



FUSION JOURNAL ISSUE 10

*LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land*

**Arts practice and inter-generational equity: A consilience approach.**

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Significant Roadside Environment Area #2 – C. Orchard 2016

In late 2013 to early 2014 over a period of three long and dry summer months spanning December through February, three very significant life events took place. I moved house from the city of Wagga Wagga to the small rural community of Marrar in regional New South Wales, a place where for all intents and purposes, I knew no one, and had very little immediate kinship with. At the time of this move my first child was born, a transformational event for which there is very little in the way of words to describe, other than a knowing through being. To compound these alterations, as part of my ongoing desire for research dialogues, came a need to investigate the theoretical and practical means by which we come to understand a personal relationship with land, place and space. I commenced a practice-as-research focussed PhD with the University of Tasmania. It was a shifting of mindset away from a previous mode of landscape photography embedded in a discourse of the sublime that dominated my Master of Arts (hons) projects, to a more exploratory and conversational relationship with the familiar, born through repetition and connection-over-time. I had the overwhelming feeling that I needed to know more about how we

come to understand and relate to place/s, and how to communicate those understandings to others, particularly a sense of environmental stewardship, a kind of working within nature (not with, but inside of its means), not just for me, but for my family, and my communities.



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I made a decision, albeit only recently, that at the core of uncovering, or bringing forward new knowledge, I could not be transient or a visitor to places, but had to be critically engaged and actively embedded in the regions I occupied and worked within to make honest responses. This comes from a passing through landscape as tour guide with Dr. Troy Ruffels, but also ideas shared over a vindaloo and lager with Plymouth Professor of Photography and the Land Jem Southam October 2014 in Plymouth UK. All of the practice-as-research investigations would be in some ways autobiographical and auto-ethnographic in nature, responding meaningfully to the lived experience of working and practicing within a rural community in regional New South Wales. This includes the localised issues associated with the lived experience

of climactic change, allowing my experience and cultural product to become a microcosm for a distributed global experience, a personal response to anthropogenic climate and other broad environmental changes, impacting at the local level. My immediate footprint, in terms of physical agency is centrally positioned in the Riverina region, a broadly agricultural region of South Western, New South Wales, widely considered the most degraded landscape in NSW with approximately 2% remaining remnant vegetation. All undertakings are located geographically within an approximately 17,500 square kilometre area, with most sites bounded by Cootamundra & Mt Ulandra at the North East tracking South via Gundagai and the Hume Highway to Livingstone National Park at the South Eastern point. At the far South West sits Galore Hill and the caves of infamous Australian bushranger Daniel 'Mad Dog' Morgan, with Mt Bunganbil at the North Western point. All spaces considered, the area in which I frequent is about one fifth the size of Tasmania, and one fifth of the land area of the Wiradjuri People, the traditional custodians of the land in which I live and work. This area encompasses some major geographic shifts from the Mountains of the east, weaving westward through river & hill country, passing by long-extinct inland seas and through large transitional flats heading out west.

These selected places are sites with which I have had immediate affinity, or immediate unconscious response to, and it is these sites that more or less, that will become spaces of returned visits, at irregular intervals, when I feel it necessary to reconnect to them. As Jem Southam articulates about how he photographs place/s, these sites have found me, more than I have found them.



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It is the experience as it is lived and interpreted through photographic and post-photographic practice that generates new and thoughtful review offering potential avenues for change, new knowledge, or new modes of thinking towards research-orientated action (as *agency*). This necessitates an active approach to critical analysis, ongoing self-reflection and creative-reconstruction as new visual-data is found, produced, manufactured and critiqued. What I present here is only a nominal amount of investigations that form part of a broad scope of place-based arts practice and research outcomes. All of my practice-as-research is, at its core, interdisciplinary, as it is embedded in an individual lived reality where points-of-agency are explored through broad scoped practice. Each project is centrally informed by the Charles Sturt University ethos and Wiradjuri phrase, Yindyamarra Winhanganha; 'the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in' where discrete but invariably linked investigations are taken at the edges of traditional photographic disciplines and presented as visual allegory to test and

critique possible consiliences, convergences, nexuses and latent unities of understanding where the limits of potential experience are the limits in modes-of-interpretation. Testing of broad, but lived interdisciplinary knowledge through practice is designed to result in a dialectical method, a procedural meshwork towards critical practice in action, simplified; a physical rendering of potentials for change production. This change production is the commitment to 'communicating understandings on an individual and community level' and in engaging community in meaningful environmental stewardship discourse towards an arts practice, located and responding to place for intergenerational equity.

