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# Your Place or Mine? Curatorial approaches to place through the prism of home

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# *Your Place or Mine?*

## Curatorial approaches to place through the prism of home

Felicity Fenner

A thesis in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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The outward image of the place we call home – Australia – historically dominates and subsumes personal experiences of home in exhibitions of Australian art. The thesis argues, and demonstrates through a series of curatorial projects, that exhibitions can, alternatively, embody intimate experiences of place that more accurately describe the experience of 21st century Australia. Citing recent Australian socio-political and literary culture as a backdrop, it is shown that the prism of home is an effective curatorial device through which to transmit and receive new insights into aspects of this place we call home, Australia.

The conceit of 'home' is adopted in the thesis both as a curatorial theme and as a framework for engagement. The research reveals how reference to home can guide viewers from simply 'understanding' meaning to 'inhabiting' (being at home within) the intellectual and sensory space of artworks and exhibitions. When the idea of home is embedded in the curatorial approach, artists' knowledge and experience – particularly those at odds with mainstream perceptions of Australian culture – can be articulated. Thus, the exhibition becomes a catalyst for new ways of seeing and thinking about place.

Contextualising the author's curatorial projects with others in the region seeking to define a post-global sense of identity, the thesis reveals how the curator can employ the framework of home to facilitate new insights into place. To achieve this, three key curatorial strategies are applied to exhibitions of Australian art: the inclusion of works that are based on real life, intersect with or *are* real life occurrences; the creation of installations in the gallery space that are physically immersive or inhabitable; and the facilitation and co-production with artists of participatory works in public and non-institutional spaces.

Through a series of curated projects, the prism of home gives voice to internal (bottom-up) understandings of place, providing an alternative to external (top-down) perceptions typically associated with the visual lexicons of national and cultural identity.


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The thesis is dedicated to the memory of Nick Waterlow OAM (1941–2009).

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My supervisor Professor Jill Bennett encouraged me to undertake this PhD and provided a scholarly context for my curatorial research along the way. In addition to the exhibitions and readings she has brought to my attention in recent years, her own books on empathy, practical aesthetics and re-imagining Sydney, have greatly informed and influenced my thinking about what it means to be a curator of contemporary art in the 21st century.

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# List of illustrations


Cover: Do-ho Suh, *A Perfect Home: The Bridge Project*, 2010 (video still). Image courtesy the artist.

**CHAPTER 1**

Page 42 Figure 1: "Surprised – Richard and Tania Booker with their children". Image: Fairfax Media.

Page 43 Figure 2: Asylum seekers arriving at Christmas Island, August 2013. Image: Fairfax Media.

Page 52 Figure 3: Charwei Tsai, *Lotus Mantra* (2006). 2006 Singapore Biennale, Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 52 Figure 4: Jennifer Wen Ma, *Alms* (2006). 2006 Singapore Biennale. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 53 Figure 5: Takafumi Hara, *Signs of Memory: City Hall Pink Windows* (2006). 2006 Singapore Biennale. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 53 Figure 6: Takafumi Hara, *Signs of Memory: City Hall Pink Windows*, 2006. Singapore Biennale 2006. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 54 Figure 7: Amanda Heng, *Worthy Tour Co (S) Pte Ltd* (2006). 2006 Singapore Biennale. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 55 Figures 8: Ashok Sukumaran, *Everything is Contestable* (2006). 2006 Singapore Biennale. Photos: F. Fenner.

Page 55 Figures 9: Ashok Sukumaran, *Everything is Contestable* (2006). 2006 Singapore Biennale. Photos: F. Fenner.

Page 55 Figure 10: Gary Carsley, *Wonder Wrap* (2008). 2008 Singapore Biennale Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 55 Figure 11: Wit Pimkanchanapong, *Singapore* (2008). 2008 Singapore Biennale. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 56 Figure 12: Title page *Open House*, 2011 Singapore Biennale catalogue.

Page 60 Figure 13: Farid Rasulov, *Carpet Interior* (2013). 2013 Venice Biennale Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 61 Figure 14: installation view, *Welcome to Iraq* (2013). 2013. Venice Biennale Photo: F. Fenner.

**CHAPTER 2**


Page 65 Figure 1: *The Sydney Morning Herald,* wraparound cover, 26 January, 2014. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 69 Figure 2: Ramingining artists and Nick Waterlow, Art Gallery of NSW, 1979. Image courtesy Biennale of Sydney.

Page 71 Figure 3: Raminining artists, *Aboriginal Memorial* (1988). 1988 Biennale of Sydney. Image courtesy Biennale of Sydney.

Page 71 Figure 4: Peter Eisenman and Buro Happold, *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* (2004). Berlin. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 91 Figure 5: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Untitled (Awelye)* (1994). Image courtesy Utopia Art Sydney.

Page 92 Figure 6: Debra Dawes, *January* (2004). Image courtesy the artist.

Page 93 Figure 7: Installation view of Jemima Wyman *Kimberley Blue* (2004) and Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Untitled* (1996). Photo: Sue Blackburn.

Page 95 Figure 8: Mitjili Naparrula, *Untitled* (c.1988). Image courtesy Niagara Galleries.

Page 96 Figure 9: Melinda Harper, *Untitled* (2003). Image courtesy the artist.

Page 96 Figure 10: George Tjungurrayi, *Untitled* (1998). Image courtesy Papunya Tula Artists.

Page 97 Figure 11: A.D.S. Donaldson, *Untitled* (2002). Image courtesy the artist.

Page 98 Figure 12: Installation view of Ildiko Kovacs, *For You* (2004) and Paddy Bedford, *Untitled* (2003). Photo: Sue Blackburn.

Page 99 Figure 13: Nicky Winmar (1993). Photo: Wayne Ludbey; Image courtesy *The Age*.

Page 107 Figure 14: Tracey Moffatt, *Up in the sky* (1997). Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

Page 108 Figure 15: Tracey Moffatt, *Up in the sky* (1997). Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

Page 109 Figure 16: Destiny Deacon, *Melancholy* (2000). Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

Page 110 Figure 17: Destiny Deacon, still from *Over d'fence* (2004). Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

Page 113 Figure 18: Darren Siwes*, Just Is* (2003–04). Image courtesy Greenaway Art Gallery.

Page 118 Figure 19: Mervyn Bishop, *Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours soil into the hands of traditional landowner Vincent Lingiari, NT* (1975). Image courtesy the artist.

**CHAPTER 3**


Page 133 Figure 1: Michelle Ussher, *Campsite Day* (2005). Image courtesy the artist.

Page 135 Figure 2: Visitors physically immersed in Jemima Wyman's *Scapepology (Panorama)* (2005). Image courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

Page 137 Figure 3: Fiona Lowry, *"... there shall be two men left in the field: one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and one will be left". Matthew 24:40–41* (2004). Image courtesy the artist.

Page 139 Figure 4: Pedro Wonaeamirri, Pukamani Pole (2003). Image courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Australia.

Page 142 Figure 5: Danie Mellor, *Moving out, moving on* (2004). Image courtesy the artist.

Page 144 Figure 6: Tom Mùller, *Globalisation* (2004). Image courtesy the artist.

Page 149 Figure 7: Jenny Bell, *Shedding Light* (2011). Image courtesy Australian Galleries.

Page 151 Figure 8: Yukultji Napangati, *Untitlted* (2004). Image courtesy Utopia Art Sydney.

Page 151 Figure 9: Ahlam Shibli, *Unrecognised* (2000) (one of 25). Image courtesy the artist.

Page 151 Figure 10: Ahlam Shibli, *Unrecognised* (2000) (one of 25). Image courtesy the artist.

Page 155 Figure 11: Juan Manuel Echavarria, *Bocas de Ceniza (Mouths of Ash)* (2003–04). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 157 Figure 12: Ahlam Shibli, *Dream* (2000). Image courtesy the artist.


**CHAPTER 4**


Page 179 Figure 1: Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan, *"In-transit" Project Be-Longing* (detail) (2006). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 179 Figure 2: Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan, *"In-transit" Project Be-Longing* (detail) (2006). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 180 Figure 3: Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan with the author, Singapore Biennale (2008). Photo: John Clark.

Page 187 Figure 4: Protestors at the Diddicoolum Drain Extension site, SA, November 2007 (2007). Photo: Mick Bradley.


**CHAPTER 5**

Page 192 Figure 1: Brookwood House garden (2007/2014). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 192 Figure 2: Brookwood House garden (2007/2014). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 192 Figure 3: Brookwood House garden (2007/2014). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 193 Figure 4: Brookwood House, London (2014). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 198 Figure 5: View of Echigo-Tsumari with repurposed traditional home in foreground (2010). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 198 Figure 6: James Turrell *House of Light* (2000/2010). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 198 Figure 7: Maria Abramovic *Dream House* (2000/2010). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 198 Figure 8: Exterior view of house re-purposed by Janet Laurence (2000/2010). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 199 Figure 9: Tatzu Nishi, *The Merlion* Hotel, 2006. 2006 Singapore Biennale. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 200 Figure 10: 2007 Istanbul Biennale at Istanbul Textile Traders' Market. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 200 Figure 11: 2007 Istanbul Biennale at Istanbul Textile Traders' Market. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 201 Figure 12: Michael Lin, *Model Home* (2013). 2013 Auckland Triennial. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 202 Figure 13: Emory Douglas, Hou Hanru, Mayor of Auckland and Chair of the Ōtara-Papatoetoe local board at the Fresh Gallery Auckland Triennial opening, 11 May, 2013. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 202 Figure 14: Makeshift, *Kauri-Oke*, Otara market, 2013 Auckland Triennial. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 205 Figure 15: SquatSpace, *Tour of Beauty* participants at the old Carriageworks, Sydney, 2008. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 206 Figure 16: SquatSpace, *Tour of Beauty*, 2007. Image courtesy of SquatSpace.

Page 206 Figure 17: SquatSpace, *Tour of Beauty* participants hear from Aboriginal resident Lyn Turnbull, Redfern, 2008. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 208 Figure 18: David Cross, *Level Playing Field* (2013). SCAPE7 Public Art Biennial, Christchurch. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 209 Figure 19: Advertisement for house paint, Christchurch CBD, 2013. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 211 Figure 20: David Cross, *Level Playing Field* (2013). SCAPE7 Public Art Biennial, Christchurch. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 211 Figure 21: David Cross, *Level Playing Field* (2013). SCAPE7 Public Art Biennial, Christchurch. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 212 Figure 22: Warning sign found throughout Christchurch CBD, 2013. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 214 Figure 23: Copthorne Hotel, Christchurch, moments after its collapse 28 September, 2013. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 217 Figures 24: Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, *Breathing is Free* (2007—). Photo courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery.

Page 217 Figures 25: Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, *Breathing is Free* (2007—). Photo courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery.

Page 220 Figure 26: Marnix de Nijs, *RunMotherfuckerRun* (2001–13). Photo courtesy the artist.

Page 222 Figure 27: MAP Office t-shirt design for *Flash Run* participants, *Running the City*, Sydney, 2013.

Page 225 Figure 28: Still from MAP Office, *Runscape – Hong Kong* (2011). Image courtesy the artists.

Page 225 Figure 29: *Running the City* installation view, MAP Office, *Runscape – Berlin* (2012). Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 226 Figure 30: *Runscape - Sydney* running team, equipped with Go-Pro chest cameras, with MAP Office artists Laurent Guttierez (left) and Valerie Portefaix (right). Sydney, 16 February 2013. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 236 Figure 31: The former Australian Pavilion (1988-2013), Giardini della Biennale, Venice. Photo: F. Fenner.

Page 239 Figure 32: Still from Shaun Gladwell, *MADDESTMAXIMUS – Approach to Mundi Mundi*, 2007. Photo: Josh Raymond © the artist.

Page 245 Figure 33: Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, *Selfstorage* (2006). Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery © the artists.

Page 252 Figure 34: Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, *Deceased Estate* (2004). Photo courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery © the artists.

Page 256 Figures 35: Claire Fontaine, *Foreigners Everywhere (Arabic)* (2005). Photo courtesy the artist, Reena Spaulings Fine Art and Metro Pictures New York.

Page 246 Figures 36: Claire Fontaine *Foreigners Everywhere (Chinese)* (2008). Photo courtesy the artist, Reena Spaulings Fine Art and Metro Pictures New York.

Page 258 Figure 37: Vernon Ah Kee, *Wegrewhere* (from *Once Removed)* (2009) Image courtesy and © the artist.

# Contents


Acknowledgments i

List of Figures ii

**INTRODUCTION 1**

(i) Whose place? 3

(ii) Feeling at home 11

(iii) Background to the thesis 15

(iv) Research methodology 19

**CHAPTER 1**

**THE IDEA OF HOME IN AN AGE OF UNSETTLEMENT 26**

1.1 Curatorial and literary ideas of home 26

1.2 The terrible nearness of distant places 39

1.3 The framework of home: curatorial precedents 45

**CHAPTER 2**

**INDIGENOUS ART OF PLACE AND THE PLACE OF INDIGENOUS ART 63**

PART 1 64

2.1 Curating contemporary Indigenous art 64

PART 2 74

2.2.1 The new mainstream 75

*Talking About Abstraction* (2004)

2.2.2 Forced into images 101

*Prepossession* (2005)

2.2.3. Paradigm shifts 114

*Making Change* (2012–13)

**CHAPTER 3**
**VIEWS OF THE HOME GROUND** **126**

3.1 The lie of the land 128
*Primavera 2005*
3.2 On home ground 145
*Home Ground* (2006)

**CHAPTER 4**
**FRAGILE STATE** **159**

*2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*
4.1 Home Life 171
4.2 Home Occupation 176
4.3 Home Made 181

**CHAPTER 5**
**OUT OF PLACE** **188**

PART 1 190
5.1.1 Our special places 190
5.1.2 On the Home Run 203
5.1.3 Running the City 215
*Running the City* (2013)
5.1.4 Flash Run 221
5.1.5 Runscape 225

PART 2 233
5.2.1 Foreigners Everywhere 233
5.2.2 Once Removed 244
*Once Removed* (2009)

**CONCLUSION** 260

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** 270

**APPENDICES**

APPENDIX 1: Exhibitions curated for the research (national, international)

APPENDIX II: Images showing how the inclusion of documentary and real life material in national exhibitions can convey an understanding of place through the prism of home.

APPENDIX III: Images showing how viewers' inhabitation and immersion in a 'home' environment in exhibitions of national art forges engagement with place.

APPENDIX III: Images showing how viewers' inhabitation and immersion in a 'home' environment in exhibitions of national art forges engagement with place.

APPENDIX IV: Images showing how participation by the viewer/participant enhances engagement with place when the theme of home is invoked.

APPENDIX V: Transcript of roundtable discussion between curator and artists. Published as: Fenner, F. (2008). In Conversation: Felicity Fenner speaks with eight artists from "Handle with Care". *Art & Australia*, *45*(3), 344–349.

APPENDIX VI: Interview with curator about curatorial approach. Published as: Keehan, R. (2008). Handle With care: Interview with Felicity Fenner. *Broadsheet,* 37(1), 18–21.

APPENDIX VII: Profile piece on the curator of *Once Removed*, Venice Biennale. Published as: Gibson, P. (2008). Profile – Felicity Fenner. *Australian Art Review*, August–October, 62–64.

APPENDIX VIII: Major exhibitions visited by the author for the research.

## INTRODUCTION

### Your Place or Mine?
### Curatorial approaches to place through the prism of home

> The artist Christian Boltanski tells an ancient story about a little girl who desired to have time alone with her newborn brother. With trepidation, the parents consented, then surreptitiously listened in as she asked the baby: 'Tell me about god – I am beginning to forget.' Some wisdom traditions believe that everything already exists (this is a crisis for the modernist Western mind anxious to claim the avant-garde), that existence comes first and our awareness of it follows, that at birth people are potentially all-knowing and life is a process of forgetting with occasional realization of what we already know; and that certain experiences – including, notably, art experiences – trigger the release of that information and help them to recollect what's 'on the tip of their psyche', as architect Michael Rotondi puts it. If we value the viewer as not empty, but instead make an empty, open, and expansive space – and exhibitions can be one of these generous spaces – then the fullness of the visitor's experience (rather than the museum's or sponsor's or curator's experience) can fill that space, fill it with the experience of art.[1]

*Your Place or Mine?* is premised on the belief that successful engagement with art depends on a curatorial openness that values not just the artists' knowledge and intent, but also "the viewer as not empty". Based on an equal privileging of artists and viewers, the curator facilitates in the exhibition space a cognitive bridge not just between artworks within the exhibition space, but between artworks and viewers.

[1] Jacob, M.J. (2006). Making Space for Art. In P. Marincola (Ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (pp. 134–141). Philadelphia: Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, p. 137.

The thesis is presented in a hybrid format, the dissertation underpinned by practice-based research in the form of curated exhibitions. Framed around a question – your place or mine? – the research argues for and demonstrates the capacity of exhibitions to convey intimate and empirical (bottom-up) experiences that contrast with externally imposed (top-down) perceptions of place.

Citing Australian socio-political and literary culture as a backdrop, through a series of curatorial projects it is argued that the prism of home is an effective curatorial device through which to transmit and receive insights into place. In the context of the thesis, place refers to both geographic and cultural conditions. The research is based on a concept of place not as an immutable, fixed site, but, echoing contemporary socio-cultural conditions, a space of flux and change, of intersection and co-existence. Affective, mnemonic experiences of place – brought into the curatorial space by both artist-producers and viewer-consumers – are referred to here as 'home'. Home, therefore, is conceived as a metaphor for the previous knowledge brought to the exhibition forum both by artists and viewers, a filter through which knowledge and experiences contained in artworks are collated, re-ordered and transmitted by the curator and received by the viewer. In the exhibition outcomes selected as case studies in the thesis, the idea of home provides a conduit for the viewer to discover new aspects and concepts of place. The filter of home, it is demonstrated, facilitates a meaningful dialogue between curious viewers (represented in Boltanski's story by the little girl) and the knowledge that artworks (the newly arrived baby) bring to the exhibition forum. Inevitably, whatever insights the little girl gleans from the baby will be influenced by her existing knowledge and experience. The curator's role in this story is that of the parents, who have ultimate responsibility for creating an informed environment in which the curious are guided towards new insights and ideas.

Deploying articulated curatorial strategies, the thesis is tested in a series of curatorial projects undertaken by the author from 2004 to 2013. Throughout

the research, home refers to what Homi Bhabha calls a "third space" of engagement where artists' and viewers' perceptions intersect, where new interpretations and meanings of place can be forged.[2] At all levels of interpretation, the conceit of home refers to grassroots or bottom-up perspectives of place which the curatorial projects throughout effectively invoke in order to challenge and subvert top-down myths of place.

The research here owes much to the legacy of curator Nick Waterlow OAM (1941– 2009), who believed that the curator should be "an empty vessel", must possess "an ability to be uncertain" and should make possible "the altering of perception".[3] The thesis demonstrates that the 'home base' is an effective device for achieving open-mindedness and altered perceptions of place. The thesis is focused on Australia: the research articulates new curatorial approaches to revealing aspects of place in exhibitions of contemporary Australian art.

The following Introduction locates the socio-political, cultural and theoretical context in which the research is conducted. While specific curatorial paradigms responding to notions of home and place are examined in Chapter One, the Introduction references curatorial ideas of place and the idea of home as it is applied in this research to exhibition-making. The curatorial background, theoretical context and methodology of the research are also introduced.

## (i) Whose place?

Australian culture is as broad and varied as the country's landscape. Australia is multicultural and multiracial and this is reflected in the country's food, lifestyle and cultural practices and experience. Australia has an important heritage from its indigenous people, which plays a defining role in the cultural landscape. This

[2] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 28–56), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 53.
[3] Waterlow., N. From notes found after his death titled *A Curator's last will and testament.*

> diversity of influences creates a cultural environment in Australia that is lively, energised, innovative and outward looking.[4]

The above description of Australia is from the Australian Government's website. The landscape is cited in the first line, perpetuating 19th century understandings of the nation's psyche as being shaped by the landscape, despite the fact that in the 21st century only ten percent of the population live in regional areas.[5]

This top-down, external (public) image of the place we call home – Australia – often dominates and subsumes internal (private) experiences of home in cultural productions, including exhibitions of Australian art. The 2013 exhibition of 200 years of Australian art organised by the National Gallery of Australia for the Royal Academy in London, for example, sought to maintain an antiquated image of the nation as "a sunburnt country, a land of sweeping plains, of ragged mountain ranges, of droughts and flooding rains".[6] Though the title of the exhibition, *Australia*, seemed simple enough, the curatorial premise was not. What was the incentive for and intention of such an exhibition? English art critics complained that it was not clear whether the exhibition was about Australia the country or about the art of Australia. While the 19th and early 20th century work in the exhibition certainly reinforced European colonial perceptions of Australia as an uninhabited and harsh environment where the character of people and place is inextricably tied to the landscape, the art of the last 50 years was skimmed over by the curators, possibly because it tends not to support the British colonial view of 'the Antipodes'. As *The Guardian* critic wrote:

---

[4] Department of Finance, Australian Government, (2014). *Our Country.* Retrieved from http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country

[5] In 2011, 90% of Australians lived in urban areas. Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2013, 24 July*) Australian Social Trends.* Retrieved from http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30April+2013#back10

[6] Mackellar, D. (1908). *My Country*. First published in 1908 as *Core of My Heart.* Retrieved from http://www.dorotheamackellar.com.au/archive/mycountry.htm

> After the 60s, though, it all goes wrong. The curators lose their thread. Is this a show about Australia or a show about Australian art? They seem not to know, and in something of a panic have crammed in as much contemporary work as they possibly can. The result is a mess: a whole string of artists represented by only a single piece, each of which has been chosen, it would seem, for its uniquely 'Australian' qualities.[7]

The critic is correct to assume that the "mess" of the last 50 years is not a misjudged curatorial device designed to reflect cultural diversity, but reveals the curators' genuine confusion over how to represent what Homi Bhabha refers to an "impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force": a homogenous view not necessarily of Australian art, but of Australia itself.[8] On one level, colonial views of Australia are not entirely obsolete: Bhabha argues, for example, that colonialist attitudes to place inevitably inform contemporary perceptions, despite the passing of time. Supporting the premise of this thesis, however, Bhabha also sees concepts of place as inevitably and inherently shifting and evolving, a theory that in the 20 years since the publication Bhabha's of *The Location of Culture* (1994) has gained currency in the field of curatorial practice.[9] While historical (including colonial) perceptions are as valid as other viewpoints, Bhabha argues that chronological sequencing should not be a privileged methodology in portrayals of place:

> The linear equivalence of event and idea that historicism proposes, most commonly signifies a people, a nation, or a national culture as an empirical sociological category or a holistic cultural entity. However, the narrative and psychological force that nationness brings to bear on cultural production and political projection is the effect of the ambivalence of the 'nation' as a narrative strategy. As an apparatus of symbolic power, it produces a continual slippage of

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[7] Cooke, R. (2013, September 22). Australia – review. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/sep/22/australia-art-royal-academy-review

[8] Quoted by Stratton, J. & Ang, I. (1998). Multicultural Imagined Communities: Cultural Difference and National Identity in Australia and the USA. *Continuum: The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, *8*(2), p. 124. Retrieved from http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/8.2/Stratton.html

[9] Chapters One and Five analyse international exemplars and the author's own research into curatorial responses to shifting cultural identities.

> categories, like sexuality, class affiliation, territorial paranoia, or 'cultural difference' in the act of writing the nation. What is displayed in this displacement and repetition of terms is the nation as the measure of the liminality of cultural modernity.[10]

Bhabha's description of the slippage between various and diverse categories of nationness is central to this thesis: in curating an exhibition of art from a single nation, what curatorial strategies can be implemented to conjure not a predetermined image of place, but the complex and intersecting zone of slippage between different determinations of place? Is nationness inherent to the exhibition's story and, if so, referring again to the Royal Academy exhibition, how can the curator avoid leaving visitors "wondering who this 'Australia' is for and which 'Australia' it is trying to represent"?[11] The thesis argues that by anchoring the curatorial dialogue in projections and evocations of home rather than a more nebulous and shifting sense of place, the exhibition can become a site that forges affective, personal connections, offering a conspicuous space of dialogue between artworks in the exhibition space and between artworks and viewers. Narratives of place in exhibitions of national content dictated by official perceptions of home are in danger of (and, as *Australia* revealed, often succumb to) fixed ideas of place that fail to embrace the flux and complexity of contemporary culture.

In Australia, these exhibitions include government-supported international projects of Australian art, including Australia's representation at the Venice Biennale, and major recurrent exhibitions of national art, such as the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art and the annual Primavera exhibition of young artists' work.[12] The curatorial research encompasses an example of each of these

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[10] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 199–244). London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 201.
[11] Higgins, J. (2013). Australia. *Artlink*, *33*(4). Retrieved from https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4040/australia/
[12] The other leading recurrent exhibitions of Australia art are the National Gallery of Australia's Triennial of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Darwin's Telstra National Indigenous

projects; in the curatorial approach to each, the filter of home is applied as a means of challenging preconceived notions of 'Australia', offering instead a picture of the more culturally diverse and socially complex place of contemporary Australia.[13] These outcomes are illustrated in the Appendices, where they are presented not as discrete exhibition projects, but according to the curatorial strategies employed to convey a sense of place through the prism of home: the inclusion of documentary images and events that are based on or intersect with real life (Appendix 2); the creation of installations in the gallery space that are physically immersive or inhabitable (Appendix 3); and the co-production with artists of participatory works in public and non-institutional spaces (Appendix 4).[14]

External (official) descriptors of home are those imposed in a top-down manner, with national 'traditions', as Eric Hobsbawm convincingly demonstrated, often invented for political expediency.[15] As the government website description of Australia attests, top-down assessments of place tend toward the narrow and simplistic, deliberately excluding diverse viewpoints. Those at the very top – Australian prime-ministers – understand and utilise a funnel approach to describing place, one that is most efficiently delivered manifesto-like during election campaigns when the population votes for the kind of place it wants to live in. Once hailed as a model of successful multiculturalism, in the 21st century, post-9/11 racial division has curbed Australia's embracement of cultural diversity, a shift echoed in imperious pronouncements such as "We will decide who comes to this country and the

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Art Award. The discussion here, however, is not about culturally-specific exhibitions, which inherently present a particular view of place, but about exhibitions open to all the cultures than make up contemporary Australia.

[13] Major outcomes of the research into curating Australian art are: *Making Change*, National Art Museum of China, 2012; *Once Removed*, Venice Biennale, 2009; *Handle with Care*: Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2008; and *Primavera*: exhibition of young Australian artists, 2005.

[14] The three leading recurrent exhibitions of Australian art illustrated in the Appendices are: *The Lie of the Land*: Primavera, 2005; *Handle with Care*: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2008; and *Once Removed*: Venice Biennale, 2009. The 4th Appendix also includes *Running the City*: International Symposium of Electronic Art, 2013. Other curatorial projects are illustrated in the body of the dissertation text.

[15] Hobsbawn, E. (1984). Mass-Producing Traditions. In E. Hobsbawn & T. Ranger (Eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (10th ed., 2003)(pp. 263–308). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

circumstances in which they come", instilling for political advantage a xenophobic fear of 'home invasion' on a national scale.[16]

Cultural theorist Benedict Anderson argued in his seminal book, *Imagined Communities*, that national identity is a conceptual construct. In Australia, top-down portrayals of the nation opt for a homogenous vision of place that is as flattened out as the vowels of a broad Australian accent. Such over-simplification of place will inevitably result in tensions because it is so easy to *not* fit into:

> Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail… the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is the fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. [17]

*Australia* is the most recent high-profile exhibition to be mounted on a platform of national identity. It was defined (and flawed) by a curatorial approach not favoured since the late 1980s, when the Australian bicentennial prompted a number of patriotically inspired internationally touring exhibitions.[18] In analyses of Australian cultural identity since the 1988 bicentennial, it is revealed that top-down portrayals of Australia as a unified, if not homogenous culture are not only problematic but propagandist. In her study of patriotism in Australia and the United States, American sociologist Lynette Spillman extended Anderson's theory of "imagined communities", concluding in a comparative

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[16] Howard, J. (2001, October 28). Election Speeches – John Howard, 2001. Retrieved from http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/2001-john-howard. The rhetoric continues in 2014. At the time of going to print, talkback radio was preoccupied with discussion of an imminent invasion of Australia by China, a notion propagated by the Palmer United Party.
[17] Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd ed.). London & New York: Verso, p. 7.
[18] The key curatorial projects were *The Face of Australia: the land & the people, the past & the present*, comprising four touring exhibitions sponsored by the Australian Bicentennial Authority, see Hansen, D. (1988). *The Face of Australia: the land & the people, the past & the present*, Sydney: Fine Arts Press; and *The Great Australian Art Exhibition 1788–1988*, see Radford, R. (1988). *Creating Australia: 200 Years of Art 1788–1988,* Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia.

study of bicentennial commemorations in the USA and Australia that there is a set of internationally available claims about national identity (about the land and cultural diversity, for example) that governments invoke in the process of fabricating top-down portrayals of place.[19] Australian commentators Ien Ang and Jon Stratton also cited Anderson's idea of "imagined communities" in their parallel comparison of cultural-identity mythmaking in the USA and Australia.

> In the last few years, the question of national identity has become an intense site of concern, debate and struggle throughout the world. Emerging from this problematisation is a growing awareness of what Homi Bhabha calls 'the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force'. The nation can assume symbolic force precisely in so far as it is represented as a unity; yet national unity is always ultimately impossible precisely because it can only be represented as such through a suppression and repression, symbolic or otherwise, of difference.[20]

In Australia today, the situation Ang and Stratton described at the end of the 20th century is not only continued but exacerbated under the Abbott government's racially provocative position on 'whose place' Australia is. Since 2013, renewed calls for exclusion – ("This is our country and we determine who comes here") – from the highest level of government suggest that policy is no longer aligned to official claims that ours is a broad and varied culture.[21] The messages contained in the Australian tourism campaign featuring a bikini-clad Lara Bingle asking "Where the bloody hell are you?" and the Cronulla race riots

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[19] Spillman, L. (1994). Imagining community and hoping for recognition: Bicentennial Celebrations in 1976 and 1988. *Qualitative Sociology*, *17*(1), 3–28. The research was subsequently expanded and published in book form. See Spillman, L. (1997). *National and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[20] Stratton, J. & Ang, I. (1998). Multicultural Imagined Communities: Cultural Difference and National Identity in Australia and the USA. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, *8*(2), p. 124. Retrieved from http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/8.2/Stratton.html See also Cochrane, P. & Goodman, D. (1998). The Great Australian Journey: Cultural logic and nationalism in the postmodern era. *Australian Historical Studies*, *23*(91), 21–44.

[21] Tony Abbott, 2013 election campaign. Hall, B. & Ireland, J. (2013, August 15). Tony Abbott evokes John Howard in slamming doors on asylum seekers. *The Sydney Morning Herald.* Retrieved from http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/federal-election-2013/tony-abbott-evokes-john-howard-in-slamming-doors-on-asylum-seekers-20130815-2rzzy.html

chant – "We grew here, you flew here!" – relay contradictory messages.[22] This push-and-pull effect of seduction and rejection exemplifies the fluent socio-cultural conditions of today's Australia, and thankfully inhibits top-down attempts to standarise perceptions of place. Characterised by tribalism and parochialism on the one hand, diversity and displacement on the other, contemporary Australian culture has never been more fascinating yet more fractured. In 2014, it seems the question "Your place or mine?" is central to an articulation of Australia's sense of place.

In the context of curatorial practice, the thesis demonstrates how the prism of home is an effective device in fostering unlimited imaginings by artists and audiences who bring diverse views and experience to the exhibition. While extremist political positions hijack debate by shutting down complex issues with reductive generalisations, exhibitions can do the opposite: exhibitions can set up a discourse between widely differing experiences of place, revealing unseen and alternative views and stories that lead to new insights and understandings.

The thesis employs concepts of 'home' in its investigation into curatorial responses to place. Home uniquely represents both knowledge and power: the site of everyday inhabitation and interaction, the knowledge of home is intimate and infinite; and for most, there is far greater capacity for the exertion of power (both constructive and destructive) in the home environment than in surrounds less familiar to the individual. The relationship between power and knowledge is a recurrent theme in Michel Foucault's analyses of power, which is referred to in the thesis as it considers 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' perceptions of place.[23] Of particular relevance to the research here is Foucault's interest in 'local

[22] Australian Tourism advertisement (2006); Cronulla riots (2005, December 11).
[23] Foucault, M. (1970). *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. (translation of *Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, [1966]). London: Pantheon.

knowledges', which in art and curatorial practice in Australia is exemplified by community cultural development initiatives in Western Sydney.[24]

Exhibitions most successfully engage audiences when they are open-ended, multilayered and thus open to interpretation from a range of viewpoints. The thesis shows how the prism of home can replace top-down branding of place with a forum in which complexity of place is conjured from a grassroots level borne of individual and community experience. The concept of home is a starting point from which exclusionist, dubbed by Anderson as "rational", understandings of place are exposed as irrational, nationalist rhetoric.[25] Curators can harness this complexity, creating situations in which recognition, empathy and affect flow in the exhibition space between artworks and, most importantly, between artworks and viewers.

### (ii) Feeling at home

*Home*: the word derives from the French *hanter*, which in turn originates from the Germanic word *haunt*. We are all haunted by our original home, the place where we began, where we learnt the culture of family and peers, and later brought this knowledge to bear on our negotiation of the wider world. As well as being a point of origin, home is a destination that we aspire to arrive in, a place of refuge and asylum. In all contexts, the concept of home is synonymous with the fundamental need to belong.

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[24] The combination of grassroots multi-cultural community activity and local government political strategies has resulted in an exponential expansion of the arts in Western Sydney, an area formerly considered a cultural wasteland, over the last decade. (See Chapter One on CCD strategies that incorporate the idea of home). Chapter Five investigates participatory forms of inquiry empowered by local knowledges (the 'home ground advantage').

[25] Anderson traces the rise of modern nationalism back to the 16th century, arguing that exclusion came to be considered a rational approach with the planetary spread of Europeans and European power. Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd ed.). London & New York: Verso, pp. 57–58.

The conceit of 'home' is applied throughout the research, both as a descriptor of geographic or physical space and as an affective enabling agent of feelings of recognition, familiarity and empathy. It refers not to official (top-down) notions of home, but to intimate (bottom-up) experiences of home. As expatriate Australian author Geraldine Brooks recently wrote, "The idea of 'home' is bigger than the floor plan of any given four walls or the mass of any roof line. It cannot be encompassed by rote recitations of suburb or postcode, nation or state."[26]

In Australia concepts of home are many and diverse, and often conflicted. Sometimes it is the expatriate commentator who is most attuned to this diversity and conflict, because, as Anderson argues, diversity resulting in racial tension arises not *across* but *within* national borders.[27] Some of the most insightful critiques of Australia have been delivered by expatriate writers (such as Brooks, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes), while English-born Nick Waterlow was the first curator of Australian art to appreciate that the perspective of the 'other', with the advantage of distance, can offer new ways of seeing and experiencing this place, Australia.[28] Though first inhabited by Aboriginal people tens of thousands of years ago and being located in the Asia Pacific region, Australia more readily identifies with cultures of the northern hemisphere; it functions within Western social and political paradigms that, despite paying lip-service to the value of relationships with our original inhabitants and nearest geographic neighbours in South-East Asia, continue to disenfranchise both. Cultural consumers that view Australia from the outside, such as visitors to the Royal Academy *Australia* exhibition, are likely to be confronted with confusion and contradiction if the narrators of the story (the curators, in the context of this thesis) are unable to keep the dialogue open and engaging, and unwilling to present art history from a socio-anthropological point of view rather than as a self-contained and horizontal aesthetic lineage.

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[26] Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011.* Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 3.
[27] Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (2nd ed.). London & New York: Verso, p. 150.
[28] See Fenner, F (2010, June). A bird's–eye view: Nick Waterlow's exhibitions. *Art and Australia*, *48*(1), 64–67.

How can exhibitions of Australian art convey the ever-shifting, intersecting understandings of place that comprise modern Australia? With thematic threads to home, the thesis shows that exhibitions can promote alternative understandings of place, replacing the top-down, externally projected visions of place with an image drawn from internal experiences shared on deeper levels of affinity and empathy. Addressing the discord between external and internal experiences of place, Eastern European curator Iara Boubnova observes that "The tension between notions of home and shifting national identities is exacerbated by the globalization of the domestic and the domestication of the global".[29]

The curatorial research in this thesis reveals that the "globalization of the domestic" can be recast as a point of identification and recognition, creating an affective rapport that diffuses rather than exacerbates tension in an exhibition context. In a post-global world, shared connections to the idea of home have been so eroded by globalisation that there is a greater imperative than ever to seek out affinities across a range of cultural fora. It is argued and demonstrated in the thesis that the prism of home is an ideal curatorial framework in group exhibitions because of its affective qualities: the feeling of 'home' is analogous with feelings of belonging and welcome, a condition of being that people are universally drawn and bring tolerance and their own experience to.

According to design theorist and philosopher Tony Fry, we are living in an age of planetary unsettlement, defined not only by the ever-increasing movement of people around the planet, but by shifting concepts of place.[30] Exhibitions have the opportunity to provide a road into, through and around competing and conflicting ideas of place. The English critics, and presumably audience, were unable to find a way into *Australia*, particularly the contemporary section,

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[29] Iara Boubnova quoted by Fijen, H. (2005). Foreword. In B. Vanderlinden & E. Filipovic (Eds.), *The Manifesta Decade.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p. 11.
[30] Fry, T. (2011). *Design as Politics*. New York: Berg, p. 2.

because the tokenistic inclusions and chronology-based curatorial pathway did not allow for the emergence of individual voices, nor the space for dialogue between works. Instead, the curatorial premise required artworks to be subsumed into a cultural narrative based on obsolete perceptions of and prejudices about Australia. Not only was the cultural landscape largely invented, so too were actual works of art.[31] By denying any intellectual or affective space for curiosity and connectivity, the exhibition failed to represent what Bhabha describes as "… the complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of 'the people' or 'the nation' and make them the immanent subjects of a range of social and literary narratives."[32]

When the museum opened in 2000, Tate Modern curators made the controversial decision to install the permanent collection thematically rather than chronologically, recognising that the themed approach is flexible from the outset and allows viewers to draw connections between artworks that would otherwise not be associated by chronological sequencing alone. It is an approach that echoed the concurrent cultural shift from homogenous to deterritorialised socio-cultural perceptions of place.[33] As is illustrated in this thesis (and by the failure of *Australia*'s ad hoc chronological pathway), drawing thematic links also has the ability to open up different readings without imposing a top-down, didactic curatorial view about the development of art.[34] In other words, it frees the exhibition from the historicisation of people and place that Bhabha rejects, instead providing a platform for engagement and connectivity in the liminal spaces of cultural displacement and complexity. Such

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[31] In at least one case, the curators knowingly misrepresented the artist's work: Vernon Ah Kee's film-based work, *Cant Chant – Wegrewhere* (2009) was represented in the exhibition by a production still from the video used by the author to illustrate and promote the work in 2009 at the Venice Biennale and in 2012 at the National Art Museum of China. (Chapters Two and Five.)
[32] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 199–244). London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 201.
[33] For concepts of deterritorialisation in the cultural sphere see Papastergiardis, N. (1999). Clusters on the Move. In *Perspecta 1999: Living Here Now: Art and Politics*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, and McNeill, D. (2010). Art Without Authors: Networks, Assemblages and 'Flat' Ontology.' *Third Text*, *24*(4), 397–408.
[34] See Gutiérrez, I. (2013). *Theme versus Time: Tate Modern's Display of its Permanent Collection*. Retrieved from https://vastari.com/feature_detail.aspx?id=D5MZLiRACUs=

a curatorial approach seeks the openness and engagement that Waterlow valued, and underpins this thesis and the exhibitions curated in its development.

### (iii) Background to the thesis

The curatorial research in the thesis explores the complex slippage between ever-evolving *external* (political) understandings of home that are aligned with perceptions of national identity, and *internal*, mnemonic signifiers of home that are the result of experience and dwell in the imagination. The prism of home and its capacity for affective insights and new interpretations is examined in the context of curated exhibitions. The argument for the enabling capacity of the prism of home is advanced through a series of curatorial projects that are treated as fora for dialogue that occurs in the interstitial spaces between bifurcated descriptions of 'home'.

While exhibitions about place that refer to the importance of home have been researched and written about in the northern hemisphere, those in our region of the world have not been this century. In Australia, the two major precursor exhibitions of the recent generation to have examined the meaning of place and home in the late 20th century are *Spirit + Place* in 1997 (curated by Nick Waterlow and Ross Mellick) and the subsequent 1999 Perspecta, *Living Here Now* (curated by a consortium of curators, including the author). Since then, except in the exhibitions curated in the research here, the idea of 'home' as a curatorial device has not been fully explored as a vehicle of engagement by other curators in our region. Occasional exhibitions, typically directed by foreign curators, have alluded to home as they seek to convey a sense of place. Each iteration of the Singapore Biennale (established 2006) has referred to ideas of 'home' in its articulation of cultural intersection between Singapore and the world, while in New Zealand two major exhibition projects in 2013 explored the meaning of home: Hou Hanru's *If you were to live here…* Auckland Triennial,

and Blair French's SCAPE7 Biennial of Public Art in Christchurch.[35] The research here utilises the forum offered by an exhibition to explore how contemporary Australian artists respond to concepts of home in a post-globalisation context of shifting national identity.

This interrogation into the meaning of home starts with a (true) story…

I visited the 1979 Biennale of Sydney, curated by Nick Waterlow, with my art class on a school excursion. Titled *European Dialogue*, the exhibition opened a conversation between artists of different cultures, revealing rapport between, for example, the political cogency of New Zealand born Rosalie Gascoigne's lament to her adopted Australian home country, *Feathered Fence*, German artist Nickolaus Lang's earth samples from Europe, and a large group of bark paintings by Ramangining artists. The vision and insight of the curator in creating not just a sense of place with the above works and others, but a real dialogue between works in the spaces of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, was in evidence throughout. A full decade before Jean Hubert Martin's *Magiciens de la Terre*, widely acclaimed yet controversial for presenting superficial similarities between primitive and Western art, the 1979 Biennale of Sydney presented Indigenous Australian and Western art on an equal platform, while for the first time drawing connections between current Australian and international art practice.

Though appreciated at the time for its inclusion of Indigenous art as contemporary practice, it took many years for the impact of Waterlow's curatorial intrepidness to be publicly acknowledged. In their recent, major study of international biennales, Anthony Gardner and Charles Green acknowledge the importance of the exhibition's curatorial approach to the subject of Australia:

[35] These exhibitions are discussed in Chapters One and Five.

> 'European Dialogue' is a watershed exhibition not only for its series of hitherto unexpected meetings, nor just for its inclusion of Aboriginal artists' paintings as *contemporary* rather than so-called 'primitive' or 'traditional' art (the first time this happened in a major international exhibition like a biennial). Just as important are the three publications…[36]

Some time after the 1979 Biennale of Sydney, when I was planning a gap year in Europe and England, I overheard my grandmother telling friends and family that I was going "home" for the year. She was born in rural Australia in the early part of the 20th century, to Australian-born parents with Scottish ancestry, and only ever visited Britain a few times on holiday with my grandfather in the 1950s and 60s. Nevertheless, she always thought of Britain as "home".

This dual meaning of the term 'home' – that for me signified the place I was born and lived in, but for her a place on the other side of the world which she had little personal experience of – intrigued me. (Sadly, she didn't live long enough for me to describe to her my sharing of her subconscious bond to a foreign place when, upon settling in London several later, I felt surprisingly 'at home', as if the place was already known to me.) Though beyond the scope of this thesis, recent scientific research has found "compelling evidence for the biological transmission of memory… [including] transmission of the 'memory' of ancestral experience down the generations".[37] The scientific research opens the possibility that attachment to place could be built on memories not experienced in one's own lifetime, but by one's ancestors. This possibility is borne out in the context of Indigenous Australians, who claim an emotional and spiritual connection to ancestral lands, even if they have not lived in or visited those places themselves. The capacity to simultaneously exist in two worlds, whether past and present or contemporaneous cultures, is an intangible state of being

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[36] Gardner, A. & Green, C. (2013). Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global. *Third Text*, *27*(4), 442–455. p. 451.

[37] Richard Gray, R. (2013, December 1). Phobias may be memories passed down in genes from ancestors, *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/science-news/10486479/Phobias-may-be-memories-passed-down-in-genes-from-ancestors.html

that for many defines our existence in the globally networked 21st century, and that thoughtfully curated exhibitions have the capacity to conjure.

My earliest curatorial research into interstitial spaces of cultural intersection was in my capacity as Australia's curator and commissioner for the Indian Triennale in New Delhi, 1997.[38] The exhibition of Simeon Nelson's work explored this notion of being between two places. Titled *World Between*, the Triennial's national pavilion exhibition format invited a narrative on the meaning of place, of one's homeland. Nelson's exhibition used found items of garbage as a symbol of shared experience. The exhibition also explored the intersection of public and private space, anticipating subsequent curatorial research into 'internal' and 'external' perceptions of home, an inherent part of this thesis.

At the same time, I joined the curatorial consortium for Perspecta, the biennial survey of contemporary Australian art, co-curating what was to be the final iteration of Perspecta in 1999. One of the key thematic drivers of the exhibition was "an exploration of the complexity of our experience of place and nation".[39] Titled *Living Here Now: Art and Politics*, the exhibition was co-curated by nine curators across a number of institutions (including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Museum of Contemporary Art, Artspace and the Australian Centre for Photography), in retrospect a format that reflected the dispersive experience of "living here now", and the ultimate redundancy of an institution such as Perspecta, which every two years since 1981 had tried to convey the character of contemporary Australian art. I co-curated *Living Here Now* when I was writing a (never completed) book about abstract painting in Australia. The more I thought about the difference between connections to Australia by Aboriginal artists and non-Indigenous painters, the less interested I became in 'abstract painting' and the more curious I became to explore ways of creating a space in

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[38] *Simeon Nelson: World Between*. 9th Triennale – India, 3–31 December, 1997, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi. Australian commissioner and curator: Felicity Fenner.
[39] Tunnicliffe, W. (1999). Foreword (pp. 5–7). In *Australian Perspecta 1999: Living Here Now: Art and Politics*, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 5.

which different artists/cultures could represent the place to which they belong, in our case Australia.

### (iv) Research methodology

The research comprises two interwoven strands: curatorial research (the dissertation) and curatorial practice (curated exhibitions).

*Your Place or Mine?* proposes a set of conditions within the exhibition space that facilitates a reading of exhibitions through the prism of home. Those conditions depend on three key curatorial strategies investigated in the thesis in the context of Australian and international exhibitions, and tested in curated exhibitions of Australian art, including Australian art presented internationally and Australian art shown in Australia alongside art from other parts of the world. The curatorial strategies, illustrated in the Appendices, are: the inclusion of works that are based on real life, intersect with or *are* real life occurrences (Appendix II); the creation of installations in the gallery space that are physically immersive or inhabitable (Appendix III); and the co-production with artists of participatory works in public and non-institutional spaces (Appendix IV).

Acknowledging the wealth of curatorial practice undertaken in response to geo-political issues in Australia and the immediate geographic region, the thesis contextualises the author's curatorial projects with others in the region. While projects further afield are briefly discussed as background reference – biennial, triennial and stand-alone projects in London, Istanbul, and rural regions of Japan and China, for example – the focus of the background discussion is on those that have addressed notions of home in the 'new', formerly British colonial nations of our region, specifically Australia, New Zealand and Singapore.

In the curatorial practice component of the research, these strategies are applied in a series of exhibition projects undertaken over a ten-year period, 2004–2013. The research is presented with specific reference to Australian geo-politics during the same period: a decade that encompassed the Cronulla race riots, the Apology and a political pledge to "stop the boats", among other indicators of rapidly evolving (for better and for worse) attitudes to 'home'.

Following is a chronological summary of the exhibitions curated. Participating artists are listed in Appendix 1.

*Prepossession* (co-curated with Jill Bennett and Liam Kelly)
Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW, Sydney: 4 March – 9 April, 2005
Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast: 17 Sept.– 15 October, 2005

*Lie of the Land*: Primavera 2005
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney: 7 Sept. – 13 November, 2005

*Home Ground*
Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
21 April – 3 June, 2006

*Handle with Care*: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide: 1 March – 4 May, 2008

*Once Removed* (Australia: 53rd International Art Exhibition)
Venice Biennale, Venice: 5 June – 22 November, 2009

*Making Change* (with Brenda Croft and Kon Gouriotis)
National Art Museum of China, Beijing: 12 Nov – 13 December, 2012
UNSW Galleries, Sydney: 23 August – 5 October, 2013

*Running the City* (International Symposium of Electronic Arts)
UNSW Art & Design, Sydney: 7 June – 20 July, 2013

Essays discussing the curatorial rationale and details of particular works appear in the catalogues for *Prepossession*, *Lie of the Land*: Primavera 2005, *Home Ground* and *Once Removed*. These texts are referenced in the dissertation, with some sections adapted and the arguments expanded. For *Handle with Care*: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, I was the commissioning editor of a catalogue containing my curatorial essay, 24 short texts by 24 writers selected in consultation with the participating artists, and the transcript of a roundtable discussion between myself and participating artists, originally commissioned by and published in *Art & Australia* (Appendix V).

The thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter surveys the field and establishes the context for the curatorial research, which is presented in Chapters Two to Five and defined by four distinct avenues of investigation, as outlined below.

**CHAPTER 1: THE IDEA OF HOME IN AN AGE OF UNSETTLEMENT**

The first chapter establishes the idea of home as it manifests in recent international curatorial practice. The chapter overviews the literary, theoretical and curatorial background that provides a context for the thesis, with a focus on the situation of Australia and the local region. The chapter title borrows from Tony Fry's concept of the "age of planetary unsettlement" in which we live, and locates the research in the context of the critical theory of Homi Bhaba, Geeta Kapur, Miwon Kwon and Nikos Papastergiardis. Citing the writing of some of Australia's current leading authors such as Drusilla Modjeska, Kim Scott and Christos Tsiolkas, the meaning of 'home' is explored also from a literary perspective, revealing the cultural ubiquity of the in-between zone of slippage between national and cultural identity that permeates our experience of home. International curatorial precedents that used the prism of home are cited in a discussion of late 20th and early 21st century exhibitions that have invoked the idea of home to convey a sense of place: the work of curators Jan Hoet (Belgium)

and Nick Waterlow (England/Australia) is cited as the foremost early precedents in this field.

## CHAPTER 2: INDIGENOUS ART OF PLACE AND THE PLACE OF INDIGENOUS ART

Central to the investigation of the filter of home as a device to investigate perceptions of place is Indigenous culture's ancient relationship to this place we call home, Australia. This chapter examines curatorial approaches to the recent recontextualisation of Australian Indigenous art, largely ignored for the first 200 years of colonisation, as a contemporary and influential narrative on place. Referencing international indicators of shifts in curatorial approach since Jean Hubert Martin's 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre*, the research suggests that while Nick Waterlow's 1979 Biennale of Sydney first signalled a re-thinking of the role of Indigenous art in Australia, Vivien Johnson's pronouncement a generation later that "Indigenous art is the mainstream of Australian contemporary art" remains an aspirational claim.[40] The research examines through a series of curated exhibitions that an understanding of the place of Indigenous art is indeed central to the articulation of 'home' and demonstrates how this centrality might be established by the curator. The research locates itself in the context of international cultural theory that includes investigations into curatorial practice by Reesa Greenberg, Abigail Solomon-Godeau and W.J.T. Mitchell, among others; and by curators Hou Hanru and Okwui Enwezor, who also examine in their exhibition-making practice competing claims to place by existent and colonising or transitory communities. Locally, the sociological and cultural research of Ian McLean and David McNeill is referenced in the context of curatorial and broader manifestations of Indigenous culture in Australia.

[40] Johnson, V. (2004). Surface Tension. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *Talking About Abstraction*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, The University of New South Wales, (unpaginated).

## CHAPTER 3: VIEWS OF THE HOME GROUND

Curatorial approaches to the representation of contemporary Australia are examined against the backdrop of changing political and social attitudes to place. In this component of the research, place is conceived as a geographic as well as a cultural entity. The research here responds with curatorial solutions to Homi Bhabha's observation that "The recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity" is inherently undermined by "the distracting presence of another temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of the national present."[41] This "other temporality" in the Australian context comprises both dissent and disagreement with top-down views of Australia, and the viewpoint of Indigenous artists. The research in this chapter applies new approaches to traditional concepts of home in the forum of exhibition-making – both reinterpreting old models (such as 'landscape painting') and examining insights to place by artists whose practice is centred on the place of their home. Paul Carter's iconic *The Lie of the Land* provides a sociological context for the curatorial research and Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* informs interpretative approaches to place, while the theoretical investigations into curating by, among others, Jill Bennett and Claire Doherty, contextualise the research outcomes comprising two curated exhibitions.[42]

## CHAPTER FOUR: FRAGILE STATE

This chapter demonstrates how the exhibition space can be constructed in such a way that the prism of home becomes a key perceptual agent in teasing out connections between artworks within the exhibition space. The research shows how connections can be orchestrated by the curator to facilitate meaningful engagement and new understandings of place. The curatorial research outcome was *Handle with Care: Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, which tested the filter

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[41] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 199–244). London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 205.
[42] *The Lie of the Land*: Primavera, 2005 and *Views of the Home Ground*, 2006.

of home as an effective means of engagement between culturally diverse articulations of place. The research applies cultural historian Linda Colley's understanding of the 'other' as pivotal in community-building to the contemporary Australian situation, examining in a curatorial context tensions over 'whose place' our continent is, who has the right to call it 'home' and, in recent political discourse, 'who comes here'.[43] By utilising strategies of immersion, inhabitation and documentary association, the research makes an original contribution to international curatorial investigations into engagement between artworks and viewers in the dialogues it sets up within and beyond the exhibition spaces. Irit Rogoff's research into cultural difference and Mary-Jane Jacob's work on exhibition-making, which in turn cites Bhabha's emphasis on the necessity of an in-between, "third space" of engagement, is analysed in the context of the author's own curatorial practice.

**CHAPTER 5: OUT OF PLACE**

In the final chapter, the research extends the previous chapter's curatorial agency in the 'real' world outside the museum to test the effectiveness of the prism of home in projects embedded in non-institutional and public spaces. The research here argues that strategies of displacement, such as fostering incongruous and subversive approaches to established ideas of home, can heighten levels of engagement with place. The first section of this chapter examines the evolution in curatorial strategies from 'responding' to place to 'curating place', focusing on recent participatory projects in the public sphere that articulate a sense of 'home'. Here, Grant Kester's research into the nexus of empowerment and engagement is considered in the context of Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics and its interpretation by Doherty and, in terms of Debordian experimental geography, the work of artist-curator David Cross. Key curatorial initiatives in England, Japan and China are assessed in the context of

[43] See Linda Colley's research into constructed ideas of place in her acclaimed analysis of the beginnings of British national identity, which argued that the British have always articulated a identity against the European 'other': Colley, L. (1992). *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1847*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

projects in Australia and New Zealand. The author's testing of how artists and curators can map alternative views of place in their home cities constitutes the curatorial research for *Running the City*. Concurrently, 'place-making' curatorial approaches to cultural 'otherness' (commenced during the research that comprises Chapter Four), is undertaken in an international context with the curating of *Once Removed* for the Venice Biennale. Being physically and perceptually 'removed' from the official national pavilion, the exhibition deliberately subverted top-down ideas of Australia and staid perceptions of place by introducing a young generation of immigrant, Indigenous and site-specific artists whose practice engages with ideas of home from an experiential, bottom-up relationship to place. In each of these final components of the research, the curator's role shifts from one focused on the facilitation of connections between works in an exhibition space to one that is also concerned with forging connections to place itself.

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# CHAPTER 1

# THE IDEA OF HOME IN AN AGE OF UNSETTLEMENT

> In the heat of a Port Moresby night, Jericho, at thirty-six, feels tears of self-pity roll into his pillow. He hears the whirr of a mosquito inside the net and doesn't care. Let it bite him. Let him die up here, let them return his body to the earth of this accursed place. He forgets the nights he lay awake in his flat in Shoreditch, woken by dreams of tall trees shading the sky, a landscape of dark ridges, sudden clearings of brilliant green inhabited by beings with high heads, feathers dancing in the white, shining light of the moon. He forgets the longing, and the fear that he will be expelled, cast out, never to return to that memory place of earth smells and comfort dimly recalled.[1]

## 1.1. Curatorial and literary ideas of home

The displacement of individuals, communities and entire racial groups is a global phenomenon that increasingly preoccupies the work of writers and socially engaged artists. Revitalisation strategies by artists and curators not only offer communities new ways of imagining how we might live in changing times, but reveal to visitors from elsewhere the inhabitants' indelible connections to and sense of place.

In her 2011 Boyer Lecture, *The Idea of Home*, Geraldine Brooks cites dictionary definitions of home as "a place of origin, a native habitat", an "environment offering security and happiness", and "the place where something is discovered, founded, developed or promoted. A source".[2] By exploring the in-between spaces that have traditionally separated private and public space, and newcomers from original inhabitants, art in all its forms has become an

[1] Modjeska, D. (2012). *The Mountain*. Sydney: Random House, pp. 271–272.
[2] Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011.* Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 38.

aspirational pursuit in society's search for belonging, responding to and aspiring to effect social change. In re-imagining new connections and definitions of home, art and exhibitions can be a hotbed of insight and innovation, implementing creative approaches underpinned by empathy and experimentation.

The economic "globalization of the domestic and the domestication of the global" has seen many writers and artists addressing in their work an erosion of traditional concepts of place and home.[3] In literature there is growing interest in the predicament of displacement, from Cormac McCarthy's warning to mankind, *The Road* (2006), which paints a bleak picture of a post-apocalyptic future earth, to Australian novels that examine quintessentially Australian experiences of home from the point of view of Indigenous and immigrant experience. These include Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005), Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010), Drusilla Modjeska's *The Mountain* (2012) and Christos Tsiolkas's *Barracuda* (2013). All are framed around themes of home and our complex relationship to it; the inability to belong – to feel grounded – without a sense of home. In the latter, Jericho is the hapkas (half caste) protagonist in a story of individuals – black, white and mixed race – caught up in Papua New Guinea's transition to independence in the late 1960s, and between Australia, New Guinea and London.

Jericho's existence is defined by displacement, by his incapacity to feel at home either in the tropical birthplace that haunts his dreams, or in his adopted city of London. His name is borrowed from the ancient place that epitomises the tumultuous environment of counter-claims to place. The transient communities of ancient Jericho, a place synonymous with impermanence and displacement, are echoed in the movement of people in today's world as a result of conflict and disaster, poverty and environmental degradation.

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[3] Iara Boubnova quoted by Fijen, H. (2005). Foreword. In B. Vanderlinden & E. Filipovic (Eds.), *The Manifesta Decade.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p. 11.

As we are catapulted by climate change into an age of unsettlement, how can curators help society to re-imagine a sense of home? Thierry de Duve argues that the need for site-specific art is a community's acknowledgment of their sense of place having been lost.[4] How then can curatorial practice be the catalyst for an understanding of, and even for the creation of, place? In recent years curators, particularly of biennales, have focused on the local as a way of rejecting the homogenisation of culture and place imposed by globalisation. Because they are premised on a biennial cycle, biennales are one genre of curatorial practice that demand a frequent reinvention of approaches to place. Biennales embrace the contemporary understanding of place not as a static, finite description of a physical place, but as socially produced, heterogeneous and constantly evolving.

While the curatorial methodology of most biennales involves just a small proportion of specially commissioned site-specific art, a few initiatives have successfully adopted the prism of home to revitalise a sense of place. Outside the space of the gallery and museum, close collaboration with local communities has proven an effective means of revitalising place and cultural tradition. In northwest Japan, the former rice-growing area of Echigo-Tsumari hosts artist installations in villages being abandoned as younger generations leave the area for the cities. In southeast China, artist/architect Ou Ning's *Bishan Project* helps local communities rediscover their own craft traditions and build new cultural roots in the agricultural community. Ou Ning purchased some houses in Yixian County near Huangshan City to work with the farmers in revitalising the countryside, because, as in Japan's Echigo-Tsumari region, the area has been depopulated as young people move to the cities. In each of these initiatives, concepts of home are re-defined and restored through the empathic and experimental interventions of artists, curators and architects. In post-earthquake Christchurch, the 2013 SCAPE Biennial of Public Art successfully

[4] De Duve, T. (2007). The Glocal and the Singuniversal. *Third Text*, *21*(6), 25–30.

used the prism of home to engage local audiences in a physically active re-imagining of their forever fractured city.[5]

These projects recognise and grant agency to the role of local knowledge in their successful engagement with people and place. In these projects, the decentralisation of power from the state to the local community illustrates Foucault's claim that in the modern world power is necessarily defined by diversity, local knowledges and, above all, freedom from top-down political structures.[6]

It is an approach echoed in projects in Australia. Though initiated not by curators but by a state government strategic plan, the Community Cultural Development (CCD) programs in Western Sydney have in the last 15 years overseen the establishment of Australia's richest, grass-roots arts culture.[7] Communities in the catchment of CCD auspice organisations, primarily Casula Powerhouse (Liverpool) and Campbelltown Arts Centre, have established and sustained viable cultural industries based on local inhabitants' ethnicity and lived experience in Western Sydney.[8] In 2014 Campbelltown Arts Centre commissioned *Temporary Democracies*, a series of site-specific, participatory art projects in Airds in South West Sydney. Uniting art and sport, David Cross's *Skyball* required local inhabitants to organise themselves into teams for a competition played out over number of weekends. The game, which involved participants climbing inside an inflated ball and chasing a football (of any code), was closely related to the team-based hybrid sport that Cross invented for the previous year's SCAPE Public Art Biennial in Christchurch.[9]

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[5] See Chapter Five for a discussion of the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial, Ou Ning's Bishan project and David Cross's interactive work in SCAPE7.
[6] Fischer, Frank (2000). *Citizens, Experts, and the Environment: The Politics of Local Knowledge* (pp. 1–28). Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 24–25.
[7] The NSW government launched the Western Sydney Arts Strategy in 1999.
[8] For an evaluation of the social impact of CCD strategies, see: Ho, C (2012), Western Sydney is hot! Community arts and changing perceptions of the West. *Gateways: International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, *5*, 35–55.
[9] See Chapter Five for an analysis of Cross's Christchurch project in the context of site-specific community participation and engagement.

On the heels of Western Sydney's cultural activation, curatorial input has been partially 're-centralised' with the establishment in 2006 of C3 West by the Australia Council and Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. Producing durational and participatory art projects in Western Sydney, C3 West fosters partnerships between art and other sectors of the community, developing new models of engagement and new audiences for contemporary art. The curatorial strategy for projects to date has been to embed high-profile artists in Western Sydney communities, fostering creative working relationships between producers and consumers of art. The projects to date that have had the most profound impact on communities in terms of engagement (buy-in) include Angelica Mesiti's *The Begin-Again* (2011), which involved the story-telling participation of people from Hurstville, and New Zealand artist Michael Tuffery's *Transforma* (2014), a seven-week residency that addressed through the involvement of the perpetrators some of the area's most problematic anti-social behaviours – arson, theft and the dumping of cars into the river. Central to Tuffrey's project was educating young people to care for the health of the river, and for the local environment more broadly. The strategy here of the artist to engage the community in a way that reveres place – their home – is echoed in the curatorial approach to place adopted by Ou Ning's Bishan Project and by the organising curators of the Echigo Tsumari Triennial.[10]

Curatorial practice has since postmodernism been preoccupied by the desire to articulate a sense of place through art. At the height of painting's renaissance during the 1980s, the Royal Academy mounted huge exhibitions about Britain and Germany. (A generation later, the 2013 *Australia* exhibition was a hangover of this curatorial methodology. It was, however, too late: as discussed in the Introduction, in our post-global era of displacement and cultural hybridity, the old chronological survey of art from go to whoa fails to convey the complexity of place as a shifting and multifarious entity.) After 1989 – the year the Berlin Wall

[10] See Chapter Five for discussion of community engagement in the Chinese and Japanese projects.

came down, that the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing turned the spotlight onto China, and the year of Jean-Hubert Martin's influential *Magiciens de la Terre* – there was a surfeit of exhibitions about place, with a generation of Young British Artists (YBAs) and contemporary Chinese artists both securing a high profile in a marketplace eager for new manifestations of regional distinctiveness.

Following 9/11, curatorial attention began to shift from a position of horizontal, global authority to search for local, vertically articulated, bottom-up significance. The late 20th and early 21st century, where this thesis is set, has witnessed an unprecedented flux of people around the globe and rapidly evolving perceptions of place. On the one hand the concept of place has been usurped by globalisation and a resultant homogenisation of culture; on the other hand there has been social pushback in a search for locational identity by artists and curators, a trend that manifests much more alarmingly in the political sphere, evidenced in Australia with inward-looking, inhumane schemes such as those designed to stem the movement of people seeking asylum in Australia ("stop the boats"). Biennales have reflected this to-ing and fro-ing: in one sense they are like Westfield shopping malls that have the same shops and products (artists and works) in each shopping centre (biennale); at another level they strive to distinguish themselves from each other by articulating locational identity with site-responsive and site-specific works.

David McNeill describes this change in curatorial practice to what Nikos Papastergiardis has previously described as "clusters", a shift from collection-based exhibition-making to something more akin to event-based production. Citing Robert Storr's 2007 Venice Biennale exhibition, McNeill claims that it failed to aggregate

> impressive single works into a cultural statement (or series of statements) that could offer meanings on a molecular rather than atomic plane [and failed] to

> animate *relationships* between the participant works; or rather they fail to animate these relationships that move beyond the purely formal.[11]

It was this failure of previous exhibitions to "move beyond the purely formal" relationships between Western abstraction and Aboriginal painting that prompted the research that resulted in the *Talking About Abstraction* exhibition.[12]

Miwon Kwon's influential book *One Place After Another* (2002) is premised on the acknowledgement that the world is in a state of flux and fluidity as people move about and places are reimagined, redeveloped and repurposed. Kwon argues that it was the very homogenisation of culture resulting from globalisation (the comforting 'home away from home' phenomenon of eating the same food from the same fast food chain in every city) that facilitated the movement of people between places, including (presumably) the nomadism of contemporary artists and curators.

Since the publication of *One Place After Another*, however, there has been a shift back to searching and articulating local identity, from top-down political efforts to grassroots cultural initiatives. In our region, for example, the City of Sydney has demarcated areas of the greater Sydney area into "villages", each boasting particular characteristics and specialisations in culinary, market or architectural attractions. Underlying the successful branding of all areas is a common commitment to creating localities that embrace "diverse communities sharing together", having "a sense of belonging" and a "connection to the local".[13] Of course, these urban village qualities – as places of sharing, connecting and belonging – are the same qualities we seek from 'home' as a place of community, offering an individualised sense of locational identity.

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[11] McNeill, D. (2010). Art Without Authors: Networks, Assemblages and 'Flat' Ontology. *Third Text*, *24*(4), 397–408. p. 397.
[12] See Chapter Two for a curatorial contextualisation of *Talking About Abstraction*.
[13] City of Sydney. (2008). *Sustainable Sydney 2030: The Vision*. Sydney: City of Sydney, p. 101.

In curatorial initiatives in the Australasian region, too, there are signs of a return to localism. It is an approach to which Papastergiardis's theory of clusters can be usefully applied, as it involves strengthening the sense of place through a network of cultural connectivity rather than a top-down, didactic curatorial mission.[14] Taking Papastergiardis's proposition to its logical extension, this thesis argues that the most successful projects are those that invoke bottom-up ideas of home to configure new articulations of local identity. Of the large-scale international projects, Blair French's curatorial approach to earthquake devastated Christchurch in SCAPE7 and Hou Hanru's collaborations with local artists, architects and art spaces in the 2013 Auckland Triennial both implemented innovative curatorial approaches to place that succeeded in engaging local audiences by anchoring the projects' conception, production and presentation in existing networks within the organising institutions' home ground arena.[15] Echoing in a new context Bhabha's concept of a "third space"– the space created by affective engagement with the subject – Hou refers to the recent post-global embracing of the local as a "third force", writing with his characteristically manifesto-style belief in the capacity of art to be an agent of social change:

> Looking at current popular movements increasingly prevailing in the world today – from anti-imperialist to anti/alter-globalizationist, from environmental protectionism to anti-gentrification activists – one can witness the rise of a third force in all domains… Today, modernization should be carried out in diverse models, relevant to local conditions and ideals, and in the negotiations between individual localities and the 'global'.[16]

This idea of a resonant, *felt* intersection ("negotiations") between the local and the global is the quality that distinguishes Hou's curatorial practice from that of other more local or more generically global curators. In his exhibition-making

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[14] Papastergiardis, N. (1999). Clusters on the Move. In *Perspecta 1999: Living Here Now: Art and Politics*, (pp. 10–15). Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 11.
[15] These projects are discussed in Chapter Five.
[16] Hou, H. (2007). *Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War – 10th Istanbul Biennial.* Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, p. 24.

he weaves the two together seamlessly, revealing how local social and economic conditions are impacted by global concerns and thus linked from context to context (country to country). Extending this theory of a "third force" borne of affective and activist engagement at the nexus of art and life (of ideas and home) to the more specific context of curating the Istanbul Biennale, Hou claims that a biennial exhibition must be based on negotiations between local and visitor stakeholders:

> It must consider the most efficient and effective means to engage artistic activities within the social reality and provide innovative visions for social change. Bringing both local and international artists and their works together and encouraging them to carry out dialogues with the local community, the biennial is a space in which creative forms of global–local negotiations take place… It's through this engagement that the Biennial itself will obtain new energy and significance.[17]

By embedding itself in the city's everyday living and working spaces – the networked grid of the city – and by proactively seeking the engagement of local communities allowing local people to interact with artworks in the course of their daily lives, Hou's methodology ensures a space for engagement that might look subtle, almost as if it is flying under the radar of visual impact, but in fact infiltrates the psyche of a local community much more effectively than artworks that depend on temporary spectacle over lasting meaning.[18] It is at that point of facilitating knowing through passive infiltration, that Hou's "third force" intersects with Bhabha's "third space".

