

‘Walking in the  
configuration of  
infinity’  
Interview with  
Sandra Bridie by  
Melody Ellis

## Interview with Sandra Bridie by Melody Ellis for, 'Walking in the configuration of infinity'

Melody Ellis (ME): I guess the obvious place to start, Sandie, is with the role of fiction in your work, but also the walking artists. I wondered if you could start talking about broadly the deployment of the fictional artists in your work, but specifically about the walking artists among those fictional artists that you have created.

*Sandra Bridie (SB): It's long and involved, but I began creating fictional artists in 1986 when I was in third year at art school out of a kind of malaise, I guess. The idea that was encouraged at the VCA at that time was about originality in your work and I had exhausted the idea of originality with my own work. Also, the status that the CV held. To begin with, I began fictionalising my CV, thinking that for artists that's where you look to for evidence of successful practice. I thought, well, 'What if you lie here?' Then faking my signature was another thing I was interested in. So I started replacing the artist's name with my own or grafting my own name onto texts about renowned artists, emulating smaller versions of their work to accompany the text – artists such as Kathe Kollwitz, Susan Valadon, AME Bale, Sol LeWitt, Carlo Cara, Cezanne, Kandinsky and others – and just seeing how that looked. Inserting my name into these types of texts looked ridiculous, a kind of a joke, when you knew that I was a mere student artist. Suddenly the claims for the work and the language to describe it looked preposterous. That was my starting point.*

*Then I discovered the artist Jean Le Gac, who invented this character, this amateur Sunday painter called 'le peintre', who had these adventures that were taken out of pulp fiction – little detective stories where he would create these absurd but quite beautiful phototexts of "le peintre" seeking out, trailing, skirmishing with and sometimes catching villains in the French countryside. The details were always very vague. He would document himself as the Sunday artist at an old-style folding landscape easel, painting what we can only imagine to be quaint and somewhat amateur landscapes, followed by photos of him off on these adventures chasing the villain, or at one point tied up on the railway tracks by the villain. My 'discovery' of Jean Le Gac was like a projection of this image of what I wanted to play with. As the texts he wrote as a central part of his works were all in French and my French wasn't very good, I found I could project what I wanted onto this artist and what he was saying through his work, at the same time projecting these qualities onto my own practice and the works I would create.*



*Initially, in the early fictions, I asked other people to write 'lives' for me; so I asked Kevin Murray, for instance, who wrote 'Susan Fielder: A Fictional Retrospective', which was my first big show at 200 Gertrude Street in 1991. In 1991–92 my father, Ross Bridie, wrote in French, 'Un homme et son mont: ou l'histoire de Maurice Ponque, peintre insolite' ('A man and his mountain, or the story of Maurice Ponque, eccentric painter'), which was a story about a bizarre French landscape painter.*

ME: Was your father a writer?

*SB: He spoke and wrote French well enough, and he wrote these little fable-like short stories for his French classes and the grandchildren, so I asked him to write me a 'life'. He created this character, Maurice Ponque, who painted Le Mont Saint Michel and insisted from a young age that he would devote his life to painting this one 'motif'. He had a sort of idee fixe about the famous island off the coast of Normandy and Brittany. In 1994, a friend of mine, Judy Smallman, wrote 'Sandra Bridie: Shadow of a woman' about this woman who could only imitate the artist Craig Best (someone 'like Ken Done'), who became successful with her imitations – so much so that Craig Best asked her to create this 'Moody Summer' range of soft furnishings under his name. After this I began my project at the VCA for my Masters, the Fictional and Actual Artist's Space, where I invited fellow students and VCA staff to exhibit in FAAS alongside my own exhibitions there. That was in 1995. From then on the interview with the artist was incorporated into my fictions alongside a project of actually interviewing my peers. BS Hope became the fictional interviewer of the various iterations of Sandra Bridie with different birthdates and art practices that appeared. The fictional conversations derived from my listening and recording of interviews with other students and artists, based on the rhythms and details of a young artist's life in Melbourne. That's where the banality of practice, the everyday observations of how we spend time in the studio that we all have experienced, was incorporated into my interviews.*

ME: Why the banality of all things?

*SB: Well, we spoke about recognisable activity in the studio making the work for the exhibitions, and often not so much about art – about how someone might spend their day: what books they read and movies they saw rather than the dedicated pursuit behind being a famous artist.*

ME: I wonder as well whether there is something to do with the interview that is in and of itself a banality, particularly an interview with a made-up part of yourself. I wonder whether there is something to do with that mode of address

somehow.

