

# DEALING WITH THE PAST

Simone Eisler *Wall Of Skulls - Deer Skulls, Sheep Hide, Shells, Copper*  
2009, part of *The Armoured Forest*, Howard Smith Wharves, Brisbane.  
Dimensions: Various within 20 x 15m. Photo: Brian Hand.

■ Carol Schwarzman

...cultural memory is as real and as shifting as sand.  
Chris Healy<sup>1</sup>

art is a game between all people of all periods.  
Marcel Duchamp<sup>2</sup>

Considered as a technology evolving over time, the international biennial form has been styled, varyingly, to highlight the avant garde, to represent nations on a global platform, and these days to test out new cities and markets for the business and commodification of art and artmaking.

Brisbane's 2009 *ARC Biennial of Art*, as recently curated by Kevin Wilson, is a biennial of yet a different kind. Presenting temporary, site-specific works, ARC removes itself from commerce and assumes a unique role in the production of the city's public art. As director of Queensland Artworkers Alliance, Wilson's artist-run organisation is a premier protagonist on the not-for-profit state map. His self-professed mission with ARC is to support new ways to make art: to move the artist-viewer relationship outside the sanctity of the gallery and into the everyday.

Now that Brisbane promotes itself as an international city and is no longer a 'big country town' ideation of an historical context is required, not merely for supporting tourism, but also for maturation as a civic entity.<sup>3</sup> As adepts of living for the moment, Queenslanders also need to put themselves into context. Thus ARC's push to use performance and ephemerality to launch participants into a relationship with communal memory is in direct contrast to most public art. Wilson intends to carve out more funding for 'challenging, gritty spaces'<sup>4</sup> for relational and performative public work. With the 2009 ARC, he centred his curatorial approach on the question, 'How do you make contemporary art that deals with the past?'

The bureaucratic wheeling and dealing necessary to gain permission for the use of two historical sites was a major work in itself: the Howard Smith Wharves under the Story Bridge had been abandoned for over twenty years and were formerly the scene for much of the city's overseas import and export trade; Fort Lytton, although a national park – and far from abandoned – presents itself 'as is', with much of its architecture an aged evocation of time's passage. Built in 1881 as protection from invasion, the fort became a quarantine station in 1915 and first point of entry for migrants to Queensland. So, thematically, ARC 2009 also began forming itself as a consideration of boundaries: what is allowed to enter, and what is excluded.

Notes on some of the Events (not in chronological order)  
*14-15 November 2009 - Fort Lytton:* Megan Cope installs *Marutchi*, constructing a projection of the indigenous name *Turrbul* on the water's edge, visually overwriting the oil refineries opposite, to commemorate this Aboriginal crossing site. In collaboration with Joshua & Denis Walker of the Jendairwal Nation, she creates a dual, toponymic sound landscape of war chants and place-names, calling up those who lived on the land prior to settlers' arrival, and the untold story of the wars fought within Australia. *Marutchi's* billboard stands sentinel during a weekend of ARC performances.

*9 October-1 November, 2009 - Shed E, Howard Smith Wharves:* At this grungy warehouse situated on Brisbane's last undeveloped stretch of riverfront, visitors enter, walk past a reception desk festooned with publications and postcards, and are swallowed up into a glowing, multicoloured lightscape of undulating, pulsating mechanical jellyfish.



Simone Eisler *The Armoured Forest* (Install) 2010, chain, deer antlers and skulls, Barramundi scales, copper, Oyster shells, fish and Eel leather, dried leaves, trees, sound piece. Photo: Brian Hand.



Fabricated on-site from repurposed computer parts, guitar tuners rewired for sound and Tupperware by Shih Chieh Huang, *Cubozoa – L-og* recalls an invasion of the river by blue blubber jellyfish – caused by humans’ depletion of competing species. (Memory of human life before we came out of the sea; futuristic projection of possible scenario of hybridity... ) (See review *Artlink*, vol 29, no4.)

14-15 November, 2009 – *Fort Lytton*: Free morning and afternoon teas are served to visitors by Elizabeth Woods and her team, offering an intimacy in the Fort Lytton experience. Guarded by actors posing as soldiers, *Fortification* consists of an elegant café of home-baked cakes and sweets, the recipes for which have been sought from third and fourth generation Australians, members of immigrant cultures, eager to share the cuisines and tastes of their cultural backgrounds. Some of these recipes were originally introduced by travellers who passed through Fort Lytton Quarantine Station. They have now been compiled and disseminated in *The Fortification Cook Book*, underscoring Woods’ concerns of community building, authenticating food sourcing and production. Nostalgia, a key component of much public art, is represented here in the Proustian *madeleine* experience of eating and tasting. To further develop connection to where food comes from, a dual screen video installation in the Fort’s autoclave room projects images of the harvesting of wheat, sugar, eggs and milk. (Memories of migrating to Australia, countries of cultural origin, and comforts left behind... )

14 November, 2009 – *Fort Lytton*: As the sun sets on this clear, late spring afternoon, three hundred people congregate to the sounds of didgeridoo and bagpipe. Witnessing as sixteen horses and their female riders (from local pony clubs) pound onto the grassy earthworks amphitheatre, observers engage with Pat Hoffie’s *Troop Drill* – a spectacle steeped in 60s Happenings’ visceral anarchy. While the riders guide their mounts through training paces, imagery of Australia’s Light Brigade, (projected archival footage and text created in collaboration with video artist Anthony Hamilton) and Queensland Army encampments at the fort layer their movements, and the crowd cheers and whistles. Hoffie is interested in giving participants a connection to the site – other than curiosity – fulfilling the need to be part of something larger than oneself. She says, ‘So many aspects of the site are powerful: the indigenous heritage, the idea of a ‘ruin’ in a place like Queensland, the reminder of the futility of ‘keeping out’ anything... the fact that things surface many years after [a war] that somehow are conducive to community, to shared remembering and to treasuring simple moments.’<sup>5</sup>

