

“A promiscuous, fleeting moment”

Crowd Theory – Port of Melbourne

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‘The old tank farm’ is a long, empty block between West Swanson Dock and the Coode Island liquid storage facility. To one side, a row of giant Panamax cranes displays the DP World logo and yellow ‘straddles’ skim like insects across the bitumen surface of the wharf. Across the road, a massive white silo marked ‘MOLASSES’ squats amid dozens of others with less innocuous contents. The clay-capped strip of middle ground is bare: yellow-headed weeds stake their claim amid deep tyre ruts and puddles. Three empty shipping containers lie at odd angles – spotlights shine down from tall cherry-pickers set up behind them.

Near the western perimeter stands a 6.5-metre scaff tower and a stretched-out scissor lift, from which a thin trail of tech staff wander back and forth, adjusting cables and testing sound levels. Around two sides of the squared-off area are what look like soft water pipes – steam exhales eerily from them now and then. It’s late afternoon, bleak and windy; around 160 people cluster around a heated, open marquee where hot soup is being dished out. It’s like a community hall before the dance starts – you can almost hear the voices echo off the walls as the visitors speculate on what’s about to happen.

From the placement of the shipping containers to the dry ice vapour that later seeped from a zig-zagged crack in the earth, everything about *Crowd Theory – Port of Melbourne* responded to the location. Created by artist Simon Terrill and producer Footscray Community Arts Centre, the work is the fifth in a series that has also explored sites at Footscray, Braybrook, Footscray Railway Station and Southbank – all with the same rationale. The Port of Melbourne site was chosen after a lengthy search, aided by project partner the Port of Melbourne Corporation. After exploring a number of possible locations, taking test shots from a small cherry-picker, and making numerous drawings, Terrill settled on the old tank farm site, part of the leasehold of stevedoring company DP World. Negotiation to use the land had to be conducted through the company’s Dubai headquarters.

Behind Terrill’s bare ‘set’, the yellow straddles move in and out of diagonally parked rows, waiting, reapproaching, moving a box, parking again, in a huge mechanical dance. Sometimes a row of them lines up in staggered formation, like an inhuman corps de ballet, before peeling off one-by-one for the next brightly coloured prop labelled Hamburg Süd or Evergreen.

Competing with the clangs and growls of the machinery, Footscray Community Arts Centre’s Jeremy Gaden steps onto a milk crate with a mic, and a crowd forms. He runs through some ground rules before introducing the artist. Everyone focuses intently on what Terrill has to say. He invites us literally “into this picture” and asks us, “What does this strange piece of land mean to you?”.

Those listening include local mortgagees and their kids, Port of Melbourne engineers, office staff, truck drivers, rail managers and dock workers, the Mission to Seafarers

Chaplain, former seamen, anti-dredging and pro-dredging proponents, and many who are simply curious about what goes on under the bright lights at the fenced-off head of Port Phillip Bay. Before the event, Terrill has spoken to as many participants as possible about what drew them here. Everyone has submitted a short statement, ahead of time, about their affinity with the Port.

The *Crowd Theory* “contract”, as Terrill calls it, involves setting up the event with attention to every detail, and then allowing participants to respond to the location as they wish. Interviewed at the time of the Port of Melbourne shoot, Terrill said: “I try to tread that line between facilitating the crowd ‘thing’ and not directing it.”

A Crowd Theory shoot unfolds as a kind of ‘ritual’, in which Terrill takes exactly ten shots over a one-hour period, a few minutes apart, on a large-format film camera. Between shots, exposure time is checked, lighting is adjusted, but essentially, the next shot is taken ‘ready or not’, locking Terrill into the same sequence that shapes the participants’ response.

“So at first it’s always nerve-wracking because it doesn’t seem to be working at all...and then within a few shots it always finds itself,” Terrill said. “It’s the ritual of the photographic process: take a shot, pause, reload the camera, take a shot – that repeating kind of rhythm.”