*SB: It was also addressing the interview as seen in published magazines, which were really scrubbed up and focused on these typical biographical moments, these confluences of 'big moments', rather than the banality of these 'nothing really happens' moments. I was wanting to record artists – my peers – talking about practice because I wanted to get that; the experience of the day that we all recognise, rather than expression from the position of fame, about how you become a great artist. 'How do you become an ordinary artist?' was more what I was interested in.*

ME: Is that where the interest in Perec came in, too – in terms of that interest in the everyday?

*SB: Jean Le Gac is like that too – he records these failed artists, including his own invention of a failed artist; this community of people who have suffered lots of lost opportunities. Georges Perec, the writer whom I reread above all others, is behind almost all of it, in a way. The detail, the exhaustive inventory of things surrounding us and things we do to describe everyday life and the places we inhabit is the type of experience I am interested in. Definitely also, Perec and the group, the Oulipo, that he was a part of have had a huge influence on the kind of constraints that many of my fictional artists operate under. Personally, I don't feel like I do have recognisable constraints that I work under, a routine, or habits of practice, but I would like to very much. It is as if these characters that I create operate in a very known universe.*

ME: So, Sandra Bridie the artist doesn't operate within the constraints of the artists created by Sandra.

*SB: That's correct. I don't have the clarity that my artists often have nor their obsessions.*

ME: So you are the conduit. I just think it is so curious that you would make that separation. I think that writers do that too, when you hear writers talking about characters and their inner worlds and even sometimes the way that they think about the way they write themselves. It's curious that there might be that kind of split because, really, it's you imposing these constraints, obviously!

*SB: Yes, but it is only within the time constraint of the single project or fiction, not my actual ongoing practice.*

ME: A kind of nesting of constraints, really.

SB: Yes.

ME: So it's really very interesting these terms that are coming up: 'projection', 'originality', 'signature', an 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' self, perhaps, or certainly the 'authentic' or 'inauthentic' artist, against the narrative of artistic success, or this idea of a grand artistic practice that is somehow not ordinary. I wonder if there might be a bridge there in terms of thinking about the fictional walking artists. You have this interest in creating these fictional characters and these constraints that they work under and then the ways that these fictional artists work are varied, which is interesting too. Some of them, of course, are walking artists. I wonder if you could tell us about those.

SB: *The walking artist has become a definite, almost dominant sub-genre of my fictional artists, possibly ever since I heard about and consequently became very interested in the possibility of walking the Camino de Santiago, from a colleague at work in 2004. That year I was invited to exhibit in an outdoor exhibition in Birrarung Marr. So since 2004 I have produced seven walking artists. A few of them walk in the configuration of infinity, some have longer hiking type practices and others do promenades or take shorter walks.*

*The first fictional walking artist was this character AB Hope. There are two AB Hopes; the second was produced for this current Bus project, 'Walking in the Configuration of Infinity'. AB Hope from 2004 comes out of the narrative of the Mildura Sculpturascapes of the late '60s to '70s. The work was commissioned by Rose Lang for an exhibition of outdoor sculptures at Birrarung Marr called 'Skinned'. So I had to produce something to go into the landscape. Now, I am no sculptor. I was told I was crap at sculpture by both Tony Clark and John Nixon at art school, and it was true! This news wasn't devastating; it was a statement of fact. I had to produce something in the landscape at Birrarung Marr at the base of the long Tanderrum Bridge, there near Speakers' Corner, so I created this character who walked in the shape of infinity and created a path in the shape of infinity on the site I was allocated. It was meant to be a sunken path, but it ended up being a small, shallow pool in the shape of infinity due to the amount of rain that fell that November in 2004. The story behind AB Hope's work was that it was an excavated path. From time to time the artist would camp in the area (prior to it being landscaped into the Birrarung Marr precinct) and do a walk in the shape of infinity in the park, and he would bury evidence of his time there, such as newspapers of the day, video and cassette tapes documenting his work, ceramic tiles with map drawings on them, and sets of footprints embossed into aluminium sheets were also buried.*

ME: And you did that burying work on his behalf?

SB: *Yes, I had City of Melbourne assistance in the 'excavation' with an expert digger. She was also instructed to devise a railing out of wooden sticks and jute rope around the 'dig' for OHS reasons, which assisted in the allusion of the work as an excavation or archaeological dig. It was meant to be various layers of paths on the same infinity path, each burying a different type of artefact.*

ME: Did you leave them there?