The adoption in Hou's Auckland Triennial *If you were to live here…* of curatorial strategies devised in response to the cultural specifics of the place in which the exhibition is held further extends the curator's methodological focus on the

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[17] Hou, H. (2007). *Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War – 10th Istanbul Biennial.* Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, p. 25.
[18] A good example of banal yet spectacular artworks is the large rubber duck by Florentijn Hofman installed at festivals in different parts of the world in 2012–14.

local evidenced in previous exhibitions. As far back as 1997, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Hou's *Cities on the Move* showed that 'home' has a new meaning in the context of globalisation. *Cities on the Move*, a globally touring exhibition that interacted with the local population and cultural environment at each venue, was based on the premise that imposed ideas are less meaningful than continually re-invented concepts of home. In the years since that exhibition, post 9/11 and as people move from place to place in unprecedented numbers, this is more true than ever:

> Global displacement through migration and exile has meant that the notion of homeland is no longer perceived as stable. Cultural identity and the body (national, religious, sexual, etc), are again no longer assumed to be firmly located in a specific place, within fixed cohesive identities. Consequently, we have seen a zealous return to a desire for certainties with new emerging religious and national fundamentalisms. Associated to this we have seen the return to essentialist identity politics.[19]

The research here demonstrates that hand-in-hand with the rise of "essentialist identity politics", the return to certainties of place has been facilitated by a shift to a privileging of the 'internal' (intimate, personal) perceptions of place over top-down 'external' (public) narratives. Thus, because it invites a bottom-up investigation of place based on shared experience, the concept of home is a useful lens through which to address changing attitudes and descriptors of place.

Homi Bhabha describes today's experience of cultures in flux:

> The Western nation as an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the locality of culture. This locality is more around temporality than about historicity: a form of living that is more complex than 'community'; more symbolic than 'society'; more connotative than 'country'; less patriotic than *patrie*; more rhetorical than

[19] Phoca, S. (2007) No Place Like Home. In J. Rugg & M. Sedgewick (Eds.). *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*. Bristol: Intellect Books, 45–55, p. 49.

> the reason of State; more mythological than ideology; less homogeneous than hegemony; less centred than the citizen; more collective than 'the subject'; more psychic than civility; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism.[20]

Certainly cultural homogeneity and common goals have never truly existed in Australia and complex layers of social antagonism persist throughout the so-called multicultural and classless society. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, while the description of the average Australian may sound quite typical, the fact that no-one meets all the criteria that coalesce to describe the average person shows that the very notion of 'average' masks considerable (and growing) diversity in Australia.[21] The curatorial research in this thesis examines the reality of Australia as a heterogeneous culture: bringing to the forum the experience of living between two or more cultures.

The protagonist of Christos Tsiolkas's 2013 novel *Barracuda* suffers the same feelings of displacement as Modjeska's Jericho, though in this case he feels in-between cultures within his own city of Melbourne: in-between his immigrant working class family and the boys with a sense of entitlement at "Cunts College", the private school he attends on scholarship:

> 'That in-between feeling, that's the world I know, and Danny's in-between in lots of ways,' Tsiolkas says. 'When I went to Melbourne Uni, it seemed like everyone else there knew each other from when they were kids. And that stuff I'm talking about in Barracuda, the golden boys and girls, that thing about their perfect skin and teeth, when I was at uni I felt that. I was walking around going,

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[20] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 199–244). London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 200.
[21] Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2013, 24 July*) Australian Social Trends.* Retrieved from http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30April+2013#back10

> how the hell do they do that, their skin and teeth are perfect!'[22]

Concurring with the proposition that the affective relationship to home can be recreated by the curator in the exhibition space in order to facilitate an intimate space of engagement, South Korean curator Young Chul Lee writes that "Exhibition making is about constructing the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of cultural difference in the present tense."[23] In the context of art and curatorial practice, this in-between space can also be identified as the slippage that occurs between top-down, external constructs of cultural identity and bottom-up, internal connections to home. Writing about the 1999 Perspecta exhibition, *Living Here Now – Art and Politics*, Nikos Papastergiardis identified this slippage as a form of confusion:

> Where do we belong? What is our identity? These questions are so often coupled… the being of our identity transposed onto the conditions of belonging, and vice-versa. In every claim to identity there is a reclamation of territory.[24]

Curatorial decisions for *Living Here Now* were being made at the same time as Sydney was gearing up to host the 2000 Summer Olympics, creating a push-and-pull effect: as our home city was thrust onto the world stage as a place of sunny beaches and multicultural harmony, as curators of *Living Here Now* we were researching artists whose work looked inwards to reveal alternative aspects of our home, Australia, that were for the most part antithetical to the Olympic organisers' claim that "we all feel as one".[25]

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[22] Johnstone, D. (2014, 26 January). Christos Tsiolkas: In the swim and on the money. *The Independent*. Retrieved from http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/christos-tsiolkas-in-the-swim-and-on-the-money-9082955.html
[23] Lee, Y. C. (2007). Curating in a Global Age. In S. Rand & H. Kouris (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (pp. 108–117). New York: apexart, p. 111.
[24] Papastergiardis, N. (1999). Clusters on the Move. In *Australian Perspecta 1999: Living Here Now: Art and Politics* (pp. 10–15). Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 13.
[25] Papastergiardis, N. (1999). Clusters on the Move. In *Australian Perspecta 1999: Living Here Now: Art and Politics* (pp. 10–15). Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 11. For a critique on cultural identity around the Sydney Olympics, see Hanna, M. (1999). *Reconciliation in Olympism: Indigenous Culture in the Sydney Olympics*, Sydney: Walla Walla Press in conjunction with Aboriginal Research and Resource Centre and the Centre for Olympic Studies, University of New South Wales.

My exhibition for Perspecta, *Living Here Now*, focused on concepts of home, bringing into the gallery space photographs of home environments by four Australian artists.[26] Through film and photography of contemporary urban life in Australia, the exhibition explored "the crossing of social boundaries and underlying feelings of loneliness and alienation in the inner city, at the same time reflecting collective anxieties that lie just beneath the surface of living here now".[27]

In curatorial practice the idea of deterritorialisation can also refer to the space created by the transference of some degree of artistic authorship to the space of a curated dialogue between works in an exhibition that in turn provides an intellectual entry point for the viewer. In other words, a partial transfer of authorship from artist to curator. Achieving this curatorially-orchestrated deterritorialisation, however, requires the willingness of artists and their works in the exhibition to collaborate with and corroborate the curator's storytelling. The curatorial methodology is a connective joining of the dots, in which each artist's work is likely to forfeit some of its original purport to become a molecular component of the curator's thematic cluster. As David McNeill argues, achievement of the curatorial imperative

> will depend on a capacity to acknowledge the potential of their work to transcend the constraints of authorial intent and to participate with other works and artefacts in the creation of 'assemblages'. This is, to 'let go' of the work and permit it to make its own way to form its own alliances… The product of their association is suggestive of what the philosphers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have called a 'minor literature'.[28]

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[26] Artists in *Living Here Now* were Judith Ahearn, John E (Hobart) Hughes, Steven Lojewski and Harriet McKern.
[27] Fenner, F. (1999). Living Here Now. In *Australian Perspecta 1999: Living Here Now: Art and Politics*, (pp. 56–59). Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 58.
[28] McNeill, D. (2010). Art Without Authors: Networks, Assemblages and 'Flat' Ontology. *Third Text*, *24*(4), 397–408. p. 407.

The storyline of this "minor literature", in the case of group exhibitions, is created and directed by the curator. With the decision to sublimate, to some degree, the artists' authorship (and inherently the artists' intent) to the curator's own narrative, the curator is providing an in-between or "third space" for the emergence of connections between artworks in the exhibition and connections between artworks and audience. As many a high profile exhibition has proven, especially when we add to the mix the politically incorrect anthropological habit of the recent past to include un-credited Indigenous artworks, the curator must tread a fine line between respecting the artists' intent and employing those artworks in the enunciation of the curator's own thesis.[29]

## 1.2 The terrible nearness of distant places

Jericho's failure to remember the fear of being expelled from the native paradise of his childhood suggests reluctance to inhabit the in-between place separating the divergent cultures that define him. When past universals are superseded, as proposed by Geeta Kapur, the way in which we experience the world is turned on its head.[30] Haunted by the promise of a better place, we look for new ways of belonging, of finding that 'memory place' we call home.

Jericho's situation reveals that the need to reconcile the longing for home in the context of an ever-shifting world can be obstructed by fear and prejudice. By embracing cultural diversity within the forum of an exhibition, however, the space of engagement can become one of empathy and acceptance:

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[29] Exhibitions such as *Primitivism in 20th century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 1984, and *Magiciens de la Terre*, for example, attracted wide criticism for ignoring artistic authorship (Primitivism) and intent (*Magiciens*) in order to verify a curatorial premise. See Chapter Three.
[30] Kapur, G. (2007). Curating: In the Public Sphere. In Rand, S. & Kouris, H. (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (pp. 56–68). New York: apexart, p. 65.

> A whole consisting of singularities, a multiplicity of groups and subjectivities – founded on the common value of love, as is defended and promoted by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their theory of 'the multitude' (in *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.)[31]

While it is difficult to reject Hou's idealism as an impossibly optimistic function of exhibitions, Ute Meta Bauer, writing with reference to the 2002 Documenta11 that she worked on alongside Okwui Enwezor, sees the "third" or in-between space as a curatorial healing area that, as was discussed in the Introduction and is expounded upon by Jill Bennett in her book *Practical Aesthetics*, can give rise to new meanings and interpretations by finding common ground among diverse cultures and viewpoints:

> We love the 'foreign' so long as it remains far away and does not attempt to assert its right to exist alongside us, so long as it remains outside – 'outside' in the sense of an exception as well – or among its own kind. Between the two options of exiling the 'foreign' to its place or assimilating it to our own surroundings, Documenta11 tries to open up a space of in-between, of transition and of passage, a space of the diaspora, a 'third space' in which the inevitable discrepancies and irritations that come with it are not only retained as a structure but moreover are inserted as catalysts for new forms of understanding that can be developed – perhaps as productive misunderstandings, perhaps to goad us toward more intense engagement, perhaps in fruitful confrontation of different methods, ways of thinking, and languages.[32]

The fear of the foreign is a form of racial intolerance that can be overcome in the exhibition space with the implementation of the curatorial strategies examined in this thesis, most specifically those of inhabitation, immersion and interaction.

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[31] Hou, H. (2007). *Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War – 10th Istanbul Biennial.* Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, p. 24.
[32] Bauer, U.M. (2002). The Space of Documenta11: Documenta as a Zone of Activity. In Fietzek, G. (Ed.), *Documenta11_Platform 5: Exhibition* (pp. 103–107). Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, p. 105.

All are means to a level of engagement that is not proactively sought in everyday life. The upside of the museum or gallery environment being thought of as elitist and somehow separate from everyday life, is that it is approached with more open-mindedness than politics or the media. So while on the one hand curators need to find ways to connect viewers' experience of exhibitions to everyday life, on the other, the sanctified space of the exhibition allows a degree of conceptual freedom to present alternative views to mainstream channels of information. Bennett analysed the increased role of the documentary image in contemporary art in *Practical Aesthetics*.[33] The research in this thesis shows how documentary images, when seen in the context of an art exhibition, are invested with an independent status that invites a more objective and thoughtful engagement than when encountered in arenas, such as the media, beyond the gallery space. The research capitalises on the fact that the exhibition of art is 'once removed' from everyday life, empowering the curator to present descriptions of place that challenge mainstream perceptions.

Australia has a love–hate relationship with 'foreignness'. The top-down attitude is contradictory, a classic case of 'not-in-my-backyard' (nimby)ism: on official sites of public communication the government boasts that we're "multicultural and multiracial", while at the same time it tows back asylum seeker boats that dare sail too close to our coastline, and deports newly arrived asylum seekers to offshore detention centres. A newspaper article in the week leading up to Australia Day in 2014 revealed the ugly face of 'essentialist identity politics' that has increasingly pervaded the nation's day of celebration (or commiseration, for those that conceive of it as Invasion Day):

> Supermarkets have been slammed for selling Australia Day products that are made in China, Thailand and Taiwan. Businessman Dick Smith has called on Woolworths, Coles and Aldi to stock locally made products, while the clothing workers' union has accused the supermarkets of 'cashing in' on the patriotism

[33] Bennett, J. (2012). *Practical Aesthetics: Events, Affects and Art after 9/11* (1–32). London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. p. 20.

> of ordinary Australians. Despite the brands being high-profile partners of the 'Australian Made' campaign, Fairfax Media was unable to find a single Australian-made product among their Australia Day flags, T-shirts and other products… Textile Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia national secretary Michele O'Neil said stocking imported Australia Day products was a disgrace. 'It is a complete contradiction and hypocrisy to sell products supporting Australia Day that aren't made here in Australia', she said. 'If you really want to support Australia, then part of that is supporting Australian jobs and Australian industry. Ms O'Neil said she hoped people would check the label and decide not to purchase the imported goods.[34]

**Figure 1: "Surprised – Richard and Tania Booker with their children". Image: Fairfax Media**

The supposed outrage is a form of thinly veiled racism that the top-down narrative imposes on 'ordinary Australians'. It was not surprising, consequently, to see Fairfax Media extend this parochial attitude into the annual Australia Day wraparound cover for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, which featured paintings by 12 artists – all of them white, most of them male. Not surprisingly, the feature attracted a spate of criticism from the art community, including several letters to the editors, none of which was published.[35]

Echoing Ute Meta Bauer's understanding of 'the foreign' as something that needs to be kept at a safe distance, Okwui Enzwezor, also writing for Documenta11, considers the social push-and-pull effect of post-globalisation:

> From the moment the postcolonial enters into the space/time of global calculations and the effects they impose on modern subjectivity, we are

[34] Jeffares, A., & Waniganayaka, T. (2014, 19 January). Australia Day 2014: Retailers' patriotic products made in Asia. *The Sun-Herald*, p. 11.
[35] See Brenda Croft's letter to the editor and discussion of the place of Aboriginal art in Chapter Two.

> confronted not only with the asymmetry and limitations of globalism's materialist assumptions but also with the terrible nearness of distant places that global logic sought to abolish and bring into one domain of deterritorialized rule. Rather than vast distances and unfamiliar places, strange peoples and cultures, postcoloniality embodies the spectacular mediation and representation of nearness as the dominant mode of understanding the present condition of globalization… The postcolonial today is a world of proximities. It is a world of nearness, not an elsewhere.[36]

**Figure 2: Asylum seekers arriving at Christmas Island, August 2013. Image: Fairfax Media**

The "terrible nearness of distant places" aptly describes the condition in Australia that gives rise to the kind of fear-based, ignorant propaganda so heartily embraced by politicians and the media. If we accept that exhibitions can subtly expose "the major, often lethal tensions between peoples and regions", how can curators invoke the prism of home to successfully disentangle conflicting concepts of nationalism and cultural identity?[37]

This thesis argues that curatorial strategies of inhabitation, immersion and interactivity can bridge the divide between external and internal perceptions of home. In providing a space in which viewers can engage with artworks that convey alternative viewpoints to their own, viewers can 'step into the shoes' of the artist in a context that is removed from real life conditions of cross-cultural

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[36] Enwezor, O. (2002). The Black Box. In Fietzek, G. (Ed.), *Documenta11_Platform 5: Exhibition* (pp. 42–55). Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, p. 44.
[37] Kapur, G. (2007). Curating: In the Public Sphere. In S. Rand & H. Kouris (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (pp. 56–68). New York: apexart, p. 65.

tension.[38] On the incapacity of 'ordinary Australians' to feel at home in the real world, David McNeill writes that in Australia

> … it might be argued that the extent to which we are unable to feel at home in a world that includes Islam and are unable to accept Islamic migrants as fully constituted citizens is simply irrefutable evidence of our failure as a nation… [of] a stubborn insularity resulting from the top-down imposition of a national narrative that invites us to conceive of ourselves as a homogenous and like-minded community fully in charge or our own destiny and immune from the vagaries of world history… a reluctance or inability to imagine forms of exchange, comradeship and generosity that can thrive outside the tired conceptual inhibitions of nationalism as it was constituted in the century that we have so recently left behind.[39]

The disjuncture between our European, Asian and indeed Indigenous cultural realities is more effectively explored in the arenas of arts and the humanities than it is by politics and the mainstream media. While this thesis attests to the capacity of curatorial practice to effect the consideration of a myriad of alternative perspectives (as offered in a group exhibition), literature reveals that an openness to cultural difference lies with individuals. Geraldine Brooks's *The Idea of Home* tells the autobiographical story of rejecting top-down national narratives in favour of an independent, empathic response to cultural difference, while Christos Tsiolkas's protagonist of *Barracuda*, Daniel Kelly, conveys intolerance to the "stubborn insularity" that is arguably shared by a large proportion of 'ordinary Australians':

> The golden boys and the golden girls had no interest in experiencing the world – they wore goggles in the pool and blinkers out of it. Not him. He was going to

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[38] Hossein Valamanesh's work created for *Handle with Care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* was titled *Leave Your Shoes Here*. It invited viewers to symbolically (and physically) temporarily step out of their shoes and inhabit the Islam-inspired, poetic prayer-space that the artist had created inside the exhibition. Exhibition curator: Felicity Fenner. See Chapter Four.
[39] David McNeill (2010). Art Without Authors: Networks, Assemblages and 'Flat' Ontology. *Third Text*, *24*(4), pp. 407–8.

take it in, possess the whole of the world. *Aussie Aussie Aussie, Oi Oi Oi*? Fuck off. He wanted more.[40]

## 1.3 The framework of home: curatorial precedents

As a curatorial conceit, the idea of home has historical precedents that recognised its community-building potential to gain the attention of local audiences, thus providing the potential to further engage visitors in issues beyond home. Key progressive curatorial strategies around the idea of home include two in Ghent, Belgium, both initiated by the late Belgian curator Jan Hoet. *Chambres d'Amis*, curated by Hoet in 1986, invited artists from Europe and the US to transform 50 private, everyday spaces – homes and work places – throughout Ghent. Turning away from the museum, works were created in response to the peoples' own sites of everyday life. This curatorial model was subsequently adapted for major exhibitions in the mid-2000s, such as the 2005 and 2007 Istanbul biennales, the 2006 and 2008 Singapore biennales, and in 2013–14 by Lyon Biennale curator Gunnar Karvan, who invited the people of Lyon to accommodate and share an artwork in their homes for the duration of the Biennale.[41]

In 1993 *Rendez-Vous* was organised by Jan Hoet and Bart de Baere, its format an inversion of *Chambres d'Amis* in which the citizens of Ghent were invited to bring from home an object of personal value. Four artists (Huang Yong Ping, Jimmie Durham, Henk Visch and Ilya Kabakov) were commissioned to arrange the display of the borrowed objects within the museum in the context of their own practice, yet the subject of the exhibition remained the 1,650 objects representative of the local people's homes.

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[40] Tsiolkas, C. (2013). *Barracuda*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, p. 192.
[41] Esche, C. & Korton, V., Curators. (2005). "Istanbul Biennale 2005." Istanbul, Turkey. Hou, H., Curator. (2007). "10th International Istanbul Biennial: Not Only Possible but also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War." Istanbul, Turkey. Nanjo, F. Curator. (2006). "1st Singapore Biennale: Belief." Singapore. Nanjo, F. Curator. (2008). "2nd Singapore Biennale: Wonder." Singapore.

While these early precedents represented a very literal connotation of home, subsequent exhibitions about place have stressed the theme's relationship to ideas of connectivity and connectedness between people and between people and place. A relatively early example is the 1997 *Spirit and Place: Art in Australia 1861–1996*, curated by Nick Waterlow and Ross Mellick for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney:

> One of the consequences of the commodification of the world in our time is the disconnection of the human from other living things, and the draining away of the numinous dimensions of the world. The art experience, almost alone, stands against this process by opening us up to the experience of the interconnectedness of all things… At the heart of this exhibition is the curators' acknowledgement of the need to celebrate these possibilities of the art project.[42]

The exhibition brought together 19th century spiritualist work with early and contemporary 20th century Australian art concerned with spiritualism. Except for the strong component of Australian Indigenous art throughout the exhibition, 'home' was cited more in a spiritual than geographic context. Exceptions of non-Indigenous work that offered engagement through the prism of home were Olive Cotton's intimate photographs of everyday scenes, Clarice Beckett's ghostly paintings of suburban Melbourne, and Rosalie Gascoigne's *Feathered Fence*, a favourite work of Waterlow's that he had also featured in the 1979 Biennale of Sydney.

Post 9/11 there was renewed emphasis on exploring the meaning of home in large-scale exhibitions: while Documenta11 set an immediate and radically altered curatorial agenda in Europe, in our region of the world *Site + Sight: Translating Cultures* in Singapore successfully nurtured support for

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[42]Mellick, R. (1996). Spirit and Place: Art in Australia 1861–1999. In N. Waterlow (OAM), & R. Mellick (Eds.), *Spirit and Place: Art in Australia 1861–1999.* Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 17.

contemporary art from the nation-state's politically controlled cultural sector. In retrospect this exhibition was a turning point on the road towards Singapore establishing a full-scale international biennale, which it did in 2006. For the first time in 2002 the Singapore Arts Festival incorporated a larger than usual visual arts component to complement the majority theatre, dance and music programme of this annual event. Curated by Binghui Huangfu, then director of the Earl Lu Gallery at Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts, the exhibition was positioned within a contemporary international visual arts dialogue.

*Site + Sight* was installed in six venues across five Singapore arts institutions. While many of the 26 artists were clearly safe curatorial choices, having been tried and tested on the international art circuit, their work broke new ground in the relatively conservative Singapore context. Its theme was globalism – loose enough to be all-encompassing, yet specific enough to infer political content. The exhibition's tour de force was Gu Wenda's *United Nations – Man & Space* (2002), a collection of 188 national flags woven from human hair. Its sheer scale and tactility provided a visceral, immersive experience imbued with connotations of mortality and trauma.[43] Overall, the exhibition did not reveal any aspects of globalism that were not already subject to public debate, yet for Singapore it was a courageous exhibition to present, subtly critical of world political policies and their impact on the immediate region and beyond, while implementing effective curatorial devices such as scale and immersion to engage the viewer in the artist's intellectual space.[44] Curator Binghui Huangfu sees Singapore's global connectivity as advantageous to the politically motivated curator:

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[43] The flags were full ceremonial size, hung floor to ceiling in rows around the four sides of the space. In the centre of the room they created a suspended portal, with Singapore in the keystone position flanked by China and the United States, the two nations of most influence on the republic's political and cultural psyche. One million people donated their hair for this project, from over 700 barbershops and hair salons in 18 countries. In its merging of themes of human similarity, frailty and nationalism, the work conveyed an empathy with the human condition and poignant political inference unusual to the nation state of Singapore where censorship, including self-censorship of art continues to be commonplace.

[44] For a thorough critique of this exhibition see Fenner, F. (2003, April). Simultaneous Translations. *Art in America*, *91*(4), pp. 81–83.

> As a venue for exploring questions of globalism Singapore is ideal. Singapore as a small island state is almost unique in its dependence on the world. Having few resources other than its limited population numbers Singapore could be viewed as one of the first nations to understand and implement a global philosophy for its very survival.[45]

The subsequent first three editions of the Singapore Biennale – 2006, 2008 and 2011 – were the most ambitious examples of large-scale exhibitions in the Australasian region to recognise the prism of home as an effective curatorial strategy to engage local audiences:

> International biennales in Asian countries are understood as part of the cultural industries by politicians, city officials, local people, and even by local artists; they are not interested in transnational, global contexts or in the issues of contemporary art. Those issues are for a few specialists. The slogan of viewer participation and education appears to have changed the format of biennales, however, it is local politics and their expectations, experience and ethical judgements that influence the contents, direction, and success of a biennale. They expect the biennale to contribute to the publicity of their city and local artists in a short period of time despite the fact that the local contemporary art system is extremely weak.[46]

Curators must juggle the dual obligations to support the culture of the local region while presenting it as globally relevant. It is a conundrum often tackled by setting up deliberate juxtapositions between art from home and international work of similar concerns (political concerns, for example), while at the same time presenting international ('foreign') work in quintessentially local contexts, typically historical venues imbued with national cultural significance. One approach to ensure a balance of local and foreign content and

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[45] Huangfu, B. (2002). *Site + Sight: Translating Cultures* (pp. 12–21). Singapore: Earl Lu Gallery, LASALLE-SIA College of the Arts, p. 15.
[46] Lee, Y.C. (2007). Curating in a Global Age. In S. Rand & H. Kouris (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (pp. 108–117). New York: apexart, p. 116.

context is to marry an established, well-known international curator with one or more local curators – a strategy employed in the first three Singapore Biennales.

As Miwon Kwon has explained in relation to site-specific art – an argument equally relevant in the context of curatorial practice that addresses cultural identity – the very understanding of *site* and *place* has become destabilised with the advent of globalisation:

> If the search for place-bound identity in an undifferentiated sea of abstract, homogenized, and fragmented space of late capitalism is one characteristic of the postmodern condition, then the expanded efforts to rethink the specificity of the art–site relationship can be viewed as both a compensatory symptom *and* critical resistance to such conditions.[47]

While criticality of place is a necessary and often inherent (depending on the courage and professional standing of the curator) aspect of curating in non-Western contexts, Huangfu's suggestion that Singapore offers an ideal testing ground for experimental curatorial approaches that effectively capture the characteristics of place, together with the achievement of her 2002 exhibition, reveals that the art–site relationship can be invoked not just as compensation or resistance to the loss of place (a view echoed by de Duve), but as an effective means of opening up dialogue between the local and the global.[48]

Speaking from the distance of his "European home" of curating in Asia following his experience in South Korea as the co-curator with Hou Hanru of the 2002 Gwangju Biennale, Charles Esche, at the same time (also as Documenta11) and in the same spirit, echoed Huangfu's reflection:

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[47] Kwon, M. (2002). *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity* (1–9). Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p. 8.
[48] De Duve, T. (2007). The Glocal and the Singuniversal. *Third Text*, *21*(6), 25–30.

> I see a cultural potential and energy far greater than in my European home. Culture matters here because society is still overtly contesting power and art is one way in which that contest can be measured. In Europe, and even more so in the United States, we have only one social model on offer, only one possibility, only one perfect image. Art, under such a blanket of consensus, has few options… We have to look to Asia and learn from your experience here if we are to reap any kind of benefit for society as a whole.[49]

In 2005 Fumio Nanjo was named Artistic Director for the inaugural Singapore Biennale and his tenure was extended for the second edition. In both cases he employed curators to work with him: Roger McDonald, Sharmini Pereira and Eugene Tan in 2006; Joselina Cruz and Matthew Ngui in 2008. In 2011 Mattheew Ngui (Singapore) was appointed Artistic Director; he worked with co-curators Trevor Smith (USA) and Russell Storer (Australia).[50]

In these first three editions the curators adopted a range of sometimes innovative curatorial strategies to promote the idea of home, whether by opening the doors of usually private spaces (such as places of worship) or advertising the fact that the exhibition is a gesture of welcome to the world, as was implicit in the title of the 2011 edition, *Open House*. For the first two editions the curators decided not to utilise the Singapore Art Museum (SAM); in turn, SAM presented its own exhibitions of regional content and both provided a valuable elucidation of the local context for the biennale.[51] In 2011 *Open House* was mostly but not entirely situated outside SAM, Singapore's main public art gallery. The curators of all three editions utilised non-institutional venues such

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[49] Esche, C. (2002). …We won't use guns, we won't use bombs, we'll use the one thing we've got more of, that's our minds… In W. Sung, H. Hou, C. Esche, W. Bradley, G. Lovink, D. Song & K. Kim (Eds.). *Gwangju Biennale 2002, Project 1: Pause – Realization* (pp. 32–37). Gwangju: Gwangju Biennale Press, pp. 35–36.

[50] The 2013–14 edition of the Singapore Biennale is not discussed in the thesis: having been taken over by the conservative SAM, the exhibition's curatorial agenda regressed, both in terms of geographical scope, content and location.

[51] In 2006, SAM's *Telah Terbit (Out Now)* explored art movements in Southeast Asia during the 1970s, before the West's "discovery" of Chinese contemporary art; in 2008 SAM presented an historical survey exhibition of Singapore's Artists' Village, a group that formed the basis of Singapore's contemporary art community.

as decommissioned military and aviation sites – the Tanglin army camp in 2006, South Beach Camp development and Marina Bay in 2008, and the derelict Old Kallang Airport in 2011 – in the same way that Venice utilises the Arsenale and Sydney the historically layered Cockatoo Island.

In the 2006 *Belief*, a large proportion of work was commissioned for particular historic sites such as the redundant municipal building, City Hall, and, more contextually given the exhibition's title, numerous places of worship – the Armenian Church, two Catholic churches, the Kwam Im Thong Hood Cho (Chinese) Temple, the Sri Krishnan (Indian) Temple, the Magahin Aboth Synagogue and the Sultan Mosque. Besides Tanglin army camp, a housing commission flat was another site and, at the other end of Singapore's socio-cultural scale, the Hermès store in the upmarket Orchard Road retail precinct.

The curators partially invoked the prism of home in the choice of exhibition venues and used communication technologies to reach out to the Singaporean population. As well as the opening up of historically loaded, usually non-accessible sites, local audiences were further enticed with exhibition tours available for download onto smartphones and a television show developed with a local network. Tapping into Singapore's passion for chat shows and local culture, it featured impromptu street interviews with biennale visitors, beaming their responses back into thousands of homes across the island.

Of the traditional approaches to site-specific art – in which the form of the work is largely influenced by its physical site – the best installations were those that worked with, rather than imposed themselves, on the existing space, such as Charwei Tsai's ephemeral *Lotus Mantra*. On lotus leaves sited in the corner of the busy Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple courtyard, Tsai inscribed the Lotus Sutra in miniscule calligraphic text that from a distance resembled natural markings. Other works were less successful, such as Jennifer Wen Ma's *Alms* video of a hand cradling glass marbles, repeated in the Maghain Aboth Synagogue (which didn't always open at the appointed hour), a meeting room

**Figure 3: Charwei Tsai, *Lotus Mantra*, 2006. Singapore Biennale, 2006. Photo: F. Fenner**

**Figure 4: Jennifer Wen Ma, *Alms*, 2006. Singapore Biennale, 2006. Photo: F. Fenner**

adjacent to the Masjid Sultan Mosque and St Joseph's Church. Referring to parallels in different religious beliefs, the video screen was awkwardly installed and failed to engage on a visual or meditative level. Another misjudged proposal was Xu Bing's *Magic Carpet* designed for the Kwam Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, combining religious and philosophical texts. Before the Biennale opened, the work was relocated to the National Museum because worshippers objected to walking or kneeling on writings, as the artist intended. In its place, *Prayer Carpet*, in which the artist took a more secular approach and rendered the word "belief" in his trademark Roman letter calligraphy, was hurriedly fabricated and finally installed some six weeks later. While the curators successfully secured unusual venues such as these for site-specific works, the choice of artists was sometimes more predictable and lacked adequate negotiation. Each of the three aforementioned artists abides in New York City: the mixed success of their installations could perhaps be attributed to their distance (cultural and geographic) from the sites. More than a curatorial faux pas, the failure to acknowledge the inappropriateness of imposing foreign artists' idea of home on the innermost sanctum of human identity – one's place of worship – was at best a naïve mistake, at worst an arrogant presumption.

While the curatorial strategy to occupy places of worship was almost certainly well-intentioned, when there is intersection between differing religious cultures the risk of acrimony is high. As Nikos Papastergiardis stated in his Perspecta essay, 'On Living Here Now', "The feeling of belonging never seems to settle into

a safe and secure home." The "safe and secure home" that he refers to here can be read as a metaphor for cultural identity, which is often in discord with one's sense of home. In his parallel essay for the exhibition, 'Clusters on the Move' (a pun on the title of the groundbreaking exhibition *Cities on the Move* then touring the world), Papastergiardis describes "clusters" as having replaced homogenous communities in society, defining a cluster as a space where differences can be held together and arranged in multi-directional, fluid forms, resisting homogeneity:

> Within a cluster the cultural activity of translation is not regarded as the shadow, but the very condition of all communication, and there is an appreciation that every attachment to a territory is also a deterritorialisation of that space. To participate in a form of belonging with others may not require that we all feel as one.[52]



**Figures 5 and 6: Takafumi Hara, *Signs of Memory: City Hall Pink Windows*, 2006. Singapore Biennale 2006. Photos: F. Fenner**

As previously noted (in this thesis and by David McNeill, quoted above), top-down narratives of national identity that require us to "all feel as one" tend to attract more dissent than agreement. In contrast to the curatorial forays into

[52] Papastergiardis, N. (1999). Clusters on the Move. In *Perspecta 1999: Living Here Now: Art and Politics* (pp. 10–15). Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 11.

religious sites, a more successful strategy adopted by the curators of the first Singapore Biennale was to invite artists to collaborate with everyday Singaporeans in the realisation of their works. Designed to test individual, internal stories of home in an international art context, the outcomes were amongst the most engaging in the exhibition. Singapore filmmaker Sherman Ong presented a series of conversations between immigrants and foreign workers about their everyday working lives in Singapore, with water (and its apparent scarcity in a time of drought) as the focus. Similarly collaborative was Takafumi Hara's paintings based on the lives of various ethnic groups in Singapore, installed into the window recesses of City Hall. These works proved that giving voice to local audiences in the production of a work is one of the curatorial strategies that best embeds a biennale into the local culture.


**Figure 7: Amanda Heng, *Worthy Tour Co (S) Pte Ltd*, 2006. Singapore Biennale 2006. Photo: F. Fenner**

A problematic dimension to government-run exhibitions is that of censorship. In *Belief* there was a sprinkling of political art, but little that reflected directly on Singapore. Amanda Heng's invented travel agency advertised a "worthy tour" of historical cultural collections of art and artefacts that have been re-sited away from Singapore in recent years, as the nation re-defines its outward cultural identity as being more global. *Worthy Tour Co (S) Pte Ltd* "questions the idea of an 'official culture' and explores how diverse cultural memories and identities can form a space for discussion and revelation".[53]

[53] Tan, E. (2006). Amanda Heng. In *Singapore Biennale 2006: Belief*. Singapore: National Arts Council Singapore, p. 82.

Figures 8 and 9: Ashok Sukumaran, *Everything is Contestable*, 2006. Singapore Biennale 2006. Photos: F. Fenner

Another form of political critique was found in Ashok Sukumaran's interactive work. People were invited to turn on one of two light switches that lit the façade of the 19th century Armenian Church of St Gregory the Illuminator, the first public building in Singapore to have electric lighting. The idea was to compare the (poorer) quality of power provided by the government with that provided by a rival, privately-owned company. The work successfully involved local people in a wry critique of government services.

Figure 10: Gary Carsley, *Wonder Wrap*, 2008. Singapore Biennale 2008. Photo: F. Fenner

In the second Singapore Biennale of 2008, there were fewer works that explored notions of place (Singapore) within their conceptual fabric. Gary Carsley's *Wonder Wrap* domestic furniture boasted a vinyl veneer of Chinoiserie patterning based on the artist's own photographs of exotic parks and gardens in Singapore. Carsley's re-worked Ikea furniture, which was also included in the form of wardrobes at City Hall, layer art, history and identity in readymade objects with site-specific functions embedded in concepts of home.

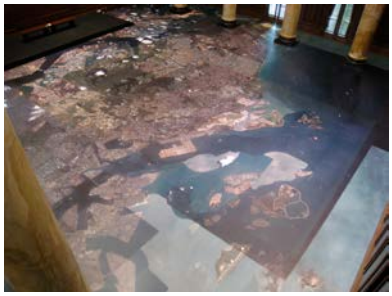

Figure 11: Wit Pimkanchanapong, *Singapore*, 2008. Singapore Biennale 2008. Photo: F. Fenner

Thai artist Wit Pimkanchanapong appropriated a Google Earth image map of Singapore, which he transformed into a floor-covering for City Hall's central chamber. Visitors were encouraged to post notes and messages onto sites of personal significance to them, over the duration of its

exhibition creating a citizens map of the island-state. The artist provided tags for visitors "provide personal information about their homes, workplaces and… the spaces of Singapore".[54] Because the Chamber at City Hall is steeped in political history, every nuance of the nation's transformation was symbolically monitored by the ghosts of former leaders.

**Figure 12: Title page, Singapore Biennale 2011 catalogue**

The third, 2011 edition of the Singapore Biennale more purposefully adopted the theme of home. The title *Open House* made clear the exhibition's theme of home as a metaphor for welcoming, acceptance and security. The focus was on locality and the idea of home both as a starting place and a space of engagement. Constructing an international biennale in a new nation defined by an immigrant culture, the idea of home is a complex concept. Bruce Ferguson, Reesa Greenberg and Sandy Nairne wrote in the context of Manifesta, that

> … the location of an international exhibition constructs a map of the world from both the perspective of the city and the country that sponsors it, underlying any notion of an equality of nations.[55]

Indeed, the curators of *Open House* – one Singaporean, a Canadian and an Australian – found their way into the location by implementing curatorial strategies around the theme of home:

> In conceiving the third Singapore Biennale, we, too, considered its location. The unique historical, social and cultural conditions of Singapore, as well as the role of contemporary art here, has informed our thinking all the way through this project. Our first point of departure were thoughts around 'home' linking to

[54] Nanjo, Fumio et al. (2008). Wit Pimkanchanapong. In *Singapore Biennale 2008: Wonder*. Singapore: National Arts Council Singapore, p. 66.
[55] Ferguson, B., Greenberg, R., & Nairne, S. (2005). Mapping International Exhibitions. In B. Vanderlinden & E. Filipovic (Eds.). *The Manifesta Decade* (pp. 47–56). Cambridge MA: MIT Press p. 47.

> ideas of place, connection and community – as well as displacement, division and loss.[56]

While the "open house" theme was in many ways diluted by artworks that may have as well belonged to other thematic genres (such as family, history, archive), there were enough key works envisaged through the idea of home to create meaningful spaces for local–global engagements. The standout installation was Tatzu Nishi's inhabitable installation that commandeered the Merlion, a famous Singapore landmark. Enclosing the huge public sculpture with a hotel room, Nishi appropriated the public's access to the iconic work, offering it up instead to anyone willing to book and pay the (modest) cost of overnight 'hotel' accommodation. The reward was temporary 'ownership' and a close-up view of the Merlion, a witty commentary on capitalism, identity and intimacy. In a rationalisation of openness reminiscent of Hou Hanru's emphasis on "the common value of love", anthropologist Souchou Yao claims that the idea of home promotes engagement across cultures. [57] In his essay for *Open House*, he claims that the exhibition

> … makes much of the power of domesticity. It props up the idea that homeliness can tame the otherness we invite into our homes, and it carries the moral that love will save everyone from alienation and estrangement… We want our home to be a place of intimacy and private enjoyment, in which we can develop and discover ourselves.[58]

Echoing the above comments by Charles Esche and Binghui Huangfu in reference to opportunities offered by globalisation to emergent cultures, Geeta

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[56] Ngui, M., Smith, T. & Storer, R. (2011). Open Plan: Curatorial Notes. In M. Ngui, T. Smith & R. Storer (Eds.) *Singapore Biennale 2011: Open House* (pp. 99–113) Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, p. 101.
[57] Hou, H. (2007). *Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War – 10th Istanbul Biennial.* Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, p. 24.
[58] Yao, S. (2011). Private Space, Public Space and the Modern Subject. In M. Ngui, T. Smith & R. Storer (Eds.) *Singapore Biennale 2011: Open House* (117–122). Singapore: Singapore Art Museum. P. 119; Hou, H. (2007). *Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War – 10th Istanbul Biennial.* Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, p. 24.

Kapur identifies southern hemisphere nations as best positioned to determine new meanings of place:

> If place, region, nation, state, and the politics of all these contextualizing categories of history (proper) are in a condition of flux everywhere in the world, we can presume past universals – regarding culture, for instance – to have been superseded, exposing the major, often lethal tensions between peoples and regions. It is the task of specific art loci in southern countries to focus on their peculiar forms of political society that are especially volatile, and that mark a set of cultural conjunctures conducive to another kind of meaning production – in art and in history, separately and alike.[59]

As one of those southern countries, in terms of commissioning art that responds to place, a conflict for Singapore arises, as it does for many of the newer biennales in Asia, in its co-existing objectives to be seen as global while promoting the local. Overcoming this challenge can lead to compromise when organisers' key indicators of success might not necessarily be the conceptual scope or scholarly merit of the art exhibited, but the status of the curators and the capacity to attract well-known international artists, cultural tourists and high-profile critiques in the international media. This scenario has a particular risk of unfolding when the biennale is government-run, as is the case with the Singapore Biennale, rather than an independent organisation.

Inevitably, curatorial approaches and art production are influenced by this agenda. Therefore, it becomes almost impossible to glean from these exhibitions a sense of place that is not influenced by the agenda of the event's funding model. Also, there is the trend of co-curatorial partnership models for biennales: an uber curator from elsewhere is teamed with a local co-curator, the latter acting as a guide to introduce the imported curator to local art, as well as a gatekeeper to monitor the proportion of international art (too much of which

[59] Kapur, G. (2007). Curating: In the Public Sphere. In S. Rand & H. Kouris (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (pp. 56–68). New York: apexart, p. 65.

might threaten to show up the comparative weakness of local art), and bean counter, ensuring the inclusion of work by a good proportion of local artists. Usually, the superstar international curator is acknowledged as the creative force behind the exhibition, a kind of mentor for the local curator, who is tolerated as a necessary compromise in the undertaking of a major exhibition in someone else's country. In these situations, the question "your place or mine?" becomes a dialogue at the organisational level.

Curiously (and contentiously), the Biennale of Sydney – the world's third oldest biennale event (after Venice, 1895 and Sao Paulo, 1953) – has only once, and only after 40 years since it was established, appointed a curator born, living and working in Australia.[60] Not surprisingly, given their alien status in Australia, none of the Sydney biennale curators have embraced the concept of home as a curatorial thematic. Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster's 2012 exhibition, *all our relations* did, however, have related themes of connectivity at its core, albeit based on a horizontal structure that sought connections across cultures rather than between people and place. De Zegher's insistence on the role of connectivity in contemporary art echoes David Suzuki's call to "re-value what has become devalued".[61]

> In the arts, as elsewhere, there seems to be a compulsion of relation, as if we were embodying the transition from a disruptive modernity to a new era driven by re-connection and re-evaluation. What has been torn to pieces by displacement, violence, contamination and destruction is today slowly but insistently being re-composed and being 'healed' by the real efforts of many around the globe… For participants in the Biennale, including artists, curators, administrators and audiences from different backgrounds, the artwork is

[60] The first exception was in the 2014 19th edition, curated by Juliana Engberg. The other Australian curators – William Wright (1982), Lynne Cooke (1996) and Charles Merewether (2006) – were expatriates, all (coincidentally) living and working in the United States when appointed. In the 2000 collaboratively curated iteration, Indigenous curator Hetti Perkins and expatriate Lousie Neri were members of the seven-person international curatorial panel, headed by British-born Nick Waterlow.

[61] Suzuki, D. (2010, 30 November). *David Suzuki:* The Legacy (lecture attended by the author). Content adapted from Suzuki, D. (2010). *The Legacy: An Elder's Vision for our Sustainable Future*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

> realised in togetherness, dialogue, and communality – in effect, questioning the validity of notions of alienation, separation, lone genius and de(con)struction in the formation of art.[62]

Though beyond the geographic scope of the thesis, it is important to recognise the fact that exhibitions in which the curator creates an evocation of 'home' have occasionally featured in recent editions of the world's largest art event, the Venice Biennale. Inhabitation as a curatorial device accounted for the success of the Iceland Pavilion in the 2009 Venice Biennale. Occupying the ground floor of Palazzo Michiel dal Brusà on the Grand Canal, the space was set up as an artist's studio and occupied for the six months duration of the Biennale by two performers, the 'artist' (Ragnar Kjartansson) and his 'model'.

**Figure 13: Farid Rasulov, *Carpet Interior*, 2013. Venice Biennale 2013. Photo: F. Fenner**

At the 2013 Venice Biennale there were two examples of a typical home being recreated as a vehicle to convey a sense of place. Farid Rasulov recreated a domestic interior in the Azerbaijan Pavilion, offering to visitors an immersive environment enveloped by traditional carpets, furnished with comfortable seating and coffee table books about Azerbaijan and its artists. Perhaps the best example of invoking 'home' as a curatorial strategy was the Iraq Pavilion in 2013, a group exhibition in an Iraqi domestic setting titled *Welcome to Iraq*. Visitors were offered tea in the kitchen area and invited to spend time in the generous lounge room sofas perusing books about Iraqi art and culture. Curated by Briton Jonathan Watkins, the first floor of the 16th century Ca'Dandolo was transformed into a genuinely welcoming space where

[62] de Zegher, C. (2012). 'arc are ark arm art… act!'. In Catherine de Zegher, C. & McMaster, G. (Eds.). *all our relations: 18th Biennale of Sydney*. Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, pp. 99–101.

visitors were made to feel at home in 'Iraq'.[63] Jeremy Deller's *English Magic* installation in the British Pavilion in 2013 adopted a critical rather than welcoming approach to what Bhabha describes as 'nationness'. Again, tea was provided, though in this case not as gesture of welcome but as a tongue-in-cheek enactment of a quintessentially English custom. In the British pavilion, tea was served in the self-reflexive context of a participatory critique of English society: as such it was a performative element of the artwork. In the Iraq pavilion, in contrast, the serving of tea, along with the comfortable sofas and coffee table picture books, was a curatorial conceit that provided context rather than became an inherent part of the artwork/s. As such, the affective quality of the Iraq pavilion – visitors felt genuinely welcomed – was achieved not through artistic participation but through a curatorial strategy of inhabitation. Watkins's curatorial approach in *Welcome to Iraq* successfully created that space for the viewer that is the focus of this thesis, a space of engagement that allows connections to be made not just between artworks, but between artworks and viewers.

**Figure 14: *Welcome to Iraq*. Venice Biennale 2013. Photo: F. Fenner**

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As the research in this chapter has demonstrated, there have been a number of precedents both in Australia and internationally of curatorial approaches that include an exploration of the meaning of home. The exhibitions discussed in this chapter curated over the last 20 years – by Jan Hoet, Nick Waterlow, Hou Hanru, Binghui Huangfu, Fumio Nanjo, Matthew Ngui, Jonathan Watkins, Catherine de

[63] Watkins was also responsible for Mike Nelson's transformation of a building in Potts Point, Sydney, in his role as curator of the 1998 Biennale of Sydney, *everyday*. Nelson's subsequent transformation of the British pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale is not discussed here in the context of themes around home because, unlike Deller's 2013 *English Magic*, its focus was Istanbul, seen not as 'home' but as an exotic 'other' place.

Zegher and Gerald McMaster – represent both the most influential models of engagement with place (Hoet and Hou) and the curatorial approaches in our region (Waterlow, Huangfu, Nanjo, Ngui and de Zegher) that have consciously sought to reject top-down narratives of place by implementing curatorial strategies of connectivity, conviviality and the everyday experience of home.

While these examples provide a high-profile international backdrop to the research, the context of this thesis is curatorial approaches to place in exhibitions of Australian art. As the first section of this chapter revealed, concepts of home in Australia are multilayered, sandwiched between top-down political narratives and a huge diversity of intimate relationships between people and place that are forged from the bottom up. Recent Australian literature, as discussed, provides a cultural framework that can be usefully reflected in curatorial practice, as the subsequent chapters reveal, to provide a space for engagement with place through the prism of home.

In the following chapters, the research takes as its starting point Bhabha's theory of the "third space" – the space created by an affective engagement with the subject of the art or exhibition – and applies it to curatorial research that is themed around place in the context of Australia. In doing so, the curatorial precedents discussed here are acknowledged and built upon, specifically by seeking a more meaningful engagement with place that invokes the idea of home in all its guises – as a physical entity, metaphor, aspiration or memory.

## CHAPTER 2

## INDIGENOUS ART OF PLACE AND THE PLACE OF INDIGENOUS ART

> Under the house, covered by the weight of Mr Thornhill's villa, the fish still swam in the rock. It was dark under the floorboards: the fish would never feel the sun again. It would not fade, as the others out in the forest were fading, with no black hands to re-draw them. It would remain as bright as the day the boards had been nailed down, but no longer alive, cut off from the trees and light that it had swum in. Sometimes, sitting in the parlour in the red velvet armchair, Thornhill thought of it underneath him, clear and sharp on the rock. He knew it was there and his children might remember, but his children's children would walk about on the floorboards and never know what was beneath their feet.[1]

This chapter looks beneath the floorboards of Australia, exposing Indigenous art's inextricable ties to place, land and home. Kate Grenville's William Thornhill, like other 18th century colonisers complicit in the eradication of the native population, correctly forecast that, two generations hence, the presence of Aborigines would be all but erased from the collective psyche of Anglo-Australians.

The research proposes new curatorial approaches to the recontextualisation of Australian Indigenous art not as an historic curio discovered under the floorboards, but as a contemporary and powerfully influential narrative on place. Part One analyses curatorial paradigms in exhibitions of Australian art since the emergence onto the art world stage of Aboriginal art in the 1980s. It proposes that curatorial strategies of assimilation with contemporary non-Indigenous art have tended to be closely aligned with top-down governmental assimilation policies, with little regard for artists' inextricable ties to place. The

[1] Grenville, K. (2005). *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, p. 316.

research in Part Two inverts those curatorial paradigms: in three research projects resulting in three exhibitions of contemporary Australian art, it argues that a more successful curatorial approach is to create a space for Indigenous artists' work to engage on its own terms; to resist being assimilated into a visual arts culture that places comparatively superficial import on historical and cultural ties to place. Turning upside-down inclusionist curatorial paradigms in group exhibitions that seek to bring Indigenous art into the fold of the mainstream, the exhibition outcomes of this research foreground Indigenous Australian art not as a peripheral cultural entity knocking on the door (or from under the floorboards), but as the mainstream of contemporary Australian art.

PART 1

## 2.1. Curating contemporary Indigenous art

> Sorry, what year is this? I did a double take when viewing the Sydney Morning Herald's weekend Australia Day special wraparound, specifically Leo Robba's selection of 12 leading artists' vision of Australia's 'national identity'. Seriously, no disrespect to the artists who were selected (apart perhaps from Robba who included his own work among his selection), but not even one Indigenous artist? Perhaps a number of our nationally and internationally renowned contemporary Australian Indigenous artists were approached but declined, 'Sorry, my vision for what our community commonly calls Invasion Day might incite the violence suggested by Ben Well of the Australian Monarchist League for even considering Australian First Nations representation in an amended constitution.' To consider what could have been included turn to page 13 of the same edition to see what is arguably the most successful public art piece ever truly 'Made in Australia' – the pulsing red, black and gold of the Aboriginal flag, designed by Luritja artist Harold Thomas, first flown in Adelaide on National Aborigines Day in 1971. As was voiced loud and clear by thousands of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people a quarter of a century ago on 26 January

1988: White Australia has a Black History. Lest you forget.[2]


**Figure 1:** ***The Sydney Morning Herald*****, wraparound cover, 26 January, 2014. Photo: F. Fenner**

It does indeed seem inconceivable that in 2014 *The Sydney Morning Herald* would publish an Australia Day wraparound cover featuring 12 artists' "artistic vision of our national identity", not one of whom was Indigenous.[3] Croft's outrage was justified; the *Herald*'s refusal both to include Indigenous art and to print Croft's letter (likely one of many expressing similar sentiments) was completely unjustified. Editorial disingenuousness aside, the incident reveals the kind of deep-seated racist attitude towards Indigenous culture that ought to have subsided with the international acclaim accorded Australian Indigenous art over the past 20 years. The colourful wraparound cover is a 21st century incarnation of the picnic rug that, to borrow Paul Carter's analogy, was overlaid on Australian soil by white civilisation to cover the foreign textures of the ground.[4] When a specially commissioned photo-essay such as this fails to acknowledge what is arguably Australia's leading cultural export – Aboriginal art – the publication's claims of objective reporting are thrown into disrepute.[5] While the newspaper wraparound cover clearly suffered from a lack of curatorial input (and is therefore not worthy of a curatorial-based analysis), it equally suffered from the

[2] Croft, B. (2014, January 26). Letter to the Editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald* (unpublished). Shared on social media, 27 January, 2014.
[3] Robba, L. (2014, January 26) Celebrating Australian wonder, (Australia Day cover), *The Sydney Morning Herald,* (unpaginated).
[4] Carter, P. (1996). *The Lie of the Land*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 2.
[5] Some weeks later, *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s failure to report on nationwide "March in March" protests against the mandatory detention of asylum seekers further evidenced the publication's lack of objective reporting.

same top-down presumptions about place that resulted in the debacle that was *Australia* at the Royal Academy the previous year.[6]

Since early, curatorially problematic post-modern attempts to integrate Indigenous art into a Western art historical lineage began, commencing with Rubenstein's problematic *Primitivism in 20th century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* in 1984, in which the authors of 'primitive' artefacts remained anonymous, curators have incrementally gained insight into the necessity not only of naming the Indigenous artists whose work is being exhibited – of moving from an anthropological to a contemporary curatorial approach that accords equal authorship and authority to all objects – but of understanding the history, culture and traditions that inform Indigenous artists' practice; in other words, to understanding the home ground to which each of the artists is connected.

While acknowledged as a game-changer in curatorial approaches to bringing together art from different cultures, the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* quickly became controversial for its curatorial approach to the included works by Indigenous artists. Jean-Hubert Martin set up deliberate juxtapositions between work by well-known contemporary visual artists from the world's art centres and traditional practices from Indigenous cultures. The exhibition was widely acclaimed, though the Indigenous work, while recognised as powerful within its cultural specificity, was out of context at the modernist Pompidou Centre despite the formal alignments put in place by Martin, and was therefore still largely perceived as peripheral to international contemporary culture. Johanne Lamoureux claims in a comparison of *Primitivism* to *Magiciens* that Martin failed to articulate the conditions created by the curatorial approach:

> The time of otherness became the space of otherness, but the same safe distance was maintained and, more important, so were the very boundaries the exhibition pretended to shake… Martin has claimed to have had no desire to

[6] The selector of images, Leo Robba, is an artist with a former professional affinity with the newspaper's publisher, Fairfax.

> homogenize the artifacts of *Magiciens*. But his lack of reflexivity about the very practice of exhibition making and the conditions of exhibition viewing did not allow him to translate his intention.[7]

Despite criticism of Martin's assumption that a "neighbouring" (like with like) methodology is, according to Lamoureux, akin to an "aesthetics of mending" that can make only superficial, formal relationships incapable of constructing affect as an exhibition effect, there was acknowledgment at the time that a new space had been articulated in the exhibition forum, one that had the potential to engender new ways of looking at and thinking about intersections between old and new cultures. As a young Nicolas Bourriaud expressed the time, "For the first time in a long while, a curator has forced us to consider to rethink art in time and space, re-examine our values and our understanding of the word 'art'".[8]

The criticism of *Magiciens* was largely directed not at the content of the exhibition, but at the assumption of curatorial authority in presenting work from cultures that the curator knew little about and the co-participant non-Indigenous artists even less. In a comparison of the curatorial approaches in Martin's *Magiciens* and Okwui Enwezor's Documenta11, Lamoureux contrasts the smoothing over of difference in *Magiciens* to what Reesa Greenberg calls a "cohabitation" installation strategy that in Documenta11 gave rise to an unsettling self-reflexivity "where installation is predicated on a destabilization of the expected and the known."[9]

In contrast to Enwezor's ground-breaking realignment of curatorial paradigms, "the destabilization of the expected and the known" is historically avoided at all costs by Australian curators of Indigenous art. Exhibition-makers have trodden carefully, afraid of being criticised for revealing colonialist, tokenistic or

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[7] Lamoureux, J. (2005). From Form to Platform: The Politics of Representation and the Representation of Politics. *Art Journal*, *64*(1), 64–73, p. 71.
[8] Bourriaud, N. (1989). Magiciens de la Terre. *Flash Art* 148, 119–121, p. 120.
[9] Greenberg, R. Identity Exhibitions: From *Magiciens de la Terre* to *Documenta11*. *Art Journal*, *64*(1), 90–94, p. 91.

superficial attitudes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art. The curatorial research in Part Two of this chapter takes a bolder approach, creating not just a place at the table, but command of the menu for Indigenous artists, embracing the capacity of destabilised certainties and unexpected outcomes to provide catalystic conditions for meaningful engagement. Eschewing historical approaches to curating Indigenous art, the research here articulates perceptions of place from the inside, from bottom-up knowledge and experience, as opposed to imposing external, top-down narratives. Recalling Sophia Phoca's text, "No Place Like Home", the research acknowledges the impact of destabilised certainties as an effective rather than threatening curatorial strategy:

> The notion of place has traditionally been understood 'externally' as a geographic, anthropologic, economic or political site, as opposed to 'internally' as a disembodied space in terms of psychoanalysis, memory or philosophy. With the collapse of foundational certainties, the concept of place has been destabilised… Global displacement through migration and exile has meant that the notion of homeland is no longer perceived as stable… Consequently, we have seen a zealous return to a desire for certainties with new emerging religious and national fundamentalisms.[10]

In Australia, the swing to nationalist ideals has been alarmingly expeditious since the electoral demise of the Labor Party in 2013. (Tellingly, both the regressive RA *Australia* exhibition and *The Sydney Morning Herald* wraparound Australia Day occurred in the immediate aftermath of the change to a conservative government.) Historically too, the mainstream acceptance of Indigenous art by curators of contemporary art exhibitions has been piecemeal. In the context of this thesis, the focus is on group exhibitions that combine non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australian art. Despite the acknowledged influence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art on non-Indigenous artists throughout the 20th century – from Margaret Preston to Ian Fairweather and Tony Tuckson – the inclusion of Indigenous art in group exhibitions of

[10] Phoca, S. (2007). No Place Like Home. In J. Rugg & M. Sedgewick (Eds.), *Issues in Contemporary Art and Performance* (pp. 45-58). Bristol: Intellect Books. pp. 48–49.

Australian art is generally only traced by historians as far back as the 1981 Perspecta exhibition. Curating Australia's biennial survey exhibition of Australian art, Bernice Murphy included Western Desert painting alongside other examples of contemporary Australian art. Ian McLean concurs that "Postconceptual paradigms were first applied to Aboriginal art when three collaborative Papunya Tula paintings were included in the inaugural Perspecta of 1981."[11]

Certainly, painting from Papunya, represented through the Papunya Tula organisation, was the first of Australian Indigenous culture to emerge in mainstream contemporary art exhibitions. The 1981 Perspecta was a natural forum for its inclusion, coming just a few years after Papunya schoolteacher Geoffrey Barden offered the means and guided senior Aboriginal men to record traditional cultural stories in acrylic paint on canvas. However, contrary to McLean's above claim, the 1981 Perspecta exhibition was not the first to consider Australian Indigenous art in a contemporary art context. Nick Waterlow had included the work of three Ramingining artists in his first (the organisation's third) Biennale of Sydney in 1979, two years before Perspecta and a full decade before *Magiciens de la Terre* was credited with breaking similar curatorial ground. Though at the time Waterlow did not make a connection in his catalogue text with Western art (he may, for example, have drawn parallels with Land Art or Nikolaus Lang's installation for the Biennale, *Samples of Earth, Colours and Paintings*, 1978), he did make those connections almost two decades later in *Spirit and Place* at the Museum of

**Figure 2: Ramingining artists and Nick Waterlow, Art Gallery of NSW, 1979. Image courtesy Biennale of Sydney**

[11] McLean, I. (2013) Surviving 'The Contemporary': What indigenous artists want, and how to get it. *Broadsheet*, *42*(3), 166–173, p. 170.

Contemporary Art, Sydney.[12] Indeed, the context of the spiritual offers deeper resonances and affinities than a curatorial cohabitation based purely on formal similarities. Reesa Greenberg has written of the often overlooked importance of considering the role of art in different cultures:

> Exhibitions that interrogate identity and globalism also interrogate models of the spiritual in relation to sociopolitical change, raising another set of questions about contemporary interpretations of magic, shamanism, the fetish, the avant-garde as spiritual quest, and exhibition making and viewing processes.[13]

In 1979 Aboriginal art had not yet penetrated the consciousness of international art curators or markets. The advisor to Ramingining in Arnhem Land, Peter Yates, who worked closely with Waterlow on the representation of their artists in the 1979 Biennale, had the title of "Craft Advisor" to Ramingining, a clear indication of the art's status as 'craft' rather than 'art'. Yates recognised, however, with the inclusion of the men's work in the 1979 Biennale that a shift was occurring in the way Aboriginal art would be viewed by the Western art world:

> Their inclusion in a significant international Biennale represents a historic occasion, and parallels a growing awareness in political and economic spheres that the future of Aboriginal society is tied to the dominant Australian consciousness.[14]

For the 1988 Australian Biennale, Waterlow returned to Ramingining, this time presenting 200 burial poles created by a dozen artists. The *Aboriginal Memorial* was an astute way, in the politically contentious context of the bicentennial year, "to present Aboriginal culture without celebrating".[15] Sir Nicholas Serota

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[12] Waterlow, N. & R. Mellick, R., curators. (1996). "Spirit and Place." Sydney, Australia: Museum of Contemporary Art.
[13] Greenberg, R. Identity Exhibitions: From *Magiciens de la Terre* to *Documenta 11*. *Art Journal*, *64*(1), 90–94, p. 90.
[14] Yates, P. (1979). Aboriginal Artists from Arnhem Land. In N. Waterlow (Ed.), *European Dialogue: The Third Biennale of Sydney* (unpaginated). Sydney: Biennale of Sydney.
[15] Mundine, J. (1988). Aboriginal Memorial. *1988 Australian Biennale – From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c.1940-88.* Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, p. 230.

recalls the 1988 Biennale as "A pivotal exhibition in contemporary Australian cultural history. It took courage and some well-hidden guile to lead in this way. As a curator, Nick had verve and the courage to make unconventional choices and juxtapositions".[16]

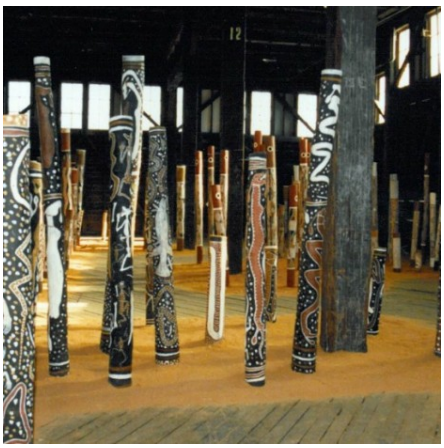

**Figure 3: Raminining artists, *Aboriginal Memorial*, 1988. Biennale of Sydney 1988. Image courtesy Biennale of Sydney**

**Figure 4: Peter Eisenman and Buro Happold, *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*, 2004. Berlin. Photo: F. Fenner**

Waterlow's conviction was that an art audience's imagination is directly informed by the curator's level of engagement not only with the art of the times, but with its origins and relationship to its own and other cultures, past and present. Dismissing the anthropological pigeon-holing of Aboriginal art that still persisted in curatorial practice at the time, Waterlow declared in defence of the politically provocative *Memorial*'s claim to contemporaneity that "It matters not so much what artists do, or what materials they use, as how they do it and how they use them."[17] Ahead of Enwezor's installation "predicated on a destabilization of the expected and the known", and just a year before Martin's controversially inclusivist *Magiciens de la Terre*, Waterlow included Indigenous art (as he had in the 1979 Biennale of Sydney) on its own terms: first and foremost as current art of place, not as relics of a culture long since swept under the floorboards.

One of the most unconventional curatorial choices in the 1988 Biennale of Sydney, called the Australian Biennale as it toured to Melbourne that year, was the commissioning of the Ramingining burial poles and the centrality of its

[16] Serota, N. (2010) Eulogy, London: Chelsea Old Church (unpublished).
[17] Waterlow, N. (1979). European Dialogue. In N. Waterlow (Ed.) *European Dialogue: Biennale of Sydney 1979* (unpaginated). Sydney: Biennale of Sydney.

positioning – in terms of placement and concept – in the exhibition.[18] The work was immersive, with visitors able to walk between the poles in the same way that one walks between the stelae in Berlin's more recently erected *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe*.[19] Meaningful, affective engagement with the subject matter is achieved in both memorials by facilitating an immersive experience for the viewer. Visitors were able to see the work in its entirety, absorbing the scale of the tragedy portrayed before entering the installation and finding intimate spaces of contemplation as individual objects are encountered. The level of engagement achieved, ranging from aesthetic appreciation of the whole to confronting truths about violence and loss, can be attributed to two of the curatorial strategies discussed in this thesis, immersion and real world relevance:

> *The Aboriginal Memorial* met all the criteria of relational and contemporary art more generally: social-political content, disjunctive temporality, the re-fashioning of local traditions to global contexts (in this case the history of colonisation in Australia), installation format, collectivist and intercultural production and postconceptual form.[20]

The subsequent transfer of the 200 burial poles to a permanent home at the National Gallery of Australia reveals, in response to an assertion posed by Claire Doherty about the limited relevance of art conceived for a specific purpose, how context-specific projects and artworks become meaningful outside the signifying context of the exhibition.[21] In the 2010 refurbishment of the National Gallery, the *Memorial* was again relocated to a prominent position by the Level One entry, where it's not only highly visible upon entering the Gallery, but has been installed with a path that meanders through it, inviting an immersive experience. The NGA's new galleries of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art

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[18] For a discussion of identity and politics in relation to the project, see Smith, T. (2001). Public Art between Cultures: *The Aboriginal Memorial*, Aboriginality, and Nationality in Australia. *Critical Inquiry*, *27*(4), 629–661.
[19] Designed by Peter Eisenman and Buro Happold; built 2003–04.
[20] McLean, I. (2013) Surviving 'The Contemporary': What indigenous artists want, and how to get it. *Broadsheet*, *42*(3), 166–173, p. 170.
[21] Doherty, C. (2004). In Doherty, C. (Ed.) *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* (pp. 1–9). London: Black Dog Publishing.

are located adjacent to the *Memorial*. (This is in stark contrast to, for example, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which keeps its excellent collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art "under the floorboards" in the basement Yiribana Gallery).

With the exception of the three curated by Waterlow, the Biennale of Sydney's integration of Australian Indigenous art has historically been compromised by a lack of scholarship or even curiosity in the area by curators most often appointed from the northern hemisphere. Inevitably, non-Australian, Western curators view Australia through the prism not of our Australian home, but from the distance of Europe or the US. David Elliot, curator of the 2010 edition, was the first to acknowledge the dilemma of distance in curating a biennale in and for Australia. Just as Waterlow in 1979 had declared in the exhibition's title, *European Dialogue*, that distance could be broached with conversation, so Elliott embraced the geographic disconnect between Australia and its Western antecedents, titling his exhibition *The Beauty of Distance*. Indeed, the exhibition was dedicated "To the life and continuing influence of Nick Waterlow OAM (1941–2009)"; Waterlow and Elliott had been colleagues in Oxford in the late 1960s and early 1970s.[22] Elliot's Biennale of Sydney showcased a major installation by an Aboriginal artist, demonstrating how interactive works reliant on audience participation can successfully facilitate a pensive rather than passive engagement with visitors.[23] Brook Andrew's *Jumping Castle War Memorial* (2010) capitalised on, rather than ignored the fact, that the vast majority of visitors to the Biennale are 'outsiders' to Indigenous culture: people indulged in interacting with the work, mostly oblivious to the implied cultural sacrilege of jumping all over the Wiradjuri patterned bouncy castle, which the title clearly identified as a site of commemoration.