There are a few projects inside this framework that have been undertaken, over the now 10 months full-time equivalent that I have been enrolled in the PhD. These projects briefly introduced, in chronological order are:

1. **Agrophilia**: a site-specific photographic investigation in to the familiar, specifically located at viewing/re-viewing colonial marks on the land between Wagga Wagga, Junee and Coolamon.
2. **Performing Geographies**: a second site-specific investigation undertaken in to the vernacular and familiar, specifically located at testing the politics of space from Temora to the base of a long extinct inland sea at Ingalba Nature Reserve.
3. **Making Place / Making Peace**: a post-photographic response to notions of place and the ANZAC centenary as part of the curated exhibition Loss, Reverence and Longing: ANZAC stories from the home front.
4. **Significant Roadside Environment Area #1**: A post-photographic response to environmental groups concepts of significance in competing environmental, economic, social and political concerns; specifically located between Marrar and Wagga Wagga. I drive this road twice a day, once to work, and once

5. coming home. One of the hardest parts of being an academic and doing a PhD is making time from the competing demands of work/home to actually respond to land (which requires above all time) to make new work.
6. **Playing and Reality:** a post-photographic response to ideas of climate change, water shortage, prolonged drought and intergenerational equity. A response to time spent in Broken Hill, Mungo National Park and being at home in Marrar.
7. **Extinction Clock:** a post-photographic response to increasing concerns for rapid biodiversity loss and an attempt at the translation of complex facts/figures in to new and meaningful forms. More an exploration of alternate forms than anything solid or resolved.

I want to explore these projects in a more depth as to how they inform the overall line of inquiry.

**Agrophilia.** - <http://corchard.com.au/index.php/agrophilia/>

Agrophilia took the form of an artist's e-book and photographic essay: operating with the by-line *Exposing an Australian Regional Vernacular, or, Architectural Agrarianism*. Published in the Academic Journal 'Fusion' in its 4<sup>th</sup> edition 'The Town and the City'. It worked towards a preliminary investigation, an exploration of one key question for me that arose from a reading of Deborah Bright's essay *Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Men* where she says:

Whether noble, picturesque, sublime or mundane, the landscape image bears the imprint of its cultural pedigree. It is a selected and constructed text...

For me, the way the landscape as colonial & post-colonial text within my region had been constructed by others, and how I was, in the midst of reconstructing this text to make meaning in my own life, due to moving house and by means of cultural symbolization, it was an important moment for consideration. I was being asked, not

by anyone else, but rather by myself, what about (townships) place do I value? I was struck by the way John Brinkerhoff Jackson spoke of landscape and the familiar in both 'Discovering the Vernacular Landscape' and 'Landscapes: Selected Writings'. I was re-assured by them that it was okay to like same-ness. The project re-acts to certain ambivalence. I felt at once burdened by incredible debt, logging in to netbank for the first time to see the total debits was a kind of depressing mathematical sublime, but somehow also freed to enjoy a lifestyle of regionalism and vernacular character that was in many ways, slow and soothing; a troubling, unreconciled state I still carry with me, and probably will for the next 20 years paying off a mortgage.

I began to document the planned landscape of my region, labelling it as a kind of frontier territory (because I was experiencing it anew, or for the first time), where its often-ugly histories would be buried beneath a familiar and vernacular veneer, yet both things provide a true vision of small-town character. At the cross roads of major travel routes would be the same few things: the Court House (reminding people on the frontier of their civic duty and responsibilities, providing a reminder of the rule of law), the Post Office (providing a connection to the outside world), the Bank (reminding people of the economic systems of governance, and to provide a sense of solidity to their endeavours)... and on the fourth corner, of course, the pub (allowing people to forget the realities of actually being there on the frontier). It was the same four stories played out from Wagga Wagga, to Junee, to Coolamon to Lockhart. I could see how towns had been built around these colonial ideas and conflicting realities as colonisation pushed farther... transformed later, as it were by the railways and the automobiles, in towns large enough to support it, changing the way we access these spaces in to American style strips.

