



Ecologies of art: social engagement, collaboration and the environment

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Doctor of Philosophy (Creative Arts)

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School of the Arts, English and Media

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ABSTRACT

This practice-based PhD comprises four research projects that employ socially engaged art practice to investigate environmental situations on local, national and international scales. I work immersively in communities, both outside and within the academy, to engage with the complexities of human interactions with land and water. Working in regional and rural areas in Australia and the Pacific, I use collaborative, participatory processes to engage with environmental issues within communities. From agricultural practices to fisheries management, from care for local creeks to care for the Great Barrier Reef, I collaborate with a broad range of people and groups to contribute to environmental discourse and practice.

The PhD research thesis involves two intersecting components. Firstly, I am a participating artist in the generation and enactment of the projects. Secondly, as a critical researcher, I document the mechanics as well as the successes and limitations of the projects in the exegesis. As a participating artist, I use a 'suite' of methods, both practical and poetic, to engage communities. This approach allows multiple projects to coexist and at times overlap. Using a range of platforms—site-specific public events, journal essays, blogs, video documentaries, exhibitions, conferences and the exegesis itself—the projects contribute to the discourse surrounding socially engaged art and the environment.

Through the exegesis and the portfolio I show how using this 'suite' of methods and communicative platforms across multiple sites allowed a unique methodology of socially engaged art to emerge. In doing so I document and reflect on how the methods of collaboration and socially engaged art activate new environmental dialogues, and new ecologies for art.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the First Australians of this country, in particular the Boon Wurrung people of my birthplace, Mornington, Victoria, and the Wodi Wodi people of the Illawarra, New South Wales, where I live. By recognising their long history of habitation of Australia, I am reminded that how we place our feet on the ground tells much about our relationship with land.

My supervisors Dr Lucas Ihlein and Dr Su Ballard offered valuable support and sage advice over the past three and a half years. Dr Ihlein is a wonderful collaborator. He has provided countless opportunities for me to participate and collaborate in projects that I hope have not only enriched us but also enriched the communities in which we have worked. Dr Ballard worked closely with me through the research and writing, encouraging me to shape the work in my own way, while offering clear perspectives and direction. She has shown great confidence in me, presenting many opportunities to participate in academic projects that have extended me and strengthened my self-belief. It has been an enormous privilege and pleasure working with both people and has forged enduring connections.

Along the way, Dr Penny Harris, Dr Joshua Lobb, Dr Agnieszka Golda and Associate Professor Brogan Bunt offered quiet support in the background at the University of Wollongong. Dr Sarah Hamylton and Dr Leah Gibbs are respected colleagues—together we have explored what it means to work across disciplines. Farther away in Mackay, Queensland, Simon Mattsson and his family, John and Christene Sweet, Starrett Veä Veä, Fiona Vuibeqa, Cherrie Hughes and Kellie Galletly have become like family.

My partner Mailin Suchting has demonstrated endless kindness and patience and has survived this intense and demanding period. She has shown great interest in the various activities of this practice-based research and has been my most vocal cheer squad.

Finally, I honour my beloved dog Lulu—a small being with a big personality—who died in May 2018. I hoped she would be there for the entire journey, but it wasn't to be. I still feel her licking my face.

CERTIFICATION

I, Kim Williams, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctor of Philosophy from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kim Williams', is positioned above a horizontal line.

Kim Williams

6th June 2020

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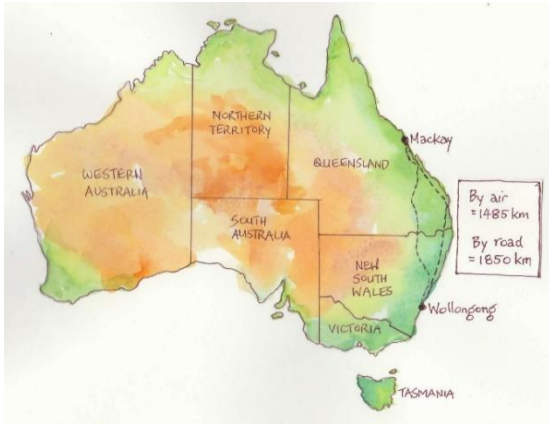
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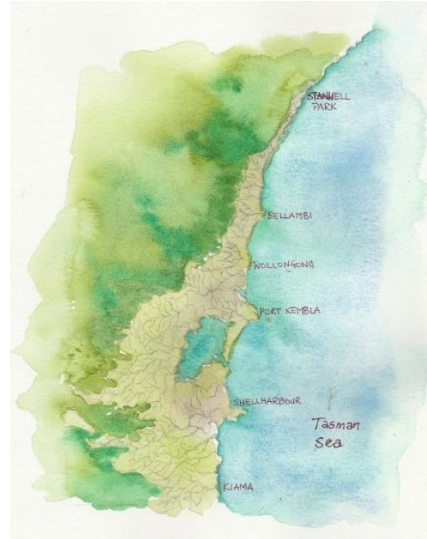
PROJECT DIRECTORY



SUGAR VS THE REEF?



MAPPING THE ISLANDS: HOW CAN ART AND SCIENCE SAVE THE GREAT BARRIER REEF?



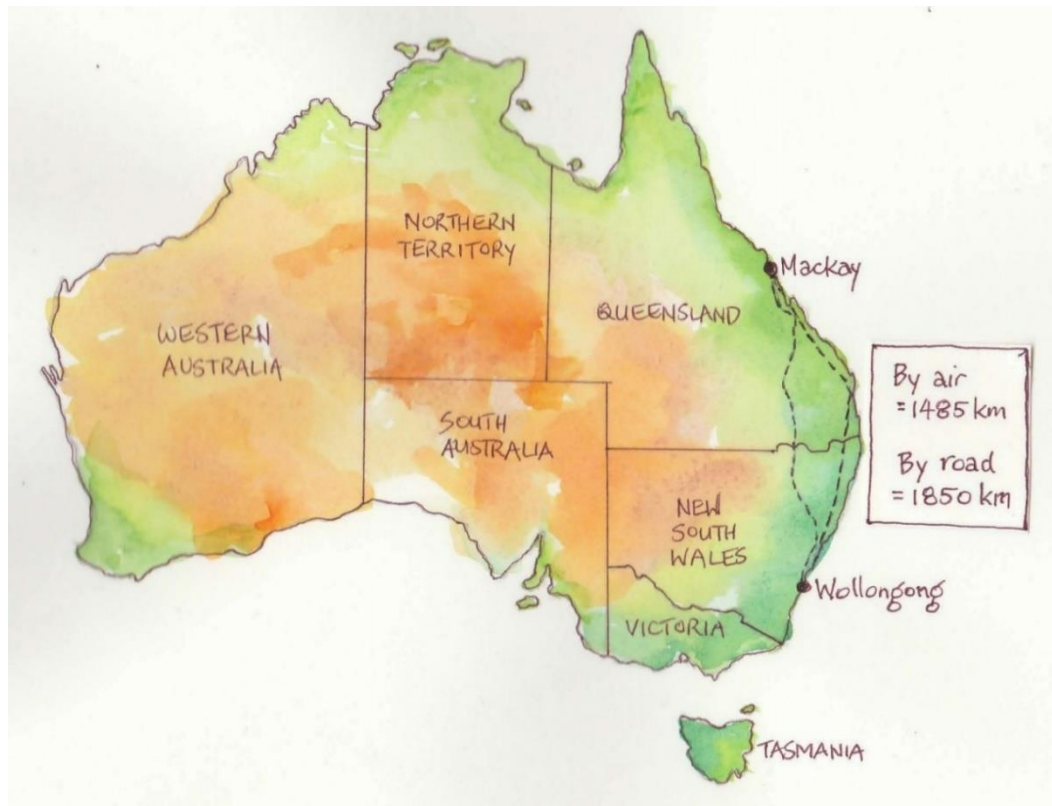
WALKING UPSTREAM: WATERWAYS OF THE ILLAWARRA



KIRIBATI FISHERIES BLOG

This project directory is a guide to the four research projects of the PhD. It is a summary of the components and scope of each project as a whole. The online portfolio is a compilation of the outputs of each project, across a range of media. The portfolio should be viewed in conjunction with the exegesis at: <http://www.kimwilliamsportfolio.net/>

PROJECT:
SUGAR VS THE REEF?



Artists

Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein

Location

Mackay, Queensland

Dates

2016-2019

Sub-project

Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project

Parameters

Socially engaged collaborative project with sugarcane farmers, artists, traditional custodians, Australian South Sea Islanders, natural resource managers and community members of Mackay.