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[22] The 2010 Biennale of Sydney was subtitled *Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*. The curators had worked together at Bear Lane Gallery, Oxford. The dedication that appeared the catalogue: Biennale of Sydney (2010). *17th Biennale of Sydney–The Beauty of Distance: Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*. Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, p. 2.
[23] Andrew, B. (2010). *Jumping Castle War Memorial* [Sculpture]. Sydney, Australia: 17th Biennale of Sydney.

PART 2

Part Two of this chapter proposes through a series of three curatorial projects that in the 21st century Australian Indigenous art has assumed a central and influential position in Australian contemporary art. *Talking About Abstraction* (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW, 27 May – 3 July, 2004) was curated as a parallel program to the 2004 Biennale of Sydney, titled *On Reason and Emotion*. By inviting non-Indigenous artists to identify and exhibit alongside the Aboriginal art that influenced their own practice, it challenged the assumption in *On Reason and Emotion* that Aboriginal and non-Indigenous contemporary art belong to separate cultural trajectories. This research predated and was in fact the catalyst for the PhD research, which commenced the previous year.

The second two exhibitions were co-curated, travelled internationally and argued for the central positioning of Indigenous Australian art in the contemporary international arena. The first was *Prepossession*, co-curated with Jill Bennett and Liam Kelly. It was exhibited at Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW (4 March – 9 April, 2005) and the Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast (17 September – 15 October, 2005). The second was *Making Change*, co-curated with Brenda Croft and Kon Gouriotis for the National Art Museum of China in Beijing (12 November – 13 December, 2012) and subsequently exhibited at UNSW Galleries (23 August – 5 October, 2013). In both exhibitions Indigenous art was represented only by photographic and film-based work, those being the most persuasive media in making the case for contemporaneity.

### 2.2.1. The new mainstream

> Australian culture is as broad and varied as the country's landscape. Australia is multicultural and multiracial... Australia has an important heritage from its indigenous people, which plays a defining role in the cultural landscape…[24]

What is this "defining role in the cultural landscape"? Top-down narratives are often summarised in media reportage of Australian art exhibitions abroad. While criticism of the 2013 *Australia* exhibition in London provides insight into how curators can fail to convey a sense of place in international exhibitions of Australian art, politicians have been known to express an opinion too. An exhibition of contemporary Australian art at the Australian Embassy in the US elicited the following response from the then Ambassador:

> Ambassador Beazley also discussed the openness of Australian diplomacy, but said that hosting art exhibits reveals the true soul of the Australian people. He fondly recalled the first exhibit he attended at the embassy focusing on aboriginal art. "We display what Australians are really like," the ambassador said. "The story unfolds here, in the exhibit next to us." He added: "Gradually, we expand the character of Australian characters through these exhibits".[25]

It is not clear how the Ambassador understands the capacity of art exhibitions to reveal the "true soul" of the Australian people, nor how Aboriginal art can "display what Australians are really like", but he at least recognises the affective power of "these exhibits" and acknowledges the importance to our culture of Aboriginal art. At the *Australia* exhibition, the curator's role in establishing the preeminence of Indigenous over Western art was noted by British critics:

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[24] Department of Finance, Australian Government, (2014). *Our Country.* Retrieved from http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country

[25] Schuessler, R. (2012, 31 July). Aussie Abstraction – "Shifting Geometries." *The Washington Diplomat.* Retrieved from http://www.washdiplomat.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8498:aussie-abstraction-shifting-geometries&catid=1491&Itemid=428

> The first gallery presents a display of modern indigenous art, representing a tradition stretching back tens of thousands of years before the first Europeans even glimpsed the Australian mainland at the start of the 17th century. This is a clever move on the part of the curators, since these enormous, dazzling paintings are far more exciting than the tight, narrow-minded little pictures from the early colonial period that follow – and which, if the exhibition's chronological arc had been strictly adhered to, should have come first. The indigenous pieces, rippling with constellations of abstract swirls, squiggles and stippled patterns using the red-and-ochre palette of Australia's wild interior, are an Aboriginal equivalent of Op Art or gestural Abstract Expressionism, infused with ancestral magic. With the appearance of embroidered blankets and aerial photographs of the bush, they manage to be homely and universal at the same time.[26]

The reference here to "homely" is revealing because it conveys a recognition of the fact that Aboriginal desert painting, while superficially resembling Western abstract art, is anchored in the home ground of the artists' country. While one would not expect the art critic of London's *Telegraph* to deconstruct the curatorial strategies that result in this "homely" feeling, it was the immersive experience, described in detail by another art critic, that more effectively than any other component of the exhibition conveyed a sense of place through the prism of home.[27]

It was only in the late 1980s that Indigenous art began to gain a foothold in Australian curatorial practice.[28] The research in this thesis commences in 2004

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[26] Sooke, A. (2013, 16 September). Australia at the Royal Academy, review. *The Telegraph.* Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10312476/Australia-at-the-Royal-Academy-review.html

[27] Writing in *The Times*, Rachel Campbell-Johnston described the first rooms of Aboriginal art in the exhibition as "a powerfully atmospheric evocation of a country seen from myriad facets, often quite literally as works are hung on the ceiling, or laid out on the floor as their aboriginal creators intended." Crerar, S. (2013, 27 September). The Royal Academy's survey of Australian art cops extreme criticism. *ABC Arts News.* Retrieved from http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s3856760.htm

[28] "The new possibilities for being an indigenous artist suddenly appeared in the late 1980s. A truism of art criticism today is that a seismic shift occurred around then, as if a threshold was crossed and art began to speak a different language across the world. As this new master

with a discussion (culminating in the exhibition *Talking About Abstraction*) that took "conversation" as its theme, inspired by the possibility of re-examining in the context of a new generation the "dialogue" inherent to Nick Waterlow's 1979 Biennale of Sydney, *European Dialogue*. The aim was to shift the inclusionist and widely adopted curatorial paradigm articulated in Waterlow's Biennale, witnessed by the author as a schoolgirl 25 years earlier, to reflect the largely increased profile and position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art in the 21st century. The "conversation" about the place of Indigenous art in Australia was underscored by the proposal (by Vivien Johnson) that Indigenous art is "the mainstream" of Australian art.[29] Over the course of a year (2003–04), many conversations took place in the studios of all the non-Indigenous artists in the exhibition, in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the bush. The outcome of the research was presented as a parallel program to the 2004 Biennale of Sydney, *On Reason and Emotion*, curated by Portugese curator Isabel Carlos.[30]

The research sought, from a conversational, bottom-up point of view, to measure the impact of Indigenous Australian visual culture on non-Indigenous contemporary Australian abstract painting. The research was premised on a new understanding of place in the context of contemporary art, one that defined Australia not as an Anglo-Celtic culture in which Indigenous art finds a place on the periphery, but one that was fundamentally underpinned by that Indigenous culture. It sought to locate current Indigenous art not just within the context of non-Indigenous art, but as the prime cultural influence that underscores one aspect of contemporary Australian art: post-minimalist abstract painting. The curatorial strategy was premised on a rejection of Carlos's assumption that Aboriginal art is "contemporary" because the process and outcome echo abstract expressionist tropes. By her own admission, Carlos was unfamiliar with Aboriginal art when appointed to curate the 2004 Biennale of Sydney. Having

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narrative came into play in Australia, a shadow lifted off indigenous art and it was seen in the bright lights of the contemporary". McLean, I. (2013) Surviving 'The Contemporary': What indigenous artists want, and how to get it. *Broadsheet*, *42*(3), 167.

[29] Johnson, V. (2004). Surface Tension. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *Talking About Abstraction*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, The University of New South Wales, (unpaginated).

[30] *Talking About Abstraction*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, The University of New South Wales, 27 May–3 July, 2004.

subsequently visited Aboriginal art centres as part of her research for the exhibition, her key point of entry to understanding Indigenous culture was through visual parallels with abstract expressionism:

> After visiting two or three communities, it was very clear in my mind that this was contemporary art. Watching the Aboriginal artists work was like watching a video of Jackson Pollock painting on the floor of his studio. It was exactly the same. I watched the process, saw how they talked about what they were doing – they are contemporary artists.[31]

What Carlos failed to recognise was that the work came from and was based on the artists' home country and thus is in no way "exactly the same" as American abstract expressionism. Explaining her decision to include the work of Wirrimanu artist Elizabeth Nyumi Nungurrayi, Carlos again evades a level of engagement that considers the unique context of the culture and place in which the work is created: "I just love Elizabeth Nyumi's paintings. I could eat them. They are so sensual and appealing".[32]

*Talking About Abstraction* countered Carlos's disengagement with Indigenous artists' work's inextricable link to home and sought to reveal not the visual parallels between Indigenous and modernist art that had been the favoured approach by many curators to date, but to consider the role of place from a holistic point of view by examining, in consultation with the artist practitioners themselves, the impact of Indigenous culture on contemporary Australian painting. The research adopted an innovative curatorial strategy that rejected a top-down, curator-as-coloniser approach and instead invited non-Indigenous artists to articulate themselves the nature of their engagement with Indigenous Australian visual culture and the subsequent impact on their practice. The

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[31] Interview with the author, 8 December, 2004, published: Fenner, F. (2004). On Reason and Emotion: Isabel Carlos, Artistic Director of the 2004 Biennale of Sydney, in conversation with Felicity Fenner. *Art & Australia*, *41*(4), 556–559, p. 559.
[32] Interview with the author, 8 December, 2004, published: Fenner, F. (2004). On Reason and Emotion: Isabel Carlos, Artistic Director of the 2004 Biennale of Sydney, in conversation with Felicity Fenner. *Art & Australia*, *41*(4), 556–559, p. 559.

exhibition inverted the common curatorial strategy of "putting like with like".[33] Rather than the curator selecting all the works, non-Indigenous artists were asked to identify specific works by Indigenous artists who had influenced their own practice. The curatorial approach took as its point of departure the fact that the current generation of young to mid-career non-Indigenous abstract painters in Australia have been inspired and influenced by Aboriginal painting more than any other, not just at a formal level but in their recognition of both shared and divergent connections to place.

An earlier generation of Western-trained artists came to Aboriginal art retrospectively, having completed art school and defined their own area of practice before Australia's Indigenous culture began to achieve the prominence it is enjoyed over the last three decades. For those entering art school since the early 1980s, however, Aboriginal art has been a formative influence, integral to their study and visual experience. For many non-Indigenous artists of this generation, Aboriginal painting is also central to their own collections of contemporary art and, indeed, some of the Indigenous paintings in the exhibition were from the collections of participating non-Indigenous artists.

It is important to note that the research did not set out to interpret Indigenous culture as if in "an evolutionary stage towards integration" with the Western mainstream, an assimilative stance that Okwui Enwezor has correctly identified as inherently flawed:

> In every stage of this evolutionary scheme, Westernism's insistence on the total adoption and observation of its norms and concepts comes to constitute the only viable idea of social, political and cultural legitimacy from which all modern subjectivities are seen to emerge.[34]

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[33] Lynn, V. (1990). *Abstraction.* Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 5.
[34] Enwezor, O. (2002). The Black Box. In Fietzek, G. (Ed.), *Documenta11_Platform 5: Exhibition* (pp. 42–55). Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, p. 46.

On the contrary, the exhibition premise of *Talking About Abstraction* was radical inasmuch as it positioned the Western artists as the interlopers into the well-established, ancient Indigenous culture, rather than vice-versa. Reversing the standard colonial and postcolonial tendency to assume that Indigenous culture is in a perpetual "evolutionary stage towards integration" with Western culture, the curatorial research tracked an evolution in the opposite direction, inventing a reverse paradigm that facilitates the integration of Western artists' practice to Indigenous culture. This movement in the opposite direction indicates a re-definition of home from the new place of colonised Australia to an idea of home as the pre-contact ancient culture.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art became more available for exhibition, its impact on young artists, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, inevitably became more profound. The Indigenous artists included and the geographic regions reflected in *Talking About Abstraction* were determined by the degree of innovation and apparent influence inherent to the work. Represented were the desert communities of Utopia, Haasts Bluff and Kintore, the eastern Kimberley Ranges in the north-west and Peppimenarti in the north. The non-Indigenous artists in the exhibition were selected on the basis of the clearly articulated influence on their practice of Indigenous art, specifically of the work by the Aboriginal artists represented in the exhibition. The non-Indigenous artists were all based in or near the eastern metropolitan centres of Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

Although much talk about cross-cultural dialogue has accompanied the rise of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art, *Talking About Abstraction* proposed that it is not so much a 'dialogue' as a one-way conversation between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous painting. Geraldine Brooks remarked in *The Idea of Home* that we "are turned out to the world": indeed, Western artists have always been very open to influence from artworks seen in art history books and international art magazines.[35] *Talking About Abstraction* revealed that

[35] Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011.* Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 68.

Aboriginal art has provided Australian non-Indigenous abstract painters with alternative possibilities in abstraction, especially in terms of process, line and colour, but on a deeper level enhancing Australian artists' understanding of the place they also call home. While 20th century abstract models – from constructivism to minimalism and abstract expressionism – remain central to Western-trained artists, they are inevitably viewed through the prism of postmodernism. Arriving on the heels of the rumoured death of painting, the ascendancy and impact of Indigenous art was particularly timely and offered another view, throwing a lifeline to young Australian painters seeking to re-invest the medium with the meaning and significance once championed by the early modernists.

Conversely, Indigenous artists from remote communities have had variously small degrees of exposure to contemporary international art, certainly not enough to constitute a 'dialogue' with their non-Indigenous Australian peers, despite the call for dialogue as far back as the 1979 Biennale of Sydney: "The [Ramingining] painters' only wish is that the Europeans who view their work will look far enough into the dreaming to find a starting point for real dialogue".[36]

The thesis argues that despite Indigenous artists such as the Ramingining men indicating a desire for dialogue, it is been a very one-way discussion, with non-Indigenous artists "turned out to the world" to absorb what they can while Indigenous artists still look to home, to their country, for inspiration.[37] Though the 'dialogue' between cultures was put in place by Nick Waterlow in the context of the 1979 *European Dialogue*, it was not until a generation later, with a shift in power – evidenced by the indisputable influence of Indigenous on non-

[36] Yates, P. (1979). Aboriginal Artists from Arnhem Land. In N. Waterlow (Ed.), *European Dialogue: The Third Biennale of Sydney* (unpaginated). Sydney: Biennale of Sydney.
[37] This discussion refers only to tradition-based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists working in remote communities. It does not refer to Indigenous artists working in contemporary media, whose work is the subject of the subsequent research in this chapter.

Indigenous art – that the dialogue was detected.[38] The motivation for staging *Talking About Abstraction* was to bring into the open the conversations with artists that were testament to this power shift.

Opportunities in the interim years since 1979 had existed for engagement, but Western art has to date been of less interest to Aboriginal artists than vice-versa. There are a few exceptions. When Emily Kame Kngwarreye was taken to the National Gallery of Australia she was particularly impressed not only with Aboriginal painting from other parts of Australia, but with the abstracted landscapes of Fred Williams, which she understood as being by a "whitefella painting his country". Maxie Tjampitjinpa felt a similar affinity with paintings by David Aspden; the connection to place that Aspden shared with Indigenous artists was astutely recognised also by curators Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster, resulting in their surprising inclusion of the late Aspden's work in *all our relations*, the 2012 Biennale of Sydney. Similarly, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri's interest in alternative techniques was aroused by a survey exhibition of Degas's pastels that he saw in New York.[39]

One fundamental difference between cultural absorption by black and white artists, however, is that while Western artists tend to paint for personal, intellectual fulfilment, the process of painting for Aboriginal artists is more culturally oriented. It is a method of keeping alive traditional cultures otherwise threatened by assimilation. In other words, just as traditional Indigenous work does not divulge details of (sacred) content to a general audience, neither is that

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[38] The connection between the themes of "dialogue" in the 1979 Biennale of Sydney and "talking" in *Talking About Abstraction* was acknowledged and in fact enjoyed by Waterlow.
[39] All examples cited by Christopher Hodges in conversation with the author, 7/05/04. In order to protect the market's demand for 'authenticity', outside artistic influences on Aboriginal art are often downplayed or even denied. In *Talking About Abstraction*, Paddy Bedford's debt to Rover Thomas was reflected in his painting and series of gouaches, but did Thomas ever look at images of Western art? Is there a debt to Miro, for example, in the brightly coloured lines; or Motherwell, in the singular rounded forms of his late gouache paintings? While it might be patronising to have expected Bedford to be flattered by the impact his work has on non-Indigenous abstract painters, it is far more arrogant to expect him and other Aboriginal painters living in remote areas to remain ignorant of or immune to Western culture. From my frequent conversations with art advisor Tony Oliver about this issue, my conclusion was that Bedford was not only cognisant of, but influenced by the American abstract expressionism that Oliver openly admired.

content readily open to introduced influences. While innovative forms of artistic expression flourish, the core of Aboriginal painting, unlike non-Indigenous work, is fixed in the specificity of its historic cultural roots.

Earlier exhibitions had stopped short of introducing a dialogue, but had considered formal parallels between the work of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous abstract painters. *Talking About Abstraction* was the first to openly discuss the impact of black culture on non-Indigenous art in Australia. Some previous surveys of abstract painting in Australia had avoided confronting the difficult issues by omitting Aboriginal art altogether.[40] Generally, though, it is now established curatorial practice to exhibit Indigenous art in the context of contemporary Australian and international art. Not only has Aboriginal art escaped the ethnographic ghetto, it now provides a benchmark against which contemporary painting is judged.[41] One of the earliest exhibitions to make formal comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art in Australia was Victoria Lynn's *Abstraction* 1990. Though too early then to suggest an influence of Aboriginal art on non-Indigenous painting, the exhibition purported a shared idiosyncratic approach to abstraction by artists from different cultures. In acknowledgement of the project's potentially problematic premise, Lynn took "heed [of] Arthur C. Danto's warning that likeness hung with likeness takes no account of context".[42]

In the second half of the 1990s, commercial galleries sought to broaden the appetite of the market by placing Indigenous art in the context of Western abstraction. In 1996 Niagara Galleries, Melbourne, presented a group show of paintings from Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists with a stated objective "to throw open the conversation between a number of leading abstract

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[40] Examples include Shead, S., curator. (2001). "Abstraction: Spirit, Light, Pure, Form." Tim Olsen Gallery, Sydney, Australia, and, Baker, J. & Barrett-Lennard, J., curators. (2002). "in abstract: form and essence in recent Western Australian Painting." Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia.
[41] Gloria Petyarre and George Ward Tjungurrayi, for example, were both awarded the Wynne Prize for landscape painting from a field of mostly non-Indigenous painters.
[42] Lynn, V. (1990). *Abstraction.* Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 5.

painters".[43] Though a visually compelling show, it was less of a "conversation" than a series of formal coincidences. The same year Sherman Galleries, Sydney, went a step further and dispensed with the foil of Western art, presenting an exhibition of Aboriginal painting under the rubric of "abstract". While the exhibition successfully balanced curatorial innovation with commercial intent, it was noted at the time that conflating abstract with Indigenous painting undermined the cultural integrity of the latter:

> The most pertinent issue to arise… from the exhibition as a rhetorical exercise is that of cultural assimilation… To speak of abstraction is to refer to modernism, which is peripheral to the reading of Aboriginal art and ultimately only useful as a point of comparison.[44]

It is now accepted that the successful international reception of Indigenous art is largely contingent on a resemblance to certain genres of Western abstraction. Ironically, it is also accepted that Aboriginal art's link to modernism is a convenient invention of Western critics and the marketplace. Indeed, the presence of "abstraction" in most Aboriginal painting is arguable, given that imagery is typically based on elements of the land, traditional ritual or beliefs. W.J.T. Mitchell questions the inherent subjectivity of Western readings of Aboriginal art, which are informed by either the Greenbergian definition of abstraction as non-objective, or by a broader concept of abstraction being based on phenomenological motifs in the representational world.[45] Aligning the curatorial premise of *Talking About Abstraction* with Mitchell's critique, the exhibition rejected any claim for the abstract status of Aboriginal art, professing instead that the innovation in the work of artists in the exhibition is based not on any connection to Western art, but, conversely, to its disconnection, or departure from traditional figurative modes of rendering narrative content.

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[43] Nuttall, W.J. (1996). *Contemporary Australian Abstraction*, Melbourne: Niagara Galleries (unpaginated).
[44] Fenner, F. (1997). Aboriginal Abstraction. *Art and Australia*, *34*(4) (560), p. 560.
[45] Mitchell, W.J.T. (2003, 12 March). *Abstraction and Intimacy* (lecture attended by the author). London: Royal College of Art.

Locating Aboriginal painting within the Western art arena remains fraught and politically sensitive. Anthropologist Eric Michaels alluded to the reasons for a problematic discourse as early as 1988, just as Aboriginal art was gaining status on the international art market: "Considering Aboriginal art practices as problems in contemporary discourse – problems of production, circulation, and exchange – may indicate that something about world economies and ideology is also centrally involved here".[46]

Though artists, critics and collectors are generally drawn to Aboriginal art through an existing love of Western abstraction, "the strangeness of buying other people's religious images and putting them onto the wall" is a phenomenon that demands consideration.[47] In the pre-Apology political climate that prohibited public remorse for the past ill-treatment of Aboriginal people, the market enthusiasm for Indigenous art seemed uncomfortably tied to issues of reconciliation. It was a way of saying "sorry", of championing the underdog without having to confront the legacy and ongoing affects of mistreatment. For all the (lack of) impact the Apology has had on improving conditions for our Indigenous people, however, this may still be the case. In his essay for Nick Waterlow's *Spirit and Place*, Djon Mundine wrote of an Anglican bishop's exasperation at white Australia's treatment of Aboriginal people:

> Bishop Wilson implied that the present non-Aboriginal landscape and society were cursed by their 'original sin' against Aboriginal people that can only be cleansed and reconciled by an attempt to redress this crime. The land remains alive both spiritually (invisible) and physically (visible).[48]

It would be naïve to presume, however, that Aboriginal artists are any less motivated than their Western counterparts by market demand and are not able

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[46] Michaels, E. (1988). Bad Aboriginal Art. In E. Michaels, (1994), *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons* (pp. 143–164). Sydney: Allen and Unwin, p. 144.
[47] Mitchell, W.J.T. (2003, 12 March). *Abstraction and Intimacy* (lecture attended by the author). London: Royal College of Art.
[48] Mundine, D. (1996) …Without land we are nothing. Without land we are a lost people… In R. Mellick & N. Waterlow (Eds.] *Spirit and Place* (pp. 46–48). Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 47

to respond with works that fulfil that demand while at the same time protecting Indigenous cultural heritage. Philanthropy and politics often go together and Aboriginal art has been a powerful political tool in drawing attention, nationally and internationally, to Indigenous issues, particularly the dispossession of homelands. Mervyn Bishop's 1975 photograph of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pouring red soil into the hands of Aboriginal elder Vincent Lingiari has for this reason assumed iconic status in Australian political and cultural life.[49]

In curating *Talking About Abstraction* the prism of home was a useful curatorial strategy to disentangle superficial similarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous abstract painting by removing any purported sharing of purpose. The curatorial intervention was largely a political but outwardly passive one: by allowing the non-Indigenous artists to speak for themselves about why and how the work by the Indigenous artists had influenced their own practice, it was revealed that the Indigenous artists' work was all about *home* (art that talks about country), while the non-Indigenous artists' practice was all about *art* (art for art's sake). The curatorial approach in *Talking About Abstraction* was bottom-up rather than top-down, constructed upwards from conversations with artists rather than imposed from an external position based on pre-existing perceptions of likeness.

The intersection between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous culture is not a black and white one: it is a complex grey zone of debates about tradition and currency, invention and appropriation. This complexity is an inherent part of projects that bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous art and, as Okwui Enwezor warned in a conference paper during the research period for *Talking About Abstraction*, it is crucial that we do not allow political correctness to curtail such debate or inhibit open discussion.[50] *Talking About Abstraction*

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[49] For the same reason the photograph became the leitmotif of the *Making Change* exhibition of Indigenous new media art, curated in 2012 (see 2.2.3).
[50] Enwezor, O. (2003, 20 September). Ethics and Aesthetics Conference, Art Association of Australia and New Zealand, NSW Chapter (lecture, attended by the author). Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales.

prompted discussion by providing a metaphorical 'conversation pit' within the gallery spaces.

Eric Michaels argued in relation to paintings from Yuendumu and Papunya that "these works are to be judged first and foremost in terms of the social practices that produce and circulate them – practices that promote authority, not authenticity".[51] Similarly, Bernice Murphy cited the deep-seated prejudice of curators of Australian art when she controversially included Aboriginal work in the inaugural Perspecta exhibition of 1981, noting that "Aboriginal ground paintings in acrylic on canvas have been long excluded from the art museum context in Australia as a result of quite artificial strictures placed around the question of cultural authenticity".[52] While the perceived "authenticity" attracts a proportion of investment-collectors, it is the more elusive sense of *authority* that attracts non-Indigenous artists to Aboriginal painting. Problematically, while it is commonly accepted that the work of non-Indigenous painters is likely to be enhanced rather than compromised by its contact with Indigenous art, the reverse is not true. Thus, it was the concept of authority examined through the prism of home, of the artists' knowledge of country, which underpinned the curatorial strategy adopted in *Talking About Abstraction*.

Curators risk undermining in exhibitions that combine works from very different cultures the role of cultural heritage in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous painting. Curator of Indigenous Australian art Quentin Sprague has recently highlighted the significance of place in Indigenous Australian art and the danger faced by curators of airbrushing over cultural difference:

> A certain kind of exhibition-making has provided a key means of communication, in a sense enabling a level of cross-cultural understanding that had largely been foreclosed elsewhere… However, this doesn't mean encouraging audiences to disregard the specific cultural aspects of the work.

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[51] Michaels, E. (1988). Bad Aboriginal Art. In E. Michaels, (1994), *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons* (pp. 143–164). Sydney: Allen and Unwin, p. 162.
[52] Murphy, B. (1981). *Australian Perspecta 1981*. Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 15

> These remain absolutely central – it's sort of impossible to remove this frame of reference, even if, for whatever reason, you wanted to. In fact, I'd think it would be difficult to stand in front of a work by Rusty Peters for instance, and not sense the feeling for place that activates his work and his thinking as an artist.[53]

*Talking About Abstraction* acknowledged the danger of underplaying cultural difference, embracing the fact that the Indigenous and non-Indigenous paintings had emerged from very diverse cultural backgrounds and that their intersection occurs at a formal rather than deeper cultural level. In creating a forum that did not simply reveal formal parallels, but made a case for the influence of one on the other (the "other" in this case being the Western-trained artists), the exhibition highlighted rather than obfuscated their difference. At the heart of that difference is the fact that all tradition-based Indigenous painting comprises depictions and stories of home, and is underpinned by an historical and emotional link to place that is lacking in purely abstract Western art.

It is only a generation ago that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art's 'difference' emerged both as a barrier and inducement to the mainstream art world. The Australian public was introduced to Papunya Tula paintings in the 1970s and though the work was an enormous revelation to Western audiences, early methodologies of interpretation were akin to learning a foreign language. Geoffrey Barden used a diagram to explain the paintings' narrative and symbolism to non-Indigenous audiences. As a result of such attempts to decipher, it became common practice for paintings in gallery and museum exhibitions to be accompanied by explanatory texts. Since then, curatorial practice has evolved to reflect an acceptance of Indigenous art by a general art audience more knowledgeable about Indigenous culture and, if devoid of that knowledge, more comfortable reading the paintings on a purely formal level. The disadvantage of this curatorial assimilation is that labels do articulate the

[53] Sprague, Q. (2013). The world is not a foreign land: A conversation between Joanna Bosse and Quentin Sprague. In *The world is not a foreign land*. Melbourne: Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, p. 10.

works' fundamental link to land and the importance of each artist's experience and knowledge of their home country.

Internationally, shifting curatorial approaches to the presentation of Indigenous cultural practices in a visual arts context have accompanied a broader re-definition of the role of curators as creative agents in the commissioning, production and presentation of contemporary art. As noted at the start of this chapter, the first exhibition to hang Picasso next to an African mask was *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, curated for MOMA by William Rubin in 1984. While the curatorial presentation of the 'affinity' (ethnographic) artefacts was criticised as neo-colonialist both for denying the makers' right to authorship and for assuming their authority as influential agents promoting the concept of the "noble savage", Rubin was at least successful in demonstrating the significant influence of tribal culture on modern art. However, the fact that Rubin believed "that political and ethnographic concerns could be omitted from the consideration of non-Western art" is problematic: because it was mounted 20 years later, following the emergence of Aboriginal art into exhibitions, scholarly discourse and the marketplace, *Talking About Abstraction* was, in contrast to *Primitivism*, able to invest work by the agents of influence – the Indigenous artists – with the meaningful context of time, place and politics.[54]

In the wake of sweeping political change that saw old concepts of place unhinged and the idea of home being renegotiated in many parts of the world, Australian artists too began to reframe their cultural concepts of home as aligned not with the northern hemisphere but with the continent on which they lived and worked. 1989, the year of the Tiananmen Square massacre, the collapse of the Berlin Wall and of *Magiciens de la Terre*, was also the year that the women artists from Utopia, having been introduced to canvas and acrylic paint just months before, held an exhibition at the National Trust's S.H. Ervin

[54] Laganà, L. (2008). The Primitivism debate and Modern Art. In proceedings from *IV Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics, 'Art & Time'* (pp. 157–165). Irbid: Yarmouk University, p. 64.

Gallery in Sydney. *A Summer Project* presented the first 81 paintings to emerge from artists such as Emily Kame Kngwarreye and Ada Bird Petyarre. This was the first of many exhibitions of Aboriginal art in the early 1990s that collectively had as powerful an impact on young Australian artists as the 1967 *Two Decades of American Painting* on the preceding generation.[55]

*Talking About Abstraction* foregrounded Ian McLean's claim some nine years later that: "In the emerging post-Western era, non-Western traditions are increasingly shaping the sense of what contemporary art is." McLean also acknowledges the importance of conversation – of 'talking' – in this new world order:

> This has not been at the expense of, or in opposition to, Western art, but conducted as a conversation between contemporaneous traditions across the world no matter how incommensurable they might appear. To make contemporary art now requires artists to engage with the simultaneous presentness of contemporaneous worlds.[56]

*Talking About Abstraction* was a project that involved discussions with artists in the planning and conversations in the exhibition spaces between the works. All the non-Indigenous artists in the exhibition cited Emily Kame Kngwarreye as a key influence on their own practice. From 1989 and culminating in the posthumous 1998 retrospective exhibition at Queensland Art Gallery, Kngwarreye's paintings had an unprecedented effect on artists and audiences. Kngwarreye was central to *Talking About Abstraction* because in dispensing with familiar Aboriginal iconography and thereby taking Aboriginal painting to a new level of abstraction, her work, while maintaining its reference to place (country) and culturally-specific intent, so much resembled the visual language of international contemporary art that artists and audiences felt an immediate

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[55] Having first-hand experience of *Utopia* as an emerging curator, then Assistant Curator at the S.H. Ervin Gallery, the exhibition, the power of Kngwarreye's work in particular, also had a tremendous impact on me, planting the seeds for continued research into art that is invested with concepts of home and country, its strength largely determined by intrinsic ties to place.
[56] McLean, I. (2013) Surviving 'The Contemporary': What indigenous artists want, and how to get it. *Broadsheet*, *42*(3), 166–173, p. 167.

familiarity that in turn offered a visual route into appreciating the paintings. For most non-Indigenous critics and collectors, Kngwarreye's work was not seen as belonging solely to an Aboriginal visual heritage, but as a bridge between Indigenous and Western painting. Her innovative approach was not only hugely influential on the work of non-Indigenous artists, as *Talking About Abstraction* demonstrated, but inspired other Indigenous artists to new and independent expressions of traditional culture. In the dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art, the exhibition was the first in Australia to deploy the prism of home – Kngwarreye's country – to create a resonant line of communication about place between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists. Kngwarreye was represented in the exhibition with two major paintings, both Dreaming maps of her desert country. From 1993 until her death, the artist produced a series of dramatically reductive linear paintings, returning to the body paint markings of her *awelye* yam Dreaming that formed the compositional basis of her earliest paintings. One in *Talking About Abstraction* had been the centrepiece of the Australian Pavilion exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1997; the other in the exhibition was an earlier, very gestural painting that revealed a loose, underlying grid. While Kngwarreye's work influenced many artists, for Debra Dawes it was the elder artist's expression of her home country that struck a chord. When Dawes first came across Kngwarreye's work she admired its capacity to describe the land with "palpable energy and intensity".[57] At the time, Dawes was working on paintings that resembled large swathes of gingham fabric, investing the flat repetitious grid design with tonal movement across the canvas, creating an impression of flux and three dimensional space. Gingham, a quintessentially

**Figure 5: Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Untitled (Awelye)*, 1994. Image courtesy Utopia Art Sydney**

[57] D. Dawes, personal communication (conversation with the author), January 4, 2004.

domestic, feminine fabric was synonymous with Dawes's rural Australian childhood home in the northern New South Wales town of Moree, a place with a large urban Aboriginal population and deplorable race relations. Dawes's credits Moree with her understanding of the land's capacity to ingrain itself on one's consciousness. The sense of place, especially her childhood home, remained inherent to Dawes's practice. She remembers the long line of the bitumen road through the landscape and the repetition of her encounter with it as she walked home every day from school. Dawes was mapping that line through space and time in the paintings made for *Talking About Abstraction*, which were divided into vertical bars reflecting the number of days in the month. One panel was completed each day, with colours chosen intuitively at the time of execution. The finished pattern of panels, each differing in colour and breadth is, like the work of many Aboriginal women painters, the vestiges of her "performance", a visual barometer of the rhythms of daily life. Dawes also appreciated the performative aspect of Kngwarreye's work, the perception of one's art practice as an extension of the artist, her home and the rituals of daily life. When she visited the major Papunya Tula exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2000, Dawes recognised also in those paintings the same sense of the body's role, of being in the moment, integral to the process of painting repetitive lines or dots, patterning that in its imperfections reflects the body's breath, shifting positions and the need to pause for a cup of tea.

**Figure 6: Debra Dawes, *January*, 2004. Image courtesy the artist**

The research into curating Indigenous art revealed that the sense of place in these artists' work was inextricably bound to the body and brain (the physical and the cognitive) being in sync during creative acts such as painting. It was this aspect of tradition-based Indigenous practice that piqued Isabel Carlos's interest in including remote Aboriginal art in the 2004 Biennale of Sydney, yet,

as indicated above, it was an avenue not fully explored by the curator.[58] The theme of *On Reason and Emotion* sought to connect not just reason and emotion, but concepts of place, specifically dichotomous perceptions of north and south: Carlos set out to explore differences in the cultural psyche of 'north' and 'south' countries. Prior to her research for the Biennale, Carlos had considered Australia to be a 'southern' (of emotion) country, yet upon coming to know the culture she recognised it as more 'northern' (of reason) in character. Expectations of finding cultural parallels between Australia and the other of Kapur's "southern" regions of the world – such as Africa and South America – were dashed, despite the curator's research travel to remote Aboriginal communities.[59] The incapacity to engage with the context of place was exacerbated by the fact that the curator chose not to visit South-East Asia at all.[60]

**Figure 7: Installation view of Jemima Wyman *Kimberley Blue*, 2004 and Emily Kame Kngwarreye, *Untitled*, 1996. Photo: Sue Blackburn**

The link between body and brain – between empiric and cerebral experience – in the context of place and Indigenous culture is best understood by artists and viewers who share an experience of place. The collective memory of home, in spite of even vastly different cultural backgrounds, is a platform for a level of affective engagement that cannot as easily be achieved by a top-down or external curatorial rationale. For this reason, as a non-Indigenous Australian

[58] It should be noted that Carlos was not alone in this apparent reluctance to engage on a meaningful level with the event's geo-cultural context: this has always been a problem with the Biennale of Sydney given its demonstrated preference for northern hemisphere over local curators.

[59] Kapur, G. (2007). Curating: In the Public Sphere. In Rand, S. & Kouris, H. (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (pp. 56–68). New York: apexart, p. 61.

[60] For her research for the Biennale, the only Asian regions that Carlos visited were the cities of Shanghai and Beijing. See Fenner, F. (2004). On Reason and Emotion: Isabel Carlos, Artistic Director of the 2004 Biennale of Sydney, in conversation with Felicity Fenner. *Art & Australia*, *41*(4), 556–559.

curator, the decision was taken to allow the artists to speak for themselves, to direct their own dialogue within the forum of the *Talking About Abstraction* exhibition. While Debra Dawes came to Kngwarreye's work relatively early in the elder artist's career (she remembers being initially struck by it 1991), for Jemima Wyman, the youngest artist in the exhibition, it was Queensland Art Gallery's 1998 retrospective that inducted her. Like that of most Aboriginal painters, particularly the women painters, Wyman's background is in performance.

> There was a retrospective of Emily Kame Kngwarreye's work at the Queensland Art Gallery. This was work I could see first-hand and it impacted on me physically. A few things excited me about this exhibition: the scale of the works (consuming the body, the space and shifting between installation and painting); the mark (an index to the body, performative and continuous, challenging the autonomy of any one painting and making each relate to time, space and the history of the maker); the connectedness of body/artwork/space. Process is also important in my own practice, registered through videoed performance and by using the canvas as a receptacle for the gesture.[61]

Wyman's painting practice has a performative aspect that results in three-dimensional, immersive painted environments.[62] Her concept of the nexus between body and brain is, like that of Aboriginal practitioners, grounded in direct cultural experience. The installation/painting in *Talking About Abstraction* was called *Kimberley Blue* after the base colour used from a range of house paints. The confluence between performing, the landscape and house paints was not lost on Wyman: "I'm interested in the readymade nature of this process and chose this particular colour because of its name and implied link to the landscape – the colour could be associated with the Australian outback and Kimberley region".[63] Wyman's choice of colour was a way of domesticising the land, of conceiving of place through the lens of home.

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[61] J. Wyman, personal communication (conversation with the author), 24 May, 2004.
[62] Expanded discussion of the performative aspect of Wyman's work appears in Chapter Three, in relation to her installation in *The Lie of the Land*.
[63] J. Wyman, personal communication (conversation with the author), 24 May, 2004.

Angela Brennan recognised in Kngwarreye's work the same energetic freedom of colour and line she'd always admired in the work of 1960s and 70s abstract painters such as Morris Lewis and Jasper Johns.[64] In reviewing the Kngwarreye retrospective exhibition in 1999, Brennan, like Wyman, was attracted not only to the formal and expressive qualities of the paintings themselves, but to the fact that Kngwarreye is a female artist challenging the traditionally male dominated arena of Western abstract expressionism:

> It's pointless to make stylistic comparisons to Western artists… [though] interesting to muse on the fact that one stylistic language can be developed in two radically different cultures; the colours, shapes and brushmarks might be similar, but Kngwarreye's work originates from somewhere else – at least one galaxy away from Western male stars… Pictorially there is something very attractive about the lack of a centre. It has the effect of producing a reverberating infinity – the edges of the canvas are not there for Kngwarreye. You get the feeling of unboundedness; that the paintings go beyond the borders even if the paint doesn't.[65]

**Figure 8: Mitjili Naparrula, *Untitled*, c.1988. Image courtesy Niagara Galleries**

The phrase "all-over" and reference to a decentralised composition are concepts borrowed from American art critic Clement Greenberg's description of abstract expressionism some fifty years earlier. Yet we know of Kngarreye's painting that it is about her home country: in the artist's words, "That's what I paint: whole lot".[66] This was not Brennan's first exposure to Aboriginal art. In 1996 she went to Alice Springs and Haasts Bluff to see first-hand the Aboriginal art that she'd come to know through her

[64] For a discussion of Eurocentric responses to Kngwarreye's work, see Benjamin, R. (1998). A New Modernist Hero. In M. Neale, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere – Paintings from Utopia,* (47–54). Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery; Sydney: Macmillan, Sydney.
[65] Brennan, E. (1999, Autumn). Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Alhalkere - Paintings from Utopia. *Like, Art Magazine, 8*, 48–49.
[66] Emily Kame Kngwarreye, 1990. In M. Neale, *Emily Kame Kngwarreye: Alhalkere – Paintings from Utopia,* Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery; Sydney: Macmillan, Sydney. (Title page – unpaginated).

Melbourne gallery, Niagara. There she met Mitjili Naparrula, who subsequently proved a key influence on Brennan's work. Naparrula was represented in *Talking About Abstraction* with a favourite painting of Brennan's: a striking work characterised by a non-traditional palette of bright blue, yellow and red, the composition is divided into three sections of thick, parallel lines. The brazen use of colour and line finds an echo in the conspicuous forms and palette of Brennan's work.[67]

**Figure 9: Melinda Harper, *Untitled*, 2003. Image courtesy the artist**

**Figure 10: George Tjungurrayi, *Untitled*, 1998. Image courtesy Papunya Tula Artists**

Melinda Harper cited George Tjungurrayi as an important influence on her work (as did co-exhibitors A.D.S. Donaldson and Ildiko Kovacs), particularly the way in which figurative markings of place are transformed in his work to linear patterning. In the paintings in *Talking About Abstraction* by Tjungurrayi, Tolson and Tjapaltjarri, it was possible to trace an evolution from definitive dotting in the earliest work by Tolson, to flowing, abstracted lines in the work of the youngest (Tjungurrayi). The precise dotting of Tolson's horizontal lines is looser and less detailed in Tjapaltjarri's work, in which the dots become continuous, unbroken lines, and is completely absent in the later, freely drawn linear patterning of George Tjungurrayi.[68] These three artists collectively represent the trend towards 'abstraction' in Papunya Tula painting.

[67] Naparrula's work has also been influential in the Aboriginal art community, especially on female relatives in Kintore, who had in the early days remained in the shadow of the male Papunya Tula artists. They travelled to Haasts Bluff in 1993 for the opening of the Ikuntji Women's Centre, where the work of Naparrula and other women artists greatly impressed and inspired the Kintore women to paint themselves. Artistic exchanges followed, culminating in a large exhibition of women's work at Tandanya, Adelaide, in 1995.

[68] For a discussion of Tjungurrayi's practice and its stylistic evolution, see Butler, R. (2004). In G. Bösch & S. Zein (Eds.) *Spirit & Vision: Aboriginal Art*, Vienna: Sammlung Essl, pp. 74–77; p. 113.

Like Debra Dawes, A.D.S. Donaldson's rapport with Aboriginal painting is informed by his childhood experience: an early boyhood in Darwin underpinned his ongoing interest in Aboriginal art. Donaldson is drawn to investigating the process of painting by his "colleagues in the desert" and the inherent performative practice, in particular, of George Tjapaltjarri and George Tjungarrayi, noting that their paintings are often undertaken with a single, repetitive action.[69] He regards the elder's work as linked to theirs by the fact that all embrace imperfection: in Donaldson's grids the spray paint flicks out accidentally; in Tjungarrayi's it is possible to see where the artist has stopped to re-load the paint onto the brush. (In Debra Dawes's work, similarly, the rhythm of her days over a period of time is reflected in the composition and density of the finished painting). In all, each of the lines is unique, borne of the moment and the place in which it was created: "They are not minimal in terms of surface or finish, but contain accidents and the uneven marks of process and time-passing".[70]

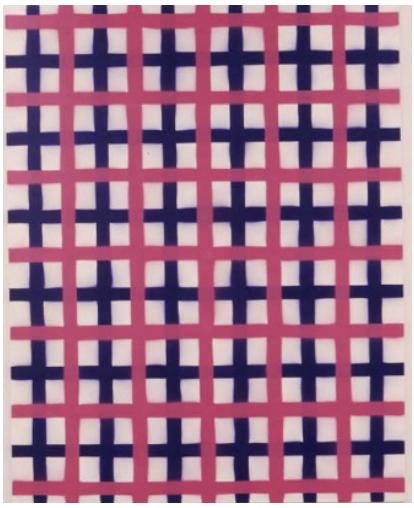

**Figure 11: A.D.S. Donaldson, *Untitled*, 2002. Image courtesy the artist.**

Donaldson's participation in the exhibition was the result of a long-term dialogue between artist and curator on the capacity of Indigenous art to teach non-Indigenous artists more about the place, Australia, in which we live. Some years ago Donaldson replied, in answer to a question about the future of Australian art, that "I look forward to a continually evolving dynamic between the work of contemporary abstract painters and that of Indigenous Australian artists".[71] Interestingly, he chose the word "dynamic" over "influence", because he sees the relationship as current and ever-evolving.

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[69] Szczepaniak, A. (2001). Last Word: Now Art: A.D.S. Donaldson is one of the artists in the *New Painting in Australia* exhibition. *Look*. July 2001 (42). p. 42.
[70] D. Dawes, personal communication (conversation with the author), March 15, 2004.
[71] Szczepaniak, A. (2001). Last Word: Now Art: A.D.S. Donaldson is one of the artists in the *New Painting in Australia* exhibition. *Look*. July 2001. (42). p. 42.

**Figure 12: Installation view of Ildiko Kovacs, *For You*, 2004 and Paddy Bedford, *Untitled*, 2003 (three of four works shown). Photo: Sue Blackburn**

Ildiko Kovacs nominated Kimberley artist Paddy Bedford Jawalyi for the exhibition, as the artist who had most influenced her recent work. Kovacs's interest in Aboriginal art stemmed from her admiration of early Australian experiments with abstraction by Ian Fairweather and Tony Tuckson, both non-Indigenous artists profoundly influenced by Aboriginal painting. Like them, Kovacs set out to explore for herself the role of country in Indigenous art. Early in her career she spent almost a year based in Broome, visiting the Kimberley region to see first-hand the ancient Aboriginal rock art. At this time, in 1996, she became acquainted with Rover Thomas's work, which proved highly influential. She returned in 2003 and witnessed a number of artists at work, most notably Paddy Bedford. At a time when Kovacs was trying to avoid becoming formulaic and was seeking a new approach to painting, Bedford offered her a lifeline, a mode of practice that was conceptually grounded in knowledge of the land and executed with intuitive response to its line and colour. Bedford himself had broken with traditional visual lexicons while maintaining a lineage to the ancient and more recent cultures of his country. His work combined important family Dreamings with renditions of the roads and rivers in his home country, Bedford's own 'special place' that he continued to visit until an old man. As in Emily Kame Kngwarreye's reductive aesthetic, the paintings invoke an emotional attachment to the artist's particular place and story. His innovation was in the creation of new methodologies to

map ancient knowledge and biographical anecdote. In response to observing him at work, Kovacs made more than fifty works on paper that became the basis for the paintings shown in *Talking About Abstraction*. Signalling a shift in her practice, the new paintings were noticeably more raw than earlier work in their incorporation of accident and irregularity (also identified by Donaldson as a key influence of Indigenous painting), and in their reductive composition and palette. The lesson Kovacs took from the experience was that the confidence to render the land in the simplest of means requires an intimate knowledge and understanding of that place.

Most Aboriginal painting commences with a black field, or underpainting, while non-Indigenous artists traditionally work on a white field. Again, this phenomenon encapsulates political relationships to the home country. It is a metaphor analysed by Paul Carter in *The Lie of the Land* in terms of colonisation and the desire for the land to be a 'clean slate', and also underscores the fact of fundamental difference between the approach of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous artists, whose work might on the surface look deceptively similar. Referencing the sense of belonging to place that is central to Aboriginal identity, David McNeill cites the iconic image of Aboriginal football star Nicky Winmar lifting his team jersey in response to racial abuse, and pointing to his (black) skin during a game in 1993.[72] Indeed, under the bright club colours of some of our most famous footballers' jerseys and embedded in the Aboriginal painting that is had such a definitive influence on non-Indigenous art, this country's Indigenous voice is defining its position on the modern cultural landscape.[73]

**Figure 13: Nicky Winmar, 1993. Photo: Wayne Ludbey. Courtesy *The Age***

[72] McNeill, D. (2008). Black Magic: Nationalism and race in Australian football. *Race & Class 49*(4), 22–37, p. 22.

[73] It is indicative of Australia's swing to the political right that in 2013 and again in 2014 Indigenous AFL player Adam Goodes became a target of racial abuse on the field and was forced into the position of having to reiterate Winmar's defiant stance of 20 years earlier.

Whether on football grounds or in art galleries, the push-and-pull effect between resisting assimilation while assuming increasing influence on non-Indigenous culture is palpable. The curatorial challenge in *Talking About Abstraction* was to create a space where non-Indigenous artists could openly voice their artistic debt to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art without accusations of appropriation. The non-Indigenous artists were selected not on the basis of (potentially coincidental) formal similarities between Indigenous practice and their own, but for their respect for the role that knowledge and experience of land and country plays in the creation of art about place. Unlike the FIFO (fly in, fly out) biennale curators who often fail to attain more than a superficial overview, these artists' interest in the land and its Indigenous heritage arose through their own experience of the Australian land and deep understanding of the links between place, self and cultural knowledge.

The research implemented a curatorial strategy not undertaken in previous exhibitions. As the research in this chapter has demonstrated thus far, the earliest curatorial attempts to foreground Indigenous art within a broader contemporary art context (such as the 1979 Biennale of Sydney and 1981 Perspecta) were gestures of acknowledgement by the curators that tradition-based Indigenous art should have a place in contemporary culture. Subsequent exhibitions to include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous art did so through the lens of Western abstraction and were premised on formal affinities (*Abstraction*, 2004 Biennale of Sydney). By moving the dialogue to the forum of a conversation, *Talking About Abstraction* demonstrated that, in citing Indigenous art, abstraction cannot be deployed as a free floating aesthetic signifier. Unlike modernist abstraction, which tends to operate free of site, engagement with Indigenous art as an agent of influence is only meaningful when paralleled by an engagement with its source; when regarded in the context of the place to which it is bound. The subsequent research in this chapter extends the curatorial paradigm shift, moving from a conversation about the influence of Indigenous art to demonstrating its mainstream status.

### 2.2.2 Forced into images

Concepts of place are ever-shifting. In Australian culture, the visibility and influence of Aboriginal art represents a paradigm shift at a time of deeply felt "tension between notions of home and shifting national identities".[74] In a tactic that is counter to historic curatorial attempts to assimilate Indigenous art into the majority non-Indigenous culture, the exhibitions discussed in this chapter aim to guide a mainstream acceptance of Indigenous art's centrality to our cultural landscape.

> To accept Aboriginality would be to deny the validity of the annexation of the continent for the British monarch. The planting of Union Jacks on tiny bits of it would be seen from the Aboriginal point of view and understood to have been entirely insignificant. The concomitant of accepting Aboriginality, then, is denial of the act of colonisation. In this version of events colonisation was attempted and failed.[75]

Germaine Greer's assessment of our inability to accept cultural difference is shared by other commentators speaking of other cultures. David McNeill's explanation of mainstream Australia's inability to feel at home with Islam can equally be applied to an inability – one that manifests in racism and oppression – to embrace Aboriginality as a central aspect of our cultural identity, of our perception of home.

> It might be argued that the extent to which we are unable to feel at home in a world that includes Islam and are unable to accept Islamic migrants as fully constituted citizens is simply irrefutable evidence of our failure as a nation… [of] a stubborn insularity resulting from the top-down imposition of a national narrative that invites us to conceive of ourselves as a homogenous and like-

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[74] Iara Boubnova quoted by Fijen, H. (2005). Foreword. In B. Vanderlinden & E. Filipovic (Eds.), *The Manifesta Decade.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p. 11.
[75] Greer, G. (2004). Daniel Malone. Quoted in I. Carlos, *2004 Biennale of Sydney: On Reason and Emotion*. Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, p. 140.

> minded community fully in charge or our own destiny and immune from the vagaries of world history.[76]

In order to avoid parochial habits of curatorial navel-gazing, the three exhibitions in this stage of the research "turned outwards to the world", a rare (according to McNeill in the above essay) but celebrated (according to Brooks in *The Idea of Home*) national trait.[77] The next stage of curatorial research following *Talking About Abstraction*, resulting in the exhibition *Prepossession*, positioned Australian art in the context of work by high-profile, international artists; later, *Making Change* dispatched entirely with contextual positioning in a curatorial rationale that claimed on the world stage that contemporary Australian art can be exemplified exclusively by new Indigenous art.

This research for *Prepossession* was commenced in 2004, as part of the investigations into the role of home and country in Indigenous art undertaken for *Talking About Abstraction* and for the subsequent exhibition, *The Lie of the Land* (Primavera). It culminated in the exhibition *Prepossession*, in which the work of three Indigenous Australian artists was presented alongside the work of three other artists' work, two from Northern Ireland and one from South Africa, co-curated by Jill Bennet and Liam Kelly. The exhibition sought to communicate the existence of trauma in places haunted by colonial dispossession, discord and violence. The curatorial rationale identified themes of place, contested sites, in current photographic and new-media art from these three nations that share a history of dispossession and displacement.

The Australian half of the exhibition comprised work by three Indigenous artists – Destiny Deacon, Tracey Moffatt and Darren Siwes. Unlike the *Talking About Abstraction* artists working in traditional contexts in remote regions of Australia, Deacon, Moffatt and Siwes utilise photography and new media to

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[76] McNeill, D. (2010). Art Without Authors: Networks, Assemblages and 'Flat' Ontology.' *Third Text*, *24*(4), 397–408, p. 407–8.
[77] McNeill, D. (2010). Art Without Authors: Networks, Assemblages and 'Flat' Ontology.' *Third Text*, *24*(4), 397–408, p. 407–8; Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011.* Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 68.

explore aspects of place and issues of displacement. In a different approach from the previous exhibition's structure that examined connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous painting, the curatorial strategy in *Prepossession* shifted the discussion into the international arena by setting up a dialogue between the three Australian artists and the three artists working with similar concerns in similar mediums from other areas of the world. *Prepossession* proposed "that by exploring the manner in which we inhabit and experience spaces and places, visual art makes a particular kind of contribution to the study of culture and politics".[78]

In Australia, dialogue about the spaces and places we inhabit primarily revolves around the rights and connection to land by Australia's Indigenous people. The three Indigenous artists in the Australian component of *Prepossession* were all selected as leaders in their field: Moffatt, in particular, at the time had been living in New York and exhibiting globally for some years. The three artists were brought together for this exhibition because each captures in their work not just the tension between black and white Australia, but the historical culture of racism that has sanctioned the displacement and disconnection to place of Indigenous people. In addition, each of the three artists is acutely aware of the political role their practice has played not just in redefining the place of Indigenous art, but also the place that is Indigenous Australia, the homelands of their ancestors and extended families. While there are other Indigenous artists whose practice is equally political, these three were chosen for *Prepossession* because their photo-based images are figurative depictions of the contentious interface of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations set in rural and suburban home environments around Australia.

The work of Deacon, Moffatt and Siwes was selected for this exhibition also because of the stage-crafted manner in which the images are presented so as to convey a sense of place. Miwon Kwon's comments in relation to public art also resonate with curatorial projects such as this one that seek to convey certain

[78] Bennett, J. (2005). A Concept of Prepossession. In J. Bennett, F. Fenner & L. Kelly, *Prepossession*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, p. 3.

aspects of place: "The chance to conceive the site as something more than place – as repressed ethnic history, a political cause, a disenfranchised social group – is an important conceptual leap in redefining the public role of art and artists".[79] The works in *Prepossession* were theatrical vignettes starring 'actors' (often the artists and their friends or family) in situations that range from the banal to the surreal. In occupying homes and everyday situations, their work inhabits spaces of the public imagination, utilising the familiarity of place to engage audiences across racial divisions. The three Indigenous artists whose work was in *Prepossession* stage-manage their images to heighten dramatic effect. The stage for reconceiving place in all three artists' work was home, whether literally (Deacon's own home is her stage) or symbolically. The performative aspect of the work is crucial to its interpretation, making the point that these are not random snapshots, but strategically managed images, executed and edited to maximise their political agency. This approach was subsequently adopted by younger Indigenous artists, including Vernon Ah Kee, whose tongue-in-cheek documentary surf movie represented Australia in *Once Removed* at the 2009 Venice Biennale (see Chapter Five).[80]

The photo-based and video work of Deacon, Moffatt and Siwes shared with the other artists in *Prespossession*, particularly that of Willie Doherty (Northern Ireland) and William Kentridge (South Africa), the utilisation of theatrical devices to present visual narratives descriptive of place and evoke palpable tension and inherent trauma. While all the artists in *Prepossession* employ visual cues to indicate a specific, geographic place, the real 'place' described in their work is a psychological one born of lived experience. The prism of home, inferred here as a stage, was the device that underscored the Australian artists' work and effectively engaged viewers.

All three Australian artists were born in the decade spanning the late 1950s to

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[79] Kwon, M. (2002). *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity* (11–31). Cambridge MA: MIT Press. p. 30.
[80] Other Indigenous artists to employ theatrical devices in their work are discussed in the next section in relation to *Making Change*.

late 60s, a period of immense social change in Australia, when European migration was at its height yet Indigenous people were still classified as "flora and fauna".[81] Artists born a little later, from the early 1970s onwards, experienced this displacement through stories rather than lived experience. Yet it was also the era of a burgeoning Aboriginal voice, when claims to land, to the vote, even to one's own children, were heard for the first time in the political and public arena. Activist Charles Perkins, inspired by the example of black America, embarked on the Freedom Rides across rural New South Wales in 1965; in 1967, less than fifty years ago, a national referendum declared that Indigenous Australians be accorded equal rights, including the right to vote.

Deacon, Moffatt and Siwes are city dwellers, then living in Melbourne, New York and Adelaide respectively, engaged in new media, photo-based art practice that belongs not to the past but to a contemporary international visual art vocabulary. Whether raised in a white foster home or on the edge of town in an Aboriginal community, they have lived on the frontline of racism in Australia's so-called 'multicultural' urban centres, denied the experience of belonging, instead having to deal with being treated as 'other', of being forced to assume an identity based on socio-political strategies of assimilation, or, as Destiny Deacon aptly describes it, "forced into images".[82] The political content of their art, therefore, is neither objective nor didactic: like the best art produced anywhere and at any time in the world, it is born of a deeply felt, visceral and emotional experience of place.

Certainly, the work of Deacon, Moffatt and Siwes is *possessed*, not by the traditional Aboriginal spirits that sometimes haunt paintings by their desert peers, but by the spirit of lived experience, of injustice and oppression in the place they call home. As Jennifer Biddle has written, it is a spirit characterised

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[81] "*127. In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, aboriginal natives should not be counted.*"
National Archives of Australia (2014). *The 1967 referendum – Fact Sheet 150*. Retrieved from http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs150.aspx
[82] Deacon, D. & Fraser, V. (2001). *Forced into images* [Video: 9 minutes]. Sydney, Australia: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

by feelings of anger, tempered in these artists' practice with irony, wit and a wry intellectual approach to negotiating the conflicted intersection between black and white social territory in Australia today.[83] In contrast, Aboriginal artists in remote regions of Australia re-instate an Indigenous presence through artistic continuance, specifically in the use of traditional visual lexicons. For those artists, tradition-based painting is a method of keeping alive cultures otherwise threatened by assimilation. Conversely, the practice of Deacon, Moffatt and Siwes charts new territory, directly addressing some of the most confronting issues that have hampered and haunted the Aboriginal population since British colonisation – including poverty, alienation and invisibility. While each of these artists describes a different facet of place in terms of the site in which the images are located, a deeper level of interpretation distinguishes all three artists' work not as place-specific, but as descriptive of a place imbued with psychological trauma. While the work of the three Australian artists in *Prepossession* investigates the often untold stories of Indigenous Australia with the sense of 'authority' usually reserved for the best of Aboriginal desert painting, it evades ethnographic pigeonholing by embracing the visual language of international contemporary art.

The political agency of these artists' work is enhanced by the fact that it is photo-based, lending it the immediacy and documentary qualities of photo-journalism. Indeed, these are not abstracted, poetic renditions of place: they are overtly figurative images, narratives informed by a deep understanding of white Australia's largely racist perceptions and treatment of Indigenous people. The images are menacing in tone and subversive in their storytelling. It is these artists' focus on both individual and generic stories and renditions of 'sacred sites' (whether domestic, geographic or cultural) that locates this work in a global contemporary art context. Testament to its universal resonance was the inclusion of Destiny Deacon's work in Okwui Enwezor's 2002 Documenta11. (The curatorial decision to include only the voices of Indigenous artists in

[83] Biddle, J. (2008). The Imperative to Feel: new intercultural Australian cinema. In *Un_imaginable: Australian Chapter*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW (unpaginated).

*Prepossession* – to assume, in other words, their authority – was extended on a much larger scale in *Making Change*.[84])

The place depicted in Moffatt's images has an otherworldly, ethereal quality that distances it from the real world. Moffatt's practice has consistently eluded categorisation – whether artistic, racial or national – pursuing instead a cinematic and universal aesthetic that crosses cultural borders. The narratives in Moffatt's oeuvre are enigmatic in content, brimming with familiar motifs and feelings, yet defying articulation of specific places or narratives. This is a quality shared with other artists in the exhibition: "In all instances, what is at stake is a reckoning with a violent historical past whose legacy in the present remains variously that of racism, exclusion, alienation and political conflict but where the historical evidence cannot be directly represented".[85]

**Figure 14: Tracey Moffatt, *Up in the sky*, 1997. Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery**

Children of the Stolen Generations were made to fit into an ideal vision of white society ("forced into images"), until the practice of child removal was finally ended in the late 1960s. They were educated in Western ways, dressed in Western clothes and denied access to, in some cases even knowledge of, their Aboriginal heritage. The works by the three Australian artists in *Prepossession* were possessed by the histories of the place in which they are enacted. Narrative scenarios are implied rather than described, conjured as much by viewers' imagination and association than any significant signposts planted by the artist. While *Up in the sky* invokes horrific stories from the Stolen Generation, the status of the woman, the baby and of the socially disenfranchised characters playing peripheral roles is uncertain. The historic, the universal and the specific overlap and intersect, creating a

[84] See 2.2.3 for a discussion of *Making Change*.
[85] Solomon-Godeau, A. (2005). Haunted Habitats. In J. Bennett, F. Fenner & L. Kelly (Eds.), *Prepossession*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, p. 10.

psychological tension that, like Willie Doherty's work, is more closely linked to cinematic thrillers than didactic or political art. Echoing the menace and anxiety that imbues George Miller's *Mad Max* series, these images seem to belong to the lineage of construed mythologies of the land and are thus familiar, lying somewhere between knowledge and imagination, between history and fiction. It is a perpetually intriguing perception of place appropriated also by Shaun Gladwell in his iconic *Maddestmaximus* series.[86]

This ambiguity surrounding the meaning is intentional, as explained by Moffatt:

> The *Up in the Sky* pictures look a little like photo documentary, but there is still a surreal quality. Some of the images are in fact what I saw and photographed but most are staged up, set up. I like that people can't tell which is which, I like that there is an 'in-betweeness' about them.[87]

**Figure 15: Tracey Moffatt, *Up in the sky*, 1997. Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery**

This 'in-between' quality that Moffatt refers to, which permeated all the work in *Prepossession*, conveys the affective – emotional and psychological – impact of traumatic histories connected to place and circumstance. From the perspective of the immigrant rather than Indigenous experience Christos Tsiolkas writes semi- autobiographically of "that feeling of in- betweeness" in *Barracuda*, describing the same tension over place – your place or mine? – that afflicts Drusilla Modjeska's Jericho.[88] Moffatt's photographs are haunted, not only by the fact of what may or may not have

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[86] Gladwell, S. (2007). *Maddestmaximus* [Eight-part video series]. Venice, Italy: 53rd Venice Biennale 2009. See Chapter Five.
[87] Tracey Moffatt in Matt, G. (2002). An Interview with Tracey Moffatt. In P. Savage & L. Strongman (Eds.), *Tracey Moffatt*, Wellington: City Gallery Wellington, p. 34.
[88] Johnstone, D. (2014, 26 January). Christos Tsiolkas: In the swim and on the money. *The Independent*. Retrieved from http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/christos-tsiolkas-in-the-swim-and-on-the-money-9082955.html

happened in the locations or situations they depict, but by the audience's affinity with the context of an unkempt bedroom or a neglected home: the affective symbolism of a perilous existence on the edge of town.

Deacon's grungy and earthbound melodramas also offer new insights to place through the prism of home, specifically the artist's own home in Melbourne. Her carefully choreographed backyard photographs and lounge-room videos are like theatrical plays that children perform for their parents, characterised by homespun costumes, precariously placed props and meandering, seemingly under-rehearsed dialogues. For non-Indigenous audiences, the dolls that the artist often substitutes for real people serve both to depersonalise and globalise the significance of Deacon's project. The artist believes that audiences are more receptive to Aboriginal people if they are represented by dolls rather than the real thing – they prefer the 'other' as inanimate entities, "coz they don't answer you back".[89] (The de-animation of people finds a dark parallel in the Nazi Party's inhumane treatment of concentration camp inmates, the rationale being that if a person is de-humanised in the eyes of others, it allows those others to perceive them not as people but as animals, or "flora and fauna", and treat them accordingly.) Ever compliant, Deacon's long-suffering dolls are degraded, shoved unwittingly into uncomfortable scenarios, even mutilated and amputated – literally "forced into images". As Jennifer Biddle has written, "any and all images of Aborigines can never be dislodged from a violent history of colonial representation that is not yet past".[90]

**Figure 16: Destiny Deacon, *Melancholy*, 2000. Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery**

In *Melancholy* (2000), the doll has been decapitated so that it fits into a watermelon skin. Set on a cheerful gingham tablecloth, the little black doll has been sacrificed in the quest to satisfy non-Indigenous

[89] Deacon quoted in King, N. (2004). A laugh and a tear in every photo. In *Destiny Deacon: Walk & don't look blak* (17–23). Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 19.
[90] Biddle, J. The Imperative to Feel: new intercultural Australian cinema. In *Un_imaginable: Australian Chapter*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, (unpaginated).

perceptions of how the domestic and exotic might co-exist. In order to articulate a sense of place, Deacon creates a domestic 'non place' – working class interiors that are universally recognisable and, given the activities here, might insinuate domestic violence. In Deacon's work domestic violence, even when inflicted on dolls, signifies racial violence. Marcia Langton has written of the tension that artists such as Deacon and Moffatt convey in their work as reflective of colonial attitudes towards Aboriginal people:

> The tension between assimilating Aboriginal people by extraordinarily brutal means in reality and yet at the same time depicting them as fascinating primitives reflected the need of the older colonists for security and for emblems of cultural uniqueness and difference from Europe.[91]

We are reminded by Langton's observation of Kate Grenville's protagonist William Thornhill, who in the early 19th century was torn between respecting and murdering the Aboriginal neighbours on 'his' land. He eventually learned that the Aboriginal people had a deep connection to the place that he could never feel. His response was to murder them, souveniring the rock painting hidden under the floorboards to remind himself of, to quote Djon Mundine, that "original sin" of having been complicit in the displacement of the native race. [92]

**Figure 17: Destiny Deacon, still from *Over d'fence*, 2004. Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery**

In Deacon's video work, *Over d-fence* (2004), the black dolls/babies are pushed around in toy strollers and subjected to play/torture that includes hanging by the neck. The fence divides individuals from their pesky neighbours, while also suggesting a better place within or beyond. Though there is little dialogue, the few

[91] Langton, M. (1997). The valley of the dolls: Black humour in the art of Destiny Deacon. *Art and Australia*, *35*(1), 100–107, pp. 106–107.
[92] Mundine, D. (1996) …Without land we are nothing. Without land we are a lost people… In R. Mellick & N. Waterlow (Eds.] *Spirit and Place* (pp. 46–48). Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 47

words spoken are on territorial themes: a little boy looks longingly through the gap in the fence and says that he wishes he could be in there; the bossy woman next door addresses the invading children from her kitchen step, ordering them out of her place. As one critic wrote upon seeing the exhibition when it toured to Northern Ireland, it turns on its head the image of Australia portrayed overseas in popular television programs such as *Neighbours*, noting that Deacon's film "conveys a real world where the questions of place, identity and ownership have not been resolved".[93]

Again, in this image, the theme of in-betweeness underscores the imperative of the work. Media theorist Laura Marks's comments on black American cinema can also be applied to the Australian situation, in which "Cinema can be the site of new configurations of sense knowledge, produced in (or in spite of) the encounter between different cultures".[94] Experimentation around the theme of living between two cultures is also key to the work of filmmaker Warwick Thornton, who in *Stranded* employs a three-dimensional effect to conjure the experience of being torn between Aboriginal and non-Indigenous Australia.[95]

In contrast to Moffatt's *Up in the sky* series, Deacon's photo-based work is deliberately low-tech both in means and presentation: Polaroid snapshots are transformed into large digital prints, sacrificing sharpness of image in favour of amateurish authenticity. The portrait she presents of contemporary Aboriginal life, once we see past the veneer of tragic-comical humour, is disconcerting: by apparently ridiculing the plight of urban Aboriginal life, is she in fact subverting the racist nonchalance (complicity) of non-Indigenous Australia? As Christine Nicholls wrote in response to Deacon's 2004 exhibition at the Salzburger Kunstverein, "Deacon takes an ironic stance where 'performing the subjugated and compliant native' becomes a position that is in fact the opposite of submissive or yielding".[96]

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[93] Kennedy, B. (2005). Prepossession. *Circa*, 114, 97–99, p. 98.
[94] Marks, L. (2000). *The Skin of the Film: intercultural cinema, embodiment and the senses* (194–244). Durham: Duke University Press, p. 195.
[95] *Stranded* was included in *Making Change*; Chapter Five.
[96] Nicholls, C. (2004). Aboriginalism in Europe: on the way out? *Artlink*, *24*(4), 70–73, p. 71.

