



Gudgenby Valley, Namadji National Park, NSW. Photograph by Kirstie Rea, 2009.

On Immersion, a note on process and place

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The Gudgenby Valley, southwest of Canberra within the Namadji National Park, was an Indigenous fishing and meeting place appropriated in the 19th century as settler farmland, then gazetted as a National Park in 1879. Over its last 100 years, the Valley – like the rest of the Park in which it sits – has been subjected to changing management policies, alternately cautious, visionary, and parochial, or a combination of all three.¹ Indigenous and non-Indigenous fauna do not compete so much as awkwardly co-exist. Wild dogs and pigs cohabit the roaming grounds of kangaroos. To immerse oneself in this place is not a dip in a splash-pool; this is taking a swim in a great billabong of tensions and complexities, of overlapping gains and losses, private and public mythologies. It is thus steeped in layers of tension and contradiction that perhaps neither art nor politics can ever quite resolve.

I first visited this valley in May 2009, in order to steep myself in the same landscape in which artists Paull McKee and Kirstie Rea were placed as part of a project steered by Craft ACT – Craft and Design Centre. I came to breathe what they breathed, smell as they smelt, leave behind my city-mind. They each stayed five weeks; I stayed just two days, in the heritage-listed, urban-style ‘ready-cut’ Gudgenby cottage that sits on former grazing land.

The Immersion project, set up in collaboration with National Parks with funding support from the Natural Resource Management Council, was a test case for bringing disparate groups together outside their core business² to respond to this environment. The project was linked to two Parks’ open days, a forum, and – after one year – an exhibition, in which both artists communicated to an urban gallery audience something of their experiences. Although both McKee and Rea regularly ‘commune’ with the bush, they found themselves significantly changed in their personal topographies.

It is autumn, late dusk. As I drive to the residency, the light is powdery, the ground sinks a deeper grey. The swerving road through scrubby bush becomes a long path beside the river, opening to cleared land. The refurbished cottage – front verandah, hallway, lounge and kitchen, and pressed glass front door – sits like an old dame looking out on a former dominion, over fence-posts in collapse, rushy reeds by the river, whispers of drover-song.

A black wallaby watches me unpack and stash my belongings and re-emerge to gather wood for the fire. The wallaby’s eyes glimmer and blink, her eyes so strangely distinct. Soft snout, whiskered face, whisky eyes. It’s already very cold so I set the fire to blazing. At 3am, the fire is out. Dingo howls spread

up from the valley, invading my sleep much as fog slowly climbs altitude in morning air. Eventually, I peel out from under my sleeping bag and peer through lace curtains onto a soft, whitish dawn; for a farmer or bushie, it's late – past eight o'clock. Intensely displeased with the cold, I make moves like an old urban deer, antlers stiff and cracked. Eventually, I take a walk. Long grass tongues my jeans with ice. From a deciduous tree, frost still falls in sheets. White rain, baby snow.

My day is a long sequence of walking, watching, fire stoking; I'm not even sure I *think* any more. Do I write, when I take up the pen? Or is this something else that happens, a kind of alchemy where ink appears on page after passing through layers of half-conscious membrane? Moist, yet dry, neither young, nor old; my body is skin, whiskers, air and bone. My mouth, whet by eucalyptus dreams, savours leaves and angels. I am interwoven between (and by) infinity and outline.

Immersion processes are gaining currency. High schools arrange groups of fifteen-year-olds to go live in the outback, or work in indigenous villages overseas. Art schools organise field trips of several days. The principle of staying immersed, seeing what happens, is possibly what most artists long for every day in their studio, allowing their senses *long enough* to connect, to reciprocate with their tools and their environment.

When I talk with people involved in this residency, the passions they harbour and nurture are apparent, whether their materials are glass, fibre, found objects, words, or the soil, trees, fauna and air. These are experiences and intentions which both artists and rangers describe in a parallel language. Both groups mention 'mutual respect', 'deep listening', 'reciprocation', 'a capacity to let go'. It's what intrigued Head Ranger Bernard Morris about the project. Once past an initial suspicion – 'what do those artists want to take from here?' – he recognised mutual integrity, a similar ground.