Aims

- To transform agricultural practices along the Great Barrier Reef coastline
- To transmit knowledge of regenerative agriculture practices across communities
- To bring Indigenous and Australian South Sea Islander knowledges and histories into the contemporary agricultural space in Mackay
- To contribute new methods and knowledge to the field of socially engaged art

Collaborators

Simon Mattsson (farmer)

John Sweet (activist and retired farmer)

Kellie Galletly (community educator)

Starrett Vea Vea (Chairperson, Mackay and District South Sea Islander Association)

Jemal Davis (work crew supervisor)

Deb Netuschil (Yuibera elder)

Uncle George Tonga (Yuibera elder)

Uncle Phillip Kemp (Yuibera elder)

Cherrie Hughes (social media and events)

Kate Finch (Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority)

Tegan McBride (permaculture practitioner)

Juliane Kasiske (natural resource manager)

Fiona Vuibeqa (artist and regional arts officer)

Partner organisations

Central Queensland Soil Health Systems

Local Marine Advisory Committee (Mackay)

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority

Reef Catchments Mackay
Mackay Food Growers' Network
Mackay Regional Council
Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens
Artspace (Mackay Regional Gallery)
Central Queensland University
Farmers for Climate Action
Mackay Conservation Group

Funding bodies

Australian Research Council
Australia Council for the Arts
Regional Arts Development Fund (Mackay Regional Council)
Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority Reef Guardians' Program

Events

Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers (July 2017)—held on Simon Mattsson's farm

Legume Planting Event (March 2018)—Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens

Seed and Song Planting Event (August 2018)—Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens

Future Leaders Eco-Challenge workshops (in partnership with Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, September 2018)—Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens

Sunflower and Song Harvest Event (November 2018)—Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens

Future Leaders Eco-Challenge workshops (in partnership with Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, March 2019)—Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens

Old Ways New Ways Sugarcane Harvest Event (October 2019)—Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens

Exhibitions

Sugar vs the Reef? Artspace Mackay, October 2018-January 2019

Key advocacy meetings

Jim Pearce, State Member for Mirani

George Christensen, Federal Member for Dawson

Greg Williamson, Mayor of Mackay

Jon Brodie, Professorial Fellow with the ARC Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies,
James Cook University, Townsville

Stephen Andrew, State Member for Mirani

Media interviews

ABC Tropical North Radio, July 2017, August 2018, November 2018, October 2019

My105.9fm Indigenous radio 2017, 2018, October 2019

Channel 7 Mackay, July 2017

Channel 9 Mackay, November 2018

Mackay *Daily Mercury* newspaper, February 2018, August 2018, November 2018

Constellations: Talks across Art, Technology and Science Podcast series, Episode #12, “The Soil”: with Lucas Ihlein, Kim Williams and Simon Mattsson, dLux Media, 1 July 2019

Rural Weekly, 10 May 2019, 14 October 2019

Conferences and presentations

Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, *Water Futures—Asia Pacific Knowledge Exchange and Transdisciplinary Laboratory*, 23-25 February 2017, Melbourne

Kim Williams, *H2O: Life and Death*, University of Adelaide, 14-16 September 2017 (an interdisciplinary conference organised by the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice)

Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, *Farmer/Artist Collaborations: An Australian Perspective*, May 2018, University of California, Santa Barbara

Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, Simon Mattsson, *Conversation with Robbie Buck, Siteworks*, Bundanon Trust, Illaroo, September 2018

Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, *Artists' talk, Sugar vs the Reef?* exhibition, Artspace Mackay, October 2018

Related publications

Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, 2019, "Fresh water, salt water: socially engaged art, collaboration and the environment", *Australian Humanities Review* (in press)

Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, 2019, "Working and Walking with Waterways", *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder* (book chapter), Open Humanities Press

Lucas Ihlein, Laura Fisher, Kim Williams, Simon Mattsson, 2018, "Socially Engaged Art and Agriculture: Experimenting with Extension", *Journal of Sustainability Education* 17, February 2018, http://www.susted.com/wordpress/content/socially-engaged-art-and-agriculture-experimenting-with-extension_2018_11/

Laura Fisher, 2017, "Ecologies of Land and Sea and the Rural/Urban Divide in Australia: Sugar vs the Reef? and The Yeomans Project", *Culture and Dialogue* 5: 98-130

Fiona Vuibeqa, Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, 2018, catalogue interview, *Sugar vs the Reef?* exhibition, Artspace Mackay

Blogs

<http://www.sugar-vs-the-reef.net>

<http://www.watershedmackay.land>

Proposals

Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, Simon Mattson, John Sweet (Central Queensland Soil Health Systems), 2018. Outline proposal for a partnership with Central Queensland University to establish a demonstration farm in the Pioneer Valley, Mackay

Kim Williams, 2019. *Farmer-to-Farmer mentorship program*. A regenerative agriculture demonstration model (see Chapter 3 and online portfolio)

PROJECT:

WALKING UPSTREAM: WATERWAYS OF THE ILLAWARRA



Artists

Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, Brogan Bunt

Location

Illawarra region, New South Wales

Project dates

2014-2018

Parameters

Public creek walking events and related activities with collaborators, friends and members of the public

Aims

- To develop a community of interest in waterways
- To transmit knowledge of and care for waterways across communities in the Illawarra
- To bring Indigenous knowledges and histories to public creek walking events
- To expand socially engaged art methods and create links with other waterway art projects

Collaborators and guest facilitators

Vincent Bicego (photographs, catalogue essay, book essay)

Cath McKinnon (storytelling)

Jade Kennedy (Welcome to Country and storytelling)

Uncle Les Bursill (Welcome to Country and storytelling)

Charles Huxtable (botanist)

Patrick Lyons (musician)

Mick Douglas (RMIT, Melbourne; guest writer and curator of *Fluid States: Performing Mobilities* conference exhibition, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCA, Melbourne)

Laurene Vaughan (RMIT, Melbourne; guest writer and curator of *Fluid States: Performing Mobilities* conference exhibition, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCA, Melbourne)

Funding bodies

Australian Research Council

Australia Council for the Arts

Wollongong City Council Small Cultural Grants

Public events

Public creek walks: Hewitts Creek, Collins Creek, Towradgi Creek, Stanwell Creek, Bellambi Creek, Byarong Creek, American Creek, Brandy and Water Creek, Fairy Creek, Duck Creek, Mullet Creek, Macquarie Rivulet, Ooaree Creek

Guest creek walk, Edgars Creek, Coburg North, Melbourne

Artists' talk, Wollongong Art Gallery, December 2017

Workshops

"Walkshop" series coinciding with exhibition at Wollongong Art Gallery, October 2017-February 2018

Exhibitions

Fluid States: Performing Mobilities conference exhibition, Margaret Lawrence gallery, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, September 2016

Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra, Wollongong Art Gallery, October 2017-February 2018

Media

Illawarra Mercury, October 2017

Conference presentations

Kim Williams, "Ecologies of Art: Collaboration, Social Engagement and the Environment", *H2O: Life and Death*, J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice, University of Adelaide, 14-16 September 2017

Kim Williams, Brogan Bunt, Lucas Ihlein, *Climate Change: Views from the Humanities*, University of California, Santa Barbara (video presentation)

Related publications

Kim Williams, 2019, "Fresh water, salt water: socially engaged art, collaboration and the environment", *Australian Humanities Review* (in press)

Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, 2019, "Working and Walking with Waterways", *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder* (book chapter), Open Humanities Press

Kim Williams, Brogan Bunt, Lucas Ihlein, 2017, *12 Creek Walks* (book), Leech Press, Wollongong

Future Proposals

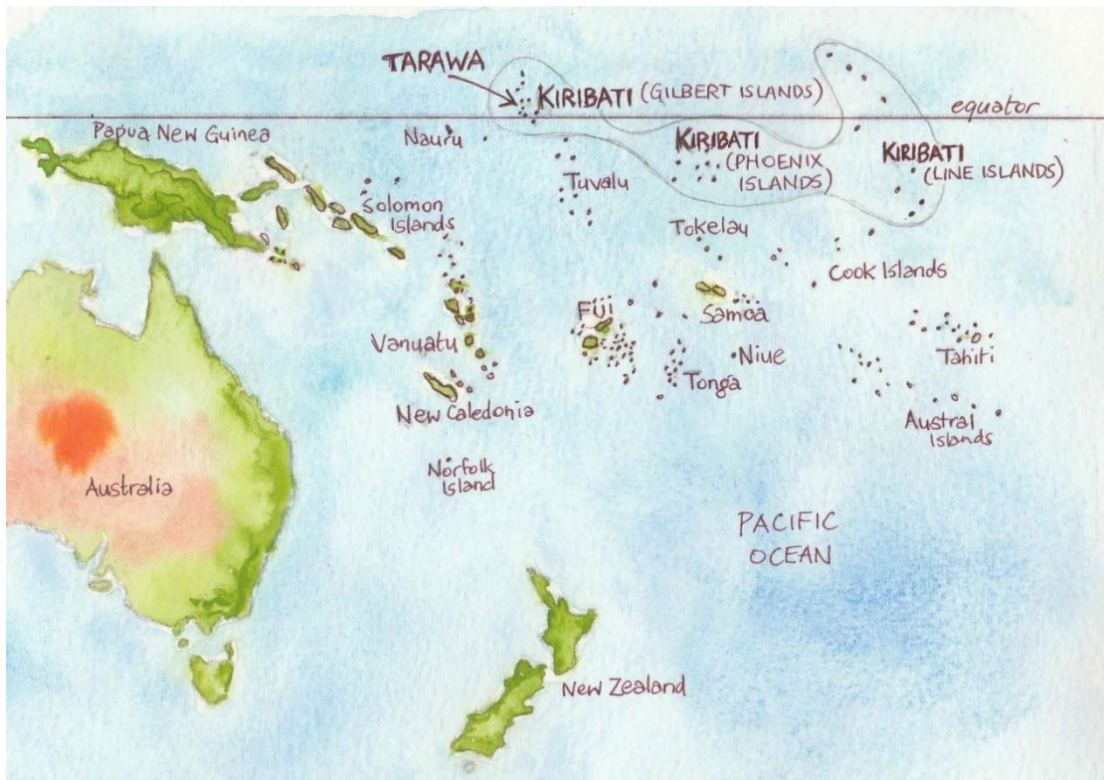
Transdisciplinary collaborative project, involving artists biologists, chemists, engineers, geographers writers, conservation groups, community members. Objective: to remediate a creek and its catchment and to identify an accessible location on the creek where citizens can drink potable water.

