

The Wrong Place... or a brief utopia

Claire Doherty

A helipad marks out an overgrown stretch of asphalt which lies in a non-descript no-man's land in the centre of town.

'Honk 4 Art' declares a hand-made sign, catching the attention of truck drivers as their articulated cargos screech past the main street en route to the interstate highway.

A small group of people march through the town, a banner held aloft, at dawn and then again dusk.¹

These are incongruous, ill-fitting activities for a small town in the Western Australian wheatbelt. They are the traces of outsiders. They are fleeting artistic interventions into the social fabric of a place named Kellerberrin, some 210km east of Perth and were commissioned in 2004 by IASKA (The International Art Space, Kellerberrin Australia) as part of its ongoing programme of exhibitions and residencies. Artists are invited to stay in Kellerberrin for up to three months, encouraged to research and develop works that engage with the specificity of that remote rural location and community.

In contrast to its Australian peer-group of city-based residency programmes such as Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces in Melbourne or Artspace in Sydney, the objectives of IASKA are more closely aligned to the context-specific biennale or commissioned art programme. These kinds of projects are defined according to the organising principle of place. They are rooted in the encounter between outsider and insider. Yet, as the resulting artworks or documentation enter the global art economy (in this case via the national touring exhibition *From Space to Place*²) the key issue becomes how meanings translate beyond the specifics of the originating context or the first local audience. Is there a discernable difference between a work made in a rural or urban context or even between an Australian or non-Australian context for that matter? Curator Marco Marcon acknowledges, '[I]n rural Australia traditional ideas of belonging and locality are also increasingly challenged by the economic and social consequences of globalisation.³ Perhaps a starting point for a consideration of contemporary Australian art might be to acknowledge that our notion of place has shifted from a fixed geographical location to something or somewhere which is still being constituted through social, political and economic processes.

The recent large-scale survey exhibition of Australian art *2004* (ACMI and National Gallery of Victoria) raised significant questions about the representation of Australian visual culture, perhaps the first to do so since the demise of *Perspecta* in 1999. A critical response to the exhibition asked, '[H]ow is it possible to identify Australian culture now through the very media that insist upon the irrelevance of the category 'Australian'? By what criteria do we ascribe 'national' status for the

purposes of a 'national' survey exhibition?'⁴ But a more revealing set of questions might focus on what it means to make work *from* Australia, rather than *about* Australia and whether the new terminology surrounding place (and how we inhabit and produce it under globalisation) has a bearing on a consideration of recent tendencies in Australian art?

To my mind, what courses through *2004*, and other recent survey exhibitions of Australian art, is a feeling of being 'out of place', or perhaps more specifically dealing with the 'wrong place'.⁵ Cultural theorist Miwon Kwon proposes a notion of the 'wrong place' in her influential book *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*.⁶ Kwon identifies the principle dilemma that faces itinerant artists and nomadic curators: as our interest and commitment to genuine engagement with context has intensified, so our understanding of place has shifted from a fixed, physical location to a subjective experience. The term site-specificity, she suggests, has been replaced by gamut of new ones which includes site-oriented, site-responsive, context-specific or socially-engaged.

Kwon suggests that we are comforted by the thought that a place is ours, that we belong to it, perhaps even come from it, and therefore are tied to it in some fundamental way. Such places ('right' places) are thought to reaffirm our sense of self, reflecting back to us an unthreatening picture of a grounded identity. This kind of continuous relationship between a place and a person is deemed to be lost, and desperately needed, in contemporary society. In contrast, the 'wrong place' is generally thought of as a place where one feels one does not belong: unfamiliar, disorientating, destabilising, even threatening.

It is the 'wrong place' and associated feelings of displacement and disorientation, that connect the diverse practices Raquel Ormella, Tom Nicholson, Jan Nelson, nat&ali, Shaun Gladwell, David Rosetzky, James Lynch and the Kingpins. Much of this work is assertively performative and resonates with the vocabulary of the street or popular culture. Using the ready-mades of banners, t-shirts, drag, animation and skateboarding, these artworks are often multi-disciplinary, occasionally collaborative and consistently witty, perhaps with the exception of the work of Nelson and Rosetzky, which communicates the same sense of displacement but through a more subdued and languid tone.

Ormella's hand-made banners, placards and pamphlets utilise the language of protest. Her past involvement with the artist-run gallery *Squatspace* in South Sydney and her ongoing commitment to environmental issues (evident in her recent project in Kellerberrin and her work for Juliana Engberg's exhibition *Cycle Tracks Will Abound in Utopia* at ACCA) certainly indicate her activist credentials.⁷

Alongside her some-time collaborator Regina Walter, and others such as Melbourne-based artist Tom Nicholson and performance group Damp (which currently includes James Lynch), Ormella

questions the de-politicisation of the public realm in cities undergoing rampant regeneration. Back in 2000, she and fellow artist Lucas Ihlein created an infamous intervention on the outer wall of *SquatSpace* which simply read 'Brief Utopia', setting the inevitability of urban renewal against the optimistic collectivism of an artist-led initiative.

