

## Dancing in-between

### *The Artist at the Station*

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**ABSTRACT** In this personal essay I reflect on the first ten months of a fifteen-year performance project. As performance director, my role in the artistic team “Weekly Ticket Footscray” is to shape and document a weekly two-hour performance by performer David Wells at Footscray Train Station in Melbourne, Australia. Interviewing members of the artistic team and using my own writing, I describe our discoveries and new understandings, the first steps in this evolving public performance work. **KEYWORDS** Public art; Longitudinal art; Weekly ticket; theartistatthestation

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On 3 February 2016, the artistic team of Weekly Ticket Footscray assemble at 10:30 a.m. at Footscray Train Station in Melbourne, Australia, ready to start a fifteen-year performance project. As a collaborating artist, I am admitted through the secret orange door at the side of the station office. Conscious of entering the environment of the station staff for the first time, I am nervous. How does an art project fit in this place? How will station staff react to us? How do we describe what we are doing? We have received permission from Management, but making a personal and positive connection with the staff is critical to the success of our project.

*FRAGMENT 1: DAY 1. Signing into the visitor’s book inside the station for the first time we (myself and performer David Wells) meet two station workers. Both their names are David. A good omen? We explain what we are doing “We are starting an art project here for fifteen years.” They roar with laughter “I can’t even think about tomorrow!” jokes one David.*

The artist wears a simple outfit of black pants, a colorful shirt, and a black hat. He carries a wooden chair. This is our departure point, framing him as someone who is not a commuter, who can sit where he pleases, who is “in residence.” Standing on the chair, he emerges above the crowd like a monument.

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We watch the clock tick down to 10:30 a.m., and then we start. He picks up the chair and runs up a ramp with us watching. The reality of embarking on such a project is emotional, we feel entrusted with something but we don't know what it is. We are overwhelmed by the thought of who we will be in fifteen years, and who and where our friends, family, and children will be. Concurrent with these huge feelings is the reality of being at the station, being surrounded by normality, by crowds of people who don't know what we are doing. It's raining and the artist finds a courtyard space to dance, responding to the weather and puddles of water. We watch him from a walkway above. Commuters are intrigued, oblivious, confused; sometimes they smile. We have begun. The first moment is recorded for our website, where we will post images and text every week.<sup>1</sup>

Weekly Ticket Footscray (WTF) is a public art project in Melbourne that installs an artist for fifteen years at Footscray Train Station, a busy inner western suburban train station. Footscray has six platforms with trains arriving and departing from regional and metropolitan areas. The station is open to the elements with a combination of original red brick buildings from 1859 and new covered walkways and waiting areas built in the last few decades. The design of the station offers a multitude of performance viewpoints for an audience: through and over tracks and platforms, from above on overhead walkways, and from train carriages. The station is opposite Footscray Market, a multicultural market busy



FIGURE 1. David running with chair next to train. Photo credit: Meropie Carr

with local shoppers, and the station itself is populated by the culturally diverse residents of Footscray and commuters from regional and outer western suburbs.

The artistic team of WTF are curators and artistic directors Madeleine Flynn and Tim Humphrey, performer David Wells, myself as performance director, and community liaison Bec Reid. David will perform weekly at the station for two hours for the next fifteen years. Interviewing the artists involved and referring to my own weekly writing, in this article I interrogate our understandings of the first phase (ten months) of this longitudinal experiment into art in a public space. As an artistic team, we constantly balance the pragmatics of achieving a fifteen-year project with the large questions we pose by doing it. After this first phase, my questions are “How will this project change the station?” and “How will this project change us?” I can barely envisage the day in 2031 when we look back and try to answer the question “What happened?”

