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More than a theory

by [Michelle Kotevski](#)

[Arts Hub Australia](#)
Wednesday, January 03, 2007

It's the 10th of December 2006 and I'm sitting at Northies in Cronulla... it's the thing to do every Sunday in summer. The TV and papers are back here again.

Whilst sitting here I check the weather forecast for the evening. The winds are too high so *Junk Theory* won't be sailing tonight... but the forecast for the 11 December is fine. I wonder what the TV and papers will say...

In December 2005, many lifestyles and cultures were ridiculed and abused and seen as being of less value than others. They became "junk", something to be thrown away and trampled on. There was heartache all across Sydney. What could any of us do about it and quickly?

Junk Theory was conceived by Big hART across December and January last summer. A project designed to build social harmony, with a high profile artistic outcome that would shine a new light on the people from the Sutherland Shire - in their own voice and image. Working with young people from different cultural backgrounds in the Shire, older community members, local businesses, seafarers, shipwrights, a photographer, filmmaker and sound artist - the basic premise was that it is harder to hurt someone when you know their story.

Big hART hit the ground in June 2006. *Junk Theory* was launched on 5 December 2006. In this time we worked with 40 young people, over 37 local organisations, businesses, community groups and numerous individuals. Together we've taken over 4000 photos, recorded over 20 interviews, created 2 new songs, 8 new short films, 8 new musical scores, a website, several animations, and one new sailing installation.

Junk Theory also intended to put forward positive stories and examples of people working together, step by step, to achieve social harmony and to provide a counter balance to the unhelpful 'one year on' stories that



Junk Theory sailing around Sydney harbour. [Photographer: Keith Saunders]



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would inevitably be written and aired across the country. We estimate that 25,000 people will see *Junk Theory* during the Sydney Festival.

Responding creatively to a major social event or issue is a challenging task, but one many artists and arts companies, including Big hART pursue. Social and cultural relevance in the arts are characteristics many government agencies and philanthropic bodies encourage and desire. However, triennial funding models, 3 to 8 month grant-making processes and a structural absence of major organisational support for companies of this nature, all make the job of being and creating responsive, socially and culturally relevant work almost too difficult to contemplate.

Junk Theory wasn't part of a three-year plan or an annual program of activities. Trying to raise sufficient financial support for a project that needed to hit the ground running ASAP required resources, tenacity and a good deal of hope.

Discussions with Sydney Festival, a local partner, NSW Government and the Australia Council began in January 2006. Sydney Festival didn't hesitate and neither did Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre. Four months later a philanthropic foundation and the Australia Council were committed. We were able to start the project. Three months after that the NSW Government was on board.

Junk Theory got 6 yeses and 29 no's. That was the result of 40 meetings, 35 project proposals, 58 letters, 32 emails and 115 phone calls. In the meantime, there was a community ready to move forward.

The accountability of arts companies and those agencies and organisations that support them is of paramount importance. Trust for work of this nature and for the companies that deliver this work time and time again is equally as important. Whilst it is a credit to all the funding partners that they were able to provide support, a higher level of trust for projects of this nature needs to be demonstrated. The expertise, skill and willingness of artists and companies around Australia, including Big hART, could be further capitalised upon to deliver major socially relevant projects with high quality public outcomes. To do so, and to ensure the growth and sustainability of projects like *Junk Theory* requires the commitment of agencies to actually broker multi-agency support and to resource the work to the level it takes to do quality work. I hope it doesn't take someone 58 letters and 115 phone calls to achieve that.

So what did we do in Cronulla?

The process of working on the ground with the young people and older community members and all our artists is another story. But one of the results of this process is a new floating multimedia installation for the 2007 Sydney Festival.

At dusk from 5 December until 26 January, around the foreshores of Port Hacking, Botany Bay, Sydney Harbour and Pittwater, a Chinese Junk will glide past residents, pedestrians, festival goers and picnickers. Projected onto its sails will be a series of portraits, films and evocative images of people who live in Sutherland Shire, created by people who live there and a team of professional artists. Shot in both colour and black and white, utilising both still and moving image, the visual projections will be accompanied by music and sound scapes wafting from the vessel's decks.

Junk Theory is designed to create a beautiful and thought provoking picture of the values and cultures that make up our Emerald City, whilst sailing around its beautiful waterways every night.

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Come and see it for yourself.

Season:

6 – 26 January, Sydney Harbour – Pittwater

Specific sites:

In January *Junk Theory* will be moored at four locations. Bring a picnic!

- Saturday 6 January at 8pm – Jubilee Park, Glebe
- Friday 12 January at 8pm – Lavender Bay
- Saturday 13 January at 8pm – Woolwich Dock, Clarke Road, Woolwich
- Thursday 25 January 8pm – Fairlight Bay

To find out whether or not *Junk Theory* is sailing that day (weather is a massive factor) and the course of the junk that evening, call the *Junk Theory* info line on 0410 181 440 (updated at 5pm each day after the 4pm weather report).

For a video news report offering further background on the Cronulla Riots, [CLICK HERE](#).

For more on the Sydney Festival, visit www.sydneyfestival.org.au.

For more information on Big hART and Junk Theory visit:

- www.bighart.org
- www.junktheory.org

Michelle Kotevski

Michelle Kotevski has been working with Big hART since late 2005 and is the Creative producer of *Junk Theory*. Along with Gemma Pepper she is the co-founder of Artel International - a new not-for-profit organisation that aims to work creatively in the arena of international community aid and development. Michelle is currently the Chair of Queen Street Studio, a not-for-profit rehearsal and creative development facility, established by artists for artists. Over the last 12 years she has worked in a range of roles with the Australia Council for the Arts, Xtext Magazine, Carnivale Festival, Victorian College of the Arts, One Extra Dance Company, Telstra, Theatre Hydra and Shopfront Theatre for Young People. She is currently undertaking a national community cultural research project for the William Buckland Foundation.

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