Jackson says:

I define a landscape not as scenery; which is the customary use of the word, but as an organization of man made spaces. Those are the things that have an immediate sympathetic appeal, at least to me.

I'm not interested in the natural scenery here, I'm interested in what other men have done, or tried to do on the face of the earth; and this design changes from season to season, and from year to year and from generation to generation and is eventually obliterated and replaced by another design. This is the history of the (vernacular) landscape.

I wrote about these at the time, and feel the same now that this sense of sameness makes one calm during a road-trip, that passing through such spaces to me was a general sense of cultural nostalgia, a sense of homeliness tinged with an essence of hard work and perseverance. The only unease provided by the love of the horizontal (what I came to call Agrophilia), and that, in every small town, the other story playing out was the death of the vertical and the closure of the second storeys and above of any building. Once the province of Doctors, Lawyers and all manner of moneyed gentry, the upper storeys of the regional shopping malls has lost their appeal. The doctors, lawyers and accountants have long since outgrown these premises and they no longer serviced the needs of such businesses. Many are now boarded up to prevent entry, converted to cheap student accommodation or sport a perpetual for lease sign.

All of these small towns I can remember as a kid visiting, stopping for fish & chips and a lemonade on our way somewhere, either out bushwalking, bird-spotting or out fossicking. It is this *nostalgia* I would investigate further later on.

### **Performing Geographies - <http://corchard.com.au/index.php/performing-geographies/>**

Performing Geographies in many ways is the next iteration from Agrophilia: this time tracing the movement from a town (Temora) and its traditional centre outwards. Again, taking the form of an artist's e-book and photographic essay, currently pending publication in Fusion Journal #7, MASK; Performance, Performativity and Communication in the Professions and Creative Industries. The full title of the photo-essay was *Performing Geographies: Between photographs and footprints*, and, in

many ways serviced to ask whether there was any value in taking photographs, or whether we should leave footprints, and what these statements might really mean in an already degraded landscape. In the contextualising paper I wrote that the use of photography to punctuate walking as an act of recording a political will has a long and multifaceted history. I stated that I am less concerned with building layers of complexity on top of an existing and well-documented history than I am with going for a walk... and investigating or thinking through what going for a walk might mean in the anthropocene (to me), and in regional New south Wales. I want to read a little of that paper;

... I have been walking now for about 3 hours and 42 minutes to arrive at my final destination: the Ingalba Nature Reserve, 17.8 kilometres by my GPS counting west-south-west on foot from the New South Wales regional town of Temora. The nature reserves sits at the bottom of a long vanished inland sea, and with it remnants of a drastically changing land, not just in recent economic or political shifts of land usage, but a real sense of a deep and geologic time.

To provide context, I used to come to Temora a lot as a child. While others might have had hobbies, for my two brothers, both diagnosed Asperger's, the concept of idle time filled with diversions was unheard of, there was no mere distraction or entertainment, but rather concepts that required frequent and intense investigation to uncover every known detail. One of these pastimes we got into was lapidary, but no mere (normal child's) rock-collection was enough, but rather the hunt for specific types of stones, found only in specific locations, then, the cutting, faceting and making of cabochons and other forms (and only a knowing of the underlying geology, chemical makeup, scientific names and every possible minutiae of information would suffice). I wasn't able to keep up with this, but I certainly could enjoy being in the countryside digging in the clay, sand and dirt, uncovering a few interesting stones. This pastime would take us out almost every weekend somewhere new around the region for the better part of 3 years, and whether it was greenstone, amethyst, quartz crystals, soapstone, and agate or, as happened on

one occasion, opalite, it was lovely to spend weekends as a family walking through country together learning.

