

SITWORKS: ECOLOGIES AND TECHNOLOGIES

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Abstract

SITWORKS is an interdisciplinary research and practice project that invites artists, scientists and scholars to respond to the Bundanon property through the lens of their specific discipline. Over four years this has led to a series of interactive projects, many utilising electronic technologies. The inaugural investigations focussed on the geomorphology of the site and palaeo-environmental research, specifically in the area of sea level rise and climate change [1]. In subsequent years the focus has been on water and the river; land management; Indigenous cultural heritage, and food security.

Keywords: geomorphology, indigenous, food security, Bundanon, climate change.

KILLING THE HOST

Linda Dement

Killing the Host is an augmented reality work that can be viewed on smartphone *in situ*.

Giant scabies mites stand threateningly over wombat burrows on the Bundanon property and at sites of long-wall mines in the southern coalfields of NSW. On approach, sounds of frenzied eating and pained screams erupt. Phrases, gleaned from mining company documents, explain and justify the actions of a parasite so consumed by short-term gain, it fails to realise it is torturing and destroying the very thing that sustains it.

By engaging with the Bundanon property in a site-specific work, *Killing the Host* functions between the material landscape and the invisible environment

of satellite signals, GPS co-ordinates and fluctuating wifi. Bundanon has its flows and paths of wifi signals, wombat burrows, scabies infestations, chemical traces, walking tracks, hovering satellites, fox dens, odd wisps of phone signal and of course far more. This work pinpoints and scales up the cruel presence of microscopic scabies and counters the disturbing silence of mange infested wombats, drawing them into the invisible but connected field of signals for a shifted emphatic presence in the landscape.

Long-wall mining and coal seam gas fracking in the nearby southern coal fields are of ongoing concern to locals, farmers and environment groups as the land and water systems are increasingly damaged. Augmented reality allows an insertion directly into otherwise inaccessible mine locations, giving form to critical dissent as an immediate overlay on the source of the problem.

Landscapes are not only composed of farm and bush, river and mine, but also data, signals and connections. Energies and dynamics emerge from, interleave, intersect with and accrete around the real objects and formations of visible tangible ecology. Wifi accumulates around artists. Scabies mites accumulate in cool dark burrows. Satellites throng above the naval base. Longwall mining machinery proliferates where activists do not. Phone signals avoid the valley. These environments entail a shifting conglomeration of invisible entities, convergences and exchanges that arise from and hook back into the solid and real.

Killing the Host aims to conflate, layer and echo between parallel damaging situations –mange and mining – highlighting these two instances of a pattern of tunnelling, toxicity, proliferation and destruction. It gives voice to the experience of a dying host, and makes visible a parasitic infestation that destroys the very thing it relies on for survival.

THE LANTANA PROJECT Gary Warner

Lantana camara is a scrambling, thicket-forming plant with pretty flower clusters. Native to Central and South America, it was brought to Europe in the seventeenth century as a garden ornamental and diffused across the world in the wake of European colonialism.

In Australia, lantana is deemed a “weed of national significance” due to its ability to aggressively colonise and seriously disrupt natural ecosystems. It is estimated that 5% of the continent is infested with lantana.

A visit to Bundanon in 2007 exposed me to the exhilarating native bushland surrounding the farm, and the shock of decades of significant habitat degradation by lantana.

In response, I determined to spend three weeks of a 2009 artist residency removing lantana by hand from a dramatic bushland amphitheatre. Each day I packed lunch, tea, tools and cameras, and walked up the forest trail to practice ‘weeding meditation’.

This involved the methodical removal of dense lantana thickets that were smothering and killing native species and obscuring a panoramic assemblage of sandstone boulders.

The procedure involved a series of stages. Firstly, reaching into the brambly thicket to cut back the leading branches with secateurs. Then using the pruning saw to cut back the branching structure. Then cutting the trunk close to ground level and painting it with glyphosate herbicide to kill the plant. The mass of cuttings were mounded up and left in the amphitheatre to naturally decay.

Why is this meditation? My interest in Zen Buddhism directed my thinking about this project, particularly tenets around work as practice, the value of daily discipline and mindfulness during activity. While working alone through the day, I was open to the sounds of the forest, encounters with birdlife and the changing atmospheric conditions under the canopy of spotted gum and stringybark trees - light, air, rain, scents. Each day I broke for a lunch of rice, vegetables and tea, sitting for a while in a state of empty mind before starting the afternoon session.

