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THESIS

The Audience That Acts  
by  
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## **Statement**

This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

## **Statement of Originality**

This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge, the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Katie Louise Williams

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# Summary

## Abstract

### The Audience That Acts

This thesis explores an evolution of the relationship between socially-engaged artists and audiences, focusing on a number of strategies through which this connection is being renegotiated, and how these tactics have allowed a new model of artist-audience collaboration to emerge.

The model that is proposed is one that positions the artist as a conduit as opposed to an originator. By this I define 'the artist' as one who conducts ideas, as copper wire conducts electrical current, and the 'active audience' as someone who makes use of the energy of those ideas to bring about an act of their own creation. In this way the artist becomes a catalyst for different perspectives and 'artworks' become subversive through the power and resilience of human imagination.

The emergence of these forms of collaborative practice, loosely termed 'socially-engaged', is charted through case studies of my own work and the innovations of a number of artists over the past fifty years. These practices share many things in common, including an ability to move easily between modes of engagement with audiences, and the institutional, communal or virtual sites that audiences occupy.

Artworks developed in these marginal zones between audience and artist

often go unacknowledged (as art), and it is for this very reason they are able to become such potent tactical forms of infiltration of power, shining a light on the invisible to make it visible. It is at these sites of energy transferal that audiences can discover a new articulation of their resistance.

In an attempt to reflect in textual form the way that the relationship between artist and audience is being renegotiated, this thesis includes a combination of autoethnographic qualitative research narrated in the first-person, and analysis of theorists, practitioners and audiences in the third-person.

*Key Words: Audience, socially engaged art, collaboration*

## **Description of creative work**

In keeping with the core principle of my practice as described in this thesis, that artist and audience must remain alert and active to the possibilities of any given moment and seize the opportunity to act, my final work concerns itself with the threatened closure of Sydney College of the Arts. The last period of my candidature has coincided with my involvement in fighting the proposed merger of SCA with UNSW School of Art and Design initiated by The University of Sydney.

The creative work that I had planned to exhibit for examination was an expansion of the direct actions described in the last chapter of my thesis, The Ribbons Project. After much deliberation, the imperative to address what is currently unfolding has taken precedence. The synergy between both projects

in addressing power imbalances is apparent. The actions of current students, staff and alumni, and the extraordinary solidarity and creative energy that has been harnessed to fight against the closure represents in living form an active and emancipated audience. This present struggle, its tools, techniques and the lessons learned from this fight, should be preserved for an unknown audience in the future. Consequently I will be creating an SCA Time Capsule to be buried at the Callan Park campus of Sydney College of the Arts. The capsule will contain multiple sources of documentation of the actions/art, stories, images and films that catalogue our battle. The capsule will be buried in a performative ritual on 22 September, 2016 at the first evening viewing of all final masters and PhD works. It will be registered with The International Time Capsule Society (ITCS), based at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

## **Introduction. Opening Act**

My research for this thesis is principally focused on the relationship between contemporary artists and audiences. This connection is currently being renegotiated, and due to this a new model is emerging that merits investigation. I suggest that this new model positions the artist as a conduit as opposed to an originator. By this I define 'the artist' as one who conducts ideas, as copper wire conducts electrical current, and the 'active audience' as someone who makes use of the energy of those ideas to bring about their own creation. Thus they are offered, as Boris Groys suggests, 'an opportunity to exhibit themselves to themselves'.<sup>1</sup>

There are many metaphors advanced for the contemporary artist: artist as shaman, revolutionary, teacher or sage, even artist as proxy who experiences on behalf of the audience. In each of these models the artist is central to an act of creation, whereby she or he in some way transmutes a quality of existence into a quantity of meaning for a spectator. The audience, on the other hand, is often characterised as being in a one-way relationship with the artist, alienated, mute, isolated from connection and incapable of an unaided experience. Being an audience in this manner can equate to being a passive consumer of the artist's labour.

<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys, "Politics of Installation." e-flux journal (2009), accessed 22 June 2015.

My practice as a contemporary artist has been to a large extent an instinctual reaction against these grandiose conceptions of the artist and the equally desultory views of the audience. If there is an imbalance of power between artist and audience I believe it is not something that is natural to either role but rather a condition that has been brought about by institutions, fostered by curators and dealers, and readily subscribed to by some artists.

The parameters of this thesis are defined by works created by contemporary art practitioners from the late 1960s to the present. These works and their impact will be analysed and several key contemporary theorists will be drawn upon to help emphasise the importance of creating a truly active audience.

Throughout my thesis I will look at case studies of my own and other practitioners' works that explore the ways in which the binary notion of artist and audience are overturned, allowing for new forms of knowledge and being to appear. I will also examine the nature and variation of ways in which these works or *situations* (this term references Claire Doherty's use of the word) are capable of abstracting, destabilizing, and reconstituting the audience-artist relationship.<sup>2</sup> In this way situations can be seen as a means of the artist democratising her practice, of allowing the audience inside the work, to tramp around within it and create experiences out of it that cannot be predetermined

<sup>2</sup> *Situations* is an arts organisation dedicated to commissioning and producing compelling and imaginative new forms of public art. Claire Doherty, its Director, describes the aims of the organisation being 'guided by our belief in the capacity for the arts to change, enhance and inform the way we think about and interact with the world around us.'  
< <http://www.situations.org.uk/about/>> accessed 12 July 2015.

or controlled.

The argument I will advance is that the locus of creation is never singular, that a contemporary audience acts with an artist to co-create works. Therefore, creativity is not the exclusive domain of the artist. The encounter itself becomes the work, and this encounter is a complex relationship between artist, audience and site. Each element contributes to create a work.

Making art in this world for me is a synthesis of many components: a life well lived, learning, thinking, feeling, absorbing, and the complex web of relationships that exists between myself and all other beings, human and non-human. Within this matrix I am never an impartial and distanced observer, nor are those who interact with me. I act with and through the world as it does with me. Like a dance, each action, each movement has its counterforce and so the dance progresses.

In looking for a way to write this thesis that is at one with the way I create artwork, or a translation of my work in textual form, I became aware of the qualitative research tool, autoethnography. A concise definition of this term is hard to pin down but the overview of Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner may be a useful way of perceiving it.

*Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges*

*canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act.*<sup>3</sup>

Deborah Reed-Danahay,<sup>4</sup> an early proponent of autoethnography, refers to it as synthesizing postmodern ethnography and postmodern autobiography because of its inherent suspicion of the objective observer and notions of the singular self.

As my practice is socially-engaged and collaborative (two key terms I use throughout my thesis that will be explored in depth in later chapters), audience and artist(s) are intertwined, sharing the role of actor-observer. There is no distant neutral place to observe. To stand apart is to be removed; the role of observer and actor are inseparable. In a practical sense, my work is autoethnographic, so to take an autoethnographic stance in my thesis is a logical way to progress. The 'personal narrative' is the way I navigate my life/art and it would be false, in carrying out research, to deny the influence of life experience in my work.

Therefore, my thesis will include a combination of autoethnography with first-person narrative in primary position, and the processing of third-person narrative in secondary position. My own narrative and lived experience are at the core, anchored to my practice. I also examine the work of contemporary

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams & Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview". *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1), Art. 10. 2010

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Reed-Danahay, (ed.). *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the self and the social*. (Oxford: Berg, 1997)

artists working in the same field and analyse residencies I have undertaken, writings of other practitioners and theorists in my sphere of knowledge, transcriptions of conversations recorded with other practitioners, curators and activists, and information gained at conferences that are germane to my area of practice.

There have been criticisms of autoethnography in the academic context, foremost of which are accusations of subjectivity. However, if objectivity is both the realisation of the constant intrusions of the self in every human endeavour coupled with a conscious effort to exclude the intrusive self, then it is impossible to pursue a socially-engaged practice, much less theorise about it in any detached sense. As long as we continue to conflate 'objective versus subjective' with 'real versus ostensible' we are perpetuating a patriarchal system of thought. The foregrounding of my own voice is indicative of a view of the world that sees no separation or distinction between self and world. As Karen Barad has noted about Barbara Smuts's research work with baboons in the wild:

*The only way to carry on and to do research objectively was to be responsible; that is, that objectivity, a theme that feminist science studies has been emphasizing all along, is the fact that objectivity is a matter of responsibility and not a matter of distancing at all.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Karen Barad, "Meeting Utrecht Halfway" (Text from intra-active event that took place on 6 June, 2009 at the 7th European Feminist Research Conference, hosted Graduate Gender Programme of Utrecht University. Accessed on 14 March 2015 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/11515701.0001.001/1:4.3/--new-materialism-interviews-cartographies?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>)



Real art work for me involves real need, sometimes distress and discomfort, even disorientation, and this brings about a struggle to comprehend the unknown, to wrestle with the unformed and grapple with traces and fragments that do not piece together comfortably.

Throughout this thesis I will illuminate that struggle, the way things rub up against each other, and how this friction creates new and unpredictable possibilities. My intent in undertaking this research is to draw out the connections between my practice and its social, political and theoretical links to the world; and through an analysis of my practice and that of other artists, to illustrate the ongoing process and reciprocal relationship with audiences, and how this affects and continues to evolve the artwork.

Therefore, it is appropriate that the raw material for this thesis start with my own story, an account of some of the events that have led to where I am today, which I outline in *In the Wings* later in this introduction.

Subsequently, the thesis is broken down into five chapters, as briefly outlined:

*Chapter One. On Script: The Audience* provides the underpinnings for my thesis with an examination of the 'contemporary audience'. I explain the rationale for the use of the term 'audience' in preference to 'spectator' and discuss how these terms were historically formed. Through an analysis of the writings of Guy Debord, Jacques Rancière, Nicolas Bourriaud, Allan Kaprow and Claire Bishop among others, I attempt to uncover the particular way I explore the role of the audience. This situates the audience within a specific time frame, that of the late 1960s to the present. The positioning of the artist-

and-audience relationship and its importance and changing dynamic during this time frame is discussed. The audience's role, both inside the boundaries of art and outside it, is noted. I also contextualise my own role as both artist and audience. The idea of a socially-engaged audience and its recent rise in popularity is examined, and leads to an analysis of changes and possible concerns that may affect the contemporary artist.

*Chapter Two. Impromptu: Ruptures* examines deviations from the expected that are capable of disrupting audiences' preconceptions and through this enabling them to be emancipated and 'present'. This type of situation is further explored through case studies involving an analysis of several lecture performances. The case studies in this chapter are specifically autoethnographic, underpinned, however, by the theoretical writings of Guy Debord, Michel de Certeau and Nato Thompson.

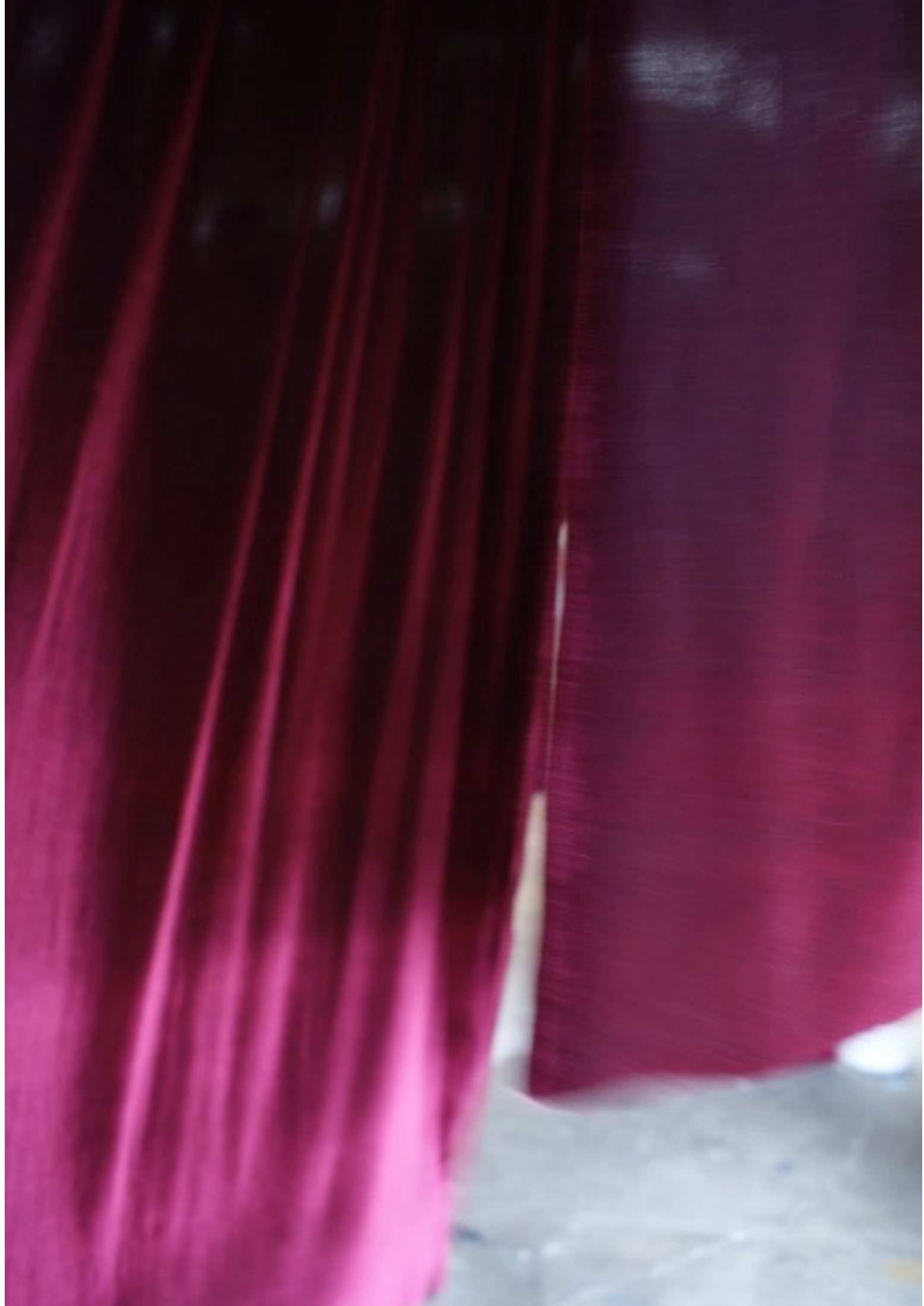
*Chapter Three. Losing The Red Velvet Curtain: Alternate Spaces* looks at case studies of work created in alternate spaces, with a focus on Artist Run Initiatives that challenge an audience's perception of what a gallery space is, and that in turn create new and changed relationships between artist, audience and environment. This prompts a questioning of what it means to create a social space, where the work is co-created by audience and artist, and queries how this relationship could be ongoing, not just a one-off experience. The case studies I examine include Alaska Projects, located in a parking station in Sydney's Kings Cross and an interview with its founder director Sebastian Goldspink; and *Cementa*, a biennial art event at Kandos in rural NSW and an interview with Alex Wisser, one of the event's founding directors. This chapter is informed by my own experience as a board member for two years of

Articulate Project Space in Leichhardt, Sydney. I note the writings of Miwon Kwon, who traces the trajectory of site-specific work from the 1960s that provides a bridge to these case studies. The political ramifications of these sites are also investigated through the concepts of Doherty and Thompson.

In *Chapter Four. Dialogue: Collaboration* my focus is on partnership and the blurring of boundaries that occurs between artist(s) and audience as collaborators. I examine a unique kind of textual collaboration in the letters of Brazilian artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark. I look at various forms of collaboration in my own work—as part of the duo ek.1 (with Emma Hicks) and *Distanciation* (with Hayley Megan French, Carla Leisch and Richard Kean)—and the work of other contemporary artists Paul Chan and Ian Milliss. The potential for alternate ways of navigating these connections is analysed, framed against the views of Nicolas Bourriaud, Charles Green and post-relational aesthetic theorists such as Claire Doherty and Grant Kester.

*Chapter Five. The Ribbons Project: Art/Activism/Life* examines the issues that arise when art falls outside the frame of art and becomes life; how do audiences deal with situations that are not in a gallery space or even positioned as art. These themes are explored through the ideas of Thompson and artist/activist John Jordan and brought to life via a single case study of my most recent work, *The Ribbons Project*, a socially-engaged project that drew together multiple audiences to connect with a specific social, political and moral issue.

The span of works in the catalogue that follows at the end of this thesis is a reflection of my practice over the four years of research for the PhD and represents my critical engagement with the theories expressed therein.



## In The Wings

*Let me make a little detour through my own political and academic experience.<sup>1</sup>*

I arrived at the PhD after a life lived in various places. Starting young as an actor, I travelled to New York to attend HB Studio (The Herbert Berghof Studio). The actor and co-founder, Uta Hagen, had written a seminal textbook for actors, *Respect for Acting*,<sup>2</sup> which challenged how actors approached their craft, and I was keen to experience this first hand. After auditioning, I was accepted for her class, and came to understand how audiences read a character's physical actions down to minute detail, and how this translates into the spectators' embodied experience. This period was vital in establishing an interest in two things: 'the audience', who they were, what makes them tick and how they react to various stimuli. And second, 'physicality', my own and others' and how the physical is an expression of the psychological and imaginative state.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. (Verso Books, 2014), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Uta Hagen and Haskel Frankel, *Respect for Acting*. (New York: Macmillan, 1973)

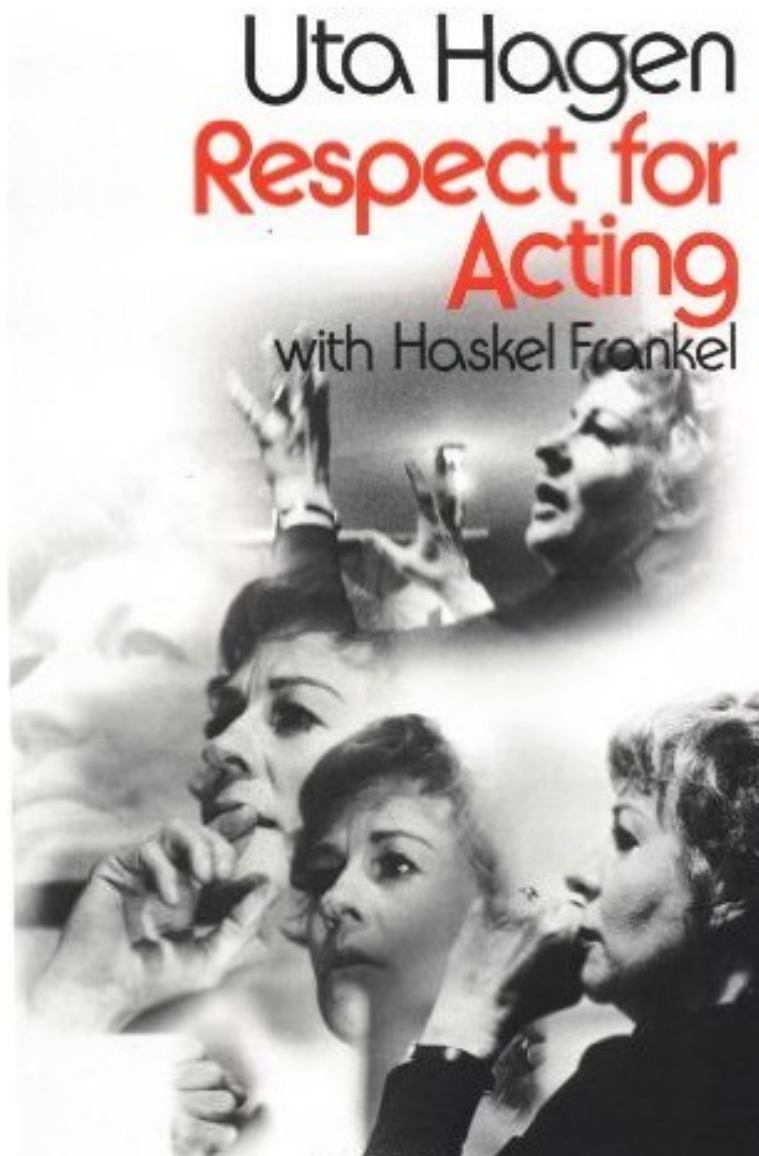


Fig 1: Uta Hagen, Haskel Fankel, *Respect For Acting*, Bookcover. 1973 <[https://books.google.com.au/books/about/Respect\\_for\\_Acting.html?id=4yhAGplhYdcC&source=kp\\_cover&redir\\_esc=y&hl=en](https://books.google.com.au/books/about/Respect_for_Acting.html?id=4yhAGplhYdcC&source=kp_cover&redir_esc=y&hl=en)>, accessed 27 January 2016

**HB STUDIO  
BROCHURE  
SPRING 1988**



**SPRING TERM**

**MARCH 28-JUNE 17**

**Registration begins March 9**

**OFFICE HOURS:**

**Mon - Fri, 9:45am - 9pm**

**Sat - Sun, 9:45am - 4pm**

Fig 2: Original *HB Studio Brochure*, 1988, New York, USA.

Living in New York in the 1980s exposed me to many other influences that run through my practice. From Andy Warhol's parties in the Tunnel and the red velvet-curtained rooms of Nell's nightclub to being mugged at knifepoint in the subway, New York was an intense experience for a 19-year-old.





Fig 3: *Macbeth* performance, 1989, Guildford University of Surrey, UK.

Following two years in New York, I spent a short time in England, studying and performing Shakespeare in Guildford at the University of Surrey, then returned home to Australia to find work as an actor in TV, film and on stage. But the reality of life as an actor left me wanting more. I was well aware that I was an instrument for others' scripts, and this lack of autonomy led me to return to night school and retrain to work in advertising. My father was an art director, so I had been around this world all my life.

Embarking on a career in advertising, I started work with the Sydney agency SASS (Simpkins, Anstey, Sawyer and Smart). This group of mavericks never stuck to mainstream ways of initiating a direct connection with their target audience. The agency had strong links to the big promoters of the time,

entrepreneurs such as Kevin Jacobsen and Michael Gudinski, and consequently our approach was an unusual one. I was in charge of coming up with events and situations that involved groups of consumers, distributors and media being exposed to unexpected experiences in daily life, which would help position our client's brand at top-of-mind.

These events ranged from closing the monorail for a night and transforming each of the stations into wonderlands that were unrecognisable to the normal commuter, to flying in the Bolshoi Ballet for a private performance on a deserted island in the Whitsundays for an unsuspecting group of resellers. I see clearly the links to my current artistic practice, although my budget and motives have changed significantly.

From these beginnings, how did I transfer to the art world? There is an explanation that is probably the vital link. My mother is a writer on art and architecture so from an early age I had been exposed to art.

I am adopted, and when I finally met my natural mother she recounted the story of my birth. She and my natural father were living in the 'Yellow House' in Kings Cross (an early artists' community where art and life merged) and that is where I was conceived.

We all find our way at some stage and my moment came while living in America the second time around with my husband and two small children. I met up with a friend, the Australian painter Denise Green who lives in New York and teaches at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art, Philadelphia. Denise took me under her wing, inviting me to lectures and tutorials and I realised I

had knowledge and opinions on what was being discussed. Two years later, on my return to Australia, I enrolled in a fulltime course at TAFE where I focused on traditional techniques, majoring in painting and printmaking. Then I entered Sydney College of the Arts and completed my undergraduate and honours degrees.

The remnants of these key events go into my artwork and therefore are threaded through this thesis. Trained as a painter, I have painting's history through which I filter works. However, as time has progressed painting's limitations have pushed me to explore its boundaries and more recently to free myself and move beyond its frame. I now work between installation, film, performance and constructed situations.

The things that motivate me now have probably always been the things that have interested me. They include a synthesis of the world that surrounds me; how to translate this through an environment, a situation, or an object that is capable of altering an audience's perception of the world; an exploration of how people react to certain situations or stimuli; what connection is formed through me to those who participate with these environments, objects and situations; how am I changed and affected by those reactions; and does this lead me to an ongoing engineering of new, and perhaps more effective and affecting ways to connect with audiences.



## **Chapter One. On Script: The Audience**

To set the scene, find the players and join together to create a work: a seemingly simple aim, and yet one that for me is fraught with potential pitfalls. In this chapter I propose several arguments centring on my contention that particular forms of theatre can combine with specific forms of artistic knowledge, and this combination will allow for a new form of work that will effectively activate an audience.

By virtue of my experience in theatre, I am able to draw on a practitioner's working knowledge of theatre's tools and to combine its techniques with my artistic practices. This hybridised practice has enabled me to experiment with a range of ideas and has helped to form an in-depth understanding of the philosophy and mechanics of audience activation. In a very practical way, I am able to observe the development process and how a work operates in conjunction with a live audience, allowing me to continually refine and adjust it.

In my artistic practice I have often drawn on personal links to the theatre, and more specifically my training in New York, mentioned earlier in *In the Wings*. In my time working with Hagen and her husband and teacher Herbert Berghof, I came to understand that a key component to being an actor is being an audience to oneself, to pay attention to the smallest moment, to be aware and open to recognise the sensations and fluctuations in one's being and relationships, and to live each moment in that state of awareness which ultimately allows for the development of a new form of existence.

Hagen describes it as an enduring task of self awareness and self learning:

*The continuing job of learning to find out who you really are, of learning to pinpoint your responses—and even more important, the myriad, consequent behaviours which result—will help you begin to fill your warehouse with sources upon which to draw.*<sup>1</sup>

I clearly remember an exercise undertaken in Hagen's class of holding a steaming hot cup of coffee, smelling its aroma, feeling the warmth seep into my hands, noting the sensations flooding my body, the anticipation of its bitter taste in my mouth. For me acting became about 'presence', about the experience of the moment, not the manufacture of a simulacrum of it.

Consequently, I began to understand 'actor' as another aspect of 'audience', and both terms became expansive and liberating. For Hagen, acting was akin to Allan Kaprow's vision of what art should be: 'Doing life consciously . . .'<sup>2</sup>

These ideas have been significant drivers in my artistic practice.

In the original iteration of my work *Staged* in 2011 (and the subsequent version created for Verge Gallery in 2012) a 'stage' was set up with the aim of allowing the audience to become conscious of their own presence, rather than be confronted with a fixed object or scripted production. The rectangular raised black platform, surrounded by a black velvet skirt, had a minimal simplicity but an intrinsic stage-like quality. In version one of the work, sited outside on the expansive grass area at Sydney College of the Arts, a large 'daylight maker' light was installed for the evening performance.

<sup>1</sup> Hagen and Frankel, *Respect for Acting*, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Allan Kaprow and Jeff Kelley, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 195.



Fig 4: Katie Louise Williams, *Staged 1*, 2011, Stage 10m x 4m x 70cm, 'daymaker' flood light, Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle NSW.



Fig 5: Katie Louise Williams, *Staged 2*, 2012, Stage 9m x 2.5m x 70cm, Microphone, 'red hat' spotlight, Verge Gallery, University of Sydney, NSW.

At 6pm the light was turned on to signal the beginning of the show. The audience gathered and spread picnic rugs around the stage in anticipation of the coming event. One man even set up a camera to photograph the proceedings. After waiting, and having their expectations thwarted, the audience gradually began to take to the stage themselves. In an act of knowing creation, multiple small impromptu performances sprang up: several young girls danced; an old couple set up a picnic and shared a bottle of champagne on the stage edge; two young men talked in deep conversation, one becoming tearful. On the grass, other moments of presence emerged. A man became distressed, feeling his job was to defend the stage: he had watched it being set up and wanted to protect it from unauthorised actions.



Fig 6: Williams, *Staged 1*, 2011





Fig 7: Williams, *Staged 1*, 2011



Fig 8: Williams, *Staged 1*, 2011

Here was an active, engaged audience. This brings to mind artist Tania Bruguera's thoughts:

*What interests me as art is the process, but not the process in the sense of 'showing' something that is taking place in time and space, but the thinking process activated in the spectator.<sup>3</sup>*

The audience to *Staged* not only became aware of their physical presence on the stage but also gained an awareness of their thinking processes. This included having to wrestle with their expectations, their social relations, and ultimately their role as an audience integral to the creation of the work. As Jan Verwoert points out:

*It is we the socially engaged—who create communal spaces for others and ourselves by performing as instigators of social exchange.<sup>4</sup>*

The term 'socially-engaged' is much used of late in contemporary art. I would like to look at my own definition of the term as it relates to the evolution of my work and the way I go about creating art.

Socially-engaged art has many synonyms. As noted in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*,<sup>5</sup> it can be called 'relational aesthetics',

<sup>3</sup> Tania Bruguera in Roberta Tenconi, "Interview", Ed. Jota Castro, *Phobia Paper, A Publication for The Fear Society, Pabellón de la Urgencia*. (53rd. Venice Biennale, 2009), iv-v.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Verwoert, "Exhaustion and Exuberance: Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform." *Dot Dot Dot*, No.15, (Winter 2007), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Nato Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012)

‘social justice’, ‘social practice’ or ‘community art’. Each of these terms brings to mind very distinctive forms of art practice. For instance, the term ‘community art’ denotes an art that stems from a specific group working towards a similar aim. In contrast, ‘social justice’ implies a political imperative to fight for a particular cause that in some way champions justice. In relation to my own practice, these alternative terms are too narrow and do not allow for forms that are able to adapt to the many and varied situations, audiences and sites I encounter. I use the term ‘socially-engaged’ as its range is broader and allows for artistic work outside as well as inside the gallery and institutional systems.

My work is always based in the ‘social’, and by this I mean all forms of relationships and connections, both positive and negative, between people. ‘Engaged’ I see as signifying a form of connection that is active.

This social exchange and the power dynamics that exist within social groupings must be fully comprehended if artists are to create work in this area. In his book *The Nightmare of Participation*,<sup>6</sup> Marcus Miessen raises several issues about social exchange that have become pivotal to my practice. Like Miessen, I see that participatory artwork is at a turning point and a transition is taking place.

The romantic notions of collaboration and inclusion now operate in opposition to their original aims. In popular ‘inclusive’ artworks that invite the audience to

<sup>6</sup> Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation: Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality*. (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010)

participate in a manner that is preordained by the artist, we may witness a deactivation of the audience and a loss of any possibility of a true activity. In these pseudo-participatory works audience members can become merely pawns in a game, where they are deluded and duped, given a false sense that they are creating and connecting when the reality is that they are only playing a prescribed part in a neo-liberal system. The perpetuation of this mirage of activity only acts to reinforce and reproduce the system in its own likeness again and again. The audience, believing themselves to be active, cannot break free, and paradoxically they remain in a state of disempowered inactivity.

Through my practice I have grappled with how to tackle the constraints of a system that can deactivate an audience. If an audience cannot act, why do we assume that their ability to see, feel or be present is somehow not similarly compromised? Even the slightest imbalance of power, as Michel Foucault points out in his discussion of the Panopticon,<sup>7</sup> allows for abuse in all situations, from an individual unable to speak up for themselves on through an inevitable progression of larger consequences, such as oppression, racial marginalisation and the abuse of women, children, and animals.

At times in my practice I have been invited to participate in exhibitions with socially-inclusive themes, only to encounter limitations imposed by the gallery that restricted the way the work could operate. Many an intervention was frustrated by a curator's rigid conception of participation. At The Banff Centre

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995)

for the Arts, Canada, in 2012, I attended the thematic residency *The Decapitated Museum*<sup>8</sup> with high hopes that the centre and the assembled international artists, curators and theorists were participating in the six-week residency to investigate the possibilities beyond the museum, and also within its walls. What I discovered instead was that the centre appeared more interested in the artists' output, using their labour as a marketing tool for the institution itself and imposing its expectations of what artists must produce. These included open studios for important benefactors to view the artists' works, along with PowerPoint presentations given by the artists that proclaimed the status value of their work and the prestige of the galleries where it had been exhibited.

Moreover, those facilitating the residency seemed less concerned with fostering an exchange of ideas than in using it as a platform to advance their own manifesto. It was under these restrictive conditions that I created several works aimed at exposing the limitations of this form of residency. A detailed description of these works and the possibilities they opened up for my practice forms part of *Chapter Two* in this thesis.

Through these and other experiences I have come to the understanding that consensus and inclusion are often not the most productive forms of exposing underlying power imbalances, and I agree with Miessen in his concept that

<sup>8</sup> Vincent Normand and Etienne Chambaud, (conveners). *The Decapitated Museum*. Thematic residency, The Banff Centre, Alberta, Canada. (13 November – 7 December, 2012)

participation needs to be a way to 'enter politics instead of a politically motivated model of pseudo-participation.'<sup>9</sup>

From the outset, then, I need to carefully choose and define a term for 'those who are not the artist' because ultimately my practice is testament to how infinitesimally small is the difference between the audience or viewer and myself.

There are many words used to describe someone who engages with contemporary artworks. Spectator, observer, audience and viewer stand opposite, although never comfortably or legitimately, the terms artist, creator and performer. Then there is 'participant', which allows a continuum of agency on the part of she who participates, but which nevertheless implies an unspoken protagonist who is someone more than a mere participant (a super-participant if you will). Most frequently, in our rush to describe art and its relationship with society, culture or the institution, we settle for 'spectator' or 'audience'. However, as a socially-engaged artist the choice of these words cannot be casual. Words are symbols and semiotics is always political. As Ludwig Wittgenstein says, 'philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language',<sup>10</sup> and so our world is created collectively by the words we use.

<sup>9</sup> Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation: Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality*. (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 256.

<sup>10</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. eds. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 109.

In theatre the audience is very much part of the performance. We call a play performed without an audience a 'rehearsal'. Only in the presence of an audience does a play become a performance. The moment of creation is contemporaneous with the moment of perception. The spectator or audience in art, however, has rarely been attributed as much agency.

The term spectator for me is intrinsically linked to the 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*<sup>11</sup> where Guy Debord proposes the idea that human fulfilment is no longer equated with what one makes of oneself, but rather what one possesses. Debord then accurately predicts the subsequent contemporary evolution from 'having' to 'appearing' where social status is now solely derived from appearances. And so 'being' is commuted to 'owning' and 'owning' is commuted to 'appearing'. Debord continues:

*The more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him.*<sup>12</sup>

Debord's view is a dark one that is ultimately about alienation and the commodification of every aspect of life to the point where the authentic becomes impossible. The spectacle in Debord's view is man's essence, torn away from us, made foreign to us, a collection of images whose reality is

<sup>11</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. (New York: Zone Books, 1994)

<sup>12</sup> Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 30.



nothing but man's own dispossession. In his final book, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*,<sup>13</sup> published in 1998, Debord's ideas became considerably bleaker. He describes a world in which images have become the principal means of connection between people and a society with which they once directly interacted. Isolated from their context, their past, their intentions and consequences these images could mean anything at all. The Debordian spectator is therefore ultimately subsumed into the spectacle.

I bring up Debord's ideas of the spectacle as they have been important in my own questioning of how to activate the audience. I remember reading *The Society of the Spectacle* and feeling powerless, and I must admit, a little hopeless. The main question raised for me was, why create more images in a world already so saturated with them? And if indeed we had all become the spectacle, surely art, and specifically the contemporary art world, could no longer critique the spectacle it aimed to address. Rather, I began to realise that the biennales and large scale blockbuster exhibitions that I had once viewed as activating audiences were in fact exactly what Debord had predicted: part of the spectacle. This insight for me precipitated a radical change in the way I created artwork.

Up to this point I still painted and was interested in creating installations and sculptural objects that I believed were able to incite a rupture of the audience's visual perception and thus enable a form of activation on their part. The work I am specifically thinking about in this context is the series

<sup>13</sup> Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. (London: Verso, 1990)

*Twisted Logic* created for a solo exhibition at MOP Gallery in 2011.<sup>14</sup> It comprised large pieces of triangular mirror-finished stainless steel folded, origami-like, into sculptural floor and wall works. My hope with this work was that people would not just look at the form of the pieces but would in fact become implicit in creating the work, as they would see themselves and their surroundings fractured and rejoined in strange ways across the various angled surfaces.



Fig 9: Katie Louise Williams, *Twisted Logic*, 2011, MOP, Chippendale, NSW  
Dimensions: variable. Material: Folded mirror finished stainless steel, folded matt black aluminium

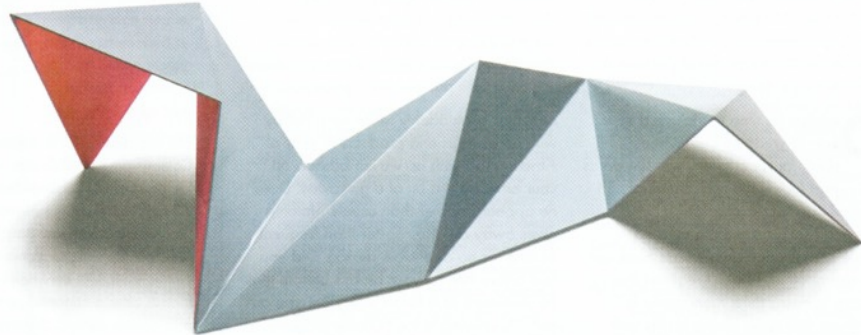
<sup>14</sup> Katie Louise Williams, *Twisted Logic*, MOP Gallery, Chippendale, NSW, 2011.



Fig 10: Katie Louise Williams, *Twisted Logic*, 2011, MOP, Chippendale, NSW. Dimensions: 1.2m x 60 cm x 20 cm. Material: Mirror-finished stainless steel, folded

I noted as I wrote this chapter that in the Fairfax Media publication *Sunday Life* of September 2015 one of these works of mine has now been recreated, almost in every detail, by designer Dion Horstmans, as a piece that 'Sunday Life Loves', listed as a key 'want' for that summer. Patently, my concerns about art's ability to critique a world that has itself become part of the spectacle are in keeping with Debord's ideas. To continue to create art with this understanding required me to reassess and look to other sources for ways to move forward.

# sundaylife LOVES...



WANT

*Piece in our time*

This striking wall sculpture by New Zealand-born, Sydney-based artist Dion Horstmans is made from folded industrial steel backed in surprising fluorescent pink. *Arcus I* can be bought online for \$1500 from [chinaheights.com](http://chinaheights.com).

Fig 11: From *Sunday Life*, The Sydney Morning Herald, September 2015

Jacques Rancière in his essay “*The Emancipated Spectator*”<sup>15</sup> provides a counterpoint to Debord’s philosophy. Rancière does not identify looking with passivity, as Debord did, and he dismisses the opposition between looking and acting. In his view spectatorship is not passivity that must be turned into activity—spectatorship is no less than our normal condition. He writes, ‘We learn and teach, we act and know as spectators who link what they see with what they have seen and told, done and dreamt.’<sup>16</sup>

Rancière believed that as spectators we are active in that we observe and at the same time we select, compare, interpret, we link an image with something we

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. (London: Verso Reprint edition, 2011)

<sup>16</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 17

have read in a book or dreamt about or lived. Rancière says the spectator  
'...makes his poem of the poems that are performed in front of him.'<sup>17</sup>

Rancière reveals spectators as 'makers', 'poets' even! And art becomes something performed, with the self-aware theatricality implied by that term: a knowing performance of the theatre of life. Unlike Debord's theory, which relies on the externality of vision and presupposes that spectators look at an image or appearance and are automatically separated from it, Rancière's understanding is that the spectator does not simply see what the artist would have us see, any more than the student just learns the same thing as the master teaches. Teaching is not just the transfer of the master's knowledge into the student. The student, like the spectator, possesses an innate ability to learn, and while they do not have the knowledge the master possesses, they have the means to acquire it.

For Rancière, what is true for the student is true for the spectator. There is not a sense of the spectator as a vessel to be filled with the spectacle. His 'emancipated spectator' is in fact active in the creation of the spectacle. This is a concept that my own practice returns to again and again.

In the work *Staged* discussed earlier, the platform that I created was a vehicle to allow for social interactions to occur, and for the audience to gain an awareness of their presence and its complex social and political ramifications. I did not, however, see myself as the 'master' who knew exactly what the audience could make of the situation and how the event would progress. Nor

<sup>17</sup> Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 13.

did I naively or unknowingly fail to understand the potential ramifications and critique of the institution that was framed within the work. But what I could not know or predict was the full gamut of the audience's reactions and interactions. As an artist, I also become an audience and was able to learn and be affected and changed through the witnessing of this work.

Although Rancière convincingly argues that spectatorship is a natural human state and the spectator is no more passive than the student is simply a sponge, even Rancière's spectator ultimately lacks agency for she lacks the ability to originate.

It must be acknowledged that in the sphere of theatre, 'audience' is no less contested a concept than 'spectator' is in visual arts. The audience in conventional Aristotelian theatre has similarly been regarded as passive consumers of the labours of playwright, director and actor.

According to Augusto Boal, Aristotelian theatre is 'designed to bridle the individual, to adjust him to what pre-exists'.<sup>18</sup> The problem with this idea of theatre is that it rests on the imbalance between that knowing-judging-teaching playwright and the childlike audience waiting for enlightenment; sitting mute in a darkened theatre, anonymous, lights trained only on the stage and actors, in a one-way relation to the play unfolding in front of them. In this form of theatre the audience is co-opted into a coercive system, eroding any possibility for rebellion, allowing others on a removed stage to

<sup>18</sup> Augusto Boal and Maria McBride, *Theatre of the Oppressed* New Edition. (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 47.

entertain them, to tell them a story, to feel for them, with no means of disrupting, intervening or affecting the play's outcome.

This conventional incarnation of theatre is as constrictive as Debord's spectacle. In contrast, the theatre that engages me is constituted from an alternate history, from William Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare's 17<sup>th</sup> century audience responded to the play by throwing items on stage, yelling and jeering. The people were an integral part of the production and often the way a play progressed was determined by their behaviour. Shakespeare acknowledges this in the lines of the chorus in Henry V, where he describes actors' actions and words, implicating both the physical and imaginative position that the audience brings to complete a work.

*And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,  
On your imaginary forces work.  
Suppose within the girdle of these walls  
Are now confined two mighty monarchies,  
Whose high upreared and abutting fronts  
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:  
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;  
Into a thousand parts divide one man,  
And make imaginary puissance;  
Think when we talk of horses, that you see them  
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;  
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,*

<sup>19</sup> Built in 1599 by Shakespeare's playing company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the Globe Theatre was the first London playhouse built by actors for actors.

*Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,  
Turning the accomplishment of many years  
Into an hour-glass: . . .*<sup>20</sup>

The audience's physical, and most importantly, imaginative position, their ability to bring themselves to the work and the agency this gives them to co-create the play, are implicitly understood by the playwright.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century France during the French Revolution it was manifestly not possible to differentiate between audience and actor on the basis of acquiescence on the one hand and agency on the other. The theatre of the day was a bear pit of cultural and political debate. Audiences of all classes and social station came not just to listen to the loyal, satirical or polemical views of the playwright but to vigorously and even violently support or reject them. In the Paris Uprising of 1832, the barricades that sprang up in the Faubourg Saint-Martin in the centre of Paris became makeshift stages.



Fig 12: *Paris Uprising of 1832, the barricades in the Faubourg Saint-Martin, Paris*, <<http://brianmayer.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/850884.jpg>> accessed 23 May 2016

People would jump on top of the barricades and declaim dramatic entreaties that had a life or death imperative, as a good or poor reception by the

<sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, Prologue, Act 1, *Henry V*, c.1599.



audience could mean the difference between acclaim or condemnation.