A few of my later project ideas were born while undertaking this specific walk. I took a small notepad, in it I wrote: *The smell of rain on dry soil; if there isn't a word for this already there needs to be one; if there isn't a cologne that smells like it, there needs to be one.* The word is *Petrichor*, a quick google shows me that it exists (the wonders of modern technology, demystifying ideas before they even get a chance to coalesce); I thought I was on to something... ..it was apparently co-coined in 1964 by Isabel Joy Bear, an Australian. Of course it existed, and of course it included an Australian, it is such a familiar and delightful smell. Better thoughts followed yet, the smell of rain on soil is different everywhere, so this smell must be, it is, uniquely of this place. Mugga iron bark, black cypress on some gravelly and rocky sections of roadside; grey box and white cypress on slightly better soils; occasional dwarf she-oak (casuarina). I think to myself there might still be something in this... ..I have an exhibition coming up at Eastern Riverina Arts office in Wagga Wagga, maybe I can recreate a sense of place, the smell of certain bushlands, a job for later in distilling essential oils. What if my photographs not only were of something visually, but were of something via scent... I'll do this later. The truth is, I would return to my cold white office, place some eucalyptus leaves in front of the air conditioning outlet, and allow the smell to fill my room as I write these notes up... I write better in the 'open air'. *Aspects of Making Place / Making Peace and Significant Roadside Environment Area* were initially thought of through this process.

**Making Place / Making Peace - <http://corchard.com.au/index.php/making-place-making-peace/>**

From Greek origins *nostos* (to return home) and *algos* (pain) and the German *heimweh* (homesickness) came the 18<sup>th</sup> Century English term: *nostalgia* (acute homesickness). In modern dictionary definitions *nostalgia* is explained as 'a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past'. This contemporary interpretation does not embody the fullness or traditions of the word, and does little

to represent the experience of being removed from ones *home*. Reading nostalgia in a contemporary way places the term outside its known and felt psychological implications, it says home is something to see as being only romanticised about, a thing understood as mere sentimentality. In the installation work '*Making Place – Making Peace*' for '*Loss, Reverence and Longing: ANZAC Stories from the Home Front*' we (My Partner Shona Pratt & I) are asking to re-take the word back to its origins. We want to assert that *home* & *homesickness* is central not just to the lives of those touched by World War One, but, instead still to our present lived realities. We want to contend that *home* should carry with it a true weight of a person or peoples geographic, spiritual and cultural connectivity to place.

In the First World War acute homesickness was a lived experience, a reality that saw Australian soldiers returned home diagnosed with (then, but not now) a clinically diagnosable psychological illness: *nostalgia*. Through exploring the term *nostalgia* by tracing both life on the frontlines and life on the home front a rich history of shared symbolism emerges. Of the greatest interest to us is the use of natural elements (soil/water/seeds) to embody cultural experience. Our installation work is engineered to serve a dual purpose, to provide an avenue to explore the rich symbolism of War (poppy/rosemary/land), and to juxtapose these as symbols of domesticity (gardening/cooking/home): each tied to a real desire for connection to, or understanding of (a) place.

In exploring stories from the home front, we wanted to explore concepts of '*home & land*', not '*homeland*'. The deliberate separation of these two words uncouples nationalistic attachment and sentiment and returns us to a specific place, an identifiable geographical area of interacting life systems, our home habitat. Here *nostalgia* and a new *psychoterratic* (earth related mental health) term *solastalgia* (a home sickness you feel while still at home) show principal similarities in alternate spaces (the battle front and the home front) when a great cultural and spiritual trauma, one that disturbs our sense of residence takes place upon our collected lives. Soldiers want for home (nostalgia), but if returned, home it doesn't feel like home anymore (solastalgia). Families at home feel a pronounced psychic numbing

as if from the very start, what once was home will never be again. In every choice of the work we have created, these places of loss, reverence and specific types of longing play out. None of the loss, reverence or longing is ever reconciled, and this, is deliberate.

### **Significant Roadside Environment Area -**

<http://corchard.com.au/index.php/significant-roadside-1/>

In this practice-led-research project the contemporary politics of space (and mobility) are explored using the New South Wales (Australian) road/roadside as microcosm for industrial intervention at the nexus of political, economic, environmental and cultural agendas in thinking, walking or driving through the anthropocene using the road as literal 'line separating nature from technology'. Central to the Australian economy the road is explored as a physical and non-physical space for the interconnection of philosophies where an uneasy or tense marriage between commercial and financial interests and environmental vestiges of genetic variation are forced in to uneasy balances, and in many cases, managed out of an equilibrium (if there ever was one). This stability and instability is explored as philosophical misalignment of potential values, to see the road not only through anthropocentric eyes, but also as the last fragmented corridors for genetic diversity, amongst flora and fauna and as home to some last ranges of remnant native vegetation (including a large proportion of threatened/endangered species) as hosting its own capacity to value outside its value to humankind.