Finally, a sweeping arc of the amphitheatre perimeter had been cleared, to reveal and revive a variety of small trees, rock orchids, heath shrubs and large sandstone boulders.

Fig 1. Killing the Host: an augmented reality work viewed on smartphone.
(© artwork and photo Linda Dement)



Four years on, the native species are thriving, the boulders are moss-covered and the heap of decayed cuttings is occupied by bracken fern and grasses. Each year, during the Siteworks weekend, I make a pilgrimage up to the amphitheatre to wrench out any new lantana seedlings.

MILK AND HONEY Nigel Helyer

Bundanon is a canvas worked and reworked, an image floating over underpainting after underpainting, never quite obscuring the historical layers that resonate from a deep past. The hand of Boyd pushing a brush, a crawling Nebuchadnezzar, a farmhand chopping timber, a tribal owner cutting sugarbag (honey) from a blue gum, the river slowly eroding the mountain.

“A land flowing with Milk and Honey” is the phrase from Exodus describing the agricultural plenty of the chosen land. Early colonial settlers to the Shoalhaven region forged their own path towards this metaphor of plenty in a life that melded European practices and stereotypes with a landscape *chosen* but unknown and perhaps unknowable.

His eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk. Is it a small thing that thou hast brought us up out of a land that floweth with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness, except thou make thyself altogether a prince over us?

For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swear unto their fathers, that floweth with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten and filled themselves, and waxen fat; then will they turn unto other gods, and serve them, and provoke me, and break my covenant.

As if stranded by some ancient flood, two sonic river punts *float* in the Bundanon Homestead, carrying cargoes of Milk and Honey, sounding out their riverine environment with fragmentary voices in a strange new world.

The soundscape is driven by a series of eight audio actuators that resonate the surface of the sculptural elements, turning the punts, beehives, milk churns, oars and a stray Steinway piano into resonant sound-boards.

The eight streams of audio intermingle Old Testament verses with ambient nature recordings and cryptic nineteenth century farm diary entries. Waterscapes envelop the sounds of hand milking in an old fashioned dairy whilst a quill pen scratches out the daily farm routines,

weather patterns and the small detail of agricultural life:

“Drummed down a swarm of bees...Went into bush after a bees nest but got no honey... Mother cut up peaches.... Jimmy would not bring down his punt as river too high... Went over to peddlers boat... Wrote to Bob, got no prizes... Shipped 22 bags of corn on punt... Picked preserving dish full of grapes to make jam... Got a small swarm of bees, mother practiced her hymns...”

An incessant flow of small details that gradually accumulate into the great slow-moving river of life.

to create a projection piece for an audience to view as they left the property in the evening.

The second project we made for the Future Food event was a stop motion animated drawing that depicts a hand drawn map of the Shoalhaven River morphing into an Australian Bass fish leaping out of the river. These Bass have been in decline due to weirs and dams blocking fish migration on many rivers. There is the Tallowa Dam upstream from Bundanon built in the 1970s that blocked the Bass from more than 80% of their habitat before a fish lift was added several years ago. This animated drawing was projected onto several



Fig 2. The Verdant Shed projection. (© artwork and photo Josephine Starrs & Leon Cmielewski)

THE VERDANT SHED & CLOUD MAPPING Josephine Starrs & Leon Cmielewski

We created two artworks for Siteworks 2012, using video projection and animation to respond to the unique Bundanon environment and architecture.

The Archive & Study Centre is a large old shed the Trust architects sensitively converted, cladding the shed in a way that leaves its perimeter of massive posts exposed. We brought these massive tree trunks back to life by projecting an animated drawing of trees over the building. *The Verdant Shed* refers to the ancient practice of building sacred structures and meeting places from living trees and also the current organic architecture trend to incorporate living trees into modern building designs.

Bundanon is somewhat isolated, so that transient, ephemeral site-specific work such as night-time projections would not normally have an audience. The Siteworks event offered the opportunity

locations around Bundanon, from old fence posts to the stone-walls of the Bundanon homestead. It was then re-shot, edited and installed in the Bundanon Homestead Library for the exhibition.

Our project in progress at Bundanon is to document the clouds above the Shoalhaven River that winds through the Bundanon properties. We made several row-boat journeys documenting the clouds above the river. Using GPS we have placed the cloud images in the correct orientation above the spot they were photographed within Google maps. Mapping is usually about fidelity and accuracy of scale and dimension, as it is related to land title and land ownership. We find it interesting that a river is the only boundary in the rigid cartesian space of cadastral mapping that moves. All other points are fixed in space, but a river as a legal boundary line is mobile, it changes shape over time, like the clouds floating above it.

