

MY BEST FRIEND
CRITICAL RESPONSE BY JUDE ANDERSON



Malcolm Whittaker had not anticipated that his commemorative walk for dog walkers in Castlemaine would spark furore and public debate.

A self described “young man from Sydney”, *My Best Friend* was a response to the loss a year earlier of Winnie, his father’s dog.

Whittaker had spent two weeks in Mount Alexander Shire drawing out stories and garnering memories from residents who’d lost their pet dogs. *My Best Friend* was a walk he was creating “because these stories that we possess and the sharing of them give us something to hold onto in the absence of these dogs.” He was shaping a ‘performed eulogy’ with participants within the bucolic setting of “ground zero for dog walkers in Mount Alexander Shire” where owners walked their dogs ‘off the leash’ at dawn or dusk.

The conversations Whittaker had had with residents were by all accounts intimate and moving. They’d been conducted in residents’ homes, preferred meeting places, or in the vicinity of ‘ground zero’. He’d at first been taken a little off guard having to shift from his self confessed preferred performance mode of irony to the delicacy and empathy required for engendering conversations around death. But his gentle wit and genuine enquiry opened the way for participating residents to speak authentically about their lost pet dogs.

The timing of the performed walk coincidentally fell during the AFL Grand Final so Whittaker did not expect a crowd, just a few participants for whom the loss of their dog meant more than a win by ‘their team’.

So it was somewhat of a surprise to find the gathering that awaited at the Mount Alexander Shire Golf Course – “ground zero for dog walkers”.

And there was dissent in the air.

Participants, dog walkers and members of the golf course executive committee were in furtive conversation when I arrived. The Committee members were incensed. The radio interview which Whittaker had given had been the last straw – a way too public affirmation of what had apparently been THE hot issue for the executive committee over the last week – the golf course was private property for fee paying members and “certainly not a free public service” for dog owners. And to have the “dog walker free for all announcement” on radio on top of the official Council

reminder received by the golf course committee to fulfil their responsibility with regard to public liability following a letter of complaint the Council had received from “of all things – a dog walker!” was the final nail. The committee was not only going to close down the performance, but close down the golf course to dog walkers.

But art, especially Live Art informs a texture of exchange that draws from the particularity of circumstance. Suddenly we were in the realms of real civic engagement where the intended form of a commemorative walk had exploded into real public debate and negotiation. The meaning of private had shifted, and our place in the public was being interrogated. There was immediacy, and a drama of rights, loss and all that might be lost was unfolding in the moment and we were all living it together and working to resolve it. It was alive; unique. It created exchange and shift where resolve between the committee and the dog walkers to find a common solution was shared. The performance would go on, the dog walkers could use the golf course, communication channels had been created and information would be circulated.

Live Art as mediation.

Whittaker’s commemorative walk began thus, in the afterglow of a happy end to a civic debate in the dying hours of a sunny winter’s day on a country golf course.

Whittaker’s gently witty welcome speech referenced all the dogs he’d come to meet via sharing stories with their owners and was the perfect digestif following the adrenalin of the gate gathering. Using a ‘pet ball launcher’ as a ‘way finder’, we followed Whittaker as he led us across the golf course and listened as the dog owners related or read their written stories of their lost dogs. We reflected upon the semantics of whether to use the words ‘owners’ or ‘parents’. We witnessed owners who had not known whether to laugh or cry in the telling of their stories.

Whittaker finished his opening speech with a quote from a lost pet dog owners’ investor in the pet cemetery documented in the Errol Morris film *Gates of Heaven*: “Death is for the living, it is not for the dead”. A fitting reminder from Whittaker that

Live Art in its aliveness can embrace big poetic themes.

Live Art as meditation.