SB: *No, we had to unearth the lot of it and take it away. I did go back there a couple of years later to document any residues from the sunken path. There was only a tiny ghosting of a trace of the path left, where the grass grew differently. I was possibly loading too much into the work for the viewer to ascertain from it – all these ideas and all these layers. It was inexpertly executed, in a way, too. Then the fact that it rained and became a rivulet rather than a path...*

*It was a curious piece, and I am not sure if it was of any moment, but the actual shape of infinity came from a project that I did in third year at art school where I asked fellow students and staff to create a series of structures out of these turn-of-the-century ceramic blocks that I had found. Lyndell Brown, who was a fellow student at the time, had created this work of a raised path in the shape of infinity. Lyndell had written a description of the venue and its purpose as part of the project, and I wrote a short narrative informed by her description of the site. That is where the motif of the infinity sign and walking this path in my work originated from, which resonated further for me, I later realised, from the eye exercises I was given as a child where I had to trace the figure of infinity to strengthen my eyes.*

ME: What was that for?

SB: *I had a squint, a crooked eye, from the age of two. I had numerous eye operations to straighten it and lots of visits to the ophthalmologist where I sat on my mum's knee and did eye exercises following Sooty puppets moving around back and forth and in the shape of infinity.*

ME: And that was the shape that they would ask you to follow?

SB: *Yes, it still is an exercise that I do. So for me the shape of infinity goes back to that early physiological embedding, plus of course the mythical icon of what infinity is and what it evokes.*

ME: Sure, in the sense of there being no end.

SB: *Yes, but I think there is constraint in the actual shape of infinity that seems to contradict the symbol's meaning.*

ME: And that fits very well with the repetition here – this is something that you return to, that you can take up and practice in various ways again. That's fascinating.

SB: *The first three walking artists I created were men, or three men played the same character AB Hope in different settings. And the latest work I have made, the most recent AB Hope work, is a thirty-year-old man but he is using walking grids. There have been two Sandra Bridies who did infinity walks. One was a thrill seeker who due to having her cataracts removed has to walk in the shape of infinity with gauze pads over her eyes. Another Sandra Bridie did walking meditations, promenades along the Elwood promenade and other promenades in Melbourne in remembrance of her dead lover. The most recent fiction has Sandra Bridie documented doing these infinity walks at various sites along the Camino de Santiago.*

ME: So there are different shapes you walk – walking in the shape of infinity and the grids as well?

SB: *The grids are made up of these walks where I photograph the ground at every kilometre, so they just look like photos of paving.*

ME: I want to ask you – I am not sure if this will be a controversial question or not: I wonder if you think of yourself as a conceptual artist.

SB: *Some of my artists are kind of conceptual.*

ME: I am not talking about your artists now; I am talking about you. Do you think of the creation of these fictions and these characters as conceptual art or not? Perhaps it is not even a relevant question, but I am somehow intrigued by it. It seems to me to be in the field of a conceptual practice, the way in which you work – it's not entirely conceptual – but I wonder if that is of interest.

SB: *My interests come from outside of art, as a rule, so I guess I am always standing back from art. It is more like how a filmmaker might present an artist – they are like little plays, in a way, with the dialogue. They are kind of outside of the discipline.*

ME: And yet the references are highly discipline specific.

SB: *They come out of practice, yes.*

ME: Particularly in those early years you described at art school where you are to some extent rebelling against or at least highlighting the absurdity of the institution or high art.

SB: *It's flipping the paradigm of striving for excellence and striving to be a famous artist.*

ME: Right. So in that sense it is very much out of the discipline. I find it curious that you would characterise the interest of it being outside but, again maybe that has something to do with the relationship that you have with yourself as an artist, or maker, and these characters that then do the making.

SB: *I guess I would see Jean Le Gac as a conceptual artist – the art is a representation of something.*

ME: I love conceptual art; I don't mean it in a pejorative way at all. I am just curious if there is a kind of love of the concept or whether it is less about the concept for you.

SB: *It's true there is a love of the concept, that is what drives the work. I create the artists as a counterpoint, often to the last piece I made or to my own personality or my own way of working. It allows me to make the work, and I am not convinced of my reasons to make the work without the fictional construct. It allows me to work in the way that I work, which is not with any great loyalty or expertise in any particular genre, as a dilettante, and it allows me to fully conceptualise what I want ahead of making it. I see the artwork as illustration rather than something to look at and value as art. The artwork illustrates a text – the text is primary and the artwork is secondary.*

ME: When you say the text now are you referring to the concept or are you referring to the actual written text that you make?