Clearly this was theatre that mattered.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1920s, Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator and others pioneered a new form of theatre, epic theatre, which opposed the naturalist traditions of emotional catharsis. Brecht sought to encourage the audience to adopt a critical perspective: 'We cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither.'<sup>22</sup>

Brecht employed techniques to disrupt the artifice of the fourth wall, exhorting his actors to *show* Lear, not to become him. Various techniques, including addressing the audience directly both as character and as actor, reading stage directions aloud and making visible the sources of lighting, constitute what Brecht termed *Verfremdungseffekt* ('distancing effect' or 'distanciation'). Their purpose was to remind the audience that the play is a representation of reality and not reality itself. Trotsky's assertion that 'art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it'<sup>23</sup> was clearly a concept embraced by Brecht.

*It is not enough to demand insight and informative images of reality from the theatre. Our theatre must stimulate a desire for understanding, a delight in changing reality.'*<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Mark Traugott, *The Insurgent Barricade* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Trans. John Willett. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 201.

<sup>23</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*. Ed., William Keach (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957), 120.

<sup>24</sup> John Fuegi, *The Essential Brecht*. (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1972), 141.

From these antecedents came Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Augusto Boal was a Brazilian director and Workers' Party activist who created Forum Theatre in the 1970s. He saw theatre as 'a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it.'<sup>25</sup>

Boal's ideas centred on bringing to the theatre everyday life experiences that could be enacted on stage. But unlike within Aristotelian or even epic theatre, the audience was empowered to intervene, to bring their ideas onto the stage and disrupt the action. This is a vital link to the constitution of an active audience that blurs the lines of theatre, life and art. Boal's practice foreshadows much of the socially-engaged practice we see today, where artists, including myself, incorporate the audience into the substance of the artwork itself.

For a socially-engaged artist, creating art involves not only making works for an audience but also joining with an audience in a community of practice. A prime example of this form of work (which I discuss later in the chapter on collaboration) is the artist Paul Chan's 2007 presentation *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*,<sup>26</sup> staged in the city two years after Hurricane Katrina. Chan was able to draw a striking parallel between Samuel Beckett's iconic play from 1948 and the natural disaster of a superstorm in 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Boal and McBride, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, xxxi.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Chan, ed., *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide*. (New York: Creative Time, 2010)

In contemporary art since the late 1960s our understanding of the role and position of audience and artist has continued to evolve. The changes during this fifty-year period in the social, political and economic landscape are immense. This epoch is one in which the rate of change has accelerated faster than ever before in history. Massive shifts have occurred in information technology, digitisation and social media that have led artists to a renegotiation of their role and a reconsideration of what constitutes 'art'.

The tools available to artists in the 1960s, such as performance, photography, painting, design and image making, have been subsumed into the culture industry. They are the language now used by advertising and marketing companies, a phenomenon I observed during my earlier career in the industry. Of course this was never only a one-way transmission and did not begin only in the 1960s. In my time at various advertising agencies I was complicit in the co-opting of strategies and tools used by artists of the late sixties (for example, Allan Kaprow's *Happenings*). These tactics were used to subvert an audience's expectations and then to manipulate and place them in a position that would make them receptive to the brand we were selling.

The contemporary artist must be aware of the facility of economic forces to adopt any and all means of cultural persuasion, as Nato Thompson points out in *Seeing Power: Socially Engaged Art in the Age of Cultural Production*:

*The work of artists is, in fact, dwarfed in comparison to the scale and scope of the creative industries. Which means that artists*

*must be all the more resourceful when it comes to cutting through the haze of cultural production.*<sup>27</sup>

As artists we must be alert to the culture industry and how adept it is at appropriating our concepts and ideas. Looking back to our predecessors and to contemporary art practices is fundamental, but simultaneously we must also be engaged with the culture industry, which includes advertising, marketing, social media and film. Of primary importance is a lifelong dedication to understanding the audience, who they are and how to reach them in the most effective way. A tool we use today to reach an audience will tomorrow be a part of the culture machine's arsenal. To be effective we must be quick to notice and react to these evolutions in the cultural landscape.

Many writers have pointed to the potential problem of the culture machine co-opting the artist's intellectual labour. The works of Bourriaud, Bishop, Miessen, Verwoert and Lars Bang Larsen all foresaw the current popularity of socially-engaged art and its inevitable exploitation into an 'authentic social experience' commodity in the 'experience economy'.<sup>28</sup> What is now being produced is no longer an object for consumption by the audience but the experience of the audience itself. The potential to have authentic social involvement becomes the end game.

<sup>27</sup> Nato Thompson, *Seeing Power: Socially Engaged Art in the Age of Cultural Production*. (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2012), 16.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph B Pine II and James H Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, Updated Edition 2011)

In 1999, Pine and Gilmore offered the idea of staging experiences to leave a memorable—and lucrative—impression on consumers as a new way to think about connecting with them and securing their loyalty.

One of the problems I see with audience activation is how to assess it. What methods can we use to evaluate its effect and resonance for the audience? This issue was foreshadowed by mid-20th century Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica in a letter to collaborator Lygia Clark:

*...and sometimes what appears to be participation is a mere detail of it, because the artist cannot in fact measure this participation, since each person experiences it differently.<sup>29</sup>*

This reintroduces a concept I referred to earlier in my account of working with Uta Hagen, where I described acting as being an audience to oneself. For, as Oiticica points out, if the artist cannot objectively observe or measure participation for the simple reason that she is at the same time part of the audience herself, then the relationship between audience and artist is symbiotic and evolutionary. Attempts to predetermine outcomes are insincere. And there is an implied ethical imperative for the artist to go along on the journey with her audience. The artist and audience are changed and grow through this reciprocal relationship.

As outlined in my introduction, when describing an art where artist and audience co-create and a vantage point outside the action is impossible to sustain, the challenge becomes an autoethnographic one and something that requires a new terminology. The language of historical art criticism trips up on

<sup>29</sup> Hélio Oiticica cited in Claire Bishop, *Participation* (London: Whitechapel, 2006) 111.

its need to adopt a perspective outside of, or after the fact of, the moment of creation.

At the September 2015 symposium *Civic Actions: Artists' Practices Beyond the Museum*,<sup>30</sup> Claire Doherty, founder and director of Situations and a noted writer on socially-engaged art practices, used her keynote speech to address the same issue. She spoke about the importance of finding suitable tools and language to address the impact, and success or failure, of artistic works that are socially engaged and incorporate the audience as part of the creation of the work. Over the past eight years, as I have continued to experiment and advance my practice in this vein, I have struggled with the deficiencies in art theory to provide a language and a framework to adequately address what is happening between audience and artist. Nevertheless, the rise in interest along with a greater critical examination of this form of practice has recently gained traction in Australia.

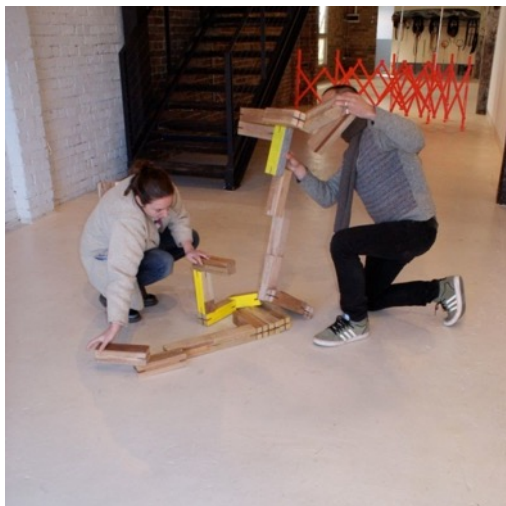
I recall the creation of my work *LOL* for the exhibition *What we were talking about the last time we spoke* at Articulate Project Space in 2012. It comprised three sets of wooden blocks, each stack joined through a central spine with elastic cords, which allowed the parts to be manoeuvred into multiple permutations much like a child's toy. This gave 'life' to the identical block sets and allowed audience members to create their own spatial configurations with one or even all three sets of blocks. What I found most exciting about the work was the joy and enthusiasm with which people took

<sup>30</sup> Claire Doherty, "Unsettling Place: The Unfolding and Undoing of Place through New Forms of Public Art." (keynote presented as part of Proceedings of Civic Actions: Artists' Practices Beyond the Museum at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2015)

to the task of creation. At one moment on opening night the blocks took on, thanks to the audience, animal personas. One set became a giraffe, which then started behaving in an amorous way towards another block creature that resembled a lizard.



Fig 13: Two views of Katie Louise Williams, *LOL* in the exhibition *What we were talking about the last time we spoke*, 2012, Articulate Project Space, Leichhardt, NSW. Dimensions: variable, Material: wood, paint, elastic cord.



The other surprising revelation about this work was the ownership of the creative process adopted by the audience. One prominent artist carefully arranged all three sets of blocks as one. He then photographed it and sent me the image of his masterpiece via text message, stating that this arrangement was the most successful way to install the blocks as it was how they functioned best.

Like Doherty, I struggle with how to assess the success of this work. Many of the art historical tools of critique are of no use to me. I have intuitively sensed when a work is functioning correctly, often by noting the stories that come from the audience after interacting with it. Doherty pointed to this aspect of assessment as one that has not yet been explored and that the stories emerging from these types of works could become a vital instrument in evaluating the success of the project.





## Chapter Two. Impromptu: Ruptures

In this chapter I introduce a different way of approaching the act of artistic creation and thus the role of the artist and their connection to the audience. One trajectory of that role has been the construct of the artist as solo creator: this artist has a concept and then follows through with certain steps to realise that idea in physical form. There can be moments of change and deviation from the original aim; the happy accident may make way for a new or alternate path to be taken. However, the act of creation and the moment of reception by an audience are separate. The artist remains isolated from a response to the process of making the work, and often lacks access to the audience's reaction on viewing the finished work. In short, the artist is singular, isolated and does not respond to their audience in a direct manner. So too the audience's reaction and reply to the artist are insulated, there is no direct and responsive dialogue operating between them.

A fundamentally different model of the artist and the way of perceiving an act of creation has emerged since the 1950s. This alternate mode was in many ways prompted by The Situationists who sought to:

*. . . break the spectator's psychological identification with the hero so as to draw them into activity . . . The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing 'public' must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors,*

*but rather, in a new sense of the term 'livers', must steadily increase.*<sup>1</sup>

This call for artists to create situations that are 'lived' experiences allows them to use the social fabric of human relations as the material of their work. Consequently, artists must be attuned to situations, people and moments and act decisively in seizing that instant to act. Unlike The Situationists, who insisted that interventions be premeditated and well-planned, this chapter explores the possibility of spontaneous acts—a form of intervention more in keeping with the ideas of Michel de Certeau, who used the term 'tactic' and asserts that artists must 'seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment'.<sup>2</sup>

A tactic can engender a shift in perception for one viewer or a moment of rupture for another. To a greater or lesser degree, it will directly impact on how they perceive a situation and their place and role within it. In this chapter I explore several examples of such events in my own artistic practice, and look at how these were made possible through an understanding of artists' work that precedes my own. Through case studies I aim to establish an argument for the use of this type of intervention/tactic in activating the audience.

<sup>1</sup> Guy Debord, "Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation", in Claire Doherty, *Situations*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2009), 110.

<sup>2</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). 37.

In keeping with my autoethnographic stance in this thesis, I begin with a personal story, one that led me to understand how audiences can become active through a momentary disruption of the expected or known, and how this understanding then translated in my work and opened up unexpected strategies to change dimensions of power and ignite audiences.

In 2010 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales I visited Tatzu Nishi's installation *War and Peace and In Between* for the exhibition *40 Years: Kaldor Public Art Projects*.<sup>3</sup> Two huge bronze equestrian statues by English artist Gilbert Bayes—*The Offerings of Peace* and *The Offerings of War*—that flank the outside entrance to the gallery had been co-opted by the Japanese artist for his intervention. A 'room' had been constructed to enclose the top of each sculpture.



Fig 14: Exterior and Interior view of Tatzu Nishi, *War and Peace and In Between*, 2009, Art Gallery NSW, Sydney.

<sup>3</sup> Tatzu Nishi, *War and Peace and In Between*, 40 Years: Kaldor Public Art Project, Art Gallery NSW, Sydney, NSW, 2 October 2009 - 14 February, 2010.

To access the room built around *Peace*, I climbed a long ramp and entered the elevated space, where I was confronted with what looked like a *Vogue Living* interior-designed room complete with Le Corbusier chairs, flokati rug and a coffee table supporting the oversized 'bust' of the rider proudly holding an olive branch. The horse's head could be glimpsed through the open door of a cupboard. What was outside had become inside. The effect was disconcerting.

A real slippage occurred between several things, most notably the idea of being outside yet inside, and between a public space that had become private and intimate, like a living room. But this 'living room' was not a comfortable, familiar one: it existed more in the realm of something from a magazine.

The strangeness was soon to veer into the surreal. At this point I stood alone in the room, guarded by the gallery's security officer who was positioned at the door. Enter stage right actor Hugo Weaving, an old friend whom I had not seen for some time. We hugged and exchanged information, but something in the surroundings altered our relationship. Maybe because we became so acutely aware of the incongruity of our meeting in this stage-like set, the usual surface chat and pleasantries that accompany a chance meeting with a friend were dispensed with and our conversation changed tack onto a highly personal one, centred on how life can alter suddenly, how adaptation becomes key to survival, and how everything moves and must be re-evaluated: children grow up and leave home and marriages must also adjust

and transform. I was alert to the fact that this discussion was only taking place due to the disruption in our environment, and that somehow the fantastic nature of the installation had facilitated a change that allowed us to become more connected and open.

During this time, visitors to the gallery entered the small room and came across the 'star', Hugo, engrossed in an intimate conversation. The gallery visitors became an impromptu audience and began to question whether what they were witnessing was part of the installation. It appeared that their imaginations were freed and consequently the magazine-shoot room/artistic installation was no longer read as art, but slipped into a hybrid zone of film set, stage production, performance piece and possibly life. As 'audience' they were then compelled to figure out what their role was in this unfolding scenario. As part of this situation, my own and Hugo's roles changed as well. Where we had started the journey into the installation as audience we had soon become the main act, supported by a superbly designed set. Our role was now simultaneously audience and act.

The blurring of boundaries between life, art, theatre and cinema on this occasion coalesced so profoundly as to make one question the nature of reality itself. This revelation brought about a shift in my thinking about art: I saw the possibilities for any and every given moment to become a point of rupture.

It was this unsettling experience that paved the way for the next work, which I now describe.



Fig 15: Katie Louise Williams, *View from Banff Centre for the Arts*, Alberta, Canada, 2012, photograph taken while on the thematic residency “The Decapitated Museum”

In 2012 I travelled to Alberta Canada to attend a four-week thematic residency at The Banff Centre for the Arts, set high in the snow-covered Canadian Rockies two hours from Calgary. It is difficult to describe the extreme isolation of this place. The town of Banff is a 20-minute walk from the Centre, through heavy snow at that time of year, and the temperature often drops to minus 30° Celsius. The Centre itself is a massive, sprawling conglomeration of buildings that includes high-tech studios, a fitness centre, lecture hall, hotel, a vast dining hall and several restaurants. The aim of the Centre is to promote creativity and an exchange of ideas in the arts and related fields, so at the time I was in residence I shared meals not only with artists from my group but with musicians, mathematicians and writers. These occasions were the highlight of my time at Banff.



Fig 16: “The Decapitated Museum” participants poster. Alberta, Canada, 2012

The residency, entitled *The Decapitated Museum*, facilitated by two French artists and theorists, Vincent Normand and Etienne Chambaud, was positioned in the statement below.

*This residency is addressed to participants willing to engage in speculative inquiry on the matter of exhibition, whether they work as artists, curators, or writers. The moment of exhibition will act as a figure towards which converge diverse spaces of authority (the studio, the exhibition space, criticism). The residency will thus be structured in as many points of enunciation, with individual studio and research time, public talks, and collective discussions enhanced by screenings and reading sessions.*



*The question of contemporary art exhibition is inevitably folded on the question of the present. This present is traditionally regarded as the site of a triangular relationship: a subject displays an object under museum lights so that this object meets the gaze of another subject. In the frame of this relationship, the object does not exist outside a scale of which the human eye is both the standard and the currency.<sup>4</sup>*

That one line, 'The question of contemporary art exhibition is inevitably folded on the question of the present', was what drew me to apply for the residency. At that point in my practice I was intensely interested in the 'present', a moment one cannot predict but only experience, which was core to my understanding of how and why I would continue to create work. At the same time, I was questioning the museum's suitability as a place for that work to occur: in relation to the 'present' what limitations and potential did the museum hold for an active audience to appear.

What became apparent right from the outset was that my hopes for the promised 'engaged, collective discussions' were not to be realised in a way that allowed for any meaningful sharing of ideas, discussion and debate. Rather, the atmosphere of the residency was akin to a return to school, with a fully resolved and static curriculum, handed down by an all-knowing French Scholar, supported by the authority of The Banff Centre with its outcomes-based program.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.artandeducation.net/announcement/the-banff-centre-residencies-and-work-study-call-for-applications/>

On the first day we were required to give a structured ten-minute presentation on PowerPoint featuring ten examples of recent work and its theoretical underpinnings. As the eighteen artists and curators embarked upon this exercise, it soon became a competition of sorts, a way of asserting a hierarchy based on where the artist or curator had positioned themselves in the international art world. Rather than an enlightening peek into another's thinking and practice, it became an endless fact sheet of galleries of international note where this or that person had exhibited.

I had compiled ten images of my own work in this format; however, after three hours without a break in a darkened room with endless artworks scrolling in front of our eyes, our ability as an audience to engage or even look and listen was seriously compromised. Consequently, as my name was called to approach the podium and address the assembled audience of residency personnel, benefactors and fellow residents, I made an impromptu decision. Instead of displaying documentation of works past, I would use this moment—this 'present'—to actively engage the audience in an experience that would itself be descriptive of my practice.

When I took to the stage I asked the technical assistant to remove my PowerPoint presentation and instead put up on the screen a live-time clock that counted down the allotted ten minutes by seconds. In this I was greatly influenced by the John Cage piece *4'33*, composed in 1952, in which the audience were presented with silence for four minutes and thirty three seconds in three movements. This work had always been highly influential in my artistic thinking. I then took the small hand bell, used to indicate the eight-

minute mark of presentations and give warning to the presenter to wrap up, and sat back in the audience to watch what unfolded.

At first there was a stunned silence from the assembly, then several of my fellow residents clapped loudly, a few giggled nervously, all looked around the room and at each other then back to the receding seconds of the digital countdown on the large screen. This prompted a strong reaction from the leader of the residency who asked me in a raised tone 'What do you want me to do with this!' and promptly left the room so as not to endure the moment. No-one else left; the remaining group sat mostly in silence, keenly aware of their presence in the space. At the eight-minute mark I rang the little bell; more clapping from the audience, possibly in relief at the breaking of the silence. Finally, as the clock hit the ten-minute mark it disappeared from the screen.

As I was the last presenter of the day, this signalled the end of proceedings and everyone moved to the foyer. It was here that the implications of this work became clear. Some members of the audience came and congratulated me on the work and expressed how much it was needed in the room that had become so constricting. Others physically moved away from where I stood to show that in no way did they share an affiliation with me or this retrograde act. Normand, the residency leader, glowered at me. Clearly I had upended the power dynamic. The effect of this rupture was akin to what Thompson describes in *Seeing Power, Art and Activism in the 21st Century*:

*To put it plainly, when it is unclear who holds the power in a room, the room becomes a space where anything is up for grabs.*

*When one feels free and empowered to act, one is able to change.*<sup>5</sup>

The freedom Thompson speaks of and its ability to empower an audience to act became an alternative theme for me (and indeed others) as the residency progressed. By deconstructing the system and not going along with the carefully orchestrated power structure, this simple action was viewed as highly transgressive. For some members of the group it was welcomed and understood for its intent. For others, and in this category I principally place those at the top of the hierarchy including the residency leader and his assistants at the Centre, this act was not welcome or appreciated. It created immediate divisions in the residency that would play out throughout the remaining four weeks.

With the changed power dynamic, the leader struggled to impose his manifesto on the group. Freed from the master-student relationship, several members began to question Normand and his philosophy, one pointing out that his ideas were so Eurocentric and specifically French as to exclude most of the attendees, who hailed from diverse parts of the world. The less Normand was able to be open and listen to the group, the more its members turned to each other. As fellow resident Michael Birchall noted in his *Frieze* article,

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, *Seeing Power: Socially Engaged Art in the Age of Cultural Production*, 137.

*The successes of the residency were more the personal interactions and the exchange of ideas that took place organically.<sup>6</sup>*

Due in large part to the changed dynamics and the mode of questioning that had opened up, small splinter groups formed and created their own agendas and exchanges, choosing to share literature, experiences and works in a much more relevant way. Birchall pointed out:

*In these informal collaborations, a real sense of community was created—one that was fostered by the context of the residency. We all cooked, ate, drank, made fires and watched movies together—this was just as crucial as the time spent in the studio or in the seminars.<sup>7</sup>*

The value for me was in being able to witness how a ‘rupture’ can change the way an audience perceives their role and how that audience, once empowered, is able to alter a course that has been rigidly defined by the established powers.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Birchall, “Postcard from Banff” in *Frieze Blog* on 9 February, 2013

<sup>7</sup> Birchall, *Postcard from Banff*



Fig 17: Two views of Maria Flawia Litwin unravelling her 2008 work *SYZYFA*, during a snowstorm in Banff National Park, Alberta, Canada, 2012.

My own practice also changed. I had freed myself from the constraints of having to produce something of substance to be displayed that would reflect well on Normand and The Banff Centre. This gave me a feeling of liberation, and paradoxically, fear. If I were not to produce, what would I do? It was this independence that allowed me to experiment and remain alert to everything that surrounded me. I was able to track through the snow with Canadian artist Maria Flawia Litman, unrolling the efforts of her artistic labour (comprising a massive length of red yarn).<sup>8</sup> I collected offcuts from the work of other artists and displayed them in my open studio in another break with the power dynamic of the residency. And finally I set the stage at the

<sup>8</sup> Litman's work *SYZYFA* documents the literal and figurative weight of her work and the attempt to rid herself of it in the act of unravelling. During the course of a month she walked carrying 48 pounds of hand-knitted yarn she had made in 2008 and finally unravelled it in the Banff National Park during a snowstorm.

Philosopher's Knoll gallery not as an installation of my own work but as a platform for all to gather and create sound works with everyday items. As Thompson points out,

*Ambiguous aesthetic actions can often act as facilitators for radically different conditions of being.*<sup>9</sup>



Fig 18: Katie Louise Williams, 2012, *untitled*, Open Studio exhibition, Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada. Dimensions: variable. Materials: papers, cardboard.



Fig 19: Katie Louise Williams, 2012, *untitled*, Open Studio exhibition, Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada. Dimensions: variable. Materials: craft board, corflute, adhesive photo paper.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *Seeing Power: Socially Engaged Art in the Age of Cultural Production*, 137.



Fig 20: Katie Louise Williams, 2012, *untitled*, Philosopher's Knoll Gallery, The Banff Centre for the Arts, Alberta, Canada. Installation. Materials: cinema projector, microphones, cubes, stool, tape, sound system.

The action of displaying the discarded remnants of other artists' work in the open studio environment allowed for those attending the day (this included Banff principals, other residents, benefactors of the Centre, and town locals) to question models of production and artistic labour, as well as the aesthetic impact of the cast-off elements. It allowed for an interrogation of their role as an audience, and for an examination of the expectations they held for an artist's work. With expectations frustrated they were freed to experience their presence in the space and its potential.

Later in the residency, Normand imposed another exercise on the group, instructing us to make a quite specific diagram of how our artistic and



curatorial practices operated. 'They are the work,' he kept repeating. When I was alone with him I tried to explain that the diagram was not the best way for me to describe my practice: it was too rigid and did not allow for the flow and merging between things. I suggested that maybe a form of painting, action or performance could better express the intermingling between artist, audience, gallery and the world in general, and that this idea lay at the core and was the essence of my work. As a metaphor I described to him the way that watercolours pool and mingle; when water is added to the mix one colour merges with another, creating new versions and hues of the original. I explained how I struggled to reduce the complexity of a visual, kinesthetic, empathetic human experience to a strictly logical semantic schema.

Instead of discussing this more visual and abstract way of approaching the exercise Normand decided that I needed his direction. Taking pen and paper he drew a simplistic diagram of how my work operated, including a stick figure for an audience member positioned within the frame of the museum as institution, and one-way arrows indicating how the art work affected the audience. This was to be my chart, he pronounced, and seemed happy that I was finally working towards his aims. However, the following day, much to his disappointment, I presented two charts, his and another of my own conception. The latter was a water colour of three overlapping circles in different colours, representing audience, artist and gallery. Where the circles overlapped the colours melded and a new hue was created, representing the active symbiotic relationship between the three. The pair of charts created great amusement in the group and great distress to Normand, since the

group stated that they understood the relationships more clearly through my painted chart.

The period of this residency was not a comfortable one, and at the time I felt it was not a particularly productive one for me. However, in hindsight I am convinced that my experiences there represented a breakthrough in my understanding of how a certain kind of intervention can be a catalyst that allows for an active and emancipated audience to manifest.

In keeping with the creative concept of ruptures I first explored in Banff, the next case study looks at a lecture performance that followed in 2014 at the Sydney College of the Arts Graduate School Forum.<sup>10</sup> This 'performance' was a conscious build upon the platform I had discovered in Canada, while incorporating changes to the original model due to the need to consider the demands of different audiences and institutions.

My lecture performance at SCA was focused on the power structure of the institution but was more than simply a form of institutional critique. It was an attempt to create an audience that was aware of the system they were enmeshed in, not by being informed per se, but by being thrust into the role of an engaged and activated part of a work that was evolving right then in the lecture space. I was of course aware that there was an element of ambush about my approach but a stunt alone would not have been enough to sustain

<sup>10</sup> The 2014 SCA Graduate School Conference was held at Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle, NSW, from 10am-5.30pm on Tuesday 9 September and was accompanied by an exhibition throughout the SCA Galleries.

the experience for the duration of the 'lecture' while still addressing my very real desire, as a graduate student, to satisfy an academic requirement of my candidature.

Akin to the structure of The Banff Centre lecture program, the university provides a guide to all graduate school students outlining what is expected of them when giving a presentation on the progression of their PhD.

In reviewing the guidelines, I was once again prompted to critically question the pedagogical approach and its tendency to reduce, or at least insist that we artists attempt to reduce, our complex multi-sensorial practices to a kind of semantic Cartesian syllogism. If words alone could capture the entirety of an artist's work, why would we then need the work itself? It would be akin to asking a musician to describe Mahler's Symphony No. 5 without once allowing him to even hum a few bars of the Adagietto. With this in mind, and having completed the Banff work, I set about constructing a lecture performance that would *embody* the work, rather than be a presentation or documentation of it.

The lecture performance was developed in the 1960s as a sub-genre of Performance art. In Robert Morris's seminal performance *21.3*, enacted in 1964, a man reads a text on form and content by the German art historian Erwin Panofsky, and as if to illustrate the difference between the two terms, the movements of the speaker's lips are deliberately out of sync with the words, which are issuing from a tape recorder.

The important thing pioneered by Morris, as curator Rike Frank notes, was his 'self-conscious use of performance as an analytical device that, by means of displacement and deferral, unsettles the "order of things"'.<sup>11</sup>

The first point I wanted to address in the SCA Graduate Forum was the stipulation that the presentation be singular. In my practice I have never considered myself singular. All my work is collaborative, sometimes with other artists, always with the audience, and of course with the space itself; all elements cooperate in the authorship of a work. So to create this work I joined with my long-time collaborative partner and fellow Sydney College of the Arts PhD candidate Emma Hicks (Emma and I create works under the name 'ek.1'). Together we fashioned an event concerned primarily with laying bare the university's systems. Our presentation started with the scripted lines:

*Rather than strictly adhering to the suggested method laid out in the graduate school forum guidelines—A leads to B leads to C—perhaps Isabelle Stengers's ecology of practices has some resonance here, for an "ecology of practices does not have any ambition to describe practices 'as they are'. It aims at the construction of new . . . possibilities for them to be present or, in other words, to connect. It thus does not approach practices as they are... but as they may become."<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> Rike Frank, "When Form Starts Talking: On Lecture-Performances" in *Afterall Issue 33* (Summer 2013), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Stengers, "Introductory notes on an ecology of practices [online]" in *Cultural Studies Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Mar 2005, 183. <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=200504057;res=IELAPA> accessed 21 May, 2015

*That being said, while practices are not independent of environment, this does not mean the identity of a practice is derived solely from its environment; rather an ecology of practices addresses how practices relate to each other.*

Having broken with tradition and presented as a collaborative partnership, something that had not been attempted before in the Forum environment, the change of dynamics affected the reception by the audience from the outset. It is important to stress that when I talk of this form of break as 'a rupture in social exchange', I see it as a positive step that can enable artist and audience to form a new relationship, or as Stengers puts it, such actions create 'possibilities for them to be present, or in other words to connect'.<sup>13</sup>

Before the lecture performance took place, the group was sent an email. Presenters were required to submit a summary of their presentation with the key point they wished to address. ek.1 however, chose to send a text by Virginia Woolf from her novel *Between the Acts*.<sup>14</sup>

The second challenge to the audience's preconceptions was to come in the form of a short film made exclusively for the lecture performance and screened at its commencement. This film anticipated the lecture in that it was shot in the venue where the Graduate Forum was being held; shot in the same gallery in fact where ek.1's collaborative work *The Enchanted Pose* was

<sup>13</sup> Stengers, "Introductory notes on an ecology of practices [online]", 185

<sup>14</sup> Virginia Woolf and Frank Kermode, *Between the Acts*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

simultaneously being exhibited for the *New Materialist* conference.<sup>15</sup> This created a link and a moment of fission as the audience was asked to consider a work occurring in several locations (and indeed time frames). The film we created for the lecture featured Emma and me seated on two fake concrete plinths, the same plinths used in our live performance of *The Enchanted Pose* in the gallery. The plinths also appeared in a filmic landscape work screened on the gallery wall.



Fig 21: ek.1, still from video made for SCA Graduate School Forum, Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle, NSW, 9 September 2014.

<sup>15</sup> ek.1 "The Enchanted Pose". *New Materialisms* exhibition, Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle, NSW, September 2014

In the lecture performance film, Emma and I performed scripted versions of ourselves. The dialogue invited the lecture audience to question the format of the Graduate School Forum:

*Katie: Who or what are we undermining anyway, like I mean who cares, it's not like we are saving anyone, right?*

Within this questioning of the format it asked the audience to consider their role and its implications in this scenario.

*Katie: Let's talk about interruptions, people rarely interrupt each other in a structure like this.*

The film, in referencing the lecture performance, intended to place seeds of doubt in the audience's minds as to the validity of what they would soon experience.

*Katie: Wait, are we talking about fiction or non-fiction?*

*Emma: Fiction, yes, but with a little bit of our own lives.*

And finally the film ended with a section of the text from Woolf's book, requiring the audience to grapple with something they had read and were now hearing and experiencing in a new context.

*Emma: So one thing led to another and the conglomeration of things held you fast, pressed you flat.*

*Katie: Wow, what is that? It's Virginia Woolf, right?*

*Emma: I wouldn't know.*

ek.1's lecture performance allowed for multiple hybrid connections to arise, not through a clear and packaged form of knowledge transferal but rather by giving the audience seemingly unrelated and disparate snippets of information in various forms, from film, to heartfelt narratives, to personal anecdotes preceded by texts from various disjointed sources. The audience's disorientation and bewilderment is a precondition to bringing about a new understanding, as American dancer and choreographer Steve Paxton suggests: 'Getting lost is possibly the first step toward finding new systems'.<sup>16</sup>

The lecture performance concluded with a video of African American jazz singer Nina Simone performing live at Montreux, Canada, in 1976, a strangely uncomfortable piece in which she continually breaks off from singing to address the audience. Simone makes apparent that she is aware of her role as performer, and yet also manages to give a bravura rendition of her song, leaving the audience in a nowhere-land between the cossetted state of receptivity and a jarring awareness of the mechanics of performing and of being performed to. In this in-between space one encounters the presence of oneself as an audience.

Simone's lyrics serve to reinforce this:

<sup>16</sup> Steve Paxton in Susan Broadhurst, *Identity, Performance and Technology: Practices of Empowerment, Embodiment and Technicity*. (Basingstoke, Hampshire England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 7.



*Anyway that's not what I meant to say, I meant to tell about a story, since we all have stories, but I can't remember it anyway.*<sup>17</sup>

The effect of Simone's performance was the same as that conjured by Morris in 21.3, and the same impact sought by ek.1's lecture performance, which in all cases is to unsettle the 'order of things' for the purpose of opening a space in which the audience can become active.

The questions posed in our lecture performance are the same interrogations that much of my work explores. I query the very nature of the boundaries of art, and more specifically the obsession of those practitioners and critics who focus on the minuscule difference between artist and audience, as if what makes us different in some way frames the artist's relevance. The desire of some artists to assert the creator's imperative is evidence of how, despite decades of institutional critique, we still strive for a kind of special recognition in our privileged niches.

I acknowledge my approach has antecedents in DADA, The Situationists, Minimalism and many other movements that have challenged the autonomy of the art object. However, these challenges need to be raised again and again as today's transgressions become tomorrow's collectable commodities.

I regard the form of work touched on in this chapter as imperative in a current climate where artists are used by institutions as cultural capital. Consequently,

<sup>17</sup> Nina Simone, *Stars*. Nina Simone. Live at Montreux Festival. 1976.

the artist's talk, the academic art lecture, the artist's workshop, and the symposium and conference are all open to be used by us as possible vehicles for something essential and reciprocal to occur between artist and audience. Perhaps in the life of an artist (and an audience), a moment of experience is equally as valuable as a quantum of knowledge.

Small white rectangular object with illegible text, possibly a calendar or notice, mounted on the wall.



## **Chapter Three. Losing the Red Velvet Curtain:**

### **Alternate Spaces**

In this chapter entitled *Losing The Red Velvet Curtain* I go behind the scenes and look at case studies of work created in alternate spaces. The focus is on Artist Run Initiatives (ARIs), which challenge an audience's perception of what a gallery space is, and which in turn create new and changed relationships between artist, audience and environment. This elicits an enquiry into what it means to create a social space where the work is co-created by audience and artist, and how this relationship could become ongoing, not just a one-off experience.

I have a particular interest in this topic after serving as one of the directors of Articulate Project Space in Sydney's Leichardt for two years, and also through multiple exhibitions of my own work at many of Sydney's key ARIs, such as Peloton, MOP, Paper Plane, Articulate and Airspace, as well as being an audience member in these ARIs.

ARIs have the possibility of operating quite differently from the museum or commercial gallery. While the physical space itself is critical, the built environment, locale, demographics, spatial structure and social structure, being mutually constitutive, it is equally important to understand the genesis of the ARI, its purpose and how it has evolved over time and developed its own community. The two case studies I have selected illustrate this point. The first is Alaska Projects, a space occupying an operational council car park in Sydney's Kings Cross. As a contrast to the urban space of Alaska, the

second case study explores a different form of Artist Run Initiative. Although not a classic ARI, the biennial art festival *Cementa* in Kandos, NSW, was born out of the Sydney ARI scene, and arose from founding directors Alex Wisser and Georgina Pollard's expertise, honed at Index Space, being developed and transferred into a regional contemporary art event.

The ideas that emerge from these case studies—and interviews with Wisser and Sebastian Goldspink, founder and director of Alaska—link to a larger discourse on these types of contemporary art spaces, and how the works prompted by them are able to disrupt power and create new social structures and systems. This is important in the larger frame of my enquiry into power and the audience to the extent that these spaces give rise to social models that allow for greater agency on the part of audiences.

There are issues that arise when looking at these alternate spaces. Questions that surface for me have been prompted by creating works such as *You Were There* at Alaska and undertakings with Wisser at Index Space.

### **Alaska Projects, Kings Cross**

*Where the Black Marias clatter*  
*And peculiar ladies nod,*  
*And the flats are rather flatter,*  
*And the lodgers rather odd,*  
*Where the night is full of danger*

*And the darkness full of fear,  
And eleven hundred strangers  
Live on aspirin and beer.<sup>1</sup>*

*You Were There* (Katie Louise Williams, 2014) was created specifically for the exhibition *Here/Before* at Alaska Projects. Rather than ‘plonk art’,<sup>2</sup> dropping a premade work into the public space, I felt compelled to create a work that explored my relationship to Kings Cross. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, I was conceived in the Yellow House, an artists’ squat on Macleay Street (now housing a gallery and a restaurant a few hundred metres from Alaska). My young mother, just 16 years old at the time, gave me up for adoption. Yet although my origins were in Kings Cross, I had not grown up there and my interactions with the area had been brief: nights out at its bars or clubs, or driving through its streets, past its strip clubs and neon lights. My perceptions were also based on what I had read or seen in the media and on television. This view of The Cross sat in opposition to a personal story that was hidden from me by broken family ties.

In our interview, Sebastian Goldspink pointed out:

*There is no Kings Cross, there is no suburb called Kings Cross.  
You can get mail sent to an address in Elizabeth Bay or  
Darlinghurst or Potts Point with the suburb as Kings Cross, but*

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Slessor and Virgil Reilly, *Darlinghurst nights and morning glories: being 47 strange sights observed from eleventh storeys, in a land of cream puffs and crime, by a flat-roof professor, and here set forth in sketch and rhyme*. (London: Angus & Robertson, 1933)

<sup>2</sup> A term coined by architect James Wines in 1969 for the kind of lone, epic public art that is plopped or plonked into public spaces, squares, in front of buildings, which rests in but is in no way relates to its surroundings.

*it's not actually a suburb. There is no postcode for Kings Cross.  
It's never existed.*<sup>3</sup>



Fig 22: Alaska Projects, Kings Cross, NSW

As I looked to engage with this car park/artspace in the centre of The Cross, I came to the somewhat difficult conclusion that I was both insider and outsider. Though the place of your birth and link to your mother for many people are the bedrock of their existence, both for me remain inaccessible. This, however, becomes an interesting position from which to begin a work. Consequently, the first step was to look at my preconceptions of the space, place and people that the work would be made in and with. As Lucy Lippard notes,

<sup>3</sup> Sebastian Goldspink, *Interview by author*. Tape recording. Kings Cross, 1 December, 2015

*As we look at ourselves critically, in social contexts, as inhabitants, users, onlookers, tourists, we can scrutinize our own participatory roles in the natural processes that are forming our futures.<sup>4</sup>*

I have a vivid recollection of the first day I visited the underground car park that houses Alaska. This excursion to the site was conducted mid-afternoon on a sunny Sunday, but descending to the basement was daunting: the space was dimly lit and mostly subterranean. Emerging from the lift, I felt uneasy as a woman alone in a car park—that feeling women share of ‘dangerous’ environments, developed from first- and second-hand experience that tells us that places such as multi-storey car parks, late night public transport, empty parks, alleyways and subways are to be avoided. Wherever there is the potential to be alone and unheard by passers-by, the social norm for women is to feel fear. While it is true that spatial structure and social structure are mutually constitutive, in the case of these environments it is men who shape the spaces and women who are shaped by them.

In interviewing Goldspink it emerged that this issue featured prominently in the origins and role of Alaska Projects.

*So we approached the parking guy and his first words to me were, ‘Don’t talk to me about art. Women are scared to park in*

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Lippard, “Looking Around: Where We Are, Where We Could Be” in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*. Ed. Suzanne Lacy (Seattle: Bay Press, 1996), 116.



*this car park and I need to do something about that, so if you can show me how [Alaska] having this space will make women feel safer, it's yours'.<sup>5</sup>*

So right from the inception of Alaska Projects, its role was very much a social one. It had a clearly defined goal to deploy strategies to ameliorate or even remove the fear factor linked to rape and violent crime that was embedded within the specific space. The manner in which this ARI was founded and developed is worth exploring. What immediately stood out in my interview with Goldspink was his conscious choice to find an underused urban space, in a city where rents and house prices were skyrocketing.

*Four years ago I was working at the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney], and I had a lot of friends who were artists. In Sydney at that time there was a real culture present of artists having to pay to exhibit, and personally I thought this was an inequitable kind of model.<sup>6</sup>*

The 'inequitable model' Goldspink refers to has emerged in some of Sydney's ARI spaces over the past decade. MOP, Articulate and several others now charge exhibition fees, at least in some instances. Two issues arise from the pay-to-exhibit model. The first is access. Only those who have funds to pay can gain access to exhibit their work, a system that is by definition elitist. The second is the impact on the type of work artists create. Many feel the need to

<sup>5</sup> Goldspink, *Interview*

<sup>6</sup> Goldspink, *Interview*

make more 'saleable work', partly through the economic necessity to recoup their rental costs. In this way the supposed ARI gallery becomes more of a quasi-commercial space. Nato Thompson describes a similar phenomenon in New York:

*The phrase 'alternate space' implies a non-profit art structure that lives outside the major power network of the art scene, but what it really means is 'not yet famous', but with a style of programming and intentionality that is barely discernible from the operating ethos of the commercial market.<sup>7</sup>*

Although Goldspink says that he is following in some ways the programming methodology he learned at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Alaska operates in significantly different ways to that museum. He talks of inequity but his long history with Kings Cross had equally as much influence over his decision to reject a commercial model for Alaska. In a place notoriously 'on the take', his instinct is to 'give back'. Kings Cross is the place where Goldspink grew up and where he now chooses to raise his family.

*I would think about when my son was born, people were like, oh you're going to move . . . But I remember he was a bad sleeper and I would take him for a walk about 3 o'clock in the morning and walk along the main street in The Cross with my newborn child and all the hookers would come over and say hello. And to*

<sup>7</sup> Thompson, *Seeing Power: Socially Engaged Art in the Age of Cultural Production*, 133.

*me that was kind of part of the fabric and I was really proud he was growing up around that, getting a sense of what reality is.*<sup>8</sup>

Goldspink's immersive knowledge of The Cross and his social connections in the community inform every aspect of what Alaska engenders. The fast and furious programming, where each artist or group of artists has only a week to exhibit, creates a dynamic flow of shows, cutting the possibility for staid or over-engineered work. This is not to imply that the work is unambitious in concept or physical presence, rather it requires a high level of temporality and spatial awareness. The actuality of the space—the architecture, the light, the smells and sounds—is significantly different from most ARIs, museums and commercial galleries. It has no pretensions to being a white cube: floors and walls are raw concrete, cars drive and park all around the area(s) where the art is; it remains very much a working car park. Artists are not limited to placing/making work in a designated space, although the mechanic's office and an area beside it are sanctioned as the official Alaska space and many artists choose to use this designated zone. However, Alaska encourages exhibitors to think of all nooks and crannies, stairwells, lifts and boom gates as places for exploration. Malm and Wik note:

*One can choose places and stories that interact and lend meaning to one another . . . In matters of the audience it*

<sup>8</sup> Goldspink, *Interview*

*becomes more complex, it includes the usual art audience, but also those people that normally frequent the space and situation.*<sup>9</sup>

With such a space, it is perhaps not surprising that Alaska is open to any and all forms of expression. No boundaries are drawn around what art may be. The range and diversity of works created here in the last few years is extraordinary. Hayden Fowler's *Your Death* is a performance-installation project in which the artist offers his own body as canvas in a poignant recollection of New Zealand's lost bird life; over three sessions, his torso was tattooed with an image of the South Island kokako, last sighted in 1967 and officially declared extinct in 2004. Rainbow Chan curated *Musical Alaska #20*, exploring her Hong Kong-Chinese heritage transfixed in sound. From curated performance events such as *Restaging Restaging*, a series of eight 20-minute performances, through an auction of artist Justene Williams's father's tools, to the bondage performance *My Safe Word is Performance* by Frances Barrett and Ivan Crozier, the scope is vast and unpredictable. To create a work under these conditions was exciting and freeing, as Nato Thompson has observed:

*Social environments where power is in flux and not a given condition can make room for open ended possibilities of self production . . . A site that makes room for new ways of being and provides equal space across race, gender and sexuality can be invigorating.*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Malm and Wik, *Imagining the Audience: Viewing Positions in Artistic and Curatorial Practice*, 210.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *Seeing Power: Socially Engaged Art in the Age of Cultural Production*, 136-137.