Blog

<http://walking-upstream.net/>

PROJECT:

KIRIBATI FISHERIES BLOG



Artist

Kim Williams (in consultation with Dr Lucas Ihlein and Associate Professor Quentin Hanich)

Location

North and South Tarawa, Republic of Kiribati

Dates

November-December 2016

Parameters

Scoping field study to determine future collaborative projects with local partners in Kiribati

Aims

- To offer an artist's perspective on the Community Based Fisheries Management program in Kiribati through the practice of blogging
- To contribute new methods and knowledge to the field of socially engaged art

Collaborators

Ass. Prof. Quentin Hanich, Dr Aurélie Delisle, Brooke Campbell (Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security, Faculty of Law Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong)

Tarateiti Uriam, Rutiana Teibaba, Ben Namakin, Erietera Aram (Coastal Fisheries Division, Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resource Development, Kiribati)

Dr Lucas Ihlein (School of the Arts English and Media, Faculty of Law Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong)

Dr Joanna Russell (School of Health and Society, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong)

Funding bodies

Global Challenges Program, University of Wollongong (Seed Funding)

Partner organisations

Australian Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (Australia)
Secretariat of the Pacific Community
Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resource Development (Kiribati)

Field trip

Outer Islands of North Tarawa, to participate in and film Community Based Fisheries Management Program meetings

Key meetings

Community Based Fisheries Management program village executive council meetings,
Buariki and Tabonibara, Kiribati

Follow-up project proposals

Kim Williams, 2017. *Healthy village, healthy fish: links between plastic waste, nutrition and sustainable fishing*

Outputs

Kim Williams, Videography for Community Based Fisheries Management program
educational video, Kiribati

Kim Williams, *Kiribati Fisheries Blog* <https://www.uowblogs.com/kimwilliams/>

Kim Williams, *Kiribati Fisheries Blogbook*

PROJECT:

MAPPING THE ISLANDS: HOW CAN ART AND SCIENCE SAVE THE GREAT BARRIER REEF?



Artists and collaborators

Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, Sarah Hamylton (Marine Science), Leah Gibbs (Human Geography)

Project dates

2018-ongoing

Location

Three Isles, Low Wooded Island, Nymph Island (Central and Northern Great Barrier Reef)

Parameters

Art/science/humanities collaboration

Aims

- To bring interdisciplinary perspectives to research and protection of the Great Barrier Reef
- To investigate and develop interdisciplinary collaborative methods
- To contribute new methods and knowledges to socially engaged art practice

Funding bodies

Global Challenges Seed Funding (University of Wollongong)

Australian Research Council

Musicians

Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, Sarah Hamylton, Leah Gibbs, Rafael Carvalho, Mystery Carnage

Creative outputs

- Original song: *Rock the Boat*—music, lyrics and arrangement by Kim Williams, copyright 2018
- Cover song: *The Reef Song*—lyrics by Kim Williams, Leah Gibbs, Sarah Hamylton Rafael Carvalho (an adaptation of *Bad Moon Rising* by John Fogerty, published by Jondora Music (BMI) and Burlington Music Co. Ltd (PRS). Used by kind permission of Warner/Chappell Music Australia Pty Ltd)
- 7" Vinyl recording (*Rock the Boat; The Reef Song*)—Recorded and mastered by Ben Davies at Silver Sound Recording Studio, Wollongong, September 2018
- Digital download: *Rock the Boat*, Bandcamp
<https://bluespottedrays.bandcamp.com/>
- Musical notation of *Rock the Boat* with scholarly footnotes (record insert)
- Record cover image: Kim Williams; record sleeve design: Kim Williams and Mystery Carnage

- Kim Williams, Sarah Hamylton, Leah Gibbs, 2018, *Nymph Island Reflections*, collaborative woven text
- Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, Sarah Hamylton, Leah Gibbs, 2020, *Rock the Boat*, large format poster with scholarly footnotes

Residencies

Bundanon Trust Artist in Residence Program, June 2018 (Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, Sarah Hamylton, Leah Gibbs)

Conference and symposia presentations

Kim Williams, 2018, "Transdisciplinary collaboration: Weaving through a Changing Reef", *Interrogating Impact: Research in a Changing World*, Postgraduate symposium, 3rd September, University of Wollongong

Sarah Hamylton, Lucas Ihlein, Kim Williams, "Interdisciplinary Research Methods and the Sea", *Sustaining the Seas: Fish, Oceanic Space and the Politics of Caring*, University of Sydney, 11-13 December 2017

Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, Keynote address, "Creative Ecologies: Art, science and community collaboration in the Anthropocene", James Cook University, Cairns, February 2018

Publications

Kim Williams, Sarah Hamylton, Leah Gibbs and Lucas Ihlein, 2019, "Sustaining the seas through interdisciplinary songwriting." In: *Sustaining Seas: Oceanic space and the politics of care* (Edited by E. Probyn, K. Johnston and N. Lee), Rowman and Littlefield

Sarah Hamylton, Kim Williams, Leah Gibbs and Lucas Ihlein, 2019, "Uncovering interdisciplinary insights on the climate crisis: Narratives from the Great Barrier Reef," *GeoHumanities* (submitted May 2019)

Leah Gibbs, Kim Williams, Sarah Hamylton and Lucas Ihlein, 2019, "Rock the Boat: songwriting as geographical practice," *Cultural Geographies in Practice*, Sage Publications

Media

Kim Williams, radio Interview with Natalie Osborne, 4ZZZ, 19 December 2018

The Stand: Stories from UOW, 2019, Global Challenges project profile

<https://stand.uow.edu.au/great-barrier-reef/>

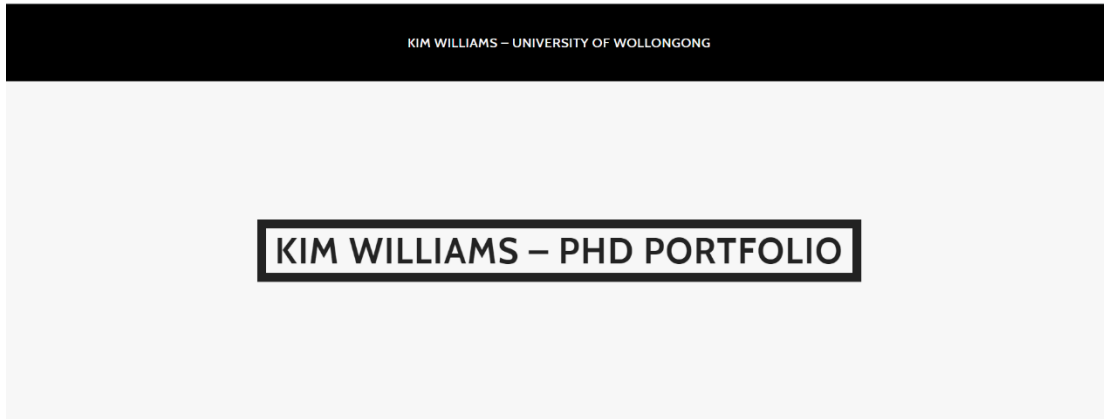
What Makes a Catchy and Effective Climate Song? Eva Amsen, Forbes online, 26 November 2019 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/evaamsen/2019/11/26/what-makes-a-catchy-and-effective-climate-song/#3fb4cc207ed6>

Future events

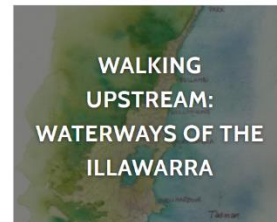
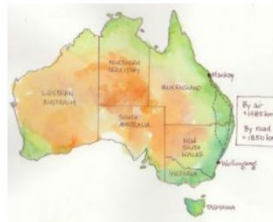
Record launch and symposium, The Servo, Port Kembla, postponed due to COVID-19

The following exegesis should be read in consultation with the online portfolio available at <http://www.kimwilliamsportfolio.net/>