With gritty realism, Deacon conveys the Indigenous experience of home not as a desert idyll, but grounded in working class Melbourne with a penchant for Aboriginal kitsch collectibles and a cautious ear to the racism that lurks just over the ("d") fence. The fence in Deacon's work is both a symbol of escape and a barrier, representing both possession (ownership) and dispossession (exclusion). In Moffatt's *Up in the sky*, the image of the window has a similar symbolic function. The black baby is inside and the nuns outside, yet from a colonialist point of view, the nuns represent the mainstream (inside) and the child, because of its colour, exists on the periphery (outside). While Deacon plays on and exaggerates white perceptions of urban Aboriginal existence, Moffatt makes cynical reference to the colonialist mythologising of Australia's desert interior as a harsh and barren land of potential danger. Both artists encapsulate in their work the in-betweeness of Australian culture, the experience of being neither 'in' nor 'out' of mainstream perceptions of place.

Darren Siwes, of Aboriginal and Dutch heritage, was the youngest artist in the exhibition and his photo-based practice at the time took a slightly different approach to the politics of place with regard to land rights and reconciliation. Ian McLean has written that this series of work is concerned "with the themes of philosophy, history, colonialism and a type of post-Aboriginal identity that seeks to move beyond the colonialist essentialising of identities and towards more complex and nuanced postcolonial frames of reference".[97] The title, *Just Is* (2003–04), is a play on the word justice, which in the context of Aboriginal Australia is a politically loaded concept, a phrase that implies compliance – the situation, no matter how wrong, 'just is'. Thus Siwes's project relates to Deacon's, whose tortured dolls are "forced into images" of domestication and are as silent in their protest as Siwes's Aboriginal ghost sentries. Both artists create a theatrical stage, a fictional yet familiar home environment into which they insert themselves.

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[97] McLean, I. (2004). Uncanny: Darren Siwes's *Just Is* series of photographs. In D. Siwes & I. McLean, *Darren Siwes: Just Is.* Adelaide: Greenaway Art Gallery, (unpaginated).

**Figure 18: Darren Siwes, *Just Is*, 2003-04. Image courtesy Greenaway Art Gallery**

In *Prepossession* a range of photographs from the *Just Is* series were included, some made in Australia (identified by the protagonist/artist standing in the foreground) and others in England (in which the male figure is in the background). They are neither historic nor contemporary figures, neither real nor imaginary. In the tradition of the best ghost stories, we can see straight through them. With their translucency, they invert photography's rhetorical capacity to infer factual documentation. Aboriginal culture is revered for its spirituality: while in Moffatt's work the spirits of the land appear, ironically, not to be of ancient Indigenous heritage, but white-skinned nuns, in Siwes's work they are contemporary young men and women wearing the uniform of anonymous city workers. In the Australian works, the figures are dressed for business though stranded between two worlds on their traditional home ground. In contrast to the preoccupied protagonists of Moffatt's and Deacon's vignettes, these characters engage beyond the picture plane, insisting on an unimpeded visual conversation with us, the viewers. They stand, stiff and still (for metaphoric as well as technical reasons, given that Siwes uses old-fashioned long exposure times to achieve his effect), staring straight into the camera with a quiet determination that is as confronting as it is unnerving. Siwes's figures are prepossessed: they are neither victims nor are they overwhelmed by circumstance, like those in Deacon and Moffatt's work can be, but defiantly standing their ground, watching and waiting. Sentinels of an Indigenous presence on sites of historical significance, Siwes's ghosts inhabit a nocturnal slippage zone, in a perpetual state of 'in-betweenness'.[98]

[98] See also the curatorial context of 'in-betweeness': "Exhibition making is about constructing the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of cultural difference in the present tense." Lee, Y. C. (2007). Curating in a Global Age. In S. Rand & H. Kouris (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (pp. 108–118). New York: apexart, p. 111.

Interestingly, the same art critic who wrote of *Australia* that individual works "resonate with broader social tensions and anxieties, but… it's impossible to make any of your own intellectual or emotional connections" had a very positive response to *Prepossession*'s capacity to engage audiences by drawing on the artists' experience of their home situations to convey the "power of affective memories [in] an exhibition where one's understanding and appreciation is undoubtedly heightened by an awareness of, and sensitivity to, some of the greater academic issues at play in terms of art, politics and cultural encounters".[99]

Indeed, all of the works included in *Prepossession* were selected on the basis of their capacity not to describe the physical and historical facts of a place, but to convey a sense of contested inhabitation and dispossession. Most feature figures, neither fully embedded nor expelled, at home but cognisant of entitlement to home as a point of contention: "Your place or mine?", they may well ask.

### 2.2.3. Paradigm shifts

> The curatorial premise suggests that it is no longer a question of analysing Indigenous art's relationship to the mainstream, but the other way around. I will go further, and say what Indigenous artists have been saying for some time now: Indigenous art is the mainstream of Australian contemporary art.[100]

In her Introduction to *Talking About Abstraction*, Vivien Johnson also noted that "The Indigenous artists in this exhibition are bigger 'names' than the non-

[99] Higgins, J. (2005). Prepossession. Originally published online for *State of the Art*, March 2005. Document distributed by personal communication with the author.
[100] Johnson, V. (2004). Surface Tension. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *Talking About Abstraction*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW (unpaginated).

Indigenous artists who cite them as primary influences." [101] So how, then, can curators reflect this changed hierarchy in their curatorial approach to major exhibitions of Australian art? The research that resulted in *Talking About Abstraction* and *Prepossession* proposed a paradigm shift in curating Indigenous art. In both, work by Indigenous artists was not included as an assimilative gesture, but in acknowledgement of its leading position in Australian visual arts culture. The logical extension of this approach was to test as a curatorial strategy not the *inclusion* of Indigenous art in a 'mainstream' contemporary Australian exhibition, as has been the approach of curators since the 1979 Biennale of Sydney, but the *exclusion* of non-Indigenous art in a major survey exhibition of contemporary Australian art curated for an international audience. Contrary to Ian McLean's assertion that "Indigenous artists cannot rely on either an epochal change that seemingly brings them into the fold, or perceptive Western critics to get them what they want", the next stage of curatorial research created a new paradigm, an "epochal change" in the how Australian art is presented to the world.[102]

Besides exhibitions that are specifically dedicated to Indigenous art, such as the National Triennial of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander National Art Awards, contemporary exhibitions of Australian art have a disproportionately low representation of work by Indigenous Australian artists. *Australia* at the Royal Academy was one such example; every Biennale of Sydney provides another. As *The Sydney Morning Herald* 2014 Australia Day wraparound cover attests, this prejudicial form of curatorial gatekeeping extends beyond the Australian art world to the mainstream media. Brenda Croft's unpublished protest is substantiated by McLean, who somewhat provokingly warns that "In privileging intercultural relations, the contemporary is a platform for the global trajectories of the most

[101] Johnson, V. (2004). Surface Tension. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *Talking About Abstraction*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW (unpaginated).
[102] McLean, I. (2013) Surviving 'The Contemporary': What indigenous artists want, and how to get it. *Broadsheet*, *42*(3), 166–173, p. 169.

local traditions. However, this platform is a contested space that indigenous artists need to seize in order to get what they want".[103]

*Australia* missed the opportunity to present the vision of an independent and Indigenous Australia, failing to acknowledge that as Australia's relationship with its immediate geographic region has strengthened, the old perception of Australia as an Anglo-Celtic outpost has altered. International exhibitions of recent years have registered widespread interest in the changing political landscape of eastern Europe and Asia, and the attendant emergence of new art practices from cultures – such as those in Africa, Latin America and China – while international interest in Australian Indigenous art has been largely restricted to desert art.[104] Taking its cue from Jean Hubert Martin's game-changing *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris, 1989), Brisbane's Asia Pacific Triennial has since 1993 looked after its own position internationally by successfully positioning the art of that region on the world stage; and Okwui Enwezor's seminal Documenta11 not only rejected the West's perceived centrality to contemporary art, but confirmed an exhibition's significant capacity to be a political forum. As noted earlier, that exhibition included the work of Destiny Deacon, the only Indigenous Australian artist to ever be included in Documenta until that time.[105] Elsewhere, however, Australian art, especially Australian Indigenous art, is poorly represented on the international stage. For this reason, *Making Change* was an important opportunity to represent Indigenous

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[103] McLean, I. (2013) Surviving 'The Contemporary': What indigenous artists want, and how to get it. *Broadsheet*, *42*(3), 166–173, p. 169.

[104] Until recently, international exhibitions of Australian Indigenous art, such as the large scale *Spirit Country: Contemporary Australian Aboriginal Art*, curated in 1999 by Jennifer Isaacs for the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, had focused on the 'exoticism' of desert and remote Indigenous painting. *Making Change* was the first all-Indigenous exhibition of Australian new media art to be seen internationally. Prior to that, the Chinese audience came to know Australian Indigenous art through two large exhibitions in recent years, *Papunya Painting: Out of the Australian Desert*, curated by Michael Pickering for exhibition at the National Art Museum of China, Beijing, in 2007–08, and *Our Land, Our Body: Master Works from the Warburton Collection*, curated by Warburton Community art adviser Gary Proctor for tour across China in 2011–12. Though it comprised largely of desert painting, *Spirit & Vision: Aboriginal Art*, conceived and coordinated by Michael Eather for the Essl Collection and exhibited Kunst Der Gegenwart, Vienna, in 2004, was the first major international exhibition of Indigenous Australian art to include a large proportion of new media; it featured photographic work by artists such as Brook Andrew, Destiny Deacon, Michael Riley and Darren Siwes.

[105] Warwick Thornton, Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, Gordon Bennett and Doreen Reid Nakamarra were included in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's 2012 Documenta13.

Australia's contemporary visual arts culture as another force in the international curatorial turn towards Indigenous and other formerly 'peripheral' cultural practices. It is a fact that while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art might have the "inside run" in curatorial practice within Australia, internationally it barely registers.[106] For this reason, a curatorial decision was taken, in devising an exhibition for China, to solely represent Australian Indigenous art, and to include new media art that challenged international preconceptions of Australian Indigenous culture as belonging to ethnographic traditions outside the mainstream of contemporary art practice. The intention was to create a forum where new perceptions of Australia's Indigenous culture could be formed. According to Homi Bhabha, cultural production that utilises the vocabulary of the present to tell stories of the past facilitates a "sense of the new" that is rooted in the past:

> The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such as does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.[107]

The very act of staging an exhibition of art from a single country implies that aspects of that country's character will form the focus of the exhibition. Even in the absence of nationalist insinuation, however, exhibitions defined by geopolitical borders still have the opportunity to evoke aspects of the place from which they derive. For Indigenous Australian artists, 'home' is a contested

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[106] "Indigenous artists gained an inside run in the Australian art world. Given that they comprise only two percent of the population, and judging by their market share, artworld discourse, media attention, appointing of indigenous curators, galleries devoted to indigenous art at State art galleries, special art prizes and funding opportunities, it could be concluded that in Australia at least they had gained a bigger slice than any other group, and by a long shot". McLean, I. (2013) Surviving 'The Contemporary': What indigenous artists want, and how to get it. *Broadsheet*, *42*(3), 166–173, p. 171.

[107] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 1–27), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p.10.

site, and, in a politically fluid world governed by the forces of globalisation, claims to place are increasingly problematic. Noting the increasing irrelevance of national borders, Ian McLean summarises this dilemma faced by Indigenous artists by addressing the problematic of nationalism itself:

> How does one fight for land in an age of de-territorialisation, for the right to be a nation in a post-national world, and the right for an autonomous identity at a time when identity politics has been discredited by the new regime of the contemporary? Condemned to being primitives in a modern world, now they seem condemned to being moderns in a contemporary world.[108]

**Figure 19: Mervyn Bishop, *Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours soil into the hands of traditional land owner Vincent Lingiari, NT*, 1975. Image courtesy the artist**

However, beyond the 'traditional' versus 'contemporary' debate, in Australian Indigenous culture the generationally inherited understanding of connection to home country is a powerful claim to place for Aboriginal artists that is generally accepted as being unmatched by non-Indigenous counterparts.[109] The curatorial strategy for *Making Change* was to reject the familiar visual traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and select work instead that employs a conceptual lexicon invested with political imperative. "Photography and film are two mediums that are highly favoured among artists whose works embody change."[110] Thus, the artists whose work was exhibited in *Making Change* evade the kind of cultural pigeon-holing that can separate Indigenous from non-Indigenous art, especially on a world stage (China, in this case), with little exposure to any form of contemporary Australian art. In terms of content, however, the film and photo-based works in the exhibition evoked

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[108] McLean, I. (2013) Surviving 'The Contemporary': What indigenous artists want, and how to get it. *Broadsheet*, *42*(3), 166–173, p. 170

[109] The concept of Australian artists' connection to place can be contentious. See discussion of *Home Ground*, Chapter Three.

[110] Lane, C. (2012). Agents of Change. In B. Croft, F. Fenner & K. Gouriotis (Eds.), *Making Change*, Sydney: Australian Centre for Photography, p. 70.

much of the Australian character: they are both cheeky and outspoken, funny and subversive. Much of the work in *Making Change* was uncompromising in its search for truth and deeply evocative of place, and while it might not have looked conspicuously 'political' in content, it was. The exhibition's leitmotif was Mervyn Bishop's iconic photograph of Gough Whitlam pouring red desert sand into the hands of Aboriginal elder Vincent Lingiari in 1975, symbolising the return of homelands to the Gurindji people. The work is testament to the capacity of the image, of art, to be an agent of political change.

As economic imperatives and diminishing natural resources lead a shift in the movement of people from first to third-world localities – a direction opposite to the traditional route from third to first world and from non-Western to Western cultures – the culture of formerly 'third world' localities (which in the context of this thesis includes Indigenous Australia) is inevitably boosted. Hou Hanru is a curator particularly attuned to the impact of global flux in the context of exhibition-making:

> [The] immigration of non-Western populations is a key element in the remaking of its demography in order to face the necessary challenge of social change. On the other hand, with the boom of new economies in different non-Western regions of the world, more and more people from the West, at the turn of the millennium, will permanently settle in those areas. This multi-directional movement of people certainly prompts unprecedented exchange between various cultures. Ultimately, it produces new localities, and hence new globalness.[111]

This phenomenon has of course been true of China over the last 20 years, a nation poised to take over the US as the world's largest economy. From a curatorial viewpoint, therefore, in presenting a survey exhibition of contemporary Australian art it was important to represent Australia not as a British colony or embodiment of Western Imperialism, but as a place that is

[111] Hou, H. (2006). Wherever They Go, They Create a New World. Notes on Migration, Cultural Hybridity and Contemporary Art. In H. Hou & G. Scardi (Eds.), *Wherever We Go*. Milan: 5 Continents Editions, p. 11.

home to new generations of one of the world's oldest living cultures. The premise of *Making Change* proposed the 'new locality' of Indigenous Australian art as front and centre in the international arena.

The exhibition was co-curated with Brenda Croft and Kon Gouriotis for the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC).[112] Including a large proportion of work that is deliberately stage-crafted – the same artistic device that distinguished works in *Prepossession* – together with the theme of land rights introduced with Bishop's iconic photograph, the exhibition contained a large proportion of current film and photo-based practice that creates a place for the role of Australian Indigenous art by staging fictional narratives. This included work by Richard Bell, Bindi Cole, Brenda Croft, Genevieve Grieves, Gordon Hookey, Dianne Jones, r e a, Michael Riley, Christian Thompson and Jason Wing. Including Moffatt's (*Prepossession*, 2005), work by other artists represented in the exhibition had also been integral to the author's earlier research and exhibitions that examined concepts of Australia through the prism of home: Vernon Ah Kee (*Once Removed*, 2009), Destiny Deacon (*Prepossession*, 2005), and Warwick Thornton (*Handle with Care*, 2008).

When the exhibition opened in Beijing in late 2012, it was neither promoted nor received as an exhibition of Indigenous art. It was seen only as a survey of current Australian art practice. Indeed, during the formal opening ceremony, the Director of NAMOC asked the attending exhibition curator: "Which of the 24 artists in the exhibition are Indigenous Australians?" He and the Museum's senior curators were astonished to learn that all the artists were in fact of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, citing the artists' Anglicised names as misleading.[113] It was clear that for the Chinese, even the Museum's cohort of well-travelled arts professionals, Aboriginal art was synonymous with

[112] Indigenous curator Brenda Croft is a researcher with the National Institute of Experimental Arts, UNSW; Kon Gouriotis was then Director of the Australian Centre for Photography (ACP), Sydney. The exhibition was a joint project between ACP and UNSW.
[113] F. Di'an, personal communication (conversation with the author), 12 November, 2012.

bark and desert painting, not with new media. With the exception of Tracey Moffatt, not one of the artists was known to them.[114]

Taking an exhibition of Australian art to a country like China that has little knowledge of Australia beyond top-down, officially sanctioned images of a multicultural society assimilated into Anglicised lifestyles, it was not surprising to find the Chinese curious about the work of these non-Anglo, non-immigrant Australian artists. Given that the only other exhibitions of Australian art that had travelled to China were of Aboriginal art that confirmed preconceptions of what Aboriginal art looks like, the Chinese could be forgiven for not recognising these works as Indigenous.[115] Official descriptors and consequently international perceptions of Indigenous art couldn't be further removed from the true nature of contemporary Indigenous art, as the presentation of Indigenous art in *Australia* at the Royal Academy and the reception in China of *Making Change* revealed. It is a misperception perpetuated by Australia's officially-supported biennial outing onto the world stage: with the exception of Vernon Ah Kee's work in 2009 (see Chapter Five) and despite its prevalence, not once in three decades of Australian representation at the Venice Biennale has new media work by an Indigenous artist been shown. By the same token, in Australia's major international biennial at home, the Biennale of Sydney, a curator of Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent has never been appointed.[116] (In fact, no person of colour – any colour at all, including Asian – has ever been appointed to curate the Biennale of Sydney: it remains a bastion of Eurocentricity in a socio-political climate that outwardly promotes

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[114] Ironically, Moffatt's was the one work almost censored by Museum officials from the exhibition for its inclusion not of sex per se, but of a lesbian sex scene. NAMOC's assistant curator explained that "We do not have lesbians in China", a claim subsequently denied by NAMOC's director, who defended the inclusion of Moffatt's work.

[115] See: National Museum of Australia, *Papunya Painting: Out of the Australian Desert*, National Art Museum of China, 2010; and Proctor, G., curator. (2011). "Tu Di - Shen Ti / Our Land, Our Body (Master works from the Warburton Collection)." Touring 18 cities 2012–14, China.

[116] Some curators of the Biennale Sydney have sought advice from Indigenous curators. In 1979 Nick Waterlow depended on Djon Mundine to negotiate the production and inclusion of the 200 burial poles from Ramingining; for the 2000 edition a selection panel was headed by Waterlow, of which prominent Aboriginal curator Hetti Perkins was one. Perkins subsequently worked closely with Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev on the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, travelling with her to Central Australia and introducing her to work by Indigenous artists.

the importance of reconciliation and Australia's role in the 21st 'Asian century'.)[117]

For Richard Bell and other artists in *Making Change*, "the being of activism has been a good way of becoming a contemporary artist".[118] Perhaps activism, intended or not, is an inherent component of contemporary Indigenous art. As Carly Lane argued in her catalogue essay for *Making Change*, "Artists are change-makers precisely because through their gazing they carry the lessons of the past into the present to change the direction of the future".[119]

Subsequent to its showing in *Making Change*, Vernon Ah Kee's work, *Cant Chant (Wegrewhere)*, was selected for inclusion in the sweeping survey of Australian art, *Australia*, at the Royal Academy, London, in late 2013. Unfortunately but perhaps not surprisingly given the conservative context of the Royal Academy, the curators of that exhibition neglected the opportunity to present Australian Indigenous art as having contemporary relevance in an international context. Even worse, in a naïve and insulting curatorial decision, Ah Kee's work was stripped of its powerful political voice and represented only by a still photograph from the video. Incredibly, the film (the work itself) was omitted, leaving no more than a parodic image that without the context of the film reinforces preconceptions of Aboriginal people as being out of place in Western culture and society. What kind of a place will Londoners think that Australia is, when its contemporary Indigenous artists are silenced and those working in traditional visual lexicons (desert painting) are hoarded together as if authored by a singular voice, separated in a room of their own from the rest of the exhibition?

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[117] On two occasions Indigenous curators have been involved as co-curators: Indigenous Canadian curator Gerald McMaster was appointed to co-curate with Catherine de Zegher the 2012 iteration (though primarily it was de Zegher's exhibition, with McMaster seemingly playing a support role); and, as noted above, Hetti Perkins was included on Nick Waterlow's selection panel for the 2000 exhibition. Also on the 2000 panel was Japanese curator Fumio Nanjo.

[118] McLean, I. (2013) Surviving 'The Contemporary': What indigenous artists want, and how to get it. *Broadsheet*, *42*(3), 166–173, p. 167.

[119] Lane, C. (2012). Agents of Change. In B. Croft, F. Fenner & K. Gouriotis (Eds.), *Making Change*, Sydney: Australian Centre for Photography, p. 75.

The curatorial fear betrayed by this myopically cautious strategy was anticipated in Greer's proposition that "To accept Aboriginality would be to deny the validity of the annexation of the continent for the British monarch."[120] The image of deferential public servant curators in Canberra compiling a polite, apolitical exhibition for Piccadilly is laughable.[121] The project was a wasted opportunity to portray a 21st century nation that no longer seeks approval from its British 'home', but that has forged a home of its own, from the bottom-up. Such an exhibition – containing more contemporary Indigenous work and less 'School of British' painting – might have confirmed for English audiences that, as the government's own website claims, we have a "cultural environment in Australia that is lively, energised, innovative and outward looking."[122]

The real obstacle for non-Indigenous curators is the fact that a meaningful post-colonial reconciliation, despite the top-down government claims, still evades mainstream Australian culture. In accepting Johnson's claim that Aboriginal art is now the mainstream of contemporary Australian art, the question "your place or mine?" pervades curatorial practice in Australia, most particularly that of non-Indigenous curators. However, as the research in this chapter has demonstrated, curators working in this postcolonial era are in a unique position to learn from their Indigenous peers what defines this place we call home, and to present that knowledge on a world stage. As Peter Osborne expresses, it is

> … precisely displaced postcolonial subjects who can most successfully represent themselves as 'native'. The native itself, on the other hand, (in so far as the term retains a meaningful referent in such an interconnected world), can

[120] Greer, G. (2004). Daniel Malone. Quoted in I. Carlos, *2004 Biennale of Sydney: On Reason and Emotion*. Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, p. 140.
[121] Quite possibly because of its poor reception in London, the curator/s of *Australia* were not openly identified. According to the National Gallery of Australia the exhibition was a team effort.
[122] Department of Finance, Australian Government, (2014). *Our Country.* Retrieved from http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country

> acquire its status as 'informant' only by being represented as such, by others, within international cultural spaces.[123]

Curators in Australia have responded with the inclusion of Indigenous art in exhibitions sited in "international cultural spaces" since the late 1970s, yet *Making Change* was the first such exhibition to be conceived not as another 'Aboriginal art exhibition' but as an exhibition of 'contemporary Australian art'. Since articulating in the exhibition forum of "conversation" the emerging dominance of Aboriginal art in *Talking About Abstraction* and *Prepossession*, the investigation came full circle with *Making Change*. Like *Australia*, the exhibition was also supported by the Australian Government, though unlike *Australia* it implemented curatorial strategies to convey the currency of place rather than propagating outmoded perceptions of Indigenous art as belonging solely to the realm of bark and Western Desert painting. On the contrary, *Making Change* was a curatorial expression of Bhabha's "third space" of representation,

> … a liminal form of signification that creates a space for the contingent indeterminate articulation of social 'experience' that is particularly important for envisaging emergent cultural identities.[124]

In addition to creating a forum for new understandings of what is an emergent cultural identity on the world stage, the exhibition repositioned Indigenous art as the contemporary mainstream in Australia, presenting new dialogues around the meaning of home for Australian artists in a post-colonial and globalised culture.

While curators have been slower to transgress the historic colonialist borders separating Indigenous from non-Indigenous art, for some artists those borders have been recognised as a trap and have been deliberately eschewed. In one sense, the curatorial strategy adopted for *Making Change* echoed Tracey

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[123] Osborne, P. (2013). *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. London: Verso, p. 163

[124] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 245–282), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 257.

Moffatt's career strategy many years ago: a rejection of the perceived ghettoisation of Indigenous art in Australia and deliberate turning away from the label or community that served to identify and pigeon-hole her practice as 'Aboriginal art'. In the late 1990s, Moffatt said to Isaac Julien, "If you write about me as an artist of colour, I will kill you".[125] Interestingly, some two decades after leaving Australia and soon after her return, Moffatt not only agreed to be included in *Making Change* with a work about filmic portrayals of 'the other', but implored in an effusive response to the invitation: "My only request is that you turn up the volume".[126]

[125] Julien, I. with Nash, M. (1997). Only Angels Have Wings. In *Tracey Moffatt: Free-Falling* (pp. 9–20). New York: Dia Center for the Arts. p. 12.
[126] T. Moffatt, personal communication (email to the author), 16 August, 2012.

## CHAPTER 3

## VIEWS OF THE HOME GROUND

> "You've got to have a nice background", I remember my father saying. Photography is about relating that background – the country's baffling and exhausting spaces, its bizarre fauna and exotic flora – to the human foreground. If the equation is balanced, we feel at home.[1]

Conrad's father perceived an incongruity between the place (the "baffling" and "bizarre" landscape of Australia) and its inhabitants (the "human foreground"). He counsels that it is the artist's prerogative, the artist's responsibility in fact, to expunge a sense of dissonance and achieve a feeling of "home". In truth, however, it is precisely this feeling of in-betweeness – of not being able to reconcile external and internal descriptors – that defines the contemporary experience of place. It is a recurrent theme in Australian literature, as encapsulated by Modjeska's Jericho, Grenville's William and Sal Thornhill, Scott's Bobby Wabalanginy and Tsiolkas's Danny Kelly – all of them struggling to find a foothold in the slippage zone they occupy between two or more cultures. As the research into curating Indigenous Australian art in Chapter Two demonstrated, the same predicament pervades contemporary art concerned with issues of place. In this chapter, curatorial research resulting in two exhibitions examines in the first instance the idea of home by subverting art historical tropes of visualising the landscape ('landscape painting'), and secondly the idea of home as seen from the inside, by artists who live and work in the place their art practice investigates.

> The notion of place has traditionally been understood 'externally' as a geographic, anthropologic, economic or political site, as opposed to 'internally' as a disembodied space in terms of psychoanalysis, memory or philosophy.

[1] Conrad, P. (2003). *At Home in Australia*. New York: Thames and Hudson, p. 18.

> With the collapse of foundational certainties, the concept of place has been destabilized.[2]

The thesis argues that the pervasive inherency of 'in-betweeness' is not to be eschewed but rather embraced as a catalyst for creating meaningful engagement, recalling Young Chul Lee's observation that "Exhibition making is about constructing the in-between space that carries the burden of the meaning of cultural difference in the present tense."[3] This in-between space can also be seen as the newly forged ground that emerges between top-down, external constructs of cultural identity and bottom-up, internal connections to home. As Papastergiardis states, "In every claim to identity there is a reclamation of territory".[4]

This claiming of territory was a colonialist imperative that still manifests today in the form of top-down government policy ("stop the boats") and bottom-up racial vilification ("we grew here, you flew here").[5] Australia's early European settlers were quick to clear the land, expelling native vegetation to create grazing grounds for sheep and cattle, and planting English country gardens reminiscent of 'home'. Paul Carter's research suggests that a colonialist rationale underpins the desire for "a nice background":

> The colonists' eagerness to remove every vestige of vegetation cannot be explained simply as a mistaken theory of agriculture; it expresses an overwhelming need to clear away doubt – not to make the land speak in accents all its own, but to silence the whispers, the inexplicable earth and sky tremors which always seemed to accompany colonisation. Progress, it seems, stamps the earth flat, turning it into a passive planisphere.[6]

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[2] Phoca, S. (2007). No Place Like Home. In J. Rugg & M. Sedgewick (Eds.), *Issues in Contemporary Art and Performance* (pp. 45–55). Bristol: Intellect Books, p. 49.
[3] Lee, Y. C. (2007). Curating in a Global Age. In S. Rand & H. Kouris (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating*(pp. 108–117). New York: apexart, p. 111.
[4] Papastergiardis, N. (1999). Clusters on the Move. In *Perspecta 1999: Living Here Now: Art and Politics* (pp. 10-15). Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 13.
[5] The slogans, respectively, of the Abbott government's asylum seeker policy and race rioters at Cronulla Beach, 2005.
[6] Carter, P. (1996). *The Lie of the Land*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 9.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that what the colonists actually created was a theatre set on which to stage the colony's settlement by a hard-working, homesick people. Treatment of the landscape as a theatrical backdrop to colonial dreams, fears and doubts is one of the most popular themes in the history of non-Indigenous Australian landscape painting. (Into the 20th century, 'clearing' as a symbol of 'claiming' land was epitomised in Papunya in the early 1970s, when government authorities infamously painted over an enormous Honey Ant Dreaming mural painted by community elders.)

Having established the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous contemporary Australian art, the next stage of the research tested the thesis that the vantage point of home can be an effective curatorial device in articulating perceptions of place, both on a national and international platform. In their focus on Indigenous art and its relationship to concepts of home, *Talking About Abstraction* and *Prepossession* lay the groundwork for research into the capacity of curatorial strategies in an expanded field to engender cross-cultural dialogue that begins with ideas of home. This research resulted in two curatorial projects: *The Lie of the Land*: Primavera 2005, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney (7 September – 13 November, 2005) and *Home Ground* (Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW, 21 April – 3 June, 2006), which brought together two Australian and two international artists.

## 3.1 The lie of the land

Homi Bhabha argues that colonialist attitudes to place inevitably inform contemporary perceptions, despite the passing of time.[7] The first section of research in this chapter tested, on a national scale and in the Australian context, Bhabha's theory of landscape as a flawed metaphor for defining national identity:

[7] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 199–244), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 201.

> The recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity emphasizes the quality of light, the question of social visibility, the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its forms of collective expression. There is, however, always the distracting presence of another temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of the national present.[8]

The curatorial impetus for *The Lie of the Land* was to challenge the "collective expression" of cultural identity that often defines national exhibitions of Australian art. It also set out to appropriate and subvert the very language of Australian landscape painting. If an exhibition is restricted in content by national borders, the curatorial premise must be underscored by an examination through the selected works of connections and attitudes to that place. The rejection of top-down images of a laid back, sunny Australia in favour of revealing the darker aspects of our home country runs counter to post-war imperatives to explore national identity through landscape painting. Nevertheless, landscape painting remains a popular genre in Australia. The image of an open and sun-drenched land has come to symbolise the cheerful disposition of its inhabitants. More recently, however, as Australia's inhumane treatment of asylum seekers and political apathy towards disastrous climatic change reveals, Australia is no longer a welcoming nation and the hedonism of carefree summer days, encapsulated by Dupain's *The Sunbaker*, has been replaced by the very real fear of environmental ruin.

The curatorial research for this project was based on a methodology and approach not previously implemented by curators of the previous thirteen editions of Primavera. The research, involving gallery and studio visits to every capital city as well as Alice Springs and Canberra, set out to imbue the exhibition with a more meaningful socio-political underpinning than previous editions, which lacked thematic intent and authentic geographic representation of Australian artists. As such, *The Lie of the Land* was the first Primavera to

[8] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 199–244), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 205.

introduce an overarching theme and the first to include Indigenous Australian artists from remote regions. Testing two of the curatorial strategies that are the subject of this thesis, the exhibition pro-actively sought to redefine the meaning of 'landscape painting' by expanding the definition of 'painting' to include installation-based responses to place that provided a three-dimensional, immersive experience in the museum; and to include work that was political in content, engaged with pressing issues of the day such as climate change, global war and the displacement of people and cultures.[9]

In the last generation of Australian art there has been an unravelling of nationality.[10] Nevertheless, the landscape remains a universally understood visual lexicon in Australian art. The land is synonymous with the meaning of home for many Australians. Landscape painting has always assumed a special place in Australian hearts and homes, particularly Arcadian views that soften a landscape perceived as challenging and harsh. Colonial artists such as Conrad Martens anglicised the land, subduing it for colonial eyes still adjusting to the light, while Fred McCubbin mythologised in sentimental narratives the hardships of early pioneer life. The artists whose work was in *The Lie of the Land* take the land – their home ground – as the primary focus of their practice. While painting links their work on a formal level, its traditional parameters were consciously transgressed in the exhibition-making process to incorporate three-dimensional, site-specific and installation practice. At a time when our sense of place is infused with anxieties over Indigenous and refugee humanitarian issues at home, environmental crises and civil wars overseas, how does this tenth generation since European settlement articulate its vision of our land? Many young people are less compliant, less willing to stand by as the land is pummelled and exploited for economic gain by the wealthiest 2% of the

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[9] "Felicity Fenner has taken the land as the theme for Primavera 2005 and her exhibition focuses on artists dealing with the representation of place. The exhibition connects with the well-established genre of landscape which is questioned and re-interpreted by this young generation of artists in response to current political and environmental reality". MacGregor, E.A. (2005). *Foreword, Primavera 2005.* Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 2.

[10] For an expansion of this argument, see Appendix V: Fenner, F. (2008). In Conversation: Felicity Fenner speaks with eight artists from "Handle with Care". *Art & Australia*, *45*(3), 344-349.

global population. This is the generation of higher education levels and falling birth rates; increasingly international in its outlook and itinerant in its lifestyle, its artists grew up with the understanding that we live on Aboriginal land in the Asia Pacific region.

Bhabha's "other temporality" in the Australian context is multi-faceted. We might call the earth below our feet 'home', but for those living in the slipstream of today's fluid internationalism, where is the home ground and what does it signify? In painting, the term 'ground' refers to the under-layer of paint that forms the surface on which the artist works. As revealed in the research towards *Talking About Abstraction*, Aboriginal artists tend to begin with a black or ochre ground, while non-Indigenous artists almost always paint a white ground – a fact that inherently politicises painting in that it is a visual, undeniable manifestation of Indigenous artists' inextricable ties to 'country'. Aboriginal artists have worked this way for thousands of years, black being the colour of the skin that is 'painted up' for ceremonial dance and red being the colour of the earth. For non-Indigenous artists, however, there is no such cultural imperative. On the contrary, in Western painting, marks are made on a clean white surface – a blank slate. As Kate Grenville's colonist character William Thornhill believed, "A person was entitled to draw any picture they fancied on the blank slate of this new place."[11]

Collectively, the work in *The Lie of the Land* referred to landscapes of many kinds, from the postcard idyll to the global political. While there were paintings in this exhibition by Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous artists that cited traditional artistic approaches in their consideration of the land's visual, geographic and spiritual traits, they did so knowingly, their art a vehicle of socio-political commentary. The staged, symbolic and overtly political landscapes by some of the other artists in the exhibition used themes of place in a more metaphorical capacity to reflect on self-destructive, malevolent and even fatalistic aspects of contemporary experience.

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[11] Grenville, K. (2005). *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text publishing, p. 319.

The artists in the exhibition also brought a diversity of cultural backgrounds to their vision of the land: two were born into remote Aboriginal communities, two were born in Europe, while the others have a mixture of Aboriginal, European and British heritage. The peripatetic lives of many of these artists inhibits a coherent articulation of the home ground. For some artists, the home ground is literally that, the place their ancestors have inhabited for tens of thousands of years. Others observe the home ground from a distance caused by separation; others view it from a broader, global context.

One curatorial aim in *The Lie of the Land* was to expand the parameters of painting by facilitating immersive, three-dimensional spaces that optimised viewer engagement inside the exhibition galleries. While Danie Mellor and Tom Muller utilised out-of-reach wall spaces that could be engaged with from multiple viewpoints upstairs and down, Michelle Ussher and Jemima Wyman each created three-dimensional installations in which viewers confronted the nature of their own relationship to the land.

Ussher's painting installation was largely drawn from experience of the landscape from a car window. She explored the interaction that occurs when we stop the car to admire the view, bring out the camping equipment and set up a temporary home. There are references embedded in this work to the history of landscape painting:

> I have a lot of respect for artists from the colonial period (Glover in particular), who were simply documenting the world around them as they knew it, trusting that it would have a greater meaning down the track. Which it does. I try to work with this in mind. Which is why my work often begins with recreational activities, and the process of making also becomes one.[12]

[12] M. Ussher, personal communication (email to the author), June, 2005.

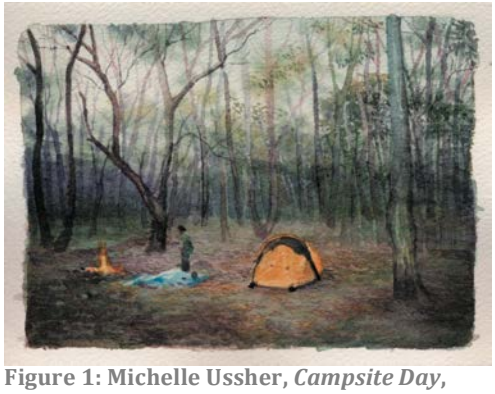

**Figure 1: Michelle Ussher, *Campsite Day*, 2005. Image courtesy the artist**

We know, however, that while Glover did not anglicise or soften the landscape as Martens and other British artists had, he did romanticise life on the land, particularly in his depictions of Aboriginal people existing peacefully in a Tasmanian colony that history reveals was hostile to them. Ussher's work is similarly romanticised, her appreciation of the land as a place of recreational pursuits inevitably that of an outsider looking in from the actual and metaphorical car window. Like Glover, however, the artist is not entirely an interloper. Like Debra Dawes's childhood experience in Moree and A.D.S. Donaldson's in Darwin (discussed in Chapter Two in relation to *Talking About Abstraction*), Ussher has first-hand knowledge of living on a racially contested home ground. She grew up in Kempsey on the New South Wales coast, a town with a large Aboriginal population and a history of racist violence and dispossession. As a non-Indigenous person living alongside an Aboriginal community, Ussher is well-placed to observe the impact of white settlement on Aboriginal society. The playful nostalgic elements in her work are not unlike those found in colonial landscape painting, only here it is a wistful reference not to the land of another continent or to romantic notions of the sublime, but to the loss of innocence. As recently as a generation ago, we barely questioned the invasive, suburban settlement of the land, shaping it into user-friendly plots that we proudly call home.

Ussher's work has a vernacular aesthetic that combines McCubbin's romantic view of the Australian bush with the shabbiness of contemporary campsites. Hidden in the undergrowth are a discarded toy, a lost tennis ball and other insignificant human accoutrements that typically litter the landscape; high in branches are rustic tree-houses, evidence of an innate territorial desire since colonisation to claim the home ground. The need to gain a foothold, to establish a sense of home in the Australian bush, is exemplified by the determination

against the odds and at enormous personal and moral expense, by Grenville's Sal Thornhill, who, faced with the reality of her family never returning to London, accepted that home was a concept that could be tied to another place: "She would not leave them, those native-born children. So, rather than taking them home, she would make home here."[13]

Grenville's Sal Thornhill in the early 19th century, like my grandmother a century and a half later, still thought of England as home, despite having created a life and family in Australia. Both women, typical of their respective eras, struggled to grow English roses in gardens fenced safely from unwanted encroachment by native bushland. Both women resigned themselves to a life under the Australian sun, sustained in their quest to achieve a feeling of home by turning their backs on the history of the land beneath their feet, embracing instead the traditions of a life in England long since abandoned.[14]

Visitors to *The Lie of the Land* were invited to feel 'at home': people were able to enter Ussher's installation and be immersed in the physicality of its painted landscape. It included a camping ground complete with a plastic table and chairs, an extension of the built environment in which it was sited. People sat and relaxed for a while, taking in the enveloping landscape painted by Ussher directly onto the wall. It reminded us that Australia's is an immigrant society and even when we are in the landscape of our own home country, we are never fully part of it; like recreational campers, we are neither quite in nor out. The landscape is a construct of our collective imagination; the expansive interior on which myths of national identity were created are rarely glimpsed. Like much of the work selected for the exhibition, Ussher echoed Germaine Greer's view (from an expatriate's distance) of an Australia largely unseen by the majority of the population:

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[13] Grenville, K. (2005). *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, p. 316–317.

[14] I cite my grandmother of English and Scottish heritage as being representative of many generations of Anglo Australian women. Beyond the ever-thirsty English garden that was home to Duncan the red setter, my clearest memories of my grandmother's house in suburban Sydney are of English hunting prints on the dining room wall, Yorkshire Pudding on Sundays and back issues of Country Life in the downstairs loo: aspirational accoutrements of a life in England she had never had.

> If we climbed out of the recreational vehicle and sat on the ground we might begin to get the message that we can't afford to hear, the message that since contact with Aborigines has never stopped transmitting. The land is the source of everything: if we rip it up and sell it off we will perish with it, or else move on in our restless European way to devastate someone else's country – or planet.[15]

Jemima Wyman's work in the exhibition also considered how we mould the natural environment – physically and imaginatively – to satisfy aesthetic and psychological desire. Carter describes colonisation and our social culture as a picnic rug thrown over the country, a metaphor for the way it distances us from its native character and airbrushes over its Indigenous past with imported lifestyles and value systems.[16] Along with trees and native habitats, Indigenous culture was swept aside for over 200 years, only recently again acknowledged, courtesy of the discovery of a rich visual arts heritage that has traction in a contemporary context. Wyman's work questions, in an engaging, three-dimensional stage set, postcolonial constructs of national identity that deny the atrocities of colonisation that have gone before. Her painting installation remapped the landscape using the visual lexicon of Western modernist painting but from the vantage point of Tasmanian Aborigines. The installation embraced rather than denied its fictional construct by mimicking in its stage-like construction the artifice of colonial claims to the land. For *The Lie of the Land* Wyman worked closely with the curator to create a site-specific painting forming a three-sided enclosure that, with its exposed scaffolding, was deliberately theatrical. Extending into the physicality of

**Figure 2: Visitors physically immersed in Jemima Wyman's *Scapepology (Panorama)*, 2005. Photo: Ben Simons. Image courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Australia**

[15] Greer, G. (2004). Daniel Malone. Quoted in I. Carlos, *2004 Biennale of Sydney: On Reason and Emotion*. Sydney: Biennale of Sydney, p. 140.
[16] Carter, P. (1996). *The Lie of the Land*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 2.

sculpture the wrap-around *Kimberley Blue* painting made the previous year for *Talking About Abstraction*, here Wyman's painting becomes a three-dimensional, inhabitable structure.[17] The imagery in the painting is based on three postcard photographs from famous environmental sites in Tasmania – Cradle Mountain and the Walls of Jerusalem National Park – stitched together to create a simulated panorama of a landscape that is also a tourist attraction.

Wyman's practice is premised on the conviction that beauty is a construct of desire: she uses formal elements to simplify and smooth over the landscape's irregularities, and exaggerated colour to accentuate its dramatic, cinematic qualities. Then based in Los Angeles, the artist was influenced by filmic constructions of alternative realities: in *Scapeology (Panorama)*, created for *The Lie of the Land*, the colours are too fantastical, the land too luscious, as if too good to be true. Yet the installation, despite its superficial glare, is infused with dark suspicion. We are reminded of the disturbing untruth that Truman stumbled on when he sailed his boat into the horizon, ripping through the painted backdrops as he collided with the outer edge of a movie-set world, confirming his suspicion that his world was a sham.[18]

Traumatic events that are all too often swept under the colourful picnic rug of fabricated histories – a phenomenon especially prevalent in Tasmania – come bubbling to the surface of Wyman's immersive landscape panorama. In the Primavera installation, a lurid palette and novel construction entice the viewer into its enclosure, but it is a trap: the viewer's experience of being encircled by the landscape is intended to evoke the experience of Tasmanian Aborigines who were rounded up, violated and often massacred. The artist reminds us that beneath its tourist-brochure natural beauty, the Tasmanian ground is forever stained by a violent and murderous past. Wyman wrote of *Scapeology*

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[17] See Chapter Two, Figure 7.

[18] Feldman, E.S., Rudin, S., Niccol, A., Schroeder, A. (Producers), & Weir, P. (Director). (1998). *The Truman Show* [Motion picture]. United States: Paramount Pictures. Theories around the existence of other, parallel universes were favoured many Hollywood filmmakers around the late 20th and early 21st centuries, most notably in popular films such as *The Matrix* trilogy (1999–2003) and *Avatar* (2009).

*(Panorama)* that it "specifically relates to the Australian landscape, its embedded histories and stories that lie beneath the surface".[19] While William Thornhill hid from the truth of the moral sin he'd committed in expunging the natives from his land – symbolised by the Aboriginal rock painting he kept beneath the floorboards – Wyman consciously exposes with deliberate stage crafting the fabricated lie of our relationship to the land.

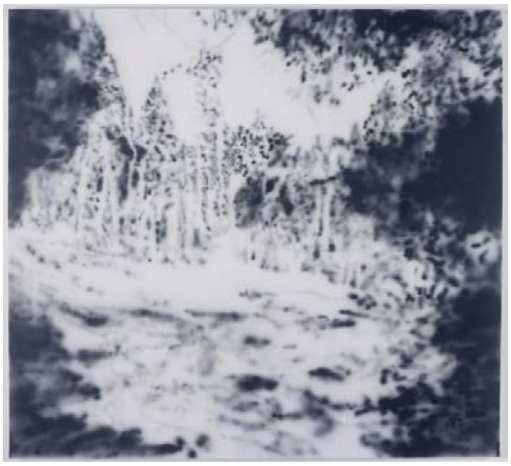

**Figure 3: Fiona Lowry, *"... there shall be two men left in the field: one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and one will be left". Matthew 24:40–41*, 2004. Image courtesy the artist**

In a parallel theme with *Prepossession*, the idea of home as a place haunted by a traumatised past underscored much of the work in *The Lie of the Land*, a concept in the case of this exhibition conveyed in painting rather than photo-based media. Fiona Lowry's work encapsulated the relationship between photography and the land to reveal the psychological tension that lingers in the space between fact and feeling. Lowry's paintings in the exhibition referred to news coverage that imbues certain places with a mystique of fear and malice:

> When Samantha disappeared from our neighbourhood, her image started to appear on posters stuck to telegraph poles and in train stations, asking 'have you seen this girl?' My very normal walk to school – short-cutting across the park to a small laneway that made the walk faster and so allowed me more morning sleep – suddenly became a journey laced with the possibility of abduction and murder by an unknown sexual deviant who might leap from behind the bushes and drag me off, never to be seen again. The landscape around me shifted for a while and became a paranoid one.[20]

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[19] Wyman, J. (2005). *Primavera 2005: The Lie of the Land* (Artist's statement). Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 53.
[20] Lowry, F. (2005). *Primavera 2005: The Lie of the Land* (Artist's statement). Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 29.

While Lowry relies on current affairs reports to provide details of violent world events, her concern is not so much the events themselves as the traumatic associations that haunt the crime scene for years afterwards. In limiting her palette to black, white and grey, Lowry provides the paintings with a bureaucratic, documentary façade. In Lowry's case, the interest in traumatised landscapes arose from a childhood incident that caused the landscape around her home to "become a paranoid one". We can't quite see what is there. Forms are unfocused and indistinct. We know what happened at that place, so think that we can feel the vestiges of evil absorbed into the ground. Perversely, the more horrific a crime, the greater our curiosity. Appreciation of the link between absence and paranoia is crucial to a reading of Lowry's paintings. Finding a parallel between menace and spectacle, "Fiona Lowry makes tourists of us all".[21]

> [I am] interested in how our knowledge of what has taken place in a certain location affects our experience of that place. Once we've located the signs of the space that conjure or remind us of its infamous associations, our vision becomes impaired. We project our belief onto and into these paces, animating the exterior surfaces.[22]

In the context of the exhibition, Lowry's work redefined the traditional role of painting of place ('landscape painting') not by becoming three-dimensional like the work of Wyman and Ussher, but by referencing news media imagery and its impact on perceptions of place. Jill Bennett has since described news events as "the definitive markers of contemporaneity [though] almost never 'represented' in any straightforward or categorical fashion by contemporary art as they were in a traditional genre such as history painting".[23]

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[21] Keehan, R. (2005). *Fiona Lowry 'Left Behind.'* Sydney: Gallery Barry Keldoulis, unpaginated.
[22] Lowry, F. (2005). *Primavera 2005: The Lie of the Land* (Artist's statement). Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 29.
[23] Bennett, J. (2012). *Practical Aesthetics*. London: I.B. Tauris, p. 33.

Wyman and Ussher use garish colour schemes to comment on aspects of our romanticised and superficial relationship to the land from an outsider's point of view; other young Australian artists use colour to directly reflect the land, its nuances and history. Colour in traditional Aboriginal art has a no less political role than in the work of Western trained artists because the Indigenous palette is based on, or in the case of Pedro Wonaeamirri drawn from the earth itself, revealing a deep rapport with the land and reinforcing cultural ties to home.

**Figure 4: Pedro Wonaeamirri, Pukamani Pole, 2003. Photo: Ben Simons. Image courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art Australia**

In tradition-based Aboriginal art, ceremonial dance, intimately connected to stories about the land, informs the paintings created on canvas for exhibition and the market. While maintaining his role as a spokesperson for and public representative of Tiwi art, Pedro Wonaeamirri also lives a home life that includes traditional fishing, hunting and ceremony. The Tiwi people have lived on Bathurst and Melville Islands for about 20,000 years and today maintain strong connections with old cultural practices and beliefs. Wonaeamirri's country, life and art are inextricably bound: "When I paint I think of myself and who I am".[24]

According to Wonaeamirri, his paint is the land of his home and his paintings are about the land, the sea and how they began. Wonaeamirri, like other Tiwi artists painting Jilamara (which translates as 'design' or 'decoration'), uses ochre sourced from the earth of his homeland to create these designs based on ceremonial body painting. Pukumani poles are synonymous with Tiwi culture and are still made today, both for funeral rituals on the islands and for the mainland and international art markets. Wonaeamirri has been carving and decorating the ironwood poles since he was a teenager and has developed a

[24] Wonaeamirri, P. (2004). *Living Tiwi: Tiwi Awuta Yimpanguwi*. Winnellie: Jilamara Arts and Crafts Association, p. 31.

distinctive style that is carried into his paintings. He uses a traditional wooden comb to achieve fine linear arrangements and, in both the paintings and the Pukumani poles, Wonaeamirri experiments with blocks of ochre background and strident, innovative patterning.[25]

The other Indigenous artist from a remote region of Australia was Yukultji Napangati from Kintore in the Western Desert. Born in 1970, she was the eldest of the artists in the exhibition, yet one of the least experienced, having only begun painting four or five years earlier.[26] Her canvas is first painted earth red, the ground of the painting matching the ground of the desert country that the artist calls home.[27] In Napangati's process this is sometimes overlayed with another, the black ground. Thus, in Napangati's work the earth and the body become a single, integrated ground that represents the land of her home. Though one of the youngest artists with Papunya Tula, Napangati has a particularly insightful understanding of the land. One of seven children from a traditional Pintupi family, as a child she lived a nomadic hunter-gatherer existence in the Gibson Desert, living off native plants and animals. In 1984, aged 14, her "lost tribe" family group of nine walked out of the desert region west of Lake Mackay, where they had been entirely devoid of contact with the outside world. She and her family were confronted for the first time by white civilisation when they arrived in the town of Kiwirrkura.[28] For Napangati, therefore, the knowledge gained by Aboriginal people from oral histories is based in a childhood not only untouched by but unaware of white colonisation and Western civilisation. Her inclusion in *The Lie of the Land* necessitated, from

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[25] Pukumani is sometimes spelt as 'Pukamani'.

[26] The definition in the case of Primavera of "emerging" artists as artists 35 years old or under is problematic for curators of the exhibition wishing to include Aboriginal artists from remote communities, who unlike their Western counterparts do not often commence painting until much later in life. This is the reason why previous curators of Primavera had disregarded the work of non-urban Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, despite the calibre of their work, claimed by some critics as representing the mainstream of Australian art (Vivien Johnson, Chapter Two).

[27] It is curious that the colour of the ground is also known, in a Western art context, as Venetian red.

[28] For an authoritative account of Pintupi people, see anthropologist Fred R. Myers's research first published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1986, later as a book: Myers, F.R. (1991). *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

a curatorial point of view, a delicate balance in maintaining in the presentation of her work the context of her understanding of place, while simultaneously imbuing her practice with significance in this new, foreign context of a contemporary art museum. Napangati also faced the same dilemma of other Pintupi artists who "sought, in their movements, to extend their system of relatedness to include the new opportunities of contact with whites and at the same time to sustain their autonomy".[29]

As identified in Chapter Two, this push-and-pull effect of wanting to embrace new opportunities whilst retaining cultural tradition can be harnessed in exhibition-making to create a tension between the work of tradition-based Indigenous and non-Indigenous art. This sense of "same but different" (to quote a phrase from anthropologist Jennifer Biddle) in turn lends a tension to the exhibition itself, one that affectively embodies contested connections to place between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures.[30] In the context of *Talking About Abstraction*, this tension was created in the gallery spaces by installing the works 'in conversation' with each other. These 'conversations' were staged on a curatorial platform that assumed the authority of the work by the Indigenous artists, yet the terms of their engagement were determined by their status as invited guests of the non-Indigenous artists. In *The Lie of the Land*, conversely, individual works offered discrete narratives of place that collectively created for the viewer Bhabha's "third space": a space where the conversation is not pre-determined, but opened, through juxtaposition and unexpected collisions of insight, to new interpretations and meanings.

The push-and-pull affect that is often intrinsic to the making and exhibition of Indigenous art in a non-Indigenous setting, when combined with postcolonial and anthropological research, can be aggregated to great effect in the work of

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[29] Myers, F.R. (1991). *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 25.
[30] Biddle's research involved the introduction of new technology and skills – animation – to facilitate the telling of community and traditional narratives. See NIEA. (2014). *Forum: Same but Different – Experimentation and Innovation in Desert Arts II.* Retrieved from http://www.niea.unsw.edu.au/events/forum-same-different-experimentation-and-innovation-desert-arts-ii

artists living between cultures. Western-trained Indigenous artist Danie Mellor, for example, was drawn back again and again to his family's country in the rainforest areas around Cairns. His PhD project, *Tracing family history and the histories of the area in the Atherton Tablelands*, inspired the shield installations shown in *The Lie of the Land* that merge Aboriginal cultural tradition with Western museological methodologies. Mellor's academic – and inherently personal – inquiry necessarily entailed museum-based research, where he was struck by the historic and in some cases ongoing clinical approach to collecting, storing and labelling Aboriginal objects.

*Moving out, moving on* is a series of twelve ceramic shields, moulded in the same shape as the traditional shields now held as 'primitive' artefacts in many museums. Mellor's ancestors' shields are no longer in the possession of family descendants: traditional objects were lost and stolen with the dispersal of Aboriginal peoples through policies of relocation and assimilation. Mellor brings together in this work his research into both the objects themselves and the histories that led to them being displaced. Thus, the shields become symbols not only of the original objects, but of Aboriginal people, shunted from place to place like excess baggage, in a top-down effort to dilute and eradicate the culture, if not the race. Each of the places named on the shields is resonant of displacement and dispossession. The work's installation was similarly symbolic, the shields on the wall relating to the formation of the land they describe. Balancing the need to present the work in a way that maintained its symbolic representation of place and movement between places (of Aboriginal people in the desert and the artist's own family across continents), while also providing an experiential narrative for viewers, artist and curator worked closely together to install the work in a way that mapped both Mellor's research into place and movement, and the positioning of

**Figure 5: Danie Mellor, *Moving out, moving on*, 2004. Image courtesy the artist**

the work within the museum so that it represented movement and opened a visual dialogue between it and other works.

Tom Mùller's work, for example, was installed adjacent to Mellor's and is also premised on a phenomenological experience of the world and the movement of its peoples. (Interestingly, both artists were brought up and educated in Europe, so bring Nick Waterlow's birds-eye perspective to concepts of home.) Perhaps a legacy of his Swiss heritage, Mùller believes that national borders should not be patrolled, but open to anyone desiring to cross them. His *World Passport* project involves the issuing of handmade passports that permit the holder to travel freely around the globe. Where Mellor's concept of home is, despite a nomadic childhood, closely fixed to a certain place, Mùller's is a conceptual place of his own making, populated by 'world passport' holders. Nevertheless, the concept underlying the project is very much formed through the prism of home: Mùller was born in Switzerland, a territory of safe haven synonymous with political neutrality. Given his interest in global movement and utilisation in his practice of map-making methodologies, a site-specific work was commissioned that would engage audiences from a number of different vantage points. In the wall painting created for *The Lie of the Land*, Mùller reduced the world's international airport runways to an abstract composition of silver lines intersecting over a dark ground, again recalling Carter's observation of the non-Indigenous relationship to the land:

> We do not walk over the surface; we do not align our lives with its inclines, folds and pockets. We glide over it; and to do this, to render what is rough smooth, passive, passable, we linearize it, conceptualizing the ground, indeed the civilized world, as an ideally flat space, whose billiard-table surface can be skated over in any direction without hindrance.[31]

[31] Carter, P. (1996). *The Lie of the Land*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 2.

**Figure 6: Tom Mùller, *Globalisation*, 2004. Image courtesy the artist**

Another of Mùller's works selected for *The Lie of the Land* was a projection of a night sky, showing another alternative model for mapping international relations. It had an ominous tone, the mode of display – projection – conjuring surveillance techniques used in warfare and international espionage. These are the tools of the earliest map-makers, who projected cartographic drawings onto the wall like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. *Globalisation* traced the landmass of every nation, as in traditional maps, but then, in a democratic gesture of equality, places them on top of each other like a stack of odd-sized pancakes, so that the whole world pivots on the centre of every single nation. In the same spirit as Mùller's other mapping projects, national borders become no more than an abstract concept. It was interesting to note that by replacing political world centres with the geographic centre of every land mass, in Mùller's ideal world Australians would look not to Canberra but to Papunya for leadership.

By including both non-Indigenous and Aboriginal approaches to mapping and imagining the land, the exhibition revealed parallels in colonial and contemporary political discrepancies between fact and fiction. While work by Danie Mellor, Yukultji Napangati and Pedro Wonaeamirri is testament to a continuing Aboriginal claim on this land, those by Mùller, Lowry, Ussher and Wyman explore the slippage between propaganda and reality, proposing that injustice and untruth continue to haunt the physical and socio-political spaces that we inhabit today.

*The Lie of the Land* set out to investigate artists' perceptions of home and place, creating a space in which challenging and dissenting views to conventional concepts of Australia could be in dialogue with each other. This dialogue around "the lie of the land" was achieved with a combination of two key curatorial strategies: the creation of three-dimensional environments which facilitated a

physically immersive engagement with the work; and the counter positioning of works in dialogue, their subject matter intersecting with real-life events.

## 3.2 On home ground

> The land remains alive both spiritually (invisible) and physically (visible).[32]

While research for *The Lie of the Land* was primarily focused on visual descriptors of place, the subsequent phase of investigation was concerned with the capacity of cognitive and mnemonic triggers to convey a sense of place through the prism of home. Extending the research into the prism of home as an effective means of engagement around place, the next phase of research applied the thesis to a curatorial project with international content. Adopting an experimental approach in the more focused forum of a four-person exhibition, the work of two Australian artists (one Anglo-Celtic, one Aboriginal) was put into dialogue with that of others from contested home grounds – Palestine and Colombia.[33] Artists were selected for their intimate knowledge of place, specifically the area in which they were born and continue to live in or nearby. Each of the artists has left their homeland at some stage and each has returned on a regular or permanent basis. The perspective gained from being away, even temporarily, has equipped each artist with an insight to home often not shared by those who never leave.[34]

The exhibition was conceived as a research exercise to test the narratives arising from convergent and divergent articulations of home by configuring in the same space work by two artists from the postcolonial story of black and white Australia and two from more overtly violent troublespots in other parts of

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[32] Mundine, D. (1996) …Without land we are nothing. Without land we are a lost people… In R. Mellick & N. Waterlow (Eds.] *Spirit and Place* (pp. 46–48). Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 47.

[33] Like *Prepossession*, the research was conducted on the basis of a fifty percent Australian and fifty percent international representation of artists.

[34] For a discussion on the foreigner and expatriate's view of home, see Fenner, F. "A bird's–eye view: Nick Waterlow's exhibitions, *Art and Australia*, June 2010, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 64–67

the world. While not taking issue with philosopher Tony Fry's assertion that we are living in an age of unsettlement defined by an ever-increasing movement of people around the planet, the majority of the world's population still live and die within a small geographic radius. If people move regions or countries, it is often because they are forced to do so by political persecution, civil unrest and, as Fry's *Design as Politics* argues, increasingly for reasons of environmental catastrophe.[35] Those with the liberty to relocate for professional or lifestyle motivations generally retain a strong sense of home as being elsewhere and often make a permanent return later in life. It seems that no matter what is played out on its ground, home has an almost universal magnetic pull.

What does 'home' mean for artists who continue to live and work (for the most part) in the place of their birth? What can their vantage point convey about place that others can't?[36] "Being situated, embedded, to feel that you belong or at least 'know' a place is not necessarily of artistic merit."[37] While this thesis agrees with Doherty's criticism of the fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) biennale artist, the research here set out to measure the impact of intimate and ultimately emotionally subjective experience of place on the artists' approach to the depiction of home. Unlike *The Lie of the Land*, in this more focused exhibition the curatorial strategies employed did not include immersion (beyond creating a darkened cinematic experience for the film work, as a curator would for any film work), but created a dialogue in the gallery spaces to compare real-world experiences of home.

The knowledge and experience contained in works in the exhibition covered four very different parts of the world – from ancient Palestine's Galilee to central Australia's Gibson Desert, from the urban chaos of Bogotá to the rural austerity of Breadalbane in rural New South Wales – the artists' work linked not

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[35] Fry, T (2011). *Design as Politics*. New York: Berg, p. 2

[36] The research towards *Home Ground* did not explore claims of connectivity to place by expatriate, migrant or itinerant artists: these artists' interest in place through the prism of home was explored in the next stage of the research (Chapters Four and Five).

[37] Doherty, C. (2007). Curating Wrong Places…Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone? In P. O'Neill (Ed.), *Curating x 24*. Amsterdam: De Appel. Retrieved from http://www.publicart.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/Writings/curatingwrongplaces...pdf

by media (the exhibition encompassed photography, film and painting), but by their implementation of the prism of home as a lens, a starting point from which to reflect on the broader human experience. The concept of home ground also laid the foundations in the exhibition space for the creation of Bhabha's "third space", in which visual and mnemonic markers of cultural identity can be re-ordered so that new interpretations and ultimately new meanings can be identified:

> It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.[38]

The affective space of engagement within an exhibition is inherently subjective, nuanced by the knowledge and experience of its users, the exhibition visitors. As Deleuze and Guttari describe it in *A Thousand Plateaus*, this alternative place in which new meanings can emerge is a space of affective rather than optical perception.[39]

While the nature of their engagement is of course impossible to entirely control, *Home Ground* was premised on the belief that all visitors share an experience of home – whether it be a current or remembered place of happiness or of trauma. It proposed, in other words, that the prism of home provides a universal platform for engagement with artworks' subject matter, no matter how diverse the cultural context in which it is produced. What happens then at the interface of the artists' stories of home filtered by the viewers' own prism of home?

While most of the world's population may indeed live and die within a few miles of where they were born, it is also true that the fairytale phrase 'home sweet home' is not one to be taken for granted by a large proportion of the global

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[38] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 28–56), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 55.
[39] Deleuze, G. & Guttari, F. (2005). *A Thousand Plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. (pp. 517–578). London: Continuum International Publishing Group, p. 544.

family. On a domestic scale, the home can be a place of violence, abuse and neglect – a place to be escaped from and remembered with bitterness. Indeed, the home regions of some of the artists in *Home Ground* were and continue to be under attack, which makes their visual relationship with home not a nostalgic one, but one of self-preservation in the face of living conditions marred by disputed lands, violence and racism. Yet the work in the exhibition was neither angry nor bitter, nor was it overtly political in intent. Its everyday themes found a connection with viewers, revealing in its imagery the strength of spirit that is to be found in the simplest of life's gestures and the most ordinary of circumstance and place. Fundamentally the exhibition was about resilience, about the strength to overcome trouble and uncertainty, to conceive of the home ground as an anchor within the broader life cycles of birth, death and renewal.

*Home Ground* presented an insider's view of the home ground, one that is inextricably bound to each artists' own history and sense of identity. The intersection with real-life in the works in the exhibition concerned the real lives of the works' authors, the four artists; thus the dialogue with exhibition visitors was conducted on the level of a shared experience of home as a concept, rather than as a shared experience of a particular place.

Palestinian artist Ahlam Shibli and Colombian Juan Manuel Echavarria undertake their practice at the coalface of political oppression and violence: Shibli in Israel-occupied Palestine, Echavarria in war-ravaged Colombia. These two artists' work is photo-based, a medium that facilitates maximum spontaneity in the most intimate of settings. In contrast to these artists' focus on individual portraits of ordinary people from home, the two Australian artists in the exhibition – one Aboriginal, one non-Indigenous – paint a land in which the human presence is all pervasive but not articulated in figurative form. We see social beliefs and stories about the land in Napangati's work and monuments to specific people having passed through a place in Jenny Bell's cemetery series, but neither include portrayals of the people who inhabit this land to which their

lives are so closely tied, only traces of a past that echo across the contemporary experience.

**Figure 7: Jenny Bell, *Shedding Light*, 2011. Image courtesy Australian Galleries**

Jenny Bell paints the little church at Breadalbane in country New South Wales, constantly threatened with closure because of its diminishing congregation, the weathered farm buildings and the cemetery at nearby Collector, resting place of local farming families for over two centuries. Like the work of other artists in this exhibition, Bell's oeuvre reveals as its impetus the land she calls home. 'Home' in the context of *Home Ground* is the "starting point" that Brooks describes, a lens from which to look through or an armature on which to build larger narratives about longing, displacement and mortality. Bell's artistic practice is testament to the fact that non-Indigenous people with historical links to a particular place experience feelings of empathy for and belonging to the land on which they were born, just as Indigenous people do. In Australia, this can be a contentious proposition, with any non-Indigenous claim to a spiritual connection to country inevitably overshadowed by the historical facts of colonial mistreatment of the original inhabitants. Complicating the acceptance of a non-Indigenous empathy with the land is the fact that Aboriginal art is conceived and marketed on its status as evidence of an historic, cultural connection to place, to the point that a non-Indigenous claim to an equally felt connection appears comparatively superficial or even staged. Thus, by accommodating Bell's work in the same space as that of her Indigenous contemporary, Yukultji Napangati, the exhibition revealed each artist's deeply felt connections to their home lands.

It is true that historically, unlike their Aboriginal counterparts, very few non-Indigenous Australian artists depict the land 'from the inside out'. As discussed in relation to *The Lie of the Land*, Conrad Martens anglicised the countryside for homesick colonial settlers, while Arthur Boyd and Sidney Nolan, despite the

paintings of the Australian land on which their fame was built, were more at home in Heide or Hampstead than they were in outback Australia. As Bell has noted on the similarities and differences in approach to the land by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian artists: "Fred Williams was perhaps the first artist to earth a deep understanding of the Western art tradition in this continent, revealing a truth that moved Emily Kame Kngwarreye to observe his work as that of a 'whitefella painting his country'".[40]

A politically active artist known for her commitment to restoring native flora and fauna on the land she calls home, Bell's knowledge of its geographic features, its vegetation and soil, of its inhabitants and social history informs her practice with a depth of understanding unusual to non-Indigenous painters of the Australian land. The paintings in *Home Ground* of gravestones in the local cemetery not only continue the artist's investigation into the relationship between people and place, but remind us of the difficulty and transience of that relationship. If the forms depicted look rigid or gauche against the bleached ground and radiant blue skies, it is because the very nature of our relationship to the land is an awkward one, perhaps even more so for those whose livelihood is dependent on farming that land. With immense visual clarity despite its apparent hesitancy, Bell describes this awkward alliance that has resulted from the implantation of European traditions onto a land whose ancient ways we still know so little about.

