into account a theoretical analysis of the specific nation and community that the project will take place in. The ideas unveiled in such analysis are then tested for validity on the actual streets that they reference.

For Astra, this process necessarily requires participation by members of the public. Despite rather rigorous attempts to design projects with an inbuilt element of control – suitable for both the scientific approach and the artist's temperament (Astra's own observation, not mine) – the involvement of others inevitably leads to unintended consequences and unexpected outcomes. Sometimes revealed on reflection, sometimes emergent during the project itself.

One such unintended consequence that emerged during *Public (Private) Living Spaces II* in Kings Cross was the establishment of an ongoing relationship with the local street community. Though her crisp white outfit was quite a contrast to the attire of homeless locals that could be seen nearby in some images, her public existence and availability endeared her to many of them. This is attributable, in part, to Astra's willingness and generosity in fulfilling their need for emotional expression.

They came to realise that Astra's presence was not about entertainment. It was not a show. There was no star. There was no attempt to expose any individual. There were simply sincere attempts to understand them.

This theme continued into a following project titled *CITYtalking*, conducted in Melbourne's CBD streets and laneways. For this project Astra's vehicle was an efficient and effective conversation booth that she wheeled around for five weeks. Throughout each day the booth was positioned

in six different laneways, becoming a temporary forum for communication in what would otherwise be merely a passageway for many.

Members of the public were encouraged to enter the booth in order to engage in a conversation with an anonymous Astra. The communication was conducted via intercom and the participating parties were unable to see each other throughout the process. The removal of the identities in the dialogue is believed to have been a likely cause for the level of self-disclosure. The anonymity afforded the participants an unfamiliar comfort.

Yet a transcript of the conversation was broadcast around the exterior of the booth, somewhat betraying the sensation of privacy that the booth offered. Despite the broadcast, Astra found that the result was often an expression of quite profound personal, social and political feelings. Leonie, a local homeless woman, is described as initially hostile toward the booth, but when she realised its unique expressive potential she became an eager participant. Revealing, for more than an hour, incredibly personal experiences of marginalisation, rejection and isolation to both Astra and the booth's audience (via the displayed transcript).

*My experience is that nobody wants to know, none of the ruling class wants to know. People are dying in the gutter and it is hidden.*

*I am lucky to be here, to have survived and now be able to speak about it. No one wants to listen to what the government did. You are just supposed to get it all together. I do not know anyone else who is in the gutter and is able to speak.*

*How do I get on my feet again? I need a voice. I am so distressed, I do not know how I have the strength to walk half the time. I cannot believe that at fifty-four years of age you are still told that you are a piece of shit.*

*My poor mother, after all the children were taken, she took an overdose, my father had a nervous breakdown. He got locked up in Pentridge Gaol for years.*

*I was demonised in my twenties, I ended up being trafficked in prostitution. I was lucky to have got out of it. I was helped by my late brother. It is not something that you wake up thinking that is what I want to do.*

*People have to stop being hypocrites and judgemental and asking why someone is in the gutter, that hurts me shocking. I am*



powerless and voiceless and intimidated to say anything. Astra, via *Public (Private) Living Spaces II* and *CITYtalking*, acknowledges and responds sincerely to one of our deepest and most affective human needs – our need for emotional expression. Our need to have our voice heard. Our need to vent. Astra's unusual, yet engaging, methods and her incredible personal emotional commitment to her projects and participants offers more than the intended understanding of individuals and their communities. These projects offer further insight into how art can promote improvements in our psychological and physical well-being. ☺

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Astra Howard THIS PAGE AND FAR LEFT ON OPPOSITE PAGE: (ARP 5.25 *Surveillance with Public Intent Vehicle*) Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide, Gosford, Frankston, Australia 2007. Commissioned/Supported by Artspace, Performance Space, QLD Government Department of Communities, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, 'Brown's Cows Art Projects' & Gosford Council, Frankston City Council. From *Narratives of the City: Revealing & Implanting Stories*.

OPPOSITE: ARP 5.24 *CITYtalking Melbourne*, Australia 2006. Melbourne City Council Laneway Commissions, from *Narratives of the City: Revealing & Implanting Stories*.