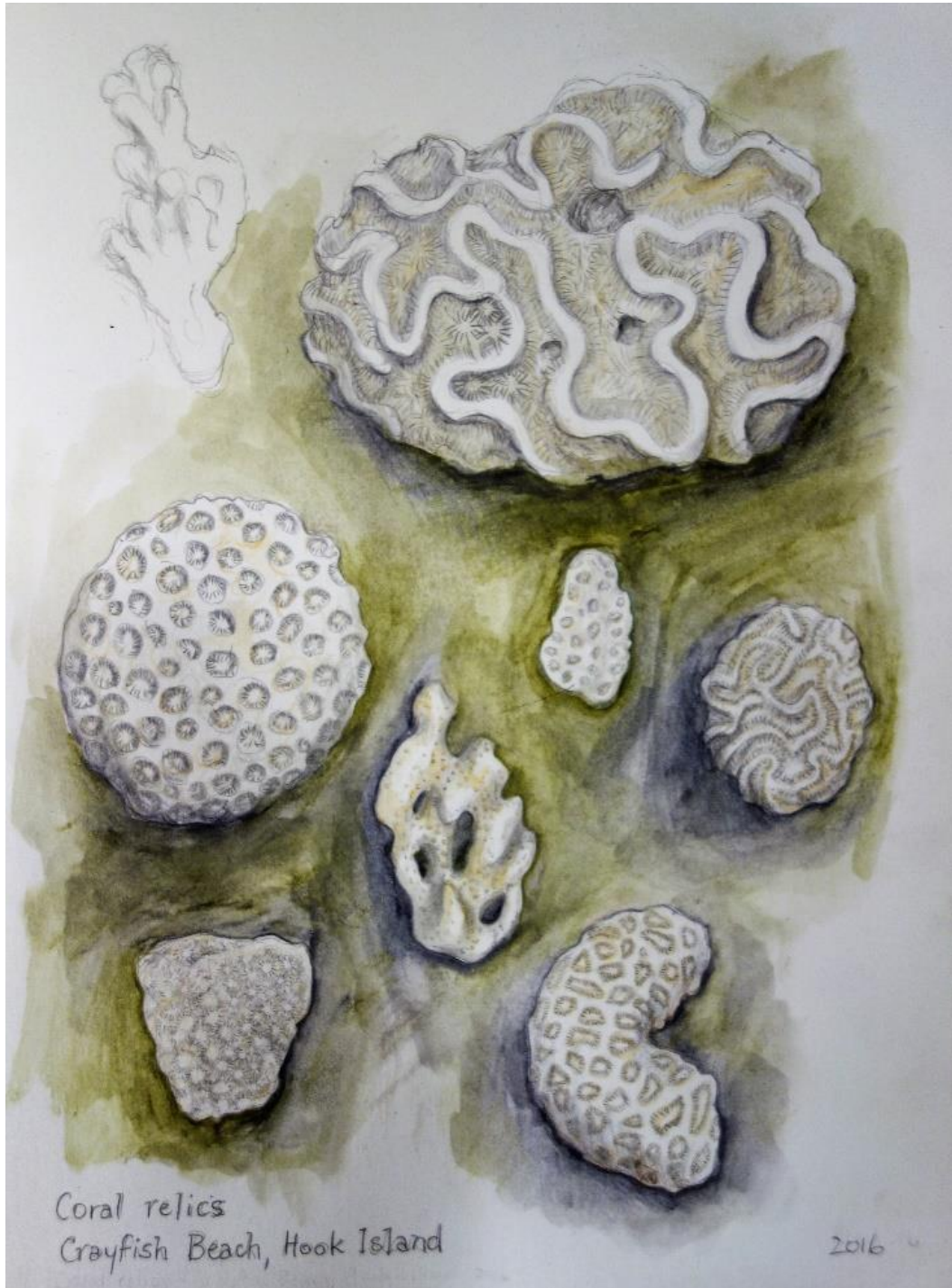
Homepage:



Kim's Portfolio of Projects



Chapter 1: Rising (introduction)



1.1 Kim Williams, 2016, *Coral relics*, Crayfish Beach, Hook Island
Watercolour pencil on paper

March 2017: *Today it rained again, adding to the week of wet weather in Wollongong. The ground is sodden, having reached its capacity to absorb water. In the afternoon, the rain was so heavy that we watched the water creep towards the doors of the building, cross the threshold and spread across the carpets. Yet this week of extremely wet weather has followed the hottest summer on record in New South Wales. Nine of the ten warmest years have occurred since 2005. The record heat has been linked to “at least a 50-fold increase in the likelihood of this hot summer due to the influence of human factors on the climate” (King et al. 2017).*

Standing in my backyard, I see that the birds are functioning, more or less; the fruit is ripening, the moon waxes and wanes. Yet, looking beyond the back fence, it becomes clear that something very serious is happening, that the planet is already in an inexorable process of environmental change. All the climate terminology since the 1970s has been scooped up by a single term, the ‘Anthropocene’, which lays responsibility for a warming planet firmly at humans’ feet.

Art in a changing climate

To search for the good and make it matter: this is the real challenge for the artist. Not simply to transform ideas or revelations into matter, but to make those revelations actually matter. (Conwill Majozo in Lacy 1995, 88)

The question of how humans relate to the more-than-human world has been at the centre of my art practice for many years. What was once labelled ‘environmental’ or ‘eco’ art moves beyond categorisation in today’s world of ecological anxiety and climate change. In the second half of the twentieth century specific environmental issues, such as pollution, deforestation, ozone depletion and uranium mining moved in and out of public discussion. Today, however, these and myriad other environmental issues coalesce into a singular human-made force, the Anthropocene. The idea of not taking action now, as an artist, seems unthinkable. In the wake of the March 2011 tsunami in northeastern Japan and the resulting Fukushima nuclear meltdown, Chim↑Pom artist Ellie said:

When everything stopped functioning properly, what artists created at times like that would mean a lot. When looking back from 50 years, 100 years, 200

years in the future, it will seem nonsensical not to have created something in response. (Chim↑Pom 2015)

The impact of the Fukushima disaster spoke volumes about human-made environmental consequences. Artist collective Chim↑Pom's response to the disaster reflects broader trends in the creative arts. Indeed, as art critic Yates McKee argues:

From the perspective of art history we have arguably reached a metabolic rift wherein ecology cannot be considered as one among other topics with which art might seek to engage (as was long the case with the subgenre of 'eco-art') ... ecology should be rethought in terms of a general biopolitical struggle against capitalism, setting the horizon for any possible avant-garde concern with art and life. (McKee 2015)

For many years, I created representational artworks to evoke human relationships with nature and the more-than-human. Now, in this growing context of the Anthropocene, I am interested in how, as artists, we can more directly engage with people to challenge the way the non-human world is perceived and acted upon.

Living in the Anthropocene

This research project is situated in the current geological epoch of the 'Anthropocene', a term ratified by the 'Working Group of the Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy':

The 'Anthropocene' has emerged as a popular scientific term used by scientists, the scientifically engaged public and the media to designate the period of Earth's history during which humans have a decisive influence on the state, dynamics and future of the Earth system. It is widely agreed that the Earth is currently in this state. (Zalasiewicz et al. 2016)

While there is academic contention on the origins and implications of the term 'Anthropocene' and its timescale (Haraway 2016, 99-103; Yusoff 2018, 1-19), there is little doubt that human activities have triggered rising temperatures, rising sea levels and rising anxiety about the future of the planet.

Climate science and climate change projections indicate that two or more degrees of average warming will have devastating implications for global ecosystems. Future predictions take into account the fact that climate change is occurring in the present and has already led to dramatic systemic shifts (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2018). Amongst governance bodies and climate scientists there is general agreement that the increase in global average temperature needs to be kept to no more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels (European Commission on Climate Action 2017). Despite yearly gatherings of politicians, policy makers and scientists in which emissions reduction targets are set, international commitments to reduce CO₂ emissions are mixed. This is a time when national borders take on a heavy meaning. Carbon emissions have a global impact, but are tied to the economies of nation states. Philosopher Isabelle Stengers asserts that the failure of scientific warnings to ‘cut through’ can be explained by a global economic system that is engineered not to listen:

Those—most notably, scientists—who thought that it was enough to sound the alarm neglected the fact that political powers had just handed the rudder over to capitalism and had solemnly renounced any freedom of action. (Stengers 2015, 10)

Atmospheric greenhouse gases protect the earth from the colder temperatures of space, while at the same time regulating heat from the sun through reflection and absorption. Since the Industrial Revolution (around 1750), human activities have dramatically increased the concentration of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (CO₂), methane (CH₄) and nitrous oxide (N₂O). The Australian Government’s “Climate change in Australia” website (2016) attributes rising CO₂ levels to the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation. The increase of these greenhouse gases contributes to global warming. Atmospheric water vapour then further amplifies global warming in a positive feedback loop as the concentration of water vapour, a greenhouse gas, increases with global temperature rise.

In Australia, the national context in which this thesis has been written, successive Federal governments have shown a particular reluctance to reduce carbon emissions. Since the first commitments were made according to the Kyoto protocol (1992) both conservative and

progressive governments have placed “jobs and growth” (Turnbull 2017) ahead of emissions reduction. In 2007, newly-elected Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd failed to act decisively on climate change, which he called “the great moral issue of our time” (2007). In opposition, Tony Abbott’s “Axe the Carbon Tax” mantra effectively defeated the Gillard Labor government (2013). Upon seizing the role of prime minister in 2015, Malcolm Turnbull forfeited his commitment to better environmental management. Turnbull’s overthrow by Scott Morrison heralds yet another chapter in politics, as Morrison winds back emissions reduction targets and Australia falls behind in its international commitments.

In this ‘climate’, it is not surprising that many artists collaborate with scientists and others in the broader community to respond directly to environmental issues. Curator Nato Thompson names it “the inevitable tide of cultural producers who are frustrated with art’s impotence and who are eager to make a tangible change in the world” (2012a, 86). The evolving artistic and academic discourses and grassroots initiatives that are taking place all over the world indicate a groundswell of concern and a call for responsible environmental stewardship.