Gudgenby – traces

Kirstie Rea is a glass artist of international repute, whose fine work ranges from representations of sky, to landforms and geological transformations, and the interplay of matter with light. In the exhibition Gudgenby-traces held one year after her Gudgenby residency, she let go of glass, and instead created an installation about the valley's *vacancies*. She used nothing more than woollen thread, marking out the distant mountain ridges, the paddock gate, the veranda's edge. In homage to the work of American Fred Sandback,³ Rea put herself and her reputation aside in order to recreate the Valley's 'emptiness'.

Rea spent a lot of her time watching the birds, wallabies and wild dogs – their worlds of flesh, fight, flight, challenge, sometimes rest. Initially she thought to 'track the flight of the bird' but in various threaded drafts realised she was creating an interference, forcing us to see what she has seen, trying to take control.

Instead, she places us with her on the veranda, in the observant company of that geographical expanse: not only looking, seeing, waiting, but also *being* seen and watched. In the mid-1960s, Sandback recognised that the concrete presence of the art object is beside the point:

All my sculpture is part of a *continuing attitude and relationship to things* ... The sculptures address themselves to the particular



1/ Paull McKee, *Wagga – Lullaby I* (detail), 2010, collected woollen blankets, brocade cloth, hessian backing, brocade and silk binding, cotton thread. Image courtesy the artist and Craft ACT, Canberra. Photograph by Creative Image Photography.

2/ Gudgenbi chase. Photograph by Kirstie Rea, 2009.

space and time that they're in, but it may be that the more complete situation I'm after is only constructed in time slowly, with the individual sculptures as its constituent parts.⁴

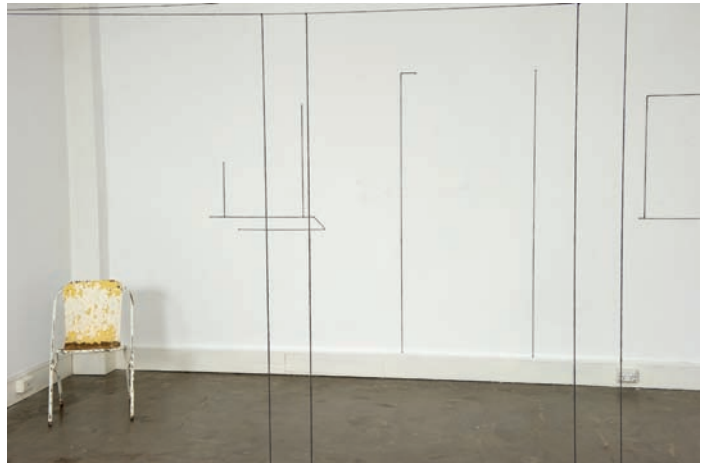
By tracing the veranda, its shade, the sky and horizon beyond, Rea invited us to share in the gift of her own hovering.

McKee, too, let go of the very concept that has driven his work for nearly twenty years. Renowned for his use of blankets and clothing salvaged from tips and the attics of people's homes, McKee's method of re-backing and re-sewing fragments and threads, and leaving gaps, tears and stains, pays homage to both colonial domesticity and the swaggy's make-do life.⁵ His oeuvre seemed to be about loss, about forgotten lives. During this immersion however, he came to an eye-opening realisation that his process is rather about hope – the kindness/willingness of people to preserve and pass things on; a link to the resilience of what *survives*.

In contrast to Rea's installation, McKee's blankets still give us finely crafted objects to contemplate. And yet I observe in these too a kind of transparency. (He says, privately, 'I want to get out of the way'.) Each blanket carries story, and allows space for our own (comfort, wrappings). Although the blankets associate with shelter and protection, they carry a kind of 'negative capability'⁶ which allows space for our own sorrows, the failures of our own



Paull McKee, *Wagga – Lullaby I and Wagga – Lullaby II*, 2010, collected woollen blankets, brocade clothe, hessian backing, brocade and silk binding, sateen binding, cotton thread. Installation view, Craft ACT, Canberra, 2010. Image courtesy the artist and Craft ACT.



