

HUMPY: AN EARLY AUSTRALIAN ARCHITECTURAL PROJECTION

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Abstract

In Australia's Bicentennial year 1988, which marked 200 years of European colonisation, an important artistic collaboration occurred between Ian de Gruchy and Krzysztof Wodiczko. Their site specific installation *Humpy* commented on the ongoing politics of Indigenous dispossession and loss of place. They are artists who helped to develop the practice of projecting large-scale images onto architecture. While the work was critically ignored at the time, it has become increasingly relevant as historians, architects and artists research and reference Indigenous architectural forms. The ongoing currency of the artist's political commentary on Indigenous loss of place is another important element of the work's continuing resonance.

Keywords: Australian Indigenous architecture, architectural projection, Australian media art, place, loss of place, media art history, colonisation, Ian de Gruchy, Krzysztof Wodiczko

Introduction

Humpy is an early Australian architectural projection that continues to hold resonance 24 years after its temporary installation at the Adelaide Festival in Australia's Bicentennial year 1988, which marked 200 years of European colonisation. While large-scale outdoor projections are now a common form, in the 1980s this new medium was being developed. Polish American artist Krzysztof Wodiczko and Australian artist Ian de Gruchy, who collaborated for a seven year period during which they created *Humpy*, were among the pioneers of this form. In this particular work, a temporary site-specific projection of an Indigenous 'ethno-architectural' humpy structure made from makeshift materials is mapped on to the modernist architecture of the Adelaide Festival Centre.

The makeshift humpy is an overlay of traditional architectural structure and colonial found materials of corrugated iron and milled wood. In the triangular form, supported by a forked post and central pole, we can see traditional structures such as that illustrated in Figure 1 from New South Wales in 1868. It is fairly close to the form presented in *Humpy* in which, through the projected image, the building is re-clad with galvanized sheet, tarpaulins and other makeshift materials.



Fig. 1. Aboriginal people outside a dwelling at Cobran, New South Wales, 1868 (Reproduced courtesy of Museum Victoria. Photo © unrecorded, XP2063).

In subject matter, Wodiczko and de Gruchy's *Humpy* explores Australian history and identity and the ongoing uncanny moments of post-colonial identity. In it we experience a mediated perspective of a particular place in which a no longer visible history of the site is made visible. In the dialogue about the particularities of place a wider narrative of Indigenous loss of place and the ongoing politics of this loss of place is uncovered.

The humpy is a home linked to traditional Indigenous forms of architecture and yet decentred through forces of the colonising culture. In this hybrid form we see layers of loss: of land, of place, of language, of culture and of life in the violence of the frontier. And yet there is also an extraordinary spirit of resilience expressed by Indigenous people in making do with available materials and traditional knowledge evident in the hybridisation between form and materials.

In this paper I examine the way *Humpy* draws from both traditional Australian Indigenous architecture, and foregrounds contemporary architectural works where media is embedded in the architectural form of a building or media becomes an embedded electronic skin. I did not experience the work at the time, but rather came across it in the documentation and archival record of de Gruchy's and Wodiczko's individual practices. In my work as a media artist and writer I became interested in *Humpy* as an artistic reference and early example of architectural projection. I was also struck by the ongoing political currency of the work 24 years on from its creation.

prehistory

The dispossession of Indigenous Australians from their particular countries, and ongoing Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships to place, arise in the work. From 1968, when prominent Australian anthropologist William Edward Hanley Stanner identified 'the great Australian silence' to characterise the structural gap in historical discourse about the relationship between 'ourselves and aborigines,' the debate about what happened between coloniser and colonised in terms of frontier conflict and relationships between Aborigines and settlers has developed [1]. In 2003 historian Tim Rowse questioned the focus of that debate, saying:

"...it is arguable that the current controversy about the extent and causes of frontier violence does not matter much because it is incidental to the really important story that indigenous people lost ownership and sovereignty without ever consenting to that loss. I want to suggest that the grounds for Indigenous grievance rest on that uncontradicted story, not on any particular account of...colonial settlement [2]."

Historians such as Peter Read have delved into Australians' sense of place and belonging, set against the backdrop of Indigenous dispossession and loss of place[3]. In *Belonging* he asks, "How can we non-Indigenous Australians justify our continuous presence and our



Fig. 2. Krzysztof Wodiczko and Ian de Gruchy, *Humpy*, 1988 (© courtesy of the artists.)

love for this country while the Indigenous people remain dispossessed and their history unacknowledged? [4].” It’s a difficult question for many people, one he explores in conversation with Australians of varied backgrounds and with reference to the work of Australian artists, poets and writers. Read also explores the question personally through his sense of place and attachment to the Northern Beaches of Sydney/ the Gai-mariagal country of his friend Dennis Foley.

In 1988, the year of the Bicentennial, there were protests around the country on Australia Day/ Invasion Day. Commemorated each year on the 26th of January, the day the First Fleet landed on the shores of Botany Bay. The Bicentennial celebrations focused on a re-enactment of the landing of the tall ships of the first fleet performed in Sydney Harbour to a crowd estimated at 2 million [5]. In opposition to the notion that Australia was only discovered 200 years ago and not occupied by Aboriginal groups for 40,000 years prior to the establishment of the British colony, the Aboriginal flag was flown at Mrs Macquarie’s Point on Sydney Harbour and at other locations around the city. A large-scale protest of more than 40,000 people, including Aborigines from across the country and non-Indigenous supporters, marched through Sydney and rallied in Hyde Park in what was the largest march in Sydney since the Vietnam moratorium [6]. The slogan “white Australia has a black history” was used in the protests [7], pointing out the

short view of white history privileged in the celebrations.

Humpy is set against this scene of Indigenous people’s loss of place and Australians’ questioning of their relationship to place during the Bicentennial year.

Site and history

Ian de Gruchy’s description of the project states that the Festival Centre was built over an Indigenous settlement and that the work was created to highlight this [8]. An Indigenous camp, which later evolved into a town camp as Adelaide developed, existed on the site.

It was known as Pinky Flats and was a favoured camping and hunting ground for possum, water fowl and other game [9]. Pinky Flats was also a favourite drinking spot during the Depression for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The site name is possibly derived from *pingko* (bilby) in Kurna, the Indigenous language spoken in Adelaide up until 1929, or from ‘pinkie’, a colloquial term for cheap red wine [10]. In choosing the site, de Gruchy drew on his local knowledge as an Adelaide resident:

“I was well aware that Pinky Flat was a site of original settlement. When you live in Adelaide long enough you know what the history of the Torrens is, ...it’s a beautiful spot along the river and it was always known as Pinky Flat and that had a resonance for me. The work was about turning a high culture site into a memory of its past and drew stark treatment to the people who had lived on Pinky Flat [11].”

Designed by architect John Morphett [12], the Festival Centre building at Elder Park overlooking the river Torrens was built over the period 1970-1973 on the site of Pinky Flats. The distinctive white geometric triangulated dome roofs of the centre provided a unique projection surface for the artists. de Gruchy describes the building as Adelaide’s answer to the Sydney Opera House with the knowledge that the



Fig. 3. Wolfgang Sievers, *Exterior view with a person on the steps of Festival Hall, Adelaide, 1973*, (Reproduced courtesy of National Library of Australia. Photo © Wolfgang Sievers.)



Fig. 4. Images given to Ian de Gruchy used as reference for *Humpy* (© Reproduced courtesy of Ian de Gruchy. Photo © David Kerr.)

Festival Centre had opened some months before the Opera House [13]. de Gruchy describes the building as “form following function” with its skin following the shells of the concert hall and theatres [Fig.3].

With its smooth skin the building provided a perfect projection surface on which to temporarily reconfigure the buildings architectural form through projected image [14]. In Wodiczko and de Gruchy’s projected humpy [Fig.2], the triangular peaked roof of the festival centre is visually matched with the triangular peaked shape of a makeshift humpy’s roof supported by a twisted tree trunk that is used as structural frame for the dwelling’s entry.

Australian Indigenous Architecture

In recent years multi-disciplinary researcher of architecture/anthropology Paul Memmott has surveyed the Indigenous architecture of Australia. Memmott describes the first generation of Australian Indigenous architects as exploring and drawing from the variety of forms and structures of Indigenous humpies in their writing and architectural work. For example architect Alison Page of the Tharawal people of La Perouse, Sydney, has said of classical Aboriginal Architecture: “Buildings were traditionally used as a skin, as living, breathing, extensions of the body. No matter what form they adopted, they were receptive, flexible and sensitive, and constantly renewing [15].”

In the context of *Humpy* this re-skinning happens electronically, through projected textures of corrugated iron, and canvas sheeting resurfacing the roof plane of the modernist festival building. The project involved re-materialising the structure into a makeshift vernacular

architecture composed of found materials laid over a wooden frame. de Gruchy has said “I was very interested in this whole relationship of how the galvanized iron actually lived on the building as a skin [16].”

Memmott’s comprehensive study into the Aboriginal architecture of Australia describes the transformation of traditional ‘ethno-architectural’ structures into the shacks and humpies of the town camp. Traditional building structures were merged with found colonial materials, such as sheets of corrugated iron. Whilst the appearance of Indigenous architecture changed over time, the spatial arrangements of town camps were in many cases based on traditional camp formations. In essence, the ‘fringe settlement’ or town camp had evolved architecturally and socially from the traditional camp [17].

Countering the popularly held belief that Aborigines did not construct permanent homes and only sheltered in temporary camps of makeshift lean-tos and shelters, Memmott describes the diversity of Aboriginal architectural forms. A wide variety of structural materials was utilised, including stone, whale bone, and sapling structures and cladding materials such as bark, grasses, reeds and palm leaves. Most tribal groups employed up to seven or eight shelter types dependent on available materials, climate and duration of stay [18]. Sadly, early colonists often misread the seasonal nature of the occupation of camps and impermanent architecture as a lack of connection or attachment to place [19].

Following on from Memmott’s study of Aboriginal architecture, Indigenous architect, Kevin O’Brien of the Meriam people of Murray Islands, sees the potential of drawing from the Aboriginal

architectural traditions: “For me it is now a matter of construction. A utilitarian approach to construction exemplified by minimal structure; effective cladding extracted from materials of that Country” [20]. In his exhibition *Finding Country – A Primer* (2009) he asked “how do we empty the city to reveal country?,” a position that is central to his work [21].

This idea of emptying the city to reveal invisible country is effectively what de Gruchy’s and Wodiczko’s *Humpy* does; an architectural structure of the city is erased through a process of digital recladding, revealing relationships to traditional architectural form and inherent relationships to climate, traditional architectural structures and country.

The reference images for *Humpy* [Fig. 4] were taken in Central Australia and reflect traditional architectures found in that environment. de Gruchy has said that he was inspired to make the work after seeing photographs of makeshift humpy structures from the Central Australian communities of Yuendumu and Papunya photographed by friend and fellow artist Dave Kerr [22] [Fig. 4]. de Gruchy and Wodiczko used these photographs as reference material [23].

Therefore, while *Humpy* refers to the history of a particular site, Pinky Flats, the reference images used do not reflect Indigenous architecture from the Adelaide area. Rather *Humpy* stands in for Indigenous architecture as a whole. A historical example which depicts particular seasonal architecture from the Adelaide area is Eugene Von Guerard’s drawing, *Winter Encampment in Wurlies of divisions of the tribes from Lake Bonney and Lake Victoria in the Parkland near Adelaide* [Fig. 5]. In this image Von Guerard illustrates domes



Fig. 5. Eugène von Guérard, *Winter encampments in wurlies of divisions of the tribes from Lake Bonney and Lake Victoria in the parkland near Adelaide, 1858*, pen and ink, wash and pencil, (Reproduced courtesy National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.)

that comprise a more robust closed structure suited to wet and cold weather with an internal fire used for heating. These sort of closed structures were used in the winter in Southern Australia in addition to open windbreaks and shade structures in the summer [24].

Another historical image related to the Adelaide area is George French Angas's etching; *Native Hut on Koorong* (1844) [Fig. 6], in which a similar rounded architectural form to that portrayed by Von Guerard is illustrated. However this structure is more open at the front and looks more like a shelter against the wind rather than wet, cold weather. The huts were built on the southern shores to face the north-east to provide shelter from cold gale winds from the south and west [25].

At face value the humpy, in all of its particular ethno-architectural and

hybridised forms, can be read as a symbol of the dispossession of Indigenous people from their land and culture; how they were pushed from their traditional lands to the fringes of the colonising European's settlements. Conversely, the humpy can also be seen as a symbol of resistance to assimilating into white culture and ways. In one way, the life of the Aboriginal town camper can be regarded as a cultural triumph. Town camps provided a setting with sufficient autonomy to maintain and practice Aboriginal culture, something that was suppressed to a significant extent in the government settlements [26]. The humpy and town camp existed in a liminal zone between the white world and the black world, where often the white world was built over the black world, with towns and cattle stations typically sited on significant areas where



Fig. 6. George French Angas, *Native hut on Koorong*, Watercolour, 1844, (Reproduced courtesy of the South Australian Museum Archives.)

water was accessible.

The removal of humpies and shanty-towns from urban areas that occurred in the twentieth century is a severing of connection between Indigenous peoples and their traditional lands. This occurred forcibly in some instances, to claim land for development [27], and in other cases voluntarily, to improve living conditions [28]. The perceptions of self-built camps and structures as being unclean and unhealthy also contributed to decisions to displace Aboriginal people from them, to government run compounds and settlements [29].

The control of Aboriginal communities and land is still unfortunately highly contested. Indigenous people only own or control 16 per cent of land in Australia, 98 percent of which is in very remote areas [30]. In the past decade government policy from both major parties dealing with Aboriginal land and lives has come under fire for being racially discriminatory and breaching human rights. The Howard government's military style operation and move to take control of Aboriginal Land in the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act* of 2007 [31] was widely criticised as an attempt to assume control of Aboriginal land and lives [32]. The Federal legislation and intervention came after the release of the Northern Territory Government's *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle* 'Little Children are Sacred' report [33]. However, once the federal election was over and power changed hands, the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments have, to the dismay of many, continued the intervention in the Northern Territory and as of July 2012 have voted to extend the legislation for a further 10 years with the *Stronger Futures Policy* [34]. Both the intervention and *Stronger Futures* have received criticism as being incompatible with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and continuing race based legislation [35]. Whilst a full discussion of these issues falls outside the scope of this paper it is important background for an appreciation of the ongoing potency and political currency of Wodiczko and de Gruchy's *Humpy*.

State vs Nomadic Space

In *Humpy*, a nomadic architectural structure is temporarily imposed over a permanent architectural form, recalling Deleuze and Guattari's notions of 'state space' and 'nomad space' in their *Traite*



Fig. 7. Realities: united, Media Façade, Kunsthau Graz, Austria, 2003, (Photo © Harry Schiffer)

de nomadologie; *La machine de guerre*. Vidler describes this contestation of space in the following terms:

“A sedentary space that is consciously parcelled out, closed, and divided by institutions of power would then be contrasted to the smooth, flowing, unbounded space of nomadism; in western contexts, the former has always attempted to bring the latter under control” [36].

This contestation of space in Wodiczko and de Gruchy’s work is reversed and temporarily ‘nomad’ space reclaims space from the ‘state space’; trumping the form of the cultural institution under the cover of darkness.

Media Skins

Wodiczko’s architectural projection works typically treat the building anthropomorphically. This strategy is one that the artist has used in many other projections in the 1980s, and in 1999 for the *Hiroshima Projection*

where the hands and voices of Hiroshima survivors were projected onto the Atomic Bomb Memorial Dome, Hiroshima. In this work, survivors’ hands were projected at the foot of the building, and the tower and dome of the building become the personified torso and head of the survivor. The body of the survivor therefore becomes a public body embodying and personifying the witnesses and survivors of a war atrocity on a previously unheralded scale.

What is different about *Humpy* and makes it unique among Wodiczko’s

projection works is that architecture is projected onto architecture. The humpy projection reskins the Adelaide Festival Building by projecting composited media of an architectural form once found at the site onto the present day structure. And through this process of reskinning, the physical architecture of the building is rematerialised in an act of politically charged remembrance. In some ways this process of reskinning the building also foregrounds modern architectural works such as the biomorphic Kunsthau Graz completed by architects Peter Cook and Colin Fournier in Austria in 2003. The *BIX media façade*, designed by Berlin designers realities:united, merges media with architecture to form a programmable electronic skin in which



Fig. 8. Krzysztof Wodiczko, Bundeshaus Projection, Bern Switzerland, 1985, (© Courtesy of the artist.)

low resolution images are drawn on its surface with individual computer programmed lamps forming a pixelated image on the skin of the building [Figure 7]. A surveying eye looks out from the *BIX media façade* building in a modern rendition of Wodiczko’s technical strategies. There are also clear visual and thematic links with the work of Wodiczko, particularly his *Bundeshaus* projection from 1985 in Bern, Switzerland [Fig. 8], which also utilises images of a single eye [37]. More generally the two pieces are linked by similar strategies of personifying a building and underlying themes of structures of power and surveillance in capitalist societies.

Conclusion

More than a quarter of a century on, *Humpy* points to continuing political debates and the difficult living conditions many Indigenous Australians experience. As a form of ethno-architecture, the humpy has recently been historically explored in its richly varied forms and continues to be fertile ground for architects and artists to draw from in both material and mediated forms.

The concerns of Wodiczko and deGruchy regarding Indigenous loss of place and ongoing disadvantage are referenced to a particular site’s history. Their use of composited photographic media to reconfigure the present architecture of the site is an effective tactic. As an immersive media experience, *Humpy* re-positions the viewer in time and space, thereby allowing an invisible repressed history to become visible.

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