SB: *I guess that the interview, the fictional interview between the fictional curator BS Hope and the fictional artist, who often enough is Sandra Bridie, is where I put a lot of my thinking; that's the premise for it, the interview, though in these interviews not all is revealed about the work. Sometimes what I want to say is in the artist's resistance to acknowledging what their own work is about. The final work is the interview sitting alongside the documentation of the artwork; the final work is the publication. The exhibition is not necessarily the thing or the end*

point.

ME: That's a good lead-in to another question that I wanted to ask to do with the role of writing in your practice. Without necessarily wanting to make a divide between art and writing, I am curious about how much of a role writing has in your practice, both in the sense that you use the word 'fiction' and even put 'a fiction' in parenthesis after the titles of some of your artworks but also in the sense of the interviews that you write and publish. It seems that writing has become, if it hasn't always been, integral to what you do.

SB: Yes, but I wouldn't see myself as a writer, I don't think I am a particularly good writer. It is more like I am trying to get the feeling of an actual interview and someone's voice and someone's reasoning for making something, so that I can get that down. If I was to sit down and try to write a piece of fiction, I don't think I could do it. The writing needs to be attached to an artwork and also to have the length of an interview, which is around 3,000 to 4,000 words.

ME: On this writing thing, I just wonder if there is any difficulty in the writing for you? I mean that as a writer myself, in the sense that writing is notoriously difficult: people often complain about the difficulty of writing. It is interesting, I think, that writing is so key to what you are doing, and you don't see yourself as a writer, and I wonder if that also liberates you from its difficulty in some sense?

SB: Absolutely, yes! My artists are often amateur or second rate, so that frees me as well, putting those limits on what to expect from them in terms of the quality of their work. It's hard won the writing, and that's why exhibitions are useful – because they are a wonderful duress. There's your outcome, whereas a publication date can be more elusive – you can keep putting it off. I would not expect many people to actually read my work. For me it is very satisfying to finally have done it. I tend to think for as long as I can before I write, so the writing is done at the eleventh hour, just before the exhibition opens, as a rule, but it gets done. It is not like I don't submit the writing that I said, or promised myself, I would. I just complete it at the very last minute so that I have time to move the details around in my head as much as I need to.

ME: Does that mean it is not a kind of free association that happens? When you are putting these texts together, you know there's a certain type of writing or journaling where you can set yourself some questions and just write freely and see what comes out. It is not like that what you are doing: you are actually constructing something –

SB: Because this project has been drawn out for so long, I have had lots of

different versions of the interviews and the background lives of the artists I have created for the project. I have written quite a lot and dispensed with most of it. I was going to produce another artist, a 75-year-old walking artist, for instance, but in the end I will be using some of the documentation that this artist was going to be presented through, which will be seen in a narrow landscape format book of documentation of these walks in the shape of infinity that I did in Spain. Also with the AB Hope character, I had different versions of his life and his interview. I have just been editing the interview today and it looks very compact, and that surprised me a lot. The interview speaks to the experience of the COVID lockdown in Melbourne, which I had intended, but I didn't realise how solid it was on the experience, as in it doesn't deviate from it.

ME: I guess I am fascinated by the creation of these fictional characters in your work. I am fascinated by the role of fiction in your work and what I see as a kind of conceptual approach to that, but also something kind of political. Anyway, I guess there are some overlaps in my own work in the sense that I wouldn't call myself a fiction writer; I am more of a non-fiction writer, but I am interested in something ficto-critical where there is a kind of blending, a self-consciousness of the conceit of my own subjectivity – that that is part of the text or the voice of the text or something. Certainly, in my PhD partly via Sophie Calle I was very interested in the way that her work tends to reveal that two things are happening. On the surface of it, it looks like she is revealing a lot about herself, in terms of her personal life, but on the other hand it is like the more she reveals the less revealing it is; it's more the artifice. I was really intrigued by that, but I was also intrigued by the way that she would make up these things. There is this 'truest stories' series where she sets up a fake wedding, her own marriage. So there is a wedding picture, but she hasn't actually been married; she just arranged for her friends and family to come together to take this picture. There's a little text that is underneath it that says, 'It was a fake marriage with the truest story of my life'. I was really interested in this idea of what the truest, or the true, story is and how we have this idea that true stories are fact; that they are real, they are not made up. In fact, it seems to me that there is a sense that the truest, or the truth, can be very much something that we imagine or create ourselves.

