

**Brent Harris** *Posteering*  
25 September – 11 October 2013  
**Louise Tu'u** *An Anthem of Hope*  
4 October 2013  
The Physics Room

# Performing Etymologies

## Zoe Crook

It is impossible to review Louise Tu'u' *An Anthem of Hope* (2013) and Brent Harris' *Posteering* (2013), without a certain hypocrisy. The kind of defining language that a text like this is meant to use is made redundant by the only definitions they offer: ambiguity and prescience. Thus, in writerly response, this text can be considered a collection of musings, on how ambivalence functions in or, rather, around these works.

In *An Anthem of Hope*, Tu'u gathered her audience at The Physics Room for a happening that spanned theatre, performance and stand-up comedy. A group of actors – some of whom were adopted members of the public – performed various conceits, often repeating them. Tu'u presented herself as 'director'. Typically one would expect the director to be a tether to reality, pulling actors in and out of their imagined world with ease. However the artist's meta-theatricality became an act in itself, enhancing rather than shattering the enchantment. The effects of this doubling became more and more apparent as friends and acquaintances, people usually encountered at The Physics Room gallery, were revealed as being knowing actors. A lesson in deception, the performance resulted in a blurring of actor and acquaintance. A similar construction may be the impetus for dramatic form, but in the history of theatre the stage has positioned reality as its necessary opponent. In *An Anthem of Hope* this dynamic is undermined: the audience have an unknowing part in the fabrication or the performance and the actors, in their duplicitous roles, maintain the strongest tether to 'reality'.

In *Posteering* the artist invites the audience on an uncertain adventure. Yet in contrast to *An Anthem of Hope* Harris presents a very broad location and a series of generalised gestures. The specifics of *Posteering* are limited to his practical maxim – a series of actions that he performs – and the beginning and end points of the 'attendees'. The conditions of his performance appear very open, if staged – when 'we're lost' becomes a realisation of 'momentary displacement', Harris seems to provide the tether but also a portal. By treating every participant as equal to himself, Harris' anonymity to the participant is equal and opposite to the viewer's impression of him. If after booking, an individual is invited to attend his series of performances, the details arrive via email. Regardless of whether the artist knows the person, everyone is treated the same. In a later conversation Harris said, 'anonymity is forgetting.' This struck a chord with me. If the basic aim of entertainment is to distract and escapism is the desire to be

someone, Harris conducts these processes of anonymity within his choreography. The performance is periodic in its structure: the audience arrives and searches for the performance, watches 'it', and then goes back to what they were doing. This being-distracted and returning-to-life creates a rhythm. Inspired by a sense of heightened reality, not dissimilar to that nervous feeling that performances incite, Harris encourages us to become aware of the split between the theoretical and the practical with the simple act of rephrasing. Treating the street as an episode the performance is whatever you want it to be; you may not have met the artist and he may not have met you, but you will have had an experience regardless of what you just watched. It is this anonymity that allows you to explore a heightened reality before you are pulled back to the real world by the tether of a start or finish time. Harris and the participants become a part of the grey area of life, the shadows between buildings, the misused parts of the city. The difference then, between Tu'u and Harris' performances, is that Harris encourages a self-directed exploration of this grey hue.

From the websites of both artists it is clear that neither wants to be defined, but it is interesting that definition is associated with the communication of ideas. Take the website of Harris for example, if one ignores the social impetus that comes with having your own website and imagines that this is a website built for the practice of a flâneur (for wandering and exploration) then this is similar to the experience that Harris engenders in his audience during performance. The lack of natural dialogue within both of their works (in the sense that *An Anthem of Hope* was scripted, and *Posteering* unspoken) and a sense of premeditation (in thought and action) become defining characteristics. Suggesting the fallibility of communication, precedence is placed via these actions onto audience immersion and interpretation. Acting as a means to *experience*, the artist has become a medium – a portal to the 'grey area'. This monochromatic scale, from lost to forgotten, offers truth in the form of a language not ruptured or proliferated; one without mis-meanings.

Whilst I was sitting the gallery one day, a visitor came in (as they do) and was mulling about in the usual fashion. Harris happened to arrive during this mulling, to grab a few things and use the loo. It just so happened that upon this day, the blurb on The Physics Room Facebook was one describing Tu'u's piece. Designed as a piece of dialogue from the 'subjective' perspective of the gallery walls, it detailed this exact event: A visitor arriving and asking to use the toilet. The visitor, the girl who was and was not participating, asked if this was part of the performance. Banality rendered meaningful, this was not so much the case of the power of art to allow this girl to see the act of visiting a toilet as an artwork but a switch – a switch that enabled someone to be open to seeing the world in a different manner. Indeed, both Harris and Tu'u may be 'acting' but they are performing in order to create a new language: the language of experience.

Tu'u uses performing bodies as a site for her work, positioning autonomy as the source of her 'moment of hope'. As the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words. Both Tu'u and Harris proposition the audience with their performances, challenging the viewer into considering why it is that we judge visuality via the dictation of letters. Within *An Anthem of Hope* and *Posteering* (and often the artists' practices in general) it is direct experience that is emphasized as the place where discursivity is active rather than in texts or explanations that occur posthumously. Art history would try to account for their work by placing it into the category of performance art. Both artists perform in their works; their art involves an audience and an artist; they exist in relation to the art world and make contributions to this in the form of critique. How is it that what Tu'u and Harris are doing is at all different? Tu'u and Harris are not creating works for the art world in general. They make art for their participants. Their works reflect life by directly altering it. In doing so they make the banal magical.

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