For Yukultji Napangati, the knowledge of her family's land and its history is based in a childhood not only untouched by, but unaware of, white civilisation and the Western world. As discussed in the previous section, at the age of 14 she was in the family group of nine that walked out of the desert region west of Lake Mackay where they had been living a traditional lifestyle entirely devoid of contact with the outside world.

[40] Jenny Bell, personal communication (conversation with the author), referring to a story recounted to the author by Christopher Hodges, 5 February 2005.

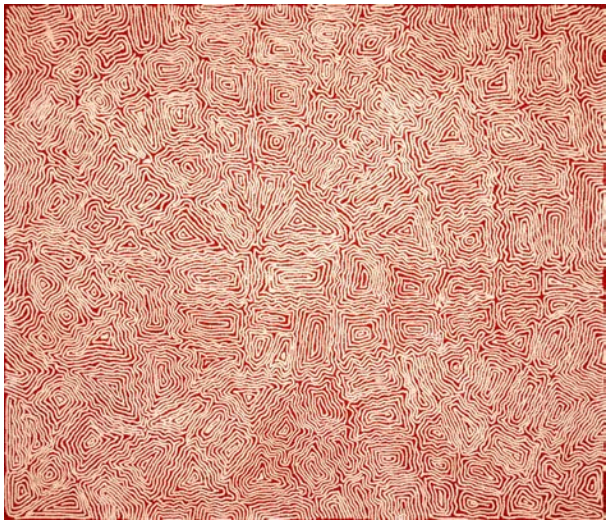

**Figure 8: Yukultji Napangati, *Untitled*, 2005. Image courtesy Utopia Art Sydney**

Napangati's paintings explore the link between body and land, of the artist's cultural connection to her home ground. Like Bell, she paints the land 'from the inside out', conveying a deep empathy with place and emphasising the process of painting from within her lifetime experience of that place and its stories.

Ulrich Loook writes of the connection between people and place in relation to Ahlam Shibli's work, the Palestinian artist in *Home Ground* though his words equally describe the observations made in Napangati's and even more particularly Bell's work:

> … the relation of a village or a house to the landscape; the relation of man-made facilities – such as a road, a fence, or a playground – to the land; the relation of buildings, shelters, and the material make-up of those structures to each other; the relation of objects to rooms and spaces; and, finally, the relation of individuals to the localities where they live.[41]

**Figures 9 and 10: Ahlam Shibli, *Unrecognised*, 2000 (two of 25). Images courtesy the artist**

[41] Loook, U. (2003). *Lost Time: Ahlam Shibli*. Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, p. 29.

Where Bell and Napangati survey the spiritual beliefs and cultural rituals that connect people to place, Shibli and Juan Echavarria (the fourth artist in *Home Ground*) turn their cameras' lenses to focus on the people themselves that inhabit what are two of the most violent home grounds on earth. Shibli's documentary-like photographs belong to the tide of photo-based documentary practice that has traversed into the field of visual art since 9/11, noted by Okwui Enwezor in 2006, the same year as *Home Ground*.[42] Shibli is a descendant of Palestine's indigenous Bedouin. From when she was four until 18 years old she was shepherdess to her family's goats before and after school every day. Just as Jenny Bell and Yukultji Napangati spent their childhood enveloped by the family's lands and its activities in rural and outback Australia, Shibli's knowledge of ancient Palestine, particularly the northern region west of the Jordan River known as Galilee, is integral to her sense of self, based as it is on first-hand experience of living on and working the land from the earliest age. Arab al-N'aim, a Bedouin village established during the 1930s, is the subject of *Unrecognised*, a series of 25 photographs.

The theme of "unrecognised" informed the dialogue between works in *Home Ground*. On one level, all the artists' ties to home are unrecognised, whether through discord or displacement. In Shibli's case, neither the 'illegal' village she documents nor its inhabitants are recognised by the state of Israel. Places such as Arab al-N'aim do not appear on any maps, are not signposted and do not have access to public services, such as power, water and sanitation.[43] Today Shibli lives in the nearby Israeli city of Haifa, returning often to her home grounds in the Galilee, where she has the understanding and trust of its rural dwellers. John Berger describes her as "a photographer of the hidden":

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[42] Okwui Enwezor quoted in Bennett, J. (2012). *Practical Aesthetics*. London: I.B. Tauris, p. 18: "… a notable development in contemporary art has been the rise of 'documentary', epitomised in doc 11 and doc 12', a documentary profoundly rooted in a politics of affectivity and aesthesis".
[43] After Israel's borders were drawn up and semi-nomadic villagers moved to a nearby Arab town, those that refused to leave their lands were, in 1964, forcibly evacuated. In Arab al-N'aim homes and the village water wells were destroyed by Israeli forces and today it is still illegal to erect permanent structures. Those that continue to live there do so in shanty homes constructed from sheets of tin, plastic and canvas.

> She photographs evidence, traces, places, people, who have remained in hiding. As a Palestinian photographer she is of course on the side of the hidden and those who hide… Some of them are alive, others have departed.[44]

Berger's remarks echo Djon Mundine's assertion in the context of Indigenous Australian art that "The land remains alive both spiritually (invisible) and physically (visible)."[45] Shibli's "hidden" views are those only seen through the lens of home, a device that linked the work of the four artists in the exhibition. In the juxtaposition in the gallery space of the two Australian artists' narratives of home, it became apparent that each was overshadowed by a layer of narrative not apparent when their work is viewed individually: by an absence. While Bell's work makes no reference to any Aboriginal history of the land that is the subject of her imagery, Napangati's makes no reference to the colonisation that has forever impacted her native lands. When put in the same room, facing each other, the images by these two women of the same generation revealed in each other's work an element of nostalgia for a place that is part-reality, part-fiction. This shared space, where memory and imagination collide, is perhaps a quintessential element of any descriptor of home and a platform for engagement with an audience with similarly unresolved connections to home. It is another manifestation of Bhabha's "third space", a space in which home is recognised by viewers in the work of these artists as a place defined by memory, longing and imagination.

In Shibli and Echavarria's portrait-based images, in contrast, there is an absence of visual documentation of the violence that has decimated their respective communities. We are reminded of Abigail Solomon-Godeau's words about the power or the hidden, of absence, in relation to *Prepossession*:

> In all instances, what is at stake is a reckoning with a violent historical past

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[44] Berger, J. (2003). A Nomadic Discretion. In *Lost Time: Ahlam Shibli*. Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, p. 7.
[45] Mundine, D. (1996) …Without land we are nothing. Without land we are a lost people… In R. Mellick & N. Waterlow (Eds.] *Spirit and Place* (pp. 46–48). Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, p. 47.

> whose legacy in the present remains variously that of racism, exclusion, alienation and political conflict but where the historical evidence cannot be directly represented.[46]

Hidden views of human resilience, which can only be conveyed through first-hand knowledge and experience, pervaded both *Prepossesion* and *Home Ground*. None of the artists in either exhibition depicts in their work extraordinary places, people or events. On the contrary, their focus is on the ordinary and the everyday. Ahlam Shibli's work is based on an intimate knowledge of the places she depicts and the people that live there. A FIFO photojournalist with Shibli's access to Arab al-N'aim would likely provide a voyeuristic view of the place, a kind of trauma tour of fascination and pity. As Ulrich Looock proposed in a discussion of another of Shibli's projects on the theme of home, *Goter* (2003), the artist is careful to circumvent political cliché by not casting her protagonists as victims.[47] Though the photographs of people inevitably function as portraits, it is the sense of home and family created in the most adverse conditions that is the artist's subject. There is only one face in the *Unrecognised* series that meets our gaze – that of an old woman sitting outdoors on the dirt. Creating an almost theatrical backdrop is a child's painting on a shabby tin wall, the outline of a suburban house and garden that is the dream, often the expectation, of children universally. The old woman relays this message of childhood hope with an emphatic stare into Shibli's lens, her imploring eyes a conduit between the outside world and a new generation of Arab children forced to live like refugees on their own home ground, and likely to do so for life.[48]

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[46] Solomon-Godeau, A. (2005). Haunted Habitats. In J. Bennett, F. Fenner & L. Kelly (Eds.), *Prepossession*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, p. 10.
[47] Loook, U. (2003). *Lost Time: Ahlam Shibli*. Birmingham: Ikon Gallery, p. 29.
[48] The political imperative that underscores Shibli's *Unrecognised* series is articulated with equal candour by Noam Chomsky: "If Obama were at all serious about opposing settlement expansion, he could easily proceed with concrete measures, for example, by reducing U.S. aid by the amount devoted to this purpose… If Israel built all the housing units already approved in the nation's overall master plan for settlements, it would almost double the number of settler homes in the West Bank". Chomsky, N. (2010). Turning Point? In *Hopes and Prospects* (pp. 177–205). London: Penguin, p. 187.

**Figure 11: Juan Manuel Echavarria, still from *Bocas de Ceniza (Mouths of Ash)*, 2003–04. Photo: F. Fenner**

The fourth artist in the exhibition, Juan Manuel Echavarria, like Shibli, seeks to imbue a sense of humanity to communities typically represented by outsiders as anonymous victims of foreign wars. Like Shibli, he deliberately avoids presenting images of violence itself – which would only contribute to the media's sensationalist imaging of their plight – and also avoids presenting his protagonists as victims beyond hope. The entire lifetimes of almost two generations of Colombians have been tainted by daily reports and graphic images of the violence wrought by drug wars. People are desensitised to images of violent crime, its ubiquity in that part of the world largely normalised. Echavarria's subjects, in contrast to the anonymous faces portrayed by the media, have individual stories to tell.

> What we see and hear in these videos are songs and performances by survivors of the ongoing conflict that rages in many rural areas of Colombia. Some of those who sing survived massacres perpetrated by paramilitary groups along Colombia's Caribbean coast, others lived to tell the tale after FARC guerrillas (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) massacred more than one hundred people inside the church of the small town of Bojayá in Chocó. The lyrics were written by those who sing as a form of catharsis that would allow them to move beyond the loss and pain of these events. Most of the singers are Afro-Colombians, among the poorest of all Colombians, who live in municipalities abandoned by the State. The aftermath of these events was that people were forced to abandon everything: their homes, their lands, and their few belongings, and move into shanty towns located in large cities.[49]

[49] Echavarria, J.M. (2005). *Mouths of Ash*. Milano: Charta, p. 46.

Like his compatriot artist Doris Salcedo, Echavarria gathers testimonies from people who have witnessed violence, including in the case of *Two Brothers* and *Mouths of Ash*, massacres of friends and family in their home town.[50] Where Salcedo's practice captures the disembodied silence of trauma and loss, Echavarria's visceral, close-up depiction of the sweating foreheads, weeping eyes and quavering voices of seven bereaved survivors of massacres leaves little space for metaphorical inference. Echavarria rescues displaced victims of violence from the anonymous, forgotten fate of most of Colombia's sufferers, by confronting viewers with their war-torn faces, voices and emotion. These simple songs performed by their authors offer an intensity and insight no longer possible in lurid media reportage. Like the other artists in *Home Ground*, the artist's story was told from the inside out, creating a forum for his courageous yet humble protagonists to do the same.[51] The difference between the outsider and insider view is the difference between art and documentary. As Jill Bennett has noted, "it is precisely in terms of the imperfect alignment of affect and knowledge-functions that certain visual art engagements with real events may be distinguished from a documentary orientation."[52]

Echavarria portrays a broken homeland, a place now defined not by communities and their infrastructure, but by individual stories of despair. Countering Susan Sontag's observation on photographic documentation that "Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience", the exhibition space of visual art can, with curatorial empathy and insight, progress from being a mere disseminator of

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[50] See Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, for links between political violence and trauma in Doris Salcedo's work: Bennett, J. (2005). *Empathic Vision.* London: Palgrave, pp. 46–49.

[51] "I became emotionally attached to those singers I filmed. I am involved in their lives, in their personal projects. We speak on the phone. We see each other. I have met their families and made sure they know where their songs are being heard. I have learned many things about this war through their stories and friendship… They all came [to my exhibition]. I felt it was important for them to see how deeply moved people were by their songs, how genuine their response. I think this allowed them to speak further about their grief, their wounds." Echavarria, J.M. (2005). *Mouths of Ash*. Milano: Charta, p. 27.

[52] Bennett, J. (2008). The Unimaginable Imagined. Havoc: Real and Unimaginable Events in Post-9/11 Art. In D. Del Favero, U. Frohne & P. Weibel (Eds.), *Un_imaginable.* Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media; Sydney: iCinema Center, UNSW; Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh, p. 97.

empiric information to being a space of affective engagement with the world.[53] The relationship between artist and subject, and in turn between artwork and viewer, is instrumented by the creation of a space where artists' intimate knowledge of place can be consumed through the viewers' own prism of home. It is this shared, internal understanding of the meaning of home, more than external visual descriptors of place, that facilitates meaningful engagement giving rise to new interpretations of place. In a curatorial project such as *Home Ground*, the gallery becomes a shared space of longing and belonging.[54]

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Together, *The Lie of the Land* and *Home Ground* investigated artists' responses to place, specifically the place they call home. By setting up in the gallery space a dialogue between artists' diverse perceptions of place, *The Lie of the Land* revealed that ideas of home – Australia – are informed by individual experience, and can be brought together in the context of an exhibition to create new insights to place. *Home Ground* extended the forum of the dialogue to include voices from elsewhere, revealing that the experience of in-betweeness – of being between memory and imagination, between history and contemporary culture – is a universal condition, and that the prism of home provides an accessible and engaging forum in which to discuss aspects of place.

As if responding to Peter Conrad's father's instruction cited at the start of the chapter – "You've got to have a nice background" – Ahlam Shibli's photograph of a displaced Palestinian woman perched in front of her makeshift home, (which was a key image and the exhibition catalogue cover for *Home Ground*), reveals that "a good

[53] Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Penguin, p. 16.
[54] See Greenberg, R. (1995). The Exhibition as Discursive Event. In L. Lippard & B.W. Ferguson, *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby* (pp. 18–25). Santa Fe: Site Santa Fe.

background" for many encapsulates Brooks' "idea of home" as "an environment offering security and happiness" – a reality that for Shibli's subject will likely remain a dream.[55]

**Figure 12 (previous page): Ahlam Shibli, *Dream*, 2000. Image courtesy the artist**

[55] Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011.* Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 38.

## CHAPTER 4

## FRAGILE STATE

> An active rethinking of museum and exhibition display strategies might allow for the staging of cultural encounters in which the West and all its others are actually inseparably entwined and entangled in one another without the recourse of falling back into discrete histories.[1]

The research in this chapter rejects the historical premise of nation-based group exhibitions as platforms for voicing collective perceptions of cultural identity ("falling back into discrete histories"), instead proposing the curatorial entwinement and entanglement that Irit Rogoff calls for. Bringing intercultural narratives of place into the fold of the exhibition-making process, the research harnesses the tension of 'in-betweeness' examined in the previous chapter, arguing that a complexity of feelings about home reflects a fragility and uncertainty inherent to a meaningful understanding of place: the curatorial research in this chapter embraces fragility and uncertainty as affective agents of engagement between art that arises from different cultures, and between art and audiences. Nick Waterlow's "ability to be uncertain", it argues, opens a space in the forum of an exhibition for new interpretations to emerge.[2]

The major curatorial research output in this chapter was *Handle with Care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* (Art Gallery of South Australia, 1 March – 4 May, 2008). The research expands and extends that undertaken for *The Lie of the Land* and *Home Ground*, revealing through installations and actions place-related issues of the day. Immersive environments provided a sensorial engagement with place, invoking visions, sounds and smells from home,

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[1] Rogoff, I. (2002). Hit and Run – Museums and Cultural Difference. *Art Journal 61*(3), 63–78, p. 69.
[2] Waterlow, N. A curator's last will and testament, diary notes found posthumously in November 2009 (unpaginated).

presenting a multifarious contemporary Australian identity that is "turned out to the world".[3]

As Australia's leading two exhibitions of work by artists who must be Australian citizens, Primavera and the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art offer a national forum through which to assess the current concerns of Australian artists. Rather than presenting a survey of current art practices as in previous iterations of both Primavera and the Adelaide Biennial, *The Lie of the Land* (Primavera 2005) and *Handle with Care* (Adelaide Biennial 2008) both articulated a curatorial thematic and both commissioned new works designed for the exhibition spaces.[4]

The curating of exhibitions that successfully entice and engage audiences can tread a fine line between providing pathways into the work while retaining enough information to create a space for discovery. Mary Jane Jacob writes of the importance of curating a space in which uncertainty can exist:

> What can exhibitions do now and why might they even be important? Open situations for experience don't happen often. They can be disconcerting, intimidating, because we are so programmed to being led to or told the result of our experiences (how we should feel, what we will feel). 'Not knowing', being given permission to be on one's own and really have a full experience, can be scary. But we need more spaces for such thoughtful experiences in our society, spaces where experience can take us to a renewed place in our lives, a transformation, a fuller sense of being beyond the limitations of self. So what we need is to curate the conditions for the audience's own creativity and deep engagement. This requires a safe and empty space for a wider view, for an intense and longer inquiry… As curators, we make exhibitions as space for

[3] Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011*. Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 68.
[4] *Handle with Care* was the first Adelaide Biennial to articulate a theme (other than a media- or race-based premise), and offered the most culturally diverse views of place than other biennials before or since. A previous iteration had focused on public space installations (1994, curated by John Barrett-Lennard), another on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art (2000, curated by Brenda Croft), one on art and science (2002, curated by Linda Cooper) and one dedicated to photo-media (2004, curated by Julie Robinson).

> experience.[5]

Though wordier in its message, Jacob echoes Waterlow's trust in the curator's "ability to be uncertain" in order to create an exhibition that, in the case of Australian art, confirms Brooks's claim that Australian culture is "turned out to the world". As the research thus far has demonstrated, the prism of home is an effective device in curating Bhabha's "third space". It enables artists and viewers with differing perceptions of place to meet on a neutral ground of affective engagement with the idea of home. In this space, signifiers of cultural identity can be re-ordered so that new interpretations and ultimately new meanings can be identified. Without visual and thematic connections between works that intersect and overlap to throw the viewer's reading slightly off balance – without "entanglement and entwinement" – the exhibition risks being didactic and ultimately disengaging.

> Part of my definition of a memorable exhibition is that it leaves me slightly confused at first, yet not in such a way that I simply feel excluded or left out of the picture, as though my confusion was merely a result of ignorance. Instead, such an exhibition encourages me to actively seek out uncertainty, rather than simply remaining unsure. And it is precisely when we are unsure of something that our curiosity is aroused, and that we then tend to regard it more closely, consider it more carefully, and, in the end, experience it more intensely.[6]

Hayward Gallery director Ralph Rugoff defends the curator's "ability to be uncertain" as a quality that can create a slight confusion in the viewer, which in turn will pique curiosity in the exhibition, opening the possibility for viewers to "experience it more intensely". The curator without an openness to alternative viewpoints will surely fail to create such spaces for viewers, spaces that recast the conditions on which circumstances and events are seen and assessed.

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[5] Jacob, M.J. (2006). Making Space for Art. In P. Marincola (Ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (pp. 134–141). Philadelphia: Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, pp. 140–141.
[6] Rugoff, P. (2006) You Talking to Me? On Curating Group Shows that Give You a Chance to Join the Group. In P. Marincola (Ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (pp. 44–51). Philadelphia: Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, pp. 48–49.

Where *The Lie of the Land* embraced Bhabha's challenge to art about place to penetrate conservative tropes of landscape imagery – by proposing new models of 'landscape painting' premised on the prism of home – *Handle with Care* responded to changing perceptions of place with works by artists from diverse cultural and interest groups. As argued in the Introduction, when attuned to the role in their work of artists' experiences and understanding of home, the curator can create an intellectual space within an exhibition that 'turns out' to the world by identifying universal aspects of experience of place with particular focus on the feeling of 'in-betweeness' ("your place or mine?"), and thereby activating viewers' own memories and ideas. A well curated multi-artist (group) exhibition can become a forum for the reconciliation of dichotomous descriptors of place by teasing out connections not just between artworks but between artworks and viewers, and, further, by creating a set of conditions that facilitate viewers' own internal, subjective engagement with the works and the subject matter. The research in this chapter extended the investigation into the effectiveness of home as a forum for dialogue around place, and expanded opportunities for cognitive and physical engagement by implementing a number of the curatorial strategies that are the subject of this thesis: inhabitation and immersion; documentary and real life events.

Exhibitions have the opportunity to provide a road into, through and around insecure and conflicting ideas of place. *Handle with Care* responded to the destabilisation of certainties around place and nation that are the result of global displacement through migration and exile: *Handle with Care* turned from *The Lie of the Land*'s investigation of external (top-down) views of the land to focus on internal (bottom-up) concepts of place. In a curatorial framework that encouraged narratives relating to the artists' knowledge and experiences of home, internal dialogues opened up in the exhibition space, tracing connections based on memory, emotion and ideas. This approach mirrors Fry's socio-political "age of unsettlement" yet grounds the narrative in personal experience, thus maximising the potential for affective engagement.

*Handle with Care* adopted a 'clean slate' selection premise, the first to do so of the major Australian biennial events – the international Biennale of Sydney and national Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art. The decision to exclude work by artists who had been represented in any of the previous nine iterations of the Biennial allowed for an articulation and dialogue around place that was uncontaminated by the mnemonic vestiges of previous biennial artworks in the same museum spaces, ensuring the creation of an 'open' situation for experience.[7]

Though necessarily national in scope, the curatorial approach was, like works in the exhibition, turned out to the world.[8] Internationally, exhibitions over the last two decades have registered widespread interest in the changing political landscape of eastern Europe and Asia, and the attendant emergence of new art practices from regions of the world formerly considered peripheral to contemporary culture. Brisbane's Asia Pacific Triennial has since 1993 successfully positioned the art of this region on the world stage, while internationally it was Okwui Enwezor's seminal Documenta11 in 2002 that not only rejected the West's (particularly the USA's) perceived centrality to contemporary art, but made a convincing case for art's agency in political debate. Since then, many exhibitions worldwide have unabashedly assumed more than a passing interest in the prevailing political climate, including some in this part of the world. In her text accompanying the 2007 Auckland Triennial,

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[7] The resulting exhibition was noted for its artistic freshness and critical candour. Pulitzer Prize-winning critic Sebastian Smee wrote that it was "The best show of its kind I've seen". Smee, S. (2008, March 15–16). Altered States. *The Australian.* p. 18.

[8] In the Adelaide Biennial, as is the case with many exhibitions that draw on a national pool of artists in each iteration, there had been repetition in the selection of artists in the previous nine iterations. In its 20 year history, the Adelaide Biennial had featured the work of over 200 Australian artists, with some of the most high profile practitioners selected two or three times. Though such repetition is commonplace in large international biennales featuring 100 artists or more, this exhibition's comparatively modest scale demands a curatorially focused approach. Like the Whitney Biennial in New York and the Tate Triennial in London, the Adelaide Biennial is national in scope, the pool of artists from which it can draw thus limited by geography. *Handle with Care* sought a fresh perspective: while presenting the work of some of the country's most esteemed artists alongside that of lesser-known and emerging practitioners, a premise for selection in the exhibition was that artists had never before been included in the Adelaide Biennial.

for example, curator Victoria Lynn discussed art made in reaction to political upheaval:

> It begs a response. It is too simplistic to just turn away from it, as if it were a purely negative condition; too simplistic to bury one's head in the sand… These might be small gestures – and artworks are small gestures – that do not change the world. Yet, art has a sensory dimension... It can catch us 'off guard' as it were, and thereby create a small, but significant gesture in this landscape of turbulence.[9]

This thesis is also based on the premise that art is able to engage and thereby influence viewers open to alternative ways of looking at the world. A large proportion of the work in the 2008 Biennial was focused quite specifically on the Australian viewpoint, deliberately exploring this place where the participating artists and the majority of the exhibition's viewers live and work. Though describing something of the country's mood would seem intrinsic to this event given its national context, collectively works in the exhibition did not aspire to convey any united form of national spirit or standpoint. This position reflects the fact that over the last two generations of Australian art there has been a rejection of nationalist imperative and, recently, as local issues such as the environment and immigration become more urgent throughout the world, Australian artists have widened their outlook to contemplate these and other themes in a global context. Australian artists' global conscience was recently evidenced, for example, in the 2014 Biennale of Sydney sponsor row, which ended with the withdrawal from the event by founding sponsor Transfield, following highly publicised objections by some Biennale artists of the company's involvement in service delivery to Australia's offshore immigration detention centres. Within this new internationalist framework of reference, curating an overview of contemporary art premised not on the artists' own experience but by geography is a strategy in danger of succumbing to inexpedient concepts of place, as demonstrated by *Australia* at the Royal

[9] Lynn, V. (2007). We Live in Turbulent Times. In *Turbulence: 3rd Auckland Triennial* (pp. 19–31). Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, p. 20.

Academy.[10] In *Handle with Care*, not only was the artists' subject-matter global in outlook, so too were the artists, hailing from Europe, Asia and the Middle East, and some living only part-time in Australia and working in other parts of the world.

In Documenta12, curators Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack chose not to include artists' place of birth or nationality in the exhibition labels. This strategy, though controversial, precluded the reading of works being tainted by nation-based perceptions of cultural identity. The exhibition required that visitors to the exhibition "read, study, think and spend time unweaving complex interplays between artistic, political and cultural themes".[11] While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the interpretive nexus between preconceived notions of national identity and artists' country of origin in exhibitions of artwork from many different countries, Buergel and Novak's strategy did succeed in *engaging* audiences in a cognitive, experiential response to artworks precisely by *disengaging* artists' work from the possibility of being read through the lens of nationalistic presumptions.[12]

Okwui Enwezor declared one of his guiding principles for the previous Documenta11 as questioning what happens to culture when you remove it from the place of another archive.[13] In the context of an exhibition such as the Adelaide Biennial that is confined to a national focus, it is impossible to entirely disengage artists' work from the possibility of visitor interpretations based on existing concepts of cultural identity. It is, however, possible to facilitate alternative points of view. One strategy for providing a broader cultural context for the all-Australian exhibition would have been to integrate artworks with the

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[10] See Chapter One for a discussion of the curatorial failings of *Australia*, Royal Academy of the Arts, London, 21 September–8 December, 2013.
[11] McNeill, D. (2010). Art Without Authors: Networks, Assemblages and 'Flat' Ontology.' *Third Text*, *24*(4), 397–408. p. 398.
[12] Geeta Kapur was a vocal opponent of depriving audiences of biographical information, claiming that cultural context inherently informs both the making and reading of art. (Tate Britain, AAH conference, attended by the author, 2008, April 2–4).
[13] See Irit Rogoff's discussion of Enwezor's *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994* in Rogoff, I. (2002). Hit and Run – Museums and Cultural Difference. *Art Journal 61*(3), 63–78, p. 69.

Art Gallery of South Australia's permanent collections of Asian, European and international contemporary art. Though granted in a subsequent iteration (2012), the request was flatly denied in 2008.[14] The intention was to re-align the museum context of the exhibition by approaching works through the lens of different cultures and eras. (New angles were similarly sought by excluding artists who had previously shown in the Biennial). *Handle with Care* sought a re-thinking by viewers with the creation of immersive and real-world installations that replaced top-down notions of cultural identity with personal, political and philosophical narratives. Its rejection of culture echoed Rogoff's call for a "staging of cultural encounters in which the West and all its *others* are actually inseparably entwined and entangled."[15]

In a global age of constantly shifting national and cultural identities, the "others" can no longer be meaningfully conceived as existing outside the mainstream. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, in the case of Australia the Indigenous 'other' culture has successfully occupied the same territory as mainstream Australian visual arts. *Handle with Care*, though denied a shared space in the state gallery's collections of the art of non-Australian cultures, provided spaces where the so-called "others" became "inseparably entwined and entangled in one another". The curatorial research found that some of the most effective narratives of place were found, for example, in the work of immigrant and Indigenous artists. Over a third of the artists in the exhibition were born overseas, coincidentally an equivalent proportion to people born overseas living in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia's largest centres for contemporary art.[16] The Biennial was thus

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[14] When the request was followed up with the Gallery Director, I was politely told to get back in my (white) box – that is, to keep the exhibition within the confines of the temporary exhibition spaces. I did, however, negotiate to install sculptural works by Kylie Stillman and Kate Rhode in the Gallery's foyer, and on opening night a political protest that was a component of the exhibition took place at the Gallery's entrance.

[15] Rogoff, I. (2002). Hit and Run – Museums and Cultural Difference. *Art Journal 61*(3), 63–78, p. 69.

[16] While Valamanesh (Iran) has lived in Australia for decades and Guan Wei (China) since 1990, Dadang Christanto moved from Indonesia in 1999 and Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan left their Philippines home for Brisbane only 18 months before the Biennial. Other immigrant artists in the exhibition included Tom Mùller (Switzerland), Suzann Victor (Singapore) and Ken Yonetani (Japan). Of the Indigenous artists in the Biennial, Walpiri painter Dorothy Napangardi and Waradgerie artist Lorraine Connelly-Northey had been exhibited and collected by public galleries and museums in recent years, while the work of filmmaker Warwick Thornton, who

characterised by a diversity of viewpoints from artists who brought to the forum their multi-perspectival experiences of home, whether it be remote desert areas, Asia, the Middle East or urban Australia. A deliberately inclusive approach alone, however, is not enough to shift traditional curatorial paradigms governed by Western perspectives.

> Looking from the perspective of 'another archive' that Enwezor has put into the discussion of exhibited culture, we can no longer indulge in the multi-cultural management of inclusiveness – letting all the *others* in while remaining with an unchanging concept of ourselves. Museums' encounters with cultural difference are in a sense an opportunity to contract rather than to expand, to contract the staunch belief system that organizes, classifies, locates, and judges everything from the prevailing perspective of the West.[17]

In *Handle with Care*, there was no attempt to organise, classify or locate artworks in the context of a nationalistic mainstream. On the contrary, the dialogue did not address different aspects of 'Australianess', but was premised on the fact that all the works were Australian, with their narrative contingent on an affective engagement with viewers. As this thesis argues, curatorial strategies that facilitate meaningful engagement with visitors must first allow the creation of a 'third space' for cognitive recognition and rumination between artworks themselves and between artworks and viewers. Specifically, the exhibition space is ideally constructed in a way that facilitates maximum affect. In *Handle with Care*, this was achieved by implementing specific curatorial frameworks – those of immersion, inhabitation and documentary and real life association.

The exhibition set out to engage on a number of levels, negotiating the sometimes uneasy relationship between intellectual and intuitive readings of art. As discussed above, it was centred around narratives of place in

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became prominent on the world stage the following year with his first feature film, *Samson and Delilah* (2009), was shown for the first time in a visual arts context in *Handle with Care*.

[17] Rogoff, I. (2002). Hit and Run – Museums and Cultural Difference. *Art Journal 61*(3), 63–78, p. 72

contemporary Australian art responding to some of the most pertinent issues facing our world today, from threatened natural environments to socio-cultural vulnerability resulting from the displacement of Indigenous and immigrant communities. Anxieties arising from global conflicts, racial tensions, oppression and isolation were also explored. Themes of displacement and fragility in our relationship to place were given voice in *Handle with Care*, both in terms of subject matter and materiality. Creating a dialogue beyond shared thematic concerns to address the works' materiality was the Biennial's underlying focus on fragility, which manifested not only in the works' conception but in its material form, much of it being visually or formally fragile in terms of materials and positioning within the gallery spaces.

The curatorial research was undertaken in the shadow of an upcoming Australian election in which issues around environmental crises, recognition of Indigenous issues, immigration and race relations culminated in a change of government in late 2007. It was a time of anxiety, transition and hope. The term


'handle with care' was chosen as the title for the exhibition because it connotes transience, caution and fragility. Invoking the prism of home on the most literal level, 'handle with care' is most recognised as a stamp on removalist boxes used for moving house. As such, the phrase conjured a universal experience relating to home as, recalling Geraldine Brooks's description of home, a "point of origin… a place where something is discovered, founded, developed or promoted": an apt starting point for the exhibition's dialogue about place that was deliberately "turned out to the world".[18]

Despite being limited to Australian artists, *Handle with Care* sought to capture the spirit of a time of global transformation, in which political and environmental anxiety is leading to unprecedented levels of global itinerancy.

[18] Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011.* Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 38; 68.

National issues inevitably also inform art practice being undertaken in Australia. Since the previous Adelaide Biennial, national incidents that had exacerbated threats of environmental and social erosion had been numerous, some drawing international attention. Investigations into the racial divisions that led to the Cronulla race riots, a United Nations report deploring Aboriginal health standards, the mandatory detention in jail-like conditions of refugees and the government's failure to join international efforts towards agreement on global environmental policy were just some of the topics that polarised opinions and engendered heated debate in this country. These issues were key contributing factors to the exhibition given the political context in which investigations into artists' perception of place were conducted. The anxiety of the time and the place – of Australia, of elsewhere, and of moving between the two – underpinned the curatorial approach of home and its application to the exhibition's dialogue between national and international concerns, between notions of home and shifting national identities.

The exhibition rejected tired perceptions of national identity and was infused instead with the anxiety of 'in-betweeness' – the feeling of being between home and elsewhere that is now a global phenomenon. Reuban Keehan recognised in *Handle with Care* that "There is a certain transnationality to your selection of artists and to the positioning of the biennale itself that differs from the very parochial nationalism that has characterised the past decade of Australian culture":

> In this tenth edition of the Adelaide Biennial I have attempted to broaden the geographical context of the event not only by selecting artists whose work addresses themes of global significance, but by including a number of immigrant artists whose work relates to their countries of origin… and commissioning international curators and writers to discuss various artists' work in the catalogue, such as Hou Hanru (USA), Binghui Huangfu (China) and Sabine Sielke (Germany). While the content necessarily remains national, the context will hopefully be a little more international in scope than in previous editions… the Adelaide event provides an opportunity to foreground

> contemporary Australian art, and I believe we should be doing so from a global rather than local, potentially parochial standpoint."[19]

With the selection of artists and pursuant discussions with each of them about developing works for the exhibition, it became imperative to highlight the fact that despite culturally identifying more readily with the northern hemisphere, Australia is home to an ancient Indigenous culture and geographically located in the south of the southern hemisphere.[20] In previous generations, Australia's geographic isolation from the ancestral culture of Britain afflicted the national psyche with pangs of longing on the one hand and cultural cringe on the other, both of which extended until recently, as my grandmother's idea of 'home' and *Australia* at the Royal Academy attest.[21] The distance, however, has sometimes led to a lethargic, even wilful ignorance, finding false protection from pressing global problems not just in the northern hemisphere but in our own Asia-Pacific region. In its examination of place through the lens of diverse cultural experiences, *Handle with Care* harnessed the experience of feeling 'in-between' to embrace complexity. As Eleanor Heartney has observed, complexity is key to contemporary art's meaningfulness:

> [Art is] an important tool for understanding and, perhaps, even changing, the world in which we live… art which operates on multiple levels can play an important role in reinvigorating public debate. To defend complexity is also to defend our ability to function in a meaningful way in the world.[22]

Within the curatorial construction of space for engagement, two thematic trajectories emerged: the emotionally conflicting experience of transiting between cultures; and anxiety over Australia's numerous environmental

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[19] Keehan, R. (2008). Handle With care: Interview with Felicity Fenner. *Broadsheet,* 37(1), 18–21, p. 19. (Appendix IV).
[20] During the research period, Australia's unquestioning political alignment with the Northern hemisphere was a subject of criticism from political commentators in the context of the Howard government's willing involvement in the USA's imperialist wars, which were marring aspects of that relationship with scepticism and discontent.
[21] See Introduction for discussion of my grandmother's story and *Australia*.
[22] Heartney, E. (2006). *Defending Complexity: Art, Politics, and the New World Order*. Stockbridge MA: Hard Press Editions, pp. i-iv.

challenges. There was intended and inevitable overlap and intersection between these themes that underpinned the exhibition. Focused on art practice that responds, poetically and/or politically, to some of the most volatile and fragile aspects of today's world, a dialogue was forged within and beyond the gallery spaces about this place, Australia, that the artists call home. The curatorial strategies implemented, referring to those outlined in the Introduction, were:

- works that documented and intersected with and *are* real life events, including the use of natural materials resonant of place;
- physically inhabitable environments relating to concepts of home;
- works that utilised culturally specific materials or art-making techniques.

Collectively, the intent and presentation of works in the exhibition was analogous to the curatorial implementation of the prism of home to investigate political and environmental issues of national and international importance.[23]

## 4.1 Home Life

The "third space" of engagement in exhibitions expands and contracts depending on the subject's proximate location between empiric and experiential evidence. Works that document, intersect with and are real life events, for example, allow a narrower margin of imagination than conceptual works that allude to but do not describe in visual imagery the subject matter. On the other hand, works that supersede the documentary to become real life actions with real world consequences have more traction with viewers as agents of affective engagement. Leading Australian artists such as Janet Laurence have reflected on the capacity of exhibitions to engage with real life experience:

[23] Refer to Appendices II–IV for images of the exhibition's documentary, immersive and inhabitable curatorial approaches.

> These exhibitions offer a wonderful opportunity to express concerns, creating a dialogue between the works both as art and as political voice. It would be great if the museum could remain memorable as a 'hothouse'. I think the difficulty is the shift that occurs between our experience of the work within the museum, and the memory of it after, outside in the world.[24]

The project for the Biennial by James Darling and Lesley Forwood brought 'place' into the sanctuary of the museum. *Troubled Water: Didicoolum Drain Extension* was commissioned for the Biennial. It was a large, site-specific installation created for a 15-metre wall in the Art Gallery of South Australia, an ephemeral work dismantled after the event.

The work – a life size reconstruction in mallee roots of a section of drain being constructed in South Australia – was of particular significance to local audiences. The Didicoolum Drain Extension project was extremely controversial at the time, having been sanctioned by the state government in the face of vocal opposition from landowners and environmentalists concerned about its negative impact on the area's ecosystem.

> The Didicoolum Drain Extension is serious. It is a highly contentious 32 km section of drain and it is the most recently completed drain in a 650 km, $78 million government drainage scheme, vehemently opposed by many in the Upper South-East region of South Australia, including Darling and Forwood, whose land the drainage scheme affects. They believe in minimum-impact, flood-in flood-out surface water management, and not deep drainage… [*Troubled Water*] is blatantly political and consciously abrasive. It is successful because it manages to be both informative and poetic. The many mallee roots at times seem to represent the entanglement of our thoughts but, seen as a whole, they realise works of astonishing harmony and completeness. They also, as *Troubled Water* attests, are provocative and agents for social change.[25]

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[24] Appendix V.
[25] Waterlow, N. (2008). Troubled Water. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*. Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, p. 32.

As Waterlow articulates here, the work's success in being "both informative and poetic" provided a platform for wide engagement. Being a local rather than global issue (though symbolic of similar, local environmental issues around the world), it was important to provide an interpretive context of place for audiences from outside Adelaide. In consultation with the artists, it was decided to accompany the installation with a series of photographs, collated by the exhibition curator, documenting recent protests on the affected land. Images of large groups of farmers holding placards in the face of earthmoving machinery and labourers in high-visibility vests imbued the installation with a local, highly political narrative about place. Furthermore, in spite of the curator's failure to secure permission from the museum director, it was decided to allow the affected landowners and concerned environmentalists to stage a protest at the entrance to the Art Gallery of South Australia on the opening night of the Biennial and its umbrella organisation, the Adelaide Festival. From 6pm, protesters wearing Drizabone coats and carrying placards positioned themselves at the entrance to the museum, handing out leaflets about the environmental destruction of the Didicoolum Drain Extension to guests arriving for the opening party.

This action demonstrated how, as Claire Doherty has noted, "context-specific projects and artworks become meaningful outside the signifying context of the exhibition".[26] While the catalyst for the protest action lay outside the exhibition, the intervention of protestors on opening night functioned as an unscripted performance that upheld the exhibition's aim to engage beyond the gallery walls. The curator's role in this case was not to orchestrate the demonstration that brought into the exhibition space some of the issues being examined in the exhibition, but to facilitate that process and embed it in the exhibition. The protest brought to life the environmental debate at the centre of the *Troubled Water* installation, utilising a combination of political action and spectacle.

[26] Doherty, C. (2007). Curating Wrong Places…Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone? In P. O'Neill (Ed.), *Curating x 24*. Amsterdam: De Appel. Retrieved from http://www.publicart.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/Writings/curatingwrongplaces...pdf

Spectacle, though superficial without the conceptual underpinning of meaningful content, is a key strategy of audience engagement.[27] Spectacle aids "the creation of new relationships that give rise to an understanding of the artwork as in-between (or, in Deleuze's terms, 'interval')".[28] It is a useful device in bridging the space between real life events and images, between images and audiences.

The in-between nature of artworks in *Handle with Care* was expressed in stories of living between cultures, between past and present, between certainty and uncertainty. It was perhaps most cogently encapsulated by Warwick Thornton's short film, *Nana*. Alongside painters depicting traditional stories in new visual vocabularies are many Aboriginal artists with more openly political agendas informed by the experience of living between two cultures, *Nana* was set against the backdrop of extreme cultural vulnerability. It is the story of a child learning from her grandmother to retain and respect a traditional lifestyle, to resist its threatened extinction. The Howard government's intervention into Northern Territory Aboriginal communities in the time between the making of that film and its exhibition had further darkened its already black humour and imbued its message with even greater urgency.

According to Reesa Greenberg, forging connections not just between the works but between the real-world subject of the artworks and exhibition is a key curatorial strategy to engage audiences beyond the museum:

> At Documenta11, the inclusion of discursive spaces – in the form of four discussion platforms on four continents with related materials published as individual volumes as well as inside the exhibition spaces with the massing of text-work and archival material at the Fridericianum – was integral to

[27] James Newitt, one of the exhibiting artists, noted in a roundtable discussion held at the time of the 10th Biennial (Appendix I) that: "Themed biennial exhibitions have come under criticism for pushing the agendas of curators or representing politicised themes rather than simply presenting the 'best' of contemporary art. This criticism is confusing to me, as I believe exhibitions have a role in addressing social and cultural issues, as well as creating a 'spectacle' of contemporary art."
[28] Bennett, J. (2012). *Practical Aesthetics*. London: I.B. Tauris, p. 26.

> reshaping Documenta from an exhibition to a discursive event in which discussion of sociopolitical processes was as important as the discussion about the art exhibited.[29]

*Nana*, like much of the work in the exhibition, was grounded in real life issues. Thornton is primarily a filmmaker, telling stories of contemporary Aboriginal life. Re-cast from its film context into the visual arts arena, the inclusion of *Nana* transgressed the boundaries of genre (from film to art), opening a space of engagement that broadens rather than narrows the experience of art and exhibitions. Like the inclusion of *Troubled Water*'s protest and documentary slideshow, the strategy of bringing the real world into the museum creates a "third space" that in turn offers greater potential for audience engagement based on viewers' own connections to knowledge and experience forged outside the museum walls.

Another aspect of the curatorial approach created a dialogue about place in works from different cultures, using found and natural materials from home. The precarious experience of living between black and white cultures was eloquently evoked in Lorraine Connelly-Northey's hazardous-looking wall sculptures. Traditional Aboriginal possum cloaks fashioned in found farm materials, the fencing wires and rusting sheets of corrugated iron offer not protection but a menacing warning to 'handle with care'. Connelly-Northey's work speaks to the absence left by the forced displacement of Indigenous people from their ancestral homelands. As demonstrated in Chapter Three, where Bell and Napangati's juxtaposed work in *Home Ground* highlighted a sense of absence (in Bell's work an absence of reference to Aboriginal histories in her home lands; in Napangati's an absence of colonialist impact on her home lands), Connelly-Northey's work in *Handle with Care* was positioned in dialogue with James Newitt's film installation of African immigrants performing traditional music and dance in their Hobart homes.[30] Both works illuminated

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[29] Greenberg, R. Identity Exhibitions: From *Magiciens de la Terre* to *Documenta11*. *Art Journal*, *64*(1), 90–94, p. 91.
[30] See Appendix III (a).

the disjunction between nostalgic visions of home and the reality of home as a place of discomfort and cultural displacement – the feeling of 'in-betweeness' as a condition of the contemporary experience of place.

Janet Laurence's installation combined melancholy with quiet optimism, her symbolic attempt to heal a dying tree invoking a spirit of resilience with an overtly political narrative. The inclusion of Laurence's work was the result of earlier curatorial investigations into the artist's work, specifically research into Laurence's methodological approach to working with and facilitating natural environments.[31] This aspect of Laurence's practice is well documented by Jennifer Taylor, whose analysis of the artist's practice at the intersection of built and natural environments also informed curatorial research for the Biennial: "It is an art of critique of man's acts, the retrieval of memory, and a healing collaboration with the physical world. It is an optimistic art with faith in the generative powers of redemption, and the ability of art to mend."[32]

The tree Laurence chose for the installation was a Lemon-scented Gum, sourced with the assistance of Adelaide Botanic Gardens' arborist. Laurence is acutely sensitive to the most fragile intersections between nature and the built environments. Her art practice provides points of entry to those intersections that are otherwise overlooked in everyday existence, and in the context of the exhibition opened up opportunities for consideration by viewers of the precarious nexus between man and nature.[33]

## 4.2 Home Occupation

Two of the key works based in real world events comprised immersive environments that documented and shared with viewers the experience of

[31] See Fenner, F. (2001). Report from Sydney II: Ground Work, *Art in America*, May 2001, pp. 89–93; and Fenner, F. (2005, January). Janet Laurence, *Art in America*, January 2005, p. 35.
[32] Taylor, J. (2005). Artist and Environment: Janet Laurence and the healing of place. *Art and Architecture*. Mulgrave: S-Lab Space Laboratory for Architectural Research and Design, Images Publishing Group, pp. 42–45.
[33] Fenner, F. (2007). The Nature of Art. *Art and Australia*, *44*(3), 420–427.

immigrants to Australia: James Newitt's *altered state* and Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan's *Address* (from the project *Another Country*). Both were commissioned for the Biennial as inhabitable installations that in different ways encapsulated aspects of domestic life.

James Newitt appropriates the culturally significant customs of music and songs, re-casting them in displaced locations that make biographical reference to the protagonists of his films. In the series of videos comprising *altered state*, African immigrants sing in the domestic settings of their homes in Hobart, far removed in every sense from African culture and experience. In preparing for the exhibition, curator and artist worked together to re-stage the sense and proportion of a domestic setting, one that immersed viewers with life size images of interiors screened either side of the purpose-built space. Key to the success of the immersive environment was its domestic scale and setting: it invoked the comfortable familiarity of home in a narrative of global significance.

Unlike other works in *Handle with Care* that shared a fragile relationship to home, often expressed with the use of impermanent materials, Newitt's two-channel film created a connective thread that, like Darling and Forwood's work, literally and symbolically performed connections to politically urgent, real life situations. Jill Bennett's discussion of theoretical accounts of connectivity in art is usefully applied to the curatorial approach in *Handle with Care*:

> For Latour… there is no social force that determines identities and group relationships, other than that which is produced through the performance of connection. In tracing the threads of a network we determine how relationships come into play and into place, but also outline further possibilities, new lines of connections, new ways of organising.[34]

As the connections between works in *Handle with Care* revealed, the curatorial role here was not simply to reveal hidden (or overt) truths inherent to the works exhibited, but to create new connections:

[34] Bennett, J. (2012). *Practical Aesthetics*. London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 28–29.

> … new connections, new ways of organising… The opposite of 'revealing' – as Deleuze and Guattari show – involves experimenting with the relationships that compose an intellectual field; creating new circuits, intensifying relationships and forces so as to re-order the field. For Deleuze… the unmasking or revealing of what is already given is not creative thinking; thinking beyond what is actually given is a creative intervention potentially occurring in writing or art, but only when the field is extended.[35]

Curatorial practice, too, can contribute to the extending of the "field" by bringing into the dialogue of an exhibition space disciplines not traditionally or wholly accepted as belonging to, or even aligned with, the visual arts. In *Handle with Care*, the three film works – by Dennis Del Favero, James Newitt and Warwick Thornton – for example, were all documentary in style, all based on true stories. All could have as easily been discussed in the context of news documentary, news events being "the definitive markers of contemporaneity".[36]

Further extending "the field" in this Biennial was the commissioning of a large-scale work by Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan, drawing on their recent, real life experience of immigrating to Australia. Illustrating Latour's reference to the "performance of connection", the Aquilizans' work not only forged connections with others in the exhibition – based on its articulation of a new kind of 'home' – but was a true performance of social connection. Like Newitt's, it too was an immersive work, a three-dimensional installation that enveloped the senses, including the evocative sense of smell.[37] Developed from the twelve boxes of possessions that comprised *"In-transit" Project Be-longing* (2006), *Address* is a 'house' created from one hundred and forty of these packing-box shaped 'bricks' made from folded clothes, toys, books and household appliances. Entering the 'house' we feel the warmth and reassurance of familiar, loved objects. But the walls are constructed from memories in place of mortar and there is no roof –

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[35] Bennett, J. (2012). *Practical Aesthetics*. London: I.B. Tauris, p. 31.
[36] Bennett, J. (2012). *Practical Aesthetics*. London: I.B. Tauris, p. 33.
[37] The clothes were infused with the oil of Sampugita, the national flower of the Philippines.

the 'home' is vulnerable, open to the vicissitudes and uncertainties of dislocation and change.

**Figures 1 and 2: Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan, *"In-transit" Project Be-Longing* (detail), 2006. Photos: F. Fenner**

The curatorial dialogue with Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan commenced in 2006, when the first phase of the work was shown at Ivan Dougherty Gallery as part of the Biennale of Sydney, curated by Charles Merewether. The artists at that point were still resident in their native Philippines but looking to move to Australia. Proving that art can indeed change lives, the artists opportunistically utilised the occasion of the Biennale of Sydney to pack a box of belongings each, plus one for each of their five children, which resulted in the 2006 work. They subsequently applied for Australian residency visas, having sent their 'belongings' ahead in the form of an artwork, courtesy of the Biennale of Sydney. Upon arrival in Brisbane later that year, curatorial discussions began around their inclusion in the Adelaide Biennial.[38] The installation for *Handle with Care* evolved directly from the 2006 work, impacted by the artists' circumstances upon arrival in Australia: the Filipino community showered the migrant family with second-hand clothes, toys, appliances, shoes, books, linen and blankets. Not wanting to reject their kindness nor waste the well-meant gifts, the artists started packing the goods into the same tight bundles as the original packages, an activity that dictated, in discussion with the curator, the nature of their

[38] Participating artists in the Biennial must be Australian residents, so it was necessary to wait until the Aquilizan's status was confirmed before inviting them to be part of the 10th Biennial in Adelaide.

installation for the Biennial in Adelaide.[39] *Address* had a peripatetic life after the Biennial, travelling first to Sydney for *Concrete Culture* and later to the 2008 Singapore Biennale.[40] The work's merging of art and life and itinerant existence between exhibitions echoed the context from which the artists derive, which, according to Hou Hanru, "represents a new kind of home-ness":

> The Aquilizans' recent settlement in Australia and their obligation to construct a new home – not only a physical house, but also a new kind of home-ness, or a communal relationship with society – in this land of strangers have provided them with an even more relevant opportunity and more intense energy to carry out their creative practice. Art for them is way to adapt to a new reality, a process of de-identification and re-identification.[41]

**Figure 3: Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan with the author, Singapore Biennale, 2008. Photo: John Clark**

Another discrete meditative space was created for the exhibition by Hossein Valamanesh. Viewers were asked to leave their shoes outside upon entering, a

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[39] In another, unplanned incident of art and real life intersecting, the Aquilizans' work was, upon being opened by registrars at the Art Gallery of South Australia, rejected from the exhibition. The first box opened, marked #1, contained traces of mould. It was assumed that all 140 boxes contained mould and there was concern that mould spores would enter the Gallery's air conditioning system and infect works in the permanent collection. Because the work was key to the exhibition's interrogation of place through the prism of home (as it appropriated the domestic structure of 'home'), I fought for its inclusion. The common sense advice from an independent conservator was to "hang the clothes out to dry in the sun to kill the mould, then brush it off", just as you would at home. Fortunately it was a sunny weekend in Adelaide, only the first box contained mould as it had been packed differently from the others using a plastic casing, and the problem was quickly solved without adverse impact on the work or the exhibition.

[40] Fenner, F., curator. (2008). "Concrete Culture." Sydney, Australia: Ivan Dougherty Gallery; and, Nanjo, F., curator. (2008). "2nd Singapore Biennale: Wonder." Singapore.

[41] Hou, H. (2008). Addressing the Black Hole. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*. Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, p. 26.

ritual required when visiting a mosque, but in this context a metaphorical gesture for dispensing with racial and cultural prejudice. It was a mosque-like room lined with Persian rugs, sections of their unique patterning highlighted by ethereal beams of light. People lingered, sat and even lay on the floor, the exotic and ethereal environment created within the gallery inviting viewers to feel at home in the space.[42]

## 4.3 Home Made

Another method by which artists construct 'home-ness' at times of displacement or transition is by utilising materials and methods that have a culturally specific resonance. These works were loosely grouped in *Handle with Care*. A major commission that embraced the in-betweeness of living between cultures was a wall mural by Guan Wei featuring his trademark chubby pink figures, symbols for him of all mankind. Though populating a natural environment that merges traditional Chinese painted landscapes with the Australian bush, the naked inhabitants gaze anxiously skyward as they are drawn upwards towards the clouds, into the unknown. They are stranded on an island, some making a miraculous ascension as they look towards the Aquilizan's immigrant home, others drowning in the sea.[43]

Similarly, Gregory Pryor's work in the 10th Biennial facilitated engagement between two cultures. It consisted of parallel diary entries by himself and Taiwanese visitors to his studio during an extended residency in Taipei the previous year. They were installed in the exhibition space side by side, as if to invite direct comparison of the different cultural responses to shared experiences of everyday life. Pryor's project represented the nexus of various

[42] Images of all works can be found in Appendix III (a).
[43] As controversy around the fate of asylum seeking "boat people" arriving in Australia became forefront in new political policies, the newly refurbished MCAA, Sydney, commissioned a new version of Guan Wei's boat people mural for its inaugural mural project in 2012. That image was subsequently appropriated by activist artists boycotting the 19th Biennale of Sydney in protest at Transfield Holdings' involvement in offshore detention centres.

strands in the exhibition: the fragile, hand-made paper on which the entries are written forged a tactile connection to the natural world; the intimacy of diary entries revealed psychological shifts from day to day, culture to culture; and, perhaps most importantly, the artist's mission to juxtapose his thoughts with those of inhabitants of the city adopted as his temporary home reflected on the fine line that can divide the contentment of belonging from the anxiety of displacement.

Extending the methodological research into facilitating an articulation of place in curatorial approaches to Australian Indigenous art (from *Talking About Abstraction* in 2004 and *The Lie of the Land* in 2005), the Biennial presented the work of Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, well-known Pintupi artist and elder brother of Yukultji Napangati, whose visual narratives of place had been pivotal to the curatorial approach in *The Lie of the Land*. His work does not use traditional methods (replacing pigment body painting with acrylic paintings on canvas), but draws on the visual vocabulary of his ancestors. Warlimpirringa was also part of the family group who emerged from the desert in 1984; he began painting about three years after that and, unlike Yukultji for whom recognition came later, quickly established himself as one of the leading Papunya Tula artists. [44]

Despite attempts to displace Indigenous communities from their homelands for more than two hundred years, the consistent recounting of knowledge and experience of the land in film, dance and visual art has secured those homelands at the international face of Australia's cultural identity. Tjapaltjarri is renowned for the abstract-looking paintings of the kind included in the Biennial, which invest the Pintupi Tingari iconography with unusual insight and spiritual underpinning, resulting in subtlety of line and dazzling optical effects. His work made an active contribution to the dialogue within the exhibition spaces about

[44] As discussed in Chapter Two, Aboriginal art scholar Vivien Johnson claims "Indigenous art is the mainstream of Australian contemporary art. Not only in the eyes of overseas audiences for whom Indigenous artists have the only distinctively Australian voices, but for the Australian art world itself". Johnson, V. (2004). Surface Tension. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *Talking About Abstraction*, Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW. (unpaginated)

the various authors' connection to place. While the curatorial juxtaposition of desert art and contemporary practice in major exhibitions such as this can be problematic (see Chapter Two), in this instance the bottom-up facilitation, as opposed to top-down imposition, of visual dialogue stemming from experiences of home ensured an empathic space for engagement.[45] For Western viewers, it is not only the recognition of visual parallels with non-Aboriginal abstract painting but also curiosity about the artist's 'authentic' desert home that inevitably informs a reading of Tjapaltjarri's painting. As discussed in Chapter Two, the perceived authenticity of the artist's experience in Indigenous Australia is actually recognition of the work's authoritative voice on the cultural import of place.

The exhibition conveyed the Indigenous connectedness to home in a diversity of art practice at a time when locating Aboriginal art within the western art arena remains fraught and politically sensitive, uncomfortably tied to market pressures and unresolved issues around reconciliation.[46] In the context of the then Howard government's refusal to apologise for past maltreatment, supporting Aboriginal art through collecting, exhibiting and promoting it to the international market became a way of giving something back to politically discarded and socially displaced Aboriginal communities. While a degree of white guilt may have been assuaged, the prominence of Aboriginal art over the last two decades has also strengthened Aboriginal pride and educated non-Indigenous people in aspects of Aboriginal culture. Most importantly, Aboriginal art has been a useful political tool in drawing national and international attention to Indigenous issues, particularly land rights. Though not always conspicuously 'political' in content, the securing of Aboriginal art's respected position within a non-Indigenous, Western art world has in itself been a

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[45] Tjapaltjarri's work received an effusive response from Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev when she visited *Handle with Care* and was subsequently included in documenta13, where it was described by *The New York Times* critic Roberta Smith as "riveting". Smith, R. (2012, 14 June). Art Show as Unruly Organism: documenta13 in Kassel, Germany. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/15/arts/design/documenta-13-in-kassel-germany.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[46] See Michaels, E. (1988). In E. Michaels (1993), *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media and Technological Horizons*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin, p. 144.

powerful political strategy.[47] It is, however, the role of the curator to embrace the delicate balance between cultural history and political contemporaneity.

> The paintings of Walpiri artist Dorothy Napangardi are evocations of place and childhood memories relating to her early upbringing on her extended family's vast estate… But the sense of *joie de vivre* that can be glimpsed in Napangardi's works in the 2008 Adelaide Biennial has an illusory dimension. At best, it can only temporarily counter deeper feelings of loss, grief and mourning. The past is indeed another country. As such, it needs to be 'handled with care.[48]

Dorothy Napangardi is another of Aboriginal painting's most famous exponents. In the lead-up to the Biennial she was inspired by an emotional return to the desert home country that she was forcibly removed from as a child. In a dramatic shift from the monochromatic palette that brought Napangardi's work to prominence some years ago, the new body of work celebrated her beloved land with a palette of pink and purple, orange, yellow and blue. Yet discussions between the curator and artist revealed that her ties to land are fragile, undermined by distance and the passing of time. For Napangardi the connection to home is an emotive and fragile one, as indeed it is for people of all cultures displaced and recontextualised by migration and exile.

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In terms of how the similar and diverse concerns of artists translated within the exhibition spaces, a discourse emerged that shed light on how artists invoke the experience of home to respond to the time and place in which we live. The 10th Biennial proposed a particular curatorial context to unite the works here – others might see them affiliated in very different ways. It is also worth noting

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[47] Establishing Australian Indigenous art as legitimately 'contemporary' and 'political' on the world stage was the subject of subsequent research undertaken in collaboration with the Australian Centre for Photography for *Making Change*, an exhibition of photo-based and new media work by 24 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists, hosted by the National Art Museum of China in 2012. Chapter Two.

[48] Nicholls, C. (2008). Another Country. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*. Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, p. 42.

that exhibitions are largely determined by their institutional context. Following its exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia, works from the Biennial were selected by visiting curators for major exhibitions, demonstrating that works of art, too, can find a foothold in the slipstream of a globalised culture in flux.[49]

*Handle with Care* facilitated within the exhibition space the possibility for and contemplation of new meanings, the curator determining the conditions for viewers to get beyond simply 'understanding' the meaning of artworks to 'inhabiting' (being at home within) the intellectual and sensory space of the exhibition. Rather than just being passive recipients of the art or exhibition's message, viewers were able to engage with works on their own terms, seeing it from the inside by recognising aligned or similar experiences, rather than as outsiders struggling to match external and internal perceptions of place.[50]

As Bourriaud has observed, "What is collapsing before our eyes is nothing other than this falsely aristocratic conception of the arrangement of works of art."[51] When underpinned by visual connections, conceptual and thematic connections within the gallery space will contribute to the exhibition's coherency. Thus, in *Handle with Care*, Connelly-Northey's iron and barbed wire possum skin cloaks were installed on the outside of James Newitt's suburban home environment; Laurence's dead Lemon-scented Gum looked across at Napangardi's paintings of her long lost home lands and Darling and Forwood's drain of mallee roots sourced from the ecologically threatened land in which they live; while Guan Wei's drowning refugees looked wistfully at the immigrant 'home' built by

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[49] Alfredo and Isabel Aqulizan's *Address* was shipped by curator Fumio Nanjo to the 2008 Singapore Biennale; Tajapltjarri's paintings were brought into documenta13 to engender a conversation around place that included Indigenous voices; Ken Yonetani's *Sweet Barrier Reef* was re-cast as one of three installations in Australia's group exhibition for the 2009 Venice Biennale, curated by Felicity Fenner. Yonetani was one of three artists in *Once Removed,* a group exhibition of young Australian artists in the Ludoteca at the 2009 Venice Biennale, organised by the Australia Council in association with Shaun Gladwell's exhibition in the Australian pavilion. See Chapter Five.

[50] Also central to the audience's engagement with the intercultural dialogues in the exhibition was the exhibition catalogue, which sold out within days and was reprinted in the second week of the exhibition.

[51] Bourriaud, N. (2002). Artwork as social interstice. In *Relational Aesthetics* (S. Pleasance & F. Woods, Trans.) (pp. 11–24). Dijon: les presses du reel, p. 15.

Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan and Pryor's diaristic installation that captured the intersecting, in-between spaces of daily lives lived between two cultures. These visual connections offered the viewer a pathway into the exhibition's articulation of a place that lies somewhere between the uncertainty of not knowing and the certainty of home. Waterlow's "ability to be uncertain" was effectively facilitated in the context of Bhabha's "third space" of engagement:

> The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation.[52]

Making connections that harness the tension of 'in-betweeness' while bridging differing experiences of place is not a simple task of joining the dots (this is the task of the viewer). Critical responses attested to the fact that the exhibition facilitated connections within the exhibition space.[53] To ensure a space of affective engagement for the audience, the curator of a group exhibition must plant connective seeds between works in the exhibition, being careful not to drown them with over-watering. Works should whisper rather than shout at one another across the gallery spaces, allowing the viewer's own experience and perceptions to inform the direction of connective growth. The analogy of planting seeds comes from the idea that the curatorial process and viewer engagement with an exhibition takes time. The curator is not all-knowing; the

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[52] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 28–56), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 53.

[53] For example: "Felicity Fenner has selected more that twenty artist whose works reflect these concerns, and has produced an exhibition that is truly connective. The show embraces contemporary art that displays sensitivity to a common shared human experience, reflecting our anxieties and our search for a possible panacea… It is this ability of almost all the works selected to entrance, seduce and enrapture the viewer and at the same time draw them towards a reflection upon contemporary social issues that makes this exhibition so successful… This is a powerful exhibition which is much more inclusive and inspiring than any Adelaide Biennial that has gone before it. It is cohesive, engaging and stunning in its demand that in our associations with each other and our world, we handle everything with care. Kalionis, J. (2008). Handle with Care: The 2008 Adelaide Biennial, *Artdate*, 85, 6–7, p. 7.

curator can only hint at, 'whisper', connections, creating a space for reflection by viewers to make their own connections. [54] Ideally, an exhibition that is anchored in place (such as a national biennial) yet houses multifarious viewpoints will offer visitors new understandings of that place. Responding to Rogoff's call for cultural complexity in the curatorial rationale, the exhibition can usurp discrete histories in a journey of entwinement and entanglement.

The farmers' peaceful protest on the opening night of *Handle with Care* evidenced the power of the prism of home: dressed in Drizabone coats and work boots, they brought the country to the Adelaide Festival and Biennial launch on the city's night of nights, bridging the divide between art and life, between 'your place' and 'mine'.

**Figure 4: Protestors at the Diddicoolum Drain Extension site, SA, November 2007. The group protested again three months later at the opening of *Handle with Care*, Adelaide. Photo: Mick Bradley.**

[54] The curator should also take the time to reflect, as John Barrett-Lennard taught me on the occasion of *Handle with Care*: "Dear Felicity, I'm not sure you'll get this before Friday night but want to wish you the best for the opening and attendant festivities. My favourite moment with my Biennial (now a long time ago) was a half hour I managed to grab, entirely on my own just before the show opened. I was able to get this quiet time, wandering through the big, off site exhibition space, looking at things, without artists, without AGSA staff, with the building entirely to myself, and before the onslaught. It was wonderful, one of the most memorable moments I've had with a show I've curated. I hope you have a similar opportunity, a time when it's all done, there's nothing more that can be done, and in which you can see what you've worked at for so long, free of distractions and with real pleasure. It'll be hard to get that in the AGSA, but I do hope that you have time for yourself and for some uninterrupted reflection. I'll be there on Friday, in the crowd, and look forward to it. Best of luck, and best wishes, John." Email to the author from John Barrett-Lennard, 27 February, 2008.

## CHAPTER 5

## OUT OF PLACE

> Our strange bifurcated place in the human story, European by history and Asian by geography, means that we live turned out to the world. We are curious before we are introspective, inclined to receive what the world has to offer…[1]

Are exhibitions of Australian art "turned out to the world"? Where do we "turn out" from? Home? Home is the base, the ground zero, from which we engage with the world. When attuned to artists' experience and understanding of home, the curator can create an intellectual space within an exhibition that turns out to the world, activating viewers' own memories and experiences, facilitating new understandings and meanings as a result of those connections. With the implementation of particular curatorial strategies that are outward rather than inward looking, a curated art project can become a forum for investigating dichotomous external and internal descriptors of place, teasing out connections not just between artworks but between artworks and viewers, and between viewers and place. The presence of the protesting farmers from the Upper South-East region of South Australia on the opening night of the 10th Adelaide Biennale, together with the demonstrated impact of other works in the exhibition, was testament to the collective capacity of works in the exhibition to be "provocative and agents for social change".[2]

In order to achieve these conditions, the thesis presumes that curatorial practice has moved on from simply assembling artworks in chronological or thematic sequence to curate (create) the conditions for viewers' engagement, enabling audiences to get beyond simply 'understanding' the meaning of the artwork to 'inhabiting' (being at home within) the intellectual and sensory

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[1] Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011.* Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 68
[2] Waterlow, N. (2008). *Troubled Water*. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *Handle with Care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*. Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, p. 32. The exhibition also impacted on curators, with the Aquilizan's work being selected for the subsequent the 2008 Singapore Biennale and Ken Yonetani's for the 2009 Venice Biennale.

curatorial space. That space of engagement is affective, experiential and experimental. Taking its cue from *Handle with Care*'s engagement *with* the real world, the next stage of research tested through a series of curated projects the ability to create these conditions *in* the real world. Critical feedback indicated that *Handle with Care* communicated much about place, specifically the Australia we live in today:

> Fenner demonstrated courage that might have been misplaced had the works not delivered in special ways. And that meant being able to address and communicate elusive perceptions about such things as being 'Australian' but also 'global', about living 'here' but also 'there', about seeing the big picture in the smallest of circumstances and above all trying to define and value those things that define what it means to be human.[3]

While the research to date was focused on forging connections inside the gallery spaces, the next stage of research moved outside the museum in response to Geraldine Brooks's claim that "we are turned out to the world" and that "the idea of home… is bigger than the floor plan of any given four walls", that the idea of place is an ever-shifting space of co-existence, intersection and reinvention.[4]

The research discussed in this chapter explores the idea of home in curated exhibitions for non-institutional spaces: one of international content in off-site spaces in Sydney, and one of Australian content in an off-site space at the Venice Biennale. *Running the City* (International Symposium on Electronic Art at UNSW Art & Design, 7 June – 20 July, 2013) brought to Sydney the work of three international artists and included two co-curated participatory art events, *Runscape* and *Flash Run*; while *Once Removed* took to the 2009 Venice Biennale the work of four emerging Australian artists (Australia: 53rd International Art Exhibition, La Ludoteca, Venice, 5 June – 22 November, 2009). In these projects the curator's role shifted from one focused on the facilitation of connections

[3] Neylon, J. (2008). Handle With Care: 2008 Biennial of Australian Art. *Artlink*, *28*(2), p. 83.
[4] Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011.* Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 3.

between works in an exhibition space, to one that is also concerned with forging connections to place itself.

PART 1

In the first section of the chapter, shifting ideas of home are analysed in the context of art projects set in home environments that are in a state of flux, whether through agricultural decline, natural disaster, urban gentrification or radical city planning.

