*City Space
Architecture*

RMIT UNIVERSITY: MASTER OF ARTS (ART IN PUBLIC SPACE)

Temporary Text(iles)

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Abstract
Temporary Text(iles) is project led research which investigates the destructive power of words and language. The artist combines text and experimental textiles to produce installations that are both performative and ephemeral. These spatial interventions are activated within contemporary art contexts and public spaces such as the RMIT University City Campus, Altona beach and Campbell Arcade, all located in Melbourne, Australia. These experimental sites offer a gentle disruption to people's everyday routine as well as a space for critical reflection and conversation. In this chaotic time of global grief and tension, the author commits herself to understanding how her artistic interventions, using the medium of text and textile, could respond to pressing social issues. These issues investigated include discrimination and sexual violence against women, the environmental crisis and the racial mistreatment against Asian Australian refugees and asylum seekers. Three works are discussed within *Temporary Text(iles)* to describe the different spatial interventions in the research project and to analyse its effect in relation to these major social issues.

Keywords: text, textiles, ephemeral, social activism, public space

Introduction

Crisis evokes fear which elicits the weaponisation of language to demean, suppress and divide community. This practice-led research interrogates the harm caused by labels and political rhetoric. Additionally, it explores how creative practice might intervene into this space. *Temporary Text(iles)* is a multidisciplinary practice which creatively merges textiles, art, and Australian government policy to form installations. With the intention of reaching an unsuspecting public to spark curiosity and dialogue, the installations are not only exhibited in galleries but also as staged public performances. This article comprises of two parts, both of which describes artworks produced from this research. The artworks are personal and derived from lived experience as well as narratives from familial relationships. The first part of the article investigates the inadequacies of written government policies. *Drip* (2019) will highlight the political rhetoric within the Australian legal framework. Similarly, *words in water* (2019) aims to capture the urgency of the environmental crisis by exposing empty promises of much needed political action. The second part of the article investigates the violence of labels through the lens of Asian Australian refugees and asylum seekers. *Adrift* (2018-20) offers an example of how creative practice can encourage the rejection of labels and the damage that it carries.

Methodology

Text and textiles share etymological roots and also have cultural and historical similarities (Andrew 2008). This relationship is a point of intrigue and establishes the basis of these artistic interventions. This practice led research draws on different garment archetypes and experiments with Polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) fabric to pattern make and construct concept led clothing. PVA fabric is a synthetic fabric that is non-toxic and water soluble. By embracing the ephemeral nature of this fabric, it rejects the formal commodification of clothing and also opens up possibilities of exciting and interactive performances. In the following installations described in this article, text is written or sewn onto the PVA fabric. In these performances, the fabric is subjected to water at different exposure levels, literally erasing the text written onto them and symbolically stripping words from its effect and affect. This technique is applied to the installations which explores political rhetoric, labels and the manipulation of language.

Washing words

The research project stemmed from deep self-reflections of my lived experiences as a cis- gendered woman to explore issues of discrimination and sexual violence against women in Australia. It is important to note that as the issue of discrimination and sexual violence is explored in this project, it is only one perspective of womanhood. I acknowledge that Indigenous and Torres Strait Islanders and women with transgender experiences are much more susceptible to violence (Our Watch n.d). The general laws which were established to protect the rights of women in Australia overlook the needs and complex challenges of women experiencing intersectional discrimination. For example, migrant women have different layers of oppression which may inhibit them from fully accessing the rights described in The Sex Discrimination Act of 1984. A thorough investigation into this Australian document also shows that there are limitations in responding to systemic discrimination. One example of this, as noted by

Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, is the ever-persisting gender pay gap (Australian Human Rights Commission 2017).

Figure 1. Drip exhibited at First Site Gallery. Photographed by Morgan Carson.

Drip (2019) is a response to my findings and takes on the form of a raincoat that is sewn from PVA fabric. Excerpts from the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 Australia were laboriously transcribed onto this fabric as an artistic query into the effectiveness of the current legal framework created to protect women's right to be free from sexual harassment and violence. Just as a water-soluble raincoat is ironically ineffectual, so may be the written laws as a guarantee safety net for all Australian women. It proposes that wearer is adorned with a false form of protection. The artwork questions whether the legislative and administrative appearance of equality from the Australian government, is reality. It recognises that change in the behaviours, attitudes and structures that endorses inequality, is pivotal to progress. Furthermore, it pushes for the values promised in these written laws to go beyond mere formal equality and that there