Art historian and cultural critic T.J. Demos attributes the ecological impacts of climate change to “today’s environmentally destructive corporate-state oligarchy” (2016, 7). He calls for “a systemic shift in reorganising social, political and economic life in order to bring us into greater harmony with the world around us, including its human and non-human life forms” (2016, 12). For Demos, plenty of solutions are already available: he looks to environmental and social activism, art, political theory and Indigenous philosophies to think outside current systems. According to Demos, various contemporary strands of thinking and activism—such as New Materialism (exemplified by the work of Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz and Jane Bennett) and the Rights of Nature Movement (see the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth, Legislative Assembly, Bolivia, 2010)—converge through demands for a more equitable decision-making framework that challenges corporate ownership of nature (for example, the patents on seeds, trees, plants and genes) and the forced removal of traditional owners and the despoilation of traditional land (Demos 2016, 4). Demos argues that “decolonising” nature means engaging with the inequalities in wealth and possession that have led to resource depletion and exploitation:

Decolonising nature entails transcending human-centred exceptionalism, no longer placing ourselves at the center of the universe and viewing nature as a source of endless bounty. (Demos 2016, 19)

For Demos, artists, and in particular, collaborative artistic practices, have an important role to play. In his book he discusses artists' groups such as Argos Collective, World of Matter and Grupo de Investigación en Arte y Política, who unmask the politicisation of nature through strategies such as documentary-style video, data visualisation, research and activism. The geopolitical territory that these artists cover, however, does not extend to the Pacific, or to Australia.

Working through the Anthropocene

The projects that form the basis of this PhD research, in part, redress this global view. They seek to think differently about climate change and changing climates by working directly with communities in Australia and the Pacific through the methods of social engagement and collaboration. These interactions are inherently political, whether it is via a public challenge to coal mining (*Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef?*), a demonstration of farming practices that sequester carbon and reduce chemical use (*Sugar vs the Reef?*), a conversation about plastics pollution with villagers in Kiribati (*Kiribati Fisheries Blog*), or a strategy that opens up awareness of the health of waterways (*Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*). They are examples of how artists and communities across the world have taken matters into their own hands to seek cultural change by responding to specific issues.

This PhD is concerned with how we, as artists, position ourselves in the multidisciplinary sphere of thinking and practice that is concerned with “imagining and helping to make happen more liveable presences as well as more liveable futures” (Haraway 2014). What can we do as individuals and communities? We can make changes in our personal lives. We can become part of collective political campaigns. We can participate in habitat and species remediation and protection. We can educate and participate in public debate. We can draw attention to matters of concern through media and digital platforms. We can participate in the development of sustainable practices on land and sea. We can influence thinking and

practice, using creative strategies. As artists, we can employ any of these actions as part of our art practice. And we can push them further into collaborative and socially engaged modes that take the art practice back out to the communities and the sciences and the governments.

The projects discussed in this exegesis are artworks located within the field of socially engaged art (often shortened to SEA), which is a dynamic field of art practices that actively promote social or cultural change (Lacy 1995; Kester 2004; Helguera 2011; Thompson 2012; Bishop 2012; Frasz and Sidford 2017). The projects are situated in specific geographic areas, yet the issues they examine resonate widely. They connect back into global concerns about coral reefs, sustainable agriculture and healthy soil and water. Through speculation, experimentation and participation, the projects engage with real-world situations in order to contribute to environmental and artistic discourse. By working within communities, small changes can potentially resonate widely and contribute to broader systemic change.

Located within complex political, economic, cultural, social and environmental territories, these artworks involve the participation of many people: Indigenous custodians, farmers and farming communities, Pacific Islanders, Australian South Sea Islanders, fishermen and women, marine scientists, human geographers, soil biologists, natural resource managers, educators, economists, politicians, policy makers, sugar industry and fisheries experts. Developed by artists who cross disciplinary boundaries and engage directly with communities, these projects produce new insights through relationship building and co-creation. To work in these fields means that the 'value' of the artwork is contained in the methods of working themselves rather than simply within the outcomes.

Emotions of grief, loss and denial are difficult to avoid in the current environmental scenario. As *New York Times* journalist Jon Mooallem says, "the longer you live, the more anxiously trapped you may feel between the losses already sustained and the ones you see coming" (2017). Art becomes one way to face this grief and anxiety head on. Making the 'artworks' through the method of collaborative social engagement involves careful negotiation between process and product. The projects are a performative demonstration of art's contribution to environmental discourse.

This exegesis discusses four projects that make up the core of this PhD research. They are located in different geographical areas, with diverse participant groups, and they engage with particular communities in the context of global transformations. Each project uses the methods of socially engaged art practice and collaboration to explore complex environmental issues raised by human impacts on land and water. Prioritising the cultural and social aspects of environmental issues, specific experimental collaborative and participatory processes underpin each project. The four projects are *Sugar vs the Reef?*; *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*; *Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef?* and *Kiribati Fisheries Blog*. Each project has its own particular size and range, from large-scale and long-term to speculative and short-term, and therefore each is weighted differently in the exegesis. Despite the variations in scale, each project has influenced the others and together they form a body of practice that contributes to the field of socially engaged art.

In this exegesis I reflect on these projects as forms of creative practice suitable for the Anthropocene, and use my discussion to extend existing discourses around socially engaged art and collaboration. I undertake this research in order to satisfy my curiosity about how best we can approach the Anthropocene through art methods. The research begins with the idea that social engagement and collaboration may have a broader influence on environmental issues than a strictly gallery-based approach to art practice. As a result, this exegesis documents how I have used socially engaged art methods to build ecological and cultural literacies through interaction with communities. My Research Masters project, *Trickle Down Effect: Sculpture and Land* (2011-12), left me with a number of niggling questions: Can art make a difference to the way we think and feel about nature? Does art make a difference to environmental behaviours? Those questions led to this current research project, in which I use the methods of socially engaged art and collaboration in order to ask a new set of questions:

1. How can socially engaged art play a critical role in complex environmental issues?
2. In what ways do the methods of socially engaged art enable artists to contribute to environmental knowledge and discourse?

I have tested these questions, under the auspices of a practice-based PhD, by developing projects through research, thinking, education and action. As a practice-based researcher, I am interested in how artists bring fresh insights and approaches to complex environmental situations through their working methods. Therefore, I am both a participant artist in the projects and a critical observer of their processes. Drawing on autoethnographic methods in art, this approach allows me to “describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al. 2011). I work to navigate the boundaries at which socially engaged art and environmental discourse meet.

Methodology

Social engagement and collaboration

Social engagement and collaboration are central to my practice. The two terms are interlinked: to be engaged in any of these projects, as artist, scientist or everyday person, is to be a collaborative partner. To collaborate on environmental issues is an inherently social activity, allowing the interactions between people to determine the focus and the course of the work. Through engagement and collaboration, these works shine a light on the tensions between environmental care, cultural practices and economic utility. All of the projects are largely experimental and open-ended; they evolve according to the circumstances and opportunities that arise over time.

Cultural researchers Frasz and Sidford define socially engaged art as “an artistic or creative practice that aims to improve conditions in a particular community or in the world at large” (2017, 4). The process of engagement involves building relationships with communities. While ‘products’ emerge through the intention of generating social change, *process* is a key part of the artwork itself. These processes bring people in as active constituents rather than passive receptors. This approach is an alternative to a solo studio-based practice “in which the artist deposits an expressive content into a physical object, to be withdrawn later by the viewer” (Kester 2004, 10). Early practitioner of socially engaged art Suzanne Lacy began working within communities in the United States in the late 1970s as feminism emerged. Her work in communities addressed specific issues such as violence against women (*In Mourning and In Rage*,

1977). Other practitioners such as Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison came from a conceptual practice to focus their energy on ecological projects (*The Lagoon Cycle*, 1974-78). In the 1970s there was no such term as 'socially engaged art' to describe these practices, yet these are examples of practitioners who began shaping their work through engagement with sites and communities. *Process* was as intrinsic to the artwork as *product*.

Central to the projects of this PhD is my collaborative working relationship with principal supervisor, Dr Lucas Ihlein. In 2015 Dr Ihlein received an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellowship, and this PhD formed part of the scope of that grant. We have consciously operated as collaborators from the outset of this research project. While the institutional framework defines us as supervisor and student, our working model acknowledges the roles and contributions of both of our skills and experience. For this reason, we each take the lead in different aspects of projects. We have stretched the traditional supervisor/student roles of the art academy by adopting a collaborative model that has led to co-creation and co-publication. This model sensibly aligns with the working methods of socially engaged art, which involves close consultation and cooperation between investigators to articulate new responses to short and long-term problems and challenges. The benefit of close collaboration is apparent in the intricate negotiations and interactions with people that are common occurrences in socially engaged art. My aim is to articulate and model methods of socially engaged art that can demonstrate the validity of new ways of understanding collaboration within the arts whilst drawing on models already present within the research university.

Historian of contemporary art Charles Green suggests that collaborations between artists gained currency in the late 1960s during the transition from modernism to conceptualism. Collaboration was a way of reframing and challenging ideas of artistic identity: "One expects new understandings of artistic authorship to appear in artistic collaborations, understandings that may or may not be consistent with the artists' solo productions before they take up collaborative projects" (Green 2001, x). My own experience of artistic collaboration reflects this statement; collaboration is at once an offering of one's skills and thinking processes and an acceptance of the other's skills and thinking processes. Ideally,

this creates fertile ground in which working together with people magnifies the capacity of individuals and generates ideas and outcomes that could only arise from collaboration. Ihlein has a history of artistic collaboration through his conceptual practice (Ihlein 2015; Ihlein and Millis 2013); my history of artistic collaboration has developed through working in community arts, in tandem with a solo gallery practice.

The projects

This exegesis began with a project directory containing summaries of the four key projects that make up this PhD. These summaries include lists of key collaborators and participants in each of the four projects. The summaries sit outside the chapter structure and form a guide to the overall scope of the PhD. Each project discussed in this exegesis uses a consciously interdisciplinary approach. This is not a new strategy. For many of the artists discussed in this exegesis, collaboration with other disciplinary fields is integral to their practice. In the projects of my PhD, I refer to ‘collaboration’ in a broad sense, including people both within and outside the academy. From my central working relationship with Lucas Ihlein, the collaborations fan out across a diverse range of participants. Each person brings their own disciplinary skills and cultural backgrounds into play.