But Ormella's work is not tactical activism in the vein of groups such as boat-people.org. Rather, her message is complicated through personal anecdote and doubt.

'This is not the life my mother wanted for me.'

'A friend of mine had a 1 night stand with a guy who threatened to self-immolate in the foyer of parliament house unless the Howard Government met his list of demands.'

Ormella's banners, Nicholson's marches and Damp's performances affect a kind of shift in the social structure of their environs. They often coax participants or interlocutors through a recognisable make-shift aesthetic. This spontaneous, low-tech conviviality permeates the art scenes in Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and Sydney. In the face of dominant consumerism, such events and projects propose alternative modes of experience, albeit through a less strident, more ironic tone, than the parallel movements of cultural activism.

Shaun Gladwell's mesmerising video works first emerged as the city of Sydney underwent the Olympic metamorphosis, whereby public space was re-authored for the Games. *Linework: A Road Movie* (2003) is the skateboarder's view of his board traversing road-markings and notably official blue line that acts as a permanent reminder of the marathon course which connected Sydney's suburbs to the inner city. Gladwell's *Kickflipper flâneur* series (2000-2003) records the artist as 'space jacker', using the city as stage for his balletic skills.

Gladwell perhaps best epitomises the Situationist notion of *dérive*, as described by Guy Debord as, 'playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects' in which persons 'drop their usual motives for movement and action... and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters that they find there. Unlike the stroll of the Baudelairean flâneur, the *dérive* is a tactical contradiction of the city.'

In contrast to the sanctioned season and spaces of the Mardi Gras, the anarchic performances and videos of The Kingpins and nat&ali propose the carnivalesque as an appropriate response to feeling 'out of place'. The four members of the Kingpins - Emma Price, Katie Price, Técha Noble and Angelica Mesiti -- use humour and masquerade to create new mythologies for the urban environment. They invade Marc Augé's 'non-places of supermodernity' -- the shopping mall, the underground car park, the lobby, the train station -- with parodies of media-generated stereotypes.

Seemingly a world away in character, David Rosetzky's video works and Jan Nelson's figurative paintings picture the same dislocation of the MTV generation, though here extrovert parody gives way to introspection.

'When I'm alone I feel odd. I feel kind of nothing. Which could be nice. But it's not. It's weird' one interior monologue in Rosetzky's *Justine* (2000) recounts. Isolation is a common theme: in Rosetzky's work through the conditioning and scripting of behaviour and in Nelson's through the stark separation of figures from context. Her ongoing series of intricately detailed paintings *Walking in Tall Grass* (1999-2004) each show a figure of a young person deeply absorbed in thought, their faces hidden or turned away from our gaze. The absence of any recognisable context in this work serves to intensify the disorientation of the subjects. They are literally held in limbo -- in time and place.

So is this Australia? These particular works -- these social interventions, these slogans, these viral campaigns and parties, these quiet, haunting *misé-en-scènes*, these candid ripostes to urban renewal, these anxious questions and these comic stories - emerge from artists who move through the metropolitan centres of Australia. Yet, the discernable icons of those locations are absent, except for the odd glimpse of the raging sea on Bondi or an re-animated St. Kilda Road.

As Miwon Kwon suggests, 'an encounter with the wrong place is likely to expose the instability of the right place.' Encountering the work of these artists will reveal that making work *from* Australia exposes the instability of the identity of Australia. To belong to this place necessitates a feeling of dislocation, a sense of being on the outside, or passing through. Hence, though the work of these artists has emerged through the vital, collective and collaborative networks of artists in these cities and speaks to the specifics of the local, it can also resonate through new locations, to new audiences in new places because it speaks of our global condition -- of being out of place.

¹ Matthew Hunt, *Helipad*, Kellerberrin, 2004; nat&ali, *Honk 4 Art*, 2004-05; Tom Nicholson, *Documents After a Marching Season*, Kellerberrin, 2004-5.

² Documentation of the events were subsequently toured nationally in an exhibition entitled *From Space to Place*, curated by Marco Marcon, PICA, March 31 - May 8, 2005.

³ See Marco Marcon, "From Space to Place", at www.pica.org.au

⁴ Anthony Gardner, "2004: Australian Anxieties", *Broadsheet*, vol. 33, no.3.

⁵ Exhibitions such as *Bittersweet* at Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2002; the annual NEW series and group exhibitions such as *Swoon* and *Cycle Tracks Will Abound in Utopia* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), Melbourne; *Face Up* (Hamburger Bahnhof), and *Primavera* (MCA).

⁶ Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002

⁷ *Cycle Tracks Will Abound*, ACCA, Melbourne August 06, 2004 - September 26, 2004

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