The wharf glows with the last of the day’s light as a group of marshalls leads the participants into the frame, where we scatter around, getting a feel for the place. The ‘ritual’ commences. A weird ‘soundscape’ shapes the atmosphere, building tension. Terrill’s voice is heard from somewhere on high, telling us we’re about to start. Then a long, steady tone is heard while the shot is taken – and everyone plays ‘statues’.

Men in orange safety vests pore over spread-out maps or blueprints; a young guy holds a trombone to his lips, dressed in brass band uniform. A couple of people stand by a small sculpture built out of rocks, lovers hug, kids do handstands, smoke machines and dry ice curl their tendrils and clouds above the pipes.

The first exposure is just a few seconds long, then as the sky fades they get longer – up to around 15 seconds. “Just think your Port thought,” comes Terrill’s godlike instruction each time. There’s a strange disconnectedness within the connectedness; a sense of ‘space between’ people and yet a shared purpose. People chat with one another, then the calling of each shot seems to fragment all the relationships while simultaneously freezing them – the ‘playing statues’ is the stillness of a group that is torn from itself in the moment of being itself. The curling smoke, the mirror sheen on a long puddle, and silence.

The *Crowd Theory* space is both fleeting and unstable, said Terrill, but inevitably “finds itself” at some point during the shoot. “I guess it fits into the propositional nature of the whole undertaking,” he said. “There’s certainly a kind of flawed, utopian thread through it all.”

“The idea is to turn an actual space into a photographic space, and in that translation it becomes a fiction. So I’m interested in that tension between the fictional image [and] the attributes that have gone into making the image; that have come from that place.”

Elias Canetti describes a crowd, said Terrill, as “one of the true moments of equality, where differences between people do drop away”. Terrill called this “a promiscuous, fleeting moment.”

“I think about it like: in the supermarket you bump into someone and you go ‘oh’! The crowd situation removes that fear, and all these interesting things start to happen.”

The crowd at the old tank farm is not the huge, amorphous entity of a rock concert or a political protest: it’s a relatively small, safe collection of curious participants. This community-based ‘crowd’ gathers together in a way that subtly teases out the sense of relation, connection, separation; perhaps even exhibits the tension between crowd and not-crowd as it considers its diverse reasons for being here.

Footscray Community Arts Centre began working with Simon Terrill in 2004, when he and former Artistic Director Jerril Rechter began to look at ways the Centre could work with local communities. In particular, Rechter wanted to produce an artwork that could also stand alone “once everybody’s gone home and all the buses have gone to their shelters”. *Crowd Theory*, said Rechter, brought together critical artistic practice and community engagement, as well as enabling other relationships – in this case with the nearby Port.

For the Port of Melbourne Corporation, the project helped demystify the 24/7 operation that dominates the local landscape while remaining largely hidden. Inaccessible to the public, the Port is nevertheless overtly present: the towering cranes and stacks of containers occupy vast areas of land between Footscray and the western end of Melbourne’s CBD. Rebecca Munn, then head of the Port’s community relations team, was approached by Rechter about developing a project with Footscray Community Arts Centre. When she saw *Crowd Theory – Braybrook* she realised the possibilities for a Port of Melbourne photograph, and took the idea back to the Corporation.

Crowd Theory – Port of Melbourne was by no means a PR exercise, however; and although the community element has been intrinsic to all the Crowd Theory works, the work of creating them aimed directly at the aesthetic outcome. Both Rechter and Munn pointed to the long and careful process of ensuring the focus stayed clearly on Terrill’s vision, helped by a steering committee. As Rechter said, “We just had to make sure that we both understood each other’s [organisational] position, and that we were able to build towards a body of communication and information that supported the end artwork.”

Munn recalled the way language helped illuminate the process for the steering committee: “Simon talks about things in a completely different way to how you talk about it in a corporation. He talks about the ‘art moment’ and he talks about the lead-up and the actual process, and it all makes sense”. At the same time, the steering committee guided Terrill and Footscray Community Arts Centre through a range of logistical issues and protocols, a process Rechter believes might otherwise have been extremely difficult.