SB: It changes with each telling, as well. Some truth is arrived at retrospectively, and that was what I was questioning with these written lives of artists, the artist's monograph that seems to make so much sense after the artist's death. And comparing that to the actual experience of living your life and the senselessness – as in not having a sense of where you are going, of moving toward a future event or moment and not knowing how the evidence will coalesce into this train of events that produce a meaningful moment or epiphany. The understanding of what life's moments mean is often arrived at retrospectively,

*and often the versions of the meaning change according to whose viewpoint you take or what you hear. Sometimes the truth is not that interesting; you know, it's more interesting to tell a tale. As evidence of achievement, to me, documents such as the CV are the least interesting. I think that's the thing I am playing with, these papers that that are supposedly documenting achievement can be toyed with. That idea of veracity is to be questioned, I think.*

ME: Indeed. I think you have just answered the question really, but I guess I was wondering if there is an interest in truth in your work. I think 'veracity' is probably a better way of phrasing it though.

*SB: Yes, it's playing with the idea of veracity, and that is why I use the different birth dates for these artists called Sandra Bridie. They are like different versions of me plotted through the years. As with anyone who writes, there are moments where the writer appears there, but it's also a confluence of other things, other people's experiences, for instance, or different viewpoints of the one moment.*

ME: Going back to that word 'achievement', which is such a big part of the narrative of art and success and making it, I just wonder about the role of failure as well in your work but also in the practice. Aside from as a thematic, I wonder about the role of failure to your work. I wonder if, in a methodological sense, there is an interest or an attentiveness to failing? You have actually said before that you have nearly given up on being an artist a number of times. I am really interested in that tension; how we might be something and at the same time be thinking about giving it up.

*SB: Yes, there is always a wanting to fall away from it. Many of my fictional artists, as I have said, have been amateurs or deluded – deluded in their estimation of their talent – or they have been successful and they have gone through a bit of a trough, or some kind of crisis. It is all about vocation, I guess, and with that sense of vocation comes doubt; also the thing of being stuck with art because it is the only thing you can do. And then, what do you do if you are no longer an artist? This idea of 'exceptional' that is so tied up with what is expected from us to be successful as artists – how does an 'ex-artist' live their life, not creating products out of their experience? It's a habit! I am always at that juncture, always about to give up; this is my constant. I was delighted to hear that Matisse, of all artists, had a year or so of malaise where he gave up art. It is interesting and good when people decide that they don't need to be an artist, because art is this artificial framing of experience, and the thing about being special – a special, creative person goes along with being an artist as a way to distinguish themselves from the people who are not special and not creative.*

ME: I think that is certainly one narrative, and clearly it is a narrative that you have been interested in questioning throughout your practice, since the days of looking at originality and signature and authenticity, but it also strikes me as a bleak way of thinking about what art is. It seems to me that art is that, but it might be other things as well.

*SB: My attitude to it does flip, which may be what keeps me here. I think a practice is also a space to examine, to connect with others and to filter experience. For that reason, it is quite hard. In all my moments of wanting to give it up, I think it's the exhibiting that I find more and more difficult; it's the public manifestation of it. But I do need something, a reflective space, and art can provide that.*

*In talking about walking, and this project being about walking, I have also done these long walks. On those long walks, especially for the first two hours in the morning when I am fresh and walking on my own, as a rule, that is kind of when I can reflect that I don't need art; all I need to do is to be walking in my own company. Someone asked me if I was lonely walking on my own, and I was surprised to hear myself say, 'Well, no, and I am in the company of nature, so I am not alone'. In a benign walking environment like these long walks that I have done on the Camino in 2015, when I walked with my daughter for five weeks, and 2018, when I did it on my own for ten weeks, not being a child who could lose herself in nature for even a moment, this was a surprise to me – that I didn't need a filtering device, to see it through the artist's lens; to feel that the experience was enough and that I did not need to do anything to it but observe and continue. I felt this was complete on its own, and I was complete on my own in it as well.*

ME: I just find that so fascinating. I feel like I need to spend some time now thinking about art as method for reflection. You are talking about the act of artmaking, in and of itself, as a kind of method to do something with lived experience and suggesting that there might be other ways – we know that there are other ways, of course, that art doesn't have to be the only way. But I think what you are suggesting is that, for you, art has been that thing and that, as such, there has been a curiosity about what else would there be if there wasn't art. And there you find yourself in walking a kind of relief.

