

Director's Foreword

Elizabeth Ann Macgregor

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the major MCA exhibition *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World*. This exhibition and its accompanying publication survey the work of over thirty artists and collectives who engage with pressing environmental issues and debates today. The majority of participants in the exhibition are Australian; their work is contextualised and expanded through the inclusion of selected artists from Asia, Europe and the United States whose works resonate strongly with local concerns.

The exhibition is divided into four loose thematic groupings. They encompass the history of art and environmental activism from the 1960s onwards in Tasmania, through logging and damming; Australian waterways and life on the Murray River; mining and its impact in relation to environmental change or catastrophe; and questions of recycling and sustainability. Plants form an integral aspect of the exhibition, from on-site installations to off-site community gardens for producing food, and walking tours which identify weeds and their unexpected uses.

There are a large number of people who have contributed their time and energy in the realisation of this ambitious project. The exhibition is co-curated by the MCA's curatorial team led by Senior Curator Rachel Kent, who also commissioned and edited this publication. MCA Curators Glenn Barkley and Anna Davis, and Keith Munro, Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Programs, have worked across all aspects of the exhibition and bring fresh perspectives to the debates that it addresses.

We are very grateful for the generosity of our project supporters including the Gordon Darling Foundation, which has brought this significant publication to fruition. We also thank the Keir Foundation, which has made *Food Forest* by the Artist as Family possible. This community garden project renews the local ecology of Surry Hills; it creates a source of free food for residents, and St Michael's Church breakfast program for homeless and disadvantaged people.

This publication features a range of voices from within and beyond the MCA. We are very grateful to the various writers who have contributed their time and insights on a range of pertinent topics. They include the four key essayists Tim Bonyhady, Natalie King, Lizzie Muller and Irene Watson; and the MCA exhibitions staff who have written on the participating artists and groups.

The publication is printed on environmentally responsible paper stock with vegetable based inks, using a carbon neutral process. A percentage of every catalogue sale is given towards the continued maintenance and upkeep of *Food Forest* by the Artist as Family, after the exhibition's conclusion.

We would like to acknowledge Jeffrey Lee, sole member of the Djok clan and the senior custodian of the Koongarra uranium deposit, Northern Territory, and thank him for his generosity and collaboration on the weatherproject_U's project for *In the Balance*. We thank the individuals who have given their time to grow plants for Lauren Berkowitz's installation *Sustenance*; the children and teachers at Bridge Road Public School; and staff at the MCA, FJMT and City of Sydney who have collected recycled materials for Berkowitz's works. We thank the volunteers who have given their time to participate in Dadang Christanto's *Survivor* performance; St Michael's Church, Surry Hills which has partnered the MCA and Artist as Family to realise *Food Forest*; and local residents who have participated in plantings for this work.

Above all, we are indebted to the participating artists and collectives who have brought so much energy and enthusiasm to *In the Balance* and its publication. They provide a fascinating array of perspectives on the environmental issues facing us as a community today; and offer information and hope for the future. We also thank their representatives, Estates, and the generosity of lenders to the exhibition.

Introduction

Rachel Kent

In the Balance: Art for a Changing World is a major exhibition of works by over thirty Australian artists and selected international peers. It responds to current environmental debates and comes at a time when attention is turned towards events such as the catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. As the exhibition opens, British Petroleum is attempting to cap a gushing leak of toxic crude oil from its deep sea well Deepwater Horizon. Considered the world's largest spill, oil has marred five American gulf state coastlines since April 2010, devastating marine life and jeopardising thousands of residents' livelihoods. The clean-up will be immense, its cost amounting to billions of dollars, and the impact felt for many decades to come.

In the Balance refers in its title to the environmental educator and politician Al Gore. Gore's book *Earth in the Balance; Ecology and the Human Spirit* preceded the widely acclaimed lecture tour and publication *An Inconvenient Truth*. In his works, the author draws our attention to the issue of climate change and the future that awaits us if we do not address critically the ways we interact with our planet. As active participants in the community, artists respond to these concerns directly and indirectly through their practices. From the documentation of imperiled or lost wilderness sites, to the creation of community gardens, they employ diverse media and approaches.

Some artists in the exhibition are philosophically opposed to the idea of art as a vehicle for activism. For others, the interconnection between art and active agency is expressed through campaigning or collaboration. Many demonstrate that what they do is part of a wider footprint – one which we all share as global citizens – so they tread lightly, recycle materials, and look for sustainable ways to create meaning. Above all, the artists in this exhibition demonstrate that to make art is to participate, through conversation and debate, about how best to live today.