“It’s a multi-billion dollar business, and so for us to interrupt them [was significant]: putting up lights, and buses of people coming in, Coode Island [a sensitive chemical storage area], and all those things that they take very seriously – they have to, because of the ‘age of fear’ we live in. We were able to crack that open, just for that night, and that was pretty special.”

The resulting image invites the viewer into a mix of rich detail and voyeuristic pleasure. West Swanson Dock is crisply defined: the corrugated steel warehouses,

perfectly readable ID codes on rich, bright containers, a speck of debris on the bitumen tarmac. Stark shadows, spotlights, machinery, slight movement in the cranes – and not a person in sight other than Terrill’s makeshift crowd.

For all five *Crowd Theory* photos, Terrill selected the image he felt best displayed the ‘crowd coherence’ towards which the project aimed: “I like to find one where no one is standing out or dominating; so there is no particular performance or gesture that tilts the whole reading of the picture.” This moment, he said, generally occurs somewhere around the half- or three-quarter point in the event.

“I think it’s just that ritual of repetition: in the first few shots you can see there’s a much more self-conscious level of performance...people aren’t really sure what’s happening, why they’re there,” Terrill said.

“Further into the process, people on their own find that reason why they came, and then the composition and all the little narratives seem to just come about. Suddenly in those 15 seconds, there’s just the most incredible feeling, because the whole scene is in silence, it’s sort of levitating; there’s a coherent composition that’s just come about of its own volition... And it feels very tentative, as though it could fall away at any second...”

Looking at the 1.8 x 2.4 metre print, the loose gathering does take on the quality of a coherent ‘moment’ – the interlaced pattern of bodies together and bodies apart becomes more and more apparent, and their gestures not random, but clear and deliberate. A visual strength that starts with the saturated colour, the cranes, the physical detail, leads ultimately to this frozen ‘crowd’ – and the seemingly fractured relationship of the crowd to the wharf behind gives way to a sense of the ‘whole’, albeit one that perhaps privileges that fracture.

The photograph has a feeling of contingency – unlike, for example, *Crowd Theory Southbank*, in which the human element appears more to ‘belong’ to the location. Here, the participants inhabit the space in ways that seem to reflect both the pleasure of being there and the uncertainty of the site – ultimately, a barren wasteland with dubious history, suggested by Terrill’s steamy vapours, issuing from their jagged crack. Interestingly, Terrill chose an exposure in which the crowd stayed well clear of the ominous vent, which, if not toxic, is at least perplexing.

In a sense, the crowd responds to a layer of narratives that Terrill creates with his ‘film-set’ approach: the earth itself, a post-industrial site; the crowd or community; the heartless but beautiful dock, controlled via Dubai; the corporate Port extending further; and the glimpsed Melbourne skyline. There is also the narrative of the process: the spotlights mounted on cherry-pickers, the lights and cables snaked across the ground, the bleached green beam in the centre of the image, like a brushstroke.

Terrill was ultimately cautious about the word ‘community’, describing it as “a strangely misused and under-scrutinised word.”

“Community defines the relatively fixed nature of a grouping,” he said, “whereas a crowd is the opposite, it’s completely un-fixed. A crowd is always inclusive, there’s no exclusion, by definition. It doesn’t have any of those overtones – it’s there fleetingly then it’s gone. And it’s quite beautiful, the idea of genuine equality, for that fleeting moment.”

Crowd Theory – Port of Melbourne (2008)

Artist: Simon Terrill

Produced by Footscray Community Arts Centre in partnership with the Port of Melbourne Corporation

Event: Saturday 2 August 2008, Port of Melbourne

Exhibition: 28 August to 28 September, Mission to Seafarers, Melbourne.

Crowd Theory – Port of Melbourne has been touring Australia in 2009 and 2010 as part of the Australia Council's KP11: producing communities exhibition, which can be seen at Launceston's Academy Gallery between 26 August and 17 October.