



# RMB 2329

## The mailboxes are talking

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artist



I've always been interested in the question of what role an artist can play if that role isn't in designing and making more stuff for us to consume. I'd returned from studying public art at the Bauhaus University in Germany and I wanted to take the very conceptual stuff that I'd been doing there and see what happened with it here in Australia.

The ultimate romantic notion for a sculptor is that you just go into an area and work with what you're interested in. But of course, projects have stakeholders with a range of desired outcomes and you find yourself sitting around with all of their criteria on the table. You're trying to deliver something that not only meets your desires and expectations of a creative product, but also answers their needs which are a bit more real in the market. My project partners in Merriwa were keen to promote its produce and the area itself as a great place to live, particularly for young families.

I'd always thought that as an artist focusing on public art that the cities are the places that you need to go because it's where the money is. It's where you're making artworks for architectural spaces and big buildings. But actually, it's more interesting working in regional and remote areas because they have character and such Australianness about

them. You can really work with the whole community and artists can put it all into process. And every newspaper wants to write the story.

I presented a proposal to make a series of talking letterboxes based on 12 families using waste materials found on their properties. The boxes contained audio gear with recorded interviews from one member of each family. Letterboxes seemed like a good symbol to grab onto: it's the periphery of everyone's boundary. It's where their milk is delivered and where all their communication with the outside world is left.

First step in finding the participants was to set up a kind of interface place at the Tourist Welcoming Centre. I started by working on some wire-text sculptures. I was wanting to create a presence within the community, to get them talking and to get people coming and talking to me. The wire work was something I could do because while I couldn't start welding or bashing in the centre, I *could* use a soldering iron. Word of mouth is important in small communities. Cold-canvassing doesn't really work. To get participants, you almost need to be introduced. I talked to the Rotary Club and the schools and other groups and I was billeted with the local families.

When I'd found the chosen families, I had them pose for postcard photographs, a kind of proud portraiture in front of their properties. I drove from Newcastle to Dubbo hand delivering these postcards to general stores in little towns

along the way. I'd give the shop owners a little stand to put on their counter and I'd have a little yarn to tell them what was going on. On the back was information about the post boxes and where they would be in Merriwa and the opening hours and so on. Some of the project partners found it hard to understand why I needed to do those wire works and the postcards first. Some were keen to just move straight into creating the post boxes. But I needed to get to know the artists first. I think artists need to follow their instincts even if things get difficult. In fact, often the things that evolve by putting yourself in these sorts of volatile positions I find make for stronger work. You've got to develop trust. They've got to trust that you have an artistic instinct to develop something that will work.

Sometimes people are tied to traditional ideas of what public sculpture should be but in this project we all went along in leaps and bounds in our thinking. The boxes are a long way from a traditional monument and all the people who participated travelled that journey with me.

The design of the boxes was reflective of the character of the participant. One family had a long, long history in the area and the box we made for them is your typical dunny-style little cabin with numberplates from an old truck used as the door. The box typified the lifestyle. Whereas another family were young, university educated, new house, on the internet every day, stock market, business, business. Their materials were leftovers from their new house so it ended up like a modern piece of architecture and it suited the voice coming out of it.

The Merriwa project was about getting the people to reflect on their own situation and gain a self awareness about their own opinions. I don't think it's an artist's role to have all the answers. In fact I think it's very demeaning to stand there and say, 'This is the answer. Look at my work and be enlightened.' I can't imagine what I'd do if I was given a white box studio and told, 'Make your magic!'



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:  
Wire text on a boundary fence  
Talking mailboxes  
One of the young families of Merriwa  
PHOTOS: TRICIA FLANAGAN