In the Balance is divided loosely into four themes which focus on Australia and the surrounding region, and draw international parallels. It addresses a history of art and environmental activism from the 1960s onwards in Tasmania: the logging of ancient forests, the damming of the Franklin River and the flooding of Lake Pedder. Olegas Truchanas' extraordinary slide shows and Peter Dombrovskis' elegiac landscape photography are central to this theme. Significantly, the latter's image of a fork in the Franklin, entitled *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, Southwest Tasmania*, served as a lynchpin in political campaigning by environmental coalition groups in 1983. A younger generation of Australian artists is also featured. James Newitt's video and photographs document the tense confrontation between loggers, for whom livelihoods and families are at stake, and activists for whom the protection and care of our pristine wilderness is paramount. Raquel Ormella's whiteboard installation comes out of her research at the Wilderness Society's Hobart headquarters and looks instead at the relationship between environmental campaigning and office bureaucracy.

Second, the exhibition considers the current state of mainland Australian waterways with a focus on the Murray Darling Basin. It traces a visual journey from the northernmost part of the river, downwards to the mouth of the Murray River, acknowledging the practices of various artists along the way. Indigenous life on the Murray forms a key aspect of this exploration and questions of survival and change are considered. Bonita Ely's photographic and performance works consider the toxic makeup of the river's water from the 1980s to the present; while Nici Cumpston's panoramic photographs reveal the scale of human mismanagement of the river and its impact on Indigenous culture in South Australia; Yvonne Koolmatrie weaves fish and eel traps in the tradition of her forbears, using the river's sedge rushes; and Barkindji artist Badger Bates documents mission life and his family's history on the Darling through three linocut prints.

A further aspect of the exhibition focuses on human industry and how mining practices (uranium, oil and gas) impact on our environment, as agents for change and as catalysts for catastrophe. One only has to look at the daily newspapers to see signs of change locally and nationally – for example, in the proposed expansion of coal mining through the Hunter Valley of New South Wales and its perceived impact on agricultural lands; or the encroachment of heavy industry and pollution in the Burrup Peninsula of Western Australia, resulting in the damage or physical relocation of ancient Indigenous petroglyphs (rock art). As world attention focuses on the Gulf of Mexico, Australia has endured a massive oil spill only months prior, caused by the Western Australian oil platform West Atlas which poured an estimated 3,600 tons of oil into the Timor Sea, according to *Australian Geographic* journal.¹

The artists' collective theweathergroup_U explores the confrontation between uranium mining and traditional land ownership through the figure of Indigenous custodian Jeffrey Lee at Koongarra; and Susan Norrie has collaborated with filmmaker David Mackenzie in Sidoarjo, East Java to create a film installation documenting the toxic mudslide precipitated by oil and gas drilling there in 2006. The mudslide continues unabated today, destroying villages and ruining countless livelihoods. Now largely overlooked by world media, it has been described as a continuing humanitarian tragedy of unprecedented proportions by Greenpeace Southeast Asia.² Los Angeles artist Andrea Bowers explores the impact of oil and gas drilling in the Arctic Circle through her multi-media work with the Gwich'in First Nations community. Global warming and sustainability in a rapidly changing world are themes in this work which resonate strongly with local concerns.

In the Balance also looks at positive outcomes, and the things that artists and the wider community can do to enable change for good. It considers recycling practices and involves voluntary participants in a range of art-making activities. They include a live performance on the MCA forecourt with Indonesian artist Dadang Christanto to commemorate the Sidoarjo survivors; growing seedlings for Lauren Berkowitz's installation of edible and medicinal plants from New South Wales, pre and post European contact; and educational walking tours in Sydney's CBD led by Joni Taylor in search of the ways that humans, architecture and wildlife interact in the contemporary urban environment.

The Artist as Family invites Sydney residents to help plant a garden with edible plants in the grounds of St Michael's Church, in Surry Hills, drawing on permaculture principles. In doing so they create a beneficial, lasting resource for the local community and the

Church's breakfast program for homeless and disadvantaged people. Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk collaborates with the residents of Liverpool and Goulburn, New South Wales, making them the central focus of her artwork and highlighting ways in which they tackle wastage and recycling on a personal level. Artistic communities are also involved in productive practices, recycling waste and generating work and income for members. The Carpentaria Ghost Nets Program supports a workshop series for local artists who refashion abandoned fishing nets into colorful utilitarian objects (bags, baskets) and sculptures. Also included in this exhibition are embossed paper panels by Euraba Artists & Papermakers, an Indigenous initiative from Boggabilla, New South Wales which recycles waste from the cotton industry into artisanal paper products and artworks.

Plants are an integral part of the exhibition, which considers their role in a changing ecosystem. Some artists, like Diego Bonetto, tackle our increasing estrangement from nature in a highly urbanised society. They propose ways for us to re-engage with the natural world that are both informative and poetic. As part of a wider ecosystem, we depend on the animals and plants around us, just as they do us; the exhibition reminds us of our place within – not dominating – this hierarchy. Janet Laurence's delicate installation of forest plants in glass vials and medical tubing suggests a form of life support: life held literally 'in the balance'. Her two-screen video of endangered animals at Taronga Zoo points to the natural diversity we could so easily lose.