*SB: And these long walks are projects that are probably achieved through the same sort of process and planning as an art publication or exhibition – sitting back and thinking, what do I want? And then you just do it.*

ME: That's so interesting too, Sandie, because then that makes me think: well, actually maybe what you were doing in that walk, maybe that was a conceptual

artwork. Maybe the walk was the art. Perhaps that is a little too esoteric, but I do find it interesting.

*SB: Well, it was: what is it like if you empty it out, if you do all this planning and you go? What happens if you don't give up, if you see it through, because you can always give up and catch a bus to the next town, or to the airport.*

ME: Because also what I think we are talking about is setting the conditions for a certain type of observation, or attentiveness. I think that is the similarity with the set-up, or the conditions, for the walk, much as you would set up the conditions for an artwork. That is quite different to just planning an itinerary. We are talking about something beyond the practical.

*SB: Yes, and the thing of self-reliance or bearing your own company is the thing.*

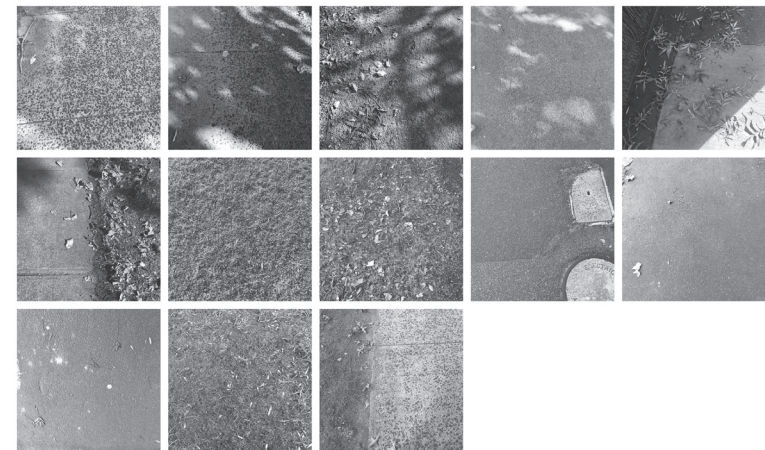
ME: And that's curious because presumably, without wanting to be too psychoanalytical about it, one of the ways that you 'bear the company of yourself', or the experience of yourself as an artist, is to create other characters.

*SB: Yes, you are often making the work on your own, in individual practice, versus a more social practice, which I alternate between. Also, I guess, my fictional walking artists always have an argument, and I have an argument, with the idea of the 'walking artist' as another example of the 'heroic', so my walking artists are somewhat antiheroic, and it is almost like, 'Why would you bother even making this work?' It is not quite infra-ordinary, but it is observing things that are not necessarily interesting.*

I think your whole practice might be characterised as an argument against the heroic. That's the key thematic here. It's the argument against a certain narrative of heroic achievements that we have come to associate with fine art, and we might say it's throughout capitalist culture more broadly. I just want to thank you for that argument against, because I think that there is something terrifically fruitful and generative, if not sometimes painful for the person who has to take up the argument, to doing this work against in this case the heroic. I think you have laid some really important and fantastic ground in how we might conceive of a narrative that is outside of the ones we are all supposed to be vying for.

Sandra Bridie's work straddles individual practice, collaboration, exhibition curation, teaching, gallery management, writing, and the interview as documentation of individual and collective artistic practice in Melbourne. Sandra has coordinated a series of spaces and projects including Fictional and Actual Artists Space (1995-6), Talk Artists Initiative (1997-2000) six conjectural modules (2002-3). Sandra was also a founding member of the artist's group Ocular Lab, which ran from 2003-2010 and through this involvement hosted a series of international, national and local artist's residencies in the Ocular Lab space.

Melody Ellis is a writer and academic living on Boon Wurrung country in Melbourne. Her work is preoccupied with an interest in subjectivity, the body, power, and place. For this project, she is particularly interested in the various - and intersecting - environmental, political and personal circumstances that might make walking not possible or difficult, and the various ways we take walking for granted.



Bus Projects acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we operate: the Wurundjeri people and Elders past and present of the Kulin nations.

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