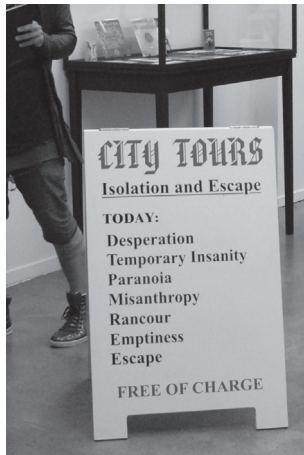*City Tours:*
Isolation and Escape
Sandwich-board sign
Kaleb Bennett
2006

Mis-direction/way-losing

Graphic Design is the communication framework through which
messages about what the world is… it's how they reach us. The
designer has an enormous responsibility; those are the people
putting their wires into our heads.
Rick Poynor, *Helvetica*, 2007

1.
Does graphic design even exist anymore? Or did 'Visual
Communication' replace it? Design critic Rick Poynor's above
evaluation is made as he speaks over images of busy streets,
billboards and signage, spliced together with the intention, in this
case, to show Helvetica cutting through the noise. Here, the
designer's role—no wait, responsibility—is to be the clearest
possible communicator… to infer meaning, to act as a guide.
The role of the designer is to visually map out the city landscape,
to design a path, to lead the viewer; design acts as wayfinder.

2.
The term 'wayfinding' was first used by the architect Kevin Lynch in
his book *The Image of the City* (1960).[2] In the book, Lynch presents
what he terms 'The Image'—a primary, in-built way-finding device
based on memory and individual perception. Stronger than any
outside devices such as street numbers or road signs, 'The Image'
is our cognitive map; what we remember of a place, or an event.
The theory supposes that each person's 'map' can be vastly
different; we all naturally choose references that align with previous
experience, we apply our histories to the present.

3.
So, if how we evaluate our surroundings is as much defined by our
history as by our present, then as we walk down 'main street': we
pick and choose what to take in, we brush over details, we make
assumptions—contrary to Poynor's suggestion of the designer
'wiring into our heads', Lynch's Image theory somewhat muddies
the waters.

4.
Beginning in Dunedin in 2005, and subsequently taking place in
Auckland, Hamilton, Christchurch, New Plymouth, and as far off as
Santiago Chile, artist Kaleb Bennett's *City Tours* ended in association
with Enjoy Public Art Gallery, Wellington, in 2009. A free tour,
participants were transported in the blacked-out back half of a highly
modified van, with noise blearing out from customised sound gear. In
most cases these were people being toured around their hometown;
familiar streets travelled countless times before, but this time,
without reference, without a history to draw upon.

5.
On the Enjoy blog, *City Tours* is described as:

A curious, atmospheric, evocative and just plain different collision of
subculture, art and performance that shouldn't be missed.[3]

An important omission here, perhaps, is the role of graphic design.

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Going back to Poynor's comment… this idea of the designer taking responsibility is tied very closely to an importance placed on legitimacy—the design that accurately represents a product or place. The *City Tours* sign appropriates the ubiquitous, legitimate sandwich board and perhaps in doing so Bennett appropriates the role of the designer… because Bennett is not a graphic designer, and he is using graphic design in a way that few graphic designers ever would.

6.
Finally, near the bottom of the Enjoy Gallery official press release, in the fine print and next to date & time reads:

If the van is not there—find the street sign.

And you might find it, and for a minute you might think you've seen it before, and then you'll quickly realise you haven't.

Matt Galloway

1. Gary Hustwit, *Helvetica*, 2007.
2. Kevin Lynch, *The Image of The City*, MIT Press, USA, 1960.
3. http://enjoypublicartgallery.blogspot.co.nz/search?q=city+tours