Recycling and sustainability are themes that many artists engage with today, through the reuse of materials or incorporation of found objects. Lorraine Northey-Connelly assembles her ambitious sculptural works from farming detritus including corrugated tin and barbed wire, as well as items such as shells and feathers. Her MCA work depicts the intersection of three rivers including the Murray which run through the border in the Waradgerie (Wiradjuri) country of her mother. Melbourne installation artist Lauren Berkowitz recycles urban detritus including white plastic shopping bags and drink bottles for her two featured installations; and San Francisco-based artist Amy Franceschini, of Futurefarmers artists' collective, explores the conversion of compost into bio fuel using a home-made still powered by the sun. While serious in intent, this work pays playful homage to American backyard moonshine distilleries in the 1920s, during prohibition.

In the Balance unfolds across the MCA galleries, Sydney's parks and gardens, and in the virtual space of the internet and artist's blogs. Sydney artist Lucas Ihlein turns the spotlight back onto the MCA in an environmental audit of the Museum's own practices. Paper and power usage, air transport for the freight of artworks,

and other aspects of its administrative and public operations are analysed. His research is illustrated through a blog with regular postings in the lead up and duration of the exhibition and posters printed on Sydney's Big Fag printing press. Diego Bonetto also uses social networking media in the realisation of his work which focuses on unloved flora or weeds. The weeds are profiled through an on-line Facebook campaign, grown in five glass terrariums in the galleries, and searched out in five public walking tours which teach viewers about their practical, edible and medicinal uses.

In the Balance provides a window onto some of the key environmental issues and debates that confront us in the twenty first century. Developed collaboratively by the MCA curatorial team, it reveals personal interests and insights with a particular focus on this country and region. Finding parallels through the work of invited international artists, it places Australian art within a global dialogue, and asks us to think carefully about how we wish to envision our future as citizens rather than observers.

Rachel Kent is Senior Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.

Notes

- ¹ <http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/journal/oil-spills.htm>
- ² See Susan Norrie and David Mackenzie's artist statement in this publication for a detailed account of the Sidoarjo tragedy.

Still wild, still threatened

Tim Bonyhady

When a Skyway was proposed for Mount Wellington in 1993, Tasmanian artists were characteristically prominent in the campaign to stop this cable car blighting the mountain. A fund-raising exhibition in the Long Gallery on Hobart's Salamanca Place in 1994 was noteworthy for its inclusion of several of Peter Dombrovskis' photographs of the mountain – the first time he exhibited them. But the transformation of a giant sign on the road up the mountain, composed of painted white stones with letters fifty feet high dating from 1905, excited much more attention. Where this sign had read 'Keen's Curry', a group of activists reconfigured it one night into 'No Cable Car'. While not the first or last time the sign had been changed, this recasting of it was one of the most inventive, effective examples of writing on the land in Australia.

This piece of activism – or art, if the re-writing of the sign is thought of as such – is just part of the remarkable history of environmental campaigning in Tasmania over the last forty years. Through this period the art engendered by Tasmania's repeated environmental conflicts has been among the most significant produced in – and about – Tasmania. Photography has been particularly significant, both artistically and politically, in the campaigns to protect the island's lakes, rivers and forests. But as the reconfiguring of 'Keen's Curry' into 'No Cable Car' suggests, many other mediums have also been used with great effect.

Olegas Truchanas, Tasmania's most renowned bushwalker-photographer of the 1950s and 1960s, was at the forefront of this movement when he brought the campaign to protect Lake Pedder to Hobart's Town Hall, presenting his slide show there to eight full-houses in 1971. Truchanas' photographs were all celebratory – taken to reveal what would be lost if Truchanas' own employer, Tasmania's Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC), had its way and buried this small lake and its unique beach under fifteen metres of water. His photographs captured both the lake's extraordinary beauty and how readily it could be enjoyed by all manner of people ranging from experienced bushwalkers to small children. A public speaker of great power despite his heavy Lithuanian accent, Truchanas spoke only briefly before

he showed his slides to music by Sibelius and Delius. Whereas Tasmania's Labor government dismissed Tasmania's south-west as both 'unused' and 'useless', Truchanas identified it as Tasmania's 'greatest asset' – more valuable than any man-made structure, at least as much the 'true Australia' as the desert. While the HEC sometimes suggested its work would create something much 'more beautiful than the original lake', Truchanas declared the impoundment would be just 'an artificial man-made pond'. How was it, he asked, when the justification for the dam was economic, the HEC had placed no value on this 'priceless lake'?

A decade later another Tasmanian photographer, Peter Dombrovskis, had much more impact with his photographs of the wilderness intact. While Dombrovskis' annual Wilderness calendars came to sell up to 50,000 copies, his work reached an even bigger audience through the mass media, particularly when one of his photographs, *Morning Mist*, *Rock Island Bend*, *Franklin River*, *Southwest Tasmania*, became the pictorial icon of the campaign to stop the HEC damming the Franklin River. After the Wilderness Society used this photograph on magazine covers, posters, by-election how-to-vote cards and even sheet music during 1983, a coalition of environmental groups put *Rock Island Bend* on a poster with a caption in its trademark yellow triangle, 'vote for the Franklin because only you can save it'. Then they reproduced it more than a million times two days before the 1983 federal election – creating what the Federal Labor Senator, John Button, described as the most powerful political advertisement he had ever seen. At a time when black-and-white photography was the norm, both the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Age* carried *Rock Island Bend* as a full-page colour insert under the caption 'Could you vote for a party that will destroy this?'