LAST WORD 2012

Robyn Backen

Last Word 2012 was a collaborative performance on the Shoalhaven River, Bundanon at dusk. It was the third and final commissioned performance in the series for Siteworks.

This work developed research into acoustic and light transmission systems in remote environments. While much research into the future advancement of twenty-first century technology is poignant, the examination of past and present forms of communication enabled a rich and deeper insight into the human condition.

This collaboration focused upon a growing understanding of the land from cultural and scientific perspectives, encompassing both indigenous and non-indigenous histories of place and inevitably, considerations of land usage and discussions around the future of food and water [2].

This work embodied a river fugue of voices, and channelled memory in the form of a farmer's diary from the region [3]. Thomas Bilholf wrote the following entry [4] on Saturday 29 September 1890:

"Cold Westerly Wind - Kate Hughes came over and washed. Bob rolled front paddock. Ted and Reggie went on planting corn inside paddock, Bob helped them in afternoon. I husked and picked corn. Mrs Trotman all right again. Mother wrote to Tottie. Cassie Hughes came over in the evening. Boys threshed."

This diary entry was expressed throughout the performance, as well as within the fugue-element, which include

a list of the mundane weather reports from 1890. These reports display a farmer's consistency, sense of time and the necessary need to understand the climate. The transmission of the reports was via echoes across the water, walkie-talkies in tin cans, PA system and portable mp3 players. The voices of the four performers were transmitted and then received beside, around and across the Shoalhaven tidal zone.

Last Word 2012 referenced the Boyd landscape legacy, specifically through the light transmission that illuminated and echoed upon the ghostly hillside, as a procession ascended and eventually disappeared into darkness. This darkness offered the audience a moment to listen to the river.

PRESENT IN THE LANDSCAPE Garth Paine

All landscapes are contested spaces. They are constructions of enculturation, be that perceptions of the energy and spirits within the land, and reflected by the land and the animals inhabiting it, or a Western consumer view of the potential of wealth production, the litres of oil, tons of ore, gold etc. *Present in the Landscape* is an exploration of the Shoalhaven River (S34 53.686 E150 30.157) in southern New South Wales, Australia. This work came about during the Siteworks residency at the Bundanon Trust property. Siteworks marks a shift in my practice - it has led to a series of works that respond to the river, the natural environment (especially the birds) and the Aboriginal culture and

practices of the area.

These works contemplate a series of communications – conversations with the landscape – a series of experiments that seek to give voice to the experience of being truly present in the landscape.

I am investigating the sense of presence as a profound oneness with the land – inclusive of the wombats and kangaroos, the birds, the fish jumping in the river, the cold, the heat, the long grass, the trees, the undergrowth – etc.

I undertake this exploration by going out at 4-am and setting up to make ambisonic sound recordings through until 7 or 8-am. The Ambisonic format is a full three-dimensional sphere – a sound field – giving a sense of immersion in the soundfield upon replay. I lie on the ground with my headphones on, enveloped in a super-real sonic environment absolutely stationary in a kind of meditation for three or four hours. They become a durational act – one of resisting the aching body, the insects crawling around and the hot or cold – an endurance of being still, present and absorbed by the earth. Recordings have also been undertaken from late afternoon into evening - listening to the unseen.

On each occasion I learn something about the transition of the night to the day – the slow quiet voice of the owls through to the raucous awakening of the parrots – the very last to wake and of course the noisiest. The fish leaping from the river to catch insects at night - the splash of their bodies re-entering the river - swallowed by the mass of water - disappeared again from sight.

Critical to this practice is the sense of lying on the ground, feeling the coldness, firmness, and vibrational energy of the space – a perception of the landscape shared with me through the generosity of the local Aboriginal people, (especially local song men Cecil McLeod and Richard Scott Moore). The welcome into their dreaming with a ceremony on the sand at the edge of the river - discussions about the landscape as vibrational energy - the appearance of a crow around the corner of the river just at the time it was named, and zephyrs of wind on the river surface apparently on command. This, all be it an introductory insight into another way of seeing the world around us, has been very influential as I laid on the ground in the dark, listening to the sounds of the ecosystem.