Fig 23: Hayden Fowler, *Your Death*, Performance, 2015, Alaska Projects, Kings Cross, NSW. <<http://home.alaskaprojects.com/2015-ALASKA-ARCHIVE>> accessed 19 October 2015

My joint exhibition with fellow artist Will Cooke, *Here/Before*, at Alaska in July 2014 began as a conversation between us. Will's practice is firmly entrenched in painting. The flat geometric shapes of modernism are transferred onto minimally inspired industrial materials, such as brushed aluminum. Will expresses personal narratives, using the term 'Nostalgia Paintings' to describe his works, which are visual representations of 'memories that are on the periphery of my subconscious'.<sup>11</sup> The odours, sounds, tastes, touch and colours that are imprinted in his mind are recycled and reformed in memory chains; one link seemingly unrelated brings to mind another link. He then transforms these sensations into paint, 'to create abstract paintings that make these recollections become less abstract'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Will Cooke, *Interview by author*. Kings Cross, May, 2015

<sup>12</sup> Cooke, *Interview*

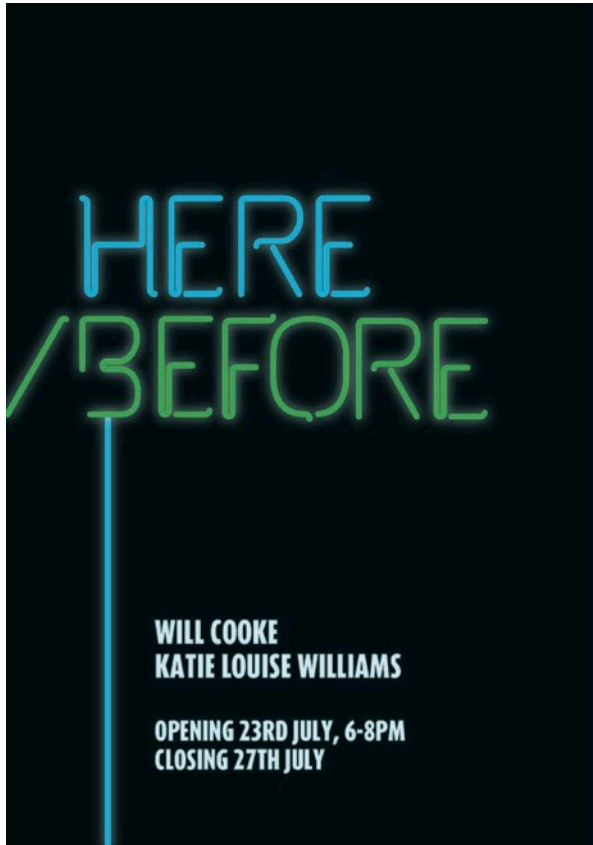


Fig 24: Catalogue for the exhibition *Here Before*, 2014, Alaska Project Space, Kings Cross, NSW



Alaska Projects 2014  
Will Cooke /Katie Louise Williams

## HERE / BEFORE

Will and Katie met at Sydney College of the Arts doing their undergrad degrees in the Painting Department. Since then they have shared an ongoing dialogue and this show emerges from this continuing conversation.

Will's practice remains firmly entrenched in painting; the flat geometric shapes of modernism are transferred onto minimally inspired industrial materials such as brushed aluminium. Will expresses personal narratives (he uses the term 'Nostalgia Paintings' to describe his works). They are visual representations of "memories that are on the periphery of my subconscious". The odours, sounds, tastes, touch and colors that are imprinted on his memory are recycled and reformed in memory chains; one link seemingly unrelated brings to mind another link. He then transforms these sensations into paint; "to create abstract paintings that make these recollections become less abstract," these memories thus have a concrete form.

Katie's practice is no longer based purely in painting; her works have become platforms for others to tell their stories. She sets the stage, provides props and lets the audience in various ways experience their own and others stories.

King's Cross is part of Katie's own story, it was the place of her birth. She was born in the "Yellow House", an artists squat on Macleay St. Her young mum, a kid herself, gave her up for adoption. This history was the starting point for the work in *Here/Before*, the sound scape "You Were There" is recorded fragments of conversations with locals, sounds of the night, and the tales of those who pass through the Cross. These private moments are restaged in this public space for those at Alaska to witness and reconfigure for themselves.

"You Were There" would not have been possible without the generous contributions of those who let me record their stories. The World Bar who opened their doors to me. Charles Hicks for his sound recording and Daniel Castro for his editing and sound engineering skills.

Fig 25: Catalogue for the exhibition *Here Before*, 2014, Alaska Project Space, Kings Cross, NSW.

My work for this show, the soundscape *You Were There*, became a platform for others to tell their stories. It featured recorded fragments of my conversations with locals, sounds of the night, and the tales of those who work or pass through The Cross. Each monologue, with occasional questions from the interviewer, was played on an individual speaker suspended from the ceiling over a concrete cube. An audience member could take in all of them as a medley of private moments in the public space, or move from one conversation to another, stringing together their own particular narrative. Or indeed, as some did, stand or sit patiently beneath each speaker to hear an entire interview from beginning to end.



Fig 26: Katie Louise Williams, *You Were There* from the show *Here Before*, 2014, Alaska Project Space, Kings Cross, NSW. Installation. Nine faux concrete cubes, suspended speaker, MP3 players.

The decision to use only audio recordings was a critical one. On one level, the stories were a way to avoid being a ‘tourist’ offering a superficial snapshot of the area. The absence of a video camera meant that the interviewees had quickly forgotten they were being recorded and had engaged in conversation in an open and natural way. Personal history was imparted, confidences shared. On another level, the heterogeneous narratives formed a kind of loose mosaic that audiences could reconfigure, as described above, in an endless variety of ways, to create a picture that might challenge or reinforce their own understanding of Kings Cross. In this way, as Lucy Lippard notes, the stories became part of a new, shared experience:



*Where once the stories detailed shared experiences, today it may be mostly the stories themselves that offer common ground.*

*Once you start hearing the stories, you are becoming a member of the community . . . as Terry Tempest Williams says 'the umbilical cord between past, present and future'.<sup>13</sup>*

For the audience to perceive this community in a non-structured way, feeling as if they had stumbled upon an intimate conversation in this very public car park, was key to the success or failure of the work.



Fig 27: Williams, *You Were There*, 2014

<sup>13</sup> Lucy R Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society*. (New York: The New Press, 1997), 50.



Fig 28: Williams, *You Were There*, 2014

Just as an emancipated audience is the opposite of passive spectatorship, only an active audience can be emancipated. *You Were There* required the audience to fill in many blanks. There were no visual clues; the faces of interviewees had to be imagined for the work to be complete. The participants physically navigated the car park among the speakers, deciding how long they would listen to a tale or if they would move back and let all the voices merge and fade in and out.

Listening without visual access to a sound's cause, what is known as 'acousmatic' listening,<sup>14</sup> forces us to disentangle ourselves from auditory habits and prejudices so that we become even more aware of the interaction between sound and meaning in our experience of speech. The timbre of a voice, which is an aural expression of the shape and length of the throat, oral and nasal cavities, can tell the listener much about the life of the speaker. In the same way that life is etched on our faces, our experiences reverberate in our voices. Therefore, the narrative of these recorded stories is only part of what the work conveyed.

What this translates into for artist and then audience is that the work they experience does not feel forced. Many a community-engaged work falls flat as the artist tries to fulfil an expectation of the gallery to 'engage', and it becomes a staged form of participatory work that can leave both artist and audience feeling used and false. As Goldspink said, this expectation is something he has resisted at Alaska:

*There is a lot of pressure, when you run a space, to have community engagement, it's a big box tick and we've always resisted it. We have resisted the whole model of community engagement. Our whole thing is we are going to provide good art, free, accessible but we are not going to make art about the community, or specifically for the community. We are not going to do a show that heroin is bad or about greedy property*

<sup>14</sup> Brian Kane, *Acousmatic Sound in Theory and Practice*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

*developers or any of those kind of things specifically. If an artist wanted to do a project about that, great.*<sup>15</sup>

With regard to the interviews themselves, in harmony with Goldspink's founding ethos for Alaska I did not set out with any predetermined story to tell about Kings Cross; to delve into its seedy nightlife, for instance, or to canvas views on the government's recently enacted lockout laws. Neither in the choice of interview subjects nor in the interviews themselves was there any attempt to steer the conversations in a particular direction. Instead they were seen as a way into individual lives and through them into a community, allowing one, as Lippard suggests, to be momentarily part of that community. It was important, for the authenticity of the interview process, that the destination remain undefined.

A number of interviews were conducted at World Bar, a well-known Kings Cross nightclub, with the owner of the premises, one of his bar staff, and one of the 'door bitches' (security personnel who vet patrons on entry). All were happy to talk about their own personal journeys to The Cross and also to comment on the profound changes that were affecting their livelihoods and the way Kings Cross was now operating. I also spoke with a local playwright, an actor, a journalist, and an old-timer.

What emerged was a picture of a place formed out of complex social, political, historical and spatial issues that was, at that moment, at a pivotal

<sup>15</sup> Goldspink, *Interview*

junction in its evolution. The Cross had a long history of strip clubs, nightclubs, pubs, alcohol and drugs, and an entrenched organised crime network, but after the 'one-punch' attacks that led to the deaths of Thomas Kelly (2012) and Daniel Christie (2013), the tide of public opinion, underpinned by politicians and the media, led to the introduction in January 2014 of new licensing laws and other penalties. Under the lockout provisions, venues in Kings Cross and the CBD were not permitted to allow any patrons to enter licenced premises after 1:30am, and no alcohol was to be served after 3:00am. The 'one-punch law' also introduced an 8-year mandatory minimum sentence for perpetrators of drunken assaults.

It was several months into the operation of these laws that I created the work *You Were There*. Before the interviews I had an outsider's awareness of the lockout rulings. However, as the interviews proceeded almost all interviewees, regardless of their role in The Cross, began to describe the social impact on the community and business owners in the area. Two years later, The Cross is radically changed. Many long-time establishments have shut their doors and the area, now deprived of much of its nighttime culture, appears to be a community in flux. That the lockout laws have moved alcohol-fuelled violence elsewhere, to Newtown and Star Casino in Pyrmont, is evident. But Kings Cross's broader contribution to Sydney is only now being understood. As I write this thesis there is a current outcry to 'Keep Sydney Open' prompted in large part by the restrictions.

As the strip clubs, bars and other venues close, property developers are quick to move in and redevelop these sites into high-rise apartment blocks with equally high prices. It is an irreversible gentrification that has been

witnessed before. The moneyed classes are drawn by the vibrant diversity of such areas but in a short time the neighbourhood is priced beyond the reach of the very people who created that diversity. Thompson correctly observes:

*What gentrification makes evident is that financial speculation effects a radical redistribution of space . . . These effects of gentrification—of capitalism spread across space—have a consequential impact on residents of the city at a very personal level. After all, one's identity is shaped by the way one occupies space, and if space is also a site of confrontation with power, then gentrification is an important battle indeed.<sup>16</sup>*

Though Goldspink may be seen by some as one of the gentrifiers, and making art in these kinds of neighbourhoods does in some way open a chink of accessibility to outsiders, alternative spaces such as Alaska have a vital role to play in community resistance to the process. They are able, if they choose as Goldspink does, to use their spaces to raise awareness of the dynamics of power, and by yielding that power over to their audience, empower them to exercise it.

### **Cementa, Kandos**

*One night we sat drinking too much wine, talking about the recently closed cement works on the mountain next to the town and the thought quickly formed that we could stage a*

<sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Seeing Power: Socially Engaged Art in the Age of Cultural Production*, 161.

*contemporary art festival here. Haha. Yes another glass of Shiraz please.*<sup>17</sup>



Fig 29: The town of Kandos, NSW, host to contemporary Art Festival *Cementa*.  
<<http://www.bylongvalleyway.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/kandos-800x580.jpg>>  
accessed 21 June 2015

By the time the inaugural *Cementa Biennial Contemporary Australian Art Festival* was held in Kandos in February 2013, the small mid-western NSW town was already in a deep decline, with many of its properties deserted, shops shut and services closed. Left in the wake of an abandoned cement factory and coal mine was a town struggling for survival and identity.

Cement was the reason Kandos came into existence. Just before the outbreak of the First World War, the NSW Cement Lime and Coal Company was registered and purchased the land for both the plant and the town. The site was chosen because of its limestone quarry, the plentiful supply of water,

<sup>17</sup> Alex Wisser, "When Life Looks At Art" in *Cementa\_13 Catalogue Essay*  
<<https://alexwisser.com/2015/02/23/cementa13-catalogue-essay-when-life-looks-at-art/>>  
accessed 18 October 2015.

and the ready availability of coal from the Western Coalfields nearby. In September 2011, after almost 100 years of continuous operation, the Kandos Cement Plant shut its doors, and three years later, Centennial Coal closed its underground coal-mining operation and announced plans to wind up its open-cut operation by the end of 2015. In a town with a population of 1,284,<sup>18</sup> almost a hundred cement plant jobs were wiped out and further 85 jobs with the closing of the coal operation.

This loss in such a small community was devastating. In direct wages alone, Mid-Western Regional Council mayor, Des Kennedy, estimated the community lost \$6 to \$7 million a year, with a flow-on effect to local businesses and services.<sup>19</sup> The likelihood that many would find reemployment in the district was remote.

It was during a residency program at the nearby town of Capertee that Wisser, Pollard and Ann Finegan came up with the idea of *Cementa*, sensing the potential of this industrial relic in the heartland of rural NSW to offer a unique opportunity and context for an exploration of contemporary Australian art. The cement works, with its silos, corrugated iron buildings, pipework and chimney stacks, are less than one kilometre south of the town. Physically and psychically it is the defining feature of the area. As Alex Wisser explained:

*Though it's in the middle of the bush, though it's on the side of a mountain, there's a huge industrial edifice just plonked down*

<sup>18</sup> ABS Census, 2011

<sup>19</sup> ABC NSW Online, "Cement plant closure 'devastating'", Posted 8 Jul 2011, 7:12am. <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-07-08/cement-plant-closure-devastating/2786614>> accessed 29 March 2015



*there, starkly, like a death star. And then the town is laid out in a grid with wide streets, built for cars. There are workers' cottages from the Depression and more stuff that was put there in the 'fifties and 'sixties, so there's a very suburban feel to it as well. The main street has the feel of an American western town but when you get out a couple of streets you feel as if somebody has airlifted some from the suburbs.<sup>20</sup>*



Fig 30: Kandos Cement Works, Kandos, NSW. Photograph K Grant  
<<http://www.kandosmuseum.org.au/about/>>

This post-industrial setting was immediately attractive to the artists. Wisser and Pollard had worked together for several years at different galleries, collectives and ARIs in Sydney's Inner West. In 2010 they co-founded Index Space, an ARI housed in a 1930s warehouse in Hutchinson Street, St Peters. They understood how to respond to these post-industrial spaces and where the space in turn could lead them. But in a twist of irony, which certainly made *Cementa* both more risky and more profound, the Kandos Cement Company refused permission for the artists to use its site. Not wanting to abandon the project, they chose to hold the festival in the town itself. The whole village was to become the site.

<sup>20</sup> Alex Wisser, *Interview by author*. Tape recording. Kandos, 27 November 2015.

The four-day festival is both of and in the town, and addresses its identity, history and current context. Wisser noted:

*By allowing artists to visit and make work that takes as its material the social, economic, environmental and cultural context of the festival, we are able to offer work to which a regional audience can relate without losing the contemporary art audience we bring with us.<sup>21</sup>*

Miwon Kwon identifies three paradigms of site specificity: the phenomenological or fixed physical site; the socially or institutionally constituted site; and what she calls the 'discursive' site, which is the site of reception or effect (i.e., within the consciousness of the audience) rather than the physical site where an action or intervention takes place.

*In this sense the possibilities to conceive the site as something more than a place—as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group—is a crucial conceptual leap in redefining the 'public' role of art and artists.<sup>22</sup>*

This multi-faceted understanding of site informed the purpose and programming of *Cementa* from the outset. Wisser describes how the nature of the festival was determined by the conditions under which it was formed,

<sup>21</sup> Alex Wisser, interviewed for "Supporting excellent ideas in regional NSW: Cementa Festival 2015" in *Arts NSW*, <http://www.arts.nsw.gov.au/index.php/news-and-publications/news/supporting-excellent-ideas-cementa-festival-2015/> accessed 9 February, 2016

<sup>22</sup> Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 30.

including the town itself, the need to earn the support of residents, the reactions of artists living and working (for a short or longer period) in the town, as well as the administrative and economic factors involved in staging a residential festival: obtaining grants and other funding, engaging sponsors, artists and the broader arts community. All these elements together resulted in a rich dialogue that ultimately became the festival.

Leaving Sydney with his family to take up residence in Kandos and bring *Cementa* to life, Wisser realised the precarious nature of his outsider status. He knew that if he failed to win the trust and cooperation of the local community, *Cementa\_13* would be the first and last biennial arts festival in the town. The idea of parachuting in to make work and then promptly leaving would not fulfil any meaningful purpose for the local community and would in fact rub salt into wounds still fresh from the closure of the cement works. On the other hand, he was acutely aware that he was leaving behind the familiarity and support of an arts community in Sydney to bring alien concepts of 'art' to a town with little contextual background to understand them. He explained:

*I'm no longer an urban artist myself, so I no longer have access to that. I was conscious of that very early on after moving up here, that I was no longer going to have that urban context of*

*what we call contemporary art. And the challenge of making art out here in a rural setting became apparent.*<sup>23</sup>

This realisation that the structures the artist had relied upon to create work no longer functioned in the same way was an important one. Although the forfeiture of familiar context and support was no doubt frightening both psychologically and culturally, out of this loss came opportunity. As Lippard noted, 'Looking at the land through non expert eyes, we learn a lot about our own assumptions, and about the places we live and move through.'<sup>24</sup>

Wisser and his co-directors embraced this possibility, as did the artists who came to create work in the town. Wisser explained:

*It really allows an artist to go into a place. There is no generality about it. You actually have to look at its specificity. The artists did that really well. . . that singularity, which is not a singularity of uniqueness, it's a singularity of the particular. Because it was this particular place and not some other particular place.*<sup>25</sup>

It is this authentic 'looking' that created the dynamic first *Cementa*. Engaging an entire community, one whose identity and economic livelihood had been so wrapped up in the cement works, was a high-stakes enterprise. Wisser acknowledges that all the artists involved in *Cementa\_13* were 'scared, really scared'. Self-conscious of the fact that they were bringing something esoteric

<sup>23</sup> Wisser, *Interview*

<sup>24</sup> Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society*, 125.

<sup>25</sup> Wisser, *Interview*

and essentially alien to this small town, they knew they would face some opposition—which they did—and feared it would be difficult to garner any kind of acceptance. They were less aware, at least at the outset, that the community in return harbored preconceptions about the artists, apprehensive that a bunch of outsiders were about to come among them, look down their noses and to somehow ‘take the piss’.

With a sense of responsibility for what they had taken on, and feeling in some way accountable, not just for their own work but for the reception of a contemporary art festival whose success was inextricably linked to its acceptance by a rural community, the founding artists came into the village with a heightened sensitivity. In Wisser's view, the best works of *Cementa\_13* were responses to that delicate, nuanced relationship between artist and community.

'Delicate' is an appropriate word. Even the simple act of observation and recording could be fraught with danger. 'You influence what you observe' is a known phenomenon that acknowledges there is no neutral vantage point, no measurement, record or representation that does not in some way interact with its subject. The observer effect played out in a dramatic way early into *Cementa\_13*. An artist, whose practice came out of the squatting movement and involved interventions in abandoned spaces, came across a house that the State had appropriated because the owner had died intestate.

Responding to her notion of a woman who had died sad and alone in an empty house, the artist obtained permission to make work in the property. She took some videos and photographs and Wisser put one of the photos up in his shop-front office.

*Literally within half an hour I had the real estate agent banging on my door saying, 'What the fuck are you guys doing, I'm getting angry phone calls'. This woman who had died didn't have any relatives but she had babysat for basically all the kids of the town of a certain generation and they were furious. There was fallout from that. I took it down, there was an apology.<sup>26</sup>*

Wisser describes how this one incident became a lightning rod for all the angst that was sitting in the community. In the end, while it was not a good thing to have happened and he acknowledges it should not have happened, it did open up a dialogue with the town. People began to speak, to say to the artists, you're doing this in our town, it's our town, we own it, this is our place. With that issue out in the open, it put artists and community on a better footing. Wisser and his co-directors saw such exchanges as a productive form of participation.

*Often what happens is an argument, and that's great. That's such a step above the moment of dismissal, because an argument is a conversation, it doesn't matter how it rests.<sup>27</sup>*

Or as Miessen writes in *The Nightmare of Participation*,

*When we look at conflict as opposed to innocent forms of participation, conflict is not to be understood as a form of protest or contrary provocation; but rather, as a micro political practice*

<sup>26</sup> Wisser, *Interview*

<sup>27</sup> Wisser, *Interview*

*through which the participant becomes an active agent, who insists on becoming an actor in the force field they are facing. Thus participation becomes a form of critical engagement.*<sup>28</sup>

The way critical engagement played out in *Cementa\_13* goes to the heart of the balance of power in terms of the relationship between artist, audience and site. Grant Kester describes this balance, or rather imbalance, as such:

*Community art is typically centered around an exchange between an 'artist' (who is understood to be 'empowered' creatively, intellectually, symbolically, expressively, financially, institutionally, or otherwise), and a given subject who is defined a priori as 'in need of' empowerment, access to creative/expressive skills, etc.*<sup>29</sup>

The model that exists in many site-specific works confers an authority on the artist. Hal Foster, in his essay "Artist as Ethnographer", argues that the artist is 'typically an outsider who has the institutionally sanctioned authority to engage the locals in the production of their (self-) representation'.<sup>30</sup> This puts the artist at risk of becoming an oracle in the community, whose role is to bring a form of enlightenment, removing its peoples' power to act, relegating them to voiceless subjects who are to be informed and educated. In a gallery

<sup>28</sup> Markus Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation: Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality*. (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 93.

<sup>29</sup> Grant H Kester, "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art", in *Afterimage*, v. 22, (January 1995). 20.

<sup>30</sup> Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer" in *The traffic in culture: refiguring art and anthropology*. eds., George E Marcus and Fred R Myers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 302-309.

space, and by that I am referring to any white cube, warehouse, building, structure or designated patch of ground that is co-opted as a place where art is viewed, such transgressions of authority can pass without comment. The space, no matter how ad hoc or temporary, becomes the artist's territory and anything happening in that space assumes the mantle of her authority to speak her truth. This was not possible in Kandos. The work happened everywhere and arose with and out of the community.



Fig 31: Georgina Pollard, *One Time*, 2013, Cementa\_13, Kandos, NSW. Photograph Georgina Pollard <<https://geoginapollard.wordpress.com>>



*One Time* by Georgina Pollard captures the delicate balance between townspeople and artist.<sup>31</sup> Throughout this work, neither held the mantle of power, each party acting and reacting equally to one another. The event took place on the last day of the festival at the Kandos Country Women's Association rooms and involved local members coming together to spin wool. As they did so, stories were shared and the audience was able to join in the ancient craft or simply sit and listen.

*The stories passed from spinner to spinner, from conversation to conversation, in a process as old as spinning a yarn.*<sup>32</sup>

What naturally evolved would create a 'circle of exchange' as many of the artists in the audience left the room and returned with their own work. Spinning and artistic work became one alongside each other, existing easily and in common presence.

*This spontaneous development seemed to . . . acknowledge the continuity that existed between the culture of the spinners and that of the artists, all of whom make, and talk while making, and in doing so produce the social fabric that permits them to possess their world in common.*<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Georgina Pollard, 2013. *One Time*. Event. Kandos, NSW: Country Women's Association Hall

<sup>32</sup> Wisser, *Cementa\_13 Catalogue Essay*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*



Fig 32: David Capra, *Ministry of Handshakes*, 2013, Cementa\_13, Kandos NSW.  
<<https://i.ytimg.com/vi/rwgorwWTnSg/hqdefault.jpg>>  
accessed 21 June 2015.

David Capra's *Ministry of Handshakes* is another case in point. Capra, dressed all in white, with figure-hugging tights and tuxedo shirt emphasizing his rotund form, stood on the main street with a two-metre-long prosthetic arm extended in a bizarre gesture of goodwill. Locals and visitors alike were greeted and offered the false hand of friendship. Ironic and humorous in nature, this work operated on several levels. It embraced the idea of the outsider, and as Wisser notes, 'abstracts and amplifies it into a bridge between the everyday and the theatrical.'<sup>34</sup>

It becomes clear that a new community arose in the *Cementa* model for all who attended, both locals and artists from Sydney, and visitors from around the state. These diverse audiences were able to connect and access different ways of

<sup>34</sup> Wisser, *Cement\_13 Catalogue Essay*

being. The challenge for *Cementa* will be how adaptable the festival remains in its ability to keep the initial open impetus for creating works that encapsulate that delicate balance, which is precarious in nature but allows for meaningful dialogue to ensue.

Both these models in their different ways—Alaska as an urban ARI in the permanent space of a car park with a weekly exhibition program, and *Cementa* as a biennial arts festival in a rural setting—raise important issues about the future of alternate spaces, where active and participatory audiences have access to both ideas and exchanges that help create a new community. However, as mentioned earlier, the neoliberal system easily incorporates the success of such models and co-opts them quickly to suit its own ends. To stay ahead of the race and also lay the groundwork for artists to come, it is relevant to take a moment to ensure valuable questions are asked, even though at this stage we may not have the answers, or at least we may not have the language to answer them.

The study of these forms of work is in its infancy. Professor Lynn Froggett and her team at the University of Central Lancashire, and Situations (Claire Doherty), have been making inroads in the field, analysing through a two-year study of socially-engaged arts practices how its impact can be evaluated and assessed and what new tools we need to establish to be able to achieve this. As Doherty notes, by looking critically over a period of time at these sites and the types of work created in them, we may be able to measure their effectiveness, not through the current art world tools of critique but through new and as yet unknown techniques and

language. This will in turn provide a method through which, as Doherty suggests, 'we might evidence how certain artworks maintain critical rigour whilst also being socially progressive.'<sup>35</sup>

Questions that arise in relation to *Alaska* and *Cementa* include: what impact have they had on their local areas; how has the socially-engaged work that has occurred there been allowed to happen; what particular works have been most successful in the constitution of an active audience; how is it possible to document this phenomenon and assess it, and how will this data and feedback be used. Although I do not have the answers to these questions at this time, it is vital that they be asked. From my observational research it seems that Australia lags behind in the recognition of this form of work and its analysis. Those who are running Artist Run Initiatives such as *Alaska* and *Cementa* need to fully grasp the important differences in their models and construct language to describe this. They must also value the importance of their spaces, not as would-be commercial environments or events but as unique models of importance in their own right; and through a comprehensive understanding of this fact, develop and protect them from co-option, so they continue to function as sites that support emerging experimental social practice.

<sup>35</sup> Claire Doherty, "How do you measure/understand the impact of bringing artists and community members together?" in <*Open Engagement* from <http://openengagement.info/43-claire-doherty/>> accessed 22 April 2015



## Chapter Four. Dialogue: Collaboration

*In contrast to cooperation, collaboration is driven by complex realities rather than romantic notions of a common ground or commonality. It is an ambivalent process constituted by a set of paradoxical relationships between co-producers who affect each other.<sup>1</sup>*

The urge to rethink singular authorship has been a prominent theme in artistic practice since early modernism. Collaboration offered an escape from the constrictions of individual production, a way of reconstituting authorship—often through concealment and/or disappearance—within a third entity or ‘the third hand’ as proposed by Charles Green in his book of the same name. Through his examination of a number of collaborative practices Green contends that collaboration was employed as a strategy to refigure the concept of artist as creator into something more akin to artist as ‘tool’ (or conduit), where the figure of the artist is ‘neither a truth nor a presence encoded at the core of the artists’ works.’<sup>2</sup>

Green’s argument positions concepts of ‘authorship’ as central to the understanding of collaborative practice. In this chapter I will explore a conception of collaboration—between artists and audiences—that can be understood as an

<sup>1</sup> Florian Schneider, “Collaboration: The Dark Side of the Multitude”, in *Sarai Reader 06: Turbulence*. Eds. Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta, Ravi Sundaram, Jeebesh Bagchi. (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies: Delhi, 2006)

<sup>2</sup> Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 189.

act of co-creation with an audience, where notions of authorship are secondary to the impulse of collective imagination and action.

Grant Kester's thoughts are instructive in their interrogation of new models of collective working that have not traditionally been considered as collaborative practice:

*Thus we might view the recent proliferation of collaborative practices as part of a cyclical paradigm shift within the field of art, even as the nature of this shift involves an increasing permeability between 'art' and other zones of symbolic production.<sup>3</sup>*

In many respects Kester's views on collaborative practice are in keeping with my own experience. He is a proponent of works that sacrifice the authorial role of the artist or group in favour of artists making clear their privileged role, creating a transparency that allows for equal and reciprocal dialogue to develop between all parties. (This idea will be expanded on later in this chapter by examining the practice of seminal Australian artist Ian Milliss.) According to Kim Charnley, Kester's views are sharply opposed to those of Claire Bishop, who places great importance on the autonomy of the artist and argues that the critical value of collaborative art is undermined without this.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Grant H Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Kim Charnley, "Dissensus and the politics of collaborative practice" in *Art & the Public Sphere* 1, no. 1. (2011), 37-53.

The volume of information on collaborative practices could easily fill an entire thesis, consequently in this chapter I have limited my exploration of collaboration to several key examples that are specifically relevant to, and influential on, my practice. The case studies reveal the importance of 'presence' in an audience and how this in turn can be traced to the theatrical lineage of audience activation that reached its pinnacle with Bertolt Brecht, whose use of the distancing effect or 'distanciation' (*Verfremdungseffekt*) counteracted the audience's tendency to accept the manipulative contrivances of theatre as real life, and instead forced the audience to become aware of their critical, analytical and thus 'emancipated' role as collaborator in the creation and re-creation of artistic forms.

'Traitorous cooperation with the enemy' is one of the Oxford English Dictionary's meanings for 'collaboration', and is a perfect description of the way I sometimes feel working in a collaborative practice. Any thoughts, readings or noticed moments become collective property. As soon as an idea is spoken to a collaborator, it is no longer one's own. Everything that was formerly prefixed with the singular possessive pronoun 'my' becomes the collective 'our'. This seems to betray historic notions of individualistic creativity, for when an idea becomes collaborative, another's thoughts, concepts, motivations, and feelings change the way that idea will develop.

This way of working can be enriching and infuriating in equal measure. As a woman, a mother, a partner, I am never singular. I once thought that through a singular authored artwork there was the possibility of achieving a voice that was individual, or a form of expression that was uniquely my own. But at the start of my career as a painter it soon became apparent that my artistic



expression was never singular, as any painting style is linked to a line of painters, mostly male, that preceded me. This insight triggered a questioning of the role of the singular artist, and the ways in which this role could be interrogated and transformed into an open practice that allows for equal input from many parties. A more even playing field.

A truly collaborative artistic practice is a hybridised one, small pieces of one artist combined with another artist, or several artists, or fabricators, scientists, friends or audience members or all of the above. A synergy of the parties, each contributing to make a work that is never a complete entity, but rather a combining of parts in a fluid manner.

An examination of contemporary collaborative art practice reveals useful models and insights into how artists are currently occupying the dual positions of artist/artists and audience to the work they create; and how the expansion of this form of artistic praxis prompts the question of why so many artists now choose this collective form of expression, and what characteristics of audience empowerment, inherent in the form, have led to it being useful as a tool to challenge the parameters of power in a globalised world. To advance an understanding of such collaborative initiatives, links have been drawn in this chapter between collaborators from the late 1960s to today, including an analysis of the influence of Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, and how their collaboration in the form of an ongoing dialogue has been utilised and expanded upon in my own and others' contemporary works.

\* \* \* \* \*

To begin I would like to consider what happens when two artists join in a collaboration to create one entity. Much of the emphasis on this form of practice has been centred on the work or output of artistic duos, such as Christo and Jeanne-Claude, Gilbert and George, and Marina Abramovic and Ulay. Many of these pairings are due to a romantic relationship between the couple. However, a more curious and lesser-known form of collaboration occurred in the late 1960s and is worth surveying, as it points towards contemporary collaborative art practices, including my own, that search for alternate forms of connection. The collaboration I am referring to are the letters between South American artists Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark, and my interest lies in examining the ramifications of the social process of their dialogue.

In this form of collaborative practice—the ‘un-produced’—the notion of conversation and correspondence is viewed as the most important element. Rather than a fixed and final artwork, dialogue is the work itself. This free flow of ideas informed and progressed each member of the collaborative duo’s thinking, with their thoughts bleeding back into the individual and collaborative practices.

The Brazilian artists began this relationship in 1958 and continued until Oiticica’s early death at the age of forty-three in 1980. Very little review or evaluation has been undertaken in regard to the letters and the intensive conversations that took place between Oiticica and Clark. The small sample of letters published in the book *Participation*, edited by Claire Bishop and translated by Michael Asbury, are a glimpse into the importance of the relationship.

One key focus of their individual and collaborative practices became the *vivências* or 'lived experiences'. Their concentration centred on the sensorial experience of the audience through interaction with the created environments, objects and events orchestrated by Oiticica and Clark. In the following excerpt, this transference of energies is discussed

*October 1968*

*Dearest HeliCaetaGerio,*

*. . . but for me it is not about the moment of chance but the 'fruit' of the moment. Fruit in the sense, such is the flavour and sensuality of eating, of living this moment.<sup>5</sup>*

Clark not only alludes to the audience experiencing the work, but also points to the vital interchange of ideas and connection that the pair was sharing through the lived experience of their own ongoing dialogue. What is also evident, in Oiticica's response, is the effect Clark's letters had on him and how this helped propel his ideas further. He writes:

*Lygia, my love*

*(...) I very much liked the ideas and incredible relations concerning you, that I wrote about it in another part of the enormous text that I prepared for the symposium I mentioned.<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Lygia Clark cited in Bishop, *Participation*, 110.

<sup>6</sup> Hélio Oiticica cited in Bishop, *Participation*, 115.

This transferal of energies was taken by Oiticica, combined with other lived experiences, and presented to the symposium, allowing access to the connections for audience members. Oiticica notes in the same letter:

*Interpersonal relations are enriched and establish a communication of growth at an open level. I say open level because it does not relate to an object-based communication, of subject-object, but to an interpersonal practice that leads towards a truly open communication: a me-you relation, rapid, brief as the actual act: no corrupted benefit, of interest, should be expected . . .*<sup>7</sup>

Clark spoke of becoming conscious again of the gestures and attitudes of everyday life. It seems that this need to connect to everyday life began for Clark with the person-to-person relationship, and the pivotal creative relationship for her was with Oiticica. The possibility that exists here is that, for Clark and Oiticica, the way to truly experience thoughts, feelings, gestures and all the complexity of 'being' was afforded to them and accessible through their dialogue. The intense focus that the duo was able to maintain through a shared quest to discover a deeper understanding of day-to-day life, and the way that gestures and attitudes are reflected through the body, was made possible by the ongoing commitment to conversation and correspondence. In effect, each became for the other, the 'audience'.

In my own practice, I maintain a similar commitment and ongoing dialogue with Emma Hicks and our connection is based on a ten-year partnership as ek.1.

<sup>7</sup> Hélio Oiticica cited in Bishop, *Participation*, 115.

Like Clark and Oiticica, our current mode of work developed out of a frustration with our singular painting practices, a need to join with our audience and a desire for connection and shared awareness of the way this is constructed. The significance of our practice also hinges on a search for our own links and how we continually build our identities. As already stated, my links to my heritage and original family is severed; I rely on stories and pieces of a puzzle, half of which will remain forever missing. Emma too comes from a broken history: her grandmother is thought to be a stolen generation child. Consequently, our collaborative practice involves a continuing quest to piece together how our identities have been formed.



Fig 33: Skype screen shot of Emma Hicks in Sydney (inset), and Katie Louise Williams in Banff, 2012.

One such exploration began when we attended separate thematic residencies at The Banff Centre in Canada, I in 2012 and Emma in 2013. During this period the imperative to jointly interrogate the ideas we were individually experiencing became apparent. Unlike Clark and Oiticica, our dialogue was not in the form of letters, but rather through the contemporary medium of Skype. These

conversations mediated through Skype afforded us the visual and auditory presence that the letter format our predecessors used had not, allowing language to move between us in a less structured more fluid manner.

Although we were divided by geographical distance, the screen and audio technology on our iPads enabled us to experience every nuance of the other's thoughts through the images of the face and its expressions and the sound of each other's voices. Our conversations were a patchwork of shared memories, moment-to-moment insights, relayed narratives of each other's thoughts, the theoretical ideas we were being exposed to on residency and all the other messy bits of emotions and confidences that others are rarely privy to. Slowly we became cognisant of the importance of our communication, and began to see it as a form of artistic work in itself. A decision was made to record all Skype sessions and to upload edited versions to our website, as well as to transcribe much of the dialogue, to see how and indeed if it changed and transformed when in textual form.

On examination of these recorded conversations, parallels emerged that linked the questions and concerns of ek.1 to Clark and Oiticica. What follows is an excerpt of one such conversation:

*The Decapitated Museum*

*Ramblings 23/11/12*

*ACT 3*

*Fade in: exterior Sydney suburban home – evening – establishing.*

*Front porch, trees blow gently in the breeze.*

*Interior Banff suite – morning – continuous action.*

*Modest hotel room, bed, standard white sheets, wood panelling.*

*K: And so it's not about if we second guess, those things will happen, you can't . . .*

*E: It has to happen, in some way . . .*

*K: But the difference is in owning it, or not owning it . . . What we have to start doing is acknowledging those things, because those things are possibly the most important things . . . because I am sick of seeing works where people know what it's going to be, what the reaction's going to be . . . you know . . . what the outcome is.<sup>8</sup>*

In our extended dialogue, the struggle to come to terms with the premise of the residency I was attending was discussed at length. The frustration and problems faced have been reviewed in an earlier chapter—all that needs noting here is that its restrictions and rules, and to a large extent those of the art world, led to the need to resort to an unconventional collaborative praxis. The recordings made clear that we were less and less interested in an artistic output, that our intent lay more in the dialogical process and how this in and of itself led to fertile exchanges and opportunities. As Kester suggests:

*The effect of collaborative art practice is this exchange (spatially, institutionally, procedurally), setting it sufficiently apart from the*

<sup>8</sup> ek.1. Transcript of conversation between author and Emma Hicks. Banff and Sydney, 23 November 2012.

*social interaction to encourage a degree of self-reflection, and calling attention to the exchange itself as creative praxis.*<sup>9</sup>

Out of these recorded Skype sessions another form of dialogue was fashioned through the recombining of pieces to create the work *The Telling of Re-telling: Forgotten Forces (2015)*<sup>10</sup> for the exhibition, publication and symposium *Tactical Imaginary* at Sydney College of the Arts. The premise of the exhibition, curated by Gary Sangster, was to focus on experimental arts-based research. The gallery was to be used in an 'experimental and generative way to develop new research around the documentary paradigm'.<sup>11</sup> For ek.1, the voice recordings from the Skype sessions matched the criterion, as they represented a form of this new research. Initially, our shared interest lay in the way that language circulated between us in conversational form, but we soon realised that the study of the dialogue itself was so much richer. We had conversed daily for many years and had arrived at a point where we could often finish each other's sentences. The smallest nuance in the other's breathing or intonation could be read and reacted to. As classics scholar Anne Carson says, in non-literate cultures people are:

*. . . absorbing sense as they listen until they breathe their contribution back into the air when they transmit their portion of*

<sup>9</sup> Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> ek.1. "The Telling of Re-telling: Forgotten Forces." *Tactical Imaginary Exhibition*. SCA Galleries - Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney. 2015

<sup>11</sup> Gary Sangster, *Tactical Imaginary*. (Publication, Exhibition and Symposium curated by Gary Sangster and John Di Stefano. Sydney College of the Arts, The University of Sydney, 2015)



*what can be known . . . The entire environment is thus 'lively', full of potential knowledge.*<sup>12</sup>

Carson's ideas centre on indigenous and aural cultures. I contend, however, that the dialogue that passes between Emma and myself has become a form of improvisational exchange very much like that of non-literate cultures. As Emma's individual work and thesis explores Australian Indigenous ways of knowing and connecting, this sensibility is infused throughout our exchanges.

Their durational nature—emerging first from our ongoing conversations of over ten years and explicitly with a focus on these interactions over a three-month period—created a coming together of components, melding, forming, breaking apart, that were equal part art theory, from the French philosophical ideas I was exposed to at the residency, combined with elements of emotions, and the exquisite mundanity of daily life viewed through the lens of cameras positioned on opposite sides of the globe. When one member of the collaborative duo was thinking about dinner, the other was greeting the morning rays. What arose in retrospect from this dialogue was a continued enquiring, as the Brazilian artist Ricardo Basbaum notes:

*Conversations are a way of thinking, where the self opens to the outside, producing a special social space where no single language of truth is prevalent.*<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Anne Carson, "Reprise", in Ross Gibson, *26 Views of the Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove, 1788-91*. (Crawley, W.A.: UWA Publishing, 2012). 101-123.

<sup>13</sup> Ricardo Basbaum, *Re-projecting (Utrecht)*. (Utrecht: Casco, 2008), 11.

The choice to reveal these private conversations in the context of the gallery, so others become privy to this ‘way of thinking’, was a considered act on our part, one that we acknowledge has a different, although not diminished, form that equally has value. What unfolded for the audience was a non-linear narrative; a darting back and forth, in-and-out becomes the modus operandi. This replaying of the Banff dialogue became a system of undoing. In editing the recordings we were mindful of keeping the discourse loose and unstructured. Any meaning had to be constructed by the listener with the sense that if they remained with the work long enough, they may be able to stitch together a theoretical position—which never eventuates. Those who engaged with the work are afforded the opportunity of creating their own personal narrative through the blending together of fragmented components. Unlike the privacy sought by Clark and Oiticica, this piece by ek.1 exposes the dialogue between us with the aim of letting the audience in on its workings, thereby allowing their complicity in its making. Swedish artists Christer Lundahl and Martina Seidl point out that many people believe they need some sort of knowledge before they can fully experience an artwork—and that this knowledge exists outside them. However they contend that everyone has the capacity to connect with anything they see and experience.