Sugar vs the Reef? is an interdisciplinary collaborative project located in Mackay, Queensland. Working together, Lucas Ihlein and I examine the relationship of coastal agriculture to the Great Barrier Reef. We collaborate with sugarcane farmers who are practising regenerative agriculture to improve soil health, thereby improving environmental outcomes for the Great Barrier Reef through a reduction of chemical run-off into the Coral Sea. To highlight the benefits of regenerative agriculture, we liaise with a broad range of community members, including natural resource managers, scientists, educators, activists and politicians. As well, *Sugar vs the Reef?* shines a light on the labour histories of slavery and Indigenous custodianship of the lands used in the establishment of the sugarcane industry. We do this through active collaboration with Australian South Sea Islanders and Yuwibara traditional custodians in our cultural/agricultural activities. By growing crops in public places as ‘land art’ we provide a public setting for cultural events and agricultural

education and experimentation. The project includes a gallery exhibition that draws out elements of our work 'in the field'.

Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra (WOTI) is a creek-walking project involving artists and community members. The project brings attention to the oft-neglected streams and creeks of the Illawarra region through the participatory act of walking. Starting at the sea, we walk upstream along local creeks to bring attention to the intersections of human development with suburban waterways and their riparian ecosystems. This project is speculative and experimental, with an open-ended timescale and an interest in the possibilities that may emerge from engaging with and forming a community of interest around waterways. It involves both immersion—in the process and duration of walking—and documentation, through the exhibition of artefacts and the production of artist books.

Mapping the Islands: How can art and science can save the Great Barrier Reef? uses the method of interdisciplinary collaboration to explore new approaches to the protection of coral reef ecosystems. We work with marine scientists and human geographers to devise ways of working across disciplinary boundaries, as well as investigating the mechanics of interdisciplinary collaboration as a practice. Through open-ended play and experimentation, we generate new forms that expand on disciplinary methods. This has resulted in songwriting and record production as well as creative and scholarly collaborative writing. Our collaborative outputs result from an immersion in each other's research process, building a trusting and respectful working method that does not privilege any one discipline.

Kiribati Fisheries Blog engages with fisheries experts and local communities in Kiribati to offer an artist's perspective on fisheries management in Kiribati. Through blogging, daily observations are made that reflect the perspectives of a non-Indigenous observer, including discussions of the impact of sea level rise and climate change with local inhabitants. The project also explores the potential for creative waste management strategies for land-based plastics pollution.

The projects are based on the cooperation and collective capabilities of many people from various fields and disciplines, enabling us to combine skills, learn from each other and loosen each other's disciplinary boundaries. Sometimes when describing the individuals

within the projects I use the phrase ‘the artists’ to focus discussion on our activities and roles within the projects. Unless specified, the plural ‘artists’ refers to both my own activities and those of Lucas Ihlein. For the purposes of this document, when discussing specific projects I often use the collective ‘our’ and ‘we’, as well as the singular ‘I’, to indicate both the individual and the collective aspects of the collaborative process.

Relationship between exegesis and creative practice

The requirements of a PhD create a somewhat artificial framework that temporarily gathers the projects of this research degree into definable units that reside within the scaffold of a time-limited period of practice-based research. The projects, however, are *temporal* and *durational* in nature. They can therefore conceivably stretch beyond my tenure as a PhD candidate and continue into the future, depending on a number of factors specific to each project. Consequently, I critically reflect on the projects not as neat units with clear boundaries, but as inherently messy and complex entities that may or may not come to a definable rest. The exegesis allows a space for reflection on the projects and my role within them—separate to, yet deeply connected with, any collaboratively written reflections.

The discussion of the projects of this research acknowledges the varying scales, timeframes and complexity of each project. Duration is a key aspect of working with iterative research processes: some projects are short-term, some are long-term, some stop unexpectedly, others are impossible to contain. In this exegesis I offer first-hand accounts, considering the successes as well as the difficulties and failures in these experimental endeavours. This allows me to consider the kinds of activities necessary to apply socially engaged processes to environmental matters. By looking ‘backstage’ as well as ‘front of house’, I will illuminate the workings of these projects to show how artists operate in specific situations.

Exegesis structure

Although each project focuses on a different geographical location—the Illawarra, Queensland, the Great Barrier Reef, Kiribati—many of the strategies overlap. This exegesis is structured around ‘doing’ words. They are broad terms, with a range of interpretations, which describe creative approaches, as well as historical, political, social and environmental

backgrounds to the works. By writing through these ‘actions’, the exegesis aims to transmit the sense of deep engagement that the projects of this research have allowed. It also allows the critical and reflective space to consider the theoretical frameworks that underpin my practice and thinking. Through these themes, I survey critical methodologies that are grounded in feminism, decolonisation and environmental justice. I preface each chapter with a short observational piece, written both in the field and retrospectively.

Chapter 2, *Locating*, positions my projects within the historical context of socially engaged art (SEA) and collaboration. I offer an overview of SEA and discuss artists whose practices offer links to some of the themes I have identified: Suzanne Lacy for the performative nature of her work, and the Harrison Studio for their environmental focus. Claire Bishop, Grant Kester, Nato Thompson and Pablo Helguera are key writers and historians in the field, providing a focus to this complex and multi-layered field of practice.

The major project of this PhD, *Sugar vs the Reef?*, is contextualised within its complex social, economic and cultural sphere in **Chapter 3, *Growing***. The cultural/agricultural focus of the project is traced through the story of how the artists became involved in the community of Mackay, Queensland. This chapter outlines the environmental and cultural background to our work, in particular the historical and contemporary story of the sugar industry and its impact on the Great Barrier Reef. I then discuss the ways in which we have brought people together to learn about and participate in the environmentally transformative practices of regenerative agriculture.

Dialogue and negotiation are key tools of these socially engaged art projects. Grant Kester and Pablo Helguera focus on the dialogical practices of SEA, demonstrating how artists use communication to bring new insights to situations or problems. The Harrisons, Suzanne Lacy and WochenKlausur are key to the discussion in **Chapter 4, *Talking***, which examines how dialogue underpins their work. In this chapter I also discuss the impact of gender in our work with farmers in Mackay.

Chapter 5, *Connecting*, examines the ways in which the projects *Kiribati Fisheries Blog* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* work within and across cultures. Through discussions of these projects I consider perspectives on decolonisation to inform my understanding of the power

relationships within my interactions with Pacific Islanders and Indigenous cultures. Both projects offer perspectives on ways of working across cultures. I also explore the function of singing and music within these projects as a way of bringing cultures together in socially engaged art.

Chapter 6, *Collaborating*, focuses specifically on the project *Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef?* to discuss methods of collaboration across academic disciplines. In this chapter I explain how this collaboration unfolded and how music and singing, as well as collaborative writing, are used to connect academic cultures. The background to the project is found in environmental historian Iain McCalman's account of early environmental advocacy for the Great Barrier Reef. Through discussion of philosopher Margrit Shildrick's approach to collaboration, I draw upon a scholarly essay written by my collaborative team to examine the benefits of interdisciplinary methods.

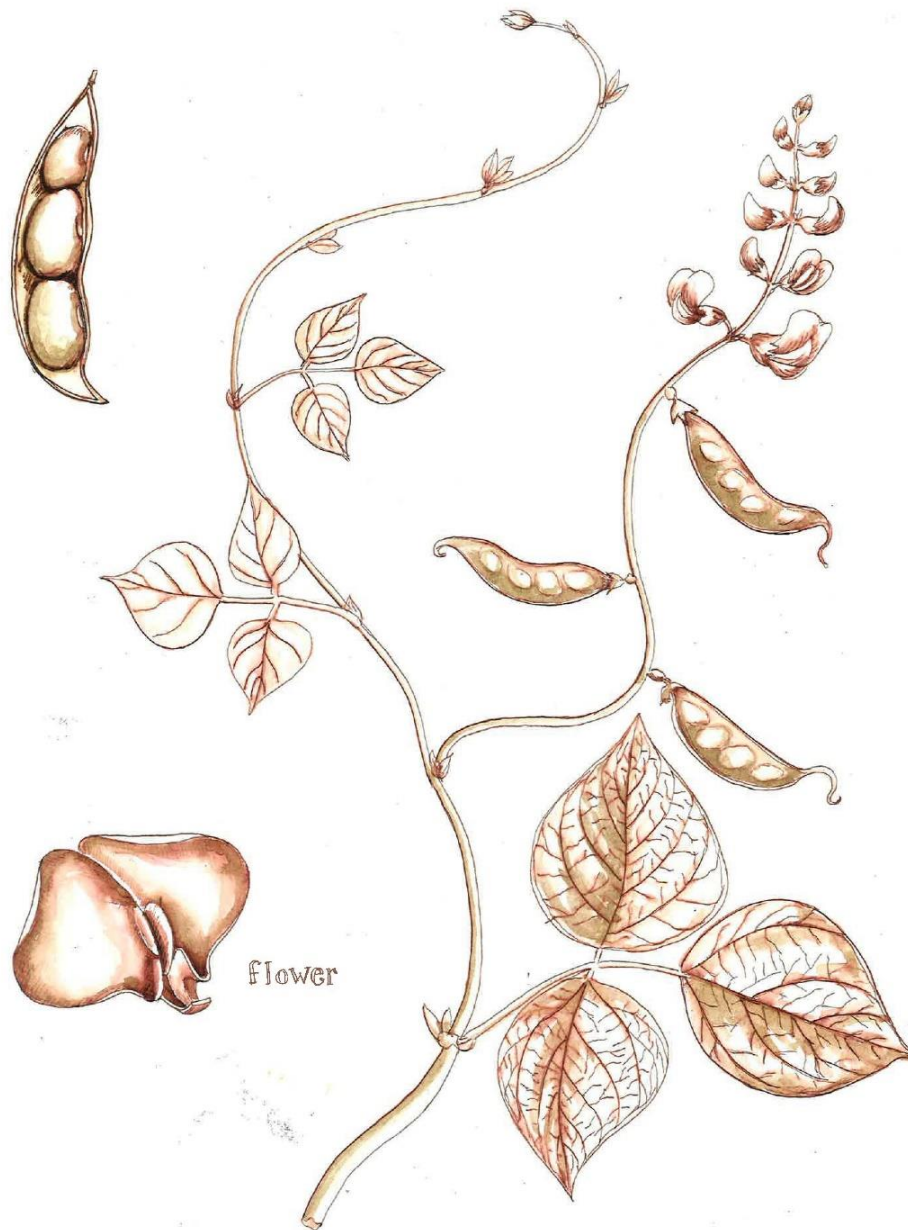
Chapter 7, *Walking* discusses walking as a cultural/art practice. The project *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* is the focus of this chapter. The artists invite friends and community members to walk upstream along local creeks. This performative work highlights the impact of human development on waterways and the implications of colonial land laws. To contextualise the project, I refer to Rebecca Solnit's historical research, which looks at the history of walking as a Western practice, from the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth to the activists of today's cities who are getting on their feet to reclaim the streets. Artists such as Richard Long, Francis Alys and Janet Cardiff also provide important historical precedents to many of today's artists whose walking activities form the basis of their practice. I also look to contemporary practices that link to our project through a focus on the protection and care for urban waterways.

