

CRITIC'S CHOICE

SYDNEY-BASED ACADEMIC AND CRITIC **JOANNA MENDELSSOHN** PRESENTS A SELECTION OF FIVE ARTISTS FOR WHOM THE CHOICE OF FORM IS INTEGRAL TO THE COMMUNICATION OF THE MESSAGE.

At first glance these five artists don't appear to have much in common. Two have achieved popular commercial success with beautiful, slightly offbeat objects; one, a photographer, was the subject of vilification by shock jocks; and two reject the very materiality of the art object made for market. What they have in common is that while they all work with layers of subtext, the meaning and the message are both integrated into the form. It is not possible to both admire the object or activity, and ignore the layers of meaning that these artists incorporate into their work.

ASTRA HOWARD

Astra Howard is not an artist making collectable objects. Instead she challenges what art might do and be. She is easily the most radical of all the artists I selected, but probably the most interesting. In the main, her work comprises actions and interactions in public spaces in cities around the world. She once sat in a glass booth, all dressed in white, communicating with the outside world by writing in mirror writing so that outsiders could read. She's made variations on that work in phone booths and a wooden box – variations on the theme of containment.

Words, writing and communication with those who don't normally relate to artists per se are at the core of her work. She calls her practice "action research," which is a fair description.

What is interesting in the present climate of support for the arts is that Howard's intellectual rigour and moral purpose are appreciated by patrons of the arts. Early in her career she was awarded a Samstag fellowship, and later an award from the ANZ Private Bank Emerging Artists Program.

Astra Howard, *Surveillance with Public Intent Vehicle*, 2007-8. Action research performance. COURTESY: THE ARTIST