*In our day to day communication, our minds are constantly filling in gaps of missing information for us to be able to have one coherent experience of reality. The sensory world of today is an increasingly complicated web of online and offline presences. Many situations*

*present us with a reality that is incomplete; to battle these imbalances we need to learn how to live with ghosts.*<sup>14</sup>

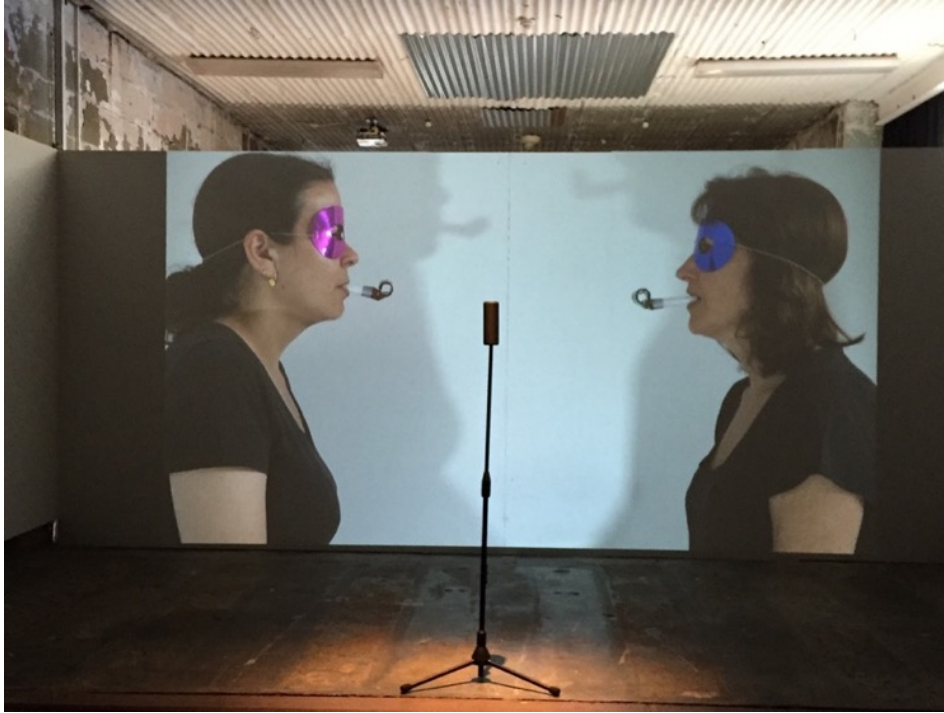


Fig 34: ek.1, *The Telling of Re-telling: Forgotten Forces* for the exhibition and symposium *Tactical Imaginary*, 2015, Sydney College of the Arts, Rozelle, NSW. Digital projection (looped), speaker on modified microphone stand with additional audio (looped).

To further the complexity of the situation we added a video element, projected onto a large wall behind the speaker that was transmitting our recorded voices. The video displayed the two of us, facing each other and seated on plinths (usually holding art, now holding artists), with cheap metallic masks obscuring

<sup>14</sup> Christer Lundahl and Martina Seidl cited in "The Viewer As Medium", in Magdalena Malm and Annika Wik, eds. *Imagining the Audience: Viewing Positions in Artistic and Curatorial Practice*. (Riksställningar: Art & Theory, 2012). 96.

our eyes and party blowers in our mouths, as we breathed in and out in unison. Each outbreath inflated and unfurled the paper tube, aimed directly at the other, until we, along with the party blowers, ran out of puff. The juxtaposition of the video image of our bodies and the dialogue played over the speaker, set up a complex and dynamic association. Contextual and theoretical dialogue merged with the personal, somewhere between staged and impromptu; all refused to settle, and the audience's hopes for a seamless narrative were frustrated. To enter into this world, they had to abandon any hope of stability or fixed meaning and allow their imagination to construct the work.

The work of ek.1 often utilises this lack of a fixed or singular position. All our works are accompanied by texts, constructed and written together, yet with no division of voice, seemingly a single entity, that are used in the exhibition catalogue or as room sheets. Reproduced below is the collaboratively written text for the catalogue of the *Tactical Imaginary* exhibition and symposium.

***The Telling of Re-telling: Forgotten Forces***

*Pathetic almost. Reactionary. They find themselves sitting on concrete plinths with two party blowers and superhero masks, the kind you find in a \$2 shop. The kind that doesn't really hide how you are feeling. They say they are fighting the urge to make something, to produce something. They continually examine, disassemble and reassemble their own works, sometimes ad nauseam. An hour has passed and the party blowers are still going. A few people wander past the studio and throw a quick glance but proceed as if nothing much is happening. This is a position to take, not something to strive for. Everyone in this place*

*is so impressively bored and completely uninterested. Walking around with that look that says they have seen enough but somehow want more. A manifestation of betrayed expectations somehow removed from ultimate disappointment. Neutralised. The studio is filled with relics. They try to breath in unison. Modulated sounds. Spit begins to fill the blowers, not enough breathing room.*

*Two heads are not considered better than one here and the singular heroic artist marches on. Only one artist is formally invited to exhibit. A small interruption in the order of things, the artist extends the invitation to the collective. Of course the irony is the curator and institution get double the amount of labour for nothing but you gotta start somewhere. . .right?*

In the creation of these writings, another element of the collaborative practice surfaces; however, it is not without its complications. An understanding of the complexity of our written voices and the different way each of us expresses concepts has developed over years. These insights are used to further the dialogue and allow our audience another point of entry. As with the written element, all material around the work is considered part of the work. Examples of this are our joint seminar talks, the collaborative design of posters and catalogues for shows, and our website and blogs and their ever-changing updates.

Our thinking was very much inspired by the Chicago-based collective OLS (Our Literal Speed), members of which include early proponents of this form of collaborative practice such as Theaster Gates. As OLS states:

*Stuff near art that is not art, which is treated as if it were art, is now the substance of most serious art.*<sup>15</sup>

For ek.1 this statement is the locus of all our artist endeavours, and forms the basis for creating multiple forms of inclusive work that facilitate numerous points of entry for our audience, who we hope are activated in the process of becoming part of the work.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late!*<sup>16</sup>

Past the street barricades on the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, with a backdrop of abandoned buildings untouched since Hurricane Katrina had hit the city on 29 August 2005, a site-specific production of the Samuel Beckett play *Waiting for Godot* was staged by multi-media artist Paul Chan in 2007. The cast and crew comprised locals displaced by the calamity,

<sup>15</sup> Theaster Gates, Christopher P. Heuer, Matthew Jesse Jackson (conveners), *Our Literal Speed*. Thematic residency, The Banff Centre, Alberta Canada. (6 January – 23 January 2013)

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: tragicomedy in 2 acts*. (New York: Grove Press, 1954)

along with professionals brought in by Chan. The audience included locals and community activists, New York artists and critics.



Fig 35: Paul Chan, *Waiting for Godot*, New Orleans, Louisiana, USA, 2007. Photograph courtesy Lee Celano, The New York Times.

Chan had visited the site a year after Katrina and was struck by the lack of response by the authorities to the disaster. People were still housed in temporary shelters, their homes destroyed or left damaged and with no connection to vital services of electricity and water. The waiting, the lack of anything tangible happening, resonated with Chan. The stillness that engulfed New Orleans reminded him of *Waiting for Godot*, which had profoundly impacted on him when he had seen it at school years before. In Chan's words, 'Seeing gave way to scheming.'<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Chan, *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide*. 26.

He embarked on a collaborative project, lasting nine months and involving multiple parties, from New York's Classical Theatre of Harlem to local residents, activists and community groups. Slowly he pieced together a plan to stage the production in strategic New Orleans locations. However, this was only one element of the project. Free art and theatre workshops, lectures and educational seminars were also included. All the funds raised by the production were donated to disaster relief organisers in the Lower Ninth Ward.

Chan's production and everything that surrounds this work create a hybridity of practice. The artist is well entrenched in the international contemporary art market, but this piece becomes much more than just a visual artwork. The categorisation as simply a politically motivated, socially-engaged work is also problematic. There are certainly political implications in presenting Beckett's play in New Orleans, two years post Hurricane Katrina, as there is also a strong statement politically in pairing Beckett's text with the devastated landscape and local audience.

*Estragon: I'm tired! (pause) Let's go.*

*Vladimir: We can't.*

*Estragon: Why not?*

*Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.*

*Estragon: Ah! (Pause, despairing.) What'll we do, what'll we do!*



*Vladimir: There is nothing we can do.*

*Estragon: But I can't go on like this.*<sup>18</sup>

The heightened sense of hopelessness that the abandoned residents of the area must have felt when hearing this text would have been profound. Those involved in the production also shared this feeling, as one of the actors noted:

*There were times when I felt I wasn't in a play. To be surrounded by the people of that community, in the middle of the Ninth Ward, where many have died, and it's two and a half years after and still looking like that and you're saying, 'at this place, at this moment in time, all mankind is us. Let us make the most of it. While we have the chance let us do something before it's too late.' Those lines just ring and ring.*<sup>19</sup>

Like Chan's work in New Orleans, Sydney's collaborative group Distanciation was to join with a community to make a work. Unlike Chan, the collective did not arrive in the town—Alice Springs in the Northern Territory—with the political agenda to stage a production that highlighted the social, economic and racial tensions that exist in the area. Distanciation's members are Hayley Megan French, Richard Kean, Carla Liesch and myself. The name derives from the term 'distanciation' coined by Bertolt Brecht for theatre that creates a break in the audience's perception, leading to a distancing effect that allows them to challenge conventional ways of thinking and frees them from the ingrained

<sup>18</sup> Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: tragicomedy in 2 acts*, 76.

<sup>19</sup> Actor Wendell Pierce in Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics*. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 226.

expectations of mainstream ideology. A large part of Distanciation's manifesto revolves around using Brechtian theatrical sensibilities to create theatre/art that leaves the stage and joins life itself.

The group was formed after an exhibition of solo works shown at Articulate Project Space, Leichhardt, NSW, in 2011. The first iteration of the collective was at *Index Space*, St Peters, NSW, in 2012.



Fig 36: Distanciation, *Impromptu performance*, Index Space, St Peters, NSW. 2012.

The work that grew out of this initial inhabitation of Index Space by Distanciation is what I focus on next. Referred to by the group as the 'Alice

Springs project’ — but intentionally untitled — this project was undertaken in 2013 at Watch this Space, an artist-run initiative in Alice Springs. From its inception, several factors stood out as breaking from simple art-world collaborative models, creating challenges for both audience and artists in various ways.



Fig 37: *Distanciation* group, from left, Richard Kean, Katie Louise Williams, Carla Liesch, Hayley Megan French. 2013, Uluru, NT.

To begin with, the group’s written application to work with the gallery, and our separate application to the NSW arts funding body, were expressly structured so as not to necessitate a prescribed outcome. This, for anyone who has ever

completed a funding form or expression of interest to show work at a space, is highly unconventional and likely to be met with scepticism from the gallery and dismissal from funders. Most want defined objectives and known outcomes. There is a risk in funding and showing artists who are willing to expose a lack of plan and non-specific goals as objectives; who base their premise on a sense of play and discovery that can develop with local residents and the site as equal collaborators.

The group determined that the traditional few days to install and show the work was not sufficient or conducive to this form of collective action. So the decision was made to use the gallery space as a laboratory over a period of a month, where various concept experiments could be performed. In keeping with this model, the gallery was open all day, staffed by the collective, and the audience was invited to pop in anytime and share a 'cuppa' and conversation. Equally the group did not feel bound by the gallery, it became a meeting point, if we felt like an excursion we would just hang the closed sign on the door and head out to explore.



Fig 38: Distanciation, *Help!* 2013. Advertisement placed in the Centralian Advocate, Alice Springs, NT.

Alice Springs opened the artists' eyes to a reality we had not been aware of. This was Australia but in a way we had neither known nor understood before. The extreme poverty, the violence (the area has the highest homicide rate in Australia), the intense heat, on many days over 45° Celsius, even the way the gallery operated was vastly different from what we had experienced in our native Sydney. Watch This Space was a hub for locals to come and interact in a relaxed and casual way.

None of us, but for Hayley Megan French, had ever been to 'The Alice' before. With no connection to the residents, placing an ad in a local paper was a leap

of faith. As a group we had to trust the public and give over power to our audience. If no one came and engaged in the project, what would occur?

What did unfold was rewarding. Locals from far and wide wandered into the gallery; one day, two Indigenous women visited, canvases under their arms, and we all sat on the floor drinking tea as they unrolled painting after painting. They talked of how their works represented bush food and described in detail what this food was and where they gathered it. How could we have predicted this open exchange, had we preconceived a work? Had we created a work where an outcome was required, the exchange would assuredly have been different.

This connection led the group to think about the importance of food as a way of breaking down barriers, and it became the inspiration for the next step of the journey: Distanciation would host a dinner in the gallery, and invite all those who had dropped in, and any of the townspeople who wanted to join us, to share food and conversation. The concept bears some relation to the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose 1990 *Pad Thai* at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York saw him serving food to gallery visitors.<sup>20</sup> But there is a pivotal difference: our gesture was not predetermined, being born out of a unique conversation with two Indigenous women. The dinner became another step in enabling residents to reveal to us 'their town'. This social exchange was about empowering an audience and, as Brecht suggests, allowing them an awareness of their role and their ability to be creators.

<sup>20</sup> Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled 1990 (Pad Thai)*, Project Room, Paula Allen Gallery, New York, USA.



Fig 39: Distanciation, *Dinner in the Gallery*, 2013, Watch this Space, Alice Springs, NT. Tables set with canvas cloths that later became maps drawn by locals.



Fig 40: Distanciation, *Dinner in the Gallery*, 2013, Watch this Space, Alice Springs, NT.

In contrast the work of Tiravanija seems to place the artist in a service role; although it opens a space for social interaction, the artist ultimately retains control as the one who has provided the service and planned the event. This form of work was championed by the critic Nicolas Bourriaud in his text *Relational Aesthetics* where he compares the shift in artist's practice to the changing nature of the economy, drawing a link between the artist as producer creating objects and paintings for consumption—much like the assembly line for the production of consumer goods—and the shift to service-based economies, where the artist now becomes the facilitator of social interactions.<sup>21</sup>

I argue that Bourriaud's view is too simplistic. Artist as 'facilitator' still retains the authorial role and negates the complexities of human social interaction. A distance between artist and audience—Brecht's distanciation effect—is necessary to allow both parties to recognise the audience's role in creating a work. They are not immersed in its illusions, nor merely a contributor, neither does the artist retain sole authorship. The two are able to enter into a partnership. In Bishop and Bourriaud's view, however, 'distance' means holding the viewer at arm's length. Kester writes that this

*. . . requires that the artist retain complete control over the form and structure of the work . . . It is for this reason, I would suggest, that a number of Bourriaud's relational projects retain an essentially textual status, in which social exchange is choreographed as an a*

<sup>21</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. Trans., Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 2002)



*priori event for the consumption of an audience 'summoned' by the artist.*<sup>22</sup>

'Improvisational' and 'situationally responsive' were the guiding principles in Distanciation's Alice Springs project. The group understood that by revealing its role and addressing the audience directly, asking for their help in an act of true collaboration, they were constructing a work quite differently to Tiravanija. Taking up the imperative of Brecht, we created a situation where the audience had the space and distance to critically evaluate their own part rather than passively slipping into the drama and being led through what they should think and feel. The work required the audience to act on this knowledge both physically and mentally. They were able to experience a change in power dynamic from artist-audience to a triangular model of artist-artists-audience, and were given the opportunity of forging a new bond of social community, where a collective story manifests and is able to create meaning.

The dinner took place on the evening of Friday 8 March 2013, the table was laid with pieces of cloth from a local supplier who happened to have some cheap remnants of canvas left over and—bearing reference to the group members' origins as painters—food was laid out in colour groupings (red beetroot, green salad, yellow squash), becoming a form of painter's palette. Permanent marker pens were placed for the guests. There was no preconceived plan to make the

<sup>22</sup> Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 32.

audience participate, rather a stage was set, 'framing' the possibility for action to take place.

As the evening unfolded the attendees made their intentions clear: they had read our advertisement and it had prompted them to reflect on their town. Soon pens were scribbling on the canvas, drips of beetroot stain and red wine rings mingled with intricate maps of their Alice Springs. Some audience members wrote down local phrases and poems, others drew images, by evening's end the strips of canvas became intricate weavings of folk stories, local legends, maps and inadvertent dinner stains.



Fig 41: Distanciation, *Dinner in the Gallery*, 2013. Detail of table cloth.

Then it was our time to explore. The next week was spent with the impromptu dinner maps in hand, driving and walking to the secret spots our audience had disclosed. Each new place revealed so much more than we could ever have expected, uncovering moments of deep political, social and geographical significance. One particularly moving journey involved our tracking down the town's well, which bore the inscription, 'For our children's children, drinking water'. The well had been encased in a padlocked cage. The group stood around in the searing heat, pondering the absurdity of locking the local water supply that had been gifted to the 'children's children' of the community.



Fig 42: "For our children's children",  
Locked Well, Alice Springs, NT.

During this process of encounter all normative roles were reversed. Distanciation had embarked on a journey of discovery prompted by our audience and their town. This inversion became infectious: leaving her official role behind for the moment, the gallery's full-time curator joined with the team in seeing the town anew. The experience bore out Kester's observation:

*Collaborative socially engaged projects open up spaces in which boundaries between artist, curators and publics are transgressed and in which the locus of artistic control may shift between any of those involved.*<sup>23</sup>

Throughout our stay, each moment of encounter was documented. This was a fluid process: whatever was at hand was utilized. From photographs and drawings to on-site performed actions, poems, paintings and videos, all held equal value. Due to the lack of regimentation and the long time-scale, precious moments occurred. One day, while I was climbing a hill in the Olive Pink Botanic Gardens, an eagle soared overhead, so close I could see it in all its stunning detail. At that instant the grief I had felt at losing my natural grandfather in the months preceding became palpable: land, loss and eagle were all joined. We existed together in that instant, entangled with a sense of past, present and future, comingling, enriching each other, united.

During the project, every idea was discussed and debated. Sometimes consensus was difficult to reach; however, we intuitively understood that it was all part of this work. Dinners stretched long into the night as preconceived ideas were left behind, each member opening to the others, allowing for a new collective and collaborative debate that was not prescribed to reach a conclusion or outcome. Rather, we could all see the merit in the process itself: insights and new knowledge were formed through this and by remaining open to it.

<sup>23</sup> Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. 33.

Deborah Bird Rose, an ethnographer who has worked with Aboriginal people in their claims to land and in other decolonising contexts, has written about the importance of country in Indigenous identity:

*Country is a place that gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and with.*<sup>24</sup>

As a group we also had to find our connection to the extraordinary heart of our land. The final stage of the work was a giving back to those who had given us so much by sharing their myths and stories. Feminist theorist Donna Haraway contends that

*. . . redistributing the narrative field by telling another version of a crucial myth is a major process in crafting new meanings. One version never replaces another, but the whole field is rearranged in interrelation among all versions in tension with each other.*<sup>25</sup>

In keeping with Haraway's thinking, we planned a retelling of the townspeople's tales through an evening of videos, photos, poems, and indeed the treasured canvas table cloths from our first dinner, which had afforded us the link to become part of this country. The cloths were hung in a large circle, representing wholeness and inclusion, above the space where the table had been set three weeks before. The audience was able to enter into this circle

<sup>24</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Nourishing terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness*. (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Donna J Haraway, "Primateology is politics by other means" in *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*. (1984), 489-524.

and to see themselves ingrained on the maps, marks, spots and stains from that *kairos* moment weeks before: our first dinner together.

Around the space were reminders from the group's explorations: a film of the various blue skies we had experienced, on a continuous loop, projected onto a gallery wall; a camp stool we had taken to rest on through our journey holding a catalogue, bound in the same canvas as our table cloth 'maps', stitched by the local swag maker. In this were photographs, poems and the original advertisement calling for community help as well as documentation of the gallery dinner. We produced 150 of these catalogues, one for each member of the community to take and keep as a reminder of the work they had created.



Fig 43: Distanciation, 2013, Watch this Space, Alice Springs, NT. Detail of hanging tablecloths and blue sky film.



Fig 44: Distanciation, 2013, Watch this Space, Alice Springs, NT. Catalogue



Fig 45: Distanciation, 2013, Watch this Space, Alice Springs, NT. installation of table cloths in gallery

\* \* \* \* \*

## Ian Millis

*In the long history of human kind and animal kind those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.*<sup>26</sup>

Arriving at his home in the Blue Mountains of Sydney, I am greeted by Ian Milliss. I have met him once before, briefly, at a master class on socially engaged practice held at Sydney College of the Arts in 2015, convened by visiting English academic Dr Michael Birchall. He welcomes me in, and over tea and slices of my homemade banana loaf, he tells me of the dramatic events that had unfolded that morning in his kitchen. A baby possum had fallen through one of the light fittings in his ceiling, landing hard on the bench top. He points to a large cardboard box in the corner, where the stunned creature shelters, warmed by a nearby heater and watched over by one of Milliss's many cats. I am reminded that this formidable man with a history of tough activist/artistic practice is at his core someone who was always willing to act and improvise, be it with this tiny creature or the entire Australian union movement.

Milliss's early artistic career is instructive in understanding the trajectory of how his interest in social relationships between people and forms of collaborative practice began. It also provides a framework for my own practice and shared

<sup>26</sup> Ian Milliss, "Happy Birthday, Mr Darwin", *Adaptive Reuse Blog*, quote attributed to Charles Darwin.



fascination with grasping the intricacies of social relations and how they are established and operate.

In the 1960s, in his teens and early 20s, Milliss was working through the art models of minimalism, hard-edged abstraction and conceptualism. These ideas rapidly evolved into works that highlighted the space itself, the gallery as site. He ceased creating objects and paintings and shifted to using what existed in the space: the gallery lighting system, the furniture, all become tools to activate audiences and make apparent the social and political construction of the gallery as a site for interaction.

(The course of my own early practice is remarkably similar, where explorations of minimalism and formalism led me into works such as *Random Tread*, where I covered a gallery's existing staircase in red and yellow barrier tape, thrusting its architectural features in high relief and creating awareness of the space and the audience's relationship to it.)



Fig 46. Katie Louise Williams, *Random Tread*, 2012, Articulate Project Space, Leichhardt, NSW. Stair Installation.



Fig 47. Katie Louise Williams, *Random Tread*, 2012, Articulate Project Space, Leichhardt, NSW. Stair Installation. Material: Barrier tape.

The seed of a unique form of collaborative practice had been planted as Milliss observed his audiences moving through the gallery space and interacting with the works, and saw opportunities for breaking apart the social construction of rules, limits and boundaries.



Fig 48: Ian Milliss, *Circular Tug of War* (restaged), October 2013. Artspace, Sydney, NSW.

In 1971 he exhibited *Circular Tug of War* at Bonython Gallery, Sydney and the National Gallery of Victoria, a work conceived to explore the boundaries discussed earlier. In this work Milliss made no attempt to preempt an outcome. At one time, prompted by the title, audience members joined in a game of tug-of-war, all pulling at the circular rope. But at other times, they deviated from the 'planned activity', no longer having the artist as decider of the outcome. The rope might be draped off someone's shoulder like a scarf, or become the thread through a conga line. It interacted with other works in the gallery, was placed on sculptures around the space. Ultimately the work was kidnapped by someone never to be seen again. The possibilities of the rope as a conductor of endless imaginative ideas became apparent.

In my own practice I reached a similar position in attempting to negotiate an alternate collaborative model between artist and audience. My work *Only Connect* (2013), created for Arterreal Gallery, comprised a series of sculptures based on the tenets of early childhood learning. The small gallery space became an installation of three interrelated objects. The first, *Thread*, was a large 2.5 metre freestanding board of architectural plywood, its smooth surface peppered with holes of varying sizes. Lying on the floor and attached to the board were two thick ropes coloured red and yellow. Beside this sat *Slide*, a concrete base with ten twisted aluminum poles protruding from it. Wooden beads were threaded along the poles, and parts of the metal were bound in red twine, allowing only partial movement of the beads. Finally, *Stack* consisted of five copper cuboids, in varying sizes, resting on the gallery reception counter, a

nod to Robert Morris's minimalist cubes but also another easily-manipulated child's toy.

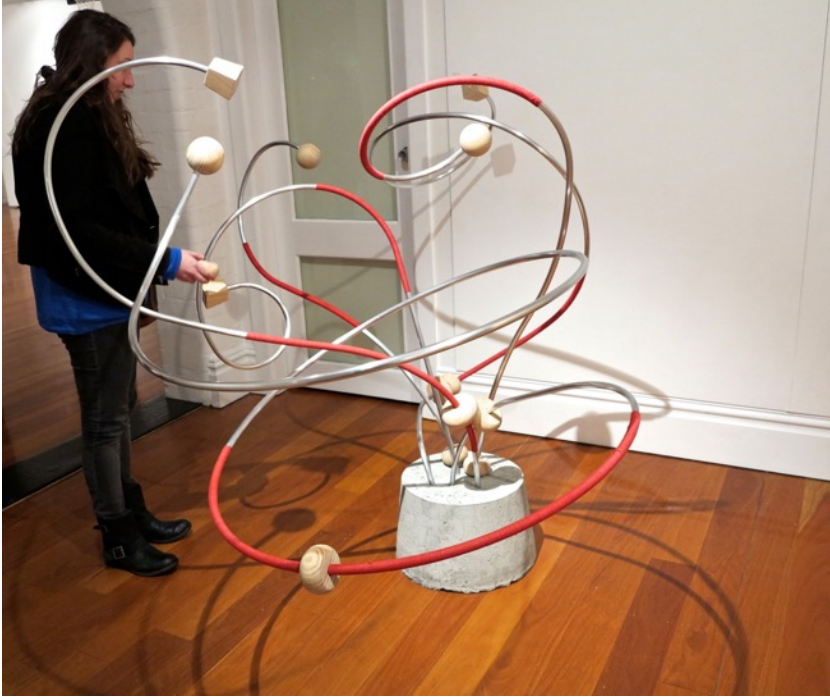


Fig 49: Katie Louise Williams, *Only Connect: Slide*, 2013, Arterreal Gallery, Rozelle, NSW. Dimensions: variable. Materials: aluminium tubing, red cord, wood, concrete.



Fig 50: Katie Louise Williams, *Only Connect: Stack*, 2013, Arterreal Gallery, Rozelle, NSW. Dimensions: variable. Materials: copper.



Fig 51: Katie Louise Williams, *Only Connect: Thread*, 2013, Arterreal Gallery, Rozelle, NSW. Dimensions: variable. Materials: architectural ply, red and yellow rope.

The proposition set up within the gallery space created the possibility for activity on the part of the audience: how should they regard this artwork? How should they deal with these objects that almost call 'play with me'. This conundrum raised an issue noted by Matt Glenn from Serpentine Gallery, London, consultant curator at Arterreal, in his essay on the work:

*The illusion to functional capacity propels the questions involved in encountering a sculpture that has been grafted with a certain welcoming to engage physically. This brings into consideration the formal decisions made by the artist, decisions not only of*

*aesthetics, but also of practicalities— solutions and sequences, both investigated and manipulated.*<sup>27</sup>

*Only Connect* required the audience to query their own assumptions, acknowledge their own role and overcome the hurdle of how to interact with the pieces. The path forward was not a predetermined one; the choice to physically manipulate the objects, to change their form and shape, to explore, to play like a child or indeed to just mentally manipulate the objects or watch others do so, was left open. Although the frame of the space, gallery and context all assert their bias, the in-between zone in which the audience finds itself becomes freeing. During the opening night of the exhibition all options played out. As Glenn notes,

*The grey areas surrounding Williams' sculptures challenge a position of absolutes. It dismantles the scaffolding of classical approaches, allowing for the function of the artwork to shift.*<sup>28</sup>

The model of collaborative practice implicit in this work is explored by Kester when he describes the two divergent paths relational practice has taken. The first, as championed by critics such as Nicolas Bourriaud and Claire Bishop, requires that the artist retain complete control over the form and structure of the work. In the second, a collaborative model more in keeping with Milliss's and my own, the audience is a trusted partner and becomes an equal party in the creation and construction of meaning in the work. It is because this latter

<sup>27</sup> Matt Glenn, *Only Connect*. (Catalogue essay for exhibition at Arterreal Gallery, 2013)

<sup>28</sup> Glenn, *Only Connect*.

model requires the artist to surrender control and autonomy that both Bourriaud and Bishop find it problematic. For Bishop, the artist's quasi-detached perspective is essential.

*Without the detachment and autonomy of conventional art to insulate them, they are doomed to "represent", in the most naïve and facile manner possible, a given political issue or constituency.<sup>29</sup>*

The position of Bourriaud and Bishop can be traced to the Greenburgian modernist philosophy that sees the specificity and autonomy of art as vital to its success. Art must retain a distance from life and remain true to its particular form; thus painting must remain true to its two-dimensionality and not drift into representations of other forms such as sculpture (perspective) or theatre (narrative). In a similar fashion, Bishop and Bourriaud assert that when art moves directly into the political or social sphere the artist loses their autonomy and thus the artwork is contaminated. Bishop and Bourriaud's approach sets the artist up as detached, privileged and uniquely capable of explaining the contingency of meaning to an audience that would otherwise be swept up in its experience of a work.

This belief betrays a mistrust of the audience and also seems to confuse the notion of autonomy with objectivity. The first position in no way guarantees the second. And when it comes to socially-engaged practice, objectivity, as pointed out in the *Introduction*, is a matter of responsibility, not distancing.

<sup>29</sup> Claire Bishop quoted in Kester, *The One and The Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*, 32.



Milliss's practice from the early seventies in Sydney clearly links to Kester's second model of collaborative practice and I contend it does not surrender the perspective of art simply because of its whole-hearted embrace of, and immersive participation in, political and social issues.

Milliss's last 'constructed work' was exhibited at Central Street Gallery, Sydney, in 1971. Titled *Life in One Room*, it consisted of a floorplan of a cell chalked onto the floor of the gallery. Included in this prototype were outlines of a bed, a radio, books, magazines, TV and newspapers. The remaining necessities of everyday existence, as instructed on the floorplan, could be facilitated communally by eating out at a restaurant, doing washing at a Laundromat, and visiting a public toilet. As the audience encountered the work, they also destroyed it, their feet slowly wearing away the chalk makings until only a faint remnant was left.

*. . . so I got people doing things and by the time of 'Life in One Room' I'm starting to think, OK, it's not just a case of people doing things, it's a case of the social world: how do people interact with each other, how is politics happening, how do social formations happen and stuff like that.<sup>30</sup>*

This progression from art world to 'whole world', the examination of how the social world was constructed, and the ramifications for every aspect of life, politics, the economy and the environment was to shape the way that Milliss's practice progressed. It led to various forms of collaborative art that saw his

<sup>30</sup> Ian Milliss, *Interview by author*. Tape recording. Linden, NSW. 20 June 2016.

audiences as active proponents for change in the world. Ironically, Milliss acknowledges, it was just as his work was entering this profound phase that many in the art world believed he had given up 'art' altogether. However, for Milliss:

*I thought this is actually a logical progression out of conceptualism . . . There were others, there were plenty of other people all over the world, who saw this engagement with communities and the public and just everyday life as the next step in conceptualism, the most radical step.<sup>31</sup>*

The forms that these works would take, the array of media used, the scope and diversity of audiences that Milliss would now address was vast. No longer would he restrict himself to the art world crowd. Now he targeted people across a range of communities.

One such work was his engagement with the Green Ban movement in Victoria Street Kings Cross, an area that he was living in at the time. The Green Bans started in Sydney in 1971 and were a direct reaction to the corrupt political environment that allowed developers to acquire public land, significant properties and even entire communities with few restrictions and build immensely profitable high rise buildings in areas such as Surry Hills and Milliss's own Kings Cross.

<sup>31</sup> Milliss, *Interview*.

*During that time the first Green Bans started and I got involved in them because it struck me, just out of the blue, these guys are doing exactly what I was talking about. They've got one tool, which is their ability to withhold labour, one simple little provocative tool and they're using it to create these situations which are enormously influential, have enormous consequences, and totally change the way people think about stuff.<sup>32</sup>*

It is this collaborative form of art practice and its ability to challenge power that Bishop and Bourriaud find so confronting, as it relies on a reciprocal relationship between audience and artist, where both parties are active and reactive to each other. As Milliss puts it:

*What I was interested in in fact was cultural evolution. I was interested in all of the things that people do that move the culture along because the world never stays the same and people's understanding of it has to keep changing.<sup>33</sup>*

The Green Bans were initially started by a small group of workers from the New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation (NSWBLF), who joined together in a true collaborative manner, using that simple tool—their ability to withhold labour—to challenge the authority of government and developers. Quite a remarkable shift occurred such that individuals, with limited tools, were able to resist the status quo to the point of halting the progress of the developers,

<sup>32</sup> Milliss, *Interview*.

<sup>33</sup> Milliss, *Interview*.

something that until then had seemed unstoppable. Audiences were given a new sense of their own power. Through the collective taking up of creative tools of resistance they were able to directly impact and shape an alternate future, and in doing so save their environment and their community. The reverberations of these actions would spread quickly around the world and act as an inspiration for future 'green' movements.<sup>34</sup>

From this time on Milliss focused his energies towards establishing platforms where people were exposed to alternate views and collaborative forces capable of making them reality. His formative time with the Green Ban movement would also act reciprocally in altering him.

*I've never had the same view of the world around me, because I learned when I was twenty-one. If you really challenge their power, they'll kill you. Don't delude yourself about it, do not delude yourself about it, ever. And it makes you look paranoid, and a conspiracy theorist, but be an adult, be serious about what you're dealing with.*

Milliss went on to work directly with the Trade Unions and set up numerous Union publications. In a departure from the style of industrial publications of the time, he borrowed the language and form of mainstream media—the likes of Time and Newsweek—to create publications that his audience wanted to read,

<sup>34</sup> German environmentalist Petra Kelly witnessed the Green Bans first hand in Australia in the mid-1970s. According to Meredith Burgmann, she was so inspired by the movement that it was mainly responsible for her launching the German Green Party. Meredith and Verity Burgmann, *The Green Ban Movement*, Dictionary of Sydney, 2011. <[http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/green\\_bans\\_movement](http://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/green_bans_movement)> accessed 3 July 2016.

that were filled with interesting and relevant information. This led to Milliss's next creation, the establishment of the country's first social marketing agency, whose principal function was selling ideas.

I do not intend here to write Milliss's life/art story (although it would be a worthy subject), but rather to illustrate the diversity of tools Milliss was able to employ and the varied range of artistic collaborative practices he established. Milliss would never claim these actions were purely his own; rather, he sees himself as simply a facilitator or conductor of collective energies.

*But again, it spread out so much and involved so many people that in a way you can't claim any credit for it. So you're the little spark that set it off, this gigantic bushfire!*

It is Milliss's explicit understanding of his role as part of a process, rather than one who claims the crown of the originator, that frames his form of collaborative practice as a valuable model for my own practice.

*And the reason why it's art in another sense, or it's cultural stuff, is because what you're doing is about meaning. It's about making people understand something else about the world and refocus the way they actually deal with the world as well.*

*The political stuff, the legislation, all that sort of thing, comes afterward as a consequence of it. That never happens until people have changed their understanding of the world.*

In this chapter, the breadth and depth of particular forms of collaborative endeavours both recent and historical have been interrogated, and connections made between often unrecognised historical works and their contemporary counterparts. Artists through redefining the ways in which collaboration can be articulated and understood have created space for an empowered audience. Through this knowledge, audiences are freed to become an active part of the work and thus a collaborative partner, not merely a distanced spectator or an instrument to be used for the artist or institution's ends.

[True to form, Milliss's tiny survivor turned out to be something really worth saving: a rare Eastern pygmy possum.]



## Chapter Five. The Ribbons Project: Art/Activism/Life

This chapter looks at how the audience through active participation in a work that straddles art, activism and life can have a profound influence in revealing and affecting the operation of power and the institution. A single case study is used to illustrate this complex process.

In June 2015, as part of collaborative duo ek.1, I was invited to participate in the Prague Quadrennial<sup>1</sup> in the Czech Republic. It was here I met activist/artist John Jordan, founder of The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, which brings artists and activists together to create new forms of civil disobedience. His presentation *The Art of Resistance* comprised a series of nine acts, with headings such as 'Theatre as if Life Mattered', 'Becoming Invisible', 'Giving up Representation', 'Designing Disobedience', and 'Reframing'.<sup>2</sup>

Jordan told us that the laboratory was invited by various institutions to make a political art project for the UN Summit on Climate Change, Copenhagen, Denmark (COP21) in 2009.<sup>3</sup> His proposal was to bring together artists, activists and engineers to recycle hundreds of the city's abandoned bicycles.

<sup>1</sup> Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space is the largest scenography event in the world. The 13th edition of the Prague Quadrennial took place from 18–28 June 2015 in Prague, Czech Republic. The main theme was SharedSpace: Music Weather Politics.

<sup>2</sup> John Jordan, "PQ Talks: The Art of Resistance, Theatre as if Life Mattered" (paper presented at the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space, 20 June 2015)

<sup>3</sup> RETHINK – Contemporary Art & Climate Change, Copenhagen Denmark, 31 October 2009 – April 5 2010



The work, entitled *Put the Fun Between Your Legs: The Bike Bloc*, was to construct tools of resistance with bikes and bodies working together.



Fig 52: Copenhagen Projects, *Put the Fun Between Your Legs*, 2009, originally intended for Centre for Contemporary Art in Copenhagen, Denmark, but eventually facilitated by the Candy Factory, Denmark, after CCAC dropped the project when they realised what 'civil disobedience' meant.

Several weeks out from the show, Jordan received a phone call from the curator of the Copenhagen Centre for Contemporary Art, which had commissioned the work; the Danish police had explained the strict laws about what constitutes a 'bicycle' in Denmark. For example, a bicycle can't exceed a width of one metre, may not carry more than three persons, may have no more than four wheels, and so on.

Jordan explained that it was all in the original proposal: the bikes were to be used in acts of civil disobedience against the corporate hijacking of the UN.

Whether they were legal or not was irrelevant. The curator was both shocked and angry. You mean you're going to break the law? You're really going to do it?

Not long after, Jordan was invited to London's Tate Modern to hold workshops in art and activism entitled *Disobedience Makes History*.<sup>4</sup> He was informed by the curators that no interventions could be made against the museum's sponsors, one of which was British Petroleum, but that Tate very much welcomed debate and reflection on the relationship between art and activism.

After Jordan's presentation in Prague, he explained to me that there were a series of moments in his career that changed his way of looking at what art was. That the contemporary art world's discourse on activist art was just that: a discourse.

*As long as the artists pretended to do politics, everything was OK. Show the world, discuss it, analyse it, make comments on it, but under no circumstances must art actually transform the world, for when it becomes useful it's no longer art, so goes the other discourse.*<sup>5</sup>

While the work I am going to discuss, *The Ribbons Project*, functions differently to the work of The Laboratory, my discussion with Jordan revealed

<sup>4</sup> *Disobedience Makes History*, Tate Modern, 23–30 January 2010

<sup>5</sup> John Jordan, *conversation with author*, Prague, Czech Republic, 20 June 2015

that we shared a similar questioning and sense of urgency about the changing role that art can play, and the fertile middle ground where art, activism and socially-engaged works meld. It is in this contested zone that many of the issues I am thinking about and working with don't currently have a well-lit place to inhabit and I believe these matters cannot and should not be reduced to a firm set of parameters. *The Ribbons Project* involved grappling with situations and events that are problematic, as they touch on the personal, political and moral. There are choices that are never neutral or indifferent, evidence (which is always incomplete) and an overwhelming hiddenness in which some connections are revealed while others have been inserted, modified or removed. But much more than that, there is a resilience of the seemingly forgotten.

It is against this backdrop that I focus on people, relationships and experience, as they constitute the main material of this work. Looking at Allan Kaprow's vision of the future of art may be of use:

*We may see the overall meaning of art change profoundly from being an end to being a means, from holding out a promise of perfection in some other realm to demonstrating a way of living meaningfully in this one.*<sup>6</sup>

*The Ribbons Project* did not entail the creation of an object, such as a painting or sculpture, although objects and spaces, both real and virtual, were

<sup>6</sup> Kaprow and Kelley, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 281.

involved. It evolved from attentiveness or, to bring it back to Kaprow, from 'paying attention'.<sup>7</sup>

The project came about in reaction to the public hearing into the response of Knox Grammar School and the Uniting Church in Australia to concerns raised about inappropriate conduct by a number of teachers towards students between 1970 and 2012.<sup>8</sup> The hearing began on 23 February 2015 as part of The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. Knox is an independent Uniting Church day and boarding school for boys, located in the suburb of Wahroonga, NSW, which is also where I live.

There is a story by science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin entitled *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*.<sup>9</sup> Le Guin calls it a 'psychomyth'. It concerns a city that is joyous and happy; everything in Omelas is beautiful. The people are well aware of how blissful are their lives but Omelas holds a secret. For this state to exist, a small child is kept locked in a dark room beneath the city. The child is abused, naked, and left to wallow in its own excrement. Food and water are provided, nothing else.

The citizens know of this dark secret, but all are aware that their own state of happiness is contingent upon the child's misery. They are revolted at the state of the child and some come to gaze upon it, yet no-one does anything.

<sup>7</sup> Kaprow and Kelley, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, 195.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/6202742a-5e8d-490b-bec4-84876bef3de0/case-study-23,-february-2015,-sydney.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> Ursula K Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" in *The Unreal and the Real: Selected Stories of Ursula K. Le Guin*. (Easthampton, MA: Small Beer Press, 2012)

What follows is an account of events that unfolded in February and March 2015 as I watched the Royal Commission's hearings streaming live on my laptop. Like the moments that changed John Jordan's view of what art is, this was a pivotal moment for me in bringing up many issues to do with being an artist in the present day. Among them, power and the institution; the influence of media in contemporary society; the multi-phase campaign; the subversion of the establishment; perceived vulnerability and fear of exposure; and crucially the theme in my own work of audience participation.

Among the leafy established gardens of Sydney's North Shore, Knox Grammar School stands surrounded by landscaped green fields. The boys who attend the school wear straw boaters, and tip their hats when walking through its aged sandstone gates as a mark of respect to this venerable institution and its long history. They feel privileged to attend the elite establishment, and are reminded of their position on a daily basis. They are the 'lucky ones'.

The Latin motto of the school is *Virile Agitur*, which has been translated as 'the manful thing is being done'.<sup>10</sup> The school, however, holds secrets that have remained hidden for decades.

My husband and I have two sons. At the time of beginning this thesis, one was attending the school, and his older brother had completed his HSC there, and was in his first year at university.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.knox.nsw.edu.au/about/history-and-tradition/history-of-knox>

Several years earlier, on 16 February 2009, while our boys (at that time 9 and 13 years of age) were away at school camp, I happened to turn on ABC News and witness the arrest of five teachers accused of pedophilia. All five were from my boys' school. Two of the accused were still employed in teaching positions in the junior campus. One was arrested at the school camp the boys were attending.