The artefacts that emerge from social processes are discussed in **Chapter 8, *Making***. Skills in object making, graphic design, musical composition, performing, drawing and writing have been integral to all the projects. In this chapter, I offer a historical background to 'craftsmanship' through the work of sociologist Richard Sennett. I then consider the many functions of artefacts in socially engaged art and the aesthetic considerations of place. I do this through an examination of artefacts generated within my own projects, as well as works

by Wu Mali and Metabolic Studio. 'Making' also serves as a metaphor for relationships to the non-human world. The worlds in which we have been operating also ask that I consider the ideas of feminist philosophers to reflect our 'entanglement' with other life-forms.

The conclusion of the exegesis, **Chapter 9, *Reflecting***, asks how we assess socially engaged art. What are the advantages of working socially and collaboratively? I briefly consider the implications of the four projects, now and in the future. I place the work back into the context of global environmental and political transformation to imagine my own future as an artist. Future projects and speculative proposals emerge in this reflective chapter. Finally, I assess the lessons I have learnt and the new knowledges generated in the enactment of these works.

Chapter 2: Locating



Dolichos lablab
Lablab purpureus

2.1 Kim Williams, 2018, *Dolichos lablab* (*Lablab purpureus*)
Sepia ink on paper

10th May 2018: *We visited Newton Harrison at his home in Santa Cruz, California. Helen Mayer Harrison had passed away only two months prior and Newton misses her greatly. We discussed ‘Sugar vs the Reef?’ and ‘Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra’. Newton’s advice was to ask ourselves “how big is here?”. Scale is a key idea for the Harrisons. By asking this question, they determine whether there are wider implications in what they are doing and if the scope of the project is appropriate. Newton tempered his views by saying that he and Helen once worked on a much smaller scale until their reputation grew and they were invited to look at larger problems. He suggested that we conduct an audit of all major coral reef systems around the world to assess the global condition of reefs. He said that presenting evidence to the public elicits indignation in people and propels them to do something about it. This is a good idea, but at the moment we are focused on engaging with people around land use. The broad adoption of regenerative agriculture practices along the Great Barrier Reef coastline feels like a big enough ambition to me. He acknowledged that an artist has to work at the scale that is within their capacity at the time, and in fact liked the sound of the smaller ‘Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra’ project and enjoyed the creek-walking guidebook we gave him.*

LOCATING

A single art action will not be able to resolve [a] predicament, but it can energise more people to start thinking about it. Social change always starts with alternative social imaginaries. (Wu Mali in Tung 2018, 236)

This chapter locates my work within the context of socially engaged art (SEA). A practice that existed before it was named, socially engaged art is an expanded field of practice that embraces interdisciplinary, collaborative and participatory methods for bringing about social and cultural transformation and community building (Sholette and Bass 2018, xiii). Socially engaged art aims to improve conditions in a particular community or in the world at large. Within the contexts of this practice, the ‘work’ is the sum of the aesthetic product and an intentional social impact (Frasz and Sidford 2017, 6). Scholars of socially engaged art offer different foci to this field. Art historian and critic Claire Bishop discusses trends toward participation and collaboration and the tensions between ethics and aesthetics (2012); art historian Grant Kester emphasises the dialogic aspects of SEA (2004); curator Nato Thompson discusses politically active modes of artmaking (2012b); and artist and educator Pablo Helguera highlights the educational potential of collaborative art (2011). All agree, however, that socially engaged artworks are a durational process of engagement in which

aesthetic products arise from ‘process’. In this chapter I introduce key works and approaches to SEA to examine their capacity to offer contributions to social and environmental issues. These practitioners and writers influence my own thinking and practice and therefore this chapter locates my research within an historical context, showing how and why socially engaged art came to be taken up by many artists as a way of addressing real-world situations.

First, I offer some definitions of socially engaged art and place this set of practices within their historical context, particularly since the late 1960s. I locate my work within both earlier and more recent trends in the field of practice, and outline my own working methods. I then look at specific works by Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison (‘the Harrisons’) and Suzanne Lacy to highlight some of the key characteristics of socially engaged art in action. These artists have had an impact on both my work and the wider realm of SEA—they have long histories of practice and are still active practitioners. They offer different strands that, drawn together, influence how I practice today. Finally, I look at a recent survey of the field of socially engaged art by Helicon Collaborative and compare their findings to my own practice-based observations. In summarising key aspects of SEA, I focus on two key features: firstly, that socially engaged art is usually collaborative and multidisciplinary, and secondly, that the ‘work’ can reside both outside and within the art gallery.

Art in the social realm

According to artist and educator Pablo Helguera, socially engaged art is a multidisciplinary practice which resides in a space between “art and non-art” (2011, 8). It is a dynamic field of contemporary practice rather than a movement. Socially engaged art evolved from earlier collaborative art practices such as the DADA cabarets of the early twentieth century; the Situationist Internationale *dérives* of the 1950s and ’60s; Allan Kaprow’s performance and happenings in the 1960s; early feminist art and educational theory; environmental and land art and the Community Arts movement in the 1970s (Helguera 2011, ix; Bishop 2012, 163). In turn, these trends in art were shaped by particular political moments across the Western world, from the early twentieth century through to today’s political flashpoints.

Socially engaged art is a somewhat confusing term. Doesn't most art engage with the social in some way or other? In their 2017 survey of this expanded field of practice, Alexis Frasz and Holly Sidford (Helicon Collaborative) offer a working definition of SEA as "an artistic or creative practice that aims to improve conditions in a particular community or in the world at large" (Frasz and Sidford 2017, 4).

They add that while 'socially engaged' artists work across a variety of traditional and non-traditional media,

The 'work' is the sum of the aesthetic product and an intentional social impact, and the process of developing the work—often in concert with community members—may even be the 'product'. (Frasz and Sidford 2017, 6)

My own work is neatly captured by this definition. The artworks are approached as a durational process of engagement with other disciplines and communities; aesthetic products arise from processes that are collaborative and participatory in nature. Socially engaged art has been described as an "an emerging, interdisciplinary field of research and practice that pivots on the arts and humanities while embracing external disciplines" (Sholette and Bass 2018, xiii). It would perhaps be more accurate to say 'evolving' rather than emerging—my own practice sits on a continuum of practices that have been evolving since the late 1960s, evident through my own experience of feminism and performance art in the 1970s and through my work in community arts and cultural development during the 1990s and early 2000s.

While I use the term 'socially engaged art', this broad field is also known as social practice, littoral art, community-based art, new genre public art and collaborative art. Grant Kester prefers the term 'dialogical art', emphasising "the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange" as the defining qualities of this form (2004, 8). Claire Bishop uses the term "participatory art" (2012, 1), implying the involvement of many people. These many definitions, according to Pablo Helguera, "have stemmed from the urge to draw lines between generations and unload historical baggage" (2011, 3). Suzanne Lacy concurs; new terminology "announces and frames new forms of inquiry, something fundamental to this experimental practice" (Lacy in Gonzalez et al. 2018, 18). In the 1990s Lacy wrote about a

field of art that reached back to the 1960s, during which time visual artists were “working in a manner that resembles political and social activity but is distinguished by its aesthetic sensibility” (Lacy 1995, 19). Lacy called her own developing field of practice “new genre public art”, to distinguish this model of public engagement from objects of art situated on public sites. As a contemporary practice in the 1990s, new genre public art took its cues from earlier avant-garde art forms that combined different media in experimental ways, but additionally moved into the social realm, developing strategies with which to work with communities.