### 5.1.1 Our special places

> Two of the most critical issues regarding urban development [are] the cannibalisation of the public realm by private organisations and questions of a sustainable future.[5]

Indigenous author Kim Scott's novel, *That Deadman Dance*, echoes Julia Kristeva's thesis in *Strangers to Ourselves* that place is inextricably bound to identity, and that the threat or loss of place contributes to feelings of alienation, or displacement.[6] As his idealist hopes for colonisation are incrementally dashed, the protagonist Bobby Wabalanginy laments:

> Too many strangers wanna take things for themselves and leave nothing. Whales nearly all gone now, and them men that kill them they gone away, too, and now we can't even walk up river away from the sea in cold rainy time…

[5] Reinmuth, G. (2008). Richard Goodwin: Porosity. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *Concrete Culture.* Sydney: UNSW, p. 24.
[6] Kristeva, J. (1991). *Strangers to Ourselves.* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.), New York: University of Columbia Press.

> They messing up the water, cutting the earth… And we now strangers to our special places.[7]

The farmers' protest at the opening of *Handle with Care* evidenced the strength of engagement with audiences when the prism of home is invoked. The affective qualities of "special places" – whether home, town or country – is, like sport, a universal leveller. The protest was sited just outside the museum, the men and women who came to the museum travelling from their farms to garner support for the proposed irrigation development that threatens the environmental sustainability of their home lands. Farmers in a sea of suits and cocktail dresses, they looked distinctly out of place at the Festival launch. Their incongruous appearance served to heighten their visibility and consequently the visibility of the political message that they were there to deliver. By bringing their concerns from home, dressed in the gear that represents their connection to place, a connection with Biennial artworks and visitors was made, and local (non-arts) media reported widely on the environmental issue at the heart of the work.[8]

The work itself, together with the presence of the protestors from the community for whom it has the deepest significance, supported the thesis that by invoking the prism of home, curators can reveal aspects of place not previously known or recognised by others. Internationally, particularly over the last decade as controversies rage over land rights and land usage, artists and curators have undertaken a range of projects that reframe the idea of home.

As a preface to the curatorial research, selected international projects that best forge an engagement with place through the prism of home are considered here in the context of current theoretical discourse on public, relational and

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[7] Scott, K. (2010). *That Deadman Dance*. Sydney: Picador, p. 392.

[8] In addition to journal reviews of the exhibition, news of the protest appeared in the Adelaide Advertiser and local papers including Border Watch and Border Chronicle, the latter reporting that "The Keith farmer who has been vocal in his criticism of the Upper SE Dryland Salinity and Flood Management program, has now taken his protest to the Art Gallery of SA… The life size sculpture evoked the desired response… People were horrified by the carving up of the landscape". Author unknown. (2008, March 13). Artist takes drain protest to Adelaide. *Border Chronicle*, p. 9.

participatory art. The research commences with an overview of curatorial projects that, like *Troubled Water*, are based on the literal understanding of home as a specific tract of land, citing three agricultural-based examples in the UK, China and Japan. It then considers recent biennale projects in which the city as home is articulated by revealing in the curatorial strategy the interconnection between place and identity.

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**Figures 1-3: Brookwood House garden, seven years on (2014). Photos: F. Fenner**

Fritz Haeg's *Edible Estates* project, which has since spread to many countries, was commissioned for a site in Southwark, London, by Tate Modern as part of its *Global Cities* project in 2007. The idea was to engage a local community in enhancing their experience of and connection with home by repurposing an unused area covered by lawn. The fruit, vegetable and herb garden was established on a highly visible triangular lawn belonging to the Brookwood House Council Estate with the intention that everyone would be able to see, participate and reap the rewards of the project. In a high density, disadvantaged area of south London, the production of food became a public spectacle.

To this day, it encourages not only residnent participants but passers-by to reconsider their connection to the land and how they inhabit it. Haeg's *Edible Estates* project began in the United States where equally high-profile public and private spaces (such as suburban front lawns) were utilised, in order to optimise visibility, thus functioning as potential agents of change:

> The Edible Estates project did not originate from thoughts of lawns or food or gardens. It is only tangentially about these things. The Edible Estates gardens are vehicles with which to engage larger issues of the human condition today. Edible Estates is about people and their relationship to each other and to their environment.[9]

**Figure 4: Brookwood House, London, 2014. Photo: F. Fenner**

Some commentators contest the apparently socially motivated intent of projects such as these. Claire Bishop, for example argues that community based art projects (as distinct from 'community art') are too easily and sometimes falsely claimed by government bodies as evidence of the latter providing social services when in fact the initiatives are facilitated by artists and curators. Bishop refers to this 'dilution problem' in her text *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, claiming that participatory practice has been politicised in England as part of the government's appropriation of contemporary art as a means of promoting Britain's contemporaneity.[10] Bishop is particularly critical of official frameworks of support that insist on making contemporary art accessible to all, arguing that such strategies not only simplify art and curatorial practice, but idealise the capacity of art and exhibitions to mend deep and long-term social division between race and class.[11] Certainly, there is evidence of this in Australia, too, with art often called upon to solve design problems and mend communities.[12]

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[9] Haeg, F. (2008). *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn.* New York: Bellerophon Publications, p. 10.
[10] Bishop, C. (2004, Fall). Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics, *October*, *110*, 51-79.
[11] See Barok, D. (2009). *On Participatory Art: Interview with Claire Bishop*. (Interview following 'Monument to Transformation' workshop, Prague, Tranzit Initiative). Retrieved from http://www.scribd.com/doc/56968733/On-participatory-art-Interview-with-Claire-Bishop
[12] The Public Art Advisory Panel (PAAP) of the City of Sydney sees many applications containing substandard art to be used in the service of camouflaging poor design, such as artists' painting

Across the range, however, most contemporary artists who undertake their practice in the public domain do so in collaboration with curators, not in response to government agendas (though their aspirations may coincide), but as a means of engaging broader audiences than offered by the gallery or museum context and as a rejoinder to the ever-deepening divisions between private and public access, between modern day colonists and the citizens displaced in their wake.[13] There are many place-making art works around the world, but the focus here is on those that require participatory interaction to activate and sustain them, and that do so through the artist's and/or viewer's prism of home.[14] The distinguishing factor of Fritz Haeg's gardens is that ownership of the project is transferred to the community, empowering its members with the ultimate responsibility for the gardens' success or failure, knowing that success (the production of food) directly benefits the resident participants.

David Suzuki urges us to think locally more than globally. [15] Echoing Foucault's argument in *The Order of Things* for the role of local knowledges in effecting meaningful change, Suzuki stresses that we need to "revalue what has become devalued", focusing on local skills and knowledge…[16] While Foucault articulates what he sees as the potential for local knowledges to bring about socio-political

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electrical boxes and community murals. (Note: the author is a founding member of PAAP, incorporated in 2007.)

[13] Today's 'colonists' are corporations. Art in the public domain proposes new models of ownership. (PARK)ing Day, for example, initiated in San Francisco by Rebar in 2005, sees participants turn a metered car parking spot into a temporary park. (PARK)ing Day has become an international phenomenon that re-defines how public space is created and allocated.

[14] Curiously, one of the earliest examples of an artist 'rescuing' a desolate area with planting, as Agnes Denes did with Wheatfield in 1982, was in Australia: Kathryn Miller's *The Grasslands Project* (1995–97) in Melbourne is credited with re-introducing a sense of place to an area that Marc Augé would define as a 'non-place'. See Rugg, J. (2010). *Exploring Site-Specific Art: Issues of Space and Internationalism.* New York: I.B. Tauris, pp. 78–82; also in Australia, Janet Laurence's In the Shadow at Olympic Park, Sydney, fulfils its place-making function with native plantings. See Fenner, F. (2001). Report from Sydney II: Ground Work, *Art in America*, May 2001, pp. 89–93 and Fenner, F. (2007). The Nature of Art. *Art and Australia*, *44*(3), 420–427.

[15] Lecture (attended by the author), Sydney Opera House (2010, 30 November). *David Suzuki: The Legacy*. Also see Suzuki, D. (2010). *The Legacy: An Elder's Vision for our Sustainable Future*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

[16] Foucault, M. (1970). *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. (Translation of *Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, [1966]). London: Pantheon.

realignments of power, Suzuki's concern is the realignment of human relationships to the natural environment. With few exceptions, the catalyst for CCD initiatives in Western Sydney has been for community engagement: the engagement of people from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds to share in a curated art project diverse local knowledges of a defined geographic region.[17] Indeed, it is in the context of home that revolutionary approaches to community-building through engaging and sustainable public art projects can be found. Artist-led revitalisation strategies not only offer communities new ways of imagining how we might live in what Tony Fry has described as an "age of displacement", but reveal to visitors from elsewhere the inhabitants' indelible connections to and sense of place. Artists and curators help society to re-imagine a sense of home: in the last two decades there has been a noticeable return to community-based art projects that blend idealism with activism, noted by Grant Kester as the trend gathered momentum in the mid-1990s:

> Concepts such as 'empowerment' and 'participatory democracy' that found political expression during the 1960's [sic] in the policies and programs of the Office of Economic Opportunity or the National Welfare Rights movement, are re-emerging in the rhetoric of the community-based public artist.[18]

Turning attention to our Asia-Pacific region of the world, it is worth noting two outstanding examples of community, home-making curatorial projects. Both are being undertaken on an ambitious scale by artists and curators working in close collaboration with local communities in effective revitalisations of place.

In southeast China, artist, curator and architect Ou Ning purchased some houses in Yixian County near Huangshan City to work with the farmers in revitalising the countryside, the area having been depopulated as people move to the cities in search of work. The *Bishan Project* helps local communities rediscover their own craft traditions and build new cultural roots in the agricultural community.

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[17] An exception was Michael Tuffrey's 2014 project in Airds, Western Sydney, produced under the auspice of the MCA's C3West curatorial program. See Chapter One, p. 28.
[18] Kester, G. (1995, January). Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art. *Afterimage*, 22, 5–11, p. 6.

Heeding Suzuki's advice, the communities are re-valuing those skills and knowledge that have become de-valued in a globalised, urbanised world:

> Traditional rural society in China has always had the ability to resist outside forces based on its economic self-sufficiency and political autonomy. Re-evaluation here is not intended as a reactionary call for a return to the past, as all countries today are compelled to form some relationship with globalization… Bishan aims to combat the encroachments of globalization and neoliberalism, and by using art and culture as our first point of entry, we ultimately hope to influence politics and economics with our work in rural areas.[19]

Ou Ning's political agenda takes to a whole new level Kester's suggestion that artists and curators "can work from a position of solidarity rather than simply as provocateurs, and that the effectiveness of this solidarity depends on their sensitivity to local political dynamics, histories, cultures and the possibility of a sustained relationship with participants."[20] This "sustained relationship with participants" modelled on a rejection of capitalism is key to the success of large-scale projects such as Ou Ning's. Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert's project in Chiang Mai, begun in 1998, resists urbanisation but embraces the socially engaged aspects of globalisation. *The Land* is an evolving, self-sustainable rice-planting, art-making and architectural project where local farmers, visiting artists and international curators come together and learn from each other. Homes are built in response to individual needs, blending traditional skills with contemporary design.

Incorporating the same imperatives, though within the recurrent exhibition model, the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial in northwest Japan bridges community art and contemporary exhibition paradigms. The former rice-growing area of

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[19] Ning, O. (2013, 4 July). Bishan Project: Restarting the Rural Reconstruction Movement. Retrived from http://www.alternativearchive.com/ouning/article.asp?id=897 [Article commissioned by the *Europe (to the power of) n* project, 18 March, 2013, Beijing. (The Chinese version was published in *ARTCO Magazine*, April issue, 2013, Taiwan.)]

[20] Kester, G. (1999, winter). Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art. *Variant*, 9, supplement. Retrieved from http://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue9/Supplement9.pdf

Echigo-Tsumari commissions artist installations in villages being abandoned as younger generations, like those in China's Yixian County, leave the area for the cities. The local population, most of them no longer young, tend to the art as they once did to the rice, creating new avenues of engagement with the land they call home. Established in 2000, the Echigo-Tsumari event began and continues to function as a Triennial, though with legacy (permanent) works accessible year-round, every year (except in mid-winter, when access is impossible due to heavy snow). In terms of re-imaging an entire area in the context of community-based, eco-sustainable public art, the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial, with an increasing number of legacy works, leads the way internationally.[21] Originally conceived as an experiment in regional revitalisation through art, the project has developed a model for new relationships between people and the environment in a now redundant agricultural area of Japan. A number of the transformed village houses are used as accommodation, including James Turrell's *House of Light* and Marina Abramovic's *Dream House* (both 2000). They are maintained by the local community. These houses have been repurposed from traditional village homes to provide for visitors to the art site an understanding of this unique place. Conveyed through the prism of home, the experience of embedding oneself in the local culture – a culture that in turn is contingent for success on the efforts of the local community – offers a level of insight into place that cannot be attained by non-participatory modes of public art divorced from the local culture. Australian artist Janet Laurence, as just one of many international artists commissioned by the Triennial, has transformed a tiny mountain house at Echigo-Tsumari into a laboratory-like space displaying natural plant remedies and their locally sourced ingredients. Interactivity, in the case of Echigo-Tsumari, functions differently to a museum exhibition: it is between artist and place, artwork and visitors – but primarily between artwork and community.

[21] For an analysis of the event's impact of community regeneration, see Maughan, J. (2010). Echigo-Tsumari: Public Art as a regenerating force. *Artlink, 30*(3), 24-29.

Figure 5: View of Echigo-Tsumari with repurposed traditional home in foreground. Photo: F. Fenner

Figures 6 and 7: James Turrell *House of Light* (top); Maria Abramovic *Dream House* (bottom). Both 2000. Photos: F. Fenner

Figure 8: Exterior view of house re-purposed by Janet Laurence. Photo: F. Fenner

In each of these initiatives, home is restored and reactivated through the intervention of artists and architects, thinkers and curators. In contrast to the regional focus of these projects, in the context of recurrent exhibitions such as biennials and triennials, the more common platform for place-making works is the urban environment. Central to the analysis of post-museum site-specific curating is the articulation of new methodologies that engage with space. As Claire Doherty reiterates throughout her research on post-museum curatorial practice, "Given that the places of the biennial have been reconsidered as points of exchange and collision, remade through intersections of social, economic and political

relations, it is not surprising that the predominant forms to emerge from these context-specific invitations are social, spatial and interdisciplinary".[22]

Social and spatial forms of engagement are of especial interest here, given the focus on concepts of home. While engagement with place is not only an *accepted* but an *expected* outcome of temporary art projects in the public sphere, how can curators frame this engagement through the prism of home, so that the biennial (or other form of temporary art project) moves beyond top-down, external descriptors of site to re-imagine place through the local experience? The thesis argues that the deeper the level of engagement demanded from participants by the artist or curator, the deeper their engagement with place will be. A couple of examples that play with notions of home demonstrate this.

**Figure 9: Tatzu Nishi, *The Merlion Hotel*. 2006 Singapore Biennale. Photo: F. Fenner**

The 2011 Singapore Biennale's curatorial premise based on ideas of home was best encapsulated by Japanese artist Tatzu Nishi's inhabitable installation that commandeered the Merlion, a large water fountain that is a famous Singapore landmark. Souchou Yao's observation in relation to *Open House*, that "the idea that homeliness can tame the otherness we invite into our homes", is also applicable to the curatorial underpinning of the ongoing Echigo-Tsumari project.[23] Yao's "idea of homeliness" echoes Brooks's "idea of home": both cite the metaphor of home in the pursuit of understanding otherness, of facilitating an empathic turning out to the world.

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[22] Doherty, C. (2007). Curating Wrong Places…Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone? In P. O'Neill (Ed.), *Curating x 24*. Amsterdam: De Appel. Retrieved from http://www.publicart.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/Writings/curatingwrongplaces...pdf

[23] Hou, H. (2007). *Not Only Possible, But Also Necessary: Optimism in the Age of Global War – 10th Istanbul Biennial.* Istanbul: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, p. 24; Yao, S. (2011). Private Space, Public Space and the Modern Subject. In M. Ngui, T. Smith & R. Storer, *Singapore Biennale 2011: Open House* (pp. 117–122). Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, p. 119.

**Figures 10 and 11: 2007 Istanbul Biennale at Istanbul Textile Traders' Market. Photos: F. Fenner**

Hou Hanru's 2007 Istanbul Biennale is an exemplar of site-specific curatorial practice that is primarily concerned with the invisible characteristics of place, employing Debordian psycho-geographic approaches to the exploration of social and political histories. The exhibition signalled a shift away from the officially-sanctioned kind of curatorial site-responsiveness employed in earlier exhibitions, eschewing touristy venues to instead inhabit culturally significant but largely unknown spaces such as shops, markets, a textile factory, a school and a warehouse by the harbour. As such, it rejected top-down in favour of bottom-up markers of cultural significance, in stark contrast to, for example, the 2003 Istanbul Biennale and the inaugural 2006 Singapore Biennale (see Chapter One), which both celebrated and inhabited their respective society's iconic architectural monuments.

Importantly, in the context of the research in this thesis, the 2007 Istanbul Biennale required visitors to walk, often long distances to far flung areas of the city, discovering for themselves hidden places around the city not already inscribed by a cultural identity bestowed by civic history. The requirement to make decisions about how to seek out exhibition sites, and to be physically embedded in new and unknown environments, was a deft curatorial strategy that engaged visitors on a physical and sensory level as well as intellectually and emotionally. While walking in foreign cities between venues is not in itself an unusual undertaking for biennale visitors, in the case of the 2007 Istanbul Biennale visitors were required to be very committed to seeing all of the

exhibition as it necessitated extended walking expeditions, including getting lost in areas of the city not equipped for tourist visitation. Thus, the curator devised a method by which visitors explored the city in a manner that recalls the situationist practice of dérive.

**Figure 12: Michael Lin, *Model Home*, 2013. Auckland Triennial 2013. Photo: F. Fenner**

For the 2013 Auckland Triennial, curator Hou adopted another alternative approach to exploring ideas of home from the bottom-up. The Triennial's title, *If you were to live here…*, was posed as a question to international artists, inviting them to consider their practice from the perspective of the experience of living in New Zealand. At the heart of the exhibition was Michael Lin's *Model Home* (2013), symbolising the universal resonance of the idea of home and glowing from the central court of Auckland City Gallery. Outside the museum, other artists were embedded into the art and architecture communities of Auckland, working in collaboration with local artists, architects and academics to re-imagine the idea of home in a city whose foreign-born population now outnumbers those born in Auckland.[24] Australians Keg de Souza and artist duo Makeshift worked out of Fresh Gallery with the community of Ōtara, a majority Polynesian suburb 30 minutes south of central Auckland:

> For Pacific artists and artists with a consciousness for South Auckland and on-the-ground communities, Fresh Gallery Ōtara presents an opportunity to effect change by inspiring viewers to reflect on issues that affect their lives. The Gallery becomes a forum for dialogue; its exhibitions, a place of conversation. Beyond the conventional measure of economic or academic value, the gallery recognises artists as important conduits to social and cultural change in Ōtara

[24] Hou, H. (2013). If you were to live here… In H. Hou (curator), *If you were to live here…: 5th Auckland Triennial*, (pp. 11–21). Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, p. 1.

and beyond. Importantly, they are also linked to the Ōtara community with a sense of investment and responsibility.[25]

Keg de Souza spent the months in the lead-up to the Triennial immersing herself in the culture of Otara, using the opportunity of a commission for the Triennial as a platform for dialogue with the local Pacific Island community. The home-like tent she created from Pacific Island fabrics was informed by people's stories and traditions. It operated as a kind of tourist information centre, offering guides made by the artist to the Pacific retail and grocery stores in the immediate area. Also based on ideas of social exchange, Makeshift's *Kauri-oke!* project invited visitors to the weekend Otara Market to participate in a karaoke performance. Commenting on the inequity of free trade agreements between the two countries, the open-air market stall was made from New Zealand kauri timber recycled from Australian homes.

**Figure 13: Emory Douglas, Hou Hanru, Mayor of Auckland and Chair of the Ōtara-Papatoetoe local board at the Fresh Gallery Auckland Triennial opening, 2013. Photo: F. Fenner**

**Figure 14: Makeshift, *Kauri-Oke*, Otara market, 2013. Auckland Triennial 2013. Photo: F. Fenner**

In very different ways, each of these examples subverted top-down capitalist paradigms and each cited the idea of home (Nishi's by playing with ideas of appropriation and proprietary, Hou's through the local, grassroots knowledge of place and collaborations with its inhabitants), and each demanded a higher level of engagement (such as walking and exploring outlying suburbs) than artworks requiring a more passive engagement, such as digital and online interaction, or

[25] Borell, N. & Tavola, E. (2013). Fresh Gallery Ōtara. In H. Hou (curator), *If you were to live here…: 5th Auckland Triennial*, (pp. 46 – 47). Auckland: Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, p. 147.

more traditional modes of sensorial reception based on vision, sound, touch and taste.

### 5.1.2 On the Home Run

> Here as elsewhere walking embodies life's freedom, it is the shortest route to experiencing it. Walking enacts freedom, so I decided to walk… [26] Running [however] takes me places I would not otherwise go…[27]

Since the surrealists embarked on psychogeographic walks in the outlying suburbs of Paris in the 1920s, walking has assumed a performative role in the work of generations of subsequent artists. In the late 1950s the situationists incorporated the surrealist interest in the avant-garde and Dada with a more overtly political imperative, and in the 1960s Richard Long first employed the activity of walking for the purpose of leaving behind visible traces on the landscape. Since then, the work of artists such as Marina Abramović and Ulay, Francis Alÿs and Sophie Calle has often featured walking.[28] In Australia, Perth artist Perdita Phillips has made a number of performance and video works of walks, and in 2014 the City of Sydney commissioned a virtual walk work from Canadian artist duo Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. The significance of the act of walking differs between projects: while Long's walking projects are conceived as ephemeral human markers of mobility, distance and time, others are more performative than sculptural. They leave no visible trace on the places walked upon, the walks instead being deployed in broader narratives of which

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[26] Mannes-Abbott, G. (2012). In Ramallah, Running. In G. Mannes-Abbott & S. Martha (Eds.), *In Ramallah, Running* (pp. 26–31). London: Black Dog Publishing, p. 29.
[27] Mannes-Abbott, G. (2012). In Ramallah, Running. In G. Mannes-Abbott & S. Martha (Eds.), *In Ramallah, Running* (pp. 60–61). London: Black Dog Publishing, p. 61.
[28] Marina Abramović and Ulay in 1988 ended their ten-year relationship by walking the Great Wall of China, beginning from opposite ends 5,000 kms apart and crossing in the middle to say "goodbye"; Francis Alÿs performed *As Long As I'm Walking* (1992), *Duett* (1999) and *Seven Walks* (2005); Sophie Calle's best-known works involving following or being followed through city streets are *Suite Venitienne* (1979) and *The Shadow* (1981).

the exploration of place plays a minor role. Unusually, and in contrast to most of the examples cited above, the 2014 Cardiff and Bures Miller commission for Sydney is not a performative but a participatory work, requiring viewers to walk. *City of Forking Paths* is accessed as a mobile device application (app) and leads walking viewers through the interstitial spaces of Sydney's Rocks area, providing on-screen cinematic diversions along the route. However, in order to experience the artists' interventions, viewers must follow the prescribed route; there are few options to deviate beyond the streets and sites set out by the artists.

Moving beyond walking, the following examples from Australia and New Zealand, which include the author's own research, support the proposition that an artwork requiring more rigorous physical interaction than walking – such as cycling and running – can offer able-bodied participant audiences greater opportunity for profound engagement with place. It is proposed in this component of the research that empowerment is key to engagement. Any meaningful engagement with art requires preparation and application: the more one studies, experiences and learns about art, the more engaging it becomes. Similarly, the thesis argues, physical effort and commitment will reward participant-viewers with a more satisfying level of engagement.

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> Running extends my residency; it works slowly by taking me to places I would not otherwise go, repeatedly. It works fast by taking me to many places as quickly as Google, but concretely… Running discourages thinking or conclusion, concentrates on the present. The present is what is, how things are for now. I'm running in the present and peculiarly alive to the details of what is around me.[29]

[29] Mannes-Abbott, G. (2012). In Ramallah, Running. In G. Mannes-Abbott & S. Martha (Eds.), *In Ramallah, Running* (pp. 32–33). London: Black Dog Publishing, p. 33.

Lefebvre argued in *The Production of Space* that capitalist paradigms of development repress relationships between places and their histories in favour of establishing new relationships between place and power.[30] Worldwide, the corporatisation of city spaces and iterative gentrification of urban residential areas is testament to the place-breaking and place-remaking power of capitalism. The proposed social cleansing of Sydney's Millers Point is the latest chapter in Australia since colonisation of government-backed developments that strategically destroy communities and their connection to place.

Artists have been quick to respond to communities' need to reconnect, share and re-establish a sense of place, often by penetrating with performance-based works the interstitial spaces of the city.[31] In its argument that intervention involving physical activity is a useful strategy in articulating social relations of space, a participatory work was introduced as part of *Concrete Culture*, an exhibition of projects undertaken at the interface of art and architecture by Australian and international practitioners.[32]

**Figure 15: SquatSpace, *Tour of Beauty* participants at the old Carriageworks, Sydney, 2008. Photo: F. Fenner**

Launched in 2005, artist collective SquatSpace's *Tour of Beauty* guides cyclist participants on a bicycle tour of Redfern and Waterloo, adjacent inner-city suburbs of Sydney that have undergone rapid redevelopment under the auspices

[30] Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space.* (N. Donaldson-Smith, Trans.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
[31] International examples that utilise the act of exploratory walking include the London Psychogeographic Association, UK, which merged in the 1960s with the Situationist International (though in the 1990s had a brief renaissance); and the ongoing Providence Initiative for Psychogeographic Studies (PIPS), Rhode Island, USA.
[32] Fenner, F., curator. (2008). "Concrete Culture." Sydney, Australia: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, 29 May–5 July, 2008. Artists: Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan, Richard Goodwin, Ou Ning, SquatSpace and Ashok Sukumaran.

**Figure 16: SquatSpace, *Tour of Beauty*, 2007. Image: courtesy of SquatSpace**

**Figure 17: SquatSpace, *Tour of Beauty* participants hear from Aboriginal resident Lyn Turnbull, Redfern, 2008. Photo: F. Fenner**

of the state government.[33] In the Australian context (being the focus of this thesis), SquatSpace's *Tour of Beauty* was performative, interactive and immersive. Participants were introduced to local residents, community leaders and activists, who told their stories of living in the area and their historical and cultural ties to the place. Speakers were selected by SquatSpace on the basis of their engagement with the urban environment and the social politics of urban change as it impacted on people's homes and communities. The participant audience was offered first-hand accounts of the impact of urban transformation on these communities from the perspective of home. In taking the *Tour of Beauty*, participants engaged with individuals in their everyday urban environment, effectively getting under Carter's picnic rug to hear from the original inhabitants their stories of a culturally significant attachment to place that underpins the communitiy's sense of identity.[34]

> SquatSpace describes its role in this work as akin to that of DJs. They don't vet what the speakers say, or provide any sort of script through which the problem of gentrification must be explained, but they choose who speaks and in what order. Each tour is a different interaction between speakers and participants… a hybrid mix of participation and preconstruction, open-ended and predetermined meanings.[35]

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[33] Development was initially overseen by the Redfern Waterloo Authority (RWA) 2005–2011 and continues under the NSW government's Sydney Metropolitan Development Authority.
[34] Featuring informal meetings with local inhabitants, SquatSpace's *Tour of Beauty* takes visitors on a Debordian psychogeographic learning adventure of cultural attachment and social displacement. Also see: www.theregoestheneighbourhood.org
[35] Begg, Z. (2008). DIY Architecture: SquatSpace and the Tour of Beauty. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *Concrete Culture.* Sydney: Ivan Dougherty Gallery, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, p. 24.

The *Tour of Beauty* offered dual forms of empowerment: the speaker-participants were given the time, space and audience to articulate their connection to place; the cyclist-participants were invited to engage on a grassroots level, able to ask questions, observe and comment, bringing to the interaction their own experience of the meaning of place and home. As such, the interface between 'artwork' (in this case the place and its inhabitants) and 'audience' (the cyclist-participants) provided a genuine interactive engagement between people, place and participants.[36]

While the cycling route and ports of call were predetermined by the organising artists – in the same way that Cardiff and Bures Miller determine the walking route in *City of Forking Paths* – cyclist-participants were permitted some degree of content control in the form of interaction with speaker-participants.[37] The fact that the audience was cycling, the project proposed, promoted a deeper level of engagement with the places than one based on the viewing of images or passive walking. Cyclists have a heightened awareness of the physical environment that provides more than a visual reception of place in the opportunity to hear, touch and smell, as would a walking tour. Furthermore, the exertion of physical energy (pedalling) promotes an even deeper connection to place, the cyclist not simply observing but responding to physical attributes of place while negotiating its unique detail –pedestrians, prams, puddles and potholes. In their fast-paced interaction with the sociological fine grain of an environment, the cyclist is forced to react with spontaneous decisions on direction, speed and duration, therefore assuming a greater degree of empowerment in their engagement with place than that experienced from a more passive viewing platform.

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[36] Louis Aragon's novel *Paris Peasant* (1926) was perhaps the most influential forerunner to the situationist interest in psychogeographic mapping of urban places in a state of transition brought about by urban planning or gentrification.

[37] For those lacking the capacity to cycle, especially given that the *Concrete Culture* tour included a number of international artists visiting as part of the 2008 Biennale of Sydney, a mini-bus accompanied the cyclists as an alternative mode of transport.

> We sit at the foot of the Waterloo public housing towers, beside the community garden. Tower-block tenant and residents' activist Ross Smith is meant to be telling our group of twenty what it's like to live here, what it means to live here. Instead he remarks, 'Most people wind up their windows and lock their cars as they drive through Redfern-Waterloo'. I think about how I pick up speed on my bike when passing Redfern station, on my way home to Marrickville… I've started to ride my bike *slowly* through Redfern – for research. I rode past Lyn Turnbull. She was sitting on a chair pulled into the middle of the footpath on Abercrombie Street outside the Aboriginal Legal Service. She was laughing and talking through the open door to someone inside.[38]

**Figure 18: David Cross, *Level Playing Field*, 2013. Photo: F. Fenner**

Redfern and Waterloo are suburbs in transition, adding significance to the appropriateness of a mobility-based experience of the area. The second example of mobility-based experience of place requiring physical exertion was commissioned by curator Blair French for *SCAPE7: Biennial of Public Art*, 2013, in the midst of post-earthquake building rubble in downtown Christchurch. Like *Tour of Beauty*, David Cross's *Level Playing Field* was conceived in response to dramatic urban change, in the case of Christchurch the controversial urban redevelopment having been caused by an 'Act of God' rather than, in the case of urban redevelopment, an act of government. And like the examples above, *Level Playing Field* has artist-imposed parameters of engagement (rules of play). Supporting the proposition that "perspirational aesthetics" provides a meaningful platform for engagement with place through the prism of home, Cross's invented game, identified in the context of this thesis as "rugletics", became a temporary 'home ground', created

[38] Vincent, E. (2006). Tour of Beauty. *Meanjin 65*(2), 121–127. p. 121; 126.

for and activated by a community whose home town (including scores of homes themselves) had been lost.[39]

French's strategy in including a work like *Level Playing Field*, which blurs the distinction between biennale art and sport, is an interesting one to consider in the context of Claire Doherty's differentiation of types of engagement between art and audience, between "artists who invite participation, often through a complicit engagement with their subject, but who essentially remain the signatories of their work… from those who embed themselves within the social fabric of a city through intervention… from those who work collaboratively effecting a kind of 'social sculpture'".[40]

Cross's work bridges all three categories, being participatory while testing the parameters of interaction, by requiring the creation of teams and thus embedding itself in the social fabric of the city, and by its reliance on collaboration to be activated, thus becoming a 'social sculpture' for and comprised of the community into which it is inserted. When planning public art in response to place, curators and artists will fail without a thorough knowledge and understanding of the community into which the art is going.

**Figure 19: Advertisement for house paint, Christchurch CBD, 2013. Photo: F. Fenner**

Given the ongoing challenges of daily life in post-earthquake Christchurch, a lack of sensitivity to the local condition would have far greater implications on

[39] "Perspirational aesthetics" and "rugletics" are invented terms, the former appropriated from Bourriaud's "relational aesthetics' and the latter describing a fictional sport that combines rugby and athletics.
[40] Doherty, C. (2007). Curating Wrong Places…Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone? In P. O'Neill (Ed.), *Curating x 24*. Amsterdam: De Appel. Retrieved from http://www.publicart.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/Writings/curatingwrongplaces...pdf

people's support of the event than, for example, in a city not ravished by disaster.[41]

Initiated in 2000, SCAPE was never conceived as a public art biennial with a mission to heal a broken place. Unlike the New Orleans biennial initiated in response to the effects on the city of Hurricane Katrina, or the Echigo-Tsumari Triennial designed to bring back to life a dying agricultural region of Japan, since 2011 SCAPE has unwittingly been re-cast as a catalyst for re-investing a sense of culture and community into a devastated city and population.[42] (Co-incidentally, the 2013 Aichi Triennale in Japan was also interpreted as a post-earthquake opportunity to reinstate a sense of community. Echoing Cross's title, it was titled *Where are we standing?*) Though begun a decade earlier, the mission and profile of the event shifted dramatically following the earthquakes. Since 2011 SCAPE has become not only central, but "crucial to the rebuild of Christchurch, to its sense of place, sense of identity and optimism. The legacy of SCAPE builds and uplifts the community sense of identity and community spirit as it goes forward."[43] In post-earthquake Christchurch, French conceived the Biennial not as curating in the public space, but curating place itself.

> We are not simply dealing with matters of the right to access, inhabit and use public space, but with competing desires and capacities to define anew the very spatial and social form of the city itself. And whilst this is taking place across diverse spheres of public debate, governmental planning and private investment and development, it is also most clearly taking place in an on-the-ground day-to-day, month-to-month reuse of constantly changing urban space by local individuals, businesses and collective groups. Out of disaster, loss and ongoing difficulties has arisen extraordinary experimentation and remarkable

[41] The 2006 Singapore Biennale, for example, was celebrated for its use of everyday spaces, even though the lack of artistic and curatorial empathy in some installations in sites of worship angered the communities that use them (see Chapter One).
[42] Dan Cameron conceived Prospect (New Orleans Biennial) after visiting the city in 2006 after Hurricane Katrina. Attending a meeting there about the role of art and artists in the rebuilding of the city, Cameron recognised an opportunity to generate social and financial benefits while also instigating the first major international biennale in the US. The first iteration was held in 2008-09.
[43] Mane-Wheoki, J. Keynote address. Christchurch, SCAPE [conference, attended by the author]. 2013, September 28.

> achievement in newly dynamic modes of place making through public practices (of which public art is just one, albeit core element).[44]

French selected artists who are not afraid of "confronting darker, more painfully complicated considerations" than those usually found in public art festivals.[45] In contrast to the context of public art place-making initiatives in most other cities, Christchurch remains in an extreme state of flux as demolition and re-building progress hand in hand. While it is true that any modern city is in a constant state of evolution, this is especially true of Christchurch given the daily changes being inflicted on its physical state. In response to this unique and extreme situation, French adopted the theme of mobility in his curatorial approach, echoing the transient rationale of other initiatives in the city that reveal the population's determination to continue as a site of growth and exchange.[46]


**Figures 20 and 21: David Cross, *Level Playing Field*, 2013. Photos: F. Fenner**

> One of the key challenges is the rapidity of change in the urban environment… Art in public space is generally approached as being site-specific, as being created in intense dialogue with the particular conditions of a site: both its material form and its social or communal operation. But the conditions of site at both the micro and macro level in Christchurch are volatile… A key challenge

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[44] French, B. (2013). Treading Lightly, SCAPE7 Public Art Christchurch Biennial, Volume One: Guide/Reader. Christchurch: SCAPE Public Art, pp. 13-14.
[45] Kester, G. (1999, winter). Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art. *Variant*, 9, supplement (unpaginated).Retrieved from http://www.variant.org.uk/pdfs/issue9/Supplement9.pdf
[46] These include the Greening the Rubble planting project, the RE-Start precinct constructed from shipping containers, Christchurch Art Gallery's Outer Spaces program, the Festival of Transitional Architecture and numerous pop-up sites for art, retail and community activity.

> for the artists of SCAPE7 therefore has been to pitch the work into a moment, recognising the inevitable transition at play around the work the instant it is revealed to its public.[47]

In the first part of this chapter it was shown that the curatorial strategies that most successfully engage with place are those based around the inclusion of art that provides for local people a sense of place. SCAPE7 contained a handful of artworks that engaged the local, 'wartorn' community. The other interactive project requiring physical engagement was Shaun Gladwell's series of skateboard ramps: while welcomed by a narrow demographic (of skateboarders), they lacked the community presence and purpose of *Level Playing Field*. The other noteworthy installation, albeit one of place-making more than community-building, was Mischa Kuball's *Solidarity Grid*: over three years it will deliver a street lamp unique to each of 21 cities around the world that have agreed to support this symbolic 'rebuilding' project.

**Figure 22: Warning sign found throughout Christchurch CBD, 2013. Photo: F. Fenner**

Cross's installation in the midst of the downtown rubble was a clever and witty response to the 'uneven surface' of this flat city, bringing together a broken community in an activity that offered camaraderie, exercise, and old-fashioned fun. The work tapped into what lies beneath the 'uneven surface' of the city, to aspects of life that matter more than physical environment – democracy, team spirit, resilience – and to New Zealanders' love of sport. Indeed, participant teams embraced the game and played with gusto. On the starting hooter, players quickly and confidently made their way across the top of the structure, dived into the escape chute as if over a rugby try line, then raced back down the bouncy edge of the structure with the speed and agility of 100-metre sprinters. The (fully qualified) umpire ran up and down alongside the inflatable field in the rubble that has become the standard ground surface in Christchurch, the ear-piercing whistle announcing fouls and points

[47] French, B. (2013). Treading Lightly, SCAPE7 Public Art Christchurch Biennial, Volume One: Guide/Reader. Christchurch: SCAPE Public Art, p. 15.

that were promptly displayed on the custom-made electronic scoreboard. Spectators cheered on with a level of enthusiasm reminiscent of that displayed during rugby matches in the nearby damaged and desolate AMI Stadium.

When making a public art intervention in a community, artists and curators are faced with the dilemma of delivering an artwork or project that is meaningful to the people in that place, and also to outsiders. Kester has warned that in many community-based public art projects it is precisely the community voice that is never heard, as curators seek to work with artists who will impose a signature approach.

> The problem typically increases for artists or collectives as they achieve some fame or visibility in an art world context and find themselves invited to produce works in quite disparate locations and contexts through the patronage of an international network of museums, galleries, non-governmental organizations, schools and public agencies. These invitations can be hard to refuse. But the further artists move from the knowledge base and collaborative networks that they are familiar with, and the more pressure they experience to produce a discrete work in an often limited time frame, the harder it can be to develop the kinds of insights that result from extended dialogical interaction.[48]

The danger Kester speaks of echoes Bishop's wariness of public art being highjacked in the pursuit of political point-scoring. It is a fear that arises when there is a failure of communication between artist and/or curator and the community that they are portraying and/or servicing through an art project. The examples cited here, however, have an open-ended structure that allows the subject-community (the disenfranchised inhabitants of Redfern-Waterloo and displaced residents of Christchurch) to utilise the artwork (the *Tour of Beauty* or *Level Playing Field*) to fulfil their own agenda, to exploit, like the aforementioned regional projects in China and Japan, their 'home ground advantage'. For those communities, the sense of empowerment over the

[48] Kester, G. (2004). Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art (152–191). Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, p. 172.

artwork's outcomes is contingent on engagement through the prism of home: this is the advantage they have not just over visitors and participants from elsewhere, but over FIFO artists and curators. The Sydney and Christchurch projects are distinguished by the fact that the artists (Squatspace, Cross) and curators (Fenner, French) share with the community-participants extensive personal experience of the place that is the works' subject.[49] And in the case of Christchurch, French's curatorial model for SCAPE7 – in which artists from both inside and outside the immediate community of Christchurch work closely with arts administrators and managers from within the community – successfully avoids the pitfalls Kester identifies. Indeed, the community's instant ownership of *Level Playing Field* was a clear indicator of its success as public art. As Kester also acknowledges, the local community has a "home team advantage" in its interaction with public art.[50]

**Figure 23: Copthorne Hotel, Christchurch, moments after its collapse 28 September, 2013. Photo: F. Fenner (ref: Footnote 51)**

Contemporary Christchurch is a city of absence and longing: each of the ubiquitous gravel carparks, like the one on which *Level Playing Field* was located, signify a place and purpose that has disappeared; while damaged buildings are precariously poised as if on death row. They resemble hapless and nostalgic monuments to loss, patiently awaiting execution. Adding to the disaster-resonant rubble siting, *Level Playing Field* was plagued by trauma from its opening day.[51] The task for curators and

[49] A point of difference between the Sydney and Christchurch projects is that the residents of Redfern-Waterloo preserve a tight community threatened by dissemination, while the residents of Christchurch are seeking to re-build a community that is already been shattered.
[50] Kester, G. (1995, January). Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art. *Afterimage*, 22, 5–11, p. 6.
[51] On the early afternoon of Saturday 28 September, 2013, the first day of SCAPE 7, the thunderous sound of a crashing building momentarily interrupted the first games of Powerslide getting underway on the newly inflated *Level Playing Field*. One city block south of Cross's installation, demolition work on the earthquake damaged Copthorne Hotel suddenly lost control with the frightening collapse of seven levels. The hair-raising sound of pancaking concrete, billowing clouds of thick dust and reverberating shockwaves in the earth below their feet was startling but not unfamiliar for local visitors to SCAPE, but unnerved newly arrived out-of-towners, most of them still coming to grips with the disaster zone that is Christchurch's CBD. By Sunday, the area around the Copthorne Hotel site had been cordoned off and the terrifying

artists working in a site of devastation such as Christchurch is to engage audiences in a way that acknowledges the pervasive trauma but does not become a trigger for more pain, given that displacement and exclusion have become the norm for Christchurch inhabitants both physically and psychologically. In re-thinking the experience of 'uneven surface' as a potential advantage in this game, Cross empowers the residents participants. The rules of the game, too, are empowering because they are quite flexible, given that the game is in fact an artwork that invites creative responses. In contrast to the official blueprint for Christchurch that has been criticised for its lack of community input, *Level Playing Field* gave people a sense of agency, permission to take control of a situation in which the ground is literally shifting below their feet.[52]

By appropriating the characteristics of "rugletics" – speed and a fierce spirit of competition – Cross embraced a negative situation to deliver a positive outcome, in which newly acquired skills of negotiating uneven surfaces provided local players with a distinct home ground advantage.

### 5.1.3 Running the City

According to Rebecca Solnit, "Walking… is how the body measures itself against the earth".[53]

But what of running? Can a heightened sensorial perception encountered when running forge a meaningful connection to place, especially in the context of the familiar place of home?

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incident, while widely reported in the media, had passed as just another reminder of the trauma and ongoing dangers of life in post-earthquake Christchurch.

[52] The inflatable field is shaken from below by team members trying to force members of the opposing team to trip and fall as they run across the shaking surface. The "blueprint" for the rebuilding of Christchurch has been widely criticised for its lack of input from residents of the city. While extensive community consultations were held, the recommendations were largely ignored in a governmental top-down approach to re-building.

[53] Solnit, R. (2000). *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (30–44). New York: Penguin, p. 31.

Having briefly overviewed recent participatory projects in the region that both embrace the theme of home and require some degree of physical participation over and above watching and walking, the research in this final section of the thesis shows how artworks requiring active, physical engagement – specifically running – provide experiential-based viewpoints and alternative understandings of place. It argues that when participants are forced to make decisions not just about which of the artist's instructions or which guided tour to follow, but about how much energy they are able to expend and how experimental they are willing to be as they're running through the city, the level of engagement is enhanced not only by the sense of responsibility and ownership (as it is for the residents of Echigo-Tsumari and Bishan province), but, importantly, by a liberating sense of control over the outcome.

Shifting the connective paradigm of Miwon Kwon's "art site relationship", the participatory running projects reviewed and curated in this component of the research propose instead a "site-participant" paradigm. In this model, the art is no longer the outcome or even focus of the project; instead, it becomes a vehicle for forging connection between people and place.[54] It should be noted that this model proposes neither a de-valuing of art per se nor a promotion of the curator's role over that of the artist's. It does, however, reject the idea of 'art for art's sake' in favour of an approach that employs the artwork in the service of building psychological and emotional connections between people and place. Imbued with this intentionality, the curatorial role is crucial in achieving engagement between art, site and viewers, though is achieved through a different set of negotiations undertaken by the exhibition curator, who instead facilitates connections between people and artworks in a museum-based group exhibition.

[54] "If the search for place-bound identity in an undifferentiated sea of abstract, homogenized, and fragmented space of late capitalism is one characteristic of the postmodern condition, then the expanded efforts to rethink the specificity of the art-site relationship can be viewed as both a compensatory symptom *and* critical resistance to such conditions". Kwon, M. (2002). *One Place After Another: site-specific art and locational identity*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p. 8.

Figures 24 and 25: Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, *Breathing is Free*, 2007. Images courtesy Mizuma Art Gallery

Unlike the presence of walking in art, the nexus of art and running is an under-researched area to date. The most definitive recent research into participatory art intervention and mapping projects is Nato Thompson's 2008 exhibition, *Experimental Geography* (the title a term coined in 2002 by geographer and author Trevor Paglen) and associated publication.[55] The project examined a range of performative and interventionist practices undertaken in cities and regions across the world, including many that aimed to strengthen individuals' roles as agents of change in their home environments. Surprisingly, however, very few of the alternative mapping actions surveyed involved running. One exception was kararinka's running performance of the previous year: the artist ran the entire evacuation route system in Boston, measuring the distance not in miles but in breaths (finding that it takes approximately 154,000 breaths to evacuate Boston).[56]

Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba's *Breathing is free: 12,756.3* (2007– ongoing), a running project exhibited in the form of multi-channel digital videos and photographs, has been mostly undertaken in the years since Thompson's research. The performative project follows the artist as he runs through regions of the world, which to date number 19. Born in Japan, raised in the United States and currently living in Vietnam, Hatsushiba utilises running as a way of mapping the migratory movements and worldwide displacement and interchange of

[55] See Thompson, N. (Ed.). (2009). *Experimental Geography: Radical Approaches to Landscape, Cartography and Urbanism*. New York: Melville House and Independent Curators International New York.
[56] Langlois, J. (2010, January 29). *Broken City Lab: It takes 154,000 breaths to evacuate Boston by Kanarinka*. Retrieved from http://www.brokencitylab.org/blog/page/58/

refugees. In *Breathing is free* he aims to eventually run the distance of the earth's diameter, 12,756.3 km. Documentation of the entire project to date was exhibited in 2013 as part of *Running the City*.[57]

Worldwide, there are few examples of artists undertaking or initiating running projects either as mapping, spectacle or participatory practice. Berlin-based artist Alicia Frankovich's *Free Time* was exhibited in Sydney in 2013: it presents a range of performative interventions in the gallery spaces, one of which was running.[58] Of Australian artists' work, TV Moore's *The Dead Zone* (2003) appropriates from the filmic genre of science fiction a two-channel video showing a man running through the centre of Sydney. On one screen he is running forwards in slow motion, on the other he is running backwards.

Perhaps influenced by global fascination with "the fastest man on earth" Usain Bolt at the Beijing Summer Olympic Games, three notable artworks involving running were created in 2008.[59] Daniel Crooks's *Study for 'Static no. 11 (man running)'* of 2008, reinterprets with the image of a man on a treadmill the motion analysis work of Etienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge.[60] Also from Australia, Daniel McKewen's *Running Men* splices film scenes of running men, presenting the footage across five screens, each featuring the solitary figure of Harrison Ford, Tom Cruise, Cary Grant and other famous actors running towards the viewer. The third, most famous of the three was Martin Creed's *Work #850*, performed at Tate Britain. Individuals from all walks of life were selected to perform, their role to run as fast as they possibly could in a straight line from the main Millbank entrance. Operating on rotation, one of the runners sprinted the length of the central court every 30 seconds. Creed's aim was to draw attention to the beauty of human movement and his comments allude to the empowering capacity of running:

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[57] Fenner, F., curator. (2013). "Running the City." Sydney, Australia: UNSW.
[58] The work was included in "The space between us: Anne Landa Award for video and new media arts", Art Gallery of NSW, 16 May–23 July, 2013.
[59] The aptly named Bolt set new world records in the 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay.
[60] Basil Sellers Art Prize (2008). *Daniel Crooks*. Retrieved from http://www.sellersartprize.com.au/artists-and-exhibition/2008/shortlisted-artists/daniel-crooks/

> Running is the opposite of being still. If you think about death as being completely still and movement as a sign of life, then the fastest movement possible is the biggest sign of life. So running fast is like the exact opposite of death – it's an example of aliveness. [61]

*

*Running the City* was an exhibition that brought together the work of international artists Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba, Marnix de Nijs and MAP Office. Premised on the proposition that running heightens engagement with place, the exhibition explored the use of the human body to articulate through running new ways of mapping physical space. It played on the relationship of virtual to real space, exploring how participant empowerment encourages the circumvention of physical and social boundaries. Examining human movement through the urban environment, collectively works in the exhibition addressed the psycho-physical dynamics of our inhabitation and utilisation of city spaces. In contrast to Hatsushiba's work, which is fundamentally a performance that is recorded for viewing in an exhibition context, Marnix de Nijs's *Run Motherfucker Run* requires visitors to interact with the artwork by mounting an oversized treadmill and running (quite fast). The faster participants run, the faster and more dynamic the image becomes. De Nijs, a Dutch installation and new media artist, has been a pioneer in researching the experimental use of media and technologies in art, critically examining their impact on contemporary society and human perception. His interactive installations use imagery, sound and movement to reflect on technology's ability to influence communication and cultural change. Incorporating recorded data and responsive imagery, *Run Motherfucker Run* is an immersive, large-scale video projection in which participants experience running through a city of empty streets, deserted intersections and ominous alleyways, and finding unexpected

[61] Singh, A. (2008, June 30). Martin Creed's Tate Britain artwork show sprinting runners. *The Telegraph.* Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2222514/Martin-Creeds-Tate-Britain-artwork-shows-sprinting-runners.html

obstacles to throw them off course. Running on a five metre long treadmill set in front of a four-by-eight-metre screen, visitors inhabited a mix of film and 3D imagery. The distance run on the treadmill's conveyor belt is the same distance covered in the virtual city on screen. By quickening the pace, the acceleration of the belt as well as the speed of the image increases and, depending on running behaviour and the directional choices, the progress of the film is determined. It is an interactive film with an atmosphere somewhere between a thriller chase and urban horror movie.

**Figure 26: Marnix de Nijs, *RunMotherfuckerRun*, 2001-13. Image courtesy the artist**

While *Run Motherfucker Run* required a degree of choice by the viewer – by moving to the left or right side of the treadmill the filmic location altered – ultimately the artist controlled the visual experience. There were more moving scenes incorporated into the work than any one participant could 'visit', but each viewer-runner's experience of place was limited to those already explored, filmed and uploaded by de Nijs. In order to test the thesis that running is an effective device for engagement with place when participants are endowed with a sense of responsibility and ownership of the experience, two participatory artworks were curated in the public sphere as part of *Running the City*, produced in collaboration with Hong Kong artists MAP Office.[62]

[62] Laurent Gutierrez and Valerie Portefaix collaborate under the name MAP Office on transdisciplinary projects that focus on physical and imaginary territories. Often incorporating humour, games and fiction, Gutierrez and Portefaix create ideas and interventions that critique the cultural parameters of urban, environmental and political spaces. Their projects are multi-faceted, combining video, photography, performance, drawing, and literary and theoretical texts to devise platforms for dissecting the methods of how we occupy and disrupt space.

### 5.1.4 Flash Run

The curatorial approach for *Running the City* was not to parachute artists in to respond to Sydney, but to bring together works in which artists explored their native or other known cities. Thus, the conversation within the exhibition spaces did not centre on different perceptions of one place, but on different methodologies that utilise running to investigate the meaning of place in a range of geographically diverse situations.

In contrast to de Nijs's work in which the possibilities for manoeuvrability were limited by the film sequences uploaded, MAP Office's two participatory works, produced as part of the *Running the City* project, bestowed the viewer-participant with a sense of freedom and control.

*Flash Run* was a curated event for *Running the City*, conceived as an ephemeral performance of running in the city.[63] Recalling Debord's belief that "Real individual fulfilment, which is also involved in the artistic experience that the situationists are discovering, entails the collective takeover of the world", the project's "collective takeover" called for participants to start sprinting in the public space, beginning and ending at exactly the same time. [64] The chosen site was Town Hall Square, that being the symbolic centre of the City of the Sydney and a site that is also central to the City's 2030 vision for a pedestrianised city centre:

> [Pedestrianisation] would transform George Street as the City's premier street, linking City Squares at Circular Quay, Town Hall and Central Station. The City Squares will be activity, service and civic hubs for the City Centre communities of residents, workers and visitors. The linked City Squares will be active public

[63] *Flash Run* was filmed with intended use in subsequent exhibition contexts.
[64] Debord, G. (1958). Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation, (K. Knabb Trans.). *Internationale Situationniste #1*. *Situationist International Online*. Retrieved from http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/problems.html

spaces for large public gatherings and celebrations with improved transport connections and interchange.[65]


**Figure 27: MAP Office t-shirt design for *Flash Run* participants, *Running the City*, Sydney, 2013.**

*Flash Run* enacted a psychogeographic temporary takeover that involved running as an alternative to walking. According to Lefebvre, perceived space is produced by its users – it is not an emptiness waiting to be filled.[66] Strengthening their temporary claim to the public space, participants were issued with 'uniforms' in the form of distinctive black and white "Flash Run" t-shirts. The t-shirts were designed as identifiers for three purposes: to empower the one hundred participants with a sense of propriety over the space; to identify participants from the general public for filming purposes; and to dispel potential fear in others of there being a criminal or emergency situation unfolding. The latter possibility became apparent during the subsequent filming of *Runscape* (see next section), which revealed that while running is essentially a commonplace and harmless activity, it can be perceived as threatening when undertaken in densely populated urban centres, unless runners display the identifying accoutrements of sport or charity branding. Running through the city for any reason other than fitness jogging (suited in appropriate Lycra attire) or a charity run (with matching t-shirts) has the potential to instil fear, anger and confusion in other users of the public space. The curatorial strategy devised to minimise adverse responses was one of mimicry: the production of branded t-shirts that mimic the running attire of lunchtime joggers.

The relationship between artists and curator in devising public art events such as this involves respect for each others' intellectual premise (the curator's

[65] City of Sydney. (2008). *Sustainable Sydney 2030: The Vision*. Sydney: City of Sydney, p. 94.
[66] Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*, (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Oxford UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

exhibition and the artists' work), negotiation around what might, can and needs to be achieved, and, above all, a leap of faith. The role of the 'curator-producer' of interactive art in the public sphere involves a delicate balancing act between observing local government regulations while organising an event premised on subverting if not the regulations themselves, the behavioural patterns that those regulations are designed to establish as normal. In producing *Flash Run*, for example, no City regulations could be found specifying that running in the city is prohibited, yet no one could be found running in the city unless they were clad as joggers or were running for a bus: that is, running is only accepted as the norm when it has a clearly advertised or articulated intent. Random running, as required in *Flash Run*, is consequently interpreted as an abnormal, suspicious and even threatening behaviour.

*Flash Run* used the human body, running, to map a defined urban space. Throughout MAP Office's practice, "the action of the body within the territory and the transformation of the body by the territory" is an underlying theme.[67] The concept emerges from the artists' background as architects and their interest in subverting the expected spaces and routes through the city that are imposed top-down by local government agencies (city councils or shires). *Flash Run* is more specifically grounded in the situationist 'constructed situation' idea of the experimental realisation of artistic energy in everyday settings.

While an event such as *Flash Run* appears from the outside as a spontaneous happening, the curator-producer is in fact involved in complex negotiations towards its realisation for months beforehand. Those transactions are largely bureaucratic in nature and in this instance included seeking advice from Council about potential safety hazards on anticipated running routes, public liability insurance and other forms of risk management, as well as contacting a range of public and cultural organisations to ascertain if other events were planned in the City centre on the same day, and if or how they might impact on the public

[67] MAP Office (2011). Conversation with Robin Peckham, April 2011. In R. Peckham (Ed.), *MAP Office: Where the Map is the Territory*. Hong Kong: Office for Discourse Engineering, p. 22.

art event. Weather conditions are less predictable, so contingency plans had to be put in place.

*Flash Run* revealed how runner participants subvert and appropriate space within given parameters of place and time. The work borrowed from the concept of the 'flash mob', in which people are organised to create an instant crowd at a particular place for a given time. *Flash Run* proposed new perspectives on the urban centre of Sydney, specifically the open spaces and streets around Town Hall and St Andrews Cathedral. No particular route or point of departure and arrival was specified; the only instruction was that participants start at exactly the same time and run as fast as they could in any direction within the defined area, finishing exactly four minutes and 33 seconds later.

*4'33"* is the title of experimental composer John Cage's famous work of 1952. The length of time was determined by gauging the average length of a pop song. Four minutes and 33 seconds is also the average length of time that a human mind will focus on a particular task before wandering. In Cage's work, the orchestra is instructed to stop playing for exactly four minutes and 33 seconds. The score that is heard is the sound of the everyday environment: shifting bodily movements, coughing, traffic – it changes each time the work is performed. Cage saw the randomness of sound as viable subject matter:

> There is no such thing as silence. What they thought was silence, because they don't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out.[68]

Just as Cage's 'composition' prompts alternative approaches to understanding sound, *Flash Run* prompted alternative approaches to the use of public space. For each runner participant, place was imagined differently: some followed the

[68] Kostelanetz, R. (2003). *Conversing with John Cage*. New York: Routledge, p. 70.

footpaths in a square around the area, some ran circles around and through the Cathedral, some zig-zagged across Town Hall Place and others ran through the underground railway station. While operating within the same broadly defined space – Town Hall and its immediate surrounds – the experiment proved the proposition that a sense of empowerment, in this case acquired through the activity of running, deepens engagement with place by fostering subversive and exploratory behaviours.

### 5.1.5 Runscape

> Running in Ramallah has bound me to the place and set me against notions of space. Place is worn, freighted, complex. Space is seductive, abstract, dust-free. I'm running an actual place…"[69]

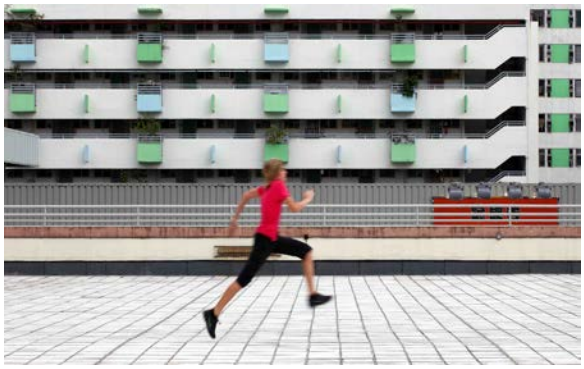

**Figure 28: Still from MAP Office, *Runscape - Hong Kong*, 2011. Image courtesy the artists**

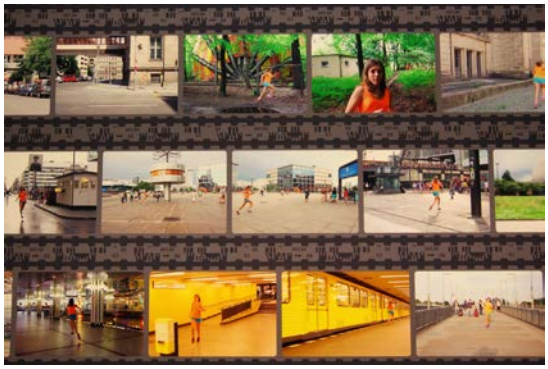

**Figure 29: *Running the City* installation view, MAP Office, *Runscape - Berlin*, 2012. Photo: F. Fenner**

A project showing how running in the city encourages exploratory behaviour, that in turn leads to a deeper engagement with place, was also devised for a more focused group of runners. The second group was given relatively greater freedom, its runners instructed to choose their own routes and the duration of their participation. Within the area of the City's defined future vision, runners could run wherever they liked for as long as they liked.[70] MAP Office's

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[69] Mannes-Abbott, G. (2012). In Ramallah, Running. In G. Mannes-Abbott & S. Martha (Eds.), *In Ramallah, Running* (pp. 93–94). London: Black Dog Publishing, p. 94.

[70] "Danish architect Jan Gehl, in his 2008 study, 'Public Spaces, Public Life Sydney', proposed transforming George Street from a clogged, noisy street to a central north-south spine for

international series of *Runscape* projects deploy aspects of Parkour as a form of city mapping. In *Runscape*, performers run at high speed through urban centres, cutting through crowded thoroughfares as they determine alternative routes through the city. *Runscape – Hong Kong* (2011) is a fast-paced, high-energy video that explores a highly pedestrianized cityscape from an athlete's viewpoint; *Runscape – Berlin* (2012) also represents the city from the athlete's point of view, though in this case the athlete is not running in her home town and the routes taken were based on those in running sequences of films shot in Berlin.[71]

**Figure 30: *Runscape - Sydney* running team, equipped with Go-Pro chest cameras, with MAP Office artists Laurent Guttierez (left) and Valerie Portefaix (right). Sydney, 16 February 2013. Photo: F. Fenner**

The Sydney *Runscape* was the first in the series to utilise a number of runners. It differed, too, from the earlier iterations in that the runners were not *being* filmed but *were* themselves filming, each one equipped with a Go-Pro (action) camera attached to the chest or forehead.[72] The runners selected for the event over two days were local people who knew the city well. In consultation with the artists, it was decided to use the City of Sydney's 2030 blueprint as a starting

pedestrians and public transport linking three major public gathering places. The idea has been developed as part of the 2030 Vision." City of Sydney. (2008). *Sustainable Sydney 2030: The Vision*. Sydney: City of Sydney, p. 142.

[71] *Runscape* is a project that evolved from an earlier MAP Office project, *Homescape* (2006), comprising large format colour photographs of the bland and ubiquitous public housing high-rise blocks in Hong Kong, overlaid with words appropriated from high-end residential development publicity campaigns. The idea of home, the artists' suggest, is a construct imposed by the aspirational rhetoric of marketing machines that purposefully disengages from emotional connections to the idea of home that might negatively inform potential clients' interest in their product.

[72] *Runscape–Sydney* was filmed in Sydney's CBD on the weekend of 16 and 17 February, 2013.

point for planning the event. In terms of 'curating' city spaces, the focus was on the George Street 'spine' that is earmarked for iterative pedestrianisation.[73]

Running is an activity associated with fitness and sport (primarily athletics and football), as well as with cultural subversion (such as Parkour).[74] Thus, the participant group chosen by the curator comprised a mix of athletes and art students. In the context of running through the city being perceived as a subversive act, and in the context of an orchestrated project such as *Runscape*, more risk-taking behaviour than walking is likely undertaken. The runner can get quickly in and quickly out of a situation, in contrast to the walker whose slower pace means confronting the consequences of their actions (such as running over café tables or accidently into pedestrians). In other words, as the project demonstrated, because the runner can make a quick getaway, they will be more experimental in their navigation of the city.

In order to maximise potential for the video data to contain multi-faceted engagements with place, runners were selected based on their likely approach to the brief: unsurprisingly, the athletes had a relatively competitive approach, sometimes testing themselves against the clock or a co-runner; the art students adopted more meandering routes at a pace that allowed for exploration of the city's nooks and crannies. The curatorial role in producing the event was to identify participant-runners who would best respond to the artists' expectation that the work articulate new forms of engagement of place.

Hal Foster warns that importing artists for a temporary project to provide an outsider's perspective on the nature of place can privilege the position of the mapper (the outside artist) over those (home based participants) that have a more intimate knowledge of the site.[75] Heeding Foster's warning and cognisant

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[73] City of Sydney. (2008). *Sustainable Sydney 2030: The Vision*. Sydney: City of Sydney, p. 43.
[74] Adapted from a military discipline, Parkour is the practice of moving the body through urban spaces at speed by running, climbing, vaulting, jumping and rolling. Running in the city is also a threatening activity because of its association with crime (e.g. running from a crime scene).
[75] Foster, H. (1996). The Artist as Ethnographer. In H. Foster, *The Return of the Real* (pp. 171–204). Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p. 190.

that the artists are from Hong Kong, a curatorially imposed condition on the selection of runner-participants was that they were all from Sydney. It was anticipated that runner-participants would feel 'at home' and therefore have more confidence to fully embrace the artists' request to "do whatever you like".[76] The expectation was that they would feel a proprietorial connection to place, which provided the confidence to make spontaneous deviations through malls and laneways, to challenge normal pedestrian traffic behaviour, and to engage in humorous, sometimes risk-taking antics. In the context of the curatorial research in this thesis, the involvement as curator-producer was an opportunity to explore the prism of home as an agent of deeper engagement with place. Thus, in selecting the team of runners for *Runscape* it was crucial to the thesis that all were locals: that each knew Sydney 'like the back of their hand'. The rationale behind this requirement was the anticipation that in having prior knowledge and experience of the territory being mapped by the project, with a licence to be experimental participants would seek out alternative places to those they usually inhabit. Participant-runners were given free rein to explore and record their home-town on their terms. The artists' interest here is not place per se, but how people behave in place. As such, the decisions made by the runner-participants became the real content of the artwork.

Running in the city under the imprimatur of the project, the participants assumed a license to explore, to subvert expected behavioural structures in the city and discover new ways of inhabiting their 'home ground'. Where out-of-towners would have likely filmed iconic sites such as the Opera House or Harbour Bridge, the home team were (as hoped) curious to record what lies beyond and beneath the façade of the city that they already know so well. In contrast to the surrealists' psychogeographic mapping by walking of the outer suburbs of Paris (that is, of places unknown to the participants), the focus here was to provide not an alternative setting to the known and everyday, but an alternative mode of behaviour in the known and the everyday; to impose an alternative mode of behaviour (running instead of walking) onto the geographic

[76] Road safety instructions were issued prior to each day's filming.

context of a place known intimately by the participants. As anticipated, the runners largely avoided the streets and pavements that normally dictate one's route through the city, seeking out instead the liminal, intimate and secret spaces of the city. The expectation that runners would seek out interstitial spaces of the city echoes Bhabha's theory that a 'third space' of engagement allows for "recognition of the interstitial, disjunctive spaces and signs crucial for the emergence of new historical subjects of the transnational phase of late capitalism."[77]

The link between interstitial spaces and in-between cultural identity in the context of late capitalism is also made by Bourriaud. In his discussion of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud claims that a work of art, beyond its commercial imperative if it has one, is a "social interstice". He traces the term, substituted elsewhere in the thesis for 'in-between' or 'in-betweeness', to Marx who, he reminds us, used the word to describe trading communities that elude capitalist structures by bartering instead of exchanging monies: "The interstice is a space in human relations which fits more or less harmoniously and openly into the overall system, but suggests other trading possibilities than those in effect within this system."[78]

Bourriaud argues of interstitial spaces, in the context of relational art, that inhabitation of the interstices promotes a kind of *relational* communication between people that is ordinarily inhibited by urban planning and social structures. The interest in interstitial spaces in the planning of *Runscape* and *Flash Run*, in contrast to its interpretation by Bourriaud and Doherty, was not so much about its socialising capacity, as it was about the potential to deepen engagement between people and place. Further, this engagement was not 'relational' as such – it did not involve responding to or negotiating with others – but made possible a very individualised experience of place. Unlike common

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[77] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 303–337), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 311.
[78] Bourriaud, N. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics* (S. Pleasance & F. Woods, Trans.). Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, p. 16.

conceits of relational and participatory art, neither *Runscape* nor *Flash Run* had outcomes dictated or necessarily anticipated by the artists. The final point of difference between relational and other forms of participatory art is the demanding level of participation: participants had to run (not walk) and, in one of very few directives, they were encouraged to run fast, in whatever direction they chose. Peter Bengtsen has recently compared the experimental dimension of street and public art in the context of Debord:

> Much in the vein of Guy Debord's concept of *dérive*, once a process of discovery is initiated, the interested spectator may come to see the street as a space which holds the potential for serendipitous encounters and profound aesthetic experiences. Unlike galleries and museums with their schedules and published programmes, there is no way to know what the street will hold on a given day.[79]

In the case of *Runscape*, engagement with place occurs in two stages: by the participant filmographers who explore the city equipped with video cameras, and later by the exhibition visitors who view the film footage of the nooks and crannies of central Sydney that are commonly overlooked by city workers, shoppers and tourists as they go about their daily business. The footage from each of the Go-Pro cameras was edited, the final work, *Runscape – Sydney*, shown as part of the artists' *Runscape* installation in *Running the City*.[80] The new work was shown on twelve television monitors arranged in a grid. It was accompanied by two earlier versions of the performance documentation, *Runscape – Berlin)* and *Runscape – Hong Kong*. The relational aspect of this work is not to be found in the final outcome – its exhibition in the gallery space – but in its production. Here, artists and curators worked collaboratively to produce footage for the eventual film.[81]

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[79] Bengtsen, P. (2012). Beyond the Public Art Machine: A Critical Examination of Street Art as Public Art (63–80), *Konsthitorisk Tidskrift: Journal of Art History 82*(2). p. 77.
[80] Appendix IV.
[81] MAP Office often employ their children in the course of making durational works. The first two iterations of *Runscape* were performed by their son (*Runscape – Hong Kong*) and eldest daughter (*Runscape – Berlin*). For the Sydney iteration created in early 2013, they were aware that the curator's son is a competitive runner, so suggested that he lead a team of athletes to make the film. (In case the filming process turned into sprinting races through the city centre,

The relationship between artist, curator and participant in participatory practice such as these two running projects is interdependent and intertwined. Writing in his role as a participant in Anthony Johnson's durational work (involving a bus ride) created for *Iteration:Again*, curated in Tasmania by David Cross, Seán Kelly describes in layman's terms the ripple effect of the artist-curator collaboration:

> On the bus I'd got to thinking about how we construct the world, how all relations, all collaborative conceits, originate in the imagination. The idea could have stayed inside the artist's mind but no, it is out in the world and constructing action in the lives of others. We are all implicated, David had an idea, gave that to Anthony who had an idea which he gave to me and now I'm sitting on a bus in the rain and the better part of my brain is playing this game. We all act out of the brains of others.[82]

The concept of acting "out of the brains of others" has a historic precedent in the surrealist game, 'The Exquisite Corpse', in which a partial idea is taken up and developed by the next participant, who in turn passes it to the next participant, and so on. The surrealist connection with these athletic mapping projects is not coincidental, given that is was the surrealists who invented the idea of walking as a form of psychogeographic mapping, a concept subsequently developed by Guy Debord and the situationists. Key to the situationists' concept of dérive was the lack of pathways: the idea was to get lost. In contemporary art, however, walking is a performative activity undertaken with navigational purpose. All manifestations of participatory projects involving physical engagement share a requirement of collaboration between artist, curator and participant:

> In participatory practice, it is perhaps the artist who initiates something in the form of an object, idea, interaction, etc., but unleashes it to the influence of the

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art students were also invited to participate, ensuring a more balanced team in terms of size, speed and likely approach to the mission.)