Fig 3. Last Word 2012 night time performance. (© artwork and photo Robyn Backen)

SITWORKS REFLECTION

Jodie Newcombe

Since 2009, I have had the privilege of attending two Siteworks events at Bundanon and each has offered unique connections, insights and moments that have been fundamental to the development of my own practice, Carbon Arts. In 2009, *Ten Trenches*, the first Siteworks project, came at a time when I had just started planning Carbon Arts as a creative agency tasked with generating multi-disciplinary, artist-led projects to address climate change.

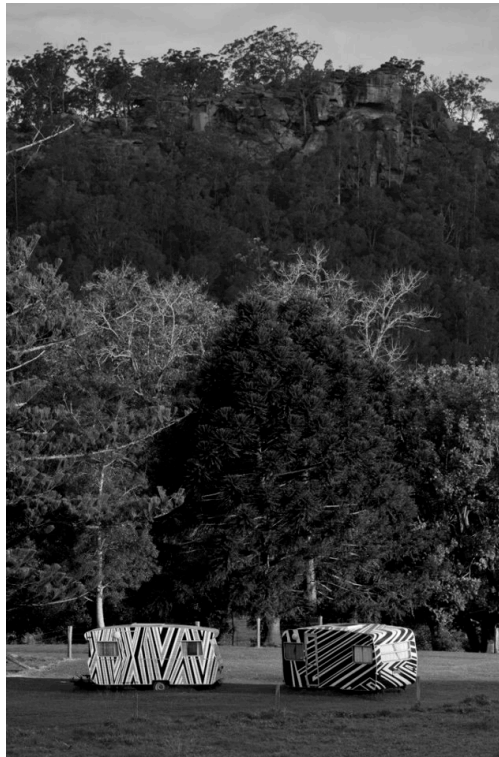
At the centre of *Ten Trenches* were the two Cohen brothers, a scientist and a theatre director who collaborated over a number of weeks to explore the impact of rising sea levels on the Bundanon property. The physical interventions on site, through the digging of trenches to reveal the historical reach of the river, as well as markers that reached above ground to show historical flood levels, seamlessly wove cultural and scientific investigation. The public event was a day and evening of stunning performances that opened my eyes to the power of art and science collaboration, and the logic of responding to global issues through a very deep exploration of site and place.

Three years on, with a number of major projects behind me under the banner of my now full-time occupation as founding director of Carbon Arts, I was invited back to participate in the *Future Food Feast*, the culmination of the Siteworks 2012 project. This time, Carbon Arts participated directly, showcasing a documentary film of one of our projects in a Brook Andrew caravan for the public to enjoy. The film tracks our long-running engagement with artist Natalie Jeremijenko and her *Cross (x) Species Adventure Club*, which “enlists humans to explore a biodiverse and delicious future; to engage in culinary experiments; invest in food innovation; and participate in re-designing our collective relationship to natural systems” [5].

A particularly magic moment occurred during the Siteworks 2012 open weekend, which for me epitomised the nature and value of the whole initiative. During the Friday evening in the kitchen shared by all the visitors, an artist specialising in weeds – Diego Bonetto – brought to the kitchen bench a thick bunch of Scottish Thistle, a reviled weed, and invited us to taste its sweet celery-like core. Standing by was celebrated chef, Jared Ingersol, who was

inspired to turn this weed into a delicious salad to be incorporated into the morrow’s public lunch; while Chris Andrews from Greening Australia watched on with amazement and exclaimed that he couldn’t wait to tell all his staff that they could eat this stuff that they usually tossed away! For me, having just launched *The Australian Future Foods Lab* to reignite the public imagination around sustainable and emergent food systems, this was a defining moment that reaffirmed my belief in the value of bringing different disciplines together to examine complex problems as an art practice.

Fig 4. Travelling Colony in situ at Bundanon.
(© artist Brook Andrew) Indigenous and Pop inspired caravans commissioned by Carriageworks and Sydney Festival 2012. © photo Rob Little)



References and Notes

1. Reported in T.J. Cohen. and S.J.K Kermode. and M. Leggett. "Ten Trenches: A Science-Art Collaboration." *Leonardo* 46.1 (2013): 74-75. Project MUSE. Web. 3 Jul. 2013. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>.
2. The core collaborative team (The PLANK) included: Ian Hobbs, Michelle Xen, Annemaree Dalziel, Neil Mackenzie, Kiera Mackenzie, Bert Tenbungru Groves–Yamma and Chris Zinn.
3. The work referenced *So You Want To Write a Fugue* written by the Canadian composer Glen Gould in Gould. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZM4yxbE0ZE>
4. The performance was held on the corresponding date in 2012.
5. <http://nataliejeremijenko.com/projects/>