This man had been my older son's class teacher in grade 6 when he was 11 years old. That year, still recent in my mind, came flooding back to me. Many events in that period had seemed strange and unsettling, and my maternal instincts had been triggered over various situations. But nothing was ever concrete and matters of concern always seemed to have plausible explanations. At that stage in my life I had little knowledge of what 'grooming' behavior was, but I did have a keen intuition and several times during the year I had acted on these impulses.

On the day of the arrests, I was finally able to join together the pieces that my misgivings had hinted at. I went straight to the NSW police, as Strike Force Arika had been set up to investigate the alleged offences. I also made an appointment with the headmaster of the school to discuss what I knew first hand about the situation, and to ensure that all children currently at the school were to be protected against pedophiles.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Strike Force Arika was established in February 2009 by NSW Police to investigate the allegations of abuse at Knox Grammar School.

My report to Strike Force Arika outlined how, during the year our son was in an accused teacher's class, several things occurred. The boys were asked to change from their school uniform into their sports uniform in the classroom. The teacher had blacked out the windows with colourful pieces of cardboard and had installed web cameras on the back wall of the room, explaining that these were set up to catch the cleaners who were stealing from his minibar fridge, which contained bottles of Coca Cola, Mars Bars and other treats for the boys. He told them he had set up the Junior School's computer system, and was able to have his laptop on a separate network that allowed him to send images and videos unmonitored by the school. My report also contained grooming behavior, for example a PlayStation given to a special boy in the class.

On 6 March 2009 I met with the school's headmaster. To my surprise the deputy headmaster was also in attendance to record the proceedings in note form. I detailed the same information, and was assured that the school was helping the police in every way possible and putting in place training for teachers to ensure the safety of all students. The headmaster explained that the accused teachers at this stage had not been convicted and the court needed to do their job. When exposed to the united front of two men in positions of authority, alone in the imposing wood panelled office, I felt immense pressure to distrust my instincts and believe the institution. Every utterance seemed so reasonable I fought the urge to doubt the validity of anything I had to say. This moment for me was a turning point. I was forced to reevaluate my own subjectivity and what power I held or did not hold in the situation.

This personal anecdote is not provided as a nostalgic form of self-reflection, but rather to investigate how such moments can incite a depth of thinking that allows us to break from conventional ways of existing. This in turn can lead to radically new modes of behavior with the potential to create a political agency that is capable of challenging the status quo, and thus perhaps form new modes of resistance.

All five teachers went through the court process, all five were subsequently found guilty of pedophilia and given various sentences. Around our local area, parents speculated that this school was now the safest in Sydney. Yet once more, I was not comfortable with the situation. Our elder son was close to completing his HSC, and our younger son did not want to leave the school.

Things were to change radically in 2015 when the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse focused on Knox Grammar School. The Commission had already investigated the Catholic Church and charitable institutions such as the Salvation Army's children's homes. Now it was the turn of this old independent boys' school.

On the day the Royal Commission hearings into Knox Grammar were to commence, my younger son attended his usual morning chapel service, when the students were asked to bow their heads in prayer. This day they were asked to pray for the headmaster, as he faced a difficult time ahead, and for God to give him strength. My son was shocked: no supplication was given for the survivors of sexual abuse who would be bravely taking the stand to tell their personal stories to the wider world. The school chaplain then told



the boys to ignore the many over-exaggerated media reports that would be flooding the news in the coming days and weeks.

When my son told me how he felt about these events, I was furious. I immediately called the chaplain and asked why he had not mentioned a prayer for the survivors. It was not appropriate, he stated, and he and the teachers had strict instructions not to mention what was happening at the Royal Commission.

These words from a man of God seemed so offensive it prompted me to action. The combined knowledge of my lived experience—emotional, instinctual, maternal and empathetic—and the skills I had as an artist practitioner, along with my years in the advertising industry where I had gained valuable insight into how the media works, came to the fore. All these elements were to merge and become one. I did not see my response as only an ‘artwork’ in the framing that I had previously understood. I had not laboured in a studio, nor did I see this action as exclusively mine. I claim no ownership. As clearly as I can, I describe this as the action of a visual collective voice, or as it is often termed in activist circles, a ‘direct action’.

*While associated with confrontation, direct action at its core is about power. Smart direct action assesses power dynamics and finds a way to shift them.<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Boyd and Dave Oswald Mitchell (eds.), *Beautiful Trouble: A Toolbox for Revolution*. (New York: OR Books, 2012), Kindle Edition Location 2044.

It is imperative to reiterate that this direct action was only made possible by the revelations of the survivors. It was not the school or the authorities who had 'blown the whistle', as was revealed in the subsequent days of the Royal Commission, but these men who saved many more children from falling prey to pedophiles. Charges were only laid because of them. Several of the victims had died, some had taken their own lives, all were plagued by mental illness, yet those still living had found the strength to speak up against an esteemed institution, risking ridicule, disbelief and damaged reputations. The headmaster had apologised for the mistakes made in the past but no-one had ever said to the abuse survivors, 'We as parents will never be able to thank you enough. It is your courage alone that has protected my son and all the boys currently at the school from falling victim to this ring of pedophiles'.

As Jordan says,

*We see 'direct action' as key. If there is a problem, you act directly to solve it. . . It is living as if one was already free. It is all about politics based on ways of doing, it's the art of moulding the world in the way you think it should be now, not waiting for some ideological point of perfection.<sup>13</sup>*

<sup>13</sup> Lieven De Cauter, "Art, Activism, and Permaculture. Interview with Isa Fremeaux and John Jordan" in *Art and Activism in the Age of Globalization*. (Rotterdam: NAI, 2011)

Direct action in this situation was to become a complex series of interrelated moves and countermoves, an agile and adaptive set of strategies. The first was emails sent to key media people, including journalist Peter Fitzsimons, whose son had been in our elder son's year. In these personal emails I outlined what I knew as a current parent and most importantly how I felt: small, impotent, greatly saddened and with a complete lack of faith in the way the institution was handling the situation in protecting its reputation above all else. I wrote that I would be placing a purple ribbon on the main school gate on the Pacific Highway at Wahroonga, a highly visible spot for passing motorists, and was asking friends with children at the school, past and present, to do the same.<sup>14</sup>



Fig 53: Katie Louise Williams, First ribbons placed on Memorial Gate, 2015 Knox Grammar School, Wahroonga, NSW

<sup>14</sup> From the Tyrrhenian purple of Roman times to medieval ecclesiastical robes to royalty through the ages, the colour purple has always symbolized power. What better colour to honour the heroism of the boys and men who spoke out against their abusers.

At 9am on the morning of Monday 2 March 2015 I placed a single purple ribbon on the Memorial Gate at Knox Grammar School. Only one other parent supported my action, adding her own ribbon. With their children still at Knox, I assumed others feared that this unauthorised act was against the school and their sons could be adversely targeted. As Michel Foucault argues in *Discipline and Punish*, the panopticism of institutional power induces society to conform not necessarily by the exercise of disciplinary power but through the internalisation and normalisation of the threat of discipline. Self-censorship is automatic and unobserved.<sup>15</sup>



Fig 54: Early evening breeze catches the ribbons at Knox Grammar School, Wahroonga, NSW.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 195-228.

Throughout the day I watched the gate with interest as others did come forward: a young man driving a trade utility who looked to be in his early twenties; an older woman with grey hair who stood and solemnly tied her ribbon. Slowly the number grew. In the evening a gentle breeze blew the small group of ribbons on the gate.



Fig 55: Article from The Sydney Morning Herald, 2 March 2015

What then transpired was not unpredictable, but it was a response I still find surprising. Later that night the school removed them all. I found this incomprehensible, yet very much in keeping with the attitude that the victims of these crimes were not to be honoured in any way.

Italian performance artist Cesare Pietroiusti notes:

*I think that a good way to define an 'institution' is to outline the fact that most of its efforts go in the direction of a self-confirmation of 'celebration', a continuous effort to give an image of success, of richness, of effectiveness, of power. It's obvious that any critical position will be seen as a menace; and, as I am convinced that the artist's position is basically a critical one, there will be an inevitable contradiction between the artist and the institution.<sup>16</sup>*

By the hurried removal of the ribbons, the school certainly followed Pietroiusti's assertion that this marker was usurping their authority and needed to be erased from the community's eyes and minds as quickly as possible.

Now the power of social media and the Twitter account I had set up came into play. Called *Concerned @ Knox* it has the tagline 'All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing'.<sup>17</sup> I had alerted the media to the account and had gained a large group of supporters by following others on Twitter. That evening I posted, 'So sad to drive by the Knox gate and see ribbons removed', and took myself off to bed.

<sup>16</sup> Sholette, Pietroiusti & Bloom, "Folds of an Institution" in *Groups and Spaces E-zine*.

<sup>17</sup> Attributed to British philosopher Edmund Burke



Fig 56: Tweet by Lisa Wilkinson, 2 March 2015 10:07pm

The next morning I awoke to find television presenter Lisa Wilkinson furious on Channel 9's Today Show and an article on the second page of The Sydney Morning Herald expressing outrage at the removal of ribbons honoring the survivors of sexual abuse.<sup>18</sup> A media storm had been ignited. It seemed the school was unavailable for comment, but by 9am a media statement had been released blaming a security guard, unaware of their significance, for the ribbons' removal. Oddly enough, he had kept them all and the school promised to return them to the gate and to fully endorse the event.<sup>19</sup>

Our calculated strategy had paid off. Through an understanding of the matrix of social media and mainstream media, and the leveraging of one against the other, a complex network had been created that allowed not only greater reach, but a situation that the school could not control. It was forced to respond, to reinstate the ribbons, a reminder of their long hidden shame, or

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/knox-grammar-lisa-wilkinson-appalled-by-removal-of-ribbons-20150302-13t8jv.html>. 3 March 2015

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/knox-grammar-royal-commission-ribbons-in-support-of-abuse-victims-retied-to-school-gates/story-fni0cx12-1227245672039>. 3 March 2015

risk being seen as unsupportive of the survivors of abuse. It was left with little choice. The ribbons were returned to the site. Once the institution came out in support of the project the gate filled quickly with ribbons, bunches of flowers and messages of support.

The school's co-opting of *The Ribbons Project* does in some ways fall into the frame of an institution using its power to neutralise a subversive act. But because of the campaign's multilevel nature, many areas slip out of that framing. It would be difficult to control the Twitter dialogue, as our account had created a place for the survivors to have their voices heard safely; several tweeted how supported they felt in seeing the purple ribbons on the gate. One said it was the first time he had ever felt acknowledged and not ashamed.

This form of sharing is in its infancy; blogs and online platforms are springing up daily, Hollaback! and S.A.R.A. (Sexual Assault Report Anonymously) to name just two. These sites support and make a space for those affected by sexual assault to share their stories and feel heard, and can red flag possible perpetrators. Sexual assault is an underreported crime, and having listened to the stories from the Royal Commission it is clear to see why. The emotional and financial cost to the victims of reporting these offences is enormous; it takes courage to come forward and sustained time and energy to move through the often protracted and hostile court system. As Anastasia Powell, senior lecturer on justice at RMIT University states,



*The Internet is providing a new tool for victim survivors to have a voice and be heard with far greater reach and in ways previously not thought possible.<sup>20</sup>*

For me as an instigator of such a site this does raise issues. The world of the Internet is a fraught one, with trolls and unfiltered access both for survivors and perpetrators. The ability to share can be very liberating but can also lead to problems, among them false accusations and further abuse online. This is not to say that it is an area that should not be pursued as a platform for voices but that critical thinking must be applied to the way these forums are set up and networked with both mainstream authorities and other organizations.

The visual impact of the ribbons filling the gate and the ritual with which people came to place them was difficult to nullify; in this way the institution's power and influence was rendered only partial. It does, however, raise the question of the fear instilled into the current and past school population, many of whom felt unable to act if the school did not sanction it.

During this time the Royal Commission continued to hear evidence from past pupils, convicted sex offenders/teachers and former and current headmasters. What became evident was the level of denial of the past headmaster of twenty-nine years (1969-1998) and the subsequent two

<sup>20</sup> Anastasia Powell quoted in Cosima Marriner, "Sexual assault victims find justice online," The Sydney Morning Herald, 24 April 2016, accessed 5 May 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/national/sexual-assault-victims-find-justice-online-20160422-god3vb.html>.

headmasters' failure to do anything about the pedophiles in their midst. There was a constant shifting and passing of blame. All began their testimonies with heartfelt 'sorry' speeches followed by a litany of reasons as to why they were unaware or unable to do anything about the abuse. The phrases 'in hindsight' and 'I can't recall' featured frequently. For the survivors, many of whom were in the courtroom, this must have been yet another lack of acknowledgement of their pain and suffering.

The Royal Commission inquiry into Knox Grammar School and the Uniting Church in Australia began on 23 February 2015 and concluded on 6 March 2015 with one last witness arrested and made to testify on 28 April 2015. This paper is not about dissecting the ins and outs of what was uncovered through the process. At the time of writing, the Commission has not yet handed down its findings, which were originally scheduled for release in October 2015. But it is devastating to know that, had any one of the men working at Knox acted to protect children and not their own and the school's reputation, countless young men's lives would have been saved from permanent damage.

In this I include my own sons, who no longer have faith in authority or institutions. As Adam Brereton, an old boy himself, stated in *The Guardian* on

11 March 2015, 'Old boys of Knox Grammar, like me, will always be marked by how close we came to the abuse there.'<sup>21</sup>

At the conclusion of the hearings the headmaster of Knox sent a note to parents, thanking them for their actions and advising that the ribbons would be archived. In this way, the school was able to claim the ephemeral act as its own. The quick removal of the ribbons also spoke of obliterating the visual sign that sparked interest and then acknowledgement in passersby of the atrocities committed at the school. However, markers like this one are not so easy to erase from people's minds, and once released into the world often have a life of their own; their control is not as easy as mere removal.

On the night of 17 March 2015 a 'town hall' meeting took place at Knox, with parents invited to join the headmaster and staff to discuss their concerns regarding the revelations. Armed with copies of the evidence from the hearings and my own experience of events, I attended not as an outsider but as a concerned insider. The open forum was structured in a way consistent with Foucault's panopticism theory. Parents were placed in raked seating facing the stage in the auditorium in the former Patterson Centre (the name had been removed as a public relations response following the exposure of the previous headmaster, Dr. Ian Patterson, as a main integrant in the systemic cover-up of child sexual abuse). Teachers sat in the front row; the headmaster stood behind a lectern before a large video screen, and

<sup>21</sup> <<http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/mar/11/old-boys-of-knox-grammar-like-me-will-always-be-marked-by-how-close-we-came-to-the-abuse-there.>> 11 March 2015.

addressed the audience.

In a school of 2170 students it is notable that only a small number of parents, at my informal tally about 120, attended the evening. The headmaster's three-hour PowerPoint presentation included the financial implications of court cases brought by victims and the belief that, these events having occurred in the past, barely anyone in the school today would have known the convicted teachers, their names merely something we may hear in a media report.

Asked how he would address all those, like myself, whose sons had been taught by at least two of the convicted child sexual abusers, the headmaster replied that enrolments were up, that Knox was a 21st century institution giving the highest standard of education and was now the safest school in Australia. I saw my challenging of these assertions as another performative element in the overall campaign. My aim was to raise concern in the minds of the parent body that the institution still had not changed many of the crucial problems that allowed the crimes to occur and far from the 'safest school in Sydney', it was still protecting its own reputation. Our son withdrew from the school the next day.

A corollary to *The Ribbons Project* was to take place after the closing of the Commission's hearing into Knox Grammar School and the reopening of investigations into the Catholic Church and its handling of child sexual abuse in the Ballarat diocese in Victoria. The evidence of the extraordinarily large numbers of children abused in that area is now infamous, as are the stories of inaction by a succession of church leaders over many decades.

On 17 May 2015 the Royal Commission began its inquiry into St Patrick's College, Ballarat, a Catholic day and boarding school for boys founded by the Christian Brothers in 1893. That day, headmaster John Crowley posted on the school's website a photograph of himself tying a ribbon to the school gate. He encouraged all members of the community to follow suit 'as a symbol of our support for past students whose lives have been devastated by sexual abuse. It also represents our acknowledgement and ownership of this part of our history and gives the broader Ballarat community the opportunity to join us in this display of support.'<sup>22</sup>

Following this gesture, as the Royal Commission examined Cardinal George Pell's knowledge of the cover-ups of sexual abuse, fences with ribbons began to spring up in numerous places in Ballarat, and as postings on social media allowed the message to spread, the ribbons soon started to appear on fences not only in Australia but around the world, including New York and Rome.

Seeking a voice for Ballarat survivors and their families, a supporter formed the Loud Fence Movement, which adopted ribbons to draw attention to the network. The stories and messages shared through their website echoed the response we had received, but on a scale that was astounding. Reading posts on their Facebook feed I was struck by their similarity to the stories on our Twitter page. I was moved to read one survivor's story: unable to leave his house due to the trauma of childhood sexual abuse by several Catholic priests, when he heard about the ribbons at his old school he ventured out for

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.stpats.vic.edu.au/en/news/article/support-for-victims-and-survivors/>

the first time in many years. As he approached the fence to tie on his ribbon he felt a force field of love and protection around him; each ribbon was a gesture of support and an acknowledgement of his survival.



Fig 57: Ribbons on St Patrick's Ballarat. Image from < <https://www.facebook.com/loudfence/> >

If the children's spirits are broken, society's ability to act against any form of oppression is ended. While in residency at Watch this Space, the collaboration in Alice Springs described in *Chapter Four*, I was privileged to have a discussion with an Indigenous elder, who pointed out that the problems of drugs, alcohol and violence that were endemic in many of the Indigenous groups surrounding Alice Springs stemmed from the removal of children from their parents and some children's subsequent abuse in church and state facilities, and foster and adoptive homes. He simply stated, 'You steal the children, you break the people'.



Fig 58: Victim's Ribbon Tattoo "No More Silence". Screen shot from Loud Fence Facebook page.  
< <https://www.facebook.com/loudfence/> >

*The Ribbons Project* was a work born out of finding a visual voice both for myself and for the children who had suffered at the hands of those entrusted with their care. The marking of the Knox Grammar School Memorial Gates was not for the dead from world wars in distant years past but for the living survivors of abuse, who entered those gates as innocent children with high hopes of bright futures and were gravely let down by the very people who should have protected them.

In reviewing the events in this chapter, several points can be noted. While the project did not entail the 'making' of an object, it is important to be aware that aesthetic choices were made. Socially-engaged art is often characterised as non-aesthetic, or rather 'these practices are less interested in a relational

aesthetic than in the creative rewards of collaborative activity—whether in the form of working with preexisting communities or establishing one’s own interdisciplinary network’.<sup>23</sup> But with *The Ribbons Project*, materiality was a key element, and this was carefully considered to elicit the maximum graphic impact. The colour of the ribbons, for example, was chosen for its symbolic value and as a visual metonym for the victims of abuse.

The gesture of the ribbons sprang from an awareness of being inside the institution and at the same moment able to stand outside it and see its power as flawed. Knowing the institution gave clues as to how to infiltrate it, and how to engage audiences to question that power and to act in a visible way against it. As Brett Bloom notes,

*I think that if you spend too much time working in opposition to institutions that you always do so according to their rules. They determine what is focused on and what is important. This isn’t very interesting. The dichotomy just reinforces the power and cultural authority that the institutions have.*<sup>24</sup>

A non-verbal symbol like a ribbon is not readily co-opted. We did not oppose the institution using its own vernacular but rather through the physical act of tying a ribbon to the school gates. Repeated many times over by members of the community, it enacted a silent statement of protest and in this way the

<sup>23</sup> Claire Bishop, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents” in *Artforum International*. (1 February 2006), 178.

<sup>24</sup> Sholette, Pietroiusti & Bloom, “Folds of an Institution” in *Groups and Spaces E-zine*. July 2001. [http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol\\_2/contributors0/groups&spacertext.html](http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors0/groups&spacertext.html) accessed 4 November 2015.



imposing gates were subverted from symbols of permanence and power to a site of commemoration and shame.

No permission was sought to tie the ribbons. Rather, guerrilla tactics were used, the ribbons placed and the media notified without the school's approval. For this project to succeed careful thought had to be placed on the 'action'. A destructive one, such as defacing or spraying graffiti on the school's property, would gain attention but at the same time adversely reflect on the proponents of the action, with legal issues perhaps rendering difficult the possibility of further protest. Such negativity can be divisive and leaves little room for the audience's critical evaluation of the situation, and the fear of arrest or legal ramifications blocks their ability to join in and act. The ribbons did not in any way deface the school. But they did serve to mark the site of abuse to all those who drove or walked by, acting as an educating tool by inviting the audience to question what they stood for, to look at the school and the gates anew, and to talk to others about what was happening at that site. In effect, to gain new knowledge and question their assumptions.

It was also considered important to employ a multi-level strategy, as Nato Thompson points out:

*Participatory art is vital to any group taking its issues to the streets, because it stresses a commitment to both representation and lived experience. Networked communications and strategies of mass-media penetration are another characteristic of*

*contemporary movements, because ideas and directly embodied struggles simply disappear without a megaphone.*<sup>25</sup>

Placing a ribbon to honour bravery on the Memorial Gate was a strong and singular act for those who made the gesture. But had these actions not operated in conjunction with a social and mainstream media campaign, they would have had limited impact. The ribbons would have numbered a few, the protest short-lived. The combined force of mainstream media (with coverage across a broad range spanning newspapers, television and radio), in combination with a strong presence on the Internet with Twitter (a continually responsive account, posting regularly on the events as they unfolded), the matrix of elements was able to facilitate many things.

The first of these was awareness. When the ribbons were removed by the school, a complex relationship was set in motion. Mainstream media following our Twitter feed responded by re-tweeting and adding their thoughts and condemnation, the message spreading to their vastly larger universe of followers. The 'porous' nature of these multi-media networks created global exposure for the project, with, for instance, the BBC in London seeking an interview.

The ribbons were one aspect of this project. The process of systematically reading through the evidence tendered to the Royal Commission, along with

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, 17.

watching the testimonies of those called to give evidence, was also a crucial part of this work. As documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras notes,

*You come to understand that everything is like a chess game. There is what we pretend is the political reality that we live in and then there are the actual moves underneath.*<sup>26</sup>

My understanding of the institution and its power structures allowed me to operate within the 'folds' of the institution, to use Pietroiusti's expression.

*I think that a critical artistic practice doesn't take any advantage from a frontal contraposition with an oppressive institution. The strategy of complaining of being marginalised, or not considered, is also a losing strategy, because somehow it is too visible, too 'declarative'. I am more interested in strategies that are more lateral. A 'fold' in a system can be seen as an interruption of its internal order, an irregularity in its rigid functioning. Artists can be flexible (easily moving and restructuring) and hopefully smart enough, to exploit the system's 'folds', and work within (or even thanks to) them.*<sup>27</sup>

In embarking on *The Ribbons Project* and indeed this chapter, I continually challenged myself as to the relevance of the project as 'art' and subsequently its inclusion in my thesis. My concerns centred on how personal this work is

<sup>26</sup> Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras, "Techniques of the Observer: Hito Steyerl and Laura Poitras in conversation" in *Artforum.com*. May 2015. <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201505&id=51563> accessed 1 October 2015

<sup>27</sup> Sholette, Pietroiusti & Bloom, "Folds of an Institution" in *Groups and Spaces E-zine*.

to me, and thus its application to the wider world and art. Confronting my learning and notions of what art entails, and doubting the validity of this action, however, opens a space to question the model of art itself and more specifically the way art can really *matter* to an audience.

I could dismiss the campaign as activism or grass roots community work and thus not my art practice. However, what has unfolded since its inception has convinced me otherwise. The scope and reach of pedophilia in a range of institutions in Australia and around the world has been exposed. The levels are beyond even the wildest conspiracy theorist's imaginings. Our most powerful institutions, such as the Catholic Church, have been involved in the cover-up and huge-scale abuse of children over a long period of time. Knox Grammar is just one small example and yet one where I have been able to gain valuable access and a deep understanding of how the institution and power functions. This has wide-ranging possibilities for me as an artist to uncover the structures of authority in all aspects of daily life and make them visible to audiences. What I have also learnt is that one small voice can be heard, and its message can travel far and wide—possibly to challenge power structures and create new networks based on support and empathy.

I have also realised that this work is in no way diametrically opposed to art that sits in the gallery or museum context. I no longer believe that one form of practice needs to lay claim to an avant-garde status that transcends what has gone before. Each form has its value and its constraints and in many ways each can be useful to the other.

At the time of writing this final chapter of my thesis I have agreed to work with John Crowley, headmaster of St Patrick's School Ballarat, to create a form of permanent memorial, using the thousands of ribbons placed on that school's fence. Crowley's progressive and supportive attitude, which puts the wellbeing of children and survivors of abuse as his top priority, has convinced me that it is worth again working within the folds of a much-flawed institution. I am, however, questioning whether the monument or memorial is the most effective tool, and will be working through the opportunities for a more 'active' instrument to memorialise survivors.

In reviewing *The Ribbons Project*, the possibility of gauging its impact is problematic. The scale of the work unfolded over a long period of time and continues to spread and act in the world. As noted in my introduction, traditional artistic critique struggles with the task of assessing work such as this. How does one take into account the myriad, private and unknowable responses to a work in terms of the psychological impact on the audience that participated in one way or another in its creation, evolution, telling and retelling, its dissemination and its mythologising?

In the practice of contemporary art, and in the social and political discourses of the last twenty years, many artists have used the means of activism in their practices. As someone who has always been concerned with collaborating with an audience in a dynamic process where we each go on a journey together, activism was a means that found me at a time when I most needed

it. As socially and politically-motivated performance artist Jeremy Deller puts it, 'I went from being an artist who makes things, to being an artist who makes things happen.'<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Jeremy Deller in Thompson, *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, 17.

## **Conclusion. The Final Curtain**

At the outset of this paper I suggested that there was a new model being negotiated between contemporary artists and audiences, one which recognises the artist not as an originator but rather as a conduit that conducts ideas, and the audience as someone who makes use of the energy of those ideas to bring about their own creation. What I have explored in this thesis is the evolution of the roles of artist and audience, and the changes and modifications that have occurred from the late 1960s to today. Through this analysis many questions have arisen. Is it the role of the artist to create and the audience to observe? Isn't the reverse equally true? Despite Debord's dystopian view of late capitalist culture—much of which has certainly come to pass—it cannot be assumed that the audience simply sees what the artist presents to them. The myriad experiences we each bring to a moment inform our perception and the meanings we make. The possibilities are endless; human imagination is essentially radical.

It may seem obvious to state that the locus of creation is never singular, and that only in the presence of an audience does the actual creation come into being. But why then does the illusion of a passive audience persist? Within our national museums the works are on display, but so too is the audience, who are being observed by gallery security, CCTV cameras and sensors. Perhaps, as Foucault suggests, this experience is seminal and remains with

us even in more loosely constituted environments. Although post-Snowden it is naïve to suppose we are ever unobserved.

For a socially-engaged artist, the creative exchange can never be one-sided. Our imperative is to facilitate situations, environments, paradoxes or incongruencies that enable the audience to *act*. If as stated in *Chapter One*, creating socially-engaged art involves joining with an audience in a community of practice then the first purpose of the artist is to emancipate her audience.

I described in *Chapter Two* how, by remaining attuned to situations, people and moments, artists can deploy tactics to disrupt institutional power or expose its operation within the audience's psyche. Ruptures work on cracks that already exist, embedded in the institutional model. Unlike stunts, which can be purely oppositional, ruptures are like holding a mirror up to a situation to reveal its true nature. When deploying ruptures, the artist does not show truth to power in order to usurp it, but in order to democratise situations and empower audiences to discover their own agency. The use of these tactics involves a degree of social and creative risk, as the outcomes of these interventions cannot be predicted.

The purpose of any institution is to govern the behaviour of people within a given community. So, inevitably, (part of) the purpose of art institutions is to police the boundaries of what art is. As we have already seen, it is not necessary to be within the folds of the institution to be within its influence. However, because space is constituted by social, cultural and economic



practices as well as institutional forces, alternate spaces can be potent tools of audience activation. It is not only the particular unconventional qualities of the alternate spaces described in *Chapter Three* and the philosophies of their directors that make them important, but also their commonplace and unremarkable nature in another sense—parking station, country town—that enables a new mode of making art with and within the community/audience.

The idea of the artist giving up control, or of never having control in the first place, is axiomatic to socially-engaged practice. The relationship between audience and artist is symbiotic and evolutionary and attempts to predetermine outcomes are insincere. The ethics of such practices are beyond the scope of this paper; however, I acknowledge there are important issues to consider, as with any democratic enterprise that intends to stay true to its first principles.

Within socially-engaged practices I have suggested a new definition of collaboration, understood by its purpose rather than its characteristics, which is to dismantle the artist's privileged role and create a space that allows for an equal dialogue to develop between artist and audience. The two are part of a chain of collaborators, and the work once set in motion has a life of its own. After a certain point, it is impossible to discern which is catalyst and which is reactant. Like a Mobius, there is no beginning or end, inside or outside.

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems inevitable that my practice would lead me to something akin to *The Ribbons Project*. This work challenged my

notions of what art entails—to the point of even doubting the validity of this action—yet it opened a space to question the model of art and more specifically the way art can be of consequence to an audience.

My frame has shifted. I see enormous potential in activities, relations and situations that previously I would have dismissed as ‘not art’ and of little interest to me. However, I am acutely aware that many of these works will fall into a marginal space, one that is seen as neither art nor activism. It is an uncomfortable place of existence, as Thomson so accurately notes:

*By being outside of both categories, works that toe the line between didacticism and ambiguity are discarded into critical purgatory.<sup>1</sup>*

I agree that these hybrid works can be condemned to critical purgatory. However, I do not share Thompson’s negative inference. For me working in this marginal zone affords anonymity and the freedom to develop ideas and assemble new knowledge bases unfettered by the constraints of current thinking.

Swamped by images, manipulated by media, click-baited, liked, friended, monitored, meta-data recorded, subsumed into the spectacle. As much as

<sup>1</sup> Thompson. *Seeing Power: Socially Engaged Art in the Age of Cultural Production*. 34.

this is not the natural human condition, it is the situation in which we find ourselves and the place from where, as socially-engaged artists, we have to base our practice. A paradox lies in our wish to oppose these forces, for the act of opposition bestows legitimacy upon the system we oppose. However, after much research, the genesis of a different way of thinking emerged. It represents an alternate way, one which is awake to the world in which we live and yet rebels against this mode of existence, not through frontal opposition but through an understanding of the emancipatory power of radical imagination, shared by artist and audience. In this way the artist becomes a conduit for profoundly different forms of thinking. This thinking becomes subversive through the power and resilience of human imagination that continues to refigure the familiar, reuse, co-opt and destabilise images and ideas, and to offer a fertile site of resistance.

In the past thirty years there has been an uprising of new forms of this type of art practice, loosely termed 'socially-engaged'. These practices share many things in common, including an ability to move easily between modes of engagement with audiences and the sites that audiences occupy, be they institutions in the form of museums, schools, universities or government bodies, or seemingly less constrained sites such as ARIs or the virtual spaces of social media. One aspect of my practice, as outlined in this thesis, has been to unpack the way that sites and social relations inter-operate, and to understand the frameworks and power dynamics that constrain or emancipate them.

## Conclusion. The Final Curtain

The trajectory of my interest in socially-engaged practice can be seen through the progression of my works, which not only slip in and out of institutions—or more accurately are both inside and outside of institutions at the same time; within institutional boundaries and yet managing to slide outside of their power structures—but which also critically and intrinsically involve working collaboratively with audiences to co-create works that overthrow the rigid duality of artist/audience.

Artworks developed in these marginal zones between audience and artist often go unacknowledged (as art), and it is for this very reason they are able to become such potent tactical forms of infiltration of power, shining a light on the invisible to make it visible. It is at these sites of energy transferal that much of the exciting and innovative work in contemporary socially-engaged practice is being created. And it is here that audiences can discover a new articulation of their resistance.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was asked after a presentation on *The Ribbons Project*, 'What next? What is your plan to proceed and attach yourself to other causes and use your skills?' This is a complex issue for me, as the final project of my candidature is one that I never would have predicted. It was not a cause that had alerted my interest any more than a number of other issues of social justice. Yet when presented with a highly personal reason to confront power and the abuse that was able to occur because of it, I was able to draw upon my years of art

training and advertising to fashion a set of tools which ultimately enabled a whole community to find its voice and to act.

Through this action, questions have arisen that have profoundly affected the way I view my relationship to others and the world that surrounds us. I am increasingly uncertain of rigid distinctions between what is art and what is life. Art and life coexist, as they most certainly always did. The questions that arise affect every aspect of how I now go about my daily living. It is no longer possible for me to have a well-read version of what constitutes community or the concept of power, without a clear and very practical understanding of how I operate in that context. To fully comprehend how to be a part of a community I had to understand what it means to lose what I initially understood as my community. In terms of *The Ribbons Project*, I had to become an audience member myself and in doing so let go of any preconceptions I held. Many long-standing beliefs on friendship, authority and family changed as the project progressed.

Will a situation like this occur again? Do I wish to continue an activist practice that addresses power imbalances? How, when, where and what this might look like is beyond my imagining at this point. However, what this PhD has opened for me is a less narrow way of viewing what is possible. In presenting the final creative component for this PhD I have had to confront again the constraints of the institution and question myself on the validity of displaying documentation of what has unexpectedly become the last work of my

#### Conclusion. The Final Curtain

candidature. For this seems to be opposite to the aims of my project—which was to activate an audience through mindful participation.

This intense questioning has again challenged my framing. I can see that the site of examination and exhibition allows the possibility to extend this work and to reinvent it in a new iteration. The span of what could be open to me, in continuing my research, ranges from teaching, community art, political lobbying, civil disobedience, electronic hacktivism—any and all of these could be tools to reveal new ways of relating and, as I still consider myself an artist, I believe they become art.

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2012



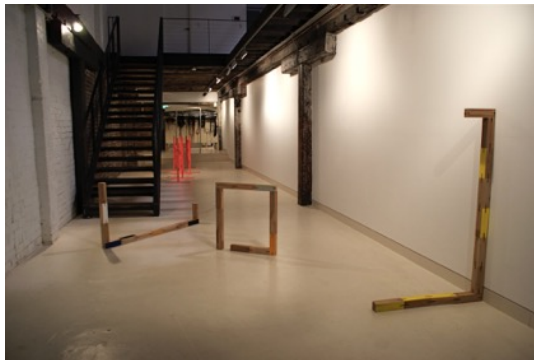
Williams, Katie Louise. 2012.  
*The Conductor*. Triple skin  
copper Faraday cage,  
dimensions 2.3m x 1.1m x  
1.1m. Paddington, NSW: Roslyn  
Oxley9 Gallery.



Williams, Katie Louise. 2012.  
*The Conductor*. Triple skin  
copper Faraday cage,  
dimensions 2.3m x 1.1m x  
1.1m. Paddington, NSW: Roslyn  
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installation, dimensions variable.  
Alberta, Canada: Philosopher's  
Knoll, The Banff Centre for the  
Arts Canada.



Williams, Katie Louise. 2012.  
*LOL*. Manipulable block sets x 3,  
dimensions variable. Materials:  
wood, paint and elastic cord.  
Leichhardt, NSW: Articulate  
Project Space.



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2013



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*Distanciation*. Installation, whole gallery space, performance and inhabitation. Alice Springs, NT: Watch This Space Gallery.



Williams, Katie Louise; French, Hayley Megan; Kean, Richard; Liesch, Carla. 2013.  
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Articulate Project Space.



ek.1. 2013. *Here/Elsewhere 1*.  
Installation, multi-channel video  
work. Leichhardt, NSW:  
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projection. Leichhardt, NSW:  
Articulate Project Space.





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*Only Connect: Thread*. Rozelle,  
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Williams, Katie Louise. 2013.  
*Only Connect: Thread*. Rozelle,  
NSW: Arterreal Gallery.

2014



ek.1. 2014. *Enchanted Pose 1*.  
Video and live performance.  
Materials: concrete plinths, 1.5m  
diameter artificial turf ball, 5m x  
0.4m runner print of water.  
Hawthorn, Victoria: Town Hall  
Gallery.



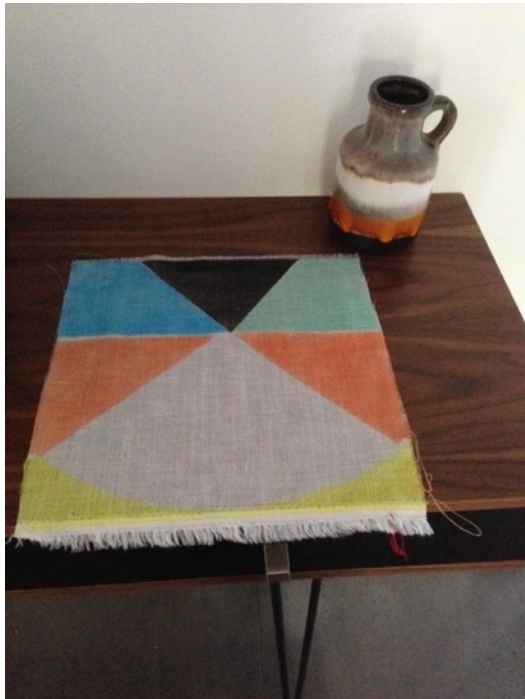
ek.1. 2014. *Enchanted Pose 1*.  
Video and live performance.  
Materials: concrete plinths, 1.5m  
diameter artificial turf ball, 5m x  
0.4m runner print of water.  
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Gallery.



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and exhibition. Video of multiple  
location performance, installation  
of objects and live performance.  
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location performance, installation  
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Rozelle, NSW: Sydney College  
of the Arts, Main Gallery.



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*Prototype for 'Australian Painting  
Now' exhibition*. Scale prototype  
of curtain depicting a painting by  
Sonia Delaunay, to be made into  
a transparent curtain, to be  
placed in the gallery's large  
shopfront window. Never shown  
due to curatorial restriction.  
Chippendale, NSW: MOP  
Gallery.



Williams, Katie Louise. 2014.  
*Here/Before*. Kings Cross, NSW:  
Alaska Projects.

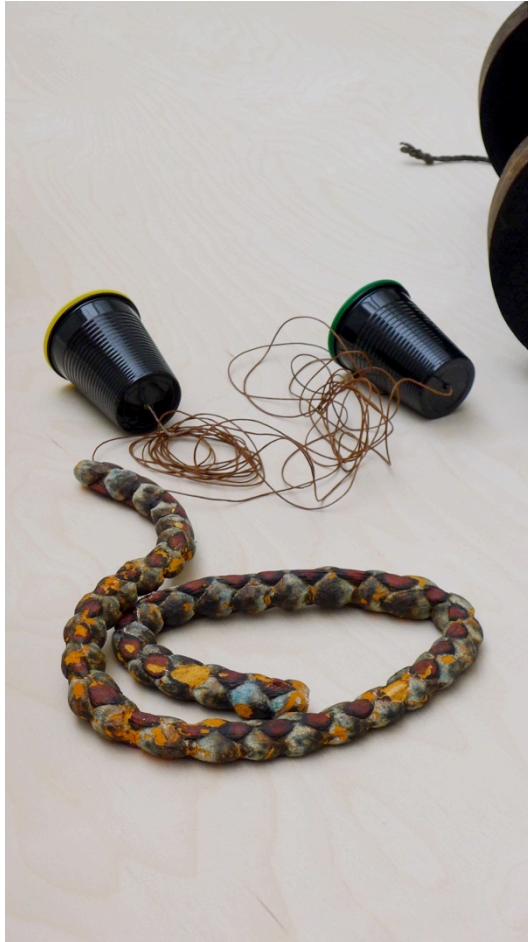


ek.1. 2014. *Untitled*.  
Wahroonga, NSW: Grace  
Cossington Smith Gallery.



ek.1. 2014. *Landscape Too*.  
Photographic print and video.  
Marrickville, NSW: Airspace  
Projects.

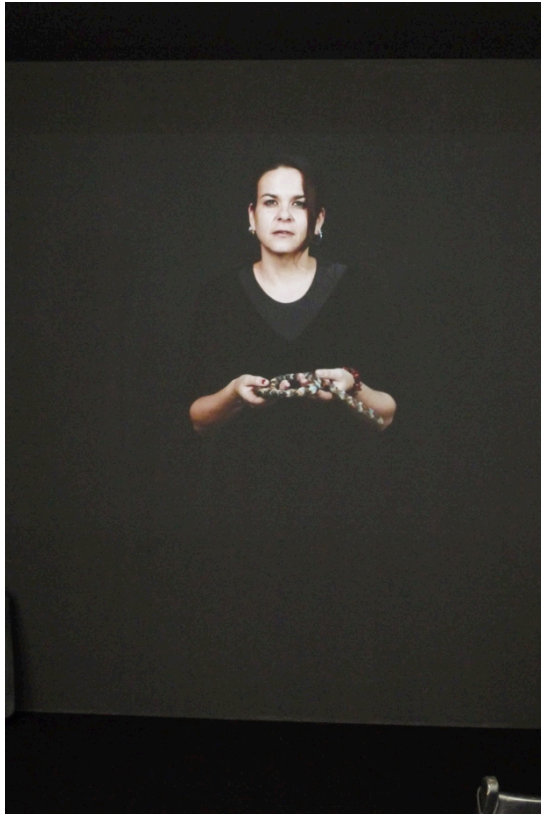
2015



ek.1. 2015. *Beyond the Final Cut*. Filmed performance and object, film 'prop' of umbilical cord (photographed with other objects). Prague, Czech Republic: Quadrennial of Performance, Design and Space.



ek.1. 2015. *Beyond the Final Cut*. Filmed performance and object, film 'prop' of umbilical cord. Prague, Czech Republic: Quadrennial of Performance, Design and Space.



ek.1. 2015. *Beyond the Final Cut*. Filmed performance and object, film 'prop' of umbilical cord. Prague, Czech Republic: Quadrennial of Performance, Design and Space.



Williams, Katie Louise. 2015.  
*The Ribbons Project*.  
Community direct action project.  
Wahroonga, NSW: Knox  
Grammar School Memorial Gate.



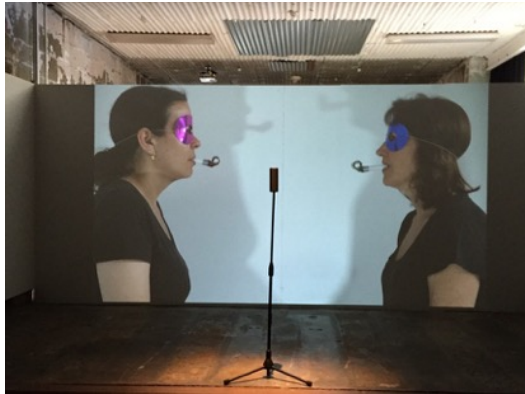
*The Ribbons Project*. The  
Guardian Online article. 11  
March 2015.



ek.1. 2015. *Escape Artists*.  
Video performance. Cockatoo  
Island, NSW: Underbelly Arts  
Festival.



ek.1. 2015. *It's Subjective*.  
Video. Concourse at  
Chatswood, NSW: Willoughby  
Visual Arts Biennale.



ek.1 2015. *The Telling of Re-  
telling: Forgotten Forces*.  
Installation of film, audio and  
text. Rozelle, NSW: Sydney  
College of the Arts.



ek.1 2015. *Here/Elsewhere 2*.  
Multi-channel video, cathode ray  
tube televisions. Terrey Hills,  
NSW: Eramboo Artist  
Environment.





ek.1 2015. Lecture  
Performance. Rozelle, NSW:  
Sydney College of the Arts.