The perspective placed on the roadside as landscape transformed by technology makes comparative analysis of New South Wales roadside areas including traveling stock routes and reserves as comprising almost 5% of the states total land mass, being an equivalent area to the states designated National Parks. To put this in a local perspective, the amount of *roadside environment* as last vestige for genetic diversity, and corridors for flora and fauna in the area I work, is equivalent to twice the size of the Tarkine. Tracing the not insubstantial history; including pre-colonial histories of the road/pathways of the Riverina Region specifically; a mapping of the

politics of land use is undertaken through autoethnographic methods to produce new land narratives and unique insights in to relationships between competing anthropocentric values, particularly the value of place-making in historical accounts, contemporary cultures and the value of recording or documenting change as it happens, and to reflect on change as means toward design futures.

Here 'significance' is manufactured by prescribing cultural value rather than natural value. A roadside area's is created or fabricated as if to be able to articulate significance purely by saying the word. Rendering natures voice visible is a constant challenge for the artist working within nature. I take the roadside out of the country and place it in the office of a local business as an installation. Meet all the criteria for 'significance', and make have people walk past it (not drive) and question their own impact.

### **Playing and Reality - <http://corchard.com.au/index.php/quarter-acre-1/>**

The exhibitions name comes from the D.W. Winnicott book of the same name as an exploration of how children begin to experience the world, ultimately in to a testing of that world, separation anxieties and building concepts and ideas around death. I first began thinking about this when undertaking the walk for performing geographies; I wrote:

I have thought multiple times before on what water restrictions mean for our mental health, what dirt instead of grass might mean for our wellbeing. I am reminded of something my partner said to me only two weeks prior about our one-year-old son, and our new home we share together in Regional Australia. She said: *'All I want is for a patch of grass for Thomas to play on, he really likes being outside'*... and every time I think of my young child experiencing the world behind the tempered glass doors of our living room, breathing conditioned air, playing with plastic toys, it makes me little melancholic... we do need a piece of green grass... but maybe we need to share that green grass with everyone (like a park) rather than own our own.

In this exhibition I put the piece of green grass up on a pedestal, under glass, behind a distant line so as to not allow close interaction. Images of brown dirt surrounded as framed prints, and shot glasses with measurements of rainfall over the three months prior sat, never to meet the grass, as over the month of install it slowly browned off and died.

My work for the recent exhibition here at Scotch Oakburn College is a continuation of that idea. Where the process of terraforming our backyard (gardening really) has started to take place.

### **Extinction Clock - <http://corchard.com.au/index.php/extinction-clock/>**

The measuring of change over time: from the vast expanse from the birth of our known universe, the fortuitous yet random appearance of our species home in planet earth, to the first signs of life and then on to the moment you read this sentence and it appears, ever onwards to progress... Somewhere between four and a half million and six million years ago our lineage diverged from other primates, three and a half million years ago our common ancestor began to walk upright & two and half million years ago, we began to use basic stone tools and to form larger community groups. Then somewhere between one hundred thousand years, and two hundred and fifty thousand years ago, what we designate as Homo sapiens appeared.

Bipedal, self reflective, imaginative... ..how awesome to be alive, and to know it. What was not to like? ... In short, death was not to like.

Some things in our experience seem immovable, unwavering & unchanged with time, others seem to change and fluctuate wildly. Yet, more things come and go largely unnoticed. This clock is a measure of change over time, a measure of biodiversity loss: of the silent disappearance of plants, animals & insects from planet earth... ..99.9% of all plants and animal species that have ever lived are no longer on the face of planet earth. This Extinction Clock counts in measures so that we

cannot just see the enormity over time, but also to see the count rise as we sit, providing for reflection on a very human scale.

### **Where to next? Conclusions?**

The easiest answer is that I do not know, and that there is no conclusion, only that time continues to move on, and that I am okay with that. Perhaps it is somewhere within the broad field of agri(culture). Where the cultivation of land, and the cultivation of self become entwined.