THE DEBTOSCOPE

The Debtoscope was one of the outcomes of Memefest 2012, an "extra disciplinary workshop/seminar/intervention" that took place in Brisbane, Australia, 15-25 November 2012. The theme of the festival was DEBT, and the more specific context for the Debtoscope was the notable discrepancy between research documenting how local Brisbanians were personally affected by debt (anxiety, psychological distress, depression etc.) and the invisibility of this debt-induced suffering in the urban space. Focusing our project around the single question: ‘How does your debt hurt?’, the centrepiece of our urban intervention was the debtoscope, a seven metre long stethoscope made of local recycled trash material. The debtoscope served a double purpose, as a device for recording answers to our single question, and as a performative artefact, making the invisible issues around debt visible. Some of the answers we recorded during our initial interventions:

* I’m always thinking about it. I have loans and credit card debt, it’s like a cloud that always hangs over your head.

* Debt where they chase you, that’s bad, I have that.

* I have a huge debt to my parents that isn’t financial.

* Right now, I have -$11 dollars in my bank account. I have never told anyone about this, even my family. I took out $24,000 in a loan and I lost it all in a scam. I don’t want to look like a fool.

* I’m behind in life, simply because I have a nice car.

The answers would subsequently be collected and then fed back to the city’s walls as anonymized statements on band-aid styled posters with blood in a second intervention. By doing this we hoped to make visible the fact that the city (qua its citizens) in some ways is bleeding from debt. Another layer to this final intervention was us reflecting on the uncertainty over the impact or change produced through our work. While we could offer a band-aid solution to the problem, it was difficult to asses our deeper impact on a wicked problem like debt in Brisbane. That said, some of the responses we collected along with some of the encounters we had on the streets,
points to the first intervention having a value in itself. Finally, the project has resonated well outside its local context, as a way for design to critically and playfully engage a topic like debt.

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