2016



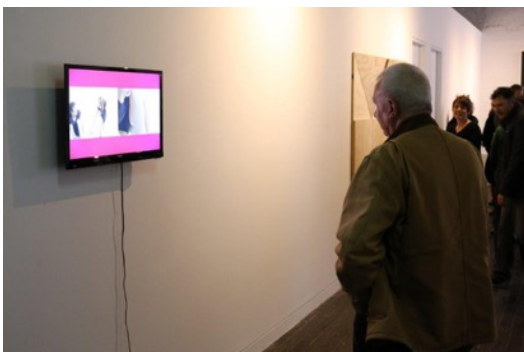
ek.1. 2016. *Beyond the Limits of Location*. Single channel video, 5 minutes. Berlin, Germany; Manilla, Philippines; London, UK: Transart Triennial 2016.



ek.1. 2016. *Beyond the Limits of Location*. Single channel video, 5 minutes. Berlin, Germany; Manilla, Philippines; London, UK: Transart Triennial 2016.



ek.1. 2016. *No Place Like Home*. Single channel video, 5-minute loop. Leichhardt, NSW: Articulate Project Space.



ek.1. 2016. *No Place Like Home*. Single channel video, 5-minute loop. Leichhardt, NSW: Articulate Project Space.

## **Catalogue of Work presented for examination**

Katie Louise Williams, *Time Capsule*. 2016.

Materials: Grade 304 stainless steel, cylindrical capsule, tungsten inert gas welded seams, neoprene closure seal, top bolts and dome nuts, argon gas charging fittings, pressure tested. To be argon-charged once filled prior to sealing.

Dimensions: 500mm height, 315mm inside diameter, unfilled weight 29kgs, volume 38.7L.

### Contents

35 images of tactics used by SOS SCA and Save Sydney College of the Arts Resistance (SCAR) to challenge the University of Sydney's proposed merger of SCA with UNSW Art & Design

Map of the original SCA buildings and uses, photographically reproduced from metal original

Archival-grade reproductions of newspaper articles pertaining to the struggle and its broader context, politically and socially, in NSW in 2016

Recorded interviews with students and staff of SCA (including Sony MP3 player, with power cord, for playing in 100 years time)

Archival-grade reproductions of catalogues from selected SCA degree shows during the school's tenure at Callan Park

Video recording (MP4) of interviews with prominent SCA alumni including Ben Quilty and Jane Campion

List of all alumni of SCA from Callan Park period

A red protest cape, designed for the SOS SCA direct action protest at AGNSW Archibald Prize Opening

Protest t-shirt

Protest paint brush and media flyer designed for the SOS SCA direct action

Hand painted banner for the 'storm the senate' direct action protest

Instructions for operating material in time capsule

Letter to the future

All texts, articles and photographic images will be copied and reproduced on acid free archival paper. Other items will be added to the time capsule up until its placement in SCA grounds.





## Appendix 1: Transcripts of Interviews

### Ian Milliss

Interview 20 June 2016, Katoomba NSW

Ian Milliss: I had all sorts of problems all the way along. Just even navigating the first bit, not exhibiting was a difficulty in itself. I've just done an exhibition in Melbourne, *The Problem of Remuneration*, or something like that, where they specifically asked me if I could do two works. It's about how artists accommodate capitalism, why do you accommodate it, you are it. The whole thing is we're in denial, and I said that.

But they specifically asked me to do two works from the 1970s. One of them was *Life in One Room*, which has only ever been shown once since, and I made a bit of a joke because I redid it out of Santa Snow [laughs], which makes it look really silly [laughs]. The work was a serious work in fact, but I thought how do I deal with it in this context, because it's not actually possible to remake it, and you somehow or other undermine it in a way while showing it. So I made it in Santa Snow.

Katie Louise Williams: That's great!

IM: But that made it a bit unreadable, so I made it again quite beautifully in fact, it was much better than the original. But anyway, there was that work . . .

KW: Then it becomes an artefact rather than . . .

IM: Well no, because it's a temporary work. You just wash it off the floor. In its original form people actually walked on it, and it disappeared before the

exhibition was even over. In Melbourne it doesn't get walked over, which is both good and bad.

They also wanted me to do a work about the Artworkers Union. So I did a big thing, it looks like a school photo, of most of the first committee members, the first bunch of people who set up the Artworkers Union, with me in the middle holding a cardboard box on which we'd written 'Artworkers Union'.

It's actually pretty much—maybe 80 per cent of the activist people in the art world around 1979, so it's a good photo. What I linked them to was a little essay about 'how do you get from one point to another', because one of them was about isolation in the art world and the other was about forming solidarity groups and collaboration.

There's an almost ten-year gap between them. *Life in One Room* in 1975 was the last thing I exhibited for about 20-something years. That wasn't quite intentional, because I did have another exhibition that collapsed, in 2013.

KW: It's a long time!

IM: Yes! But I was faced with a problem, the things I wanted to do didn't really work in exhibit-able terms. The normal institutional definition of art, since post-Duchamp and certainly post-conceptual art, has been 'art is what the institutions say it is'. But I keep pointing out, actually it's not that at all. Art is what can be exhibited by the institutions and that's a different thing altogether.

KW: absolutely.

IM: If it can't be made in exhibit-able form it's not art as far as they're concerned. The reason they want it in exhibit-able form is that's they're business model. They have premises, they have walls, they have the buildings, they push people through to look at the stuff, that's they're business model. So it has to be in that mould. And in fact they create art.



Artists have this complete delusion that somehow or other they're in control of art. It's nonsense. They're not. They are basically supported and conditioned and controlled, they're basically sub-contractors supplying the content. And that's the thing that most artists are in complete denial over. Again and again, in some unconscious way, people keep trying to bring it back to that.

Even in 1971 before those institutions really existed, or were barely coming into existence, I had already started to see this is the problem, so by the time of *Life in One Room* I was beginning almost to parody it.

There were some models in a way, there was Mail Art and stuff like that, but I didn't want to go into Mail Art because that was still making artefacts. I did do a different type of Mail Art, where I sent instructions to my friends about how to do things to their living spaces, because I was doing all these installations. I started sending instructions to people, 'Why don't you sleep in this other room?' or 'Why don't you do this or that.' I thought all of them had disappeared except it turned out that the National Gallery [of Australia] had one, so there's one still in existence. But that was sort of the point where I stopped warping it into exhibit-able form.

KW: Did something happen – how did that change happen?

IM: It was a weirdly logical progression, because by that stage I'd stopped being even influenced by anyone overseas. I was only about 20, 21, but I'd already been exhibiting for three or four years, I'd gone through a whole series of work, a really huge series of work, starting with big geometric paintings, going through conceptual stuff and participatory art and installation. Really what was happening, you can see the logic of it, I was always looking at the wider context. So when I started making paintings I began looking at the wall. Then I started playing around with the gallery space, and then I started to notice the people, so I started doing works that basically made the audience do things.

KW: Which is exactly what I do. I was so weird, I hadn't seen your Tug-o-War piece before, and the last actual work I made a couple of years ago was a threading piece, a giant board where people could thread on either side and create a thing. But then it still came to the problem that I think you're about to talk about . . .

IM: Well the context just got wider and wider and wider. There were other elements in this too, because I didn't want to become a social realist painter, but I was frustrated by the lack of connection to reality of formalist art, because I'd come out of high formalism and I still have it to some extent. I really don't think it's good enough to just portray something, you've got to have a formal structure in there as well as a subject. There is this real thing between content and form, they've got to go together in a much more complex way. And if you're doing something that's really interesting, chances are you're being innovative about the form as well as just what you're putting in it. As far as the content, or as far as the meaning.

So I got people doing things and by the time of *Life in One Room* I'm starting to think, OK, it's not just a case of people doing things, it's a case of the social world. How do people interact with each other, how is politics happening, how do social formations happen and so on. So it suddenly it went back to something you just look at, but it's a full-scale drawing on the floor of a room which basically consists of somebody asleep and information sources. There's nothing else in it really. It seemed weird but logical to me at the time that this was the way the world would go, or could go.

And I also realised in retrospect that this has some parallels with Aboriginal culture in a way. It has an incredibly low level of material culture and a really high level of complex storytelling and song, and . . . intangible culture. And it's also the way a lot of people live now. Slowly, especially as neoliberalism applies and people are becoming more impoverished, people live in second life, they live in their heads really, they live in a virtual world that is much richer

than the physical world is becoming for them—being constantly ground down and impoverished.

Sometimes as an artist you do something that is really prescient but you don't know it at the time, it doesn't read like that. Later on you can impose an entirely different reading on it that makes you understand the world.

KW: What you're talking about is so much predictive of what's . . .

IM: Yes, but I didn't even think it was predictive and that's one of those weird things about being an artist, you're sometimes picking up on stuff that's not necessarily obvious to other people.

KW: I think it's—I don't want to say intuition, but you're sifting through all the bits and it's coming out and sometimes it takes you a year, ten years, whatever it is to actually understand what it was you were filtering.

IM: I'm not at all mystical about that, but what I do think is that it's a process of cultural adaptation so you're obviously, as you say, filtering things ...

KW: But I think you're attuned to them as well because you're trying to put things together and you're questioning things, and because of that you pick up on certain things.

IM: That's right, but you see what happened around then . . . I keep finding bits of them and getting really embarrassed by them . . . I did these little things where I described what I was doing. "I'm trying to create an organisation" or "I'm trying to make a political party" or "I'm just doing a manifesto" but what I kept saying was, it's about relationships. So there are all these little documents, which is a bit embarrassing; a lot of stuff's embarrassing when you see it years later . . .

KW: Yes, but that's your initial thinking process right there, it's kind of precious.

IM: Half formed and . . . and you also think, that's wrong, that's not the way to do it. Things change around you as well and you think, OK, here's the opportunity, let's actually do art world stuff which could parallel real world stuff in some way.

I picked up on the Artworkers Coalition in New York and there were other people in the world thinking like this, so I thought this is actually a logical progression out of conceptualism, and I should actually do this. The fact that there was a thirty-year hiatus before it really became public again doesn't change the fact that the real first bit of it was people like me in the 70s. There were others, there were plenty of other people all over the world, who saw this engagement with communities and the public and just everyday life as the next step in conceptualism, the most radical step.

And so through a variety of means, I was involved with the Contemporary Art Society and I ended up on the committee, they seconded me after I kicked up a stink about something. We'll put you on the committee, you sort it out yourself smarty-pants! So suddenly I was on the committee. I became editor of the CAS Broadsheet. There were only about two or three art magazines in Australia under various names, Art and Australia for instance. Regularly one would start and have one issue and then die. And there was the Contemporary Art Society Broadsheet, which was really only a couple of Roneoed pages but I turned it into something that was about 40 forty pages thick. I did what I now do on Facebook. When I look back on it, it's really quite hilarious. Because I pinched things from all over the place and ran them, articles from magazines, all that radical stuff that was happening in New York, I had people like the Guerrilla Art Action Group sending me things.

The Artworkers Coalition put out an artist's contract so I printed out thousands of copies and we gave them out from the Contemporary Art Society to all the galleries around Sydney, and the artists were horrified by it as were the dealers. "No, no, art's a vocation" . . .

KW: I don't need to be paid, I love it!

IM: It would just piss off my dealer anyway if I actually made some rules.

KW: And I don't want to lose my dealer!

IM: It was really quite enlightening in its strange way. But that was almost like the Situationists' provocation, where you do something and you suddenly discover what the limits are.

I did that for about a year or so, with Alan Oldfield of all people and his partner Jim Davenport. They were really supportive of me.

During that time the first Green Bans started and I got involved in them because it struck me, just out of the blue, these guys are doing exactly what I was talking about. They've got one tool, which is their ability to withhold labour, one simple little provocative tool and they're using it to create these situations which are enormously influential, have enormous consequences, and totally change the way people think about stuff.

One of the articles I read was by Henri Lefebvre, about urbanism and the city as a common right, that classic Lefebvre line. I really agreed with it, this is what's going on here, this is this stuff in action. And it was what I would like to do. I was talking about people changing their bedroom, I want them to actually change their suburb, change their whole city.

Also, by grim fluke, where I lived was just near Victoria Street, so I got dragged into all the development battles that were going around it and the setting up of the Victoria Street Resident Action Group. It's a long time ago, but the Victoria Street Resident Action Group was the most violent scary resident action group, it was like urban guerrilla stuff, people got bashed up and killed, just terrifying. You discovered the real underbelly of society. Some of the people who were there went on to become journalists who exposed the police corruption and the political corruption, the first wave of all that.

KW: and it's happening again, it's . . .

IM: It's happening all over again. But there was in fact some degree of reform and we triggered it off, it wasn't just Green Bans and buildings, it was us, we triggered off this whole stuff around police and developer corruption, government corruption. We actually got politicians gaoled, but it was really gruesome stuff.

KW: Because you're dealing with people with extraordinary amounts of power.

IM: I've never had the same view of the world around me, because I learned when I was twenty-one. If you really challenge their power, they'll kill you. Don't delude yourself about it, do not delude yourself about it, ever. And it makes you look paranoid, and a conspiracy theorist, but . . .

KW: I've said the same thing.

IM: . . . be an adult, be serious about what you're dealing with.

KW: It's a hard line isn't it to be dealing with power at that level. It's the same level I've been dealing with child abuse, somebody said to me "Yes but what's the worst thing that can happen?" And I said, "You can die, or your children can die." And they said, "Oh, as if that's . . ."

IM: you don't get it do you.

KW: I stopped speaking because I thought, you don't understand on a very deep level what that means. How do you navigate going forward and still work in that manner with a family and people you love.

IM: Well, trouble is I don't have a family.

KW: Too late for me!

IM: But it's true. You know that Francis Bacon quote, about hostages to fortune. It's not a nice world, you have to face up to that. I remember when I started coming back into the art world, after doing the Artists Union stuff, in the 1990s, the art world treated me like I was some jackbooted thug. I was just too hard, too heavy, whereas the Union people treated me like I was this woozy bloody princess because I was interested in art. So the contrast between the two was hilarious. Just by being incredibly normal I was too hardline and scary for the art world.

KW: I know exactly that feeling. I gave a presentation last year and at the end of it there was just dead silence. I had worked on exposing what I had done in a really methodical way so it could be understood and it couldn't be dismissed and at the end no one could say anything. I walked out and thought I'm not in that world at all, they don't accept what I'm doing. They kind of understand it but in their minds they're thinking, "This is not art, she's scary."

IM: This is what happened to me in the 70s. Because I was quite clear about what I was doing, I had a whole theory of it. In lots of ways it hasn't changed much over 30 or 40 years. It's become more elaborated, and there's definite evidence of that. Graeme Sturgeon wrote a history of Australian sculpture up to 1975 and I've got a page or two in it where he has a whole description of what I'm doing. The first description in the world, I reckon, of social practice. He actually makes it quite clear about me working with social structures and what I thought I was doing with *Room*. It's really clear, I was describing it like that, he understood it like that, there was no question about what was going on. But all through the art world, because I really had got a lot of publicity—of that generation coming through there was Tim Johnson, Peter Kennedy, and Neil Evans and me, later on there was Mike Parr and Imants Tillers. But that's the generation.

Tim and I were the ones who got the most publicity early on, so everybody was expecting big things, as they say, and suddenly they'd say I'd given it up,

He's stopped being an artist. And I would say, "No I haven't, you just don't get it." It became second nature in the end. There were times when I said, "Oh yeah, well maybe I have given it up, I don't know," but I still kept on doing stuff. And I'd use those art skills and was actively involved in the art world.

The Artworkers Union came out of what I did but also what Viv Binns did. Then Ian Burn and others came back and there were a lot of people involved in it. Probably the point where it started was with the Contemporary Art Society distributing the Artworkers Coalition contract, because that then helped trigger off protests against the Biennale and the Biennale protest triggered off mentioning the formation of the Artworkers Union. So the sequence of things where early on I was the one isolated person, suddenly there was two or three of us and then there were ten of us and then . . .

KW: How did it operate differently as a group, not just you?

IM: I never operated as any sort of leader, because I wasn't. People were all equally involved. Just slowly ideas become everybody's ideas, not just one person's. You can be seen as one of the leaders, which was always what I was, but I was never into that Messianic stuff. Now because I talk about it a lot I probably look like I was much more egotistical about it. But I talk about it because I'm one of the few people left who were there. Unless we actually talk about the history . . . I've become much more the focus of it because I try to keep the history of it alive.

KW: I think that's important because otherwise my generation of artists coming up don't know about it and they're repeating some of the things, but repeating it in a slightly different way, because now it's in vogue.

IM: it's a different world

KW: it's a different world, and what you predicted has happened. And now it's subsumed back into the institution and you have to be really careful about that.



IM: That's another whole interesting debate. We'll get to that.

KW: I think that's important to talk about as well.

IM: So I just kept doing all this political stuff, and other stuff as well, the Yeomans thing, the farming stuff, and I was interested in trade unionis. What I was interested in in fact was cultural evolution. I was interested in all of the things that people do that move the culture along because the world never stays the same and people's understanding of it has to keep changing. What are the things that make that understanding explicit and bring it out. That's what art at its best is and what it claims to be, but art as we talk about it isn't that. It's actually a parasitic marker that deals in these sorts of product.

So I just turn the whole definition on its head and say, "Look at the people who are doing the cultural adaptation: they're the artists." That means you're not necessarily going to find them in the art world, in fact most of them you won't find in the art world.

Hey, here's this farmer called P. A. Yeomans, we should do an exhibition in the Art Gallery of New South Wales about him to explain this idea. And that's what the Yeomans exhibition was all about. Here is this culturally major figure involved in sustainable farming. He turned out to be hugely influential in actual fact. He was known before then but not he way he turned out to be over time. Most people probably wouldn't even have heard of him at the time, but he was extraordinarily important.

KW: I was working with an activist overseas, and he set up a whole farm in France based on Yeomans's ideas.

IM: My exhibition never happened. So I was looking for people like Yeomans to explain that concept to people. i.e. Look at people who are cultural innovators. They're what you should be looking at. What should institutions be doing? They should be having exhibitions about cultural innovators. They shouldn't be having exhibitions of people who manufacture decoration. Or

manufacture [missed word] for the art market. Which is not to say that that can't be interesting, but it not necessarily can be work that's significant.

So it wasn't just that I didn't do stuff that looked like the art world and didn't necessarily fit into the exhibiting format, I was also running a lie. Which was, once people thought it through and realised that it was them I was talking about and they didn't like it—more or less attacking them without attacking them personally, attacking in the sense of identity and what they were doing, and their sense of importance by being artists—I had all sorts of hostility. But I also got a huge amount done. The stuff we did with trade unions was spectacular, really spectacular. And also the work I did with the Australia Council like the *Art and Working Life* program, which they actually did off their own bat. It was invented by a woman, Deborah and Ian Burn and I did the theoretical work and the publicity, we did a huge amount of work for it. And that was again tackling the same idea. It is the cultural activity that's important, not manufacturing art, it's social relations that are important. What we'd done was our media stuff for the unions/ We'd effectively set up the first social marketing agency and we used trade unions to do it. All we did was sell ideas. Everybody else was selling balloons and we were selling ideas.

Also underlying it really strongly, in fact, was Dale Kelly. He and I had worked out this whole thing about how we could network things—like the way social media can build up disparate audiences so it doesn't have a mass audience but it has a lot of links to small audiences—we could write articles and run them in ten or twenty different trade union journals so we could actually both rationalise the production of this stuff in a business sense. But we could also create an alternative to mass media.

KW: So it ran parallel to the mass media, but did you ever link in with the mass media and use it as a tool? Because I think that's interesting in terms of what's happening now where you can actually play mass media off social media, you can use social media to influence mass media.

IM: In that sense we did. What we effectively did was create an industry because apart from the ones we did, we created an opening for other people. You've got to remember that trade union media had become just virtually a standover operation. Basically they just went up to employers and demanded they put an ad in this junior journal, and the people who ran those systems then gave the union the magazine for free. It just consisted of a whole page of type and then three pages of advertising. Just unreadable rubbish. We turned them into things like mass media publications. They looked like mass media. We based them on, say, *Who* magazine.

KW: So it became something that people actually wanted to get and read.

IM: Yes. And instead of fighting the mass media, in a way we used the mass media as in, you understand that stereotype so we'll use it, we'll meet those production standards, but we'll just put in entirely different content. So it was a sort of détournement. We took the mass media and used it against itself. And there's a pretty strong argument that that is one of the things that won key things like the unwinnable election. By that stage we had the whole trade union movement's media, what we had done became so widespread. Initially there were only one or two then eventually everybody took to it, by that stage the trade union movement could run whole campaigns across the massive union movement, which they hadn't been able to do, through their publications. We just demolished Hewson and his GST stuff, for instance, endless things like that.

KW: Extraordinary that you'd set up a platform that allowed for that sort of change to happen.

IM: But again, it spread out so much and involved so many people that in a way you can't claim any credit for it. So you're the little spark that set it off, this gigantic bushfire! For example the first real news networking thing we did was something I sold to the Australia Council. I convinced the Australia Council to let me do the *Art and Working Life* things as a news service. We'd

write an article and lay it out, print it on quality paper and send the printed pages to all the unions and then just cut and paste it in, so they had an instant page without having to do a thing. We got *Art and Working Life* articles through every trade

That became the model the ACTU used to run its own news service as a way of standardising articles through them. But there ended up being organisations in every state, in NSW there were two or three. One of them eventually superseded us. Well after I got out of it there was the big one called Social Change Media, so effectively we took over this industry. And that's not an artwork, but it is an artwork.

KW: Well to me that *is* an artwork.

IM: The other point about that is, consciously, rather than just saying "Oh I was involved in activist politics", that isn't what I was doing. Political stuff's a different thing. What I was doing was targeting what I could see as weak points where you might be able to do a little thing that would just have it. As I was saying, the builders labourers only had one tool, you find one little thing which will spread.

IM: And the reason why it's art in another sense, or it's cultural stuff, is because what you're doing is about meaning. It's about making people understand something else about the world and refocus the way they actually deal with the world as well.

The political stuff, the legislation, all that sort of thing comes afterward as a consequence of it. That never happens until people have changed their understanding of the world. They have to do the actions which is change their understanding of the world.

So that was my attitude, but everybody said I'd given up art.

KW: Because you weren't making things!

IM: Because I wasn't exhibiting things. And that kept going into the early nineties. That actually was the end of my life in the union movement because that was as far as I could go. I couldn't do anything much more there without becoming . . . by that stage I was working for just one union, I'd had a big fight with others in union media service and we ended up having management problems.

KW: was that about the really fast growth of the business model you'd set up?

IM: Yes, under-capitalised and badly managed because we didn't know how to run it.

KW: But that's interesting too.

IM: That's a whole other story but yes, it is interesting.

So I could either keep on and just do that again and again or I could think, OK, where do I go from here.

KW: And also does that keep changing or does that become an institution in itself that you have to keep tending. For me the idea of really being an artist is actually finding the thing that can keep shaping culture and changing it.

IM: That's right. So in a sense I just left it to everybody else, let them play with it.

KW: Freeing yourself from that leaves you to get on to the next thing.

IM: But what happened to me in the 90s, I was really tired, isolated and I didn't go much to art galleries anymore, only occasionally. There were still plenty of people around who knew me, failed artist, or he's given it up. And then, about 1990, Rob Lindsay, who'd been the curator of Australian art at the National Gallery of Victoria, left the NGO and started a gallery and asked

me if I would have a show. I thought, “Mmm, 1971, it was nearly twenty years” and I said I would. I was doing lots of things on the computer at the time so I just did this really personal computer work.

Then I thought, “I’ve done all this really radical stuff, I haven’t actually done any conservative stuff’. I didn’t want to go back and become a landscape painter but I just thought, there are all these other things. I’m talking about all these different ways you can be an artist, I should play around with even more of them. So I started backtracking and playing around with various things.

But I also continued to do other things, I worked in film distribution, I did computer stuff, I ended up making my living in computer programming. I now know so much about things you wouldn’t want to know about, KPIs and hotel booking systems and financial management, I did a lot of work for financial management companies so I really know how capitalism works.

KW: I think that’s probably our most important tool going forward, data management and understanding of how the data is being used.

IM: This is why I harp on, on Facebook, about open source, open standards, you gotta understand this stuff.

KW: It’s interesting watching the young generation and the brands they’re building on Instagram. Some of my sons’ friends have a million followers, but they don’t understand the platform is the power, so their brand is in a perilous relationship to the vehicle it’s been built on. Because their brand has too much power, a lot of them have been taken down by the owners of the platform. The kids are shocked: “My brand, my followers!” They don’t understand their followers are not theirs because they were gained on a platform that they have no control over. If you don’t understand the platform you’re working on, you’re in real strife.

IM: That’s so true. And even if you’re working on something really obvious like Facebook, you’re really vulnerable. I used Facebook hugely, I use it every day.

KW: Do you play with it? The way that your profile is, is your age always your age, has it always been since you first set up?

IM: Oh yeah, yeah. This was a reaction to stuff like *Art Live*, where everybody was using fake names and Anonymous. People used to read the comments and see my name, where you didn't know who everybody else was. I used to say, "That's because I'm prepared to stand by my comments and most people in the art world are too cowardly." They think they're being real smarty-pants attacking me and I can't know who they are.

KW: Well you know who they are by their comments. I know who that is.

IM: What I decided to do on Facebook is just run a news service. I read dozens of things every day, if it's at all intelligent or interesting I'm going to link it up. I have dozens of things every day, and I do all the silly things, I have cat pictures and crap, but I also have serious heavy-duty intellectual stuff, it's a whole mixture. It goes through waves. Once I had lots of Japanese architecture, because I love it. I'll have interior decoration, I'll have anything, just things that catch my eye.

KW: So you're not pigeonholing yourself in one particular area, people are not going to just block it out and ignore it because you go from a cat picture to a piece of Japanese architecture to something heavy about what's going on politically in one particular area. Because I think if you bombard people about only one thing, one source . . .

IM: Well I might do that for a month or two over something. I've posted endless amounts on Bernie Sanders, but in time even I get bored with that, so I'll go to something else, I go through phases. So I did that almost as a conscious thing, but I would never say that 'my art is Facebook' sort of thing, it's just too facile. But it's one of the many things I do.

KW: It's one of your tools.

IM: Well it's getting to a point in my life where I can't do lots of other things, I'm becoming more and more disabled with arthritis. It means I have to develop other ways of doing stuff. And you get to a stage in your life where, in a way, it's your job to be a boring old fart who talks about the past. You have to retell history.

KW: This comes back to what we were talking about a while ago, suddenly activism and social engagement has become fashionable and we're putting it in every ARI and the art gallery and we're doing these mock pseudo engaged works.

IM: I've been trying to write about that a bit. I've had people like Greg Sholette and others pick up on some of it. Because it's saying in fact, "Look at the history of the stuff, all around the world: the 70s, it's a natural consequence of the radical end of conceptual art, and effectively what happens, even though it isn't visible for everyone, is the art world almost splits into two. Even conceptual artists split into two. Some of them go off and create conventional careers for themselves, including ones who did a lot of Leftie posturing, like Kosuth and people like that.

Those people all have a life in institutions and have whole careers and they become the ones that are promoted as are their followers and the whole scene develops with pseudo conceptual-esque type artwork which goes on for the next 30 years.

Meanwhile there's another line. I'm a pretty typical example of it, but there are plenty of others—we don't know about each other very much because there isn't the sort of communication system going on at the time that helps you that much—but we all involve ourselves in community stuff and all sorts of political activism. Particularly that flowers in the eighties, but it's also killed in a way by the AIDS epidemic. The most intense period of that sort of activism is around AIDS and most of the people who were engaged in it died. So what's left is a sort of remnant. But things just happen of their own accord. They



don't have to be directly controlled or created or influenced by any one person, that whole move into self-created and self-directed art happens anyway.

That's why you have YouTube. You name it, everybody is their own bloody artist in that sense of making visual product, visual imagery. Why is the art world falling apart? Because you have this whole massive other world. It's part of neo-liberalism, but the point is that it exists. So the major significance in terms of image making is not in the art world any more. It's out in this other world, it's people making memes on Facebook, you don't know who the fuck they are, there's all this stuff, massive production of imagery, which was once the product of the art world. The art world doesn't do even do it very well any more, it's always lagging behind.

KW: You show something and you think, my kids showed me something with a million followers, their audience is so much bigger and they're so much more reactive because it's happening there and then. By the time it's into a gallery, an artist is making just a remnant of what they were thinking.

IM: All that's going on is an artist is making produce for the art world audience or the art world market. But it's not actually culturally innovative and it's not culturally significant. I talk all the time about cultural significance because I also did a lot of heritage work and there are significant guidelines, you can actually codify how to define cultural significance. All sorts of things are cultural significance.

That's why I talk about jousting. In medieval society the most important cultural form was jousting. The whole society was built around jousting as a high culture. And believe it or not there is probably more jousting in the world now than there was in the medieval period. I was in Lithgow and we had a jousting festival every year. But guess what: it's got zero significance as a cultural form. There'll be more paintings done, there'll be more sculptures made, there'll be more public art and it will all have zero significance. The

cultural significance is happening somewhere else. It's in all this generated, semi-anonymous, collaborative stuff.

But let's go backwards. We've got this whole radical stuff going on in the 70s, and into the 80s, again and again in the next 20 or 30 years. The institutions try to swallow it up. They know it's there, they can't control it but they want to, there's a sort of Marcusean repressive tolerance, they have to get their hands on it and it comes out as relational aesthetics. It comes out as this whole stream of things where they make yet another attempt to grapple with it and pull it into the institutions and control it. And social practice is just the latest version of that, where they try to market it and monetise it and commoditise it.

KW: John Jordan, who I was talking to, did a lot of activist stuff with massive mobilisation of people over the last ten years. The Tate got onto him and they said, 'We want you to do a thing on art and activism and social practice', so he, like you, said sure, I'll do that. Then they said, 'But look, don't touch our sponsors, don't talk about our sponsors'. British Petroleum was one. But he did—he did some really clever stuff to actually look at their sponsors, through the education of the young people he brought in. So he mobilised a new army of kids, and used it as a . . .

IM: This is the final thing. The institutions try to control it, then they produce their own versions of it, they produce a parody of it, which is just silly rubbish, and say, 'That's it', and it gets a lot of attention. So that's them manufacturing the sacred institutional use type version of it.

But, as I always kept saying about the Biennale protests, if you can't take their money and use it against them, you don't deserve the name of being an artist, you haven't got any ideas or creativity anyway. Take their money and use it.

Because of what's happened with the Internet, institutions are now on the back foot. They trying to grab all this stuff but they're not the only game

anymore. Their role as a gatekeeper has been undermined, the whole thing just washes around them. The gate's been flooded.

So in that case, and this is why I started exhibiting again, apart from the fact that there was less that I could do in other ways, I thought, 'Yeah well, you know, let's just treat them as another medium. Another communication medium.' I also talk a lot over the years about audiences and saying that's what the art world is, it's just another audience. Out of a million audiences. But because it is one audience you can do stuff for it.

That's what it came to at my Artspace show. I wanted to go back and rethink about this and also think about the role of institutions and museums. Blair [French] and I had a big talk about it and I thought what I want to do is actually incorporate that. Some of it will be conventional art work that I've done, like a retrospective but not really, some of it will be a sort of survey in a way, some of it will be stuff that I've done for the art world and some of it isn't, but what I'm going to do is make it almost a fuck-you, a straight-out fuck-you to the art world. Because in a way what it does is say, "OK, I've done all this stuff and you never got it, I'll make it look like artworks and see if you can understand it then!" I actually made it into artworks. They were never like conventional artworks but that's a typical example of it [shows artwork]. That's a bit of one of the Trade Union posters. I incorporated this into a whole thing about how institutions should work. What should they be doing? They shouldn't be out entrepreneuring art, they should be going back to a medieval monastery sort of thing where they actually save the culture.

We're about to see massive cataclysm really, this apocalyptic cultural collapse is coming via climate change. So, do these institutions have a role? Well, maybe they can be the little things that just save the seed bank.

KW: as you said that I was thinking that exact thing!

IM: That doesn't mean they save all the artefacts. What they do is save the *models* of the artefacts. What I did was take about 10 or 12 different artworks

of mine, or actions, over the years, and reduce them to a database, actually fields with a bit of data in each one of them. Some of them are physical descriptions, some are the social context-type descriptions, but the crucial one in all of them is the question, How would you remake this?

In some cases, as with the paintings, there are the actual measurements and the colours and the drawings of the paintings so you could just remake the painting. I had one case where I did that and the actual painting next to it, but turned back to front so you could see the stretcher and not the painting. With another one I had a set of instructions and gave them to five or six of my friends and said, Now go and make it. Of course none of them looked remotely like it, not at all, and being artists they didn't follow the rules either. So one set of the exhibition was, this is what happens. How does culture actually happen and adapt and change. You had this apparent set of rules but no one follows them. Yet you could see that they had half-followed them so you've got this whole totally different set of stuff.

Other works were a bit more straightforward, like the trade union ones, but then there was a huge wall about 8 or 10 metres long which had big blow-ups of pages out of trade union newspapers that I'd done, covers and things like that, from that 1979 period.

On another wall equally big was a newspaper called The City Squatter, again blown up, where we had 24 pages of the publication we'd put out when we got thrown out of Victoria Street, after the huge police operation. There was a whole discussion about urbanism and squatting and the history of Kings Cross, so it was a really good sophisticated newspaper. I've got an article in there which is a critique of the barricades we built, which ones worked, which ones didn't. Like an art criticism page. I got the art criticism page and Teresa Brennan and I wrote the first thing which was, not a history of Victoria Street, but 'This is Victoria Street'. This was 1973 or '74. It was pre the first Yeomans exhibition that didn't happen after my Contemporary Art Society stuff. I stopped working for the Contemporary Art Society to work on Victoria Street.

KW: I was working with Seb at Alaska doing a work in Kings Cross a couple of years ago and seeing what's happening to the Cross.

IM: I lived in Kings Cross for 30 years.

KW: Well you wouldn't recognise it now. It's not the Kings Cross you would have known.

IM: No, I don't like going back there anymore. It was so much my home territory, I loved it. I spent part of my childhood up in the bush but through my teenage years I was in The Cross, even went to school in The Cross. I was around there the whole time and I lived there all the way up to the late 90s when I finally got forced out.

KW: Wow. Well it's gentrification central now. The work that I did there was interviewing in the bars and clubs, right as the lockout laws were happening. I'd taped about a dozen people who were working there, talking about what was happening, and the gentrification and the selling off of the real estate. It's not going to be The Cross anymore, it's going to be a very pretty, expensive..  
..

IM: That was what they were trying to do to Victoria Street in the 70s, we blocked it. It was always misrepresented that we were fighting for the buildings. We weren't fighting for the buildings per se, we were fighting for the buildings because they were the platform for the whole community. We were fighting against gentrification. Even though they beat us we slowed it down for another 20 or 30 years before anyone dared try it again. Now we've lost.

KW: It's hard. You can't fight everything.

IM: You can't. And you've also got to accept that some things go on, sometimes you've got to ride with it.

KW: And you've got to pick your battles in the end, what's important for the longer future. Which is the thing you're working on with Lucas, *The Reef*.

IM: *Sugar versus The Reef* has become Lucas's project rather than mine because I can't get there. He's probably up there now, he's actually been in China doing stuff as well, because Lucas is like me, he does several different things.

But *Sugar versus The Reef* is a problematic one because it started out as a direct follow-on from the Yeomans project. It was because we discovered a fabulous guy called John Sweet who had a farm that had been done by Yeomans, and he had this totally megalomaniac idea of Keylining the whole east coast of Queensland. And we thought, 'That's a really ridiculous idea, let's do it!' So we set out to work out what we could do about it.

The whole point of it was to save the Barrier Reef by stopping runoff because it was killing the Reef, but what's killing the Barrier Reef is climate change. Runoff is a major element, but it's climate change. So it's almost a bit of a moot point in some ways, what we're doing with it. We've got to somehow or other work this—they're not contradictory.

We've got shows lined up in Mackay, we've had a lot of talks with GOMA [The Queensland Gallery of Modern Art] but haven't quite managed to nail it down. Again it's on slightly more of a bigger scale. We've got a farmer who will actually do some practice stuff on his farm, so it's on a grander scale. We've got enough to do some funding for Lucas to work on it more fulltime, so something will come out of it in the end. A lot of work and talk and research has gone into it, a lot of negotiating and a lot of travelling.

It's a logical extension of the Yeomans stuff. But equal to that is the Kandos School of Cultural Adaptation, where again we've got a farmer who will grow a crop for us. That's also Lucas but it's also other people, Alex [Wisser] and Gilbert Grace.

KW: I think Alex is a really great guy.

IM: Alex is a good guy. All of these things need someone who's insanely enthusiastic, and just such a nice person and such a charismatic person that they can ease their way through all the anxieties and hatreds that other people might have for it. Alex is the one, he's just beautiful.

KW: his spirit is so beautiful, so generous and open, I always find him a delight to deal with. But I also find him a critical thinker.

IM: The stuff he writes is very interesting, because people tend not to see the stuff he writes, it's really smart.

KW: I'd worked with him before but I spoke with him for a couple of hours for the PhD and it was really interesting.

IM: I was joking about how when things become obsolete they become art. And Kandos is now art because it's an obsolete town [laughs]. It's fantastic. It's true. And Alex has played that really well. What he's done is fantastic and I really admire him because I've lived in country towns, I lived in one just up the road. And Wallerawang is even worse than Kandos.

What I did, and this is where the School of Cultural Adaptation came from, I worked with a lot of council committees. I didn't work for them—bit by bit I ended up as community rep on a whole series of council committees. They kept on appointing me because I'd go in and whinge at them at public meetings, but unlike everybody else who whinged at them I then came up with references and so on, and they realised I really knew my stuff. If they had someone whinging at them it may as well be me! It was like the Contemporary Art Society, you're so smart, you work it out. Knowing of course that I had to defend them rather than attack them.

So I worked on the Echo Ridge Committee and their environment committee but above all on the economic development advisory committee, which was

how you develop a whole new economy for this area. All of those towns, Lithgow, Portland, Kandos, Rylstone, there's a whole bunch of them, are basically industrial towns out in the bush that have no industry anymore. They've still got a bit. Coal mining and stuff like that was all that was left and that's going.

KW: Which is the final one, where you get to the end of the valley there's that old hotel and there's a mine . . .

IM: Newnes. An old shale mining town. Or else Glen Davis.

KW: That's it, Glen Davis.

IM: Glen Davis is a much bigger thing. Newnes is just an old wooden pub but nothing else, camping grounds. Glen Davis has the ruins of the shale oil thing and this big sort of, what was once a hotel then became a monastery and is back now as a B&B.

KW: I stayed there. And that was where there was a big massacre, wasn't it? Where they herded the first nation's people into . . .

IM: Everywhere around there, everywhere. That's where I grew up. I grew up in Blackmans Flat, near where Mount Piper [coal powered power station] is.

All through there, the whole Gardens of Stone [Gardens of Stone National Park, Glen Davis] is just covered in Aboriginal hand stencils—I spent my childhood wandering through those caves. And I'd say, "You know there used to be Aboriginals here" and they'd say, "Nah, nah, there were never Aboriginals around here," "But . . ." "Oh they just went away".

KW: I've got a place at Patonga, on the Hawkesbury.

IM: I know Patonga. You've got all those rock carvings. I spent years of my life going looking at Aboriginal carvings, I used to go all the way up through



there. I've seen so many I just can't believe the people of Sydney are ignorant about them.

KW: I know. But you know that the mobs from around there actually come back to the camping ground down there and talk, in their language, it's actually not dead at all it's still active and alive.

IM: Good on them. There was a great exhibition in Paris called *Magiciens de la Terre* a really serious exhibition of Indigenous art from all around the world. One of the curators came out to Australia and I took him up to West Head and we were sitting out on this rock platform having a picnic, and he said, 'Well where is this site?' and I said, 'There. Fish. Kangaroo.' So he says, 'So how old is this?' and I said, 'About five thousand years,' and he jumped to his feet and said, 'What are we doing sitting on this stuff!!' And I said, 'Listen. The place is covered in it from end to end. It's better off treating it like this because if you put a focus on it, people will destroy it.'

KW: This is what we've done at Patonga. We've let it get overgrown because we think that's the best way to preserve it, but we know where it is.

IM: That's exactly right. That's why Parks and Wildlife have put a real focus on one or two sites to keep everybody away from other ones. It's only people like me who've researched it who know where the other ones are.

KW: I work with one of my dearest friends, we've been collaborating for about 10 years. Her grandma is a stolen generation and I only have half of my heritage, I don't know who my dad was, so a lot of our work is about identity. Our current project is all these rocks, tools, carving rocks and grinding rocks. I saw them in an auction recently—somebody had collected them over time, there were hundreds of boxes of these things taken, nobody wanted them, they were just rocks so I got them. I want to take them back to the sites and give them back, find out the history, their stories if I can.

IM: If you know where they came from.

KW: Some of them I do, some are Hawkesbury, all around Sydney. It's going to take a while to get there. Yet again it's not art.

IM: But it is. It's cultural significance. You might like a friend of mine, Naomi [Parry], who was one of the people who worked on a big database which documented all the Stolen Children's stories, to help people find each other again, kids and clan. She says it's just complex and heartbreaking, it really did her in. She did her PhD on the Stolen Generation. It's hard stuff.

KW: I know, I so get it. And the trouble is whenever you go back and find pieces of it, you never find the whole story. It actually gives you more questions and more problems. When I was talking to my natural mum and asked her who was my dad, she said well I was sleeping with a lot of guys, going up and down the coast, Indigenous guys, a Spanish guy and others. And I think, "Am I Indigenous, am I Spanish and if you give me that piece, does that make me that? But I'm not because I didn't grow up with that, so what actually am I? It doesn't put your identity back together. However for most people heritage and identity it's this given thing, "Well my Dad had blue eyes," and I look at my [adoptive] mum and dad and they tell me stories of my grandparents and so on, but I never had that, so I look at Mum and Dad and I don't look like them.

IM: So the whole abuse thing you worked on, is that because you were in institutions?

KW: No, I was adopted pretty much straight away. The abuse thing is because both my sons were at a school where a ring of paedophile teachers were arrested while they were at the school.

IM: Like my school, Marist Brothers. Marist Brothers Daceyville, Marist Brothers Pagewood and Marist Brothers Darlinghurst and one of my teachers is now in gaol for the rest of his life.

KW: We've got a whole generation of kids, from the past 50 years right up to now, it hasn't gone away, so me seeing my kids, my oldest son . . .

IM: Were your kids alright? I got a lot of violence but I never got sexual abuse.

KW: I think they were ok but. . . both my kids . . .