The Sydney photographer, Catherine Rogers, has continued to work in this activist mode – producing a series of calendars, postcards and posters as part of the campaign to protect more of Tasmania's old forests. Rogers began with the giant *Eucalyptus regnans*, the world's tallest flowering plants, in the Styx Valley south of Hobart. She went on to photograph

the nearby Florentine Valley. Her photographs record the disappearing and the disappeared, what may be saved and what has been destroyed in these valleys on the very edge of Tasmania's Wilderness World Heritage Area. The giant *regnans* in this exhibition survives because it is 76 metres tall, one metre over Forestry Tasmania's definition of a tree so tall it warrants protection. Her photographs of the 'Red road' into the Florentine Valley show a forest still intact but carrying the signifiers of its destruction. The red paint and tags indicate the line of the road – keenly contested by the group Still Wild, Still Threatened – which will open the valley to even more logging.

The American-born photographer, David Stephenson, has been exceptional in finding subjects in the impoundments created by the HEC. They are exercises in the sublime, terrifying in their suggestion of loss and devastation. While devoid of people like most wilderness imagery, these photographs show wastelands. Most depict dead trees in unusual form – showing them not reduced to stumps but still standing decades after their deaths in the HEC's dams as enduring emblems of the Commission's destructiveness. But two photographs – one of the Gordon impoundment, the other of Pedder – are different. Devoid of trees, they are, in some ways, all the more compelling for showing nothing of what has been drowned. The photograph of Pedder, in which the picture frame is filled with water apart from a thin sliver of land on the horizon, powerfully evokes the great mass of water which has transformed this once magical region, creating a dam with surface area twenty-four times the size of the original lake.

Other photographers have found iconic moments in activism. One involved another piece of rewriting, though offshore rather than on land. It was conceived by the Sydney law student Neal Funnell, the leader of a team of four activists who in 2004, subverted the maiden voyage of the Tasmanian government's new passenger boat *Spirit of Tasmania III* as it was leaving Sydney in a blaze of publicity. Just before the boat passed the Sydney Opera House Funnell and his associates slipped over the side with a banner which rewrote the name of the boat into 'Woodchipping the Spirit of Tasmania' for the benefit of waiting cameramen and photographers, above all the Sydney photographer Dean Sewell.

Another iconic moment came in 2007 when Allana Beltane, a former student of the Sydney College of the Arts, engaged in a piece of performance art as part of the campaign to protect the forests of the Weld Valley south of Hobart. Wearing an old curtain around her waist, body paint on her face and wings of white cockatoo feathers, Beltane spent ten hours on top of a giant tripod where she was photographed by Matt Newton as the *Weld Angel*. As this symbolic challenge to the Tasmanian

State not only had Beltane arrested, charged and convicted but pursued clumsily in the courts for the costs of ending her performance, Newton's photograph reached not just a national but an international audience, drawing even more attention to how much of Tasmania is still wild but still threatened.

Tim Bonyhady is an art historian and environmental lawyer whose books include *Images in Opposition: Australian landscape painting 1801-1890*, *Places Worth Keeping: Conservationists, Politics and Law* and the prize-winning *The Colonial Earth*.



Above, top to bottom:
Matthew Newton
The Weld Angel (detail) 2007
type C photograph
Image courtesy and © the artist

Dean Sewell
Spirit of Tasmania
type C photograph
Image courtesy and © the artist

Accumulation: the aesthetics of waste & recycling

Natalie King

‘The world is full of objects,
more or less interesting: I do
not wish to add any more.’

Douglas Huebler, 1968.

At the turn of the 20th century, the French photographer Eugène Atget depicted the figure of the *chiffonniers*, or ragpickers, to reveal the uneven development of capitalist modernity in urban settings. Though poor, ragpickers were not beggars but they were regarded as intransigent outsiders in the social system. In 1903, there were at least five thousand scavengers roaming through the terrain of the Parisian metropolis. The ragpicker gathered the overlooked: cans, bottles, paper and everything else wealthier inhabitants treated as rubbish that could be converted and reused. Some chiffonniers even paid concierges for the privilege of examining garbage before it was put out on the street.¹ Atget also photographed scrap merchants living in shanty towns on the outskirts of Paris. The ragpicker’s masterful recovery of the overlooked became part of a cycle of reusing detritus.² Their skilful sorting and accumulation of refuse became revelatory under Atget’s lens: a visual inventory of garbage.

Lauren Berkowitz also observed homeless scavengers while living in New York City in the entertainment area, Times Square. In the early 90s, Berkowitz recalls ‘...seeing a homeless woman wearing a ballgown dress constructed out of plastic bags: whilst aestheticising waste she metaphorically transcended her own abjection.’³ Berkowitz found herself in the midst of an excessive consumerist culture. It was here that she first conceived her sculptural corridor of used, white shopping bags in an installation titled *Bags* (1994/2010). Filled with air, these translucent plastic bags form a gigantic corridor or walled enclave. Buoyant and billowing, the by-products of consumption are obsessively collected by Berkowitz, revitalising waste into an ephemeral sculpture.⁴ The resultant aesthetics of waste conjugates the mundane

with the history of minimalist and readymade sculptures, particularly the work of Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois.

Underpinning Berkowitz’s practice is a compulsive desire to collect, collate and conflate materials. Her fascination with *objet trouvé* or recycled detritus permeates each particular work. Berkowitz laboriously amasses the discarded, deploying rubbish as a resource. Often refuse is collected by friends and gathered from the rubbish tip including bottles, bags, newspapers and telephone books. This labour-intensive process of accumulation typically recycles objects from the domestic domain. Berkowitz rearranges the unruly aspects of rubbish into organised formats, often on the gallery floor.

More recently, Berkowitz has arranged plants, seeds, spices and pulses into sensual installations that comment on retrieval and regeneration. Whether producing a geometric sequence of stripes constructed from salt and exotic weeds or a grid of Indigenous and exotic plants, Berkowitz transforms natural materials. Imbued with medicinal and healing properties, Berkowitz’s works involve communities to grow and recycle plants, thereby inducing their participation in environmental narratives of regeneration. Similar to, or evolving from *Manna* (2009), *Sustenance* (2010) is a table laden with approximately four hundred plants: a sensory kitchen garden that grows out of recycled plastic drink bottles and pots. Incorporating Indigenous plants and introduced species, this work is ‘concerned by the long term sustainability of the planet and its ability to feed and nourish an overcrowded, hotter and thirsty world...’⁵

When Louise Bourgeois was asked about her choice of materials, she commented that ‘In New York everything is dumped on the sidewalk ... you find all kinds of household things, as if a whole apartment has been put on the sidewalk ... You try to save these things because they are so wonderful.’⁶ Like Bourgeois and Berkowitz, Lorraine Connelly-Northey retrieves discarded or abandoned materials. She scours rubbish dumps on farmer’s properties in Culcairn, New South Wales, foraging for corrugated and galvanised iron, rabbit proof fencing, rusted mesh, chicken

and barbed wire. Connelly-Northey reshapes waste into sculptural forms that evoke traditional utilitarian objects. A Waradgerie (Wiradjuri) woman of Irish descent, Connelly-Northey grew up in the area where the Mallee bush meets the Murray River. She salvages scrap materials from her mother’s country, reviving these found objects into over scaled and dysfunctional *narrbong* (string bags), vessels, *kooliman* (bowls) and garments. Her sculpted detritus evokes woven or carved objects in Indigenous culture. By deploying hostile materials, she explores the residual footprint that western industrial society has left on the land.

Connelly-Northey’s new work depicts the five main river systems of the Murray Darling Basin flowing into one another. Snakes represent the rivers while the waterways include her mother’s tribal country. A gigantic wall relief complete with bowl shapes, she imbues new life into the discarded waste of western culture:

During our travels throughout the bush, Dad and I would take in old rubbish dumps seeking out hidden treasures and items of interest and use. This was no doubt a deadly skill Dad had acquired as a ‘man on the land’ under the skilful eye of his Irish farming Dad; in a piece of discarded material could be found another use. Now this skill was handed down to me.⁷

The daughter of a farmer, Connelly-Northey communicates the importance of water and rain to survival as well as her indelible connection to country.

In 2009, Rotterdam-based artists Jeanne van Heeswijk and Paul Sixta worked with regional communities to gather their attitudes towards waste and wastage, resulting in a suite of photographs and short video fictions. *Talking Trash – personal relationships with waste* (2009/2010) comprises disparate interviews as to how households in Goulburn and the Sydney suburb of Liverpool have tried to reduce waste. Images include a bikini-clad young woman gleaming in suntan oil holding a bottle of water in front of a rubbish dump and a sombre housewife standing in her kitchen clutching an aged toaster. Comical and revealing, these

personal narratives of waste or being wasteful conjure a climate of consumerism, recycling and concern for the environment. Sometimes the compulsion to collect waste can result in pathological behaviour or disposophobia: hoarding or the excessive acquisition of possessions even if they are worthless, hazardous or unsanitary. Often, these collectors or clutterers live among piles of old newspapers, tin cans, or other items regarded by everyone else as junk. Sometimes, they can barely move within their own living space. A psychologically obsessive desire to collect often underpins the work of artists who engage in recycling rubbish, bestowing new life on dumped and humble materials. Ultimately, this recovery of mundane objects deemed outmoded or useless – the flotsam of everyday life – is a ‘desire to leave a trace, a sign, a hint for posterity, involves a psychological dimension that is also political.’⁸

Natalie King is a curator and writer based in Melbourne. She is the inaugural Director of Utopia – a roving visual arts project for the Asia Pacific region, auspiced by Asialink.

Notes

- 1 Higonnet, P., *Paris: Capital of the World*, Harvard College, USA, 2002, p.222. In the 1850s, Parisians were fascinated by the lives of ragpickers, the cafes they frequented and the dishes they ate. Baudelaire wrote a poem, *Le Vin de chiffonniers* or *The Rag-Picker’s Wine*, 1861.
- 2 See Eva Diaz’s discussion of ragpickers and waste in ‘A Critical Glossary of Space and Sculpture’, *Unmonumental: the object in the 21st century*, Phaidon, London/New York, 2007, p.209.
- 3 Lauren Berkowitz quoted by King, N., in ‘Bag Lady’, *Bags Bottles Newspapers*, Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Melbourne, 1994, no pagination.
- 4 For an examination of the history of disposal and garbaging in western society, see Scanlan, J., *On Garbage*, Reaktion Books, London, 2005.
- 5 Lauren Berkowitz, notes to the author, 27 May 2010.
- 6 Louise Bourgeois quoted by Collins, J., in ‘Accumulation’, *Sculpture Today*, Phaidon, London/New York, 2007, p.414.
- 7 Connelly-Northey, L., *Cross Currents*, Linden Gallery, Melbourne, 2005.
- 8 Vergine, L., ‘Introduction’, *When Trash Becomes Art*, Skira, Milan, 2007, p.8.

Life in the system: Permaculture & the aesthetics of energy flow

Lizzie Muller

In 1968, the sculptor, critic and curator Jack Burnham published an article in *Artforum* called 'Systems Esthetics'. Influenced by emerging systems theories in the biological sciences, as well as cybernetics and information theory, he claimed that the world was 'in a transition from an object-oriented to a systems-oriented culture.'¹ The works of artists such as Hans Haacke, Robert Morris and Les Levine, he argued, could best be understood as complex systems that draw attention to the relationships 'between people and the components of their environment.'² Burnham's ideas have since been used mainly by media art theorists who see him as a seminal thinker in the aesthetics of technological interaction.³ What has perhaps been overlooked is the deep and resonant connection of systems aesthetics to the imperatives of environmental sustainability. The basis of Burnham's argument is the idea that a holistic response is necessary – in all areas of human activity, including art – to face the complex ecological challenges of a rapidly changing world:

'Increasingly 'products' – either in art or life – become irrelevant and a different set of needs arise: these revolve around such concerns as maintaining the biological liveability of the earth, producing more accurate models of social interaction, understanding the growing symbiosis in man-machine relationships, establishing priorities for the usage and conservation of natural resources.'⁴

Many artists, he claimed, had 'intuitively' grasped this need, and were responding with the creation of 'environments'. Whilst these environments were still relatively 'unsophisticated', this would change, he predicted, with time and experience.

A few years later, on the other side of the world, Australians David Holmgren and Bill Mollison developed a holistic approach to creating and sustaining agriculturally productive ecosystems that could provide for human needs in harmony with the environment. The principles of their system, now widely known as permaculture, resonate with the concerns of Burnham's systems aesthetics. Rather than focusing on the production of 'outputs' for human use, permaculture works with the relational

patterns that exist between all elements in an ecosystem. The aim of permaculture design is to create systems in which there is optimum energy flow between elements, with as little additional energy added and as little lost as possible from the system.

Drawing the connection between systems aesthetics and permaculture provides a historical and conceptual framework for understanding contemporary art practices inspired by permacultural thinking. The Artist as Family, Diego Bonetto and Lucas Ihlein all build systems of creation and participation that engage both the artist and the audience in living ecologies, such as gardens and neighbourhoods. Whilst Burnham's conceptual artists of the 1960s and 70s worked primarily with the flow of abstract information within systems, this new generation of artists works with the flow of energy. Their 'art-ecologies' engage with the processes of nourishment, work and effort that sustain human life and artistic practice.

The Artist as Family is made up of artist and poet Patrick Jones, his partner, writer Meg Ulman and Jones' 8 year-old son Zephyr. Their collaboration is a pragmatic response to the question of how to spend time with the people you love whilst making a living and making art. It originally came into being in 2009 as a way to turn a residency opportunity in Newcastle into a family holiday. Their collective blog has since documented their adventures, gathering and sorting rubbish on Newcastle's beaches and tending their permaculture garden in Victoria. More recently they have used their blog to chart the development of a community food forest in Sydney as part of *In the Balance*. Whilst many artists continue to resist biography as a mode of interpretation, the Artist as Family place their domestic life in the centre of their work – drawing attention to the way that personal relationships sustain artistic practice. Their work is a celebration of the resilience and creativity of family life. It is also a political statement about the value and purpose of art as a generative force for change, rather than a system of consumption. The Artist as Family describe their *Food Forest* as a combination of 'poetry and pragmatism', a public artwork that will 'show how art can again be *of the world*, a part of it and not merely a symbol of it.'⁵

Lucas Ihlein has spent many years developing blogging as a method to make art that is 'of the world' by closely integrating the practice of everyday life with the practice of art making. Drawing from his interest in the verb that lies within 'the *work* of art', Ihlein uses blogging as a way to make art through daily, incremental processes, rather than through the boom and bust of exhibition production. He developed his idiosyncratic approach over two residency projects, one in the remote country town of Kellerberrin, Western Australia, and a second in his home suburb of Petersham in Sydney.⁶ In both projects Ihlein set some simple rules: to spend his time within these specific geographical boundaries and write about his experiences every day. Part diary and part soap opera, these works reveal the gentle poetry that exists in the rhythms and interactions of daily life. They also inquire into the role of the artist in society as a stimulant for the creation of cultural value. These formative projects led Ihlein to develop a theory of the blog as a framing device – a way to create a certain quality of attention – that reveals the aesthetic in the everyday.⁷

Ihlein, a keen amateur gardener, has often used the metaphor of the garden to explain the ecosystem of the blog, where the author must nurture and tend to the system regularly for it to provide a yield. In 2010 he is developing two new permaculture-inspired projects that use blogging to draw attention to two different systems of energy circulation. *Tending*, developed with Sydney College of the Arts, is a community garden with a companion weekly blog that mirrors and supports its growth. Its title refers to the general social and cultural movement towards community gardening, and to the quality of care and attention such systems require. For *In the Balance* Ihlein is conducting an environmental audit that traces the energy ecology of the exhibition. This project builds on his long-standing interest in the nature of aesthetic value. By publicly auditing the energy use of *In the Balance*, Ihlein extends the idea of the energy economy beyond the livelihood of the individual artist out to the larger system of the art world. His creative accounting aims to reveal the energetic as well as the financial worth of the work of art.

Whilst the Artist as Family and Lucas Ihlein focus their attention on systems of cultivation, Diego Bonetto works on the wilder edges that exist around such systems. One of permaculture's principles is to use edges and value the marginal, for it is in these liminal areas between wild and cultivated that we can learn most about the resilience of nature. Bonetto is a champion of the feral. His art practice is concerned with the legal, ontological and cultural status of weeds.⁸ Based on meticulous fieldwork, Bonetto creates games, guides and walking trails that draw our attention to the irrepressible abundance of alien flora. Whilst we may be aware of the devastating impact of human greed and over-use on our

natural environment, Bonetto instead explores the impact of our attempts to 'do-good'. His playful artworks expand the notion of an ecosystem to include the complexity of human morality. As a first generation immigrant (Italian by birth) Bonetto is particularly aware of the way in which the Australian discourse on 'native' and 'non-native' plants includes a dimension of anthropomorphic projection. For *In the Balance* Bonetto is using Facebook as a medium for propagating the unruly growth of weed appreciation, developing profiles for his favourite weeds and encouraging people to 'befriend' them and follow their activities. His project harnesses the potential of online social networking, whilst at the same time, drawing attention to its normative ecology.

Burnham argued that the aesthetic shift in the 1960s from objects to systems was 'no less than a survival mechanism.'⁹ He could not have predicted then the tremendous possibilities that social networking tools like blogs and Facebook would open up for the creation of art systems. *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World* reveals how a new generation of artists is using these tools to create aesthetic ecologies that integrate the processes of everyday life, and draw attention to our relationship with the world around us. In doing so, they build a profound connection between sustainability at a macro-societal and at a micro-individual level. The creation of these ecologies is a response to the precariousness of life as an artist, and as a human being in an increasingly fraught environmental situation. But it is a hopeful, practical and engaged response that envisages a role for art in building alternatives and mobilising communities. By drawing attention to the complex and dynamic systems that bind us all together, these artists make a powerful argument for the value of art in a changing world.

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Notes

- 1 Burnham, B., 'Systems Esthetics', 1968, first published in *Artforum*, reprinted in De Salvo, D., (ed.), *Open Systems: Rethinking Art c.1970*, Tate Publishing, London, 2005, p.165.
- 2 Ibid, p.165.
- 3 See for example Shanken, E., 'Art in the information age: Technology and conceptual art', *Leonardo*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2002, pp. 433-438.
- 4 Burnham, J., Op.Cit., p.165
- 5 <http://theartistasfamily.blogspot.com>, accessed 18 June 2010.
- 6 See <http://kellerberrin.com> and <http://www.thesham.info>.
- 7 Lucas Ihlein 'To Follow Things as I Encounter Them: Blogging, Art and Attention', *127 Prince*, <http://127prince.org>. Accessed 16 June 2010.
- 8 <http://www.weedyconnection.com/>.
- 9 Burnham J., Op. Cit., p.167.

In the Balance: Art for a Changing World

Irene Watson

As I absorb *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World*, I think about my old people, the Tanganekald and their fight to hold country after the white invasion during the 1840s. A small number of our people survived the massacres which occurred across the Coorong in South Australia. I know that had our old people held the balance of power, our lands at the Murray Mouth would look different from the images which are represented in the work of Nici Cumpston and Bonita Ely. I know the river would have continued to flow and that the rubbish which litters it, and is transformed by the work of Connelly-Northey, would be but an unrealised nightmare; and that the cotton crops which suck the water from our sluggish river system would not have been. Instead we would have retained a river paradise of our dreaming and Aboriginal ways of knowing the world. I know that the weavings of Koolmatrie, and of myself and my grandmothers, would have been the weave that continued to hold our Aboriginal world together.

But it was not to be. We are brought to the now through the works of Nici Cumpston and Bonita Ely to the stark visual impact of the drought, of the drying up of a traditionally watered landscape. This drying space is the end point of a history which has been hell-bent on the idea of progress. Progress drags us from our native origins, progress dries up human existence and sustainable relationships with the seas, waters and lands of our selves and our ancestors.

The thing the coloniser calls progress and which many of us call the invasion, now has us residing inside the belly of genocide. This is a place Aboriginal peoples occupy and from where assimilation into the Australian nation state occurs. But at the margins as peoples we continue to perform and provide a creative response to the environmental imperatives of our time. The Euraba Papermakers face off from the impact of colonisation by engaging with the spirit of healing and the harmonious position of making good a history of environmental destruction, as they have come to specialise in hand-made paper art. In the Goomeroi language euraba means a place of healing, and the healing comes from the leaves of the *eurá* tree. But cotton has become a major crop grown in the Boggabilla region, and it has wreaked environmental destruction on the river system. But the Euraba Artists & Papermakers find a

use for the cotton offcuts which are produced by the local clothing industry. The cotton rag pulp is transformed into painted papers, bringing to the centre works of healing and high distinction.

Badger Bates' work illustrates the regimented style of living on the mission, an Aboriginal way that also continued away from the mission and on the bend of the river, and where the catching of yabbies, turtles, shrimp, mussels and fish sustained life. Stories from the sky remain with Badger, as the emu signals the change of season. In observing the changing seasons it is easy to see the impact of changes in river flows, and the impact on bird life such as the broilgas when the waters flow and also cease. These paintings are a calling for the rain to come and to make the river flow, for when the river floods food is bountiful and feeds the people. But now the river is impacted by climate change and Badger's work calls out for the rain. 'Red Roo in Drought' shows the pity of death of the kangaroo.

Out of the environmental holocaust comes the work of Lorraine Connelly-Northey. In the remaking of the past – and as an act of resistance in her refusal to use native materials, preferring instead the barbed wire of settler fences, corrugated iron, and mesh, re-woven as if processing an act of decolonisation – she takes settler commodities and transforms them into the baskets and possum skin cloaks of the ancestors. On the other hand Koolmatrie works with the native grasses used by the grandmothers, and we remember how we once lived with the land and who we still are today.

In the Balance is a collective activity which directs our gaze to the river, a homeland for some and one in the past which provided abundance, identity, caring and sharing and cradled creativity, but now looks down the barrel like its people before to a battle between death and survival as its flow trickles ever more slowly. These artistic works bring us to imagine a way through the struggle, and the colonising genocidal prison that we each in some way inhabit, whether we are Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, aware or unaware. We all face the looming climatic changes that are upon us and this is made glaringly obvious in the work

of both Nici Cumpston and Bonita Ely. While we are alerted to the looming environmental ecocide we are drawn also to the liberating spirit and the offering up of a space from which we are able to define ourselves as peoples. We discover this space in the work of Lorraine Connelly-Northey and the Euraba Artists & Papermakers, in works which create a de-colonising space. Within that space we are able to reflect on the possibility of a more caring and sharing centred sense of humanity, another future.

What we call Art can also be a strategy for survival for peoples who are rising from genocide – this exhibition is that. But it is much more too; it is also about shining light on a path that could show us a way, a way that is more for survivors of genocide who are left to assimilate, which re-claims Aboriginal space, and which humanises those dispossessed genocidal spaces. I see this as a strategy and a hope for the ending of acts of inhumanity and environmental destruction and allow us to grow up and take that different path or way, back towards being human on earth. It is a dream perhaps, but we need dreams and more importantly the generations coming need visions to imagine and grow a future humanity.

A body of work which challenges our colonial past and present is growing and will ultimately bring change in the way we think. I am hopeful this change will also translate as a liberating movement for both the now and future generations. These works are creating a space that names up who we are. We are peoples, diverse, distinct, sovereign peoples, who have risen and are rising from the Australian holocaust and reclaiming space. This is one of those spaces. An exhibition like this tells a powerful story but it is much more – it is a call to action to change, to begin change at the baseline. Genocide is the baseline and we are called to act from this end place. These works are a political expression, but I see them as also going beyond political rhetoric, going to a place of ancient obligations in order to bring change, but also the balance and harmony to our lives as humans on earth.

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