7-29 November, 2009 - *Shed E, Howard Smith Wharves*: A visitor now finds the space enclosed and divided into two main halls. Simone Eisler’s *Armoured Forest* inhabits the first of these rooms. The space has been darkened, and encrusted with the drama of found objects both natural and man-made – garlands of rusted chains hang from the ceiling, dried brown leaves cover the floor, hooded figures and little creatures gather and hover. Barramundi scales, deer antlers, cow vertebrae and fishing sinkers are among the materials used by the artist. Childlike, ritualesque, equally conversant with what’s frightening, endearing and cute – simultaneously pantheistic and post-apocalyptic. (Memories of wood sprites and nymphs, pre-modern relationships with Nature...)

Crossing into the second hall, space opens up and is lighter, contrasting in its airiness. *Apocalypse: Seven Histories into the Future*, installed by Melbourne artist Irene Barberis, assembles stations of reference to the Old and New Testament with, ‘a giant transparent inflatable, long lengths of darkened handwritten walls, a silicon Chapel, light-lines and tapestries of light, a fountain-font and a hanging cube of 40 glassine drawings.’<sup>6</sup> (Memories and future projections of apocalypse, faith and connection to a godhead... )

It’s well-known by now that forgetting plays an important role in the construction of any nation-state’s collective memory and identity. Australia is hardly alone in its working to form a national ethos based on selective exclusion and denial of the past. What’s more:

The politics of time is intimately connected to the politics of place. And the politics of space has a tendency to destroy the memory of place, and thus do violence to what in German is an overdetermined word – *Heimat*.<sup>7</sup>

Suppression of the historical difficulties of non-English speaking migrants by the Howard Government in its handbook, *Becoming an Australian: Citizenship, Your Commitment to Australia*, wipes clean mistakes and defective policies. Published as a candidate’s studybook for the citizenship test introduced in September 2007, it puts forth a particular, reductivist viewpoint of history in service of ‘the long-held belief in Australia that by virtue of their control of immigration and citizenship policies, bureaucrats and political leaders [are] the principal gatekeepers of the imagined national community.’<sup>8</sup>

In his book, *Forgetting Aborigines*, Chris Healy discusses ‘the dynamic tension of remembering and forgetting’ as a process. Remembering is never finished, and is rather ‘a shifting, heterogenous, partial and repetitive assemblage of acts, utterances and artefacts.’<sup>9</sup> Healy goes on to describe his theory of the term ‘Aboriginality’ as a zone of interface and interdependence where indigenous and settler cultures come together and consider each other. He argues that it is only in the interaction that the least amount of exclusion and forgetting can occur, that is, when living and active exchange takes precedence over one group’s portrayal or distanced perception of another. Thus, ‘remembering’ always implies ‘forgetting’ and being aware of the force of the past in the present is key to the realisation that individuals remember within the terms of their own memory-making culture.

In a postcolonial Australia, ARC 2009 has experimented to include artists and participants in temporarily autonomous zones of serious play. Aleks Danko, Jude Walton and collaborators performed their *Getting the Message Through at all Costs*, and Isabel and Alfredo Aquilizan created *Passage at Fort Lytton*; at the Howard Smith Wharves *Across the Gulf*, a major exhibition of works by twenty-two artists from Bahrain, Abu Dhabi and Dubai showcased artists practising from within their culture, and Glen Henderson installed *Perceptions in Cell Time*, a meditation on nature, time and energy as an interdependency translated into sequence and pattern. ARC 2009 also extended itself to regional spaces as far north as Gympie and south to the Gold Coast. ARC 2009 can be accessed after-the-fact by the Internet, video assisted by the team at Liveworm.

Suffice it to say that as an expression of the use of the biennial form as a medium, ARC 2009 emphasises the notion that contemporary artists have the ‘custodianship to call up the past, reinterpret it and retell or tell the stories that won’t live in the now: things don’t exist forever, they need to be sung up again into meaning every time you shift the coordinates of time and place.’<sup>10</sup> ■

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1 Chris Healy *Forgetting Aborigines*, 2008, Sydney, UNSW Press Ltd), p5.

2 Pierre Cabanne *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1979 p16.

3 At the time of writing this article the Regent Theatre, formerly one of Brisbane’s architectural gems, was going under the wrecking ball.

4 Conversation with Kevin Wilson on 4 June 2010.

5 Email from Pat Hoffie dated 15 June 2010.

6 Quoted from the ARC Biennial 2009 brochure for *Apocalypse: Seven Histories into Futures*.

7 Mark Bahnish, at *Larvatus Prodeo*: <http://larvatusprodeo.net/2008/05/06/a-nationalnatural-history-of-memory-and-forgetting/> (accessed 15 June, 2010).

8 *Does History Matter?* The citizenship test as a form of collective memory making (and forgetting), Chapter 7, p2; at [http://epress.anu.edu.au/anzsog/immigration/mobile\\_devices/cho7so2.html](http://epress.anu.edu.au/anzsog/immigration/mobile_devices/cho7so2.html) (accessed 15 June 2010)

9 Healy ibid p9.

10 Pat Hoffie in a conversation on 7 June 2010.



Aleks Danko and Jude Walton *Getting The Message Through At All Costs* 2009. Photo: Brian Hand.



Pat Hoffie *Troop Drill* 2009. Photo: Ane Hagan. Licenced by Viscopy, Sydney 2010.