IM: . . . don't talk about it

KW: No, we do talk a lot because they've got me as a mum. We can talk about it. My oldest son had two pedophiles as teachers, one for a whole year when he was 11. The windows were blocked out, he had CCTV cameras on him and the guy was actually very smart, he'd set up the whole school's computer system and he was the child safety officer for the school.

IM: Oh, of course.

KW: Unfettered access. My gut instinct knew something was wrong, but at that stage no arrests had been made and I also kind of believed in institutions at that time. You sort of think, well I went to school and you respect your elders and you respect the school and you respect teachers so when it first all started happening I was still in that mode. But as it unravelled I learnt to trust my instincts and never to listen to an institution again.

But it's really difficult as a woman going into those meetings, which I did, and taking on headmasters and people of power—this was a private boys school, very rich, very powerful—and being warned “You're a woman, with children, be very careful with what you're doing, be very careful with what you're exposing . . .

IM: Don't think we can't get you.

KW: Don't think we can't get you, don't think we don't know where you live, that's said in such a nice, “Here's a cup of tea, we're all in this together” way.

And it wasn't until the Royal Commission happened that . . . I went straight to the strike force and gave them the stories that I knew and was involved in, but it wasn't until the Royal Commission that I truly understood. But you know, of that school of two and half thousand kids, nobody else went and listened to the stories. And they actually left their children there.

IM: That's why I can't understand why anybody ever goes to a Catholic school or a Catholic church ever again.

KW: Well I've heard stories from my dad because he was a Marist boy of boys being beaten with palings from the fence. Dad wasn't sexually abused. So I didn't send my kids to a Catholic school, I sent them to a school that I thought had a much more open way of dealing. Little did I know.

IM: I've got two comments about that. One of them is: for people who weren't there, which is now most people because most people of my age are now—I'm not talking about Catholic schooling—but explaining to people why the radicalism of the 70s grew out of the Vietnam War. It wasn't just that the Vietnam War was the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War happened to a whole generation like mine who'd all been brought up post Second World War with this very idealistic, well-educated idea about the society. And suddenly we discovered we were being lied to.

That's why it's hard to describe how conceptual art grew out of the Vietnam War because conceptual art is a questioning of the institution. It's the whole institutional critique which then becomes ossified and subsumed. But it initially grows out of this questioning of every single aspect: what else are they lying to us about? That's why conceptual art was fundamentally radical in a way that is not so obvious looking back, it just looks like formal chain. It isn't. It has a basis in questioning every aspect of society, including even what an artwork actually is. You question everything, everything, everything.

The other bit about it, which is more directly related to it, because my parents split up when I was about 10 or 11, I lived with my grandmother, up at

Blackmans Flat, near Lithgow. And when I came back here, my mother put me in a Catholic school. I went to the Wallerawang public school. It was nice. It was a nice country public school. My mother, in a fit of craziness, because she was an underpaid woman with not much money, put me in a Catholic school. And it was just appalling. But as a kid, I didn't even know how to describe that it was appalling. For those reasons you said. You're supposed to respect them, you thought that was the way the world was. I remember running away from home and disappearing for about 24 hours. Freaked my mother out no end, but the point was, even though I didn't understand quite what it was, I just knew I was incredibly unhappy.

KW: But that's the thing. I don't think kids at 11 or 12 have a voice. They don't have the vocabulary and they can't articulate and that's why I wish looking back—I mean it's only recent, in the last eight years or whatever, that they've gone through. A friend of my sons in his year at Knox, coincidentally the year that the boys had the pedophile teacher, this boy hung himself with his school tie. And I went to the funeral and saw the little coffin and heard the reverend speak and I saw the pedophile teacher hiding in the bushes outside the chapel and I said to my son, why is Mr Treloar in the bushes, and Harry said, "Oh he told us he can't deal with this emotional stuff."

All of these things—if even I, as an adult, couldn't put all these pieces together how can a little kid?

IM: Even later on, even 20s, 30s, whatever, it took me a long while to even describe all this stuff. Basically those people shouldn't have been allowed near children. And then it took me much further again, to sort of—I was definitely not going to go to the school reunion, because now that I was grown up I would just punch them out. I wouldn't care if they were old and in a wheelchair! But it took ages to sort of de-normalise it. I thought it was appalling but I still just somehow or other accepted it.

KW: Yes, I think that's where both my boys are. One left on principle. Once the Royal Commission came out, he watched it with me and he just said, "I

won't be here for another day, I won't stand for this." He went in and saw the current headmaster who let some of the more recent stuff happen, and the headmaster said, "You're the only boy in the whole school who feels that way, it's very odd." He shamed that kid at 15 for standing up. Which just shows the institution yet again. . .

When I was up at Alice Springs a while ago, we were out swimming in a big hole, and I spoke to an old guy who said to me, "They stole our children. And you really wreck the society when you steal the children." That just resonates with me, with what we've done to our children in schools. Whether they're nice prestigious schools, whether they're Catholic church schools, we've wrecked a generation of men. And if you wreck men like that then you wreck the possibility for any sort of emancipation for all of us in the future. We're talking about the world getting fucked up but if you fuck up the kids then how on earth are we going to form a better society that cares about all of this.

IM: Again, I don't want to get into mystifying artists, but I actually think that a lot of one's being an artist comes from having your world view destroyed at a really young age. There are all these psychological things about how, if just once you can't see the world in the same way as everybody else, you can never see the world in the same way as everybody else. And that's what cultural change comes out of this. I don't want to say that's a positive thing, but it is a positive thing in a way.

KW: For me doing what I do, it is so much part of it.

IM: You don't quite fit.

KW: I don't fit.

IM: But I didn't fit either for a whole variety of reasons. In the 50s, a kid with a divorced mother was really unusual, there were not a lot of divorced marriages. People just pretended. They had shitty marriages but they just pretended. Whereas my mother had actually made the break and got

divorced, at huge expense, but the end result was I was effectively abandoned. I was an abandoned kid really.

KW: which is the same thing. You look at the world in a different way and you always know that there's something about you . . .

IM: My grandmother was lovely, my aunts were lovely, all of that, I was treated well, I had a really nice couple of years, but there's a sort of hole. It really damages you.

KW: I had great adopted parents so I was really lucky but the damage is that you come from a place of pain and sorrow, somebody has lost you, or two people have lost the ability to have you. That can be a good thing, in my case it probably was the best thing for me, but you come from that place.

IM: And it's still lodged there in a way. Coming back to a Catholic school, that was just horror stuff. And so that just broke my whole attitude, and broke my relationship to my mother too. It's always been nice woman but distant. I have a strange relationship with her as a result of it all.

But in a funny way that's what makes you an artist, too, I mean not many artists have had nice upbringings. You start prodding around—I really hated that idea too when I was young about artists being weirdos. Bullshit, artists do stuff like everybody else. And the longer it's gone on the more I've seen that industrial—in a sense I was espousing a sort of industrialisation of art model, everybody was just nice, we're all good workers, but now I think, "Nah nah, the only ones to do anything good are the ones who have something pretty weird about them when all's said and done. Because you don't have those insights without having something a bit weird.

KW: I think if you haven't actually experienced things, then you do take things for what they are and why would you question things. If it's rosy why put yourself through it.

IM: That's exactly right. Whereas if you know that it isn't the way it seems to be and everything is sort of wrong, then you start reading different things, and you start registering different things to everyone else.

KW: I'm still very hopeful, as I'm sure you are, that there are ways to— because actually doing the work is hope in a way because you think, “Well there must be a better way, there must be a different way to put this all together and have something—how can I connect to people in a way that isn't formed yet, and then possibly that will create . . . “

IM: I was joking about this yesterday. Donna Brett put a thing on Facebook saying, “I just had one of my students quoting Ian Milliss in an essay.” And somebody else said, “Yes, I quoted him too, that's two of us.” And I just thought, that's an unbelievable amount of respectability, I'm humble! Then the next thought was, now I'm going to have nightmares about being respectable.

But that's what it's like. You're torn between these different reactions to this sort of stuff. Especially because of the way it happened. As I say, I got a lot of attention early on, then I got reactions that went from bewildered to contempt. By the 90s people were just contemptuous of me, they really were. Some of them were just fucking rude. And then slowly creeping back into. . . as the thing has gone full circle there's been a lot of younger artists, and Lucas is a classic example, who actually did go and do their research about stuff and learnt the history and started to realise that all the things they were trying to do, actually I had done them before. And Lucas just said to me that I had given them all hope to be an artist.

KW: That's exactly what I thought when I first met you, there is somebody, because you do feel lonely and isolated.

IM: But when you do come back to being respectable again in that sort of way, I'm actually distrustful of it. I'm really distrustful, and I don't mean being horrible about people who want to talk to me, or have been really helpful and



really kind to me. But I know this is just the wheel, the wheel of life. Tomorrow you could lose it again.

KW: And I think it's reaching a point where it's becoming saturated again, activist, social engagement, so now knowing that's happening, we've got to work out what next.

IM: I know, I've got a joke about that: it doesn't matter what's happening I'm against it! I fight for stuff, then I find it's happening, and I go, "Hang on."

Because it is exactly that, it is the institution trying to swallow this stuff up, but I also think the ground has shifted. So I think institutions are as important as they are, all of this, as I say, we have this whole YouTube, do your own video, do your own artwork, but that's a part of neoliberalism as well. It's part of neoliberalism exploiting labour for no return whatsoever, they're getting all this content for nothing.

It's really complex picking your way through this, and the thing about someone like me, I am really rare in my generation, in yet another way, in that I am on social media and people can just get on there and have a fight with me if they're want to, or agree or disagree with me, you don't find 99% of them there.

KW: But I wonder as well if maybe retreat is something we should be thinking about, you know?

IM: Well that's actually what, in my Biennale articles, I was quoting the great Bifo Berardi saying that the most radical thing to do is not activism it's pacifism. Refusing to participate and that's actually more radical. But that doesn't mean running away from it. It's being more calculating.

KW: Being more calculating about what you do and how you engage and the other thing too, maybe fighting against the institution. That's a whole genre in

its own right now, but maybe, as you say, being in the institution, working within its folds but using that as a platform to reach audiences.

IM: I just wander in and out with complete disrespect. I treat it like a hotel. I'll wander in and do stuff and I'll wander out and do stuff. And anyone who thinks all the exhibitions I had in the last 10 years were the most important thing has missed the fact that the most important thing I did over the last 10 years has been I worked on the Lithgow Council's Economic Development Advisory Committee. It's like, "Get this clear. Just because you're in the art world, you have this "If it didn't happen here it didn't happen" attitude. In actual fact the stuff I'm doing now is the least important.

KW: Well there are remnants of what happened . . .

IM: Well it has it's important in its way. The things like the Kandos School of Cultural Adaptation is really a flow-on from my work with Lithgow Council. It's in fact expressing my frustration with Lithgow Council but I then create this fake Kandos on a poster because none of that stuff could get up in any other way, so here, I'll just pretend that it did happen.

IM: There's no room for complacency, the whole thing is reconfiguring itself into something else. And my point about the artists out there is that they still believe all that stuff's real, they still think they're established, that it's alright. I do occasionally throw at them, "Yeah, look at all the journalists who are now out of work". A day or two ago I posted a quote from the head of what's like the academic union in America, who said, "Being a professor isn't a job anymore, it doesn't exist. You can't actually be a professor in America anymore." That's in a sense like being an artist. You think it's going on forever. It's not. For decades you've refused to accept the fact that you're subcontract decorators for institutions. So you guys are all out of the action as far as I'm concerned.

I still will engage with it because a lot of people go to that first. They go to the art schools because they think that's actually where it is, and you've got to

get them—and things like my Artspace show, that was on at exactly the same time as the Yeomans one. At the Art Gallery of NSW Lucas and I were doing really public audience type of work which we did in one sort of way. At Artspace I did things differently, it was a really analytical thing about, What is a work of art? And, How does an artist operate? It wasn't meant for a public audience at all, it was meant for an art-world audience of artists and critics and theorists to discuss, What the fuck do we think we're doing?

KW: Which is what you're doing in other areas, saying this is my audience here...

IM: This is my target audience; this is a different target. If my audience is unionists then I use the union magazine and I use that that magazine format, I don't try and pretend it's a work of art, it's a union magazine.

KW: If I'm talking to the art world I will make it look like artworks.

IM: I deal with that quite consciously. And again, as I was saying, I'm doing some conservative things. I want to actually play around with that model too. So I've done one portrait, one big self-portrait. Which is me and my cat.

And at *Cementa 2015*, nearly everyone except Alex missed it, but in a sense I did a landscape of Kandos. I did a website called *The Kandos Red Book*. And if you know your garden history you'll know what that's about. Humphry Repton was the great garden designer of the 18th century, the follower of Capability Brown, so he was the fashionable garden designer at the time of Australian settlement. People used to describe the Australian landscape as looking like a Humphry Repton garden, or a Capability Brown park. And he used to do *Red Books*. These were like pop-up books, they had sliding panels. So he did his watercolour of the landscape as it was and sliding panels which would show you what he would do to it.

So I did a thing called the *Kandos Red Book* which was about—I'd been trying to do this since the 1980s, before I'd started exhibiting again but there

wasn't the proper computer stuff to do it, and it took me 20-something years to think through how to do it. Talk about being influenced by Aboriginal culture, I thought about this area where I'd grown up and eventually I understood it was an Aboriginal landscape, with all these rock carvings, everything I'd learned about Aboriginal stuff, I actually understood where I grew up in Aboriginal terms—obviously not in any real serious way, but got the point. I realised that it was a farm, it was a garden which had now been decimated, mined, wrecked but underlying it all was this Aboriginal farm.

So I wanted to do a Humphry Repton *Red Book* to restore where I'd lived. I did a bunch of things but realised they didn't work. Then I did some paintings. A lot of them I gave away to people but I've kept a couple of them where, when I first moved up there, I repainted the area without all the European stuff. And then I did this thing for the 2015 thingo, and it's still not finished, it's got another 20 things or so to go in it, but every post has a photo with a little story attached to it of my experience of it, or its history, it's European history. Some of them are just not true, some are complete lies, some of them aren't, some of them are very true, and some of them are completely weird. One of them that I haven't put in yet is a bit of scrub that you can't work out. This is the spot where I last saw my father. My parents divorced, I was living with my grandmother, he came to see me and we stood on this spot and he said goodbye to me.

KW: And is that true?

IM: Oh yeah, it's true. So there's all these personalised things and bits of landscape, or history, and it covers a whole area all the way from Wallerawang up to Kandos, this little rambling thing along the highway, it's like an Aboriginal thing of stories, a storyline.

KW: It's exactly what that is. Your storyline of that, from the personal thing to the landscape, all of you combined together to make . . .

IM: Yeah. And I used to joke that Australian artists always end up as landscape painters, and here was me ending up as a landscape painter with this website which is a series of photos and stories.

KW: I bet it's a wonderful work, a really amazing work.

IM: So like I said, I'm playing around with traditional things but I'm not playing around with traditional things in quite the right way.

KW: Or in the way that. . .

IM: . . . that you're meant to.

KW: I'm going to turn this off now because . . .

~ ends ~

## Sebastian Goldspink

Interview 1 December 2015, Kings Cross NSW

Sebastian Goldspink: so what we were talking about was Fran Barrett's *My Safe Word is Performance*<sup>1</sup> at Alaska. The audience were going through a parallel experience to Fran, so they had entered into a contract with the dominator, the terms had been laid out, they were given an out if they wanted to take the out, so it was about endurance for them in terms of the audience being able to watch this.

Katie Williams: Did anyone try to intervene?

SG: Yes, she's had enough, stop, all that kind of stuff. Which was really super fascinating.

KW: which is really interesting as well because I think often people don't feel they have the right to intervene in certain spaces, and that's why Alaska is interesting and different. So let's flip back to the beginning of Alaska. You're local, obviously, so when did you come across this space and why did you first think, hey, an underground car park, this is where art needs to be.

<sup>1</sup> *My Safe Word is Performance* was a live performance between Frances Barrett and Ivan Crozier that explored the intersection between performance art and BDSM practices. In this performance Ivan physically 'dominated' Frances for 20 minutes. Audiences surrounded the two performers in a semi-circle and watched as they tested their physical capacity in order to reach a heightened state through consensual brutal and intimate physicality. The only rule was that if at any point Frances said 'performance' then the performance would come to an immediate end. Alaska Projects, Kings Cross. Curated by Brian Fuata, Sarah Rodigari and Jessica Oliveiri. 31 August 2014

SG: Four years ago I was working at the MCA, and I had a lot of friends who were artists. In Sydney at that time there was a real culture present of artists having to pay to exhibit, and personally I thought this was an inequitable kind of model. I'd been asked to write an article for NAVA about Artist Run Initiatives, and I said that the term Artist Run Initiative implies that the initiative would be pro-artist, in that it's run by artists, but what I was seeing was that a lot of the initiatives were essentially pro the initiative, and not pro-artist, they weren't doing the best they could possibly could for artists. Not maliciously, but just the reality of having a space in Sydney and the costs etc.

So a lot of artists that I knew were doing shows at Artist Run spaces where they were having to pay and were trying to make work that was sellable in order to pay back the cost of that. And yet the spaces weren't actively selling the work, they were having to sell their own work, they were having to sit the space and often having to contribute to other kind of costs and that was sort of stacked against the artist. So my whole theory was, if I could find a space for free, then I'd be able to make that work for artists. I wouldn't have to charge them to show.

The other thing that was kind of weird was that I felt those spaces were setting themselves up for a compromise whereby if they didn't have an artist for a specific period they had to take whatever they could get because they had to pay the rent. So this also contributed to a lack of installation based stuff, experimental kind of stuff, there was also a real kind of bourgeois middle class bias, the only people who could afford to do those kind of experimental shows were wealthy white kids. Which is not what you wanted.

I wanted a space where anyone could show regardless of their resources and we would actively as much as possible try and support the artist. My brother used to park his car in this car park and the space that we started with was an old mechanic's office that had been disused for a decade. It was perfectly carpeted, it had a desk and a rollerdeck and a phone, and there was a leak in the ceiling and the desk was surrounded by a moat of water. It was the definition of disused. We had two choices: one was to approach the creative wing of the City of Sydney; the other was to approach the parking services guys. This building is owned by the City of Sydney. At that time they were starting a push to activating disused spaces, so it was topical. So we chose to go to the parking lot.

KW: and had you seen that model operating anywhere else in the world?

SG: yeah, yeah, not necessarily this idea of a space in a car park but I'd seen a lot of interesting stuff happening in disused spaces around the world and it was just something I was interested in. Not only in terms of art spaces but also I was kind of initially inspired by retail spaces in disused spaces. Out of Japan there was this brand *A Bathing Ape*<sup>2</sup> that had very famously done a series of pop-up stores in Tokyo in weird locations; they wouldn't advertise the location and it became about collectors hunting down the spaces. So playing off that kind of energy.

<sup>2</sup> *A Bathing Ape* is a Japanese clothing brand founded by Nigo in 1993. The brand specializes in men's, women's and children's lifestyle and street wear, running 19 stores in Japan, including Bape Stores: headquarters Tokyo, Japan



KW: which is interesting because I'd seen that in Antwerp as well and I came back to Sydney and it wasn't happening. It was all the established ARIs that were doing the things that you're talking about, but there was no such thing as a pop-up space, it didn't exist.

SG: So the parking guys—what was good about that was they don't get on well with phone calls so you get right through to the boss, and the boss was great, but a very gruff sort of man who said, 10am tomorrow, come meet me.

So we approached the parking guy and his first words to me were, "Don't talk to me about art. Women are scared to park in this car park and I need to do something about that, so if you can show me how having this space will make women feel safer, it's yours". And so we spoke to women in the area, we got letters, we submitted the thing.

KW: that's so interesting, because the first time I came here I didn't feel really great. Because there was no-one around at the time, there was no show-up, and I was like. . . because you have to go under.

SG: and King Cross and all that stuff

KW: no, it was the car park. Underground car parks, darkish car parks, women are immediately nervous.

SG: Yeah. And we didn't hear anything for months. We were looking at other spaces and then I got this email from this guy one day with no subject and all it said in the body of the email was, "Keys at Front Desk". And I eventually got

through to him and said, "What does this mean?" And he said, "Just don't fuck it up." And I was like, OK. So then we started, and it was super unclear how long we had the space for, what the parameters were, what we could do, so we were sort of left to our own devices.

What was interesting was, having worked at the MCA I really just kind of brought those systems over here, which was crazy.

KW: that sounds really weird, because this is so different. One of my questions was, compared to a white cube space like the MCA how does this operate . . .

SG: I worked in operations at MCA so I really just pretty much brought that over here. I'd learnt a lot about programming from watching the programming, so it was similar but different. Obviously our programming was shorter, everything was different but we tried to have those core principles taken from the institution in a weird kind of way.

KW: so what were your core principles starting here, what was important to you with this space?

SG: I guess access and equity were initially two really important things. Definitely a supportive feeling, Aboriginal artists was something that was really important. . .

KW: why was that important to you, because you're an urban boy, here in Kings Cross, not that that excludes but it's an interesting . . .

SG: My dad's family is Aboriginal and I kind of felt like I'm in a position now to do something about the inequities around Aboriginal art and that's something to be focussed on. It was sort of like a self guilt thing, if I'm not doing it. . . .And it's weird because some of these things were really conscious and stated and other things were just sort of organic and evolved. Early on in the piece we had an opening and a uni student asked to speak to me and she said, "I really want to congratulate you on the space," and I said, "Thank you". And she said, "I just think it's really brave that you as a straight man have opened a queer space, I think that's really progressive". And I'm like, "Oh it's not a queer space", and she's like, "It's totally a queer space". That wasn't a conscious decision but yeah, we definitely wanted to promote female artists, we definitely wanted to . . .

KW: I would call it an open space, a space that's not just targeting this or that.

SG: that's right. We really want to be broad, we didn't want the same thirty of our friends coming to each show.

KW: yes, that was one of my really important questions: when you originally looked at your target audience, as the MCA does, who did you say. . . did you say we want this sort of person, did you want locals, did you see your audience as a split thing or, as you say, the same thirty people coming, which happens with a lot of the other ARIs.

SG: Weirdly in my initial thinking I thought it was important to have a touchstone, like a motto, and ours is an inversion of that environmental motto, “think globally, act locally.” Ours is, “think locally but act globally”. To use the strength of where we’re from. A lot of it was tied in with this idea of Kings Cross, which was kind of a false idea. We were kind of trading off that ‘vice’ history of bohemian culture. We were playing with a lot of bigger narratives but what we wanted to do was use this as a starting point to do shows interstate, overseas, but also to have shows from interstate artists, overseas artists, not to be just Sydney focussed, not be insular, not just be one type of art.

Very quickly we started to embrace other art forms—music, performance, dance, film—because the sort of problems around access to space are common to all those disciplines.

KW: and those disciplines are merging with this generation of artists.

SG: yeah. And it was very much about keeping people honest in a way, where someone came to us and said, we wanted to do something, we’re like, OK, here, do it.

Another really interesting thing was the timing. This was all happening during the height of the GFC and what was really interesting was that a lot of commercially represented artists or more established artists started to become interested in exhibiting here because their galleries, I think, were so risk averse, their shows had to be commercial, that is successful, so they

weren't allowed to do installation-based work. Also because it was a bipartisan space it allowed artists to do group shows together who were commercially represented who otherwise wouldn't have been allowed to show. A lot of people who were friends but from different galleries could all show together and that was sort of OK. So we had a bunch of people showing here who really had no business showing in a basement car park.

KW: probably loved every minute of it, because it frees you from all those constraints.

SG: yeah, and that's kind of what we wanted as well. So our whole mantra was trying to support being open to different things. And I remember—I think it was on the third show, we were working with the curator and said to him, "How's it all going?" and he goes, "Look I don't know, I just don't know if it's an Alaska show, you know?" And I said, "There's no such thing. You're creating what that is now." And that's been the interesting thing for me. A programmer is—the minute you open the door you lose it, you lose control, it has a life of its own. It has a force of its own.

KW: where do you think that comes from? Is it the space itself, the people. . .

SG: It's a combination of the people, the space, the environment, and as a programmer you have some control over it, but the narratives that emerge are sometimes not what you initially planned for. So you just go with it. A lot of it is just keeping up with the space.

KW: But—and this is from my personal experience—you don't impose your will on the artists whereas a lot of other ARIs do. Just recently there was a show at an ARI that I was in, and it was about painting. Now my idea of painting and the gallery's idea of painting were quite different. I made a curtain work that was about a woman painter and it disappeared when the sun hit it, so it dealt with the actual space, there was a big window in the space. And the director when it came to hanging, they had some big names, so it was like, "No no, you see we want painting." And I was like, "Well it is a painting." "No, it's not a painting." He said, "Well you can come and you can do the sell and convince me." I thought I'm not going to sell. If you don't understand that this is a painting, well you're not having this painting that I've made.

SG: To me that's a lack of understanding of what's coming into international dialogue and the field of painting and . . .

KW: my point is the fact that there was a very prescriptive thing which totally doesn't allow for any real experimentation, whereas this space seems completely different.

SG: yes, part of that, to be pragmatic and honest as well, is just a volume thing. We can't afford to get bogged down in each thing. But what we've found in working with everybody—it's non-profit, everyone works for free—say our designer: what was really interesting with him was, we want to build a website, and I said, "These are the kind of mast headings the website has to have, the kind of content we have to handle, OK you go do it." And there has

been such a power in giving people a brief that is specific but not managing the kind of .....

KW: This was the kind of thing we're talking about. That thing of giving people creative power.

SG: and good things come out of that. To be honest you have to have an appreciation that those results are often better than if you had sat there the entire time trying to do it. And that applies to volunteers who are working here, that applies to artists, curators, producers, everything. This kind of thing that this is like a platform, come to this platform, we try to be as supportive as possible but you do your thing. And sometimes we win and sometimes we lose. There have been shows, when I looked at them, that didn't really work, but it's eighty shows since we opened so there's going to be a series of that. But there's something really powerful—and people tend to respond well to that because opportunities are so hard to come by that when they come across that they tend to take it seriously.

KW: how do you find people, or your audiences or whatever you call them, anybody who comes into this space whether they're parking their car or coming to see the show, how do people respond differently here than you found people respond in an MCA environment?

SG: what's amazing to us is, when we first opened, we—some of the initial energy around the space was, oh, it's this art gallery in a car park. But you can kinda only play that trick once. If people come and the art is shit, they go,

that was interesting, an art gallery in a car park, haven't seen that before, the art was terrible, I'm not going to come back. And what to me is really interesting is that I think people have ceased to see this as an art gallery in a car park, they just see it as an art gallery. They're aware that it's in a car park but that's not at the front of their minds. They've come here regularly, they've. . .

KW: do you think the space itself alters the way that people navigate the works, both artists and audience?

SG: yes, I think it does. It's reflective—like the beer that we have at openings has always been canned beer and that was a decision partly based on economics, that cheap kind of beer, but also wanting to create this egalitarian atmosphere; it's hard to be overly pretentious in the basement of a car park, you know what I mean? And so we've never wanted anyone to feel intimidated to come to Alaska. Or like, these people are all cool and I'm not going to fit in or someone's going to talk about some French philosopher that I've never heard of. We tried to make it as egalitarian as possible. Once again, it's this idea of openness and access. So we've resisted charging for any performances, we've always tried to provide everything . . .

KW: do you think that's perhaps why that particular performance work we were talking about before, obviously the violence was really strong in that, but maybe in an MCA or art gallery like that, people wouldn't say anything because they'd go, well this is Art, it's framed that way (SG: and it's rarefied) and it's rarefied and it's OK because the institution will look after that person



even if they're bleeding or whatever. Mike Parr and Stelarc (SG: back in the day) back in the day did some pretty horrific things, in those situations. However maybe no one intervened because they thought the institution, or somebody here, will look after this. Whereas in a space like this maybe we all become a little bit more . . .

SG: well it's a public space, we feel car parks are public spaces, like properly public spaces. Museums are public spaces but they're a different type of public space. They're loaded with issues around class and . . . whereas car parks are egalitarian in their nature. As long as you've got the money to pay for it you can come and park here. There are people who park Ferraris here, there are people who park Utes here.

KW: there's a Wayside Chapel van parked up there I saw.

SG: yeah, so I think the space definitely frames things, but what was interesting was someone sent me an architecture student's project where they were required to redesign a building in Sydney, and this student chose to redesign this car park. And there was an art gallery level in his design. And to me that was the most satisfying thing to see that. [words drowned out by loud magpie calls in the background]

KW: but it kind of isn't for me, because once it becomes that other thing I wonder if it becomes something different, and people start behaving differently. And what I find most fabulous about this space is that the first time you come down here and there's people selling cars, and people driving cars,

it's another world. Whereas those other spaces become the same sort of world each time in a way.

SG: that's true. It was just interesting for me was that it was seen as such a requirement for the redesign of this building that an art presence would be maintained.

KW: because you've established that.

SG: yeah. The other thing we did when we opened was, when we were building it, we got everyone down to have a look at it, everyone involved in artist run spaces, and you know what was fascinating was half the people were like, oh this is going to be amazing, and the other half were like, this is a fuckin' disaster, no-one will ever come here. So it was risky. And the first opening I remember we wanted fifty people, that was our target, and it ended up being around 500 people. But it was super unclear. And people were super distrusting.

The artists we wanted to put in the first show, some we knew well, some we didn't know, it was hard to get the concept and they very much dipped their toe in the water, like, "Mmm, o.k.ay-ee? I dunno, seems weird, you know?"

KW: Do you think that risk creates work that maybe pushes a bit further than it normally would, because an artist coming into a space that is really risky in those very early days, especially a more established artist, they really have to try and make it work in this different environment in a different way than they would maybe somewhere else.

SG: to a point, but what it also is, maybe I have another perspective on this, but what's been kind of weird is that I really think it's happened now that people think it's an art gallery. And it's super weird, like visiting curators coming, and people saying, "You must go and see this art space." It's super strange. All our mail is to like "Level 2, Kings Cross Car Park". It's been an interesting thing, but what has been the most heartening thing is that it came out of adversity, out of a lack of resources. If someone had given me a street front space I probably would have taken it back then. In retrospect, the remoteness of this location was to its benefit, but that was partly our trying to turn a potential negative into a positive.

KW: At the stage when you started Alaska, Kings Cross was different, it's changed enormously in that time, and I wonder what that will do to your future plans. How long do you plan to stay here?

SG: it's undetermined. We've definitely got the support of the council, and the Lord Mayor, so theoretically we can . . .

KW: so The Cross had changed enormously, (SG: hugely, yeah) with the licensing laws and how gentrified it's becoming.

SG: very much so, and we're part of that gentrification. I grew up in this area, but I've got two children, I eat at fancy cafes, I go have cocktails in bars, I am part of that gentrification.

KW: I know, Theaster Gates thinks a lot about that, and about how he can give back to the original community. Because there's a model of artists being

brought into many disused spaces, the space get rejuvenated, the cafes open up, it becomes cool, it becomes hip, the artists get chucked out, they can't afford it anymore, they have to go somewhere else.

SG: I mean artists are great gentrifiers and we see that all over the world.

KW: so what's your plan as far as . . .

SG: well for us, there's a lot of pressure, when you run a space, to have community engagement, it's a big box-tick and we've always resisted it. We have resisted the whole model of community engagement. Our whole thing is we are going to provide good art, free, accessible but we are not going to make art about the community, or specifically for the community. We are not going to do a show that heroin is bad or about greedy property developers or any of those kind of things specifically. If an artist wanted to do a project about that, great.

KW: but you're not going to force your artists into that.

SG: No, and we're also not going to force our community into that. We have an awareness that our community is very broad. There are a lot of people from this local area who do come to shows here, and that's hugely broad. But there's a lot of people who come from the inner west, and the North Shore, people come from everywhere, so I think that to me community art has always been a super slippery slope. It's that old adage that to be good is different enough. Just make sure you're good at what you do, make it accessible to people, and that's all that can be asked of you.

KW: I was talking to Alex Wisser the other day about Cementa and his idea is similar, except when you're talking about a country town it seems to me there are some real differences there as to how he has to approach his audience. They became very vocal about what could happen in their town, and what couldn't happen in their town. But a transient space like a car park is probably quite different from that.

SG: and also a neighbourhood like Kings Cross that has had a history of art, arguably one of the most significant art spaces in the country in the Yellow House (KW: I was born there) Really? You were born there? It was interesting, someone like Michael Snape coming along to one of the early shows and talking about The Yellow House, and talking about the energy, that was something we were really proud of. But The Cross has been seen in the last decade for the better or for the worse. The needle exchange was a huge turning point for The Cross, a lot of the local businesses were very vocal in their opposition to it and within a week of it opening they changed their tune.

Having worked in The Cross as well too—I was a concierge—I had called a million ambulances for people overdosing, people had died in front of me, there used to be syringes everywhere, people shooting up everywhere, there were parks in The Cross I wouldn't walk through. All my adolescence . . . it wasn't until I was in my thirties . . . Violence has always been present in The Cross, and as a young man going out, my dad would always say to me, if someone bumps into you, you say sorry. That's how you survive.

The Cross at the time was a very violent place, but it was a place really that had this order to it, where if you weren't looking for trouble, trouble wouldn't necessarily find you. But if you came thinking you're the toughest guy in your country town and you come out for a big night in The Cross, trouble would find you in a way that would make your head spin.

KW: do you think in the last few years of that, because that was The Cross that I knew when I was younger, something kind of shifted, and there were people coming in here just to hit somebody for no reason at all?

SG: to my mind that's always existed and I think about the gay community and gay bashing, and the response to that, in the '90s gay men formed gangs and the creation of safe places. That thing of people coming to inflict random violence has always been here.

KW: as a girl I feel the rape thing but I don't feel the violence.

SG: the rape thing has always existed. Women have been raped in this car park, someone was murdered in this car park, it has a dark history. A couple of years ago the Financial Review published their quotes of the year and one of them was from underworld figure John Ibrahim who said that the problem with Kings Cross is not organised crime, it's disorganised crime. And that's really how Kings Cross has always operated.

KW: that's really interesting. One of the guys I interviewed said a similar thing, he said that Ibrahim, he knew him well, and he was across at one of the bars and one of the guys, his wheelchair was broken and he couldn't afford a new

one, and he was a local, and Ibrahim organised a new wheelchair. So it was an organised sense of we look after our own.

SG: and we have a history of that. From Katie Lee and Tilly Devine, my grandfather would talk about in Crown Street and Darlinghurst how they would have a Christmas party for all the children and every kid got a present. I get emotional talking about it because these were violent women who were involved in very destructive stuff for the community, but they would assuage that guilt by those events. Similarly the only bust memorialising anybody in Kings Cross is to Bernie Houghton, the man who started the Bourbon and Beefsteak, who would run the Bed Race every year in Kings Cross, which was a great supporter of children's charities, but it must be remembered that Bernie was also an underworld figure. He was the CIA's man in the South Pacific, he was involved in the Nugan Hand Bank, deep entrenched New South Wales corruption. NSW has always been a corrupt place.

KW: which is interesting because the sort of people who have been attracted to Kings Cross also are people who slip outside the system.... But there was so much of that, squat holes and places where . . . and that's changed so much just in the time that you've had.

SG: Absolutely. I remember the milk vans in Kings Cross, they had a little decal painted on the back which was a pair of legs in fishnet stockings with heels, you know, embracing that kind of history of The Cross. But there's always been money in The Cross, there's always been wealthy landed gentry having apartments, there's always been a mix of cultures. And I would think

about when my son was born, people were like, oh you're going to move, even back then, six years ago, having children was . . .and I think it's changed a lot in that time.

But I remember he was a bad sleeper and I would take him for a walk about 3 o'clock in the morning and walk along the main street in The Cross with my newborn child and all the hookers would come over and say hello. And to me that was kind of part of the fabric and I was really proud he was growing up around that, getting a sense of what reality is.

The weird thing is I'm almost certain that that main strip of The Cross has probably got about three years left. Talking to Council, talking to people involved, the amount of hi-rise development that is planned for that main strip will just completely change it. And in some ways . . . I don't want to be an advocate for strip joints, they're oppressive kind of places, they're not nice places, but the thing is that every city in the world has those places, every city in the world has on-street prostitution, every city in the world has places where you can buy drugs. That's just reality.

KW: I think it's a bit more than that in the Cross, because I think it's the diversity that's allowed to exist here that may be isn't in other places. The fact that a 15- year-old runaway can find a place to bed down and be reasonably safe.

SG: or a gay kid from the country can move in



KW: or a guy who wants to become a girl can come down and find that acceptance. And all of those stories have happened here.

SG: and that's the greatest fear, that it will homogenised into this bourgeois kind of . . . and that's what's happening.

KW: which is why I felt when you were talking about an architecture student making a gallery here, it's a very different thing so do you maybe think that in a few year's time you'll need another space that's not what this space will be in three year's time? Or do you not think that far ahead?

SG: yeah, potentially we always want to be agile and moving and doing interesting stuff. But the larger context is interesting because the changes to The Cross have not come through policing, have not come through governance, essentially the changes have come through real estate and the values of property in this area.

I less rue big corporate nightclubs closing down, or strip joints, but little coffee shops like the Piccolo, which is really struggling to exist. That was an institution. The thing that I loved with the Piccolo, I remember first going there as a young man and they had this culture where there would be open conversations throughout the café, a lot of times about politics, and you could just weigh in with your opinion and someone would disagree with you and you would argue and you would have barristers and prostitutes and eccentrics and it was like a kind of Romanesque forum.

We talked before about legitimate engagement and legitimate relationships, that was a legitimate experience. And I want to live in a city that has those kind of things. Maybe that will happen in Alexandria, but I don't think so. So I think we are losing a lot. But I am pragmatic, and The Cross has always changed.

I've heard stories of the seventies and the Vietnam War when the first American ship arrived for R&R and they didn't have to clear customs. Old Kings Cross people talk about that day—that day, the actual day—the pipeline for drugs was open. They can remember not that time, but that actual day. And Kings Cross was flooded with heroin. It really took 30 years for us to recover from that one day. It sent this neighbourhood into a spiral of drugs and vice that was unprecedented. Drugs had always been here but . . . and when you've got key players who are ex-US military . . . the conspiracy theories are . . .

Television series like Blue Murder and Underbelly, the Kings Cross constabulary, the Kings Cross police don't fare well in any of those. And that's not so long ago, so it was absolutely entrenched. And so it's kind of weird . . .

KW: It's an extraordinarily valuable time that you've been here, because I do think it is going to change and all of that history and everything surrounds this . . .

SG: my grandmother tells me about coming to The Cross in the fifties, and the boutiques and how classy it was, the cafes, but a place like Double Bay was similar as well, you had a lot of eastern Europeans, immigration-based post-war, coming here. And coffee is a really interesting thing. Australians didn't drink coffee before World War Two, it was post-war when the Europeans came and brought their culture.

KW: same with the food. In Kings Cross there was a Hungarian café that they used to come to that was amazing and they had this foreign food.

SG: so we had this rich immigrant culture here and in Double Bay and linked to those was crime. Abe Saffron, who's the czar of this place, and his spectre still looms large. Similarly in Double Bay, people like Eddie Smith and Roger Rogerson operated out of Double Bay and it was a place where you had Twenty-One, this Hungarian-Czech culture and people could go there for coffee late at night. The fact that I can be in Dapto now and get a cappuccino is because of that. And weirdly back to Frank Lowy, the genius of Frank Lowy is here's a guy who imports one of the first commercial espresso machines into Australia. He starts this deli in Rockdale, all the different nationalities come in to get their coffee, because it's a coffee wasteland. The funny story is that they would call coffee 'coff', so people would come in speaking this broken English and would say, "You for coff? You for coff?" And Australians eventually came and they'd say, "You for coff?" And they'd be like, "You fuck off you fuckin' dago coming to my country blah blah!"

The Cross enjoyed all the benefits of that, and historically to movies like *They're a Weird Mob* that was set in this neighbourhood and about that kind of immigration, so The Cross has always been pragmatic. It's a pragmatic kind of place that has always changed to suit its audience.

KW: so you think it might, I don't know, I know it's changing again but I wonder if it becomes so gentrified that it can't go back, so it becomes this very . . .

SG: It absolutely will, the Strip is the last man standing and I just know, I can see it, it's going to change. The licensing laws, the lockout laws were just an incredibly cynical operation rooted in corruption. The fact that they don't extend to the Casino, to parts of Pyrmont . . .

KW: yes, how come the Casino is left out of that equation, that conveniently drew this little circle and all of these clubs close down, went broke, and yet people could stay down at the Casino. It's just funnelling straight into gambling.

SG: and the fact that I can go to a pub on the corner of Crown Street and Cleveland Street and drink 24 hours but I can't in Kings Cross. Two other things I will say about Kings Cross: there is no Kings Cross, there is no suburb called Kings Cross. You can get mail sent to any address in Elizabeth Bay or Darlinghurst or Potts Point with the suburb as Kings Cross, but it's not actually a suburb. There is no postcode for Kings Cross. It's never existed.

KW: that's super cool!

SG: I always remember going as a young man to the Mansions Hotel and the bouncers there were all these big Polynesian boys, it was a rough pub when I was a boy, now it's been turned into apartments. But the bouncers used to wear these T-shirts that said Mansions Hotel on the front and on the back it said, We Don't Call the Police. And to me that was the symbol of Kings Cross. That we would handle things. And this goes back to Darlinghurst, to Katie Lee, even to colonial times. The first armed conflict between the British and Aboriginal people occurred in Rushcutters Bay. There'd been an earlier fight with the French at La Perouse but with the English that was the first. All of that comes into this area in a weird kind of way, psychically it's . . .

KW: psychically I believe that spaces hold resonance of things that are past.

On a final note, you have a theatrical background. You can totally disagree with me, but in a way I kind of see this whole space and this whole project almost as a theatrical event for you, your curating of the whole thing, rather than just mini projects. Did you originally see this space like that?

SG: I had been an actor and worked in the film industry and worked in art. I actually had an arts practice, I was making work. I was surrounded by artists and started making my own work and I applied for a residency at the Fraser Studios, the Queen Street Studios, amazing kind of short-term activation of disused space in Chippendale that only ran maybe three years. And so I never went to art school, no kind of training or anything like that.

I was given this space and the first thing that I wrote on the wall was the word Alaska and that's really where the idea of Alaska took shape. Not necessarily, oh it's going to be an art gallery in a car park, but this idea of creating this meta-project that was about lots of projects rather than one . . . so it was like an economy of scale. I can make a painting but if I can create a space that then generates a hundred paintings that's, you know, more efficient. So I definitely had an eye on the kind of meta-project to begin with.

Whether or not you can perceive some theatricality in that is just a consequence of coming from a theatrical background. And part of that is from that energy of working in independent theatre and co-operative theatre, which is all about working together to achieve a goal. But an earlier influence on me was skateboarding. I grew up skateboarding, it always had a DIY aesthetic associated with it. Particularly around the construction of ramps and things like that at a time when we weren't servicing young people like skate parks like we are today.

So we were looking at this American culture and literally looking at magazines and trying to work out how we would construct those things but from images. And looking at available resources and going, Dad's got a jigsaw and we need wood, so let's go steal some wood from a building site and how we were going to transport that stuff, we didn't have cars, so we'll use our skateboards as trolleys to transport the wood. And then we'll be a team, if we get twenty guys down here and spend one weekend and build this thing, then we can skate this thing. And we need a final place, oh and Henry Borden's grandmother's got a big place and she loves us coming over and she'll feed.