[82] Kelly, S. (2013). A Journey without a Destination. In D. Cross (Ed.), *Iteration:Again* (pp. 46–51). Hobart: CAST; New York: Punctum Books, p. 50.

> many for further manipulation, engagement, etc. So the artist is the one who 'proposes' or instigates certain processes but the authorship is ultimately obscured – it occupies this important space of the "co-," where a work is partially made *with* and not *by*.[83]

British conceptual artist David Goldenberg believes that it is very rare to find situations that provide an opportunity for an audience as participants to cross over from being mere consumers of ideas to engaging with the material setup, as was the basis of participation in *Flash Run* and, to a much greater extent, *Runscape – Sydney*. Goldenberg's theory of Post-Autonomy proposes the decline of Eurocentric autonomous authorship in favour of art projects that require for meaningfulness audience participation:

> Critical to Post-Autonomy is participation as a methodology, which operates as a communicative glue within the art system, breaking down orthodox categories and hierarchies of artist, curator, institution, and audience... making transparent the setup, so the possibility exists for participants to actively take over the running of a project.[84]

The two public sphere events organised as part of *Running the City* were entirely dependent on the participants' sense of empowerment and consequent exploratory engagement with the city. They were not "pretending" or "acting" out instructions from the artists or curator: they were actively engaging in the distinctive physical and psychical qualities of a place they know intimately. As Martin Creed explained in response to criticism that *Work #850* (performed at Tate) was elitist: "It's literally not pretentious because they are not pretending to run. They really are running."[85]

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[83] Reed, P. & Goldenberg, D. (2008, Fall). What is Participatory Practice? *Fillip,* 8, Vancouver: Projectile Publishing Society. Retrieved from http://fillip.ca/content/what-is-a-participatory-practice.
[84] Reed, P. & Goldenberg, D. (2008, Fall). What is Participatory Practice? *Fillip,* 8, Vancouver: Projectile Publishing Society. Retrieved from http://fillip.ca/content/what-is-a-participatory-practice.
[85] Singh, A. (2008, June 30). Martin Creed's Tate Britain artwork show sprinting runners. *The Telegraph.* Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2222514/Martin-Creeds-Tate-Britain-artwork-shows-sprinting-runners.html

PART 2

### 5.2.1 Foreigners Everywhere[86]

Martin Creed's incredulous response to criticisms of pretension echo Theodor Adorno's belief that "Works of art do not lie". Just as Creed defends his running project as "literally not pretentious", Adorno claimed in relation to artworks that "what they say is literally true. Their reality lies in the fact that they answer to questions brought before them from outside. The tension in art therefore has meaning only in relation to the tension outside".[87]

The curatorial outcomes of research in earlier chapters demonstrated that exhibitions have the potential to cast new light on "the tension outside" by drawing "inside" (the museum) connections between subjects and themes in artworks emerging from diverse cultures and experiences. Historically, large international exhibitions such as biennales have in part functioned as fora for the easing of "outside" tensions on a global scale, offering a politically neutral platform for sharing different belief systems and political values. Where top-down political views conflict with lived experience, curatorial approaches, as demonstrated in this thesis, can guide alternative understandings by revealing bottom-up views of the world, using the filter of home to find points of commonality. In doing so, exhibitions also have the capacity to open up exchanges between opposing sides. Similarly, international sports events have the capacity to diffuse socio-political tension by bringing together culturally diverse athletes and spectators in a shared spirit of competition and support.

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[86] The section heading is borrowed from the title of series of artwork by Claire Fontaine, *Foreigners Everywhere*, begun in 2005.
[87] Adorno, T. (1997). *Critique on the Psychoanalytic Theory of Art*. In G. Adorno & R. Tiedemann (Eds.), *Aesthetic Theory* (pp. 8–9), (R. Hullot-Kentor, Trans.). London: The Athlone Press, p. 8.

The Venice Biennale is often referred to as the Olympic Games of art. It is, in many ways: each country puts forward one or more participants into the world's largest and most high profile forum of that discipline. For artists and athletes, representation at the Venice Biennale and Olympic Games respectively is a career pinnacle to which they aspire and, if achieved, will often only achieve once in a lifetime.[88] Artists and athletes participate as representatives of their nation, and spectators inevitably assess their performance through the lens of their home country's culture. An Olympic gold medal is paralleled at the Venice Biennale by a Golden Lion Award.[89] While the selection of artists for Venice is a much more subjective process than the selection of athletes for the Olympics, there is an assumption around both that the 'best' practitioners will be selected and that they will participate in a nation-based though politically neutral forum of mutual respect and cultural dialogue. While individuals in both disciplines might occasionally suffer from hubris, the performances of the best artists and the best athletes, as Adorno noted in relation to the former, "do not lie". As such, both events provide a space for the diffusion of political difference.

Comparisons between art and sport, more specifically between the Venice Biennale and the Olympic Games, are often dismissed as superficial at worst, and coincidental at best. However, as Caroline A. Jones found in her research into the history of the Venice Biennale, there is an historical relationship between the two events that underpins their importance as politically neutral for cultural exchange. Jones claims that "biennials are no different than sporting competitions and diplomatic exchanges that sublimate military desires":

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[88] Exhibitions curated to accompany the Olympic Games also tend to exemplify the spirit of national representation, but enjoy a far lower profile being on home ground than those organised for the international stage of Venice. For the Sydney 2000 Summer Games, for example, John Clark noted that "The magnificent Papunya Tula exhibition [curated by Hetti Perkins for the Art Gallery of New South Wales] held to accompany the Sydney Olympic Games… was barely visited… though it included some of the country's most important paintings by indigenous artists". Clark, J. (2010). Biennials as Structures for the Writing of Art History: The Asian Perspective. In E. Filipovic, M. van Hal & S. Øvstebø (Eds.), *The Biennial Reader*, (pp. 164–183). Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, p. 172–173. The exhibition has since been widely acclaimed, but at the time of the Olympics the international focus on Indigenous Australia was understandably not on our art but on Cathy Freeman.

[89] In current times, four Golden Lions are awarded: one for lifetime achievement and others for the best artist in the international exhibition, the best young artist and the best pavilion.

> The modern Olympic games were invented at exactly the same time as the Venice Biennale in 1894, when the French aristocrat Baron Pierre de Coubertin got seventy-nine delegates from nine nations to meet together in Paris… Some have argued that Courbertin was aware of the recurring exhibition form established by artists' associations in Germany (the Berliner Kunstverein, for example, rather than the ineffectual French state salons), which fused in his mind with the ancient Greek model of recurring athletic festivals to produce an argument for the rehabilitation of the games. Not incidental in all this was the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, which Coubertin blamed on the lapse of athletic vigor in the French nation. Like the Biennial, international competition was imagined as a way of both sharpening national skills and neutralizing the risk that national mettle would be tested in war.[90]

In the context of the Venice Biennale, the world's first and only existing biennial based on national representation, its very inclusivity (which in recent years has been extended to politically disenfranchised or precarious lands such as Palestine and Iraq), ensures that the Biennale is a politically neutral space.[91] The selection of artists to represent a nation, however, is a highly political process for each country's cultural sphere. In Australia, the process is overseen by the federal government's arts funding organisation, the Australia Council, which inevitably adds a layer of self-censorship to the decision, even though selection, ostensibly, does not assume artists' affiliation or agreement with top-down national agendas.

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[90] Jones, C.A. (2010). Biennial Culture: A Longer History. In E. Filipovic, M. van Hal & S. Øvstebø (Eds.), *The Biennial Reader.* Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall, p. 77.

[91] There are a few exceptions to the Venice Biennale being a place of political neutrality in the last decade. In 2003 Santiago Sierra orchestrated a participatory work for the Spanish pavilion in which only Spanish nationals (on production of their passport) were allowed to enter; the same year Venezuelan artist Javier Téllez withdrew his participation on political grounds and co-exhibitor Pedro Morales's work was censored by the Venezuelan government, so the pavilion remained closed for the duration of the Biennale; in 2009 Emily Jacir's text-based work, *Stazione*, that extended the itinerant Palestinian Pavilion's presence to Line #1 vaporetto stations, was disallowed by the Venice city authorities; and in 2011 the Giardini were peacefully inhabited for some days by the Occupy Movement. More common, however, are political statements within the exhibition, such as Hans Haacke's smashing of the floor of the German pavilion in 1993, and the 2013 exchanging of pavilions between France and Germany.

**Figure 31: The former Australian Pavilion (1988-2013), Giardini della Biennale, Venice. Photo: F. Fenner**

Each of the national pavilions in the Giardini della Biennale is symbolic of a nation state, its architecture often capturing the culture of the country which has its name above the front door. In this context, it is all but impossible to preclude audiences from crossing the threshold without some anticipation of that country's national identity permeating at least one aspect of the art experience.

For Australia, as one of the countries in the Giardini that mostly flies under the radar of the international art world, the curatorial balance between achieving a sense both of Australian cultural identity and world-class internationalism is a particularly precarious one. Three of the first five exhibitions in the pavilion were unabashedly Australian in content – Arthur Boyd in 1988, Trevor Nickolls and Rover Thomas in 1990, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Yvonne Koolmatrie and Judy Watson in 1997 – but for the following decade Australia eschewed overt articulations of cultural identity and was represented instead with art devoid of specific cultural context by Howard Arkley, Lyndal Jones, Patricia Piccinini and Ricky Swallow. In 2007 the work of three artists – Callum Morton, Susan Norrie and Daniel von Sturmer – was curated by Juliana Engberg, who conceded that despite best efforts to present a truly international exhibition, the fact that artists are representing their country implies a context "not necessarily attached to 'nationalism', but [that] can rarely be dislodged from the aesthetics and philosophies that circulate around the creation of art in a certain place".[92] The selection of Shaun Gladwell's work to represent Australia in 2009, therefore, signified a maturation of sorts, an ability to embrace 'Australiana' without being accused of parochialism or afflicted by cultural cringe. In 2009 the Australia Council expanded Australia's presence at the Biennale by offering

[92] Engberg, J. (2007, winter). Dig It. *Art and Australia*, *44*(4) (488–489), p. 488.

a diversity of voices in an off-site exhibition of work by emerging artists (*Once Removed*).[93] While the Gladwell exhibition with its overt *Mad Max* aesthetic endorsed popular European perceptions of place, the group exhibition was (physically and conceptually) 'once removed' both from the Giardini's national pavilions and from cultural preconceptions of Australia. Embracing the opportunity to reveal another Australia that complemented rather than competed with the pavilion exhibition, the artists were selected for their ability to convey in their practice alternative and unexpected narratives of place. (Two of the artists were born in Asia, one was Indigenous, and all have experienced life as outsiders, either by living and working in different parts of the world or, in the case of Vernon Ah Kee, by being an Aboriginal artist in a majority non-Indigenous contemporary Australia.) In other words, the *Once Removed* exhibition that was literally 'once removed' from the constraints of top-down concerns around cultural identity, provided an ideal forum in which to subvert external descriptors of Australian and present an alternative viewpoint.

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> A motorcyclist in black leathers is hurtling along an empty highway. In the distance a scorched red wilderness lies vast and flat. Suddenly he unclasps the handlebars and stretches out his arms until they appear, Christ-like, at perfect right angles to his body. It is a skillful feat of daredevilry, and it looks exhilarating – an earthbound approximation of flight. Welcome to the Australian outback.[94]

This quote comes from an English art critic, in response to the 2013 *Australia* exhibition at the Royal Academy (see Chapter One). Except in George Miller's *Mad Max* films and Shaun Gladwell's *MADDESTMAXIMUS*, there are very few motorcyclists to be found with arms outstretched in perfect Christ-like

[93] The financial demands together with a perceived dilution of the pavilion exhibition's profile resulted in this initiative not being continued in subsequent iterations.
[94] Sooke, A. (2013, 16 September). Australia at the Royal Academy, review. *The Telegraph.* Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10312476/Australia-at-the-Royal-Academy-review.html

symmetry, hurtling along empty highways in central Australia. The tension between representing Australia at the Venice Biennale while at the same time resisting stereotypical cultural identification is a perennial dilemma shared by all national pavilion exhibitions at the Venice Biennale. Inevitably, "the location of an international exhibition constructs a map of the world from both the perspective of the city and the country that sponsors it".[95] In the case of the Venice Biennale, a multitude of micro worlds are constructed (curated) in close proximity, each presenting through the lens of their own home country a narrative that seeks to make connections with the global audiences that this literal incarnation of the global village attracts. It is the curators of each of the national exhibitions who must balance audience expectation of cultural identification with surprising and unexpected content that subverts nationalistic expectation. Jones agrees with Engberg about the Venice Biennale that "Until the curtain closes on the larger theatre of nations and geopolitics, biennials and national pavilions will continue to have conceptual and political roles to play".[96] Curating an alternative national exhibition that is 'once removed' from the Giardini's global village thus provides an opportunity to provide an alternative view of national identity.

The mythology around outback Australia as an empty place offering spiritual fulfilment, like the mythology of Venice as an urban centre populated by gondola-riding Venetians, is one that outsiders cherish and pursue in the face of established empiric evidence to the contrary. Homi Bhabha writes about "living the locality of culture" as "more symbolic than 'society'; more connotative than 'country'… more mythological than ideology."[97] Over the last two decades there has been a widespread rejection of flag-waving in a world where patriotism is increasingly conflated with xenophobic and inflammatory nationalism. Even in the absence of nationalist imperative, however, exhibitions defined by

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[95] Ferguson, B., Greenberg, R., & Nairne, S. (1997). Mapping International Exhibitions (pp. 47–56). In B. Vanderlinden & E. Filipovic (Eds.), *The Manifesta Decade.* Cambridge MA: MIT Press, p. 47.

[96] Jones, C.A. (2010). Biennial Culture: A Longer History. In E. Filipovic, M. van Hal & S. Øvstebø (Eds.), *The Biennial Reader* (pp. 66–87). Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall. p. 83.

[97] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 199–244), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 200.

geopolitical borders still have the opportunity to evoke aspects of the place from which they derive. Venice established the world's first visual arts biennale in 1895 and today, as the leader in a field of over 100 such events worldwide, it is the last in the world to retain the national pavilion model. Ironically, it is precisely this preservation by the Venice Biennale of spaces in which national difference can be voiced that endows the event with the potential to reveal aspects of place, an idiosyncrasy that distinguishes it from the scores of other biennial and triennial exhibitions organised by singular curators working from a thematic premise.[98]

**Figure 32: Still from Shaun Gladwell, *MADDESTMAXIMUS - Approach to Mundi Mundi*, 2007. Photo: Josh Raymond © the artist**

Yet as the rest of the world's recurrent international exhibitions reveal, in a globalised world it becomes increasingly difficult, some may argue superfluous, to articulate a notion of place in the context of international art events. The fact that globalisation has been accompanied by a rise of nationalism in many parts of the world (including Australia in recent years), is a powerful disincentive to celebrate national difference in contemporary culture. From a curatorial viewpoint, much of the anxiety concerning issues of place in recurrent international exhibitions is brought about by having to address the opposing pressures of globalisation impacting on the minutiae of daily life as daily life itself becomes more globalised. While not arguing for a regressively nationalist curatorial approach, it must be acknowledged that against an escalating trend towards cultural conflation (which in its worst extreme results in the visual art equivalent of elevator muzak), the Venice Biennale has a unique capacity to expose both coincidences and discord arising from the contradictory forces of globalisation, making it the world's least predictable and potentially most culturally attuned of all the world's recurrent exhibitions. Thus, the modern Venice Biennale

[98] The thesis is referring here to the curators of each national exhibition/s, not the single curator of the international exhibition, generally (mistakenly) referred as the "Venice Biennale curator".

reflects as much about displacement as it does about the cultural identity of place.

"If we subscribe to a notion of place as an intersection of social, economic and political relations, rather than a bounded geographic location, where and how does artistic engagement with the context of the exhibition start?"[99] Doherty's question implies a relational instead of physical understanding of place. By shifting the dialogue from the physical to the more nebulous site of intersecting social, economic and political relations, the curator embraces the awkward in-betweeness that usurps rose-tinted ideals of home with the uncertainty of the unhomely, creating a space for engagement that accommodates a complexity of differing perceptions around place, not all of them in agreement.

The changing social demographic of Venice is itself an interesting lens through which to consider shifting concepts of place, by examining the meaning and manifestation of home in a city in which more than a third of homes are purchased by foreigners and rarely lived in, and as many again owned by Italians and leased to foreigners.[100] The permanent population of the historic centre has halved over the last generation while the temporary population has almost doubled, inwardly redefining the racial demographic while outwardly reinforcing, largely for the tourist trade, historical descriptors of cultural identity. Venice is today a city not of Indigenous inhabitants, but of transient migrants and even more transient tourists. As such, how can exhibitions engage with the concept of home in a city such as Venice, which is home to so few yet temporary landing pad to so many? If we "presume past universals – regarding culture, for instance – to have been superseded", we accept the loss of certainties around place, especially places as steeped in cultural history as

[99] Doherty, C. (2007). Curating Wrong Places…Or Where Have All the Penguins Gone? In P. O'Neill (Ed.), *Curating x 24*. Amsterdam: De Appel. Retrieved from http://www.publicart.ie/fileadmin/user_upload/Writings/curatingwrongplaces...pdf
[100] Scheppe, W. & IUAV Class on Politics of Representation (2009). *Migropololis*. Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa, Commune di Venezia; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, p. 294.

Venice (and Australia, for that matter).[101] Venice, a world heritage listed historical site, is more impacted by the social and cultural changes brought on by transitory populations than any other city in Europe, despite having outwardly remained the same for centuries. In the city's eagerness to make tourists feel 'at home', Venetians have all but abandoned Venice as their home.[102]

Since the Australian bicentenary year in 1988, when the Australian Pavilion in the Giardini della Biennale was established, Australia has been represented at each Venice Biennale.[103] Philip Cox's pavilion stood for 25 years, at least two decades longer than intended, before finally being rebuilt in 2014. Cox's 'beach house' pavilion, with its split-level interior was much better suited to family summer holidays than curated exhibitions at the world's biggest art event. It resembled a home away from home for visiting Australians and was treated like an extension of home for others.[104] In a biennale festival that is not only the world's earliest (established 1895) but the only one to retain the national pavilion format, it is ironic that for the most part the pavilion architecture rather than the visual art content of each biennale's official Australian exhibition has been the constant and most recognisable reference to Australian culture. While perhaps suited well to the architecture biennale that is staged in the interim years to the art biennale, ironically the open-plan, informal vernacular architecture encapsulated aspects of the Australian cultural identity that most exhibiting artists over the pavilion's 13 arts biennale tenure strove to avoid in their pursuit of international acceptance.

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[101] Kapur, G. (2007). Curating: In the Public Sphere. In Rand, S. & Kouris, H. (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (pp. 56–58). New York: apexart, p. 65.

[102] The city has become a "migropolis", the daily influx of over 50,000 tourists now about equal to the permanent population, which in the year 2000 dropped to below 60,000. Since then, 420 homes in the historic centre were lost to tourism repurposing (as accommodation). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2010). *OECD Territorial Reviews: Venice, Italy, 2010*. Paris: OECD Publishing, p. 75.

[103] Australia was represented seven times in the 34 years prior: 1954 – Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale and William Dobell; 1956 – Albert Tucker; 1958 – Arthur Streeton and Arthur Boyd; 1978 – Ken Unsworth, John Davis and Robert Owen; 1980 – Mike Parr, Tony Coleing and Kevin Mortensen; 1982 – Peter Booth and Rosalie Gascogine; 1986 – Imants Tillers.

[104] Embracing the vacation ambience of the structure, a Venetian member of the Australian pavilion staff for many yeaers used the space 'under the house' to store the family boat.

As discussed in the Introduction in relation to the 2013 *Australia* exhibition, Homi Bhabha claims that colonial cultural identities not only persist but are inevitably intertwined with present day perceptions of place:

> The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living.[105]

Reiterating Bhabha's claim in the context of cultural identity in 'southern' biennales (such as those initiated in the second half of the 20th century in Latin America and Eastern Europe), Anthony Gardner and Charles Green propose that rather than rejecting colonialist exhibition models, early biennales established outside the traditional art world centres appropriated the colonial-era format to subvert mainstream portrayals of place:

> What these exhibitions suggested… was that the colonial-era format of the biennial could be transformed from within… and used as a platform for debating the existing state of 'centre-periphery' exchange and developing new practices of international relations in their place. These biennials thus epitomized how the deep histories of colonialism could not be disavowed in the South's new spirit of regionalism; rather, they were central to connecting the cultures of the South… and more importantly to finding ways to overcome them. [106]

Beyond occasional re-interpretations of the meaning of 'national', national pavilion exhibitions at the Venice Biennale tend to either emphatically dismiss

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[105] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 199–244), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 200.
[106] Gardner, A. & Green, C. (2013). Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global. *Third Text*, *27*(4), 442–455. p. 454.

or subtly reinforce cultural perceptions of place.[107] Neither strategy is accidental in this context. Curating an off-site exhibition for Australia at the 2009 Venice Biennale provided an opportunity to disrupt the top-down ('northern') expectations of Australia's cultural identity. As documented below, it did so not by blatantly ignoring or self-consciously reinforcing international perceptions of place (as that year's official pavilion exhibition arguably did with Gladwell's exhibition), but by offering new perceptions of place in a forum that "transformed from within" the national pavilion model.

The concept of home as a device to articulate social, cultural and political aspects of place cannot simply be achieved by installing works in a national pavilion, even if it does resemble a beach house. As discussed in Chapter One, "The idea of 'home' is bigger than the floor plan of any given four walls"[108]. How can, in this age of flux and displacement, perceptions of home and place correlate in the space of an exhibition? Rather than resisting the socio-cultural reality of constant change, we can look to the agents of change themselves as descriptors of a changing place. Hou Hanru, for example, postulates that society's quintessential agents of change – migrants – are redefining the concept of home in this 'age of unsettlement'. His curatorial projects investigate the impact of migratory movement, proposing that within this very movement lie the new definitions of place:

> The migrants turn their 'exile' into a process of engaging and negotiating with urban/suburban spaces. Culturally and physically, their presence and active involvement strongly changes the social and cultural structures of the city in order to produce new cities [which] in terms of the urban environment, raises

[107] Germany has twice subverted the idea of 'national', by hosting an exhibition of (British artist) Liam Gillick's work in the German pavilion in 2009, and exchanging pavilions with France in 2013 and staging (in the French pavilion) a group exhibition of non-German artists Ai Wei Wei (China), Romuald Karmaker (France), Santu Mofokeng (South Africa) and Dayanita Singh (India).
[108] Brooks, G. (2011). *The Idea of Home – Boyer Lectures 2011.* Sydney: HarperCollins, p. 10.

> questions of authenticity and originality and challenges the Eurocentric imagination.[109]

*Once Removed* challenged "the Eurocentric imagination" of Australia. The exhibition was advantaged by being literally 'once removed' (a few minutes walk) from Australia's official national pavilion in the Giardini, though as part of Australia's official representation it still had the sanctioned opportunity to subvert popular (Euro-centric) perceptions of Australia's cultural identity.

### 5.2.2 Once Removed

As the negotiations between the 2006 Biennale of Sydney and 2008 Adelaide Biennial with Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan (Chapter Four) revealed, within the forum of an exhibition transience can be presented as an entity in itself, temporarily rescued from its in-between status in a curatorial realignment of values and ideas of home. *Once Removed* extended this curatorial socialisation of itinerancy, deliberately showcasing young Australian artists who work across cultural divides. In the three installations created for the exhibition in Venice the artists adopted diverse approaches to ideas of place and displacement; and while individually their work was informed by the prism of home, collectively it was distinctly unhomely. The works in *Once Removed* described both political and personal experiences of negotiating the space that we all occupy at some level between discordant realities. Politically, the displacement of individuals, communities and entire racial groups is a global concern, while the feeling of being sometimes 'out of place' or at a remove is one that prompts all individuals to 'move on' or 'move away' from the unhomely. As the research in the previous chapters has demonstrated, the tension inherent to the feeling of 'in-betweeness' can be effectively harnessed in exhibition-making to create a

[109] Hou, H. (2006). Wherever They Go, They Create a New World. Notes on Migration, Cultural Hybridity and Contemporary Art. In H. Hou & G. Scardi (Eds.), *Wherever We Go* (pp. 10–15). Milan: 5 Continents Editions, p. 13.

dynamic discourse between works offering differing viewpoints of place and heading in different directions towards 'home'.

While the artists in *Once Removed* did not presume in their work created for *Once Removed* any direct engagement with Venice itself, there are conceptual links to place that underpin global concerns around forms of racial, social and environmental displacement. As an emigrant, immigrant or Indigenous person, each of the artists in *Once Removed* has experienced cultural displacement. For both groups – whether coming or going – the concept of home is a shifting possibility. Sean Cordeiro's family is from Singapore; he and Claire Healy lead a globally itinerant life, moving between countries and cultures as studio residency opportunities arise. Ken Yonetani immigrated to Australia from Japan in 2003, returned in 2013 and now lives between the two countries. Yonetani's reflections on environmental devastation present cultural parallels between Australia and his native Japan, and, in the context of *Once Removed*, with Venice. Vernon Ah Kee has experienced the worst aspects of displacement – racism and ostracism – as an Aboriginal Australian with Chinese ancestry living in the conspicuously Anglo-Celtic city of Brisbane. The insight provided by the artists' experience of otherness underpinned the narratives of their diverse installations in *Once Removed*. In the exhibition, the prism of home revealed the artists' collective experience of unhomelines.

Historically, some of Australia's leading cultural commentators of the 20th century, including Germaine Greer, Robert Hughes and John Pilger, have been expatriates. Indeed, as many other leading world thinkers have revealed, displacement in the form of removal from one's home ground hones the antennae, allowing sharper insights both into the place from which one feels displaced as a newcomer, and the place from which one hails. All of the artists whose work was included in *Once Removed* have experienced being on the outer and it is that very otherness, that experience of being 'once removed' that united them at the Venice Biennale under the banner of 'Australian'. Geeta Kapur's

comments on national representation in exhibitions make reference to the tension of being in-between culture and place:

> Billed under a country banner, the aura of national affiliation still works… a selection of artists from a particular country/context, properly conceptualised under a theme and a problematic, can in the consequent exposition address 'universal' issues of global contemporaneity… I do not want to isolate and valorize location within what is an irreversibly globalized world, but I do suggest that if contemporaneity is continually co-produced across cultures; if place, region, nation, state, and the politics of all these contextualizing categories of history (proper) are in a condition of flux everywhere in the world, we can presume past universals – regarding culture, for instance – to have been superseded, exposing the major, often lethal tensions between peoples and regions.[110]

Kapur's "lethal tensions" (which echo Adorno's "tensions outside") were exposed in *Once Removed*, in a similar curatorial conceit to *Handle with Care* (Chapter Four). Here, however, the "tensions" were as much about Australia's relationship with the world, given the international context of the exhibition, as they were descriptive of internal difference and division. The unhomely feeling of *Once Removed* embodied Australia's disconnection from the European heritage on which its modern society was founded. As discussed in Chapter One, contrary to common perceptions perpetuated by exhibitions like *Australia* and popular culture (such as the Australian soap operas that international audiences have a bewilderingly insatiable appetite for), Australia is an ancient continent with a racially oppressed Indigenous population, suspended between Indonesia's Muslim archipelago and Antarctica in the southern Pacific. Ours is a culture displaced from its European forebears, from its next-door neighbours and, most contentiously, from its original inhabitants. Worldwide over the last two decades, the focus of curators and consumers of art has moved from the traditional mainstream to embrace the art of non-Western cultures. Australia's

[110] Kapur, G. (2007). Curating: In the Public Sphere. In Rand, S. & Kouris, H. (Eds.) *Cautionary Tales: Critical Curating* (pp. 56–58). New York: apexart, p. 65.

contemporary visual arts culture has emerged as central to the shift, a fact that was also central to the curatorial rationale of *Once Removed*, with artists such as Vernon Ah Kee and Ken Yonetani at the forefront of a global awakening to the cultural import of Indigenous and non-Western art.

Though rising above the specifics of place in terms of its overarching political narrative, these two artists' practice draws from and comments on their respective Aboriginal and Asian heritages and appropriates visual cues from 'home'. Ah Kee's installation for the Venice Biennale, *Cant Chant (Wegrewhere)* presented the beach as a contested site, reflecting the fact that beach culture alienates through exclusion people of non-Anglo backgrounds (Asian, Middle Eastern and Indigenous populations, for example), something brought to the fore with race riots on one of Sydney's most popular surf beaches in late 2005.

> The so-called 'Cronulla Riots' were provoked and inflamed by right-wing media commentators who invoked a conservative and exclusionary phantasm of national belonging in support of the white racist provocateurs who brandished signs such as 'grew here not flew here' (sic)… Here the surf beaches of the eastern seaboard became the battleground for a struggle over a view of Australian identity founded on the assumption of stasis and exclusion above the virtues of a perspective based on inclusion, generosity and tolerance. As a result of two days of rioting, surf culture became associated with a kind of thuggish white supremacist ideology that most genuine surfers would and did abhor. [111]

Ah Kee was bemused at the claim by the white Australian rioters that they "grew here", a claim by descendants of British 'boat people' who, in reclaiming the legally overturned concept of terra nullius, denied the pre-existing presence of Indigenous populations. Visual imagery framed within the three-channel video and accompanying installation of suspended surfboards also suggested iconic racist events from history, such as lynchings in North America and Australia, where blacks were ritually murdered by public hanging. The work's

[111] McNeill, D. (2010). Art Without Authors: Networks, Assemblages and 'Flat' Ontology.' *Third Text*, *24*(4), 397–408. p. 401; 405.

title, *Can't Chant (Wegrewhere)*, also refers to Thomas Keneally's 1972 Booker Prize-nominated novel, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, in which the white author, controversially, told the story through the eyes of the Aboriginal protagonist of him taking violent revenge against racial persecution in the Australian bush.[112]

The installation of Ah Kee's work required viewers to be completely immersed: awkwardly, the visitor had to walk through the forest of suspended surfboards painted up with boldly coloured Indigenous shield designs from Ah Kee's traditional home lands in North Queensland. On the underneath (fin) side were evocative, hand-drawn portraits of family members, past and present. The visitor had no option but to enter the space of these family portraits and find a way through and around them, watched by ancestors. Entering the adjacent video installation, viewers were immersed in an almost semi-circular, floor to ceiling screen showing Ah Kee's three-channel film of land and water, accompanied by a deafening soundtrack that encompassed the Warumpi Band's iconic *Stompin' Ground*, the sound of water lapping against surfboards and jolting gun shots that echoed through the walls of the building.[113] Immersive, evocative and at times confronting, Ah Kee's work evades the familiar visual traditions of Aboriginal art to adopt instead a conceptual lexicon invested with political imperative. Anger at the plight of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations is clearly displayed in his black and white wall text works and film depicting Aboriginal surfers comandeering the beach – a surreal, fairy-tale scenario in the context of a modern Australia and its Caucasian-dominated beach culture. Criticality here is cloaked in humour, making the work more palatable, a device also used by Destiny Deacon.[114] As Hou Hanru discusses in his book *On the Mid-Ground*, 'auto-critique' is a key strategy in contemporary art and exhibition making, being an effective way of ensuring audience accessibility and maintaining authorial identity in the midst of

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[112] Ah Kee also integrated the rioters slogan "we grew here", merging the words to "wegrewhere".
[113] Warumpi Band (1996). Stompin' Ground.
[114] See discussion of Deacon's use of dolls in the context of *Prepossession*, Chapter Two.

globalisation.[115]

The formal ordering of elements in the face of entropy was a device employed by each of the artists in *Once Removed* as they attempted in their installations to convey a sense of disassociation and displacement. Yonetani's carefully staged white sugar sculptures were rendered in a language that seeks to codify the damage caused by human disengagement from the natural world. The aesthetic framework for his practice is drawn from Asian culture, particularly cultural traditions that make a spectacle of ordering nature, such as the Japanese Zen garden. The particular type of garden cited in *Sweet Barrier Reef* is called *Kare san sui*, which dates back to the 15th century. These gardens were made in accordance with Zen visual and spiritual principles. Yonetani is interested in the *Kare* because it is a dry garden, made entirely from stones rather than living plants. Like the *Kare* garden, the orderly design and lack of colour in Yonetani's installation suggests a kind of living death, overseen by human cultural beliefs. Its sparse, serene arrangement evokes a post-apocalyptic landscape in which everything is bleached white, perished. Here, the excesses of life are inextricably tied to self-destruction and death.

Yonetani abandoned a career in Tokyo's foreign exchange market to study ceramics as an apprentice to a master potter in the sub-tropical coastal city of Okinawa, where he witnessed the ecological crisis facing coral reefs. Marine environments off the coast of Okinawa, like those in north Queensland, are plagued by sediment run-off from sugar cane plantations.[116] Upon moving to Australia Yonetani undertook research at the Institute of Marine Science, discovering that coral bleaching was having an equally profound effect on the iconic Great Barrier Reef. The artist's skill as a diver provided first-hand knowledge of underwater environments in his former home of Okinawa and

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[115] For the role of 'auto-critique' in contemporary art practice, see Hou, H. (2002). *On the Mid-Ground*. Hong Kong: Timezone 8 Ltd, p. 140.

[116] Yonetani noted with a sense of foreboding that "Every time monsoon rains or a typhoon swept across the island, which was often during Okinawa's long summer, the emerald water would turn the colour of red, as soil, pesticides and fertiliser from nearby sugarcane fields were swept out to sea". Yonetani, J. (2008). Sweet Barrier Reef. In F. Fenner (Ed.), *Handle with Care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, p. 68.

new home in Australia. The disastrous predicament of the Reef is the focus of heated political debate around Australia's commitment (and lack thereof) to tackling the effects of climate change. Yonetani's work, conceived some years earlier and presented elsewhere in earlier versions, was in 2008–09 one of the most politically timely and place-specific contemporary art projects to emerge from Australia in recent times.

*Sweet Barrier Reef* conveys the fragility of an ocean life exploited by industry, specifically the devastation of coral bleaching. Referencing greed and consumerism, the coral sculptures made from sugar that sit on the raked sugar garden are sexed up, similarities to human genitalia deliberately exaggerated so as to lure and shock observers. It is a visually seductive work, overt sexual imagery rendered in sweetness.

> Sugar represents human desire. I use it as a metaphor for consumerism. The sugar industry continues to increase production in accordance with growing demand globally for sugar-based products, which have, disturbingly, over the last century evolved from 'special treat' foods to staples of everyday modern diets. This reflects society's more widespread desire for instant gratification, so the sexual nature of my sculptures is also closely related to this idea of consumerism as a manifestation of desire. But coral is a living animal and its appearance can be very sexual, so as well as having metaphorical value, the sculptures are also based on coral forms I've observed when diving.[117]

*Sweet Barrier Reef* was selected for *Once Removed* for its capacity to evoke an underwater environment in the city of canals and draw an unhomely parallel with the threats to the beauty and sustainability of Venice's waterways. The work describes the fatal consequences of using the natural environment as a dumping ground for consumer-driven industry – in the case of Venice a tourist industry. A physically immersive installation, *Sweet Barrier Reef* was presented in a discrete and darkened white cube. Visitors were invited to inhabit an otherworldly space illuminated by lamps that replicated the visual effect of

[117] K. Yonetani, personal communication with the author, 1 May, 2005.

sunlight underwater. Seduced by the aesthetic beauty of the work's quiet austerity and gently rippling blue light, audiences were drawn into an environment that mimicked the experience of being underwater. Only then, once immersed in the space, did it dawn on viewers that the ground was not sand but sugar, and that the coral forms, devoid of colour, in fact represented coral bleaching.

The message was underpinned by the serving of cake by fashion models. It was a performance conducted twice daily during the three-day vernissage, at morning and afternoon tea time. Coral-shaped cake, representing the environmentally dangerous merging in the sea of sugar and coral, were eagerly consumed by visitors before they had a chance to consider the symbolism of their actions. Though the ceremony performance mimicked a form of welcome to the exhibition, any domestic comfort alluded to by the gesture was underscored by a feeling of unhomliness.

According to one (British) reviewer: "The formal beauty of *Sweet Barrier Reef* and their participation seduce viewers, priming them to accept the subtle environmental messages that Yonetani develops through his work. He educates us by whispering not shouting." [118] (As discussed in Chapter Four, whispering is also a much more effective curatorial device to engender reflection and engagement than shouting!)

Besides being immersive, the work communicated the real life, slowly unfolding disaster of environmental pollution. Though based on the artist's home experiences off the coasts of Japan and Australia, the scenario is impacting waterways and oceans across the globe. The conceptual point of entry for local audiences was the parallel with Venice, which also suffers underwater environmental damage as a result of pollution and oversized cruise ships plying its canals. By creating an immersive environment with several points of possible resonance for different audiences, the installation appropriated the seductive

[118] Martin, C. (2009). Sweet Success, *Craft Australia,* 43. Retrieved from http://www.craftaustralia.org.au/library/review.php?id=sweet_success

visual language of beauty to deliver the sharpest of political messages.

Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro were invited to create a site-specific installation for the adjacent Santa Maria Ausiliatrice. The deconsecrated church is part of the Ludoteca complex, which was occupied from the 12th to the 17th centuries by an order of Franciscan nuns. In 1630, all but one of the nuns died in the plague; the building was later used as a hospital and the church deconsecrated in 1807.

**Figure 33: Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, *Selfstorage*, 2006. Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery © the artists**

**Figure 34: Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, *Deceased Estate*, 2004. Image courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery © the artists**

Healy and Cordeiro were commissioned to respond to the site because their practice often addresses issues of home, mortality and the passing of time. In a series of major installations prior to *Once Removed*, they had created precise visual statements that appear to make order out of the vestiges of homes that, like Santa Maria Ausiliatrice, had become redundant with the passing of time.

The artists' early oeuvre includes installations created from the assorted possessions of a deceased estate, and from the building fabric of a demolished house. As anticipated, they responded with a work that extended their interest in emotionally resonant everyday items of home: *Life Span* presented in sculptural form the detritus of life's dreams, fears and desires encapsulated on

celluloid. The monolithic sculpture was positioned in response to the distinctive art and architecture of its setting.

Disproportionately commandeering the small Santa Maria Ausiliatrice church, a towering stack of VHS video cassettes, measuring over six metres high and five metres deep, cheekily proposed the substitution of religious doctrines for movie-watching as a path to spiritual fulfilment. The juxtaposition between popular videos and the church setting served to heighten the significance both of the work and the church, the stack of obsolete media an apt metaphor for the ephemeral nature of life itself.

Videos are watched in the living room, the room at the centre of home for Western and increasingly Eastern societies throughout the world. In *Life Span*, Healy and Cordeiro cast the tower of videos in the centre of the chapel, ascending in visual dialogue with the mural-decorated ceiling. All of life's moments of happiness and misery are contained within the work, displaced from the video store categories of "action", "drama", "comedy", "thriller" and "family". Ironically a large proportion of tapes forming the stack's inner core come under the euphemistically titled "adult" section, a fact the artists saw as appropriate given that the sexual act is the catalyst of creation, yet in these conservative times is hidden from public view (except in the luscious depictions of nudity that abound in historic art of churches such as the one, ironically, in which *Life Span* was installed). Collectively, the content of their VHS monolith proposed an alternative to Western belief systems in its rumination through film titles on the human condition, the meaning of life and mortality. 175, 218 VHS video cassettes were arranged to form a solid block in the deconsecrated church. The combined running time of these cassettes, if watched one after the other, would be 60.1 years, the average human life span in 1976, the year that VHS was released.

While Gladwell's work in the national pavilion conjured the sublime to reveal the omnipresence of spirituality ('in the middle of nowhere'), Healy and

Cordeiro's site-specific rejoinder transformed God's house into a place of worship of the emotionally charged detritus of the quotidian. The installation occupied the space between faith and the everyday, embracing a symbol of the globalisation of culture (movies watched on domestic televisions) in a gesture of extreme cultural juxtaposition, but one that also signified both the transience of life and the close proximity between lives of shared hopes and values. In all their work, the artists' see the recontextualisations and reconfigurations of the found materials they use as metaphors for today's world, symbols of accumulation and transition, of the interstitial socio-cultural spaces that define contemporary experience. As such, this installation, though outwardly 'once removed' from the theme of place, underpinned the curatorial valuing of 'in-betweeness'.

Just as Bhabha and Bourriaud explore the intersection of late capitalism and cultural 'in-betweeness' (discussed above in relation to *Runscape–Sydney*), Miwon Kwon recognises that the phenomenon of feeling 'once removed' is an inherent aspect of contemporary life in a globalised world:

> In both perceptual and cognitive registers – being lost, disoriented, alienated, feeling out of place, and consequently unable to make coherent meaning of our relation to our physical surroundings – is the cultural symptom of late capitalism's political and social reality".[119]

The theme of displacement in *Once Removed* was echoed in the incongruous context of the exhibition site and sometimes by parallels with the predicament of Venice itself. Water, for example, was a key theme in the works of Ah Kee and Yonetani. Ah Kee proposes the unlikely repossession of the beach and its culture by Australia's original inhabitants, while Yonetani's sugar reef conjures the destruction of underwater environments brought about by human activity. Both works resonate with their location in Venice, where the physical environment has become threatened by the hordes of tourists in a utopian search for a place

[119] Kwon, M. (2004). In Doherty, C. (Ed.) *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* (29–41). London: Black Dog Publishing, pp. 34–35.

that is fast disappearing.

In Julia Kristeva's *Strangers to Ourselves*, the status of the foreigner is established as being interior to the psyche in historical and political conceptions of social identities.[120] In the context of an international exhibition premised on national representation, the status of the foreigner is on the one hand internalised by affiliation to a particular nation, yet simultaneously externalised as an agent of globalised culture. The exhibition sought to capture this feeling of being embedded yet feeling out of place. Beyond the familial reference to one's relations of another generation, the phrase 'once removed' suggests being remote, separated – unhomely. In Ah Kee's practice the phrase has obvious postcolonial reference at a political level to the displacement of Aboriginal people (and more specifically to the Stolen Generations), though on a personal level it also refers to the artist's own feelings of displacement from a white society that has alienated Indigenous and other racial groups. In the context of Healy and Cordeiro's practice, 'removal' refers to a nomadic lifestyle that necessitates the constant packing-up, disposal and shipping of possessions, and how the character of a particular place (such as a church), can be transformed by a changed context (such as a biennale). Yonetani's work examined the disjuncture, propelled by greed and desire, between ourselves and the natural world, warning that our impending disconnection to place will eventually render us strangers, as Scott's Bobby Wabalanginy feared, to our own home ground.

While individual works in *Once Removed* referred in different ways to aspects of home – lounge-room dreamings, race relations, environmental devastation – in their articulation of place (Australia, Venice or elsewhere), the exhibition as a whole investigated the 'unhomely' (uncanny), aspects of place, employing the curatorial strategies of documentary narratives, immersion and inhabitation in creating distinctive constructions of Bhabha's "third space" of engagement. All the works were underpinned by an unhomely character, a sense that things are

[120] Kristeva, J. (1991). *Strangers to Ourselves.* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York: University of Columbia.

in the wrong place, that what appears before us is, like Venice itself, a theatre of half-truths and improbability. The exhibition suggested that often the concept of 'home' itself is an artificial construct devised to fill the space between longing and reality. Despite inclusion of and allusion to, in each of the three works, the accoutrements of home – family, comfort, food and television watching – the three installations all contained hidden depths of meaning: the porn tapes at the centre of *Life Span* alluding to the beginnings of life itself; the violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples buried deep within iconic Australian beaches and landscapes; and the inextricable link between desire, greed and environmental devastation. Inherent to all three works were allusions to that which lies beneath the surface, unseen and unfathomable. The curatorial theme drew on aspects of place to convey issues of discord that carry universal resonance, suggesting that we are all "strangers to our special places".[121]

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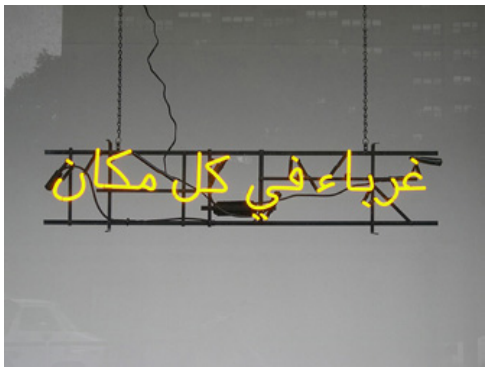



**Figures 35 and 36: Claire Fontaine, *Foreigners Everywhere (Arabic)*, 2005 (left) and *Foreigners Everywhere (Chinese)*, 2008 (right). Images courtesy the artist, Reena Spaulings Fine Art and Metro Pictures New York**

Claire Fontaine's work *Foreigners Everywhere* could well describe the Venice Biennale. The work translates in neon light the phrase "foreigners everywhere", which in English has a double meaning: one refers to the xenophobic utterances of the inhabitants of a place feeling invaded by foreigners (tourists, in the case

[121] Scott, K. (2010). *That Deadman Dance*. Sydney: Picador, p. 392.

of Venice), and the other alludes to the fact that we are all foreigners, everywhere.

Critical frameworks established over the last 20 years, such as the Asia Pacific Triennial, have explored Aboriginal and non-Indigenous art in the context of current visual art practices from the region, stimulating a dialogue that informs much contemporary Australian art and curatorial practice. The global impact of this dialogue, however, is limited, with the dissemination of discourse around Australian art still handicapped by its very low profile internationally. The lack of presence on the world stage persists into the 21st century, despite the fact that Australia hosts one of the world's major biennales (Sydney), has for 25 years exhibited at the Venice Biennale, and in recent years made available generous funding for research travel to Australia by international curators.[122] Anthony Gardner has recently expounded on the 'north'/'south' divide as central to the problematic of defining place:

> If anything, the South is itself a mode of questioning… As it sparks new links between artists and audiences from different regions, it provokes new ways of thinking about global cultural currents. It is thus a question always open to debate and discussion – including, it has to be said, debate about whether 'South' is in fact an adequate frame for such discussions, or a category that still limits the actual complexities of transcultural relations, setting them in overly simplistic opposition to the 'North', to the canonical and to the 'normal' narratives through which globalisation is understood today.[123]

The semantic issue of whether or not 'south' is in fact an adequate frame for such discussions has been addressed in detail by Nikos Papastergiadis and is beyond the scope of the research here.[124] Gardner's point about the capacity of

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[122] Currently, funding is offered twice yearly by the Australia Council for the Arts, under its International Visitors Program, for international curators to visit Australian art institutions, galleries and artists.
[123] Gardner, A. (2013). Mapping South: Journeys in South-South Cultural Relations. The South Project, Melbourne, 2013. In A. Gardner & C. Green (2013). Biennials of the South on the Edges of the Global. *Third Text*, *27*(4), 442–455. p. 444.
[124] See Papastergiadis, N. (2010). What is the South? *Thesis Eleven*, *100*(1), pp. 141–156.

the idea of 'south' to question old paradigms and provoke "new ways of thinking about global cultural currents", however, has resonance with the curatorial research underpinning this thesis. By presenting a 'southern' view of Australian art within the context of a national exhibition (such as the Adelaide Biennial and Venice Biennale national representation), the curator avoids the dilemma Gardner refers to of setting up an "overly simplistic" dichotomy between 'north' and 'south', between the 'mainstream' and 'periphery'. By working *within* the framework of national representation, rather than challenging it from the outside, the exhibition curator can present alternative views of place that catalyse new insights and understandings.

Curator Jens Hoffmann asks, "Is there any site then that remains for alterative approaches to curating?"[125] *Once Removed* demonstrated that with the imprimatur of 'home', existing as it did physically outside but still within the sanctioned spaces of national representation, curatorial practice can reveal the complexities and tensions inherent to place from a bottom-up, insiders' perspective. Further, the cultural slippage between national and international perceptions facilitated a "third space" for engagement; as Bhabha writes:

> The non-synchronous temporarility of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space – a third space – where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences.[126]


**Figure 37: Vernon Ah Kee, *Wegrewhere* (from *Once Removed*), 2009 © the artist**

This tension, earlier discussed in the context of Adorno and Kapur, was also reflected in the exhibition's status as the 'other' exhibition, in addition to the national pavilion, representing Australia at the Biennale that year. In presenting an

[125] Hoffmann, J. (2007). A Certain Tendency of Curating. In P. O'Neill (Ed.), *Curating Subjects*, (pp. 137–142). London: Open Editions, p. 141.
[126] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 303–337), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 312.

exhibition of Australian art that evaded popular perceptions of Australia in favour of more culturally complex and contemporary understandings, the exhibition echoed the research ideas underpinning *Handle with Care* (Chapter Four), *The Lie of the Land* (Chapter Three) and *Making Change* (Chapter Two). In its revelation of new meanings and forging of conceptual connections with its site in Venice, *Once Removed* extended the exploratory license afforded viewer-participants in *Runscape* (Chapter Five), directing the home team in a reinvention of its cultural identity on an international stage, strengthened by the home ground advantage of national representation.

# CONCLUSION

> I don't want to tell. I want to make a discovery which is a more dangerous and challenging route, more frightening because I go into the unknown. So an exhibition can be a question for me rather than an answer.[1]

This thesis, couched as a question – *Your Place or Mine?* – has articulated strategies to curate the conditions for creativity and deep engagement in the exhibition space. It has defined a set of conditions that facilitate a reading of place through the prism of home. Those conditions depend on a methodology of curatorial strategies, investigated in the thesis in the context of Australian and international exhibitions, and tested in curated exhibitions of Australian art, including Australian art presented internationally. The thesis argues that with the creation of resonances between artwork and viewer around the idea of home, exhibition curators can lay the groundwork for insightful engagement that allows viewers to get beyond external perceptions of place and inhabit the space of the artworks to make their own intellectual and emotional connections. As Reesa Greenberg has noted, "Presentation strategies are linked to the performative aspects of exhibitions, in particular their affective dimensions."[2] Choreographed conversations within the exhibition space in turn offer connective dialogues with audiences. The research here is primarily focussed on the specific situation of exhibitions of Australian art, demonstrating how particular curatorial and presentation strategies can be deployed as catalysts for affective engagement with place and propound new readings of the social and cultural nature of this place, Australia.

Citing Homi Bhabha's "third space" in the provision for viewers of a space unencumbered by opinion or rhetoric, the research has shown how the curator

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[1] Nick Waterlow quoted in: Darling, J. (Writer). (2012). *A curator's last will and testament* [motion picture]. Australia: independently distributed.
[2] Greenberg, R. Identity Exhibitions: From *Magiciens de la Terre* to *Documenta 11*. *Art Journal*, *64*(1), p. 90.

can facilitate in the exhibition a cognitive bridge not just between artworks within the exhibition spaces, but between artworks and viewers and between art and place itself. Further, the research has shown that in its occupation of the third space between art and audience, allusion to home provides effective agency for the ideas and issues being explored in the exhibition forum.[3]

In order to achieve the conditions for creative engagement, the thesis presumes that curatorial practice has moved on from simply assembling artworks in chronological or thematic sequence to create (curate) the conditions for engagement, enabling viewers to get beyond simply 'understanding' the meaning of the artwork to 'inhabiting' (being at home within) the intellectual and sensory curatorial space. That space of engagement is affective, experiential and experimental. The thesis notes throughout, however, that it is disingenuous to claim that the space of an exhibition can ever be neutral. The cultural context of an art project and the curatorial approach taken inevitably influence the experience of art:

> Although one might consider the work of art as an autonomous thing that articulates a meaning that unquestionably inheres in itself, it would be naïve (and even dangerous) to ignore the ideological and aesthetic impact of the context, dramaturgy, and discursive armatures that bring an artwork into public view. This is because the frame around the artwork – geopolitical, institutional, discursive, and spatial – is never neutral, but instead administers readings and interpretations.[4]

The curatorial approach to the exhibitions that form the core of the research does not seek to deny the inevitable influence of institutional site and cultural

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[3] Echoing Nick Waterlow's valuing of the "ability to be uncertain", Hayward Gallery director Ralph Rugoff believes that a sensitively curated exhibition encourages visitors to "actively seek out uncertainty, rather than simply remaining unsure. And it is precisely when we are unsure of something that our curiosity is aroused, and that we then tend to regard it more closely, consider it more carefully, and, in the end, experience it more intensely." Rugoff, R. (2006) You Talking to Me? On Curating Group Shows that Give You a Chance to Join the Group. In P. Marincola (Ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (pp. 44–51). Philadelphia: Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, pp. 48–49.

[4] Filipovic, E., van Hal, M. & Øvstebø, S. (Eds.). (2010). *The Biennial Reader.* Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall, pp. 16–17.

context. On the contrary, the curatorial research embraces the idea of place not as a static or fixed identity, but as a space of flux and intersection defined by diverse geo-political and cultural identifiers. The exhibitions reveal possible flows and pathways through the complexity of place, tracing a journey that is analogous to how we live now.

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The research here redefines the traditional concept of curating – 'to care for' – by merging it with the contemporary understanding of curatorial practice as a creative pursuit, an activity that involves working with artists from inception through to production, producing and presenting work in a meaningful cultural as well as social context, including outside the gallery or museum. The central premise of this argument is that curators need to think more holistically, curating not just objects, but the attitudes and anxieties that are embedded in and embody the places in which we live and work. While specifically concerned with the Australian situation, the research is located in a period in which, internationally, curatorial models are shifting in response to globalisation:

> The contrast between Venice and Documenta in 2007 was indicative of a paradigm shift in curatorial practice that has been rehearsed in countless small exhibition spaces around the world for a decade or more… The first [traditional curatorial approaches] can too easily express a bogus radicalism from within a formal structure that declines to challenge assumptions about presentation, audience and venue. The second will treat artwork as an apparatus for making connections and fomenting debate and will therefore necessarily overflow the borders of the sanctified and policed spaces of the mainstream artworld.[5]

The research for this thesis locates itself at the forefront of this "paradigm shift in curatorial practice" in Australia. All the exhibitions are inherently political, in the choice of artists and the content of their work and the latter projects

[5] McNeill, D. (2010). Art Without Authors: Networks, Assemblages and 'Flat' Ontology.' *Third Text*, *24*(4), 397–408. p. 399.

"overflow the borders of the sanctified and policed spaces of the mainstream artworld". Throughout, the poetic curatorial license to be political has been embraced. The curatorial research here rejects forms of "bogus radicalism" that fail to intersect with real world cultural and political situations. In a deliberate shift away from acquiescent curatorial practices that either reinforce popular constructs of cultural identity or safely question the status quo from the restricted confines of museological methodologies and settings, the thesis tested a series of curatorial strategies that seek to create a dialogue between works in the exhibition while engaging audiences in open, affective and participatory ways. Further, the curatorial strategies applied in the research are designed to reconcile the disjuncture in Australia's image of itself, disentangling a relatively static external (public) image associated with concepts of national and cultural identity, from more internal (private) experiences, Deleuze's "purely expressed" views from the inside.[6]

All the exhibitions discussed set out to describe concepts of place – specifically, Australia in the early 21st century. The lens of home provides a universally accessible entry point to the curatorial space, the experience of home being one that is shared by all. The late critic Thomas McEvilley said that "A sensitive exhibition defines a certain moment, embodying attitudes and, often, changes of attitude that reveal, if only by the anxieties they create, the direction in which culture is moving"[7]. The prism of home has been shown to be an effective device in providing a space in which anxieties are aired, differing attitudes are expressed and new understandings of place are forged. It offers a way into a space where mnemonic and imaginative connections are made between artworks and viewers, between art, people and place; a space of exchange and interaction between differing views and experiences. The research here presents views of contemporary Australia that challenge popular perceptions of place, revealing that exhibitions most successfully engage audiences when they

[6] Deleuze, G. (1990). *The Logic of Sense* (trans. Mark Lester). (12–22). New York: Columbia University Press. p. 22.
[7] McEvilley, T. (1990). The Global Issue. *Artforum*, *28*, p. 20.

are "turned out to the world", multi-layered and encompass the possibility of interpretation from a range of viewpoints.

The thesis also argued that the prism of home is a starting point from which experiential understandings of place can replace top-down perceptions of cultural identity. Curators can effectively create situations in which recognition, empathy and affect flow in the exhibition space between artworks and, most importantly, between artworks and viewers, engendering new understandings of place. Referencing Australian socio-political culture as a backdrop, through a series of curatorial projects the research demonstrated that the concept of home is a unique and useful curatorial device through which to transmit and receive insights into place. Stories and images of home have the power to expose the interstitial spaces between *external* and *internal* descriptors of a place – in the case of this thesis the discrete places and experiences of contemporary Australia. Shunning simplified descriptors of place, the research here reflects the fact that place is mutable, changeable and inherently complex. Thus, each of the curatorial projects is underpinned by a quintessential unhomeliness, imbued with the sense of not quite fitting existing understandings of Australian cultural identity. The curatorial strategies are designed to reveal the anxieties that beset our island continent, to

> address and communicate elusive perceptions about such things as being 'Australian' but also 'global', about living 'here' but also 'there', about seeing the big picture in the smallest of circumstances and above all trying to define and value those things that define what it means to be human.[8]

There is a progression in the thesis from Chapter One through to Chapter Five from *articulating* in exhibition practice the in-between, or interstitial spaces of our culture, through to *replicating* the condition of unhomeliness in the curated project itself. Parallel to this curatorial journey is a progression from working inside the museum to curating projects in non-museum spaces both in the

[8] Neylon, J. (2008). Handle With Care: 2008 Biennial of Australian Art – review. *Artlink*, *28*(2), p. 83.

public space of our own home ground and on the international stage. These developments are underpinned by recurrent implementation of the curatorial strategies identified as key to creating an open, cognitive space through the prism of home: documentary images and events from real life experiences of home organised in dialogue with each other (Appendix II); installations in the gallery that are immersive or can be physically inhabited (Appendix III); and the facilitation of works outside the museum or gallery that require active interaction by participants and/or viewers (Appendix IV).

The thesis commenced with an overview of curatorial approaches to place in Australia, citing key international examples that have invoked the idea of home in that pursuit. Both the idea of home and ideas of Australian cultural identity were explored in the context of recent curatorial practice. In the context of this thesis, the point of citing the 2013 *Australia* exhibition in London at the start was not to analyse the exhibition's lack of curatorial articulation, but to highlight the important role played by curatorial strategy in creating exhibitions that can be actively engaged with. The thesis is set in the Australian context and the curatorial approach to *Australia* epitomised all that this research rejects. In the words of one English critic, "*Australia* feels more like a history lesson than an exhibition."[9] Audiences cannot engage with artworks on more than the didactic level suggested by that critic's response unless they can find and, importantly, *feel* a connection with the work.

The title of the thesis, *Your Place or Mine?* borrows the lexicon of romance and invitation. It is a phrase that might be uttered at the end of a social gathering, but only if meaningful connections have been made between guests. Indeed, the capacity of exhibition audiences to engage with artworks in exhibitions is dependent on a set of conditions that could be compared to that of a dinner party: the setting should be conducive to finding connections with whoever (or whatever, in the case of an exhibition) is encountered. If these conditions are

[9] Sooke, A. (2013, 16 September). Australia at the Royal Academy, review. *The Telegraph.* Retrieved from http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-reviews/10312476/Australia-at-the-Royal-Academy-review.html

not met, people won't leave wanting more (perhaps asking "your place of mine?"), but will be disengaged by the experience. The same criticism was levelled against the *Australia* exhibition by an Australian critic who knows the works in the exhibition well yet noted that despite the inclusion of seminal art works "… that resonate with broader social tensions and anxieties… with no space to contemplate each work, it's impossible to make any of your own intellectual or emotional connections."[10] Just as walking into a social gathering in which there is no conversation between the guests is a disconcerting experience, finding one's way in an exhibition devoid of dialogue between works derives viewers of the opportunity to join a conversation. To shut down a conversation between works in an exhibition has the ripple effect of prohibiting engagement between artworks and viewers. The curated exhibitions that form the core of this research are designed to engage audiences in dialogue around place, supported by the framework of home.

The analogy of the exhibition as a space for conversation was contextualised in recent theory in Chapter One and activated with exhibition projects in Chapter Two. The first avenue of investigation, which foregrounded the thesis research, was into the complex relationship between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australian art, with *Talking About Abstraction* proposing the dominant influence of the latter on the former. The airing of anxieties underlying non-Indigenous and Indigenous understandings of place was developed in subsequent curatorial projects: *Prepossession*, which embraced the context of photo-media and film-based art to compare contemporary Indigenous Australian portrayals of place with equally unsettling views from South African and Northern Irish artists; and *Making Change*, which in a bold curatorial approach excluded non-Indigenous art and relied exclusively on the voices of 24 contemporary Indigenous artists to articulate for Chinese audiences a 21st century Australian cultural identity. Each of these exhibitions usurped traditional approaches to curating Indigenous art, particularly in the Australian context:

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[10] Higgins, J. (2013). Australia. *Artlink*, *33*(4). Retrieved from https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4040/australia/

> Traditionally, the exhibitions are staged in a 'white cube', somewhere in a major European or American art centre, and typically with the 'exchange' flowing in just the one direction: into the 'white cube' gallery, which – as we all know – can house anything imaginable… Placing non-Western work into this setting has nothing to do with dialogue or exchange, but rather with a restoration of the colonial power structure. The non-Western work is expected to behave as the guest it is and respect the rules of its hosts regardless of how condescending or racist they are.[11]

Throughout, the curatorial research into Indigenous art eschewed the colonial power structure of international exhibition models. It did so by facilitating a conversation between Australian Indigenous and non-Indigenous art in the exhibition space (*Talking About Abstraction*), then by contextualising Australian Indigenous art with international commentaries on conflicting claims to place (*Prepossession*), and finally by curating Indigenous art on the international stage as the sole representative of Australian culture in the 21st century (*Making Change*).

Having established the pivotal role in definitions of place in Australia of Indigenous art, the subsequent research employed the prism of home in the curating of recurrent national exhibitions that have traditionally been viewed as state-of-the-nation expositions. Just as the decision to send to China an all-Indigenous exhibition was a politically loaded strategy, so was the inclusion (for the first time in the exhibition's 15 year history) to include remote Indigenous art in Primavera. It was put into dialogue in *The Lie of the Land* with works by urban Aboriginal and non-Indigenous young artists that responded to Homi Bhabha's reservations about "the recurrent metaphor of landscape as the inscape of national identity".[12] Extending the analogy of the art and the home ground into an international context, *Home Ground* set up a dialogue about place between Australian and international artists whose work is conceived from the

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[11] René Block quoted by Pastor Roces, M. (2005). Crystal Palace Exhibitions. In E. Filipovic, M. van Hal & S. Øvstebø (Eds.), *The Biennial Reader* (55–65). Bergen: Bergen Kunsthall, p. 62.
[12] Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. (pp. 199–244), London and New York: Routledge Classics (2012 edition), p. 205.

point of view of their home state. The exhibition testified to the fact that the lens of home is an effective curatorial device in evincing and elucidating a sense of place. The subsequent research expanded in scope, bringing together not just disputed claims to place, but a complex range of cultural approaches to place. *Handle with Care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art* invited into the dialogue around place controversies about Indigeneity, Islam, land rights and immigration, airing anxieties and revealing the liminal spaces between official and actual understandings of living here now. The project successfully engaged audiences in a redefinition of Australian cultural identity in the early 21st century.[13]

Recognising that the museum or gallery imposes an artificially refined environment that is removed from real life, the final component of the research tested the capacity of the author's articulated curatorial strategies to reveal new understandings of place on the local (Sydney CBD) and international (Venice Biennale) stage. In the first section of the final chapter the research demonstrated how physically demanding engagement with place that is centred on the idea of home can unearth new meanings by exploring the interstices of place. This line of investigation was commenced in Chapter Four with the involvement of the agriculturalists and real life politics of Darling and Forwood's and other artists' work in *Handle with Care*, which was necessarily enacted inside the museum. The subsequent research moved out of the museum altogether: *Running the City* and *Once Removed* explored themes of disassociation and subversion, working closely with the artists in non-institutional spaces to re-define pre-existing concepts of place.

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[13] "This year's Adelaide Biennial is the best show of its kind I've seen... Biennials – surveys of contemporary art held every two years – are so routinely dismal that one naturally concludes there is something inherently wrong with the format… But Fenner's effort here makes you wonder again what could possibly be so hard about them. Her theme – fragility, in the social sphere and in the environment – is indicated not just by the title, Handle with Care; it finds meaningful expression in almost every work… [The exhibition] has a natural, effortless quality, allowing the work not only to speak clearly, but to breathe and become porous for the viewer's imagination." Smee, S. (2008, March 15–16). Altered States. *The Australian.* p. 18.

The thesis opened with Christian Boltanski's fable about a child hoping to find truth (god) in her newly born baby brother. Relayed by Mary Jane Jacob, a pioneer in curating socially engaged art, the moral of the story is that curators can best engage their audience not by creating a narrative, but by creating an open space in which connections can be made. This approach is heeded and expanded upon in *Your Place or Mine?* It is applied to the Australian situation in the knowledge that the divisive space between contradictory top-down and experiential understandings of place can be harnessed in curatorial practice to create an open space of connections and connectivity.

Jacob argues, as does *Your Place or Mine?*, that exhibitions can be a forum for complex conversations that tend not to occur in the everyday world:

> Open situations for experience don't happen often. They can be disconcerting, intimidating, because we are so programmed to being led to or told the result of our experiences (how should we feel, what will we feel). 'Not knowing', being given permission to be on one's own and really have a full experience, can be scary… So what we need is to curate the conditions for the audience's own creativity and deep engagement… As curators, we make exhibitions as space for experience."[14]

*Your Place or Mine?* celebrates the curator's "ability to be uncertain" and willingness to be "an empty vessel".[15] External perceptions are rejected in favour of experiential, affective descriptors of place presented through the filter of home. The thesis demonstrates through analyses and a series of exhibition projects how curatorial practice can provide a space for the emergence of alternative understandings and new insights into the culture of contemporary Australia.

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[14] Jacob, M.J. (2006). Making Space for Art. In P. Marincola (Ed.), *What Makes a Great Exhibition?* (pp. 134–141). Philadelphia: Philadelphia Center for Arts and Heritage, pp. 141–142.
[15] Waterlow., N. From notes found after his death titled *A Curator's last will and testament.*

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# Appendix I

*Practice-based research – national and international exhibitions referred to in the thesis (curated by the author):*

(i) Exhibitions of national (Australian) art:

***Lie of the Land*** (Primavera 2005)*
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney: 7 September – 13 November, 2005
(And subsequent tour to regional galleries, coordinated by MCA)
Artists: Monika Behrens, Madeleine Kelly, Fiona Lowry, Danie Mellor, Tom Mùller, Yukultji Napangati, Michelle Ussher, Pedro Wonaemirri, Jemima Wyman.
Curator: Felicity Fenner.

***Handle with Care*** (2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art)*
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide: 1 March – 4 May, 2008
Artists: Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan, Dadang Christanto, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, James Darling and Lesley Forwood, Dennis Del Favero, Janet Laurence, Anthony Mannix, Tom Mùller, Dorothy Napangardi, James Newitt, Bronwyn Oliver, Gregory Pryor, Kate Rhode, Sandra Selig, Kylie Stillman, Warwick Thornton, Warlimpirrnga Tjapaltjarri, Hossein Valamanesh, Suzann Victor, Guan Wei, Catherine Woo, Ken Yonetani.
Curator: Felicity Fenner.

***Once Removed*** (Australia: 53rd International Art Exhibition)*
Venice Biennale: 5 June – 22 November, 2009
Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney: 29 May – 1 August, 2010
Artists: Vernon Ah Kee, Ken Yonetani, Claire Healy and Sean Cordiero.
Curator: Felicity Fenner.

***Making Change****
National Art Museum of China, Beijing: 12 November – 13 December, 2012
UNSW Galleries, Sydney: 23 August – 5 October, 2013
Artists: Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Albert, Brook Andrew, Richard Bell, Gordon Bennett, Mervyn Bishop, Daniel Boyd, Bindi Cole, Brenda L. Croft, Nici Cumpston, Destiny Deacon, Fiona Foley, Genevieve Grieves, Gordon Hookey, Dianne Jones, Gary Lee, Ricky Maynard, Tracey Moffatt, r e a, Michael Riley, Christian Thompson, Warwick Thornton, Judy Watson and Jason Wing.
Curators: Brenda L. Croft, Felicity Fenner and Kon Gouriotis.

(ii) Exhibitions of international art:

***Prepossession***
Ivan Dougherty Gallery, UNSW, Sydney: 4 March – 9 April, 2005
Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast: 17 September – 15 October, 2005
Artists: Destiny Deacon, Willie Doherty, Frances Hegarty, William Kentridge, Tracey Moffatt, Jo Ractliffe, Darren Siwes.
Curators: Jill Bennett, Felicity Fenner and Liam Kelly.

***Home Ground***
Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
21 April – 3 June, 2006
Artists: Jenny Bell, Juan Manuel Echavarria, Yukultji Napangati, Ahlam Shibli.
Curator: Felicity Fenner.

***Running the City*** (International Symposium of Electronic Arts)*
UNSW Art & Design, Sydney: 7 June – 20 July, 2013
Artists (offsite participatory projects): MAP Office (*Flash Run* and *Runscape*)
Artists (installations): Marnix de Nijs, Richard Goodwin, Volker Kuchelmeister, MAP Office, Brad Miller and Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba.
Curator: Felicity Fenner.

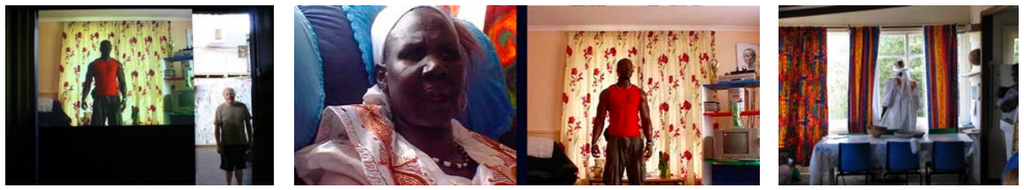
* Curatorial strategies illustrated in Appendices II–IV.

# Appendix II

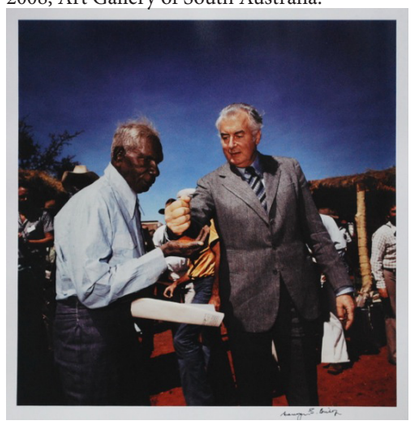
Images showing how the inclusion of documentary and real life material in national exhibitions can convey an understanding of place through the prism of home.


James Darling and Lesley Forwood, from the series *Protest at Didicoolum Drain Extension construction site, South Australia.* Photographs: Mick Bradley and James Darling. Images courtesy the artists. ***Handle with care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art***, 2008, Art Gallery of South Australia.

Warwick Thornton, stills from *Nana*, 2007. Single-channel film, 5 minutes. Images courtesy and copyright Australian Film Commission, Special Broadcasting Corporation, NSW Film and Television Office and Scarlett Pictures Pty Ltd. ***Handle with care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art***, 2008, Art Gallery of South Australia.

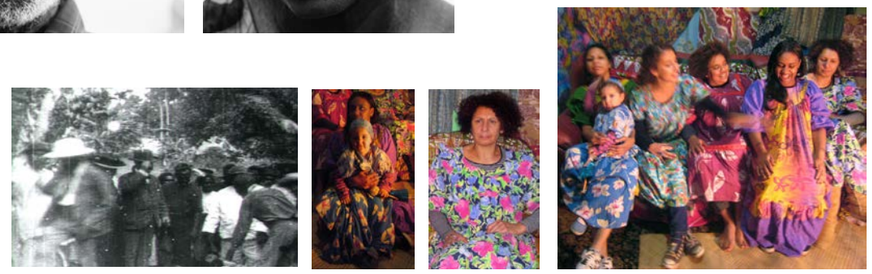


James Newitt, stills from *altered state*, 2006. 2-channel DVD video installation, 14 minutes. Images courtesy the artist. ***Handle with care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art***, 2008, Art Gallery of South Australia.



Mervyn Bishop, *Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours soil into the hands of traditional landowner Vincent Lingiari, Northern Territory*, 1975. Type R3 photograph, 135 x 135 cm. Image courtesy the artist. ***Making Change***, 2012, National Art Museum of China.

Ricky Maynard, from the series *Returning to Places that Name Us*, 2000. Black and white silver gelatin prints, each 122 x 152 cm. *Wik Elder, Arthur; Wik Elder, Bruce; Wik Elder, Gladys*. Images courtesy Stills Gallery. ***Making Change***, 2012, National Art Museum of China.



Destiny Deacon, from the series *Frieze Frames, Erub 1899*, 2011. *Untitled*. Assemblage, black and white inkjet print, 53 x 71 cm. From the series *Frieze Frames, Melbourne 2011*, 2011. Colour inkjet prints. *Cousins* (70 x 36.8 cm); *Janina* (49.5 x 30 cm); *Melbourne girls in their Marys* (80 x 94.5 cm). Images courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. ***Making Change***, 2012, National Art Museum of China

Brenda Croft, from the series *Man About Town,* 2003. Each printed on Giclee print/rag paper, 80 x 119 cm. *A Hostile Landscape; Don't look now; Landlocked; Man about town; Boy from the Bush; A Place for us*. Images courtesy Stills Gallery. ***Making Change***, 2012, National Art Museum of China.

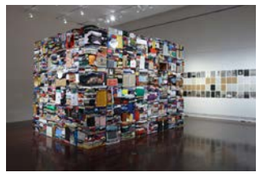
# Appendix III (a)

Images showing how viewers' inhabitation and immersion in a 'home' environment in exhibitions of national art forges engagement with place.


Installation views of Michelle Ussher's inhabitable *The Garden Inside Me*, 2005. Site-specific watercolour and pencil drawings applied directly onto the wall, pot plants and camping equipment. Dimensions variable. Images courtesy MCA. ***The Lie of the Land: Primavera 2005***, 2005, MCA.



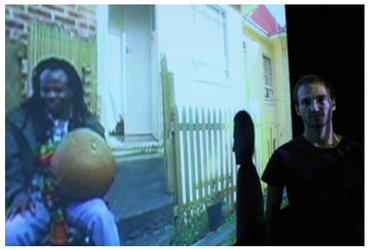

Construction and installation view of Jemima Wyman's *Scapeology (Panorama)*, 2005. 3-sided environment created with enamel on canvas panels mounted onto timber scaffolding. 200 x 1920 cm. Photographs: Felicity Fenner and courtesy MCA. ***The Lie of the Land: Primavera 2005***, 2005, MCA.

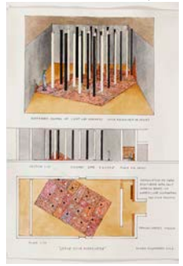
Unpacking and installation view of Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan's *Address*, 2008, from the project *Another Country*, 2007–08. Household items, clothes and personal effects, infused with Sampuguita scent. 300 x 400 x 300 cm. Photographs: Felicity Fenner and Saul Steed. ***Handle with care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art***, 2008, Art Gallery of South Australia.



Construction and installation view of James Darling and Lesley Forwood's *Troubled Water: Didicoolum Drain Extension*, 2008. Created from 10.5 tonnes of mallee roots collected from the artists' land in SA. 240 x 890 x 180 cm. Photographs: Felicity Fenner and Saul Steed. ***Handle with care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art***, 2008, Art Gallery of South Australia.

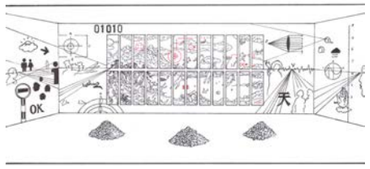


Installation view with artist in foreground of James Newitt's immersive video environment *altered state*, 2006. Photograph: Saul Steed. ***Handle with care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art***, 2008, Art Gallery of South Australia.

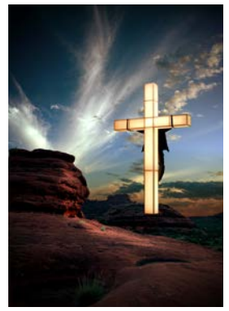



Artist's installation diagram and installation view of Hossein Valamanesh's *Leave your shoes here*, 2008. Voile, felt, steel, lights and Persian carpets sourced from the homes of friends in Adelaide. 750 x 1040 x 400 cm. Photographs: Hossein Valamanesh and Saul Steed. ***Handle with care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art***, 2008, Art Gallery of South Australia.






Artist's installation diagram, production, portrait and installation view of Guan Wei's *Transcending Limits*, 2007–08. Acrylic on 24 canvas panels with site-specific wall painting and mixed media installation. Overall size variable. Photographs: Guan Wei, Felicity Fenner and Saul Steed. ***Handle with care: 2008 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art***, 2008, Art Gallery of South Australia.

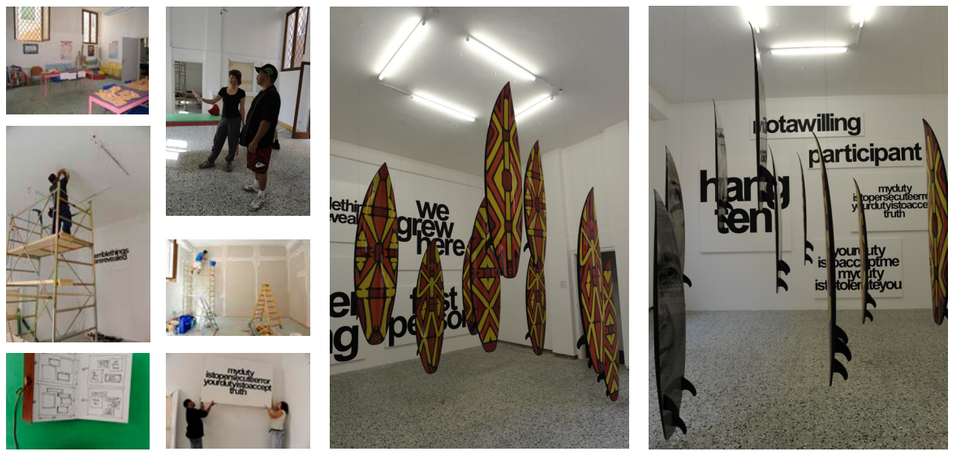


Still from Warwick Thornton's immersive 3D installation, *Stranded*, 2011. 3D single-channel video. 11:06 minutes. Image courtesy Stills Gallery. ***Making Change***, 2012, National Art Museum of China.

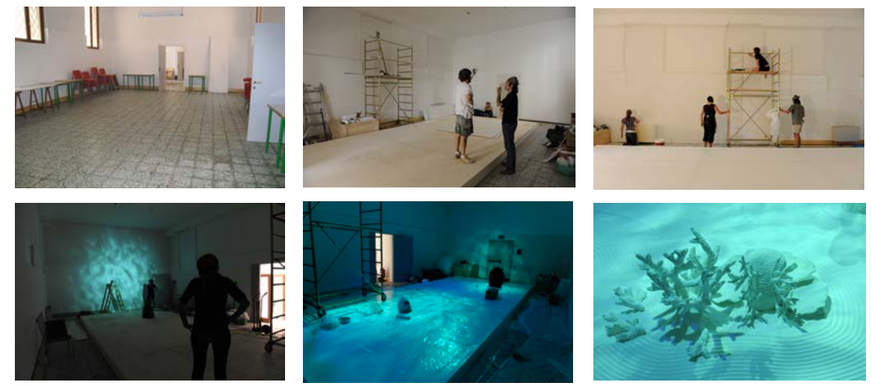
# Appendix III (b)

Images showing how viewers' inhabitation and immersion in a 'home' environment in exhibitions of national art forges engagement with place.

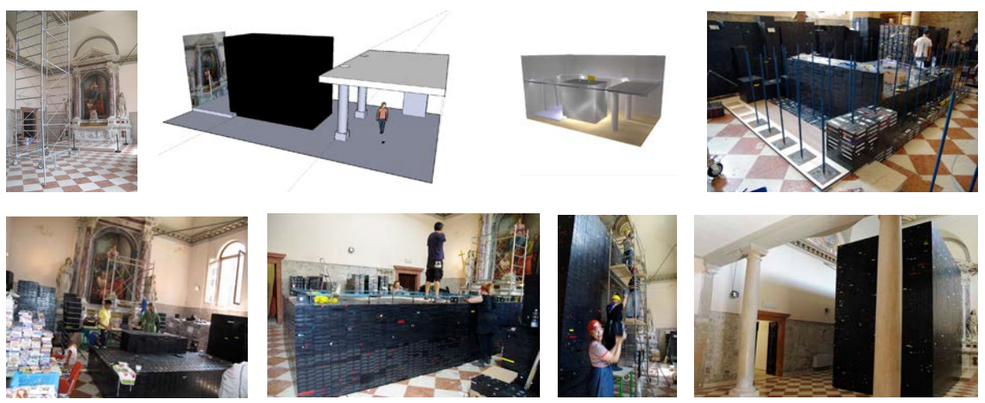
Transformation of site and installation view of Vernon Ah Kee's curved, immersive film screen, *Cant Chant (Wegrewhere)*, 2007–09. 3-channel video, 10 minutes. Photographs: Felicity Fenner and Ella Condon. ***Once Removed***, 2009 Venice Biennale.




Transformation of site and installation view of Vernon Ah Kee's immersive installation. *Cant Chant (Wegrewhere)*, 2007–09. Video, painted surfboards and vinyl lettering on canvas. Dimensions variable. Photographs: Felicity Fenner and Ella Condon. ***Once Removed***, 2009 Venice Biennale.



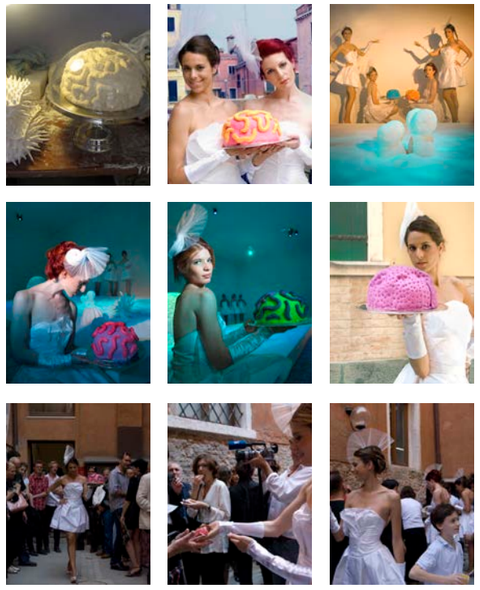
Construction, lighting tests and detail of Ken Yonetani's immersive 'underwater' environment. *Sweet Barrier Reef*, 2009. Sugar. 160 x 1200 x 524 cm. Photographs: Felicity Fenner and Ella Condon. ***Once Removed***, 2009 Venice Biennale.



Santa Maria Ausiliatrice prior to installation, artists' plan, construction progress over six weeks and installation view of Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro's site-specific installation *Life Span*, 2009. 625 x 320 x 524 cm. 175, 218 VHS video tape cassettes. Photographs: Felicity Fenner and Ella Condon. ***Once Removed***, 2009, Venice Biennale.

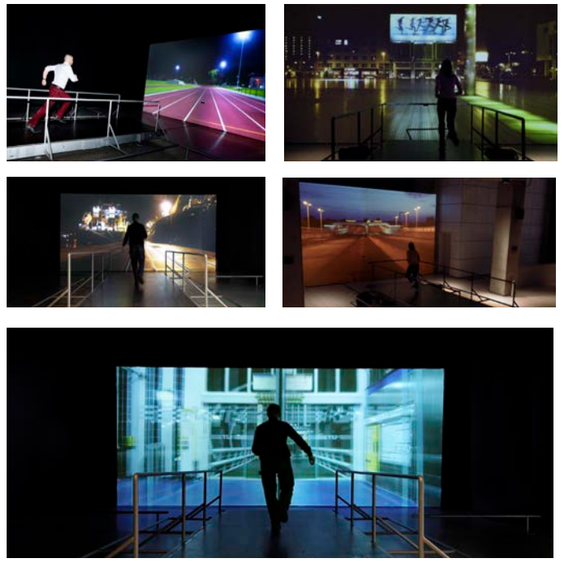
# Appendix IV

Images showing how participation by the viewer/ participant enhances engagement with place when the theme of home is invoked.



Ken Yonetani's cake prototype, models with 'coral' cakes and 'afternoon tea' performance at the opening of *Once Removed*. Photographs: Julia Yonetani and Ella Condon. ***Once Removed***, 2009 Venice Biennale.

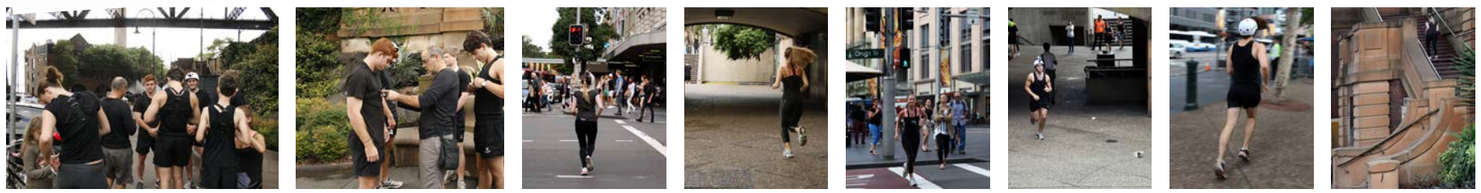
Installation view of photographic sequence showing construction and redistribution into building of Jason Wing's *The Great Wall*, 2012. Digital prints, dimensions variable. Images courtesy Arc One Gallery and Edwina Corlette Gallery. ***Making Change***, 2012, National Art Museum of China.



Installation views of participants running on the treadmill in Marnix de Nijs's immersive and interactive film, *RunMotherfuckerRun*, 2013. Oversize treadmill, and CGI interactive video. Dimensions variable. Photos courtesy the artist. ***Running the City***, UNSW, 2013.

MAP Office, *Flash Run*, Sydney, 10 June 2013. Participatory performance. 4:33 minutes. Photographs: MAP Office. ***Running the City***, UNSW, 2013.


MAP Office's diagram of route parameters for *Runscape–Sydney*.



*Runscape–Sydney* participants being equipped with Go-Pro cameras; participants running in central Sydney, 16–17 February, 2013; installation view of *Runscape–Sydney*, with 12 screens showing edited recordings from the 12 Go-Pro cameras. ***Running the City***, UNSW, 2013.

# Appendix V

Transcript of roundtable discussion between curator and artists. Published as: Fenner, F. (2008). In Conversation: Felicity Fenner speaks with eight artists from “Handle with Care”. *Art & Australia*, 45(3), 344–349.

# In Conversation: Felicity Fenner speaks with eight artists from 'Handle with Care'

**Alfredo + Isabel Aquilizan, Be-longing: In-transit, 2006,** personal effects, Sambaguita scent, dimensions variable, courtesy the artist and Jan Manton Art, Brisbane.

**The 10th Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art** explores artists' responses to aspects of contemporary life that have the potential to generate disquiet, to divide communities and incite debate. During the research process, curator Felicity Fenner held a discussion with some of the artists around shared themes in their work. Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan, James Darling and Lesley Forwood, Dennis Del Favero, Janet Laurence, James Newitt and Kate Rohde joined the conversation.

**Felicity Fenner (FF):** My aim in curating the exhibition was to offer a range of fresh voices and for this reason I based the selection on artists whose practice both refers directly to current issues and who have never before been included in the biennial.

A large proportion of the work is focused quite specifically on the Australian viewpoint, because for me the role of an exhibition restricted to being national as opposed to international in content is to reveal concerns about and attitudes to the place in which the artists live and work. The desire to describe something of the country's mood of course runs counter to our postwar quest to define aspects of national identity through art. In contrast, what has occurred in Australian art over the last generation is an unravelling of nationality: as local issues such as the environment and immigration become more urgent, artists have widened their focus to address these in a global context.

Your work, Janet, for example, encapsulates this approach: the inverted tree in need of intensive care eloquently summarises the vulnerable state not only of our Australian natural environment but that of the world's fragile position, both ecologically and politically.

**Janet Laurence (JL):** I think that art through breadth of language and its aesthetic has the potential to facilitate broad public engagement, empathy and knowledge of the environments in which we live, especially, in terms of my wor in regard to ecological issues. I hope that with works such as the one I've made for the biennial it's possible for art to have a rather remedial role by creating an awareness of transformation and regeneration.

**FF:** How does this new installation relate to your research into forests here and abroad?

**JL:** It belongs to a group of recent works that explore and reveal the fragility of specific ecological sites, in which endangered and destroyed landscapes become the subject and site for suggested revival and life support strategies.

**FF:** A majority of the work in the exhibition centres around ideas of fragility and much of it, including yours Janet, encompasses the notion of fragility not only in concept but also in its material form. Kate, your fabricated creatures are also delicate in form and, like Janet's, seem to allude to a threat of

**Kate Rohde, In my nature, 2007,** mixed media, dimensions variable, installation view, Kaliman Gallery, 2007, courtesy the artist and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney.

ecological disaster. Yet while Janet's work is often designed for the public domain, yours, by being presented in traditional glass cases, is purposely relegated to the status of museum spectacle.

**Kate Rohde (KR):** Yes, my work draws inspiration from the natural world, exploring the amazing diversity and beauty of flora, fauna and mineral specimens. I consider the palatial and museum-like environment my works are presented in as a reflection of the way many of us relate to the natural world these days. It's no longer direct, but mediated through armchair experiences such as television programs and nature journals.

**FF:** I am interested to know whether it is the vulnerable creatures you invent, or your critique of society's often dispassionate attitude towards them, that is your primary focus in these works.

**KR:** I'd define the central theme as the ever-increasing disconnection by humans from the natural world, and our obsession with dominating nature. I feel the environmental problems affecting the earth today are symptomatic of humanity's lack of connection and respect for nature.

**FF:** The cross-section of an excavated groundwater drain that James and Lesley are building into the museum wall is one of the most overtly political works in the show. I have to admit that I was surprised by the idea when James first proposed it, though really it's a material rather than thematic departure from your well-known installations created with mallee roots.

**James Darling and Lesley Forwood (JD/LF):** The use of mallee roots has a deliberately political intention. You can't make sculpture with mallee roots without referencing factors inherent in the material: the growing in the ground, the genealogy, their role in arid land, associations of heat and fire and the agricultural history of white settlement, especially land clearing. The land type supports the many hybrids of the mallee gum and extends through southern New South Wales, northern Victoria, across South Australia and through southern Western Australia. The scale and severity of its degradation reflects the huge consequences of mistaken assumptions over land use that will take a change in mindset and heroic efforts by whole communities to rectify.

What we're building for the biennial will also be unashamedly political. To make a sculpture based on a contentious regional issue, a huge drainage project that has national and international water management and sustainability factors at its core, will highlight on-ground sustainable management issues for urban audiences.

**FF:** So far the conversation has centred around works in the exhibition that directly address environmental concerns. Others include Ken Yonetani's

**Janet Laurence, Landscape and residue, carbon planting 2006,** acrylic, glass, Duraclear, grass, oil, ash, 100 x 300 cm, courtesy the artist.

*Sweet Barrier Reef*, 2005, made from sugar in the style of a Zen garden, Tom Muller's fragile glass tubes showing the amount of water left in the world's rivers, and Catherine Woo's alchemical paintings that seem to herald environmental apocalypse. Certainly the environment is a key theme in 'Handle with care', but it is just one of the many anxieties besetting contemporary life that are explored in the exhibition. Other artists, such as Guan Wei, Dadang Christanto and Hossein Valamanesh, explore the fraught experience of living between cultures and how their country of birth impacts on their life and work in Australia. And Aboriginal art in the exhibition contains another specific repertoire of anxieties over possession and dispossession, cultural strength and displacement.

The phrase 'handle with care' also invokes the phrase commonly seen on packing boxes and thus associated with moving house, and all the emotional upheaval that can entail. Isabel and Alfredo, you have lived in Australia for only one year and your collaborative practice is based on your very personal experience of shifting between two very different cultures.

**Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan (AA/IA):** We are creating a 'house' in the gallery, utilising our packed and folded belongings to create 'walls'. Under the project 'Another Country', this new work, *Address*, 2008, is concerned with the idea of home and family, dislocation and settlement, dwelling and habitation. It is also dealing with memory, anxieties of coping and negotiating the ideas of making do. It is about confronting the uncertainty of the place of domicile.

**James Newitt (JN):** The film I'm presenting in the biennial also investigates relationships between inner, psychological space and external physical and social space in terms of the migrant experience. I use social engagement as a mode of production to create videos that document social interaction and micro-performances with different individuals and communities. *Altered state*, 2006, expands on these concerns by presenting a series of interrelated performances by three recent immigrants to Hobart that indirectly speak of contemporary displacement.

**FF:** Unlike Alfredo and Isabel, your role as an artist is almost voyeuristic – you are on the outside looking in, rather than sharing autobiographical experience.

**JN:** Yes, and through its installation *Altered state* seeks also to implicate the viewer within a shared space of action and reaction, memory and present experience. It visualises conditions of isolation, transition and the fragility of memory. The notion of existing in an 'altered state' is depicted through the relationships between the appearance of the three performers, the content of their performance and the suburban places they inhabit.


**James Darling + Lesley Forwood, Protest at Didicoolum drain extension construction site, South Australia, 2007.**
Photograph James Darling.

**AA/IA:** The work we are creating for the biennial considers a notion of home based on belongings. It is about diaspora, a quasi-documentation of our family's plight as new migrants. It considers, as Patrick Flores has expressed: 'how certain things belong and how they are difficult, sometimes impossible, to give away; how lost things are remembered, constantly referred to in the present and longed for in new forms, located between the residual and the emergent; how feelings of melancholy and nostalgia are not futile, passive forms of remembrance, but rather critical modes of renewal and remaking "what could have been", in other words, of figuring the future; how the idea of value converses with the idea of sentimentality – that this value is produced and also exchanged as personal history, ideology, commodity and everyday life.'

**FF:** The anxieties inherent in everyday life permeate the exhibition. My six-year-old son recently asked me, in the same matter-of-fact tone that he asks what might be for dinner, 'When is the world going to end?' His concern was not 'will' the world end, but 'when'. It made me wonder whether we've reached a point where anxiety and its attendant feelings of vulnerability have become intrinsic, almost innate to the modern human condition, rather than an external pressure imposed on those of us most politically attuned.

**Dennis Del Favero (DDF):** While the security of entire populations has been a central anxiety of our time, the vulnerability of individuals, and particularly those working close to the sources of power, has become ever more evident. Ironically, a number of high profile individuals have concerned themselves with the social good despite the enormous pressure exerted otherwise, only to find themselves dying in the most suspicious of circumstances.

**FF:** Your video work in the biennial is a disquieting, albeit dramatised, account of factual events.

**DDF:** The pathology of anxiety, whether lived in a state of amnesia or trauma, is key to my work. The biennial piece rehearses the impossible dilemmas faced by two of these high profile protagonists in the moments leading up to their death.

**FF:** I want to ask you all how you see the role of art that is, like most of the work in this exhibition, issue-based and political at some level. While I've always doubted the capacity of art which sets out to be didactic to engage audiences beyond the most superficial level of opinionated reportage, I wonder whether exhibitions that explore, in non-didactic modes, pressing and controversial concerns of the day can have a voice above an all-pervasive

**James Newitt, Altered state, 2006,** video stills, DVD video installation, 14 mins duration, courtesy the artist.

media operating in an Australian community that can be disconcertingly passive in its political engagement.

**AA/IA:** An exhibition such as this one will always trigger discussions on issues, narratives, histories, ideologies and life. These exhibitions provide a potent venue to reflect, influence and affect. Looking into the history of international exhibitions – in our case coming from the Philippines – this dates back to the nineteenth century, when ethnographic materials and even Indigenous people were taken to Europe and North America to be exhibited. This not only showcases the particular culture, but the undertaking of the event becomes an issue in itself.

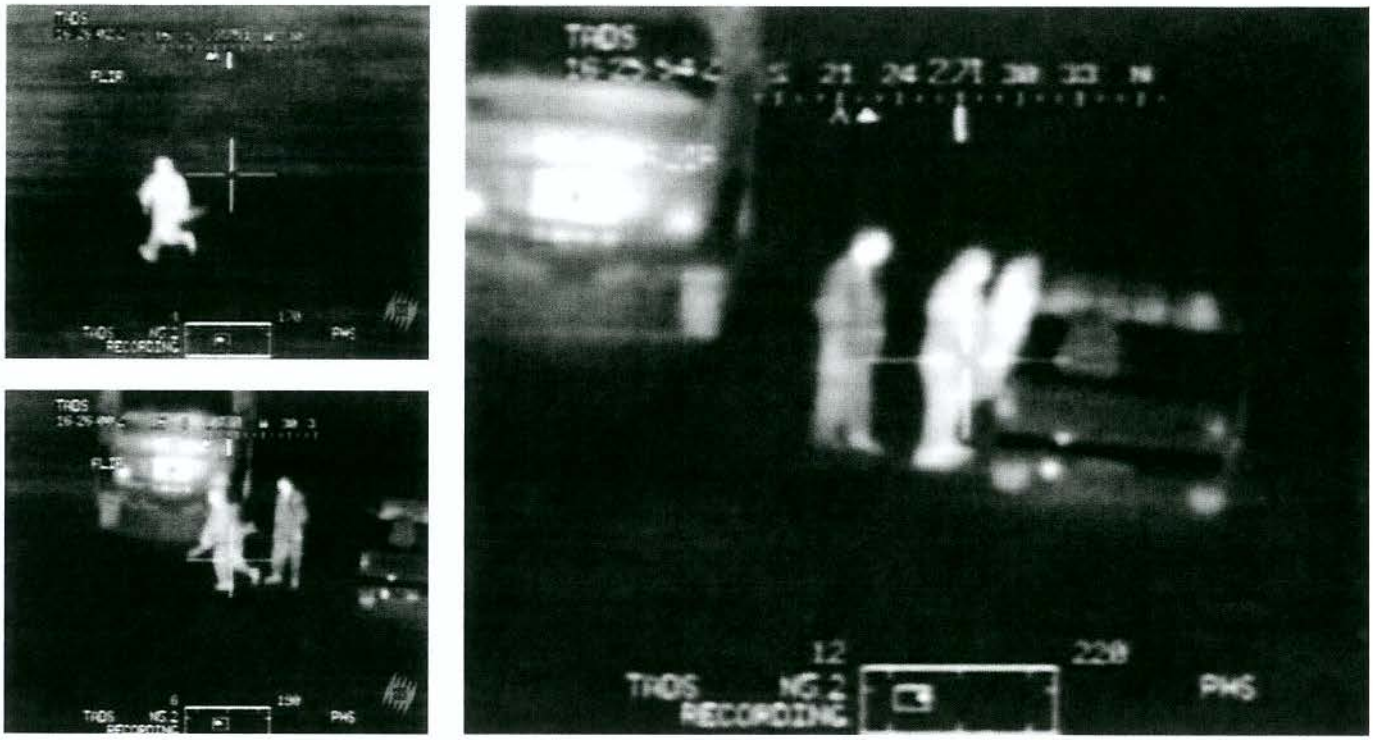
**JN:** Indeed, themed biennale exhibitions have come under criticism for pushing the agendas of curators or representing politicised themes rather than simply presenting the 'best' contemporary art. This criticism is confusing to me, as I believe exhibitions have a role in addressing social and cultural issues as well as creating a 'spectacle' of contemporary art.

**AA/IA:** In contemporary art shows such as biennales there is always a risk of exploitation in trying to fulfil a curatorial brief. But going back to the question, it all revolves around how the artists tackle the theme, the selection of the artists and how their works will be read, not only as individual works but collectively. In the end the exhibition becomes not only a narrative of contemporary art, but also of contemporary life and issues.

**JL:** No doubt these exhibitions offer a wonderful opportunity for expressing concerns, creating a dialogue between works both as art and as political voice. It would be great if the museum could remain memorable as 'hothouse'. I think the difficulty is the shift that occurs between our experience of the work within the museum, and the memory of it after, outside in the world.

**KR:** Though I doubt it would be possible for someone to attend a large show like this and not see at least one work that really gets them thinking lor after they've left the museum. For me personally, art provides a starting poin to all kinds of discussions that can lead to reconsidering opinions and beliefs on all manner of issues, or reinforcing how I already feel. I think a surprising number of people really enjoy viewing art and feeling challenged in one way another to think harder about the context and state of society that leads to a work's creation.

**DDF:** What distinguishes biennale-style contemporary exhibitions is their capacity to respond fairly immediately to artistic and social currents along wi their attendant complexities. Documenta (a quinquennial event) in 2002, for




**Dennis Del Favero, Eclipse (280208), 2008,** video stills, two-channel DVD video installation, 8 mins duration, courtesy Galeries Andreas Binder, Munich, Marion Scharmann, Cologne and Mori Gallery, Sydney.

example, not only highlighted coherent contemporary concerns in the public domain but also rapidly reset the agenda for the 2003 Venice Biennale and subsequent curated exhibitions internationally. This immediacy of art and its sensitivity to the inflections that inform our imaginary worlds, ranging from underlying anxieties and fantasies, through to the minutiae of intimate moments, provide an indelible stage on which we can rehearse and rescript the way we struggle to define our lives, marking out the pathways beyond what has already been imagined.

**FF:** I agree that the ability to respond to current circumstances of a particular time and place is a crucial function of biennial exhibitions these days, and issues of place are a particular interest of mine. Hou Hanru's 2007 Istanbul Biennale, for example, directly confronted the local politics surrounding the globalisation of that city and made a forceful contribution to debates around urban planning. In a national show such as this Adelaide Biennial there are local issues that will hopefully be stirred by works in the exhibition, such as Ken Yonetani's installation about coral bleaching on the Barrier Reef and Warwick Thornton's film *Nana*, 2006, highlighting the delicate balancing act required of traditional Aboriginal communities threatened by the imposition of white culture. The most locally specific issue confronted in the exhibition, in reference to South Australia, is the work by James Darling and Lesley Forwood.

**JD/LF:** We are constructing a life-size cross-section of the Didicoolum drain extension and hope that the installation will act as a catalyst for a broader and more informed critique of the $78 million scheme known as the Upper South East Dryland Salinity and Flood Management Plan. Its production for the biennial carries with it social and political consequences. We wouldn't be doing it unless we believed that art has the capacity to make people think differently.

**JN:** In regard to the theme 'handle with care', it seems unavoidable that any major exhibition of contemporary art could ignore current issues of socia vulnerability and cultural interpretation. We live in a state of fragility, tension and displacement. If biennial exhibitions propose to represent the most current issues in contemporary art, how can this not reflect issues that affect broader society?

**The 10th Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 'Handle with Care',** Art Gallery of South Australia Adelaide, 1 March – 4 May 2008

# BROADSHEET

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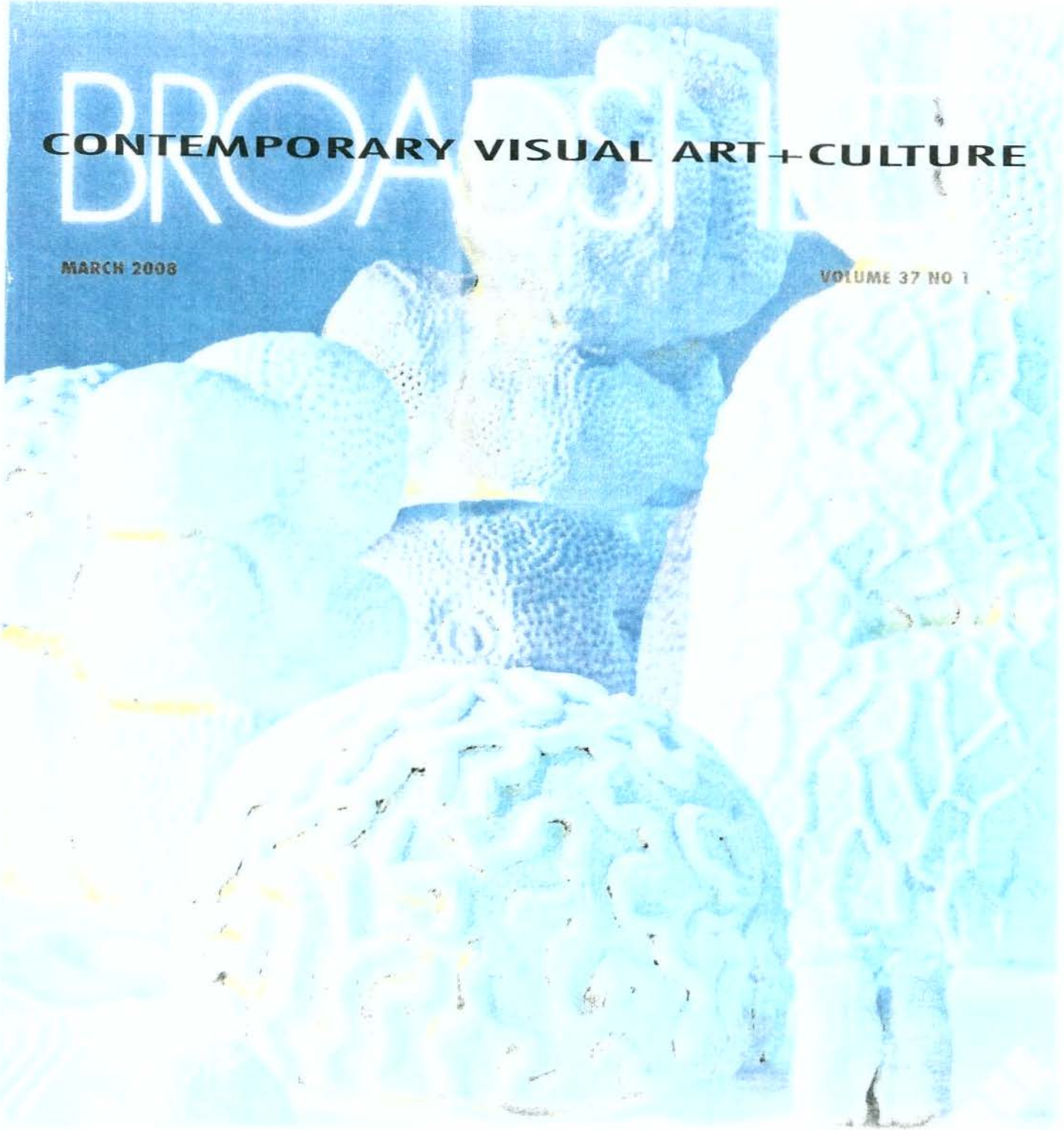


# HANDLE WITH CARE INTERVIEW WITH FELICITY FENNER

REUBEN KEEHAN

In 2008 the Asia-Pacific region will once again play host to its own art 'Grand Tour' of sorts, with international biennales, triennales and other major exhibitions scheduled to overlap in Sydney, Gwangju, Busan, Seoul, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Yokohama and Singapore. Significantly, the 2008 *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*—ostensibly a national survey exhibition and Australia's oldest—includes among its twenty-two artists and collaborations a high proportion of foreign-born participants, reflecting curator Felicity Fenner's avowed 'sub-theme' of transit across borders and between cultures, and encompassing issues, whose national relevance extends to the Asia-Pacific and beyond. Titled *Handle With Care* and seeking to describe "the fragile nature of our relationships with the cultural and natural environments in which we live", the tenth edition of the *ABAA* is further notable for Fenner's decision to restrict her selection to artists never previously included in the *Biennial*. Following the successful expansion of the *Biennial* for Linda Michael's *21st Century Modern* in 2006, the Art Gallery of South Australia will again devote its entire temporary exhibition space to the project.

REUBEN KEEHAN: *Much has been made—even if we're yet to see its promise fully realised—of the recent proliferation of biennales and other major international exhibition models globally, but particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. In the same period, we've seen an increase in national survey exhibitions, from the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art's* New *projects through to the Museum of Contemporary Art's* Focus on Contemporary Australian Art *series and the National Gallery of Victoria/Australian Centre for the Moving Image's still-to-be repeated 2004 exhibition.*[1] *Given that Linda Michael's* 21st Century Modern *finally raised the profile of the* Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art *to one of at least national significance in terms of scale and scope, how would you situate* Handle With Care, *and the* Adelaide Biennial *in general, within this broader discursive framework?*

FELICITY FENNER: Adelaide is the oldest, most established of the national events and the only one titled 'Biennial of Australian Art'. However, unlike the others it is not staged as a stand-alone exhibition; its high national profile is contingent on its close links to the *Adelaide Festival of Arts* (with over half the visitors coming through the two-month exhibition, during the two-week festival period.)

While there is indeed a proliferation of international biennial and triennial events in the region—including some major ones such as Singapore, Gwangju, Fukuoka, Shanghai and of course the *Asia-Pacific Triennial* in Brisbane—with the exception of the *APT*, the representation of Australian art is very minor in all of these; often nil or as little as one in a hundred or so artists. For this reason, there is still a role for a national survey exhibition of contemporary Australian art, even if it is staged in a local rather than international context (in terms both of content and for the most part, audience). But its primary rationale is not simply to show current art from Australia because the international events are failing to do so. Hopefully it can function as a springboard to draw Australian art more deeply into an international art discourse. In this tenth edition of the *Adelaide Biennial* I have attempted to broaden the geographical context of the event, not only by selecting artists whose work addresses themes of global significance, but by including a number of immigrant artists, whose work relates to their countries of origin (for example, Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan, Hossein Valamanesh, Guan Wei and Ken Yonetani), and commissioning international curators and writers to discuss various artists' work in the catalogue, such as Hou Hanru (USA), Binghui Huangfu (China) and Sabine Sielke (Germany). While the content necessarily remains national, the context will hopefully be a little more international in scope than in previous editions. Like the *Whitney Biennial* in New York and the *Tate Triennial* in London, the Adelaide event provides an opportunity to foreground contemporary Australian art, and I believe we should be doing so from a global rather than local, potentially parochial standpoint.

REUBEN KEEHAN: *To pick up on the first point you raise, have the* Biennial's *links with the* Adelaide Festival, *particularly in terms of audience, affected your thinking around the development of* Handle With Care? *Has there been a degree of consultation or collaboration with the Festival, or have you worked relatively autonomously?*

FELICITY FENNER: Actually, I have not had a close working relationship with the Festival, but have worked almost exclusively with Art Gallery of South Australia staff. The Festival's commitment to the project and financial support are crucial to the *Biennial*'s realisation, but the Festival is also supportive of the event's curatorial independence. A couple of the works in the show reflect the Festival's 2008 visual arts focus upon 'light' (specifically those by Hossein Valamanesh and Suzann Victor), but this is happy coincidence. In terms of audience, I have to admit that I never considered self-consciously catering to my perception of whom the Festival audience might comprise. However, I did couch the exhibition's themes in relatively broad terms, so I'm hoping that it will engage a wide and diverse audience.

REUBEN KEEHAN: *In terms of breadth and diversity, I want to turn to the relationship between* Handle With Care *as an artistic project and a more general aesthetic, its location within the distribution of the sensible. There is a certain transnationality to your selection of artists and to the positioning of the* Biennal *itself that differs from the very parochial nationalism that has characterised the past decade of Australian culture. Disregarding for the moment, the myriad convergences between the major political parties at the level of policy, there has been a definite shift in the symbolic order since the change of government in Australia—considering say, the presence of Kevin Rudd's Asian-Australian son-in-law during his acceptance speech versus the rigorously Anglo-Celtic imagery of the Howard Government.* Handle With Care *was initially developed under Howard. Has the change in government altered the meaning of the project for you?*

FELICITY FENNER: The presence of Asia in Australian culture is largely a legacy of the last Labor (Keating) government and was boosted in the arts by the establishment in the early 1990s of Asialink with its network of studios around Asia, as well as the instigation of the *Asia-Pacific Triennial*. In this context, given the large number of Australian artists who have lived and worked throughout Asia over the last fifteen years and the (albeit fewer) number of Asian artists who have come to work and sometimes live in Australia, I don't think your assessment of Australian culture over the last decade as parochial and nationalist is justified in terms of the visual arts (a view further complicated by the enormous international interest in Australian indigenous art). The impact of Asia upon Australian art in recent years has actually been quite profound—I don't see it as a new thing. Other curators, especially those working with institutions such as 4A Gallery in Sydney, have put together exhibitions primarily by Asian-Australian artists in recent years, despite the previous federal government's diminished interest in the region. Binghui Huangfu, who migrated to Australia along with artists such as Guan Wei after the Tiananmen Square 'incident', has curated a series of high-profile touring exhibitions that explore Asian art locally (in Australia) and across the diaspora.

While the *Biennial* artists were locked in well before November 2007, perhaps I was optimistically counting on a shift in the political climate when making my selections. A third of the artists were born overseas, which is coincidentally the same averaged proportion of people born overseas living in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia's two largest art centres. So there's nothing extraordinary about that statistic. The *Handle with Care* theme really came out of the Howard Government's stubbornness over delicate issues—Aboriginal standards of living and land rights, immigration and increasing racial friction, the environment and climate change being foremost among them. While it's heartening to see the Kyoto Protocols ratified and the Japanese whalers being challenged by the new government, most of the issues that have plagued this country over the last decade or so are of ongoing concern. So the change in government, while infusing the project with a sense of optimism, hasn't altered its premise.

REUBEN KEEHAN: *The notion of fragility suggested by the theme* Handle with Care *certainly contrasts with the robustness often associated, somewhat mythically, with the concept of 'Australia'—especially that sanctioned by the Howard government—whether this refers to the land, the economy or even the physical body. The themes of large-scale exhibitions are necessarily wide-ranging and often act more as conceptual frameworks or as methodological points of departure. But I wonder if you could elaborate on the concepts, particularly this sense of fragility, that have informed your selection of artists in* Handle With Care, *and indeed how those concepts might have further developed through the course of that selection.*

FELICITY FENNER: The 'robust' perception of Australia's land and economy is an interesting one. When I curated *Primavera 2005* for the Museum of Contemporary Art, I re-read Paul Carter's book *Lie of the Land*, because I was interested in the discrepancies between how indigenous Australians, international observers and Anglo-Australians (agriculturalists in particular) see this country. While Aboriginal people have the deepest understanding of its strength and fragility, Australia is promoted abroad as a rugged and sun-filled adventure playground, while farmers face problems with salinity and disastrous drought conditions—their livelihoods are inextricably bound to environmental destruction, a changing climate and the country's need for handling with care. As I already mentioned, issues around immigration and the experience of shifting between cultures are also explored in the exhibition, as are the more internal consequences of living on the edge of mainstream society, plagued by socio-political and psychological anxieties. Specifically, there is work in the exhibition about very personal experiences of political persecution, cultural dislocation and mental illness. The title *Handle With Care* also reflects the material form of much of the work in the *Biennial*—many works are ephemeral and/or made from natural and organic products, such as (threatened) trees and water, spider webs and foodstuffs. The evocative, cultural resonance of other works—such as Hossein Valamanesh's sanctuary of Persian rugs and delicate lights, and Alfredo and Isabel Aquilizan's 'house' constructed from their family's clothing and personal belongings—are fragile in sensibility as much as materiality. But to answer your question; yes, the link between the concept and manifestation of fragility was key to the exhibition's development.

REUBEN KEEHAN: *The question of curatorial responsibility and the curator's relationship with artists and audiences seems especially pertinent to these kinds of large-scale exhibitions. I was interested to learn recently that the word 'survey', overview, shares a root with 'supervision', overseeing, and indeed there are connotations of authority and visuality to the idea of the survey exhibition, the sense of an elevated point of view that is transferred to an audience. As an institutional curator, I find this particular etymology says a lot about some of the tensions central to curatorial practice; even when a unifying theme or framework develops in the course of research, it can sometimes influence an artist's decision making, especially in the production of new work. But then again, creative dialogue between artists and curators is not necessarily a bad thing, and perhaps the actuality of this process needs to be acknowledged more than it has in the past. My question with regard to* Handle with Care *is twofold, really—has the development of your theme—multivalent as it is—affected the development of work that might be unified by it? And what role in the project has been played by more tangible institutional factors, such as securing funding and gallery space, both for you and the artists?*

FELICITY FENNER: The Art Gallery of South Australia specified that work in the exhibition must be made in the last two years (i.e. since the start of the previous *Biennial*) and that the *Biennial* does not commission new work. On this premise, I selected artists on the basis of existing works, rather than asking them to create new work in the light of my exhibition premise. Nevertheless, the first question asked by the majority of artists I approached was: "What's your exhibition's theme?" I provided them with a one-page spiel and many responded with a desire to create new work because they recognised an opportunity to develop an aspect of ongoing artistic concerns in this new narrative context. I have worked with some more closely than others in the creation of new works for the *Biennial*. In my experience, working on this exhibition and others in the past, some artists prefer to work quite independently, presenting a completed work for inclusion, while others proactively seek ideas and feedback from me as the curator, during the entire course of the work's development, which in the case of the *Biennial* has been over a twelve to eighteen-month period. Either way of working suits me, so long as the process is artist-led. While I don't necessarily adhere to the 'curator as creator' curatorial methodology, if artists respond to my ideas enough to seek my opinion and feedback on theirs, then I welcome the opportunity to be involved. But if they go off and make the work without the need or desire for discussion, that's OK too. In the *Biennial* there is a bit of both. As for the influence of institutional factors, this is perhaps where the "tensions central to curatorial practice" that you refer to come into play. Certainly some of the installations in the *Biennial* have been scaled back due to funding restrictions (though not so much due to limited space). Much of my role has been as go-between for the artists and the institution, which often involved walking on eggshells (and added another dimension to my 'handle with care' theme!) In some cases unfortunately, my creative input has been directed less at developing ideas than at editing them back to fit within the budget and available resources. But this is to be expected and is the same for any exhibition, whether it's a solo show in an artist-run gallery or the *Venice Biennale*. No matter what the budget, I always tell artists to aim high and think big, to let ideas run freely, that we'll rein it back in if necessary. Artists will always come up with the best work if encouraged from the onset, rather than 'reading the riot act' before they've had a chance to exploit the artistic potential of their ideas.

REUBEN KEEHAN: *You've noted previously that "it is the biennales on the so-called periphery that are the most curatorially coherent in the way they relate to the local context and the specifics of place".*[2] *Nevertheless, doing so in a way that sidesteps parochialism on the one hand and being patronising on the other must be a difficult, or at least somewhat demanding task for curators. In what ways has the specificity of Adelaide as the site of the* Biennial *come into its development and realisation and has anything been problematic about this?*

FELICITY FENNER: My comments about curatorial coherence in the relationship to place that's found in the geographically peripheral biennales really relate to international shows. The *APT* (which of course is regionally focused anyway), the *Istanbul* and the newly launched *Singapore Biennale*s for example, address the events' location in the very fabric of their concept and content. Many of the larger biennales, such as those in Venice and even Sydney, place less thematic emphasis on the specifics of site. In this year's *Adelaide Biennial*, it's the specificity of Australia more than Adelaide in particular that I have addressed in the exhibition. As you mentioned earlier, it's the only regular biennial of Australian art considered the 'official' Australian biennial, now co-existing alongside the National Gallery of Australia's recently launched *National Indigenous Art Triennial*. I would approach it very differently if it were an international show, but for me the whole point of putting together an exhibition that's national in scope is to reveal something of that nation's current state. Otherwise, why restrict content to local artists? It's not just about keeping the freight bills down; it's about describing a current mood. Having said that however, I would not go so far as to try and articulate a national spirit as such (because there isn't one), but rather to present a diversity of works that in some way (some more than others) are responding to issues and concerns prevalent in Australia today. Problematic? Yes, as you point out, selecting a group of work that's concerned with local issues but not collectively parochial was a challenge. I tried to get around it in two ways: firstly, by selecting work that was not only local but global in its focus—looking at issues of immigration, political oppression and the environment, for example. Secondly, as a way of imbuing this tenth edition of the *Adelaide Biennial* with a fresh outlook and avoiding the traps of repetition that recurrent events can fall into, I decided not to include any (of the two hundred plus) artists previously exhibited in the *Adelaide Biennial* since its inception in 1990.

REUBEN KEEHAN: *The 2006* Biennale of Sydney *curator, Charles Merewether recently commented on what he perceived as the parochialism of Australian audiences and art institutions, which in concert with financial pressures and what he called "petty fiefdoms" within our public museums, created a context where issues raised by his* Biennale *found no purchase, nor even a forum for discussion.*[3] *Do you feel that this is an accurate representation of the current situation, and what possibilities do you see for further discussion of issues that might arise from* Handle With Care*?*

FELICITY FENNER: Presenting contemporary art in Australia is an uphill battle because we have a very small and conservative group of art critics who have the ear of 'middle Australia' through the newspapers, and museums are under constant pressure to get paying visitors through the door—people won't pay to see contemporary art, so it tends to be sidelined in favour of 'blockbuster' exhibitions of populist or historical art by well-known names.

It's depressing to hear that the issues explored in the last *Biennale of Sydney* were not adequately pursued beyond the context of the exhibition, because many, such as those around global itinerancy, were worthy of extended debate. If exhibitions are not critically received as thematically coherent or collectively pertinent, we may as well revert to the old 'best of' model in curating survey exhibitions—a subjective collection of unrelated works that sets up a competitive dimension based around fashion and spectacle. In Australia we have plenty of art prizes that operate in this way, so I believe that it's the role of our international (Sydney) and national (Adelaide) 'biennials' to take on issues of the day. Ultimately, it's the art that best engages with current issues that is also most likely to engage current audiences.
I looked at a huge range of contemporary art practice before narrowing down the exhibition's theme. It very much comes out of the art practice I found happening around Australia, not vice versa. Inevitably, the exhibition will put issues on the table for discussion and I would of course be pleased to see these taken up beyond the visual arts context. I am hoping that the beginnings of this will happen during the exhibition talks and *Artists' Week* forums planned as part of the Festival.

REUBEN KEEHAN: *Very much on the opposite side of the coin to Charles Merewether's comments then, how would you respond to artist Scott Redford's very provocative assertion in a recent* Photofile *that the responsibility for this lack of traction lies with a certain 'soft leftism' of the curators of large-scale exhibitions, through their failure to adequately problematise art as an institution (as a 'hard left' position would), or to account for cultural developments outside of a certain canon of practice, such as online communities?*[4] *In your opinion is there room for this sort of reflexivity in an exhibition like the* Adelaide Biennial*? Your inclusion of work that is explicitly presented as film, rather than passed off as video seems to suggest this to some degree, but do you think such a radical position is possible, or, for that matter, worthwhile?*

FELICITY FENNER: It's true that the lack of traction cannot be blamed entirely on the failure of critics to take up issues in any meaningful way. But we have to be realistic about the context in which art exhibitions, these two biennials and the *APT* in particular, are staged. They are hosted by the institution, funded by the State and Commonwealth and cater primarily to elite sections of the community. To get any degree of 'leftist' thinking into those institutions under the current funding arrangements is the first challenge. With the change in government I am optimistic that a greater diversity of views will be heard—certainly there was an insidious form of censorship operating under the previous federal government, which inhibited political debate in the visual arts.

You ask whether it's worthwhile to attempt a radical position. Worthwhile for whom? One thing I found when researching this exhibition (and *Primavera* in 2005), is that while many artists are very politically engaged (and such engagement was a pretext for selection in *Handle With Care*), they are wary of being typecast or misread. In response to those concerns, I have been very careful not to overstate or manipulate for the sake of my exhibition rationale the political themes running through the show. So, while I believe that curators have a responsibility to draw attention to the mood of the times—the *zeitgeist*—and believe that these biennial events could in the future accommodate more radical viewpoints, right now, relying as they do on the allure of spectacle for funding and audiences, they are not the appropriate context for approaches likely to alienate both.

Notes

[1] *2004: Australian Culture Now*, billed as "a landmark national survey of recent work" included more than one hundred and fifty artists across Melbourne's National Gallery of Victoria and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image. While organisers were careful not to bill *2004* as a regular exhibition, it was explicitly presented as the first such major survey since the cancellation of the biennial *Perspecta* project after 1999. A follow-up exhibition, *2006: Contemporary Commonwealth*, included a drastically reduced, if somewhat pithier and more cohesive selection of artists, of whom only half were Australian, with the remainder drawn from Britain and a number of its former colonies, coinciding, as it did, with the Melbourne Commonwealth Games. An exhibition tentatively titled *2008 Contemporary* is slated to open in the middle of the year

[2] Felicity Fenner, 'My Place or Yours?', *Broadsheet* Vol 35 No 4, December 2006–February 2007: 210

[3] As quoted in Sebastian Smee, 'Nation "Too Parochial" to Engage', *The Australian*, 5 November 2007

[4] Scott Redford, 'Forget the Uber-curators: You are the Content', *Photofile* 82, 2008: 26–29

Reuben Keehan is on the *Adelaide Festival of Arts* Artists Week Advisory Committee and will conduct a Critics Masterclass for emerging writers as part of the Festival. He was also involved in the production of the catalogue accompanying Felicity Fenner's *Primavera 2005* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Page 18: Hossein Valamanesh, *Leave Your Shoes Here*, 2005
Photo courtesy the artist and Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide

# Felicity Fenner

Vernon Ah Kee, ***Neil Willmett***, 2008, charcoal, crayon and acrylic on canvas, 180 x 240cm. Courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

**PRUE GIBSON examines the impact of this savvy curator and the focus, dedication and singular philosophy that drive her.**

*Contemporary curators have the power to elevate artists' careers. Having been selected for major exhibitions, new artists are catapulted into the public sphere, enjoying immediate success and higher profiles. Not so visible, however, are the curators who trawl through galleries and art spaces, looking for new art. Even less clear is how curators justify curatorial choices.*

Curator Felicity Fenner. Courtesy Felicity Fenner.

Felicity Fenner, petite, energetic and with a political fire in her belly, has been dominating the Australian curatorial world for several years. She is a lecturer and curator at The College of Fine Arts (COFA) Ivan Dougherty Gallery (Sydney) and Deputy Director of the Centre of Contemporary Art and Politics based at COFA. She was invited to curate the Museum of Contemporary Art's 2005 *Primavera*, an annual exhibition which showcases young artists, and surprised many with what superficially appeared to be a conservative landscape show but which drew out newly articulated preoccupations with the land and Indigenous points of view. In 2008, she was asked to curate the prestigious Adelaide Biennial *Handle With Care* exhibition, which dealt with the fragility of natural and cultural environments — its 1,000 catalogues sold out in record time.

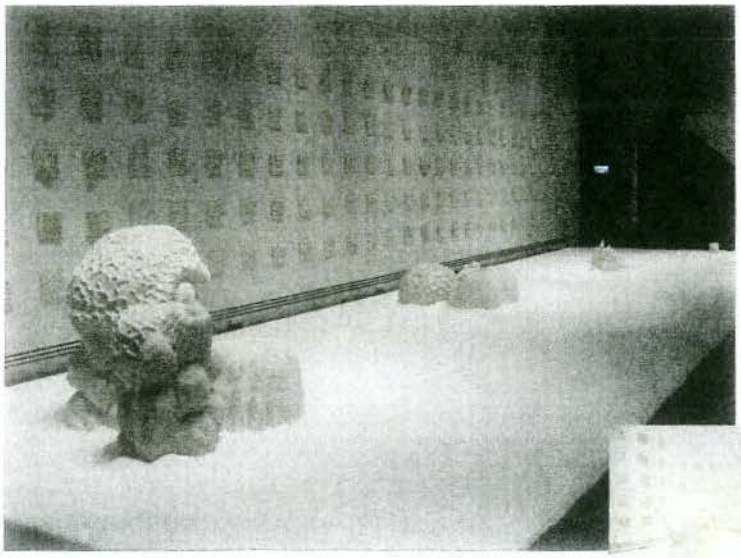
Fenner has been involved in two international exhibitions — the first was *Architypes*, co-curated with and initiated by the Emily Carr Institute, Vancouver, in 2004 that travelled to Tokyo and Sydney. For this exhibition she selected Sally Smart and Callum Morton. The second was *Preposession 2005*, a collaborative exhibition with the University of Ulster, Belfast, for which she selected three Aboriginal artists — Tracy Moffatt, Destiny Deacon and Darren Siwes. Who better than Fenner to ask how Australian art rates on the international radar. Fenner says, "Australian artists have a very low profile except for Tracey Moffatt and Shaun Gladwell, who have good representation overseas."

This may change now that Fenner has been plucked by the Australia Council from a generous handful of curators to select the Australian 'second contingent' for the Venice Biennale 2009. Shaun Gladwell has been selected as the major Australian artist with his *Maddest Maximus*, a series of videos focusing on the hypnotic, hallucinatory and suspenseful edges of the Australian desert. But no Australian curator has ever before been invited to choose this second tier of Australian artists — the golden children of Venice — who will be exhibited at La Ludoteca, a former convent.

Fenner anointed Vernon Ah Kee, Ken Yonitani and Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro for the Venice exhibition. Consequently, they will come to the notice of international audiences and will also attract the attention of Australian art advisors and collectors. One issue for Fenner was the definition of 'emerging' artists. The Australia Council's media release has carefully worded these artists as "early career" artists, partly because Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, who have been working together for six years, are already on the international stage and currently live in Berlin. Fenner says, "I really wanted to push the boundaries of what was emerging. Anne

Vernon Ah Kee, ***Annie Ah Sam***, 2008, charcoal, crayon and acrylic on canvas, 180 x 240cm. Courtesy Milani Gallery, Brisbane

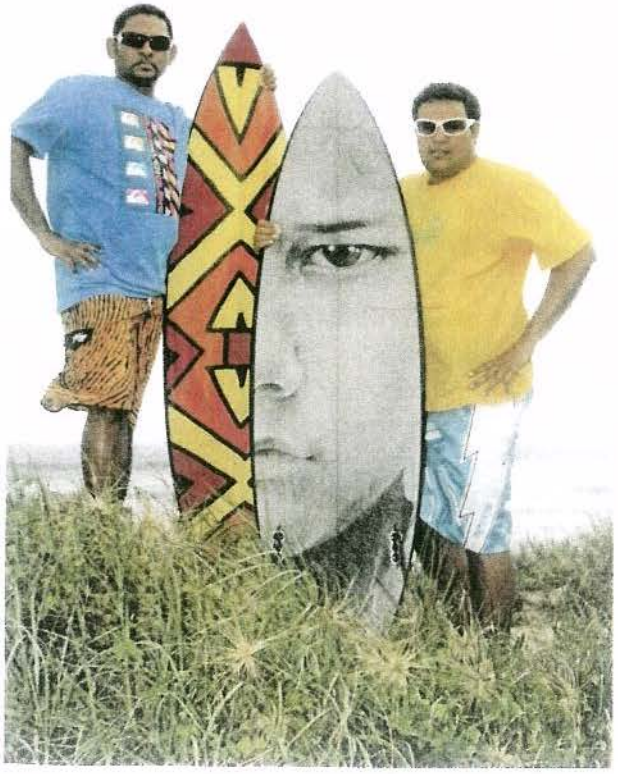
Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, ***Deceased Estate***, 2004, lambda print, 110 x 141cm, edition 10, installation of entire found detritus from artist's warehouse, Weil am Rhein, Germany. Courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis. Photograph by Christian Schnur



Ken Yonitani, ***Sweet Barrier Reef***, 2007, sugar, mixed media. Courtesy the artist

Inset: Ken Yonitani in front of ***Sweet Barrier Reef***, 2007, sugar, mixed media. Photograph by Art Gallery of South Australia


Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, ***Sameday Service or Sooner***, 2008, mdf, cardboard, perspex, tie-down ratchets, 220 x 138 x 130cm (irregular). Courtesy the artists and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney.



Vernon Ah Kee, ***Cantchant***, 2007 video still image. Courtesy Institution of Modern Art, Brisbane, and artist.

Waldman of the Australia Council explained it to me as artists having up to 10 years' professional practice."

Indigenous artist Vernon Ah Kee is 40 years old but started late, having his first exhibition in 2002. He has also been picked up by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev for the 2008 Sydney Biennale. Fenner found his work at Brisbane's Bellas Milani Gallery, which she considers an excellent source of new artists. Vernon Ah Kee's installation comprises suspended surfboards, painted like traditional shields, and videos of young Aboriginal guys working the beach. "The idea is of the beach as contested site," says Fenner. "Reclaiming the beach."

Ken Yonitani lives in the Blue Mountains on the outskirts of Sydney. His *Sweet Barrier Reef* is a massive sand castle of underwater creatures made purely from sugar. Yonitani's works are ephemeral and relate to the vulnerability of our ecosystems. Fenner explains there is a "watery theme to the selection. Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro will incorporate a watercraft and the Venice Canal. So there will be a sense of the uncanny — the link with water — magic, and things will not be as they seem."

Despite the appeal of these eerie and mysterious art offerings, the pivotal point still remains: how is the selection made and what are the criteria? Fenner explains that her selection process involves detective work: "The art must show an evolution over a period of time, it must show consistency, it must show an ongoing thematic concern and a development of technical skills and aesthetics." Fenner also says, "This time there is a cultural cross-section. It is a more up-to-date view of our geographical location because Australia can take a lead on cultural integration, moving the focus away from white Anglo-Saxon Melbourne." She says, "I don't think about history or theory. I'm attracted to work no one can pigeonhole and which is political. Unless it says something about the times we live in, I'm not engaged."

Fenner is to be respected because it's not easy to choose artists who fulfil the criteria mentioned above but who are also young (or early career), not to mention professional and experienced. Her choices make the discerning of worthwhile emerging art easier for the general public and her risk-taking, and subsequent influence on the development of Australian art, should not be underestimated.

# Appendix VIII

*Major national and international exhibitions visited by the author for the research (selected):*

Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2004
Biennale of Sydney, 2004 (curator, parallel program)
Shanghai Biennale, 2004
Gwangju Biennale, 2004
Venice Biennale, 2005
Istanbul Biennale, 2005
Primavera, 2005 (exhibition curator)
Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2006
Biennale of Sydney, 2006
Singapore Biennale, 2006
Gwangju Biennale, 2006
Asia Pacific Triennial, 2006–07
Istanbul Biennale, 2007
Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2008 (curator)
Biennale of Sydney, 2008
Singapore Biennale, 2008
Venice Biennale, 2009 (curator, Australia's group exhibition)
Asia Pacific Triennial, 2009–10
Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2010
Biennale of Sydney, 2010
Echigo-Tsumari Triennial, 2010
Auckland Triennial, 2010
Shanghai Biennale, 2010
Gwangju Biennale, 2010
Busan Biennale, 2010
Singapore Biennale, 2011
Istanbul Biennale, 2011
Venice Biennale, 2011
Making Change, Beijing, 2012 (co-curator)
Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2012
Biennale of Sydney, 2012
Asia Pacific Triennial, 2012–13
Auckland Triennial, 2013
Christchurch Biennial of Public Art, 2013
Venice Biennale, 2013
Lyon Biennale, 2013
International Symposium on Electronic Art, 2013 (curator, UNSW exhibition)
Biennale of Sydney, 2014
Limerick Biennale, 2014
Liverpool Biennale, 2014