WTF began in 2009 with Footscray Community Arts Centre calling for tenders for a public artwork at the local train station. Madeleine and Tim are audio artists, their “experimental work is driven by a curiosity and questioning about listening in human culture.”<sup>2</sup> Exploring the possibilities of working within the proposed budget, Madeleine and Tim considered the option of the yearly maintenance allowance (for a sculpture) of AUD\$12,000 becoming an artist’s wage, and the artist performing for the fifteen years that a physical public object is designed to last. WTF was created to put an artist front and center, visible and identifiable as both performance artist and presence at the station. As a trusted collaborator, improviser, performer, and dancer who has worked previously in a range of non-traditional performance settings, David Wells was invited to be “the artist.” Over the next seven years, funding possibilities came within our grasp and then vanished, and the station itself underwent major renovations and changed public transport providers. Madeleine and Tim found it was an idea that wouldn’t let them go, people they spoke to were intrigued by the idea of a fifteen-year performance, WTF kept rising to the top of their list of “imaginary and possible art works.”

TIM: I think we’re saying this is important. This passage of time for someone to be doing something like this is important. And any artwork is identifying to some extent what is important, what the artist thinks is important.

As the project continues, the station is now familiar to us. Being there is a weekly pause of two hours when we can observe and reflect. David and I

develop a repertoire of performance scores or “skeleton suggestions.”<sup>3</sup> These are structures for semi-improvised performance that give specific movement qualities, modes of interaction, themes, or environmental frames. Sometimes David responds directly to individuals or crowds, sometimes to the spaces within the station, and sometimes to the trains themselves. The audience see him from inside a carriage pulling away from the platform, from the overhead walkways, at close range, or across the tracks and platforms. They see him as they wait, engrossed in their phones, in a hurry to get where they are going, immersed in the process of negotiating the electronic ticketing system. They see him alone or with a group of friends. They see him from a carriage as they pass through the station without stopping.

DAVID: I am responding to the rituals at the station. Everyone going, I respond to that; everyone stopping, everyone standing. Sometimes I can just do the same as that, sometimes I can go—everyone’s walking past me, I can do this, everyone’s walking past me, I can go with them. Everyone’s walking past me, I can watch them. Everyone’s walking past me, I can play with the people walking past. Sometimes the response is—let’s create a picture, let me create an image over there, let me create a story for myself that other people can share in, let me create a story that involves other people.

Tim describes “episodes of satisfaction,” moments and sequences that we notice, that become performance events that emerge because we have seen, recognized, and defined them.

TIM: The moment the young music student put his guitar down and started doing a dance with David in the middle, in between platform two and three. The Tai-Chi moment, the trio of people (David following two women doing Tai Chi across the tracks), that became sort of an act because it continued on for a long time because the train came and he moved down to the end and it became a structure.

These episodes and scores are repeated and varied, the repetition itself creating new content as audiences react to scenarios or images they have seen before. Jokes emerge between David and regular commuters over time, and passengers on certain trains from particular places have their own timing, humor, and willingness to engage.

I watch every performance, and take photos to post on our website and Facebook page.<sup>4</sup> We are amassing an audience who see the project unfurl online. My

physical presence and attention sometimes frames David, giving him a legitimacy and visibility. People walk past David and then smile at me, sharing a complicit moment, assuming I am involved or interested enough to be watching with a camera. Other times I am invisible, watching the watchers. The station itself emerges as a complex site with human and built architecture—morphing, illuminating, and creating artist, audience, and a new sense of place. This reflects the idea of space as “frequented place”<sup>5</sup> and the notion of non-space, where solitary people are in a state of transit/transition.<sup>6</sup>

DAVID: Everyone’s in a state of transferring from one place to another, and they’re in the middle of that. Most people haven’t come to see me, but I have come to see them, and I think that’s different to most types of performance, where it’s more structured and people have come to see the performer. I have to be very honest and very humble about the relationship that’s there. And for my own survival I have to understand that I am entering the world of other people, even if they are in between their worlds, of home and work and home and study and travel and meeting people and everything else.



FIGURE 2. David in this performative moment. Photo credit: Merophie Carr

*FRAGMENT 2: DAY 6. A warm, rainy day. No trains are running on Platform 1 (the main platform for trains into the city). Replacement buses pull up at the forecourt and great streams of people pour out, rushing to find their train about to depart from Platform 5. Suddenly hundreds of people are lined up on the platform; David is on the opposite platform, separated from the crowd by the railway tracks. He hoists his chair onto one shoulder and walks in slow motion along the platform, head bowed. The crowd watches him, their heads turning slowly in unison. There is a profound sense of stillness.*

We didn't know at the time why so many people were arriving on buses. Further up the line there had been a fatality on the track earlier that morning. Responding to the crowds and energy, David's minimalist performance somehow created a still tableau that included everyone. It was an extraordinary suspended and silent moment.

We have begun to feel part of the fabric of the station. The station staff in their blue and white shirts greet us with the teasing tones and banter they use with each other. The station master is proud of the film he made of David dancing that he has shared on social media. Commuters and locals recognize us: "I saw you last week!" Walking by with her shopping trolley, an elderly woman stops in front of David and tells him firmly, "I love this sort of thing," and then moves on. Posted on our Facebook page by Stefanie Robinson:

Thank you for creating a ripple of warm gentle laughter through the train carriage I was on this morning. As we made the stop in Footscray, enough people looked up and out to see you to tip the balance from a group of individuals in their private spaces to a small community sharing an experience.

Francis Alijs creates artworks inspired by walking, living in, or travelling through urban environments. In his project *The Collector*, he walked around Mexico City, Mexico, with a magnetized toy dog. After doing this for several days he became a fable, an urban myth of a "crazy gringo." The collective story of the artwork exists long after it has physically finished, and this fable or collective memory becomes the work itself as it "intervenes in the place's imagination without adding any physical matter to it."<sup>7</sup> The stories emerging about WTF are beyond our expectations or control, ranging from audience members asking each other what's happening, to a state-wide news story created and screened by a commercial television station about WTF. Despite the theme of "waste of taxpayers' money" in the television story, the lasting message is one of fame and legitimacy, with commuters telling David with pride, "I saw you on TV!" A

sense of ownership, shared understanding, and place is emerging—defined by the artist—creating a new sense of “perceived space.”<sup>8</sup>

*FRAGMENT 3. DAY 9. In response to a question from a commuter, David calls out across the tracks “I’m the artist at the station! I’m going to be here for fifteen years!” A bold and joyful statement. How powerful to publicly state: We are artists, we are here making art.*

MADELEINE: The way that David and people at the station are negotiating their relationship as performer–audience, and the way that that is happening, I see is a complex set of spatial language and emotional invitations and understandings, and I think what I’m learning from watching that is there’s going to be something, some new way for me to think about what the relationship between people and art is.

As an artist, I was anticipating more resistance to our presence, more of a sense of confusion or annoyance from people in the middle of their own trajectory. But more people than I expected are prepared to engage, to be curious, to watch or even join in an unexpected dance/shared moment, not knowing why it’s happening or who the dancer/performer is. We create a ripple, an interruption, a disturbance in the everyday, in the liminal space of the station, and responses to this are as varied as the audiences we meet.

DAVID: In the context of the station, people are in this in-between limbo, so you’re playing in limbo, in the in-between world that’s not specifically something. No-one has chosen to go to the station, they’re at the station because they are going somewhere else, and you are playing in that netherworld, in that in-between world. There’s lots of energy and trains and stopping and then there’s nothing for a while and then lots of energy and then stopping and then nothing, and everyone going in one direction, everyone going in the other direction, everyone going through a small little gate, everyone spreading out and everyone coming together again. Everyone looking one way, everyone looking another way, everyone looking down, people coming from long distances, people coming from short distances, old people, young people, really young people, families, people from all around the world coming to Footscray Station, and you get this sense of momentum from every person in between coming and going. I think about this sense that we’re all just in transit, we’re all in transit in life, in time. All of us, we’re all going. All those people, including myself, we’re all going, we’re all on the way to not being there anymore.



FIGURE 3. The Artist at the Station. Photo credit: Gregory Lorenzutti

WTF has many more weekly performances left. When we finish on 2 February 2031, we will know some of the stories that WTF has created, and have an understanding of how those stories themselves have become real. We will have a new sense of time, of the art we create and have created, of Footscray Station, of ourselves as artists, of our audience, and of in-between realms we have yet to consider. ■

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#### NOTES

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