should be more considerate development of initiatives to encourage community acceptance of these anti-discriminatory values (Australian Human Rights Commission 2005). Figure 1 and Figure 2 is documentation of the first public viewing of this artwork at First Site Gallery at RMIT University. The following year, it was exhibited again at Counihan Gallery in Brunswick amongst 80 artworks for the *Moreland Summer Show*. *Drip* (2019) was awarded the 2019 People's Choice Award, suggesting the issue of women's rights and safety is current, and one that resonates with members of the Moreland community.
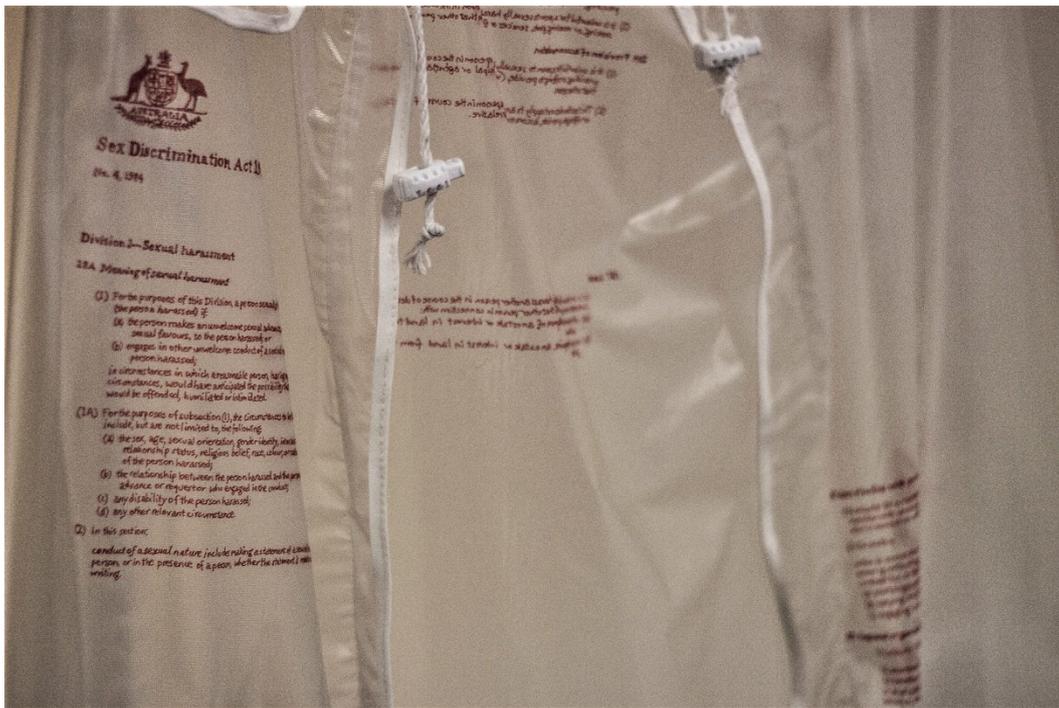

Figure 2. Drip exhibited at First Site Gallery. Photographed by Morgan Carson.

Shortly after the presentation of *Drip* (2019) in a gallery context, the artwork evolved from a static installation to a staged performance in a public site. The raincoat was a key component in a collaborative artwork with poet and performance artist, Trixi Rosa. In an event that took place on the grounds of RMIT University and as part of the *Her Boundaries* art festival hosted by the Public Art Collective, the performer wears the raincoat and slowly drenches her body with a portable shower. As she performs acts of washing and cleansing, the water tears at the raincoat, the bloody red ink of the words stain her skin. It was a performance of liberating oneself from the words that are ineffective in protecting all women from sexual violence and discrimination. This first exploration into the negative effects of political rhetoric relates to the proceeding installations.

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Figure 3. words in water installed at Altona beach, Victoria. Photographed by Morgan Carson.
Figure 4. Blown and wet PVA fabric of the words in water installation at Altona beach, Victoria. Photographed by Morgan Carson.

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Words in water
words in water (2019) was a durational performance that was installed in the tides of Altona beach in Victoria, Australia.

The artwork focussed on the event in which Australia signed a global agreement that aimed to respond to the climate crisis by reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Projections provided by the Australian government (March 2019), shows that Australia is not on track to achieving the target it agreed to in The 2016 Paris Agreement. Pieces of the PVA fabric was laboriously inscribed with articles and promises from The 2015 Kyoto Protocol and The 2016 Paris Agreement.

As the tides of the ocean come in, the fabric slowly submerges into the water and each line of these global contracts disappear, highlighting that the words are just empty promises unless backed with measurable actions. The ragged remnant of the installation is a reminder of the urgency for much needed action against climate change. The residual outcome of this performance, as seen in Figure 4, was a messy, tattered and barely intact piece of red and clear fabric. This sculpture was then installed in the fortyfivedownstairs gallery space for a group exhibition titled *1.5 degrees*. In contrast to *Drip* (2019), this artwork is a public performance which was then re-presented in a gallery context. Interestingly, a key image from the documentation of the performance was also developed into a lightbox as part of RMIT University's LIGHTSCAPES program. Hoisted high on the walls of Rodda Lane, the image faintly glows on the people who enters this public space.

Figure 5. words in water image installed as a lightbox at Rodda Lane.

A poetic gesture to combat the violence of labels

adrift (2019) is the last intervention of this practice led research project. It is an interrogation of the violence of labels and how poetic gestures can be symbolic of a reclamation of the negative language imposed onto the Asian Australian community. The derogatory slang 'Yellow Peril' from the late 19th century was used to oppress

Chinese workers who had legally immigrated to Australia. Similarly, the aftermath of the Vietnam War in the 1970s saw the arrival of the first wave of boats carrying people seeking asylum in Australia. This event introduced the term 'boat people' into the Australian vernacular (Phillips & Spinks 2013). This term has been brought into effect again with former Australian prime minister Tony Abbott's aggressive 'illegal boats' campaign in 2013 (Davidson 2013). The Liberal's campaign focused on painting a negative image of refugees and asylum seekers and had purposefully employed loaded language as a tactic to achieve this. The use of the labels has the capability to control the narrative around refugees and asylum seekers and consequently, the way in which these individuals are perceived, rejected and accepted by the public (Lee & Nerghes 2018). 'Illegal boat people' was a term that was littered in manipulative mass media during the election and demonstrates the big role language play in shaping the public's attitudes towards asylum and migration and influencing anxiety about immigration across Australia (United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees 2015). In populating discussions around asylum policies with labels such as 'boat people', it highlights the biased frame for evaluation of the same issue (Lee & Nerghes 2018). The protection framework for refugees and asylum seekers is undermined by the criminalisation and vilification that these labels encourage (Sajjad 2018). These label hierarchise human worthiness and simplify narratives to deduce those people seeking refuge to that label- that one characteristic- a singular descriptor. The violence and effects of labels opens a window of opportunity for artistic interventions to provide commentary and offer a space of critical reflection on this social issue.

adrift (2019) is a site-specific performative and ephemeral installation which aims to respond to the labels placed on refugees and asylum seekers. In the front courtyard of Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, three transparent workers shirts made from PVA fabric were hung, held together by a red yarn which is embroidered onto the shirts to form the words 'alien', 'boat people' and 'illegal'. The yarns anchor the installation to the nearby fire hydrant cage and electrical pole and as the wind blows through, gives an abstract impression of a makeshift clothesline on a boat. In this participatory installation, three people were given garden watering sprays to hose down the shirts. As the water touches the fabric, it begins to transform. The reaction of the PVA fabric to the water causes the structure of the installation to collapse with the words unravelling until there is nothing but loose yarns piling onto the floor. This action is a poetic gesture to offer individuals the tools to reject the negative labels imposed onto them. Through unravelling the negative connotations of those labels, they are no longer the object of the language. This small artistic intervention has created a world in which words are reduced to nothing. The seemingly impenetrable language system, that is often used to categorised human worth, could indeed be challenged through artistic actions in public sites. Supported by Creative Victoria, an iteration of this installation was realised at Campbell Arcade in the City of Melbourne. The work was installed in Capsule, a cabinet and window which sits in the underground concourse from Flinders Street Station to Degraves Street. The decision to activate this installation in this site was to reach an unsuspecting public audience in the commuters who routinely uses the underground concourse. In the duration of 4 weeks, the artist had revisited the space multiple times to gradually spray the shirts with water.

Figure 6 & 7. adrift installed at ACCA's foreground. Photographed by Ceri Hann.

adrift (2019) became a phased durational performance in which the commuters witnessed three stages of the installation- three different phases of decay. Throughout the exhibition of the artwork, several members of the public had shared images of the work, circulating the narrative in the digital space. The public speculations on the meaning and intention behind the work was collected. One notable response to the artwork was from a person with immigrant parents who resonated with the fragmented words 'boat people'.

Conclusion

In the global pandemic, there is an undisputable and unnerving racialisation of disease. This racialisation of diseases by our print media and politicians causes a physical, mental and emotional impact on the Asian communities and is further evidence of how language weaponised in the media filters down into Australian society. Racism is revealed in Australian print media and their choice words are an attack on the Asian Australian population. Australian publication, The Herald Sun published a headline that referred to the "Chinese Virus Pandamonium" (2020), while The Daily Telegraph highlighted "China kids stay home" (2020) in their headlines.
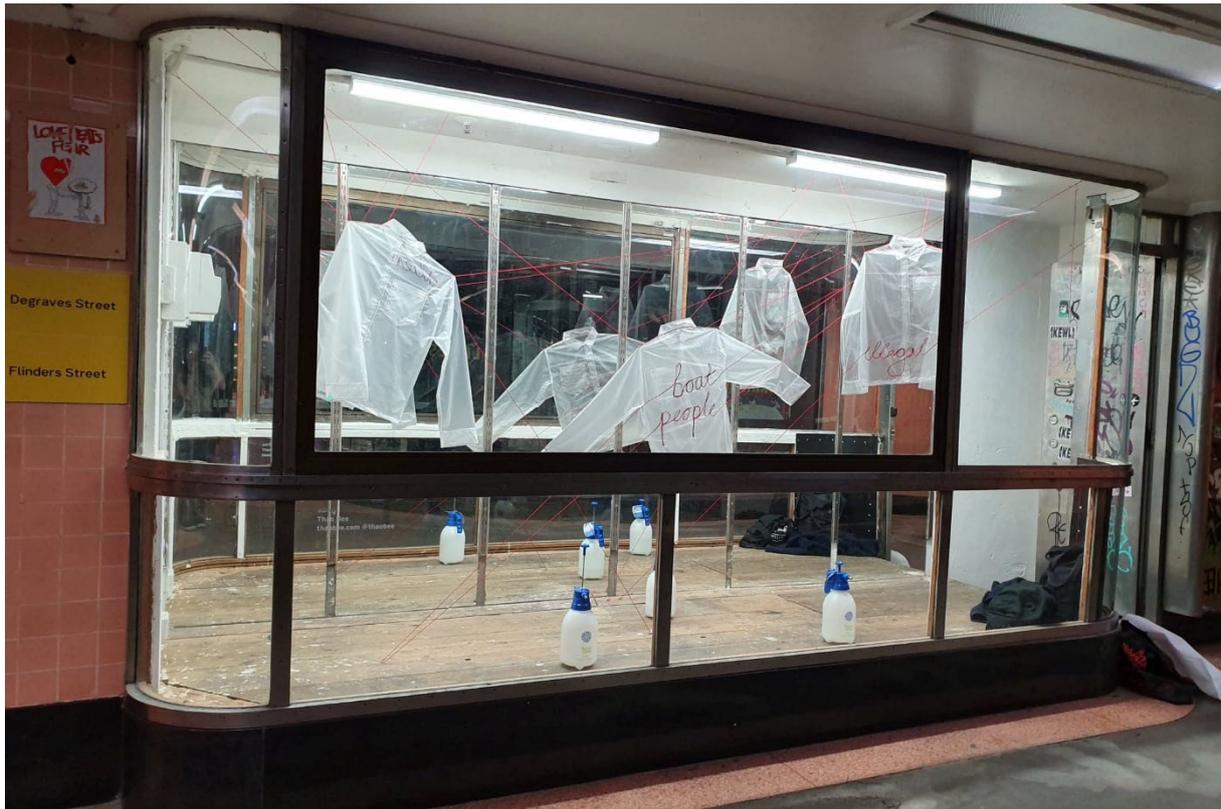
Figure 8. adrift installed at Capsule space in Campbell Arcade.
Figure 9. adrift installed at Capsule space in Campbell Arcade, after the first performance.

COVID-19 has increased the weaponisation of language to degrade the Asian communities. Racial slurs amplified by crisis is nothing new and just an iteration of what has been happening for years. For instance, the hysteria of SARS from 2013 evoked an aggressive anti-Asian mentality, equipping racists with labels to stereotype Asians. *Temporary Text(iles)* is a practice led research project which aims to hijack this cycle. In this research, the role that language plays in the inferiorisation of marginalised groups has been investigated. The findings of the project have evolved into interactive public performances and art installations. Times of crisis and elevated racism opens up the opportunity for artists to interrogate the violence of labels, the fallacies of language and to put pressure on leaders in Australian politics and Australian print media to curtail racism. *Temporary Text(iles)* is one humble example of how artistic practice can intervene into this space.

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