Kirstie Rea, *From the Veranda* (detail), 2010, wool, pins and chair. Installation view, Craft ACT, 2010. Image courtesy the artist and Craft ACT. Photographs by Creative Image Photography.

lives to emerge (i.e., when we were *not* wrapped, or warmed). They create something like a ritual space, a subtle inter-weaving of stories back and forth through a deeper span of time.

The work and process of both artists parallels that of any organism – not only the interaction of our skins with air and cold and warmth, our eyes with changes of light, our DNA with time, but as enactments of this exchange of watching, reaching, seeking, re-membering, dis-membering, being transformed. The philosopher/biologist Charles Birch states that every organism exists in an act of feeling reciprocation with the world.⁷ Art is perhaps the tool which can express this transparently, unburdening us from the heavy load of living divided from the organicity of our lives.

More than survival

The Kosciusko Huts Association publishes a brochure informing people about safe use of the huts it caretakes. These brochures also relate stories of mishaps and adversities in these parts of the bush. But there are probably thousands more stories of which we never hear, including the non-human stories which have, somewhere, left their trace – tragic or joyous – in the topography of the landscape or the rings of the trees.

In these days of urgent concern around rapid climate change and the effects of human action, maybe 'right answers' will become less significant than discovering new ways of relating, of asking questions, and of increasing systemic dialogue in these landscapes, so that we – artists, rangers, whoever – can become aware and transformed by what we learn. As we wake, as we sleep, as we breathe.

1. See 'National Parks: A Museum, a Garden, and an Asylum' in Harry F. Recher, Daniel Lumney and Irina Dunn (eds.), *A Natural Legacy: Ecology in Australia*, Pergamon Press, Oxford, London, 1981, pp. 184-199.

2. Barb McConchie, at the time Executive Director of Craft Act and at the helm of the project from its inception, notes that this was a highly unusual

partnership, characterised by a willingness of all parties to take that risk and 'recognise a potential overlap of interests'; conversation with the author, May 2010.

3. Sandback's first fine steel rod structures (New York, from 1966), which soon morphed into works in wool thread, were sculptures that 'did not have an inside' but which could 'assert a certain volume in its full materiality without occupying and obscuring it'. Fred Sandback, 'Remarks on My Sculpture 1966–1986', in *Fred Sandback Sculpture 1966–1986*, Mannheim: Kunsthalle, 1986, p. 12. Rea's use of the terms 'volume and vacancy' are direct borrowings from Sandback, but her realisations around these terms are distinctly hers.

4. Sandback, 1986: pp. 12–13; the emphasis is mine.

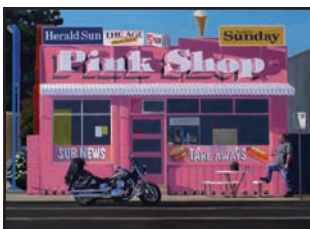
5. McKee is particularly known for his extensive work with *wagga* (or *waggas*) blankets used and sewn by swaggies for their personal use.

6. The term was first used by the Romantic poet John Keats: 'Negative Capability ... is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'; from a letter dated Sunday, 21 December 1817. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negative_capability

7. Charles Birch, *Biology and the Riddle of Life*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1999, esp. pp. 91-108.

Gudgenby – traces was the culminating exhibition of the Gudgenby Ready-Cut Cottage Residency (Namadgi National Park), showing installation-based work by Paull McKee and Kirstie Rea, Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre, Canberra, 27 May to 12 June 2010. The project was awarded the ACT Landcare Chapter's Urban Landcare Award in 2009. Craft ACT are currently planning a second Gudgenby Residency in 2012, to culminate with a 2013 exhibition. www.craftact.org.au

Zsuzsi Soboslay is a writer, performer, reviewer, exhibition curator, and illustrator with a special interest in ecology and shamanic awareness. Her article 'Artists change how we think about the world' also relating to the Gudgenby Residency, may be found at: www.craftact.org.au/gudgenby



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