Bishop’s more recent study of global trends notes a “surge of artistic interest in participation and collaboration that has taken place since the early 1990s, and in a multitude of global locations” (Bishop 2012, 1). Previously consigned to the periphery of the art world, community-based art achieved greater acceptance in the 1990s, moving into what Bishop describes as an “expanded field of post-studio practices” (2012, 1). According to Bishop, the fall of communism in 1989 triggered an artistic turn back towards the social and political—a third avant-garde wave coming from “a shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience” (2012, 2). Those previously defined as ‘audience’ would now be positioned as ‘co-producers’ or ‘participants’ (2012, 2). Bishop suggests that more recent contemporary art that continues in this vein constitutes the ‘avant-garde’ today: “artists devising social situations as a dematerialized, anti-market, politically engaged project to carry on the avant-garde call to make art a more vital part of life” (2012, 13).

In her study of Australian trends in socially engaged art, artist and researcher Marnie Badham (2010) traces the evolution of social practice through the policies and language of the Australia Council for the Arts, the Federal Government arts funding body. While socially engaged art and community arts are sometimes viewed as distinct practices, Badham places them on a historical continuum of practices “that intend positive social change and facilitate individuals’ and communities’ active participation in their cultural identity” (Badham 2010, 86). Badham identifies a shift in the focus of community arts in Australia over its more than forty-year history, from a welfare model that helps disadvantaged communities to a

recognition of a community's right to control its own cultural trajectory through a collaborative relationship with artists (2010, 86).

Badham looks to shifts in the language of policy makers to trace evolving views of 'culture' (2010, 88). In the case of the Australia Council, the replacement of the term 'community arts' with the term 'community cultural development' in the mid-1980s signaled a shift from artist *representations* of communities to a more inclusive, participatory model of self-determination. My own experiences as an 'artsworker' (a similarly conscious shift in terminology from 'artist') through the 1990s and 2000s were defined by this more inclusive policy position of funding bodies. The emphasis on participation and ownership in cultural development and 'placemaking' projects in turn entailed a sustained engagement with communities. As a community arts practitioner during this period (in addition to maintaining a gallery-based art practice), the projects I worked on were funded by various tiers of government: federal, state and local. While some of these were commissioned works, the government funded projects, to a large extent, placed an emphasis on strengthening social values through community participation. This body of work holds a logical place in the world of socially engaged art: the works aim for positive social change, they are durational and process-based, and they are "the sum of an aesthetic product and an intentional social impact" (Frasz and Sidford 2017, 6).

The social turn

Over the past thirty years there has been an increased impetus for socially engaged art practice. Critics and art historians Grant Kester, Claire Bishop and Miwon Kwon all identify periods in recent decades when the turn to the social has been triggered by social and political forces. Artists have responded by moving away from studio-based art to focus their energy more directly on social, political and environmental issues. In this way, a blend of strategies—artistic, activist, academic, social—brings artists closer to issues through which their work may resonate in the public sphere.

Bishop contends that the 'social turn' of recent decades, in which many Western artists have taken a more social and collaborative approach to art, is motivated by artists who are attempting to energise a society "rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive

instrumentality of capitalist production” (Bishop 2006, 3). The Dutch artist Jeanne van Heeswijk explains the shift away from the passivity of representational art as a reaction to the appropriation of the visual by commerce: “After all, nowadays one could receive an aesthetic experience on every corner” (van Heeswijk in Bishop, 3). In theory, a fragmented society could be reconstituted by artists who could provide opportunities for creative participation, rather than passive consumption.

Bishop is careful to distinguish this expanded field of practice from the artists championed by Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s in his book *Relational Aesthetics* (1998). In Bishop’s view, the artists Bourriaud cites, in particular Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, “are less interested in human relations than in the ‘relational’ understood as the relations between space, temporality, fiction and design” (Bishop 2006, 2). According to Bishop, these are not real-world situations, but rather “fictitious harmonious communities” of art audiences (2004, 79). I agree with Bishop on this point—Bourriaud’s claims for the emancipatory potential of art show a bias towards artists such as Tiravanija whose participatory “meals” (*Untitled [Free]*, 1992) reference the gallery as an institution rather than engaging with people outside the gallery. Paradoxically, Bishop notes the increasing tendency of biennales and art fairs to support “performative social gestures engaging with ‘real’ people” (2006, 1). In her view this suggests an acceptance of collaborative and participatory activity by the so-called avant-garde.

Miwon Kwon locates the social turn, at least in the United States, at the time of the removal of Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* from Federal Plaza, New York, in 1989. The controversy surrounding *Tilted Arc*, which was viewed by opponents as a work that did not serve public interest or amenity, allowed proponents of ‘new genre public art’ (Lacy 1995) to insert themselves into public discussion (Kwon 2002, 107). Kwon writes:

For some critics and artists ... it represents neither a new movement in the field nor a newly politicised aesthetic sensibility, but rather a moment of arrival in which a well-developed mode of practice that had been undervalued in mainstream art finally receives broader cultural acceptance. (Kwon 2002, 107)

Into the twenty-first century, political and climatic events have continued to shape new approaches by artists. For Grant Kester, the political instability of the early twenty-first century accounts for the upsurge of current art practitioners who are developing “a set of positive practices directed toward the world beyond the gallery walls, linking new forms of intersubjective experience with social or political activism” (2004, 9). More recently, he writes of the tendency for contemporary artists to work with other disciplines. These relationships are often “inspired by, or affiliated with, new movements for social and economic justice around the globe” (Kester 2013).

Frasz and Sidford’s (largely U.S. focused) survey of socially engaged art (2015-17) acknowledges the increased attention from critics, academic institutions, funding bodies and artists themselves to this field of practice. Their research indicates that this shift is led by “a growing number of [artists who] want to use their creative skills to benefit communities and address social, economic or political issues” (Frasz and Sidford 2017, 5). Their assessment echoes Nato Thompson’s suggestion that artists are turning to social practices in frustration with studio-based art, in a century where social and environmental problems are demanding more direct attention than what gallery representations of those issues can offer (Thompson 2012a, 86).

Together these shifting perspectives show that, despite a sense that the social is now critical in art practice, there is still a divergence in how this social is defined. Certainly, the projects undertaken within this PhD are motivated by a sincere desire to engage in processes with collaborators and participants to bring about cultural change. There are ‘products’ which emerge from these processes which look like artworks, yet they are often designed for use outside of the art gallery. For example, I co-authored an illustrated artist-made ‘guidebook’, for the project *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*. It has been used by members of the public as a conventional walking guidebook, although it was intended as a commentary on the cultural, social and environmental aspects of the waterways of the Illawarra. While some methods in our ‘toolkit’ have come from formal training in studio arts, we have utilised many strategies to engage, educate, amplify and encourage participation. Those methods include graphic design, meetings, community organising, talking, listening, political lobbying, songwriting, sculpting, blogging, video production, agricultural planting,

media interviews, academic writing, performing, public speaking, walking, harvesting, scuba diving, submission writing, drawing, printmaking and advocacy. They are the 'stuff' of socially engaged art. Yet, at the same time, in the projects discussed in this exegesis, we have not rejected the art gallery or the gallery audience. The projects *Sugar vs the Reef?* and *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* (discussed in detail in Chapters 3 and 7) have both included major exhibitions in public galleries. What we have in fact done is to capitalise on the benefits of diverse multiple audiences to foster further activities through the gallery platform, as a way of complementing the broader project.

Socially engaged practices offer the possibility of linking both art and non-art audiences by creating porous boundaries between the 'field' and the gallery, through both direct community participation and gallery exhibitions. By doing so, artists can not only encapsulate the work 'in the field' but extend that work by linking the issues explored 'in the field' to a further set of questions that can be explored in the gallery. In the cases of *Sugar vs the Reef?* and *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* feedback loops have been set up by inviting audiences to participate both in the 'live' works and the gallery exhibitions, in which live works are conceptualised through maps, diagrams, objects, drawings, photos and videos (further discussed in Chapters 4 and 8). The environmental issues that we are exploring in these works—agricultural practices and their impact on the Great Barrier Reef; the impacts of climate change on the Great Barrier Reef; the questions of care for local environments and waterways; the impact of plastics on marine and terrestrial life—are now firmly in the public realm. Public literacy around these issues—and the divided opinions that result—is broad enough now to allow us, as artists, to work across various cultural sites to talk about these issues, and to contribute to environmental knowledge and discourse.

A spectrum of practice

Performance theorist Shannon Jackson (in Helguera 2011) offers two examples that illustrate the wide spectrum of works that might be gathered under the umbrella of socially engaged art today. Firstly, she describes a community mural painting project with children that promotes community identity and positive values. Secondly, she describes how, in 24

Blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day's work by paid workers (1999), artist Santiago Sierra paid ten Latino workers to pointlessly shift blocks of concrete around the ACE gallery in Los Angeles for a day in order to highlight and criticise exploitation (Jackson 2011, 43 cited in Helguera 2011, 10). Pablo Helguera regards the first as a 'typical' community art project in which criticality is suspended in favour of social value, while Sierra's work, located within a gallery, is "a powerful conceptual gesture that openly embraces the ethical contradiction of denouncing that which one perpetrates" (2011, 10).



2.2 Santiago Sierra, 1999, *24 Blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day's work by paid workers*
ACE gallery, Los Angