

## Not just a pretty picture: art as ecological communication

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### Abstract

Indigenous art and the western landscape tradition form ongoing influences on Australian eco-art. A majority of Australians now acknowledge that reconciliation and environmental sustainability are related issues. At the same time, western conventions of the sublime and the picturesque landscape have remained effective campaign materials. While historical tensions between Indigenous stewardship and a culturally abject, sublime 'wildness' still sporadically reappear in the economic and political arenas, on the whole, these two powerful visions of the landscape have jogged along together for thirty or so years of environmental struggle. This paper traces a brief history of how the western landscape tradition has been modified by Indigenous concepts of country. It then opens the discussion to current projects that combine traditional and inter-disciplinary knowledge within a speculative framework of ecological aesthetics.

### Introduction

In 1963, Yolngu elders petitioned the Menzies government against the alienation of traditional lands for bauxite mining at Yirrkala in the Northern Territory. The bi-lingual petition was bordered by a painted summation of Indigenous law: landscape features and clan designs specifying ownership and responsibilities for country, one Yirritja and

the other Dhuwa, on two pieces of stretched stringy-bark.<sup>1</sup> This now famous 'bark petition' offered non-Indigenous people a rare opportunity to understand the creation and maintenance of the region, with its complex relations of Indigenous ownership, custodianship and obligation. Tragically, we ignored this opportunity to understand a comprehensive, deep knowledge of the environment that had kept it in a productive balance for millennia.

A decade later, equally traditional, picturesque views of Lake Pedder in Tasmania's south west were reproduced as campaign materials to save the lake from being flooded for hydro-electricity. They illustrated a pristine wilderness, by definition a veritable 'terra nullius' in danger of being irretrievably lost through unwanted state development.

These visual 'petitions' were politically unsuccessful in the short term, and differed on questions of ownership, habitation and wilderness. Nonetheless, Indigenous art and the western landscape tradition form ongoing influences on Australian eco-art. Indigenous art has helped to win hearts, minds and a fair share of battles for Native Title and environmental justice. A majority of Australians now acknowledge that reconciliation and environmental sustainability are related issues. At the same time, western conventions of the sublime and the picturesque landscape have remained effective campaign materials. Hardly an election goes by without sighting comparisons made between lush, dripping rainforest and blackened clear-fell.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the historical tensions between Indigenous stewardship and western ideas of a culturally abject, sublime 'wildness' still sporadically reappear in economic and political arenas, as in the 2007 tussle between Cape York greenies, traditional owners and the local Indigenous cattle industry.<sup>3</sup> On the whole, however, these two powerful visions of the landscape have jogged along together for around thirty years of environmental struggle.

<sup>1</sup> See Attwood B, *Rights for Aborigines*, Allen & Unwin, 2003, pp. 215–236; and Mundine D, 'Saltwater', *Saltwater: Yirrkala bark paintings of sea country*, exhibition catalogue, Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre & Jennifer Isaacs Publishing, 1999, pp. 20–27.

<sup>2</sup> As commented by Felicity Wade, 'Who's going to save me?', *Photofile* no. 76, Summer 2006, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> 'Australian Story', Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 28 May 2007. See also Pearson N, 'The Ideal Equilibrium', *The Weekend Australian* 9–10<sup>th</sup> June, 2007, p. 21.

Australian colonial landscapes followed those of the outlying regions of the British Isles, the Americas, Africa and other Pacific regions in hosting aesthetic and spiritual renewal, the reconciliation between humankind and nature, subject and object.<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the 19th century, Australian landscapes had also taken on board the British romanticism of John Ruskin and his fellow artist-artisan. They argued that the destruction of the natural environment and the social problems of urbanism were too high a price to pay for industrial development.<sup>6</sup> Already a highly urbanised population, Australian colonials sought their defining moral qualities in a mythic bush setting. Australian landscapes answered Ruskin's call for scientific accuracy and a profound reverence for nature. The intense, empirical scrutiny of the landscape could reveal higher moral truths, if the artist could link the understanding of natural phenomena with an imaginative response, akin to love.<sup>7</sup> From colonial photographer Nicholas Caïre's alpine peaks to Jessie Trall's intimate, inter-war etchings of moonlit gullies and Dorothy Wall's ecologically-minded *Blinky Bill*, western pictorial bush-lore has been both empirical and expressive, feeding images of pastoralism, mining, tourism and conservation in varied measure.

## Far horizons

Artist and art historian Ian Burn observed that the longstanding popularity of 'Gum Tree School' landscape painting was partly due to the confidence in which painters attacked their subject, a confidence

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<sup>5</sup> See Bernard Smith's seminal study *European vision in the South Pacific*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985 (second edition), Bernard Smith, *Imagining the Pacific: In the wake of the Cook voyages*, Melbourne University Press at the Miegunyah Press, 1992; Bonyhardy T, *Images in opposition: Australian painting 1801–1890*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, and *The colonial earth*, The Miegunyah Press, University of Melbourne, 2000; *New worlds from old: 19th century Australian & American landscapes*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra and Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> See Barringer T, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, Everyman Library, 1988, pp. 57–83.

<sup>7</sup> Ruskin J, 'That the truth of nature is not to be discerned by the uneducated senses', *Modern Painters*, Vol 1, Andre Deutsch, 1987 (1<sup>st</sup> pub 1843), p. 29.

As a critical term, 'eco-art' only gained currency from the 1990s to highlight the environmental awareness or activist base of diverse projects that prioritised process and concept and combined social and environmental engagement. Critical categories, like ceremonial art, environmental art, conceptual art, feminist art, site-specific installation, performance and community arts have designated art working in conjunction with postmodern cultural theories, Indigenous law, our colonial history, environmental science and grass-roots politics. This interdisciplinary approach has brought about a move to looser, associationist modes of working in galleries, public art projects and political actions to make art 'make a difference'.

## The western landscape tradition

From the late 1960s, feminist and conceptual artists embraced the natural environment through humbling gestures of reconciliation with the planet. They challenged the modernist belief in the dominance of humans as rational beings, along with its correlate, the environmental and social degradation of industrial capital. As they watched capitalism lurch towards an unsustainable First World post-industrialism, Second World implosion, Third World decolonisation and industrialisation, and continued Fourth World protest, the avant-garde once again sought to reconcile radical aesthetics and radical politics.

It is not surprising that the land looms larger when the order of the world changes. Writers observe how the recent call of the wild paradoxically echoed the late-18th century investment in the landscape as a privileged locus for thinking about universal human values, such as individual freedom, equality, fraternity – the moral bedrock of modern subjectivity.<sup>4</sup> The Romantic reaction against corrupt absolutist or theocratic regimes sought an Edenic, primordial space in which to reinvent humanity. Theirs was an image of nature as an active, divine force. The idea of *natura naturans*, nature as wild and majestic, was fuelled by the remote, New World landscapes of the imperial adventure.

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Ian McLLean's quote from Slavoj Žižek in 'Sublime futures: eco-art and the return of the real in Peter Dombrovskis, John Wolsley and Andy Goldsworthy', *Transformations*, No 5, December 2002, p. 6.

grounded on close, empirical study of regional landscapes.<sup>8</sup> Ruskin had encouraged young artists to develop this heightened visual perception of nature, but reminded them that the expressive truths of the landscape could only be revealed through a union of the senses and the spirit. Burn argued that paintings, such as Arthur Streeton's *Land of the golden fleece* (1926) overlaid sense and sensibility in this manner, combining the spatial distance of the panoramic view with the idea of a national space (Figure 11.1). A horizontal composition and a balanced, blue-gold palette invited the viewer to take in foreground, middle ground and far horizon with a contemplative, proprietorial gaze suggesting a seemingly natural and objective optical order.<sup>9</sup> We metaphorically associate the panoramic landscape with freedom, possibility and future, Avenel Mitchell observes, for it presents an incongruous "synthesis of nearness and remoteness".<sup>10</sup> The visitor's vantage-point is quasi-objective, disinterested and autonomous.<sup>11</sup> This combination of emotional attachment and detached moral viewpoint convincingly conveyed a national story of white progress, later animated in the elevated, cinematic panning shots of countless bush melodramas, from Franklin Barrett's *The breaking of the drought* (1920) to Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2007).



**Figure 11.1** Arthur Streeton, *Land of the Golden Fleece* (1926)

Oil on canvas mounted on composition board 50.7 x 75.5, 69.0 x 96.0 frame. Bequest of Henriette von Dallwitz and of Richard Paul in honour of his father Dr Oscar Paul 1965. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

<sup>8</sup> Burn I, 'Popular Melbourne landscape painting between the wars', Bendigo Art Gallery, 1982, reprinted in Burn I, *Dialogue: writings in art history*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991; and Burn I, *National life and landscapes*, Bay Books, Sydney 1992.

<sup>9</sup> Burn's critical review of the bush panorama paralleled the analyses within film theory of a similarly privileged, "3-dimensional, rationalised space" within cinematic realism, with its fixed viewpoint derived from Renaissance principles of perspective and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality. See for instance The British Film Institute's *Screen* project of the later 1970s and early 1980s; also Martin Jay, 'Scopic regimes of modernity', *Modernity and identity*, ed Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman, Oxford, 1992, p.184; Bryson N, 'The gaze and the glance', *Vision and painting, the logic of the gaze*, London, 1983, pp. 89–94.

<sup>10</sup> In her discussion of the Australian inter-war panorama and intimate landscape, Avenel Mitchell cites Yi-Fu Tuan's suggestion that "space lies open; it suggests the future and invites action". Tuan Y, *Space and place: the perspective of experience*, London, 1977, p.54, cited Mitchell A, 'The harvest of a quiet eye: the intimate expression of nature in Australian landscape painting from the late nineteenth century to c.1940', MPhil thesis, Department of Art History and Film Studies, University of Sydney, 1997, p. 101.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 103. See also Bauman Z, 'Strangers: The social construction of universality and particularity', *Teles*, 78. Winter 1988–89, pp. 17–18.

## The intimate landscape

Eco-artists have also been drawn to the familiar 'corner of nature.' Mitchell argues that traditional images of the country garden, orchard and bush clearing offered the sensual experience of belonging within a known place, a comforting image of humanised nature as the mechanisation of agriculture accelerated through intensive clearing of land for cropping and wool production from Federation to the 1930s. She also notes that the popularity of this sub-genre dovetailed with the promotion of native flora in suburban gardens, the emergence of bushwalking and conservation movements and the professionalisation of botany and ecology.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Mitchell, op. cit. 1997.

Clara Southern's *An old bee farm* (c1900) presents the bush beyond the fenced paddock (Figure 11.2). A constricted, Heidelberg-style composition and informal viewpoint holds the viewer's eye within a shallow visual field and emphasises a tacit knowledge of family farming and local environs through the sensory experience of 'bush enchantment'. This is also the space of the gardener, field naturalist, Gould League member and humanist geographer, whose valued empirical knowledge is grounded in the lived-world of immediate experience. The sensory attributes of the bush were valued, Mitchell attests, because they were distinctively, privately, almost secretly known.<sup>13</sup>



**Figure 11.2** Clara Southern, *An Old Bee Farm* (c1900)

Oil on canvas 66.0 x 111.7cm, Felton Bequest, 1942 National Gallery of Victoria

The intimate landscape also connected with the national story, through close, empirical (including scientific) study, bush fantasy and human anecdote. The popular image of rural life and harmonious human settlement was honed to cozy perfection through paintings like Elioth Gruner's *Spring frost, Emu Plains* (1919) and Hilda Rix Nicholas' *Knockalong garden* (1941), and continue in the weekly televised dramas of

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 44–45.

*McLeod's Daughters*. Its mythic base in peasant culture promotes a continuum between past and present. The image of the homestead at ease in the landscape is brought to life through loving attention to the intimate routines of everyday life, romantic interest on the verandah or at the home paddock gate and family members engaged in familiar chores, all welcoming scenes to the visitor. These enduring images of productive stewardship transformed earlier figures of the explorer, bush larrikin and pioneer into a more modern image of the primary producer.

## The modernist desert

The emotional ties binding city-dwellers to the pastoralist landscape were loosened in the 1940s dryland images of Russell Drysdale, Albert Tucker and Sidney Nolan. This generation of artists reconceived 'our colonial pastoral myths' in the existential terms of modernist alienation of nature and culture, subject and object, individual and society. More generally, modernism's formal preoccupations placed the work of art centre-stage, sidelining or excluding nature and natural beauty. Art historically, the dominant drive of modernism was driven by a "turning away from, rejection or repression of nature", in tandem with the path taken by modern science.<sup>14</sup>

The alienated Australian bush became witness to histories of outcasts, colonial violence and environmental mismanagement. It was peopled by marginalised folk who appeared to be of the earth itself, dwarfed by trees and rock formations that seemed all too human. Drysdale's *The rabbits* (1947) gives the bush a will of its own. Tree stumps and galvanized iron twist and turn in a grotesque echo of Antipodean space, host to a presumed timeless (Aboriginal, unknowable) essence or universal (European) existential truths.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Roberts D, 'Aura and aesthetics of nature', *Theist Eleven*, no. 36, 1993, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, pp. 127–137.

<sup>15</sup> See Catalano G, *An intimate Australia: The landscape & recent Australian art*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney, 1985; Drew P, 'Things Becoming', *Verandah: Embracing Space*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1992, pp. 180–198.

Behind this recurrent image of nature as mute witness lurked left-liberal guilt and anger for a displaced Aboriginal presence. Artists were starting to use landscape painting to express the violence of colonial settlement more directly (Drysdale's *Station blacks, Cape York*, 1953; Arthur Boyd's *Half-caste* series of 1959). At the same time, the western desert landscapes of Albert Namajira were becoming increasingly popular, and for the first time, bark paintings from the Top End were finding their way from the natural history museums to the aesthetic realm of the art gallery.

## The postmodern bush

From the early 1970s, the modernist reduction of aesthetics to a theory of art was reversed. Conceptual art and feminist aesthetics sought to understand the relationship between cognition and sensate perception. Artists returned the body to the bush, and physical immersion in nature was again valued as a basis for self-consciousness. Many open-form sculptures from this period resembled small-scaled, ecological systems, or enacted some change (installation, excavation, mark-making) in the immediate environment, as a means heightening our perception of place. The human body performed in the bush environment as just one element among others.

Australian environmental art was more modest than its US counterparts, with the exception of Christo and Jeanne-Claude's influential *Wrapped coast, Little Bay, one million square feet, Sydney, Australia* (1969) (Figure 11.3). A volunteer army of young artists and interested locals wrapped the rocky shoreline in sheets of erosion control mesh (a synthetic woven fibre usually manufactured for agricultural purposes). The project received broad public interest, and influenced many younger artists developing environmentally sensitive, site-specific work at the Mildura Sculpture Triennials from the early 1970s.

More radical projects embraced the local environment as active, sculptural material through site-specific work influenced by minimalism, post-object art and arte povera. In 1973 the Triennial extended to incorporate dry scrubland along the Murray River, and the event became known as Mildura Sculpturescape, under the direction of Tom

McCullough. John Davis wrapped trees with various materials along an informal pathway through the scrub (*Tree Piece*). Kevin Mortensen drew upon memories of dumped mining waste around Blinman in South Australia in fashioning four *Objects in a landscape* from coiled rope and bitumen, which also resembled gigantic hives, termite mounds or wombat scats set among the saltbush.



**Figure 11.3** Christo and Jeanne Claude, *Wrapped Coast, Little Bay, One Million Square Feet, Sydney, Australia, 1968–69*

Gelatin silver photograph 101.5 h x 127.0 w Gift of John Kaldor, 1982. Photo: Harry Shunk  
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Ross Grounds' *Ecological well* created a space for reorienting oneself quite literally within nature. The *Well* was a simple, excavated bunker, which also resembled a nest, cave, mine-shaft, or a womb. This habitat hosted a variety of inhabitants, matter and meanings. Frogs, mosquito larvae, fish, lizards and pigeons all moved in at various levels, taking the Emersonian ideal of a 'home in the wilderness' a step further. Like other sculptural projects at Mildura, *Ecological well* embedded human visitors as just another life-form amongst other, equally opportunistic visitors. For the 1975 Sculpturescape, Alec Danko scattered scraps of drawings,

letters and other debris in a four square metre space demarcated by string, in partial reference to the sculpture park's previous life as the local town tip, while Alison Cousland and Margaret Bell used their sculptural allotment to plant a garden.

The idea of planting or marking objects in the landscape, or subtly modifying natural features was a gentle means of reorienting oneself in space and time, installing ephemeral systems of order upon the apparent indifference of the bush. These projects paralleled the conceptual art 'rambles' of British artists Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Andy Goldsworthy, treading as lightly on the earth as their 19th century Romantic forebears.<sup>16</sup>

The natural materials used in these projects referred obdurately to themselves. The earth ceased being an inert material awaiting the artist's transformation, and instead became – at least partially – both subject and object of the creative process. Rocks, trees, soil, wind, water, fire and other environmental forces took creative centre-stage to illustrate the rationality of natural systems. This recognition brought humans down to scale as one of many generative elements in a dynamic ecology.

The urge to bunker down with the lizards extended the potential of the mimetic tradition through a sympathetic openness to nature, “experienced as something which speaks to us, affects and engages us”.<sup>17</sup> The artist joins the conversation through ritual gestures that mime natural forces. John Wolsley's later drawings extended this early desire “to copy, imitate, make models, explore difference, yield into and become other”.<sup>18</sup> Wolsley lays down his paper and canvas to allow the landscape to itself leave traces of scratching, rubbings and the brushing of burnt foliage across the page, recording the passage of the artist through the bush. He sees himself as a “facilitator for the landscape to

depict itself”, as Sasha Grishin observes, rather than as someone who depicts the landscape.<sup>19</sup>

## Gaia

These early performances and conceptual art projects often gendered nature as feminine. Performance artist Jill Orr described her 1981 exhibition, *Relics and rituals* in these terms:

I am always aware of a connection with the earth; things born of the earth, return to the earth, life needing the earth, but also its femaleness, mother-earth, upon which we establish rituals of living and coping: surviving.<sup>20</sup>

Nature as Mother Earth or Gaia is a connection shared by many cultures. Ceramicist and teacher Thancoupie (Thainakuith) has developed a feminine imagery for her pots, tiles and tile-based murals from 1971. These are derived from the sand stories and sand pictures the women draw for children on the beach at Napranum, a small community near Weipa in west Cape York Peninsula. The motif of the circle was particularly important, as she noted in 2003:

The circle symbolically (in) traditional tribal painting, that was on ground in areas here around Weipa, when on sand, the circle was a strong symbol and... the symbol of fire, the symbol of the world, the symbol of unity, the symbol of love, the symbol of mother. The circle is a very significant symbol in Aboriginal drawing, painting.<sup>21</sup>

Non-Indigenous artists have also conflated nature and the feminine. Dawne Douglas and Michael Liddle used Lovelock's Gaia theory of the earth as a super-organism, along with Lorenz's chaos theory of an inter-

<sup>19</sup> Grishin S. 'Sacred ecology', *Australian Art Review*, November 2005–Feb 2006, p. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Orr, J., artist's statement, quoted Anne Marsh, *Body and self: performance art in Australia*, Oxford University Press, Sydney, 1993 p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> Thancoupie, 'Stories and tradition in clay', *Story Place*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2003, p. 73. The artist has described her symbolism in similar terms for a 1986 exhibition in Houston, cited in Grace Cochrane, *The crafts movement in Australia: a history*. New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1992, p. 244.

<sup>16</sup> Culminating in Hamish Fulton's 1979 Biennale of Sydney visit and accompanying project *Tasmania: A Slow Journey*.

<sup>17</sup> Boeme G, in Roberts D, op. cit., 1993, p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> Taussig M, *Mimesis and alterity: a particular history of the senses*, Routledge: New York 1993, p. xiii.

connected world, as a literal design template for a walk-through park sculpture (*Vitae-Morte*, Gladstone, 1995).<sup>22</sup> A mounded spiral of stones was punctuated with vertical timbers of varying heights. These were recycled from an old wharf that once serviced Gladstone's meat packing industry, a reminder of past industry, sustainability and lost forests.

For many artists, however, the gendered view of nature as feminine posed philosophical and political problems. Heated debates through the 1980s had sought to clarify a less reductive formulation of nature and female agency. In western Cartesian thought, nature has been to culture what body or matter has been to the mind, the feminine to the masculine. Many North American feminists found this gendering of nature empowering, and used it to articulate the costs of presumptuously separating human action from the natural world. Australians were less inclined to privilege women in an eco-aware practice. Nonetheless, as writer and curator Julie Ewington noted in 1994, a predominance of women artists used natural materials and forces. "This agency is important", she argued, for "it is in direct contradiction to the influential western notion, at least as old as the philosophy of Aristotle, that women and the earth alike are passive, receptive, nurturing vessels, properly dominated by men."<sup>23</sup> Yet the artworks Ewington championed – such as Joan Grounds' open-air fire sculptures, installations and experimental film *We should call this a living room* (1972, with Alocs Danko), Joan Brassill's investigations of immaterial, electro-magnetic fields and Bonita Ely's longstanding research on the Murray River – shied away from retrogressive assumptions about femininity, masculinity, nature and creativity. Ely's 1980 *Murray River punch*, for instance, parodied both nature and kitchen goddesses in a cooking demonstration in Adelaide's Rundle Mall, concocting a mixed drink for passing shoppers (Figure 11.4). As the blenders whizzed, the artist cheerfully explained the punch's recipe ingredients: phosphate compound

fertilizers, human faeces and agricultural chemicals were added to the mix, served up with a sprinkle of rabbit dung as garnish.



**Figure 11.4** Bonita Ely, *Murray River Punch* (1981)

Performance at Rundle Mall, Adelaide, 1980. Photograph from the artist's collection, reproduced from Ann Marsh, *Body and Self: performance art in Australia, op. cit.*

## Art Activism

In the 1970s and early 1980s, eco-art was commonly aligned with the Trades Union Green Bans and campaigns for land and sea rights, anti-nuke and anti-uranium mining. Even the die-hard 'twigs and string' sculpture hippies at Mildura framed their work in political terms when calling for an artists' boycott of French sponsorship and participation in the 1973 Mildura Sculpturescape, in protest against French nuclear testing in the Pacific.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> John Davis, Clive Murray-White and Ti Parks initiated the artists' protest, which prompted heated debate amongst participating Australian (and French) artists, and which postponed the show (but not the nuclear testing). See Sturgeon G, *The Story of the Mildura Sculpture Triennial, 1961–1982*, Mildura City Council, Mildura, 1985.

<sup>22</sup> This artist-scientist team founded The ArtScience Interface (art accelerating cultural change by visualising philosophical concepts/scientific awareness of environment). See Lucy Grace, 'Vitae-morte: environmental art in Queensland', *Art Monthly Australia*, October 1995, pp. 15–17.

<sup>23</sup> Ewington J, 'In the wild: nature, culture, gender in installation art', *Dissidence: feminism and the arts 1970–90*, (ed. Catriona Moore) Allen & Unwin, 1994, pp. 228–9.

Tasmanian writers Peter Grant and Jonathon Holmes recall how romantic landscape imagery was an essential component of early conservation battles, which were fought over the meaning of wild places (Lake Peddar, 1972; the Franklin River, 1983). Olga Trucher and Peter Dombrovskis' photographs, reproduced on posters and calendars, "showed scenes most urban dwellers would never visit in person, [but] they communicated an idea and an ideal of wilderness that worked more powerfully on the imagination than any number of arguments could have".<sup>25</sup> They were used in full colour newspaper advertisements in the lead-up to the 1983 election ("Would you vote for a party that would destroy this?"). The iconic power of Dombrovskis' *Rock Island bend*, Ian MacLean later added, partly rests on the fact that "The sublime is an aesthetic of both catastrophe and hope".<sup>26</sup>

Despite its popularity during the Franklin campaign, Dombrovskis' style of 'fine print and singular image' landscape photography soon came under criticism for an essentialist rendition of Mother Nature, the evasion of ongoing Indigenous habitation and its easy co-option by the advertising and tourism industries. Sculptor Julie Gough (Trawlwoolway) later reminded audiences that the Tasmanian wilderness has never been terra incognita or terra nullius. Her installations suggest stories in the landscape which pre-date the old-growth forests.<sup>27</sup> *The whispering sands (ebb tide)* (1998) locates colonial conflict as a part of the evolving Tasmanian landscape (Figure 11.5). Cut-out figures of named individuals associated with the scientific colonial project stand revealed then submerged by water as the tide ebbs and flows along the shores of Eaglehawk Neck.



**Figure 11.5** Julie Gough, *The whispering sands (ebb tide)* (detail) (1998)

16 life-size poker worked ply figures installed at Eaglehawk Neck

From an Indigenous point of view, humans are fully imbricated in the natural world. The idea of an abjected space of utter wildness or 'wilderness' makes no sense here. The colonial conception of Tasmania as Ultima Thule was also taken up in Bea Maddock's *Terra Spiritus... with a darker shade of pale* (1993–98), an ambitious, delicately traced

<sup>25</sup> Grant P, 'Wild art at the world's end', *Artlink*, vol. 21, no. 1, March 2001, p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> McLean I, 'Sublime futures: eco-art and the return of the real in Peter Dombrovskis, John Wolseley and Andy Goldsworthy', *Transformations*, no. 5, December 2002, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Grant P, 'Wild art at the world's end', *Artlink* 21 no. 1, 2001, p. 17. See also Langton M, 'What do we mean by wilderness? Wilderness and terra nullius in Australian Art' *The Sydney Papers*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1996, pp. 11–31.

circumscription of the island. This 51-sheet uber-panorama (“A circumlittoral incised drawing of the entire coastline of Tasmania”) combined and condensed the topographical features of the coast drawn from ordinance survey maps (“worked with hand-drawn local ochre over letterpress and finished with hand-drawn script”) and is inscribed by Palawa terms for country.<sup>28</sup>

## The lie of the land<sup>29</sup>

New Left’ cultural politics fragmented from the mid-1980s as the economic, trade and industrial reforms of the Hawke–Keating government dominated mainstream politics, whilst neo-liberal economic doctrines swept aside older traditions of industry (and environmental) regulation. Environmental concerns languished at the fringes of social attention, and the radical art of the masses, the street, forest and community no longer seemed to be politically effective.<sup>30</sup> Many retreated from activist art to understand the theoretical shape of cultural politics in a post-industrial world. The contours of 1980s cultural politics were sketched in academic and gallery contexts; art and working life projects, poster collectives and street performances were perceived to be no longer at the cutting edge of art practice.

An increasingly complex, post-modern visual culture was no place for ‘lost world’ nostalgia, ‘one world’ humanism or aesthetic naivety. The call was out for a more critical, post-modern landscape project that would bring “the visual representation of the landscape into a confrontation with the symbolic system of language.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Title page, Maddock B, *Terra spiritus...with a darker shade of pale* (1993–98), National Gallery of Australia Collection.

<sup>29</sup> This sub-title is taken from an exhibition critically deconstructing the colonial ideology of the Australian landscape tradition (Powerhouse Museum, curator Ann Stephen, 1992).

<sup>30</sup> In the North American context, see Smith S, ‘Beyond Green’, *beyond green: towards a sustainable art*, exhibition catalogue, Smart Museum of Art, Chicago and Independent Curators International, New York, 2006, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> Holmes J, ‘She’s a moving place all right: contemporary visual arts in Tasmania’, *Studio International*, vol. 196, no. 1002, October 1983, p. 45, also Bann S, ‘Art into landscape: the background to contemporary land art’, *Praxis M*, Spring 1984, cited

To make audiences think actively about their environment, artists sought to distance or confound the codes of expressive realism and the picturesque landscape. Many looked back to feminist, conceptual and Indigenous art projects of the 1970s that had complicated simplistic nature imagery through use of community research and oral history, photomontage, collage and installation. In the sphere of documentary and landscape photography, for instance, Virginia Coventry’s 1979 Biennale of Sydney installation had assembled photographic documents, newspaper clippings and hand-written information: *Whyballa: not a document and Here and there: concerning the nuclear power industry*, (Figure 11.6). Jon Rhodes’ photographic series *Just another sunrise?* (1974–6) similarly brought together documentary photography and textual information to chronicle the battle over Nabalco’s mining lease in the years immediately preceding the 1976 Northern Territory Land Rights Act. In 1976 Michael Gallagher had relinquished the editorial power of the documentary photographer when invited by Yunggora community elders to document their struggle against Amax’s oil drilling program on traditional lands at Nookanbah.<sup>32</sup>

Chips Macinoly, Marie McMahon, Jan Mackay, Michael Callaghan, Ruth Waller and others extended their 1970s activist work with the Earthworks and later Redback Graphix poster workshops in similar community-based projects in regional and remote Australia. Projects like these had framed the landscape within visual, historical, political, economic and legal conflicts of interest. They declared interrogative positions for artist, subject and audience to counter the perceived univocal transmission of documentary information.

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Jonathon Holmes, ‘Blindspot: regional histories in Australia’, *Artlink*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2006, p. 68.

<sup>32</sup> See Hawke S & Gallagher M, *Nookanbah: whose land, whose law*, Freemantle Arts Centre Press, Perth, 1989.

the United States in 1982, also exploited the virtuosity of 19th century landscape photography in haunting, art-historical visions of paradise lost (Figure 11.7). He works with and against the bravura of the photographic landscape tradition as a visual match for the hubris of Tasmanian hydro-electricity schemes.<sup>34</sup>



**Figure 11.6** Virginia Coventry, *Here and there: concerning the nuclear power industry*, (1979)

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Vision and disbelief: Biennale of Sydney (curator: Bill Wright). Installation of eight collages arranged in two rows of four, each with gelatin silver photographs (some copy photographs) captioned in decal lettering, each with extensive inscriptions, some with collaged photocopied newspaper, with loose photocopies of newspaper stories placed on an adjacent table. Reproduced by permission of VISCOPY Ltd, Sydney, 2007

Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Longstanding fine art traditions also came under fire. Franklin campaign veteran Raymond Arnold reflected upon the art historical and colonial origins of his panoramic landscapes, whilst reminding contemporary audiences of other encroachments that human beings have made on the landscape either through mining, forestry or hydro-electric schemes (*Florentine Valley*, 1983).<sup>33</sup> David Stephenson, arriving in Tasmania from

<sup>33</sup> Holmes, op. cit., 2006, p. 65.



**Figure 11.7** David Stephenson, *Traveller Above Sea and City* (1985)

Silver gelatin print, 100 x 150cms

Catherine Rogers' photographs similarly prompt the aesthetic contemplation of scientific (ecological, physical, chemical) phenomena related to flooding and clear-felling, packaging nature as an object of language and desire. This post-colonial studio-lore was first road-tested in Ian Burn's sly, painterly proposition: "A landscape is not something you look at but something you look through", etched on

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45.

the plexiglass surface of *Homage to Albert (south through Heavytree Gap)* (1989) and extended in his *Value added landscapes* series of 1995–6.

From the early 1980s, the landscape has been considered as a site where environmental phenomena are registered, rather than as a window on the world. Janet Laurence's *Veil of trees* (1999 with Jisuk Han) was a sculptural, value-added landscape encapsulating many of these ideas. Laurence planted 100 eucalyptus trees along the spine of the Lawson site of Sydney's Domain. Red forest gums, originally on the site, were interspersed with large sheets of glass etched with fragments of writing about trees in Australian literature, and filled with native tree seed, resins, honey and ash. Sue Best describes the work's linearity as akin to a pathway or passage, though its open structure (veils) serves as:

at once a screen or window through which the landscape passes, and a kind of writing surface, both for the veils and twists of substance, and for the tree poems... The beholder is moved between the panels, and between the literal landscape and the landscape of the imagination, the land imbued with cultural meaning... into the imaginings of landscape that is part of place formation.<sup>35</sup>

With the demise of the open sculpture aesthetic by the late 1970s, the influence of anti-humanist and post-structuralist theory and the lure of electronic technologies, the door shut on the old aesthetic fantasy of 'natura naturans', with its attendant redemptive or reconciliatory artistic gestures and rituals. Nature lurked in the galleries through the 1980s and early 1990s in a repressed state. Spectacular and highly crafted indoor site-machines accented fragility and loss. Robyn Backen's *Sprung* (1991), for instance, transformed the primordial, Edenic garden into a fetishised souvenir. A single, elegant Azolla fern – the lowest order of plant – was 'grown' in the coils of a spare, rusty mattress-spring, barely maintained as a living system through the minimum required light and agonisingly slow droplets of water. Other gallery-based projects by Janet Laurence, Joan Brassil, Joan Grounds and Joyce Hinterding recalled the wonder of the science laboratory, space observatory and natural history museum.

<sup>35</sup> Best S, 'Immersion and distraction: the environmental works of Janet Laurence', *Art and Australia*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2000, p. 88.

These artists variously researched a variety of changeable and unstable, non-permanent materials (liquids, rope, lead, chemicals, electricity) as catalysts for chance, alchemical transformations.

Later in the decade, a number of unsustainable, gallery-based garden installations in the United States prompted critics to loudly question the value of bringing nature into the gallery. It was argued that slick packaging wrapped around environmental crises was not necessarily edifying.<sup>36</sup> In Australia, however, this has not been such a big issue. The gallery system remains politically relevant today as a platform for ecological communication largely due to the force of the Aboriginal art revolution. Indigenous curators like Dion Mundine, Hetti Perkins and Brenda Croft maintain an inter-connection between gallery art and the political realm of environmental decision-making. Over the past two decades, they have exploited the aesthetic power of formal gallery installations and the cultural power of the museum sector to publicise, educate and authorise connections between Indigenous art, land and sea claims and customary law. To emphasise their point, Yolgnu senior artist Djambawa Marawilli re-stated the claims made by his people's 1963 bark petition, warning audiences at the 2006 Biennale of Sydney to remember that Yirrkala bark paintings have a broader purpose than international gallery artefacts: their status as native title documents in a current battle with the Northern Territory tourist and fishing industries.<sup>37</sup>

## The concept of 'country'

Indigenous artworks brought post-colonial frameworks to bear on gallery-based and site-specific eco-art. They showed how European regional landscape traditions have been premised on the invasion and ruination of other peoples' country. These traditions had located Aboriginality in the realm of the natural, as their mythic precondition. The European understanding of culture and nature as mutually exclusive, had prompted radical artists of the 1950s to seek atonement, and those of the 1970s to try to recover a presumed lost connection.

<sup>36</sup> Avgikos J, 'Green Peace', *Artforum*, April 1991, pp. 104–110.

<sup>37</sup> Marawilli D, artist's statement, *Biennale visitor's handbook*, 2006, p. 21. See related statements in *Saltnator: Yirrkala bark paintings of sea country*, Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre and Jennifer Isaacs Publishing, Yirrkala, 1999.

Indigenous art and philosophy hastened the rejection of this dualism, and the romantic search for 'harmony between people and nature' was re-cast in the activist framework of social and environmental justice.<sup>38</sup> Much of the art from Indigenous communities of northern Australia and the Pacific islands employ local materials, are community based, activist-oriented and relate to long-held beliefs that everything is inter-related.<sup>39</sup> This work has helped link ecology and art to identity and cultural survival. Conversely, loss of identity is seen to go hand in hand with environmental degradation.<sup>40</sup> This identity remains extremely diverse, for Indigenous artworks express the viewpoints of six hundred or so language groups in Australia, and therefore cannot be reduced to an essentialist art historical concept.

By acknowledging these counter-traditions, the European idea of 'landscape' has broadened to the concept of 'country'. 'Country' is a handy, European term respectful of Indigenous land ownership and custodianship, whilst recognising the potential of non-Indigenous stewardship. It signifies post-colonial relations with the natural world which acknowledge Indigenous, colonial and anti-colonial myths and images, as South Australian arts writer and novelist Stephanie Radok muses, "layered on top of each other to make a richer, deeper place".<sup>41</sup> Canberra-based art historian, Mary Eagle has also observed that in thinking of country:

<sup>38</sup> As noted in an international context by US writer Victor Margolin, 'Reflections on art & sustainability', *Beyond green: toward a sustainable art*, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago and Independent Curators International, New York, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> So said Julie Ewington, then education officer at the Queensland Art Gallery, in her paper 'Installation and environment in South East Asia', Topographies Conference, Centre for Environmental and Ecological Art, Townsville, 5-7 August, 1996, as reported by Chris Downie, 'Topographies', *Periphery*, no. 25, November 1995, p. 10.

<sup>40</sup> This point was made by Perc Tucker Gallery Director Ross Searle in his paper 'The Art of Survival', at the 1996 Topographies Conference. Chris Downie, op. cit. 1995, p. 10.

<sup>41</sup> Radok S, 'Pip Stokes: Unfolding the night', *Art and Australia*, vol. 39, no. 4, (June-July-Aug 2002) p. 544.

[there is] no divide between representations of land and of people, hence no 'landscape' in the western sense of an abstract scene waiting to be filled ... The Aborigines envisioned journeys and represented them in songs and images according to the waterholes, food resources, people, land rights, rites and permissions involved.<sup>42</sup>

In most Aboriginal communities, Indigenous law maintains distinctions between visual representations, dance, ritual, poetry, song and a ritualised use of language, and dictates their use in declaring the central theme of possession, identity and custodianship. Indigenous art has helped others understand how the law codifies and maps obligations to the land.

This has helped raise the standard of Australian 'landliteracy', as Ray Norman terms the ability to read and appreciate the signs of health (and ill-health) in the landscape.<sup>43</sup> A good example is the way Lockhart River painter Samantha Hobson reads the land in environmental, as well as cultural, economic and community terms (*Burnt grass season*, 2002). Balkanu's 'Caring for Country' manager Barry Hunter explains traditional agricultural practices that have helped the Top End's potential carbon trade economy:

"Firestick farming (burning off), is a well-documented technique Aboriginal people used to renew and manage the land ... In the north of Australia it is carried out at the beginning of the cool, dry season. Firestick farming serves two main purposes. One is to decrease the chance of a wildfire by reducing the vegetation; this vegetation could be fuel for a major fire. Secondly, fire is used to clear the country and encourage new growth. This new growth attracts wildlife, and such as kangaroos and other species, which are drawn to nibble on the soft new shoots sprouting after the fire."<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Eagle M, 'Traditions of representing the land in Aboriginal art', *Art & Australia*, vol. 37, no. 2, (Dec-Jan-Feb 1999-2000) p. 236.

<sup>43</sup> Norman R, 'Reading the waters', *Artlink*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2001, pp. 10-13.

<sup>44</sup> Hunter B, *Story Place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest*, exhibition catalogue, Cairns Regional Gallery, 2003 p.28. See also Frew W, 'Use Top End to trade in carbon, say scientists', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23-24 June, 2007, p. 6.

Peter Debnam notes that Hobson's *Burn grass season*, along with her *Strived* (2001) and *Bust 'im up* (2000) can also be read:

as a metaphor for the volatile social conditions that often undermine the community. There is, however, an underlying optimism that 'burning off' also involves purging and cleansing – the growth of fresh grass and new hope.<sup>45</sup>

The concept of country also allows artists to reinterpret useful elements from the western landscape tradition. For instance, the ambiguous, moral discourse of unity, progress and nation afforded by the panoramic vista remains a powerful visual tool. Today, the panorama might still be proprietorial and moral; however it is often metaphorically linked with the viewpoint of Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History', propelled forward into the future whilst looking back, appalled at the environmental and human wreckage of the modern, industrial age. Western Australian photographer Richard Woldendorp's stunning aerial panoramas occasionally stop us in the tracks of this historical viewpoint. Newspaper photo-journalists more regularly return this sorry gaze in panoramic shots of the rural wreckage left by agricultural industrialisation, the cornerstone of Australian modernity. We look out over parched catchment areas and degraded watercourses, the spooky colour coding of bleached coral or salt encrusted soil with a guilty sense of 'proprietary' responsibility.

The intimate landscape's expression of local attachment and productive stewardship also resonates in current projects on agricultural sustainability. Today's intimate bush claims ancestry in both Indigenous bush tucker ceremonies and the English landscape garden tradition. It expresses a dynamic and productive relation between art and nature, where nature aids art, and the artist/gardener aids the creation of future nature.<sup>46</sup> The genre's emotional investment in a corner of nature was the experiential focus of 'Karra: Karrawirraparri Red Gum Forest River' (2000) Adelaide Festival, curator Vivonne Thwaites). Artists Chris de

<sup>45</sup> Debnam P, *Story places*, 2003, p. 101.

<sup>46</sup> Instances of art-nature co-productivity range widely, from projects associated with *Waternooks*, SA Country Arts Trust, Adelaide, (curator Catherine Murphy) to the native grasses garden planting at the Casula Powerhouse in Liverpool, South-west Sydney, regularly harvested for community grass-weaving workshops.

Rosa, Agnes Love and Jo Crawford provided a quieter space within the Festival, by installing a bark-scattered, forest bush track in the festival's artspace. The gallery bushwalk implicitly lead outside to the old, gnarled trees along the nearby River Torrens, some pre-dating white settlement, and bearing scars of Aboriginal timber-collecting activities<sup>47</sup>. The settler-landscape themes of 'bush enchantment' and the artisanal knowledge of the artist and crafts worker all resonate with the important Indigenous lesson that ecological communication is both cognate and sensate.

Mary Eagle, writing on Emily Kngwarreye's *Big yam dreaming* (1995) describes how the canvas is worked from the outside in, rendering the yams' journey as they spread underground (Figure 11.8). Kngwarreye painted at arm's reach, demonstrating her knowledge, power and connections with the yam's life force: "Unlike her western counterparts she neither had nor required an encompassing view through looking. She looked at her work from the point of view of a woman digging for yam tubers."<sup>48</sup> Painting as tracing with fingers, Eagle continues, "Her hands understood her subject through a lifetime." The practical philosophy embedded in this artwork educates Australians about tacit knowledge, ownership and responsibility for country.



**Figure 11.8** Emily Kngwarreye, *Big yam dreaming* (1995)

<sup>47</sup> Vivonne Thwaites, 'Karra: Karrawirraparri red gum forest river', *Artlink*, vol. 31, no. 1, March 2001, p. 36.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Eagle, op cit. 1999–2000, p. 236

Acrylic on canvas, 291.1 x 801.8 cm, presented through the Art Foundation of Victoria by Donald and Janet Holt and family, Governors, 1995. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Copyright Emily Kngwarreye, 1995. Reproduced by permission of VISCOPY Ltd, Sydney, 2007

The inland has come into its own as a positive rather than a negative space. As Hetti Perkins and Hannah Fink noted when introducing the 2000 exhibition, *Papunya: genesis and genesis*, marking the centenary of Federation, one (pastoral) landscape tradition (Heidelberg) has given way to another – “an appreciation of the spiritual resonance of the desert”.<sup>49</sup> The well-established art centres of the Western Desert helped audiences mentally repopulate the existential void of the modernist heartland.

This opened the space for renewed interest in the anti-colonial, dryland visions of Drysdale, Boyd, Nolan and Namatjira. Tracey Moffatt’s photographic series *Up in the sky* (1997) revisited Drysdale’s cross-cultural badlands. Her associated 1990 film *Night cries*, which is in part an imaginary sequel to Charles Chauvel’s 1955 assimilationist epic *Jedda*, vividly evokes home as heartbeat and prison, mother–daughter relations and stolen generations. It was filmed in a studio set against a Namatjira-style backdrop (*Jedda*’s opening credits were themselves projected against a generic ‘Namatjira’ watercolour).

Susan Norrie has also often evoked a Drysdale-esque orchestration of natural disaster and human menace. Her 2006 video *Black wind* is an elegiac tribute to the Aboriginal Tent Embassy haunting Canberra’s parliamentary triangle, and also to memories of nuclear testing at Maralinga, with its legacies of dispersal, blindness and sickness (Figure 11.9). The camera slowly rolls out an extended drive-by dolly-shot of the wind-swept campsite, stopping, starting up again, moving in and around tents and washing-lines to again circle the beltway in an eddy of movement, like wind moving across country. Norrie’s 2003 video installation *UNDERTOPIA* similarly surrounds the spectator with slow-moving, ominous imagery of wonderous and ominous environmental phenomena (tempests, bubbling mud pools, dust storms, cherry

<sup>49</sup> Perkins H & Fink H, ‘Covering ground: the corporeality of landscape’, *Art & Australia*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Sept–Oct–Nov 2000), p. 75. See also Langton M, ‘Sacred geography’, in Perkins H & Fink H, *Papunya Tula: genesis and genesis*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2000, pp. 258–267.

blossoms, environmental disasters) and equally inexplicable scientific experiments.<sup>50</sup> Neither seem to hook up – a theme that Norrie has developed over a decade of investigating environmental phenomena and human prediction. *HAI/OC*, her video installation at the Australian Pavilion for the 2007 Venice Biennale, continues to explore our dreadfully dislocated environmental times. As the artist explains of the Venice project, “I continue to deal with my ongoing interest in thermodynamics, which is an indicator of disorder within our times. This project is located in the region of the ‘ring of fire’ – a glimpse into worlds which are both geologically and politically volatile ... Indonesia acts as a microcosm for the broader condition of the world.”<sup>51</sup>



<sup>50</sup> Norrie S, *UNDERTOPIA*, Art Gallery of New South Wales Contemporary Art Projects, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> Norrie S, *HAI/OC*, Artist’s Statement, Au3 Venice Biennale 2007, Australia Council [www.australiavenecebiennale.com.au/content/view/full/68/115/](http://www.australiavenecebiennale.com.au/content/view/full/68/115/), accessed 13 June 2007.

**Figure 11.9** Susan Norrie, *Black mind* (2006)  
DVD installation, Mori Gallery, Sydney

## An aesthetic green audit?

Concern for the environmental impact of artworks, processes and objects has prompted informal green audits, re-igniting and extending the 1980s industrial health and safety campaigns of the state-based Artworkers' Unions. Studio residencies now screen pets, the use and disposal of toxic materials and the removal or alteration of flora. "What's wrong with tying this artwork to this tree?" or "What do you normally do with the waste toxic resins you use in your work?" are now common questions.<sup>52</sup>

Could we also make a metaphoric green audit of art writing? At the very least, critics are starting to ascertain whether an artwork is simply a passive object or an active force. Is it something that is simply created, or is it something that creates? A renewed emphasis on creation leads to viewing the panoply of eco-art projects with a more creative aesthetic response than one derived solely from traditional curatorial and critical frameworks.

In the field of public art, for instance, David Cranswick observes a shift from 'plonk art' (object-in-the-space) to art as restoration ecology. This shift has dovetailed with the emerging eco disciplines that are also concerned with the study of relationships, supplanting outmoded ideas about humans being dominant and separate from the places in which they live. Artists now share knowledge within collaborative, interdisciplinary teams for ecological restoration.<sup>53</sup>

For instance, Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford's 1996 *The memory line* called upon local residents to help plant a 270- by 4-metre expanse of rye-corn grass meandering along what was the original course of a creek in Fairfield, a suburb of south west Sydney (Figure 11.10). This early stage of Fairfield City Council's 'Restoring the Waters'

<sup>52</sup> Grant P, op cit. 2005, p. 39.

<sup>53</sup> Cranswick D, 'Bridging art and ecology', *Artlink*, vol. 21, no. 1, March 2001.

environmental rehabilitation project aimed to get the locals involved, and the grass line was the first stage in the removal of a concrete storm water drain and restoration of a sustainable creek line.<sup>54</sup> The community planting successfully reversed local cultural and environmental amnesia, and highlighted the vulnerability of the urban landscape. Such projects are evaluated for the strength of their inter-related environmental and aesthetic dimensions. It is difficult, however, to formalise imaginative resources for evaluating art as ecological communication. As United States art historian Victor Margolin argues:

We will need a new aesthetic to embrace the three categories of object, participation, and action without privileging the conventional formal characteristics of objects. In this aesthetic, the distinctions between art, design, and architecture will blur as critics discover new relations between the value of form and the value of use.<sup>55</sup>

This aesthetic is necessarily contingent, and could never be a singular category embracing all objects or participatory actions. Nor can it be set down in advance; rather, like feminist aesthetics, it develops a descriptive, evaluative and analytic purchase in tandem with specific art projects, audiences and contexts. It would be silly, for instance, to set out *a priori* aesthetic frameworks for projects that welcome the potential loss of control over medium and message that comes with working in public, as in the unscripted, interactive processes of Squatspace's popular anti-development *Tours of beauty* (2004–6) through the backstreets, community centres and housing commission apartments of inner-Sydney Redfern and Waterloo.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Lynn V, Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford: The choreography of time, light and water, *Art & Australia*, vol. 39, no. 2, Dec 2001-Jan/Feb 2002, pp. 238–247.

<sup>55</sup> Margolin V, 'Reflections on art and sustainability', in *Beyond green: toward a sustainable art*, Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago and Independent Curators International, New York, 2006, p. 29.

<sup>56</sup> Ihlein I, 'Art as situated experience', *If you see something, say something*, (ed. de Souza K & Begg Z), exhibition project documentation and catalogue, Sydney/Melbourne, January-February 2007, p. 9. For a broader appraisal of related activist projects see Dean B, 'Seeing what we need to see', *realtime*, no. 78, April-May 2007, p. 46.



**Figure 11.10** Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford, *The memory line* (1996)

Corn grass, 270 x 4 x 1 m. Clear Paddock Creek, Fairfield, Sydney. For the Australian conservation and 'Restoring the Waters' Project with Schaffer Bamsley Landscape Architects. Photo: Ian Hobbs.

Compositional unity, dynamic symmetry, aesthetic emotion, truth to materials, sculptural presence and the tonal nuances of the zone system are among the many criteria used to discuss modern art. Eco-aesthetics introduces values like sustainability, biodiversity, environmental activism and Indigenous community protocols, although the critical and art historical language for these seemingly instrumental outcomes have yet

to be developed beyond their use as simple descriptors.<sup>57</sup> Undoubtedly, our critical language will broaden as authors, subjects, objects and processes change. Bush tucker, salinity, tidal patterns and rainfall are now common artistic motifs. Artistic processes have expanded to include direct seeding, hand-planting, feral pest control and water sampling.<sup>58</sup> Adelaide artist Gavin Malone proposes a common view:

It is easy to consider a sculptural form to be a river valley, paint strokes to be the planting of trees, shrubs and grasses, the grubbing of fennel and poisoning of blackberry to be the editing of superfluous content. But bring in others – collaboration with engineers, architects, urban planners, landscape planners – those who influence the form of our public space and infrastructure. Then another layer – ecologists, botanists, cultural planners, and importantly, artists ... To manipulate an urban, rural, or remote landscape, to change its aesthetic from degraded to sustainable, to mediate and act on the way people understand and live in the bio-physical world, can be and is art.<sup>59</sup>

Many of the projects discussed here share a speculative, working framework of environmental forces or elements. Given the space available, let us elaborate how just one of these elements could be used to help frame a 'green aesthetics'. No doubt the most important element in Australia at present is water. Stephanie Radok has already conveyed the poetic force of water as an important motif in contemporary art:

Art that concerns itself with some manifestation of water demonstrates what can be considered a new phase in Australian art about the land. After Mabo, ... after the Aboriginal art that makes known the daily patterns of almost every region of Australia, this land can never be seen in the same way again. Aboriginal land, occupied land, land covered with stories, births and deaths, it is yet ready to receive more

<sup>57</sup> The positive value of critical description has, however, been ably argued by New Zealand art critic Justin Paton in 'The shadow economy', *Art Monthly Australia*, no. 200, June 2007, pp. 9–11.

<sup>58</sup> Radok S & Malone G, 'Remediation as art', *Artlink*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2005, p. 47.

<sup>59</sup> Malone G, 'The Ecology of Art or Art as Ecology', *Broadsheet*, vol. 27, no. 7, Summer 1998, p. 5.

living and to deepen our understanding of what was and may still be. Our understanding of this history makes both bitter and sweet our current occupation. Each of us arguably comes from river people, or plains people, book people or boat people, people of the night, of the fish, of the mountains or of the sea. Many of us do not know what kind of people are ours or where we belong but perhaps we can, by listening to our intuitions and feelings, understand where we fit in and take responsibility for the effects on the world produced by our actions and ways of thinking.<sup>60</sup>

### Saltwater

Radok implies that water is a productive, scarce, sacred and contested element.<sup>61</sup> Beyond that, we can make no easy generalities. Yolgnu artists, for instance, relate the poetics of water to specific actions on land and sea rights in their region. A case in point is the 1999-2001 travelling exhibition *Saltwater: Yirrkala bark paintings of sea and country*, which was prompted by Garranali custodian Wäka Munungurr's discovery of an illegal barramundi fishing camp hidden amongst the mangroves near the homeland community of Bäniyala (Figure 11.11). As Andrew Blake, art coordinator at Yirrkala's Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre explains:

This apparently small incident began the monumental story of the production of 80 bark paintings – set against the backdrop of a national legal and political maelstrom. While these barks were being painted, we saw the historic recognition of Native Title in the sea by the Federal Court one day ... and its extinguishment by the Parliament literally two days later. Through all this, the events set in train by Wäka's discovery continued as inexorably as an incoming tide. These works and this catalogue have been brought in by that tide.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Radok S, 'A water or a light', *Artlink*, vol. 21, no. 1, March 2001, p. 47.

<sup>61</sup> See also Langton M, 'Waterscapes: the social and spiritual construction of water in Aboriginal societies' In David B, Barker B and McNiven IJ (eds.) *The social archaeology of indigenous societies*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 2006.

<sup>62</sup> Blake A, 'Preface', *Saltwater: Yirrkala bark paintings of sea country*, Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre and Jennifer Isaacs Publishing, Yirrkala, 1999, p. 6.



**Figure 11.11** Miniyawany Yunupinu, From Biranybirany (c. 1996–1997) Painted strings/bark, 178 x 107cms, reproduced in the exhibition catalogue *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country*, Buku-Larrngay Mulka Centre and Jennifer Isaacs Publishing, Yirrkala, 1999

Floating an exhibition of bark paintings about Sea Rights on an incoming political tide is a powerful ecological aesthetic platform. The image of estuarine ebb and flow provides a poetic, cross-cultural metaphor for reconciliation and extends the concept of Native Title to the sea. Curator Djon Mundine explains how

The Yolgnu use water as a tool, a model for philosophising. The estuarine area of a river has different plant species along its bank. The constant renewal where fresh and salt mix and

return is known as ganma. This is used as a metaphor to describe a different kind of mixing: mixing Balanda thought from overseas (saltwater) and indigenous wisdom from the land (fresh water) to create new life and ways of thinking.<sup>63</sup>

The image of eddying, converging or blending philosophical currents carries political implications in other coastal waters. In the metropolitan context of super-marina real estate, Sydney artist Nicole Ellis images the ocean as a conduit “for ideas and bodies, history & knowledge ... How does water carry the memories of those who lived on its shores and even on the water and below the waterline ... ?”<sup>64</sup> Ellis worked with James McGrath to digitally tabulate the contentious submarine spaces of Sydney Harbour for the ‘Green Olympics’ Arts Festival. *Tidal vectors: 2000* mapped the congested patterns of boat hulls, bordered by more streamlined underwater currents moving around landforms and the contours of harbour inlets and channels (Figures 11.12a & 11.12b).

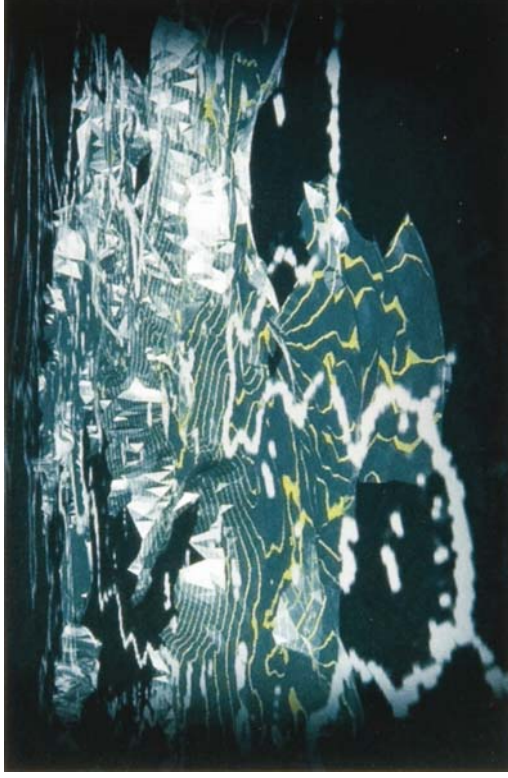
On the Tasmanian coast, the laissez-faire mixing of seawater and introduced material angers artist Jane Quon, a self-proclaimed ‘boat person’. Quon projects digitalised photographic images on industrial structures to communicate the threat to Tasmania’s marine environment from dumped ship ballast. Her 2000 installation *Ballast exchange* was developed from a combination of phenomenological and scientific research on coastal ecology gained through her work as a diver (Figure 11.13). Geographer Pete Hay writes:

... she has seen the inshore ravaged by proliferating Pacific starfish (*Asterias amurensis*), the European green crab (*Carcinus maenas*), a Japanese seaweed (*Undaria pinnatifida*), and toxic dinoflagellates, all introduced per the agency of dumped ballast water. Islands are especially vulnerable to the perturbation wrought by invasive species, diversity being typically lower and ecological relationships less resilient than on continental landmasses.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Mundine D, ‘Saltwater’, *Saltwater: Yirrkala Bark Paintings of Sea Country*, 1999, p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> Radok S, op. cit., 2001, p. 49.

<sup>65</sup> *Ballast Exchange* was devised for the Bass Strait Forum in Launceston, December 2000. See Peter Hay, ‘Dinoflagellates, and Arr: Jane Quon’s Marine Installations’, *Artlink*, vol. 21, no. 1, March 2001, p. 19 Jane Quon, ‘Phenomenology and artistic



(a)

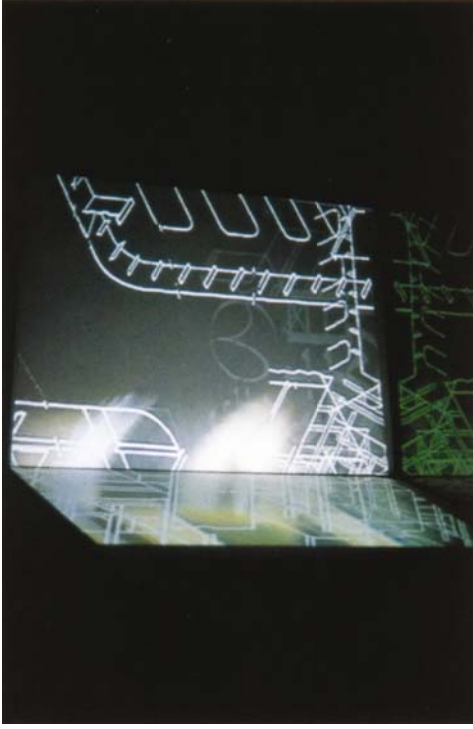


(b)

**Figure 11.12a and 11.12b** Nicole Ellis (with James McGrath), *Tidal vectors: 2000*

Digital installation, Museum of Sydney, Olympic Arts Festival, image courtesy of the artists and dl-ux media/arts 2000. Permission by Viscopy Ltd, Sydney, 2007

praxis: an application to marine ecological communication’, *Leontario*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2005, pp. 185–191.



**Figure 11.13** Jane Quon, *Ballast exchange* (detail), 2000

Mixed media installation of polystyrene, aluminium, steel cable and fittings, glass, video, slide projection, sound, 240 x 240 x 420 cm

From the Top End to the Southern Ocean, fluid metaphors describe processes of marine pollution, historical flotsam and more productive mixing of thought, information and action. Saltwater might also be used to evoke the generative mix of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural knowledge embodied in the production and reception of these works. Incoming political and cultural tides bear these projects through gallery spaces and arts festivals to bob up against our scientific and political institutions. As the Yirrkala artists suggest, politicians are starting to acknowledge the cultural authority of their internationally-recognised artworks. Tasmanian arts writer David Cranswick admits, however, that the scientific community is still backward in according due authority to art and to indigenous knowledge when it comes to ecological sustainability – a residue of scientific dominance in the history of

modernism.<sup>66</sup> There remains a minority scientist or wildlife ranger perception of ‘surely the natural world can speak for itself’, a legacy of the old nature/culture opposition, and a reluctance to understand how art adds another side to the conservation story.

## Freshwater

Our river systems, the proverbial lifeblood of Australian economic history, have become as stressed and depleted as the agricultural cliché itself. Art projects feed the system as backwaters, creeks, waterholes and tributaries, carrying provisional images of subjectivity, customary and tacit environmental knowledge to come up against the mainstream current of Australian history. There is no easy or abundant flow in a badly regulated and overdrawn system. Art projects can remind us of historical moments when it could have been otherwise, and champion overlooked local knowledge of water management.

For her ten-year project *The Darling* (2000), Ruby Davies decorated the walls of the gallery with photographic prints, explorers’ observations written in river mud, and included stories and songs on compact disc (Figure 11.14). Tracing the passage of Charles Sturt and Thomas Mitchell over the Darling River in the 1830s, Davies returned to her childhood home at Wilcannia in far western New South Wales to explore different viewpoints – colonial, pastoral, Indigenous – of the landscape. These images are soaked in the photographic history of Charles Bayliss’s 1886 photographic drift down the flooded Darling River. Davies uses a pinhole camera, which requires extended exposures, giving her time to look around for the “shell middens, campfires, canoe trees and flints” of the Bakandji people along the river banks and alluvial flood plain. The pinhole camera gives a vignette-like blur around the periphery and a central focal point for each image, offering a clarity of vision which stretches to infinity.

<sup>66</sup> Cranswick D, op cit. 2001, p. 47. Cranswick cites an important exception in the employment of indigenous artist Tex Skulthorpe as a senior consultant to the Murray Darling Basin Commission in the late 1990s. Skulthorpe was given significant respect and authority at senior levels of integrated planning, and his paintings about the land “were accepted as a complete state of the environment report for the Murray River.”

health of the river and its flora and fauna”.<sup>67</sup> Davis looks over the shoulders of the *Walkabout* cattlemen and beyond her own, brief childhood memories, to discover the enduring connection the Bakandji feel with the river, as they have celebrated in image and song: “We are the people of the river”; “My people are Bakandji, the river knows who we are”.<sup>68</sup>



**Figure 11.15** Michael Riley, *Untitled (Locust)* (2000), from the Cloud series

Inkjet print on banner paper, reproduced by permission of VISCOFYP Ltd, Sydney, 2007

Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi artist Michael Riley’s *Cloud* series (2000) is also a poetic catalogue of iconic objects recalled from the artist’s childhood on the Macquarie River at Dubbo, north western New South Wales (Figure 11.15). Curator Djon Mundine lists them: “A floating feather, a

<sup>67</sup> Stephanie Radok, op cit 2001, pp. 47–48.

<sup>68</sup> As sung by Bakandji Children’s Choir, St Therese Community School, Wilcannia. Compact disc accompanying Davies’ series ‘The Darling’.



**Figure 11.14** Ruby Davies ‘...stories (detail)’, from *The Darling* (2000)  
Silver gelatin pinhole photograph, 63.5 x 80cm

Historical and political clarity is granted through recognition of the intimate landscape photography that has framed the river from the early trade in views to the 20th century photogenic stockmen who drove their cattle across the pages of popular illustrated magazines like *Walkabout*. *Walkabout*’s regular feature, ‘Our cameraman’s walkabout’ tailored the picturesque, the curious and the conversational for armchair travellers. Davies’ sweeping river gums recall the earlier narrative style and pay tribute to these photographic backblocks. The later work rewrites earlier travelogues. Davies alerts us to the changes that have taken place to the river, and includes recorded local narratives about irrigation, drought and dispossession. Radok discusses Davis’ work in relation to the cotton industry, with its impact on the river, “... breathing life into the human populations of places such as Bourke while tragically setting back the

sweeping wing, a vigilant angel and the cows from the mission farm. A single Australian plague locust in flight, referring to the cyclical swarms of locusts, a comforting bible and a graceful emblematic returning boomerang.<sup>69</sup> Each isolated object is floated against an expanse of blue sky and cirrus cloud, redolent with conflicting memories of human occupation and dispossession, sweet pain, productivity and degradation. Riley's images probe the sights glossed or overlooked on whitefella walkabouts, and Mundine's accompanying commentary recounts stories left out of pastoralist and travellers' tales: the Breealong Massacre in 1900; John Oxley's surveying of the area; the setting up of the Talbragar Mission under the Aboriginal Protection Board around 1900; and the important first meetings of the Aboriginal Progressive Association in the 1930s. Murray-Darling photographers like Riley and Davies offer the postcolonial flipside of agricultural landscape photography and modern travel writing. The well-known painter Margaret Preston was one such artist-traveller. She journeyed up the Darling River in 1942 to paint its tributary, the Warrego River, at Cunnamulla and Charleville.<sup>70</sup> The resulting paintings haunt Davies' carefully composed photographs of river banks and over-arching, elegant gums (barnara or, as the Bakandji call it, the 'main tree on the river').<sup>71</sup> Davies lingers to remember, whereas Preston travelled smartly, in a hurry to spot and describe the next picturesque watering-hole, which was always:

A short motor drive away. Brewarrina, one of these, looks a thrifty, up-to-date place on the Barwon, nee Darling. This river has aboriginal fisheries close to the town. They consist of stones, big and little, placed about the river to catch the fish as they come down. Brewarrina has had many aborigines, but they are now drifting to Bourke, much to the latter's annoyance.<sup>72</sup>

Brewarrina photographer Mervyn Bishop also set Preston's unwitting racism to rights in his return trip up the Darling River. His 2004 slide

and video monologue, *Flash back*, describes how far-flung river communities from all over were unwillingly brought from their country to Brewarrina. With fellow photographer William Yang, Bishop drove back home to see the ruins of the old mission, now reduced to a pile of building rubble and a solitary road-sign. He made a wide-angled, photographic monument of the bridge over Hospital Creek, a local massacre site. Bishop is no slick presenter, however; these beautifully framed images are singularly reticent. The memories are too painful for easy words and images, and the often difficult lives of Brewarrina's present Indigenous communities are briefly noted with 'blak' humour or veiled sadness. Bishop is far more fulsome in naming every niece and nephew, aunt and uncle, grandmother, father and neighbouring child featured in each picture. Brewarrina seems filled with Indigenous families and community histories, if only Margaret Preston knew. These photographs add personal, aesthetic, political and historical arguments to our environmental consideration of the Murray-Darling basin. The work of these photographers re-imagines the history of occupation, exploration and depiction along the Darling River to help us think through issues of ownership, development and regulation of the river system.

## Water Table

Downstream in Sunraysia, water is everything. It is now common knowledge that the Murray-Darling River is on the 'top ten' list of endangered rivers of the world, along with the Nile, the Yangtze, the Rio Grande and Danube. The raising of the water table and increasing salinity in soil is cause for common alarm, as salinity audits predict ten million tons per year moving through the landscape by 2100. The Sunraysia Irrigation Scheme was Australia's earliest large-scale regulation of the Murray River. Deakin visited California in 1885, and subsequently pushed irrigation legislation through the Victorian parliament. Sunraysia's pumping stations and irrigation channels were in place by the turn of century, forming the backbone of South-Eastern Australia's agriculture. Artist Megan Jones created a series of digitally-manipulated photographs of the scheme's history for the Mildura Alfred Deakin Centre in 2000–01. She researched and manipulated local, historical photographs to give a historical snapshot of this artificial landscape, along with satellite images and panoramic photographs. We note the

<sup>69</sup> Mundine D, 'On a wing and a prayer' in *Michael Riley: Cloud*, exhibition catalogue, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, 2000, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Preston M, 'Hunting the Warrego', *Australia Weekend Book*, no. 2, 1942, Ure Smith, Sydney, pp. 170–74.

<sup>71</sup> Butcher M, Bakandji educator, cited *The Darling*, 2000.  
<sup>72</sup> Preston, op. cit., 1942, pp. 171–72.

progressive degradation of the river system and acknowledge sporadic, recent efforts for more efficient and less wasteful water use, more extensive soil surveys, increased drainage and monitoring of groundwater – all part of the regional Salinity Management Plan. Malcolm MacKinnon notes that:

Dwell long enough within it, and it's possible to lose sight of the multiple layers of intervention which have created the place. It's the same illusion as that practised in the neo-Arcadian parks and gardens of Palladian England, or romantic landscape paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>73</sup>

Megan Jones makes this layering of intervention visible, through photographing derelict or outdated pumping station equipment, and by digitally piecing together 360-degree panoramas to guide the viewer through interconnected sites. Her interactive window display orchestrates images and sounds to simulate the controlled flow of water and salt through a constructed environment.



**Figure 11.16** Alex Kershaw, *A lake without water* (2006) (detail)  
Mixed media installation, Artspace, Sydney 2006

<sup>73</sup> MacKinnon M, 'Simulating the flow', *Artlink*, vol. 21, no. 1, March 2001, p. 57.

*A lake without water* was a community-based project that also concerned itself with related environmental, aesthetic, social and economic legacies of poor land management (Illustration 16). Coordinated by artist Alex Kershaw (with sound artist Gail Priest), this elegant multi-screen video installation (Artspace, Sydney 2006) involved local residents from Weerewa, a dry lake in the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales. An auctioneer calls an imaginary land auction for what is becoming Sydney sea-changer real-estate. A race-caller scans the desolate lake bed and calls an imaginary race. Two surveyors in Akubras run down a mossy hill, scattering 'planning' paper at their feet. They then slowly trudge back up the hill, cleaning up the mess, to the surprisingly violent, amplified sound of scrunching paper. An adjacent screen shows a dry, sandy riverbed being re-planted by Landcare labour. "Like an overzealous gesture towards reforestation, the trees are placed where even weeds couldn't grow", thought reviewer Bec Dean.<sup>74</sup> In the distance, a young musician from the local brass band plays a trumpet in a large, empty concrete water-tank. Her melancholy tune underscores the race-call and auctioneer's chant, bouncing around the gallery walls as if it were also an empty tank. Google Earth aerial shots of the area are projected on tables in the centre of the room: "From the air, farms look like geometric abstractions, punctuated here and there by the appearance of white-rimmed, black welts of salt that have risen to the surface of the earth." Nearby Goulburn residents were the first to vote for recycling their drinking water and Canberra's Cotter Dam was at a historic low as the community art project took form. Dean's review accurately noted how this project offered regional and metropolitan Sydney audiences a "timely meditation on propriety, planning, speculation and the mythopoeia of struggle in the Australian landscape".<sup>75</sup>

## Catchment

River systems closer to regional and metropolitan centres are more commonly considered as water catchment areas, and are subsequently highly regulated through scientific, town planning, engineering and economic overview. This level of interest and control provides a suggestive, interdisciplinary metaphor for environmentally-based

<sup>74</sup> Dean B, 'A desolation too real', *Realtime*, online, April 2007.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid*

curatorial strategies, particularly in regard to public art projects. Increased local government sponsorship of restorative projects require artists to frame recreational sites, provide imaginative and protective points of access to wetlands or sites of historical, cultural and ecological significance. These community-based, local government projects can sometimes prove to be locally popular, but illustrative, tendentious and visually unexciting. More often than not, these problems result from a weak curatorial selection framework or a flawed commissioning process, and an unimaginative aesthetic response to art and environment. As a basic measure, Alan Cruickshank argues, pointing to Adelaide's woeful environmentally-based public art, the so-called public – town planners, councillors, mayors, council architects and general 'public opinion' ("more often than not, private-opinion-as-public-interest") – should be kept out of the commissioning and implementation loop.<sup>76</sup>

More successful restoration commissions have given curators and artists creative control. Strong curatorial strategies are particularly important when blurring the traditional distinction between practical and discursive arts, as when art, community and economic development combine with landcare and employment programs, as in 'best practice' community-based arts centres like Yirrkala, Ernabella and Hermannsburg. In regional and metropolitan areas, the primacy of discourse in artistic practice, and the fact that artists need not be accountable, as designers are, to produce something useful, has given artworks special status in a museum or gallery.<sup>77</sup> This opens the possibility for gallery-based art to be a platform for ecological activism, and for community and campaign materials to claim a discursive power usually granted to 'disinterested' images and objects. *Grounded: art, activism, environment* (Campbelltown Art Gallery, 2007, curators Lisa Havilah and Jo Holder) brought together artists and community activists from south-west Sydney to reflect on the compromised state and reckless development of their local environment. An eclectic installation wove historical connections between fine arts, crafts and resident actions to highlight the Lemma government's poor

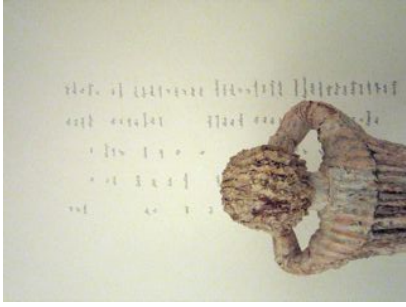
<sup>76</sup> Cruickshank A, 'Tyranny of consensus: who put 'public' in public art', and why do "they" think they own it?', *Broadsheet*, vol. 32, no. 2, (June, July & August 2003), pp. 12–15.

<sup>77</sup> Margolin, op cit, 2006, pp. 24–25.

performance on over-development, water and energy resources management in the lead-up to the 2007 state election.

A Google Earth map helpfully pin-pointed areas of interest from the ocean (disputed luxury developments at Sandon Point on the Illawarra coast) where local painters reprise traditional pictorial conventions of the intimate landscape to convey local attachment. Alongside, a frayed and burnt Aboriginal flag was draped alongside photographs of the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent. The escarpment meets the sea at the nearby historic Bulli coal seam, acknowledged with miners' union reliquary objects and Sydney artist Deborah Vaughan's video loop of coal trains weaving through the escarpment tunnels to the Kembla Grange BHP steelworks. Up the Bulli Pass, the Appin long-wall colliery has a less illustrious history of unsuitable technology, inadequate regulation and resultant devastation of the Avon and Nepean River systems. A video documentary by the Save Our Rivers group links the southern coalfields with similar riverbed collapses in the Upper Hunter.

On the Cumberland Plains, local botanical drawings by Sonia Bennett and John Riley are sold to help fund the protest against the Australian Defence site sell-off, a significant remnant of urban bush with high levels of biodiversity, including roaming mobs of emu. The exhibition then traces Sydney's fast-sprawling growth corridor upstream to the Nepean River headwaters, the Wingecarribee wetlands and Warragamba Dam. These are mediated by Alison Clouston playing Huckleberry Finn in a sculptural boat-ride down the Nepean River, accompanied by aerial maps, a taxonomy of endangered local birds and the sound of an increasing volume of water trickling, burbling then running and crashing out to sea. Nearby Toni Warburton's *Wall chronology: transactions to catchment* (1990–2007) poses a large, sculptural figure of a boy facing a wall, arms upraised in the act of drinking a beaker of water. He seems to look through the bottom of his upturned glass like binoculars to read the poetic wall-text describing the sheer, sensual pleasure of his drink. Alongside, an elegant wall installation of ceramic, glass and hand-made artist's books relate the beaker form to sedge, wetlands and the natural science of water filtration (Figure 11.17)



**Figure 11.17** Toni Warburton *Wall chronology: transactions to catchment* (1990–2007). Photo: Jo Holder  
 Courtesy the artist and Mori Gallery

Elegant banner slogans by Sydney conceptual artist Ruark Lewis punctuated the show with poetic reminders of the potential for grassroots action. The exhibition of historical campaign materials provided an activist context for studio-based artworks, which in turn invite audiences to appreciate inventive graphics and complex historical, aesthetic and emotional connections on display. The aesthetic formality of the installation and artworks, alongside the documentation of local town planning and conservation battles, moves between discourse and action.

The orchestration of art, ecology and action responds to the aesthetic activism of many works discussed in this chapter. It is a creative institutional response to local environmental issues that is shared by a few independent commercial galleries, artist-run initiatives and regional art centres. Well-curated public and gallery-based projects make fruitful links between the art industry and other agencies, and support a pluralistic approach to producing, viewing and participating art as a platform for ecological communication.

This chapter has charted some of the ways that Australian artists, curators and art institutions have shifted their aesthetic focus from

topographical views of the landscape to phenomenological perceptions of the country's environmental forces. Both the western landscape tradition and Indigenous art have helped us develop all our senses, overturning the old divisions between mind and body, subject and object, self and nature. 'Perception through the senses', the original meaning of the term aesthetics, can be understood as a precondition and correlate of ecological activism. In Australia, the landscape tradition has been thoroughly modified by the forces of Indigenous knowledge, scientific research and environmental activism. In turn, art continues to make us grasp the fact that we are ourselves part of a threatened nature.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Roberts D, 'Aura and aesthetics of nature', *Thesis Eleven*, no. 36, 1993, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, p. 128.