So it was looking at not accepting that you couldn't do something because you didn't have those resources immediately available but going, what do we want to achieve and how can we do that. And not taking no for an answer. And also in a pre-Internet time—all of that would have been made so much easier with modern technology, so I think that kind of idea was important.

KW: it was a very grass roots idea too.

SG: we like the energy of grass roots things but we don't like the aesthetic of grass roots things. And the other weird thing that should be said about Alaska is part of that has been its autocratic nature, part of it has been that fact that it's controlled by one person.

KW: that's also why I was asking you about your original aim for this space and how you imaged this.

SG: it came from my kind of vision but I was smart enough to realise that you need to give people space to work in that. But what it meant was

KW: but that's quite different from a grass roots thing where you go everybody's collaborating, there's nobody who's the boss, we're all just . . . but you're working on a different model from that.

SG: yeah, but we always sign up everything, we always frame off everything as team Alaska. And Team Alaska is this idea that extends beyond just the immediate people, it's everyone who's ever worked here, everyone who's showed here, everyone connected to the space. And building that

community—it's really interesting, when we did the first Sydney Contemporary Art Fair, we had a space we shared with First Draft, and they were there with their audience, and what was amazing was a whole bunch of people who had come to Alaska gravitated to our space and hung out in our space because they felt a direct connection maybe in a way that they wouldn't with a commercial gallery. And they hung and gravitated and would say to each other, I'll meet you at Alaska.

KW: The Art Fair thing is a whole other thing. To still have that brand of Alaska so strong and to have that feeling of close community translate into a art fair space is insanity, right? and for people to have that comfortable feeling of, yeah let's hang out there, that's really interesting.

SG: To me it's that sense of community, and fostering community and building a community. I'm really proud of that community. It's a diverse community. We've had shows where young queer kids have come and they've dressed up and I don't think they've ever thought, oh fuck, am I going to get beaten up? To me that's a really proud thing. That's a really important thing for me.

Jumping back to that autocratic thing, it's a wrong term for it really . . .

KW: Yes it is actually, because you have a vision but you're bringing a whole team of people with you rather than going, right, you do that. It's more what we were talking about . . .



SG: what it means is the decision-making is streamlined because not everything has to go to the committee, we can make decisions.

KW: and you don't have to have those meetings that go—I was on the board of Articulate and some of those meetings went for six or seven hours over one point.

SG: when I worked at MCA there was a guy called Euan Upston who was the COO and he was very much like that shooting-from-the-hip kind of guy and he smoked, like I smoked and if you wanted to have an audience with Euan you had to catch him when he was having a cigarette and you had the time of that cigarette in order to plead your case and he would either say yes or no. And what was great about that was it was decision making that happened really quickly.

Kw: yeah, because it's that drawn out process, specially in corporations where they're international corporations and have to go back to the mother ship, it's a killer.

SG: and Euan was a very instinctual, very responsive guy and actually effected change, and what was great was that his word held. You could say to everyone, Euan's okayed that.

KW: which is pretty much your way of operating here.

SG: he was pretty much a mentor to me. Institutions change. When I was there, and I think this is probably common to a lot of institutions around the

world, curatorial was king. But now I get the sense that marketing, sponsorship and client are really the thing.

KW. interesting.

SG: when we worked there in programming we would always make this joke about programmers who really didn't know what they were doing. We were inspired by the TATE, they had really amazing programs, they would have maps to the museum that were based on emotions, say you'd just broken up with someone. So it's not about showing everything in the museum but curating an experience. And we would always joke that when people didn't know what they were doing they would suggest doing a wall where the audience would write their own stuff and generate their own content. That was just the worst example of box-ticking. And unfortunately a new head of programming came in and she was only short lived and at the first meeting she said, I haven't come with any baggage, I really want to work with you guys, the one thing I'm definitely going to do, imagine a big wall—and it was a joke that we'd made for years. People had to leave the room. It was the beginning of the end for this woman, she was looking around the room and going, what have I said?

But this idea of culture not being able to take a position and saying, we'll let the public decide—you have to take a position. And this applies to this model as well. As much as we say we're open to things, which we are, you still have to have a position.

KW: I think there's a brand Alaska. It will be really interesting to see where it goes next.

SG: yeah! For me too!

KW: thank you so much.

~ ends ~

**Alex Wisser**

Interviewed 27 November 2015 Sydney NSW

KW: So you've been busy up there?

AW: I have. I've got a very busy life, I'm just between doing lots of art things that don't make me any money and doing all sorts of non-art things that make me money, it's just I never have any time. You know, like I thought I'd move up to the country to slow down and . . .

KW: You need to go somewhere like Patonga where there's no phone reception and you have to go on the top of a mountain and hold your phone up and you might get something for two minutes and then you lose people. I kinda like that I gotta say!

AW: I know. It's a beautiful thing to be able to get . . . and it's funny with the festival actually, because we don't get Vodaphone, you can only get Telstra here so half the people can't get on their phones, and they love it, they're . . .

KW: It's great. It's the best thing. A couple of years ago I made a Faraday Cage at Ros Oxley Gallery so that people could come into the gallery and escape. Because I'd been over in America and I'd noticed everybody going up to the artworks and literally holding their Smartphones at the artworks to capture the barcode to tell them what they needed to know about the artwork. They were so busy looking at their phone that they weren't looking at the art and so I thought actually what they really need to do if they go into that gallery is have a space away from everything where they can't get

reception, so I made this bloody big Faraday Cage which nearly killed me but it was really interesting.

Now, I wanted to talk to you and thank you so much for giving me your time. I've been watching *Cementa* with great interest, so I wanted to talk to you about *Cementa*, but also the Forest Gallery. Because I think they're two really interesting projects.

So let's talk about *Cementa* first, and then move to the Forest Gallery. I know a bit about *Cementa* but the Forest is new to me so you're probably going to have to talk a lot. I plan to shut up, I know you love talking, so you can talk as much as you like!

AW: I like to talk but I don't know I'm never there when I'm talking, so. . .

KW: I'm recording this today. I'm interviewing you, and Sebastian Goldspink as that inner-city type space is quite different, and I think the sort of spaces that you're doing, you're both doing very interesting things.

The quotes that I'm taking are from your essay from *Cementa* 2013. First, can you give me a really quick description of what *Cementa* is and how it was originally established.

AW: *Cementa* is a four-day contemporary art festival that takes place in my home, well my now home town, Kandos in New South Wales. Kandos is a small post-industrial town which is—if I think the local populace has anything to say about it—won't remain so forever, but it was a cement town founded

almost exactly 100 years ago to house the working population of the Kandos cement works, which are still there on the side of the road just outside of town.

The festival began when my partner Georgina Pollard and I came up to Kandos for a residency at Capertee, an artist residency put on by Ann Finnegan, who is the third founding director of the festival. We were all three of us sitting around one night, drinking wine and talking about the empty cement works and the idea of putting on a festival came up. And it turned out that the three of us had a pretty good range of resources: Ann was from a very different neighbourhood of the art world.

KW: Because Ann had been working as an academic, at SCA, wasn't she at that stage.

AW: Yes but I think her position was, as much as that, because that was an important part, is that she had been involved, supporting and writing about promoting artists of a certain generation. Basically artists of the generation that we would now call established, so she had access to a lot of artists who had been around for a while. And had really gotten their careers on line and had done some pretty amazing things. And the Georgie and I were part of a more emerging scene running an ARI space in Sydney and basically involving ourselves with stuff that was just coming off the ground in the scene in Sydney.

KW: and that was Index Space.

AW: That was Index Space and before that it was At The Vanishing Point, which was founded and run by Brendan Penzer. We did our co-directorships there and he mentored us in curating and so on. It was a good space and a lot of really good stuff came out of that. I credit that space with where Georgie and I are today.

KW: So that's a pretty big change from being a city artist working in Marrickville/St Peters all those inner city areas. Industrial areas. I suppose there's a crossover of the industrial but Kandos is very much a post-industrial town so what was your first thought in doing a festival in a town like that as opposed to where you don't have a ready-made audience?

AW: Well we never ended up getting a hold of the cement works. We ended up putting the festival on in the town itself. Shopfronts and garages and vacant lots and wherever we could put it. So really that post-industrial facade kind of fell away. Your question goes to the heart really of the challenges I face now. I'm no longer an urban artist myself, so I no longer have access to that. I was conscious of that very early on after moving up here, that I was no longer going to have that urban context of what we call contemporary art. And the challenge of making art out here in a rural setting became apparent.

Contemporary art derives a lot from Modernism and Post-Modernism and a really heavy saturation of popular culture, and all of that stuff's actually hard to find out here. It's there but it's very hard to find. It's very hard to find the contemporaneity of the rural setting. The regional setting.

I'm a photographer and coming out here and starting to attempt to take photographs of a landscape that is in many ways, at least apparently, timeless. How do you mark the contemporaneity of that landscape. How do you say, This is the now of this landscape rather than what it was a hundred years ago, because it looks that way. It's not. This is one of the things I found really fascinating.

So to get back to the festival, that was not so hard because in this small town you could always find—especially because it was an industrial town, the next town down is this very quaint, 19th century town with leafy streets and old buildings, very Australian Aussie outback kind of a cliché. It's very beautiful, don't get me wrong.,

KW: What's that next town called?

AW: Rylstone.

KW: Yes, Rylstone, it's really beautiful.

AW: There were some questions from the Rylstone people, why weren't we having the festival there. We were far more attracted to Kandos. It is starkly modern. I've been told it's one of two towns in New South Wales that were founded in the 20th century. And one of the first towns, in New South Wales at least, that had electricity.

Though it's in the middle of the bush, though it's on the side of a mountain, there's a huge industrial edifice just plonked down there, just starkly, like a



death star. And then the town itself is laid out on a grid, with wide streets, built for cars. There are workers' cottages from the Depression and more stuff that was put in in the 'fifties and 'sixties, so there's a very suburban feel to it as well. The main street has the feel of an American western town but when you get out a couple of streets you feel as if somebody has airlifted some of the suburbs.

KW: a bit of the 'fifties suburbs with the red brick.

AW: and for me I think part of the attraction for an artist is that singularity that it has. It really allows an artist to go into a place. There's no generality about it. You actually have to look at its specificity. The artists did that really well. They went into what was specific and what was particular, what could not have happened or what did not happen anywhere else. What was particular, well that's the history of this place, that singularity, which is not a singularity of uniqueness, it's a singularity of the particular. Because it was this particular place and not some other particular place.

KW: and I think coming in as an artist with fresh eyes, from the city, those contrasts and those things are so apparent. You spend some time there and you think, how could you not want to deal with these things, we need to talk about these things.

AW: and I think that also what was part of the contrast between the artists and the town is that the town had been looking at this place with these eyes that had grown up here. They'd seen it their whole life. Ian Milliss said

something very beautiful about that, about how it takes somebody from the outside to come in and give you a new look, because this town is changing. Whatever it's going to be, it's not going to be what it was.

KW: I'm going to stop you there because there's a very important point that you make about . . . you've already defined two very different audiences. Your city artist coming up with fresh eyes but then you've got a whole generation of people who've grown up in that town and are probably older now, I would assume. I don't know, tell me about those two different audiences and how with one contemporary art fair you address two such different audiences.

AW: This was not something we specifically. . . the one thing we were most wary of was the parachute. We were aware we were going to come into this small town and use it as a setting for a party that we were going to have, it was going to be our party, and we didn't want to be in the position of having a sense of entitlement, where we just come in and it's our party and there's no participation of the locals. And our concern was that our work should address them in some way. And the way that we did that was to make the town the subject of the artwork. It kind of worked out really well for us, I don't think we were aware of it at the time, but when I look back on it that of course, the language of contemporary art would have been quite foreign to them, but the subject was them. So it was something they understood. And even if they didn't agree with the way that the city artist would be seeing things, they had a position that they would take that was native to them. That they wouldn't feel was alien, that they had to somehow earn or they had to be somehow initiated into in order to be entitled to take up a place. That really

happened. The locals were able to go, Hold on, this is our town, we have as much right as anybody else to have an opinion about this art.

Whether there was an argument or a new awareness, I think that's what enabled it. Basically what we managed to overcome was that sense of intimidation, for one thing.

KW: I was just thinking that very thing. So by making the town the actual thing you emancipated them from being stuck in a thing where they're like, ooh I don't understand this, it's art. They're suddenly like, no, of course I have a say on this, I might not quite get how you've done that but that's my local shop, you're talking in my church.

AW: Yeah, I think that's quite a . . . a lesson. . . because you were talking earlier about people walking around with their phones, looking at the wall, not looking at the work but trying to get that little bit of context and I completely understand a wall plaque, I know that that is a substitute for context. If you don't have any of the intellectual or historical context of a work it can give you look in. I think it's a very flawed, it's a limited solution. Works sometimes, sometimes it doesn't, sometimes it actually confuses things.

So trying to find ways in which you can enable avenues of approach to an audience that isn't already initiated, doesn't have their own place within the context of understanding, that for me is a kind of a challenging ambition, something I've always watched and wondered how you might be able to actually effect that without putting the wall plaques up. And allowing people to

come in and feel they can look at that work, gauge it, engage with it, without having to know what it means. That's most of my experience of art, and I'm initiated.

It's just being able to give people that sense of entitlement, of being entitled themselves to look at the work and to judge it. And I also think that when you do have that sense of entitlement and are less intimidated, you are less likely to dismiss the work. Less likely to go, oh that's crap, the guy's talking wackydoodle. If it makes a little bit of sense you're going to be less likely to just go, nah, if it doesn't communicate with me I'm not going to communicate with it.

KW: you've got that 'in', you've got that first start, where you think, I do understand the fabric of this community, I do understand these buildings, I know these things, so I've got the starting point, now you're showing me this rupture within this thing that I know, I have to negotiate that in some way. Because I know this thing.

AW: Often what happens is an argument, and that's great. That's such a step above the moment of dismissal, because an argument is a conversation, it doesn't matter how it rests. It is still the use of language to communicate with each other. When somebody says to me, I hate that artwork, I'm happy.

The first festival was very freeing, I was so happy when people would come up and go, this is shit. And I was like . . .

KW: Great, we're talking now, we're speaking! Not in reverence and silence. And you know, it's funny because with this great turn in the social at the moment, and everyone wanting this socially-engaged works, I think people mistake engagement for everybody holding hands and it all being rosy, all being good, and I think sometimes the most interesting things come out of the most difficult things. And I'm sure you've seen that.

AW: Yes, and this is again something that we learnt in the festival because there was some scary stuff that happened. We were scared, really scared.

KW: Tell me, what was scary?

AW: Well first of all, without going into specifics at this point, we were coming into a small town which by our preconception, because that's all we had about what a small town is, that they would be hostile to something as innovative, something as esoteric. . . basically you have a hard time garnering any kind of acceptance in the city, where people are far more used to this sort of thing. That basically we were walking into people's town and putting on this thing that was completely foreign and alien. And we were pretty sure we were going to face some pretty stiff opposition to that. Which we did. And we did it in very different ways.

That whole idea of preconception, it's one of the driving factors of the festival, and its structure. Because one, while all we had were our preconceptions, what we learned was the town only had their preconceptions about us as

well. They were all expecting us to come up and look down our noses at them.

We were all going to be snobs, we all thought we were better and smarter and knew more and would have this esoteric language that only we shared and we were going to use that to somehow take the piss out of them or whatever. It was a lot more complex than that.

KW: did people voice that to you before the festival or was it just a feeling?

AW: not before, but after. We had a woman come to our feedback sessions—our feedback sessions for our two festivals, they've all been pretty much the cheer squad, everybody who loved the festival, they come and tell us how great it was and there's always an element to the town that is still hostile to the festival and there are going to be there every time we come up and do it. And the first time this woman, and I could tell right off she was not. . . I'd never seen her before, she was alone, and she had this look on her face that she'd girded her loins. She was very serious, and we were all very chummy with each other. And she was great. She hadn't actually come to the festival, she came up and said to me, well she didn't say it to me she said it to Mimi, that she'd actually just come on behalf of her friends who had been to the festival.

KW: So she was head of the posse.

AW: Yeah. And she said, I have a big mouth, so I'm going to open it. She said, you have to understand how scary this was for a small town like this. It

was such a beautiful thing to have said openly and honestly. And I said, well we were frightened as well, you have to know that, we were scared of what we were doing. For me that was part of the charm of that festival we're established, even if we haven't won everybody over, we're basically a little bit a part of the town now and every year we'll become something the town is more and more used to. So that will never happen in the same way.

I will tell you this other incident. And this was a really defining incident. We had an artist come up who had been active in the squatting movement and she did interventions into abandoned spaces, so she'd go into buildings, do a work where she would tie a string on a little toy car and push the car as far as she could through a crack in a door in a building and she'd film that. These little things about getting into spaces that are . . .

KW: that you're not supposed to be in.

AW: Yeah. She came up and she came across a house that the state had taken ownership because there were no living relatives of the woman who had owned it. So she had been thinking about this woman, thinking she had died alone and how sad that was, and there was this empty house that she had lived in. So she went into this house, which was for sale, and she made a work. She didn't know, none of us did . . . we'd arranged together a house that we had permission to get into . . . so she took some photos and some video, and I put up a photo of the work. Literally within half an hour I had the real estate agent banging on my door saying, "What the fuck are you guys doing, I'm getting angry phone calls." This woman who had died didn't have

any living relatives but she had babysat for basically all the kids of the town of a certain generation and they were furious. There was fallout from that. I took it down, there was an apology.

KW: See I think that brings up a really important ethical point as far as how artists navigate the town, as it is possibly different to a contemporary art space or festival where the audience, are expecting to be challenged, but for the town this artist flies in and this is happening in a lot of places, and says, "Ah, an interesting thing. I'll do the thing that I do in the city to this abandoned building", but it's quite different in a small community.

So how did you handle it?

AW: She learnt like that, she was terrified. So just to hark back to that idea about interesting things coming out of difficult situations. This was a realisation that Georgie made which is that we've come in and we'd sort of decided we wouldn't do the whole town-hall meeting before the festival. Ann had gone to a town hall meeting on a different subject, and witnessed it being railroaded by a whole bunch of negative people, and she said, if we do this we're gonna just . . .

KW: sink before you even swim.

AW: And we did have strong support within the community, we just didn't open it up to everybody. We had a lot of people who were giving us help and businesses that were encouraging, that wanted it to happen, locals who had lived here their whole life. I'm not saying we had everyone, because we



certainly didn't have everyone, but we did have a support base that we felt was strong enough. And we decided we weren't going to go down that difficult route of opening it up to a lot of committees and complaining and . . .

KW: And a lot of censorship before you even start.

AW: exactly, and to be perfectly honest I'm glad we did it that way. Also because it did bring up a lot of stuff, and it brought it up in a very immediate way that wasn't being suppressed by the kind of bureaucratic protocols of steering committees. It actually brought up the feeling, the actual. . .

KW: And I think what you're talking about is the politics of fear. An outsider coming in, well we'll stop them doing anything because they're from outside, they don't know our community, we'll shut them down just out of fear, rather than being open to seeing your town with new eyes.

AW: and there were people who would have done that right away. And even after the second one they would rather we didn't show up.

So what happened with this one incident, and Georgie realised this, that it created a lightning rod for all of the angst that was sitting there, waiting, because they were just hearing about us in the gossips. It was a small town, it was all generating a lot of talk and there wasn't a whole lot of information forthcoming. So it created a lightning rod in which they got to say, "No, this is our town," and they got to claim it back for themselves. For that I think it was really quite a . . . I won't say it was a good thing, because it wasn't a right thing, it shouldn't have happened in the first place, but because it allowed

that to happen, it allowed that conversation to come out, and for them to say to us, “You’re doing this in our town, it’s is our town, we own this, this is our place, this is our home”, and so it put us on a better footing. Which I don’t know, maybe there were a lot of town-hall meetings that could have happened as well.

For us—for me anyway—there is that sense that the fact that this was a risky business was a part of why it was such a successful art festival.

KW: I actually want to ask you, the initial thing that you do that is so effective because of that rupture of something that’s sort of unknown and that negotiation, a couple of years down the track becomes something quite different and the festival, the idea, takes on a life of its own and becomes almost an institution itself, and then that institution wants to reproduce itself rather than the original aims, and so what happens then? What are your plans as far as that goes, do you have a time where you kill the bastard baby and say enough’s enough, what are your plans for the future, for when that happens and you understand that that point has been reached?

AW: I have no idea. But it is something I look at. I’ve never done anything like this in my life, I’ve never been there at the inception of something as large or as successful as Cementa but I do know that these things have a limited life-span or they actually transform into something very other than they were in their originary moment. And I do know that it would be folly to think that we would be able to reproduce that. Because an originary moment is not

something that we manufactured. We were just holding on for dear life.

[laughs]

KW: Yes. But I think that, as far as my research over time and from my making work, those moments sometimes only come along once in your lifetime. And you absolutely know as an artist that that's what happened. Somebody asked me in a PhD talk the other day about this moment where in my life I'd been given a situation that was incredibly difficult and that allowed me to protest against an institution. Because I'm an artist I was actually able to make a work that affected the power balance in a very real sense, I understood the system. But an artist asked me, well how do you reproduce that again. For me you don't ask for these moments, they come to you. And you don't want to reproduce them, you've lived that moment, that's the extraordinary thing about it.

I think that's the surprising thing about Cementa, but I do wonder, because I'm questioning myself the same thing, when do you say, ok, it's not working, or I'm not doing what I originally hoped to do anymore and when do you put a stop and say OK that's finished now and not let it limp on because it's got funding or because there are a lot of other parties involved in this. There are your supporters and artists who are helping you, there are funding bodies. . .

AW: the other thing that I'm painfully aware of as well is that I now feel a sense of obligation to this town. I'm now a part of it and . . . Cementa's a pain in my ass, you know, I dream of being free most days. But I'm in the town and if the economic situation was dire in 2013 it's now much worse. All the

mines are closed now and people are very nervous, so I feel I've made a certain commitment to this town. I don't think I'm going to just jump ship, because I got what I wanted, and now it's . . . because who wants to just keep moving on as well? There's something here, and it will never be that for a festival again and so be it, that's not necessarily . . .

We have that idea that the artist is just this perpetual exploding machine, as High Modernism would describe him as, just knocking shit out and destroying things.

As well I'm now in a position where I can get funding, I can do things on a scale I've never been able to do before, I have access to resources. All of those things offer possibilities, there's all sorts of risks, I constantly worry for my soul.

KW: No no no, I understand your worry for that, because I think you believe in the power of the right sort of art, and funding brings with it its own strings, and the more funding, the more spectacular, the bigger the artist that want to come and make work, however what you've created is very much a grass roots thing—the material of the town, the people of the town and the artists working together in quite a small and delicate way, and when it becomes a spectacular where everybody comes up there's that pressure to produce, first something that is spectacular rather than something that is connected, which is what was so exciting in the first place. So you lose what's unique.

AW: I like that word delicate. That's a very beautiful way of describing . . . like the works that . . . my favourite works in the festival are where the relationship is very delicate. And they're not going to be impressive in that sort of loud and flashy way.

KW: I think one of the most beautiful works was the Circle of Exchange where Georgie did the work with the women of the town and the stories that came out of that. Because I think more and more contemporary art is becoming about the material of people and relationships and I think that work is just such a beautiful metaphor for that. Maybe you could talk a little bit about that work because that came up in . . .

AW: I guess for me . . . so it's funny because the discussion we're having right now, it seems the focus of your work is all about the stretch between art and life.

KW: Absolutely.

AW: And the tension that builds, and what's produced by that tension. On either side there's always the artist striving to make his art/life and standing on one side of that polarity misses the point completely. It has to be that tension between them, the desire to take in and once you're in you turn around and go, but I want to go back.

KW: (laughs) that's so true Alex!

AW: and so one of the things that I've been thinking about a bit is that when you take art into life you're also at the same time executing the inverse. Life enters the art and it loses its artiness. It loses its distinction. It loses the white walls that render its art status, it begins to meld in with the complexity of the everyday world. The vast, the unknowable, the unthinkable of the everyday world. That work, what it made me realise was that these practices that we have are so—they don't necessarily have to be but they belong within a spectrum of rarefication. They strive towards it. They strive towards purifications and essentialisation, minimalisation, and when that work came in it sort of lifted these threads out of a living everyday culture.

It made it completely evident to me that what we do is contiguous to that culture. That culture that four years ago would have been The Other of the culture that we live in. Which was also the preconceptions that we faced when we came up. Those preconceptions that for us are old, they're a bit hackneyed, that idea that high art is in contrast to everyday life. We're a little bit over that but the rest of the world still sees it in those terms, that high art is in polar opposition to craft. Probably when the spectrum opened for me was when the artists went away and came back with their work. And started making their work in the same . .

KW: in the same space.

AW: That occurs, you know, when you're working,. Your body is detached from your mind in a way, and doing something that's automatic. It's an amazing work. It's my favourite work in the festival as well.

KW: such a beautiful work, and such an extraordinary work and such a timely work.

I suppose we should also talk about The Forest.

AW: Well before we do that there's one other thing that I wanted to get to and that was the development of the festival. And this is for me was the difference between the first and second festival because it was not just the festival that changed, it was the artists as well. So what we lost, I thought, not totally but to some degree, was that level of sensitivity that we had in the first festival. Which I talk about, the way that artists seemed to be attuning themselves very conscientiously to the perceptions of the town and how they were going to be perceived, and I think this was a direct result of the risk they felt they were taking by making this work and participating in this festival. They were scared. . .

KW: so they were highly tuned on that fine level. . . which is very different than just going to produce what you want to produce.

AW: and we had a lot more works that I felt were artists bringing their . . . basically it's one of the things that I want to—and I think we can try to avoid it for as long as we can—to remove the idea that this is an exhibition out of town. That this is another venue to show art and be seen.

KW: so rather than bringing your tap-dance, you're going to come to Kandos and you're going to understand the fabric of this town and you're going to engage, which is quite different.

AW: and not try to impress everybody in the art world. And we did. We had a local come up and they actually said they liked the first festival because they felt it spoke more to them than the second one. We had a sound artist come up, we knew what she did and that was fine, and we thought that will be enough. And then another sound artist whose name I can't quite remember came up with her, and did something before her, and it was completely out of character from what I've known, so we were in the RSL, in the bowling club, it's not a 'nowhere' place, and he did this work which I actually really liked but it really pissed me off that he did it here. It was all reverted noise, and it was like he emptied the room, like it was packed and everybody was sitting there, he was really aggressive, and I thought, oh, this quickly we've got to this point where he completely disregarded the context of where you were doing this. And basically the sensitivities of people that you . . . and we had a bloke at the bar yelling at him, fucking piss off. You know. Which I thought was good, again, interesting.

KW: Yes interesting, but ....

AW: this guy was basically . . . the women at the bar were brilliant. I went up and apologised afterwards, and they were like, no, don't worry about it, they were much better about it and they like kept the peace at the bar where the locals were sitting, and they were far more accepting of this work than I was. Because I felt a little bit like—betrayed is not the right word, but I felt like that was a great work for the Art Gallery of New South Wales, you know?

KW: Yes, it should be there, not here.



AW: we were doing something in a context where a very slight thing could be quite challenging. You have to ask yourself, why would you get aggressive? It's just pure aggression and the guy at the bar is like yeah, he's in a bar and somebody is getting aggressive with him and he does what he does, he tells him to fuck off and gets aggressive back. He does what he does in that situation, it's quite native to that. That was a slight disappointment. I do realise this is going to be the growth pattern of this festival, it's not going to do me any good to think of it in terms of the halcyon days.

KW: But what do you think in looking back now on that particular event and the second Cementa as opposed to the first, what changed?

AW: artists were more comfortable. They were more comfortable with what they were doing and they weren't going to get turfed out or challenged by their audience. They were free to act out more. I definitely think that was what was happening. Artists weren't being attentive to their subject in the same way. I think that work was an extreme example and there were very beautiful works in the second festival, it was certainly not a disappointment. But it's just a difficult thing. These are all things that I try to keep in my mind that we do. I know that I'm not going to be able to overcome the entropy. That's going to be an affect as the festival grows, it will attract more and more entropy to it and there will be things that I like about it less and less, I know that's going to happen, but if I'm aware of it going in and aware of it when we're curating, well at least we can address them or attempt to address them. And I think that's all we can be asked to be doing.

KW: and don't you think too though that being aware of those things, and raising those questions, means that you're open to other possibilities as well. So it's those next possibilities. Because I think what happens is when somebody is not open to the possibilities, says no we've got the funding, we've got too keep reproducing this thing that worked in year one in the same way, that's when things get stale and problematic, you know?

AW: You're absolutely right. And the very fact is that that notion of preconception, and this is what we found happened with the artists, everybody came up with a backpack full of preconceptions, ideas of what they were going to do for the festival. And then any artist that actually spent a small amount of time on the residency there was an impact of the town itself, of the reality of what they were facing. And those ideas changed. The materiality, the medium of what they were working with began to change. It's this thing that I don't think we're terribly aware of anymore about art, it's an empirical activity, it's a powerful statement . . .

KW: I know, but you wonder sometimes, having put in for residencies, they often become bureaucratic and outcome based. I went to the Banff Centre a while ago and experienced that myself where literally I got there and I didn't go with preconceptions because I don't believe in that with work, I went there with open eyes to see what I was going to see, but others on the residency including the leader had gone there with their manifesto of what they were doing. And I think when you go in with that sort of thing artists become very attuned to wanting to fulfil the criteria, something that I think you have to be careful with as well.

AW: That notion of the constant between reflection and projection. And then sometimes it is our role to project on something, you know what I mean? It is sometimes, you take action and it's don't look at this reality because you're projecting your myth onto it. At then other times it's about perceiving, and try to bring that perception into appearance. To get to the appearance that you present of it. For me I think that's what this festival is about, and I think that's what getting outside of the art world is all about as well. It is about looking, and as you're perceiving the world, making it evident, making it manifest in some way. Which I hope the festival will always do.

The idea of remaining aware of how the festival is developing is the same process of remaining contemporary to it. The only thing I can do is be honest and observant in what I can about the reality that the festival manifests each time. And it might actually be really great, because we might be able to speak about the processes of cultural entropy that occur when we make these things happen. How they degenerate.

KW: Absolutely. You discussing before about talking to the audience of the town after the event, and I think that's really interesting because even as we talk to people, as we know, it affects the answers you're going to get.

Thinking also about how you collect your data of what actually happens and what the people perceive. Claire Bishop talks about the stories that come out of things, not necessarily the formally documented but the stories that are told after these more ephemeral events happen, and that they are sometimes the most interesting way of documenting them. So there are all these possibilities for you of working out how you . . .

AW: As an artist those stories hold more water to me than any bureaucratic measurement. It's like, oh, so we made work that had meaning for you because you were able to generate a story out of it. That's why I make art. So therefore it was a successful artwork.

KW: Yeah, I think that's one of the ways of gauging, and when those stories are passed on, when it really changes somebody and they hand that story on to someone else and you hear it second-hand from a daughter or a thing where, oh my god this thing happened.

So the Forest Project. How did it happen?

AW: The Forest came about because—this is the coming to grips with moving out of the region. I did a practice where I would go around on council collection day when everybody puts their rubbish out on the street and you actually have to fit it within a certain space, it has to fit within a metre by a metre and I would select one of those and treat it like an artwork. So I would take this whole bundle of rubbish and I would take it to an art space and then have to make an artwork out of it. I had to use all of the material and I couldn't add anything into it. I did it about three times in the city and it worked really well in a white cube. You create these very beautiful relationships. Then I moved up here and there's no collection.

KW: and probably everybody just reuses their stuff, sticks it out the back for use later.

AW: there's a lot of that. So a friend of mine had found a dump, a private dump in the middle of the forest, Clandulla State Forest, and he showed it to me and it was amazing. It was big, a lot bigger than anything I'd worked with before, and it looked like somebody had just taken a living room and dumped it into the forest. There wasn't any furniture, but it was clothes, cookware, food, toys, books, and it looked like a murder site. Toys, little girl's things . . . it was just creepy.

So I told him about this artwork and he said you should just check out, and I looked at it and said this is just way too much rubbish, it had been in the bush for a couple of months, it was degrading, the food was rotting. But eventually I ended up going, I think I'll just have to start making art, it was driving me nuts, so I went out and I started to address this. It was really hard. It took me about a month of just keep going out there and working it.

I learnt so much about the process of the work that I was doing. I hadn't realised when I was in the white cube. I had to make meaning or create some order and I didn't realise that's what I was doing with the first works. To some degree I did; I know that I made a sort of a list of strategies that I could implement. For instance I could use an object to create narrative; I could abstract it into a formal quality, for colour or form; I could place it with another object in order to make relationships between them. So there were a number of different strategies that I was able to employ. But when I was in the forest, and the forest is so visually complex there was no way to make . . . well you could make an order but it was so weak, straight lines, pure colour.

There was definitely that notion of violence that I could use, so with this work I was definitely able to employ that. And also I realised that in the first festival artists were coming up and giving that special attention, that very minute attention that they give to the material, they were giving that to the town and the social milieu, I realised I was able to do that to these objects because I'd spent so much time with them. So I was just looking at the rubbish, acclimatising myself to them, and out of that, almost by osmosis, I developed an idea that I reckoned it was probably a breakup, that they guy had lost his family, his woman had left him and he had just dumped everything as an act of revenge. Because he could have taken it to the free tip but as an act of violence he just dumped his home that he'd lost in the forest.

It's not like I was trying to tell that story in the work. I was really just trying to make some sort of visual order or sense out of it. It was probably my least successful iteration of it in art terms. It was a very conflicted and unresolved work, until I finished it. I had an opening, invited all the local arts people to it, we sat around, drinking wine and looking at it, and then we disappeared. Over the next couple of weeks I cleaned it up.

For me it was the best artwork I ever made. I took this piece of rubbish, this thing that was really offensive and I cleaned it up, and it was so resolved. It restored this little bit of bush to a state where it was bush again, not a murder site. It was very gratifying even in this sort of . . . it's funny, because even in this insignificant way because I realise this is not . . . it's a completely symbolic act, me cleaning this little bit of bush up. I'm not restoring nature,

but basically through this very small—insignificant is probably the word—but the significance of that insignificance.

KW: but there's such an act of care in spending that time with those objects and trying to understand those objects in that space, and that knowing of that space, and then the gathering of those objects, there's an incredible amount of care. It's an extraordinary act.

AW: there's care that grows into place in a way. That in the end was what I was able to do, to care for that place. And care for those objects as well. We're all talking about basically establishing an emotional relationship.

I do make works like this, especially when they're out in remote places, I make works that are often no more than my experience of them. The audience doesn't really have access. I don't know if you saw on my website the hole I dug out . . .

KW: yeah.

AW: that work was my experience of it. [laughs] I'll never be able to actually represent that experience. I was the audience, I was the artist, and that was enough of an artwork for me.

So that was the beginning of The Forest. There is a direct link in my mind to Kippenberger, you know the work *Walking Through the Forest after Taking My Pills*.<sup>3</sup> I've always loved the way, how flippant he was.

So the gallery came about, you know, that sheer flippancy. Compare to that to me dealing as well with the fact that CEMENTA is getting a bit heavy, becoming institutional, becoming very serious on certain levels and I know that's something deadly to my art making.

KW: I think that's happening to all of us. I was only hinting at that before but I feel that that institutionalisation of things is the most dangerous thing in every form of life. Once something wants to keep reproducing itself we don't have any real input anymore we're just part of a machine.

AW: Yeah I know. So we just simply become subordinate to its reproduction.

KW: so The Forest is your breakout!

AW: Yes, it basically is. And trying to find somewhere further away, that's harder to get to. That's less likely to attract a crowd. I wasn't long after I did it I've imagined having an art opening in the Antarctic. Going out there, getting some cheap bottles of wine, making some artwork out of the snow and inviting all my friends. [laughs] It would be really fun.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Kippenberger, *Now I'm Going Into the Big Birch Wood, My Pills Will Soon Start Doing Me Good*, 1990, MoMA



KW: Go for it! But you have invited audiences to The Forest.

AW: yes, I'd seriously invite everybody. At Index and at Vanishing Point we were basically the inner west, and it was strange at the time, and still today actually, we used to call it the corrugated iron curtain. Nobody would come from the eastern suburbs to look at art, nobody would come to our fuckin' art gallery.

KW: I remember you had to have them on—what time was our opening, it was like 11 o'clock on a Saturday or something—and there wasn't allowed to be alcohol at that time, and we had to keep it. . . .but it's an industrial street, what's the issue here, neighbourhood?.

AW: but what I discovered, and this is very much about social media, if you put it up on social media, the next time you went to one of their openings everybody would come up to you and go, Oh I saw that thing you did, it was amazing. Yeah, yeah, it was amazing, you should have been there, and then I realised that's how art is disseminated. I can do art anywhere, again being out here, it's all part of the way I perceive our relationship to the outside. Is that it has to be outside, it has to be something you can't get to and really a lot of things start to fall into place in terms of my understanding of art history which is basically predicated upon the fear of missing out.

Art history is one long train of the fear of missing out, and basically you do, you miss out, even if you were there you've missed out. So there's this relationship to the past that's already set up. Being aware of it I just take

advantage of it. I just think, you guys, that's fine. You'll be [garbled] in 20 years in which you come to the first one, and that's going to be the one that every one's better, or the second one or the third one. And that's where it's going to take its line from. Being there and actually being able to participate, that is an amazing thing. It's wrong to set up a dichotomy between coming and being, it is something that is being communicated from the past, that's existing in the past and what it is when you're actually making it, I think artists being in the moment of making, of becoming, that's the vital moment. That the life the art exists in that other phase.

KW: Although I think that when you're working with the social fabric of a community, say, often I found, certainly when you work within the white cube space and you take a work in, the pre-done thing that is just displayed there, you don't even want to be there, it feels extraordinarily dead. The further you move away from that, and the more you work with people as fabric and social media as your material, the more interesting things start to become because you're actually working in the present rather than. . . you know? It's quite different.

AW: Yeah, I know, it's funny because I think I am perceiving of everything in its relationship to the past, because one: the thing you can't get away from is the past. In the artwork that I'm making now, that 'nowness' that we do exist in, that is all predicated upon the past and our entertaining of the past and our desire to have participated in the past and the values and the meaning, and basically all of that ground, like a forest floor, it builds up every year,] and you're simply this year's droppings. [laughs]

KW: [laughs] Leaf litter, we're all just leaves, just a bit of this year's litter.

AW: It's kind of me attempting to have an awareness of how our culture functions. And then I think our culture does function in its relationship to the past. I think we're changing how it functions, how it works, and as it changed over the last hundred years it will change over the next hundred years. That culture will function differently especially for instance where we become aware of a certain dimension of it that we weren't aware of it before. And we're all aware of it now so we can't actually participate with it in the same way and that pushes us outside of it. And then we have to find another way of relating that will be as fruitful as the first one.

AW: The thing that I wouldn't want to do is advocate for some kind of overarching strategy for defeating that system, because as soon as you become at all universal then you fit right. If you do remain singular you do remain outside that system. It just gives you a little leeway. They'll get you in the end!

KW: Absolutely. To me it's the little points of rupture that you've talked about all the way along, even if they're only a little break in the window for two seconds and you have that two seconds, and then it gets co-opted and down, but you go again. And that's the way, I don't know if you stay ahead of it, but it's certainly a way of making some sort of impact.

AW: And I think keeping your effects present. I'm not attempting to strategize a universal revolutionary rupture, but a small rupture between me and

somebody I don't have a relationship to actually generates a relationship with that person.

This is something Georgie has been key in teaching me about: that notion that the idea of rupture, which has connotations of violence and is historically associated with a culture of violence through Modernism and its notions of critique and revolution and these sort of things, is that actually looking at how rupture generates quite positive results that are the opposite of a critique. The binding together of two people or the joining together, because I think 'relationship' is actually a word that I'm getting to like more and more. And to use it maybe a little bit in contrast to the notion of 'relational art' which I find is the abstracting of relationship into a form that will fit within an art context. Like taking a dinner, which is an amazing thing to have and a beautiful way to forge relationships, and turning it into an almost spectacular experience in an art context, where, ooh look, we get to relate to people we don't know.

[laughs]

KW: I think it's very much the flavour of now, so I think that defining the difference within that is very important at this point of time. As the social has been co-opted, I don't believe that all of the social has been co-opted, because I've seen in my time moments of true social engagement. I've still got questions, say with Kandos, of how that moves on. I'm certainly not speaking of you, but I've seen artists move into towns all around the world, and the spectacular comes in and does its thing and then it moves out, people sort of drop on the ground, and it's, oh woops, but it was great, it was

great for the town. I certainly don't think that's happening at Kandos—yet—  
but it's something that needs to be considered.

AW: my personal strategy for the turn out is—I'm thinking of doing a postgrad  
as well and whether I will do it or not, and the best title I've got so far is 'How  
to Avoid Making Universal Art in a Globalised Art Culture', and trying to  
remain outside of . . . when you say the social, it's a universalising gesture, to  
name it all as The Social. It abstracts it all into a single universal concept. And  
it's absolutely refusing that and sticking with those moments where you are  
able to witness that, because being an artist you don't have to name shit, you  
know? Everyone else is doing it, you don't have to do it. You should be  
spending most of your time denying it.

KW: Absolutely! Well I'll be very interested in how you get your PhD doing  
that, because that's been my main aim in doing mine, is to find a way of  
writing a PhD that is well...the same as the way I make work.

Thank you so much for your time, I've taken up a huge amount of it and I  
can't tell you how much I appreciate it and it's wonderful to speak to  
somebody who truly understands. It's rare these days, you're often you're  
surrounded by people who are almost talking a different language, so it's nice  
to talk the same language with someone. So thank you.

AW: Same back to you. It's very good to be able to talk about it, because all I  
do is think about it otherwise.

KW: you need to talk it about.

AW: there's a Cementa documentary, it's half an hour, it's on a posted site. You have to subscribe to it. You sign up to it and get seven free views on this documentary. I'll send you the details.

Have you talked to Ian Milliss yet? We met him through the festival. He was living in Malawi, two towns down.

KW: he told me he was in the Blue Mountains.

AW: Just before he moved into the Blue Mountains. This is the Blue Mountains by the way.

He was born an hour away from here, a coal town, Malawi basically. And then he grew up and got into Central Street. He was seminal in helping us to, his influence is, he wasn't there at meetings or any of that shit, just his presence, the way he talks about what we were doing, he questioned us, just kind of made us think you've actually been doing this forever, we're in your footprints basically. Because he's been so successful at doing what you're talking about, he's sort of stayed, well, institutions won't have anything to do with him. He gets a show here and there. So he would blow your mind.

He was trying to find a way of making art outside of the art world and making art that actually affected the world. He proposed The Yeomans Project at the Art Gallery of NSW

KW: They stopped him didn't they? They pulled the pin?

AW: Yes but Yeomans was a farmer, he wasn't an artist, and it was like, no, he's an artist, he's a cultural innovator, he's an artist. Milliss is probably the most cogent thinker on the subject that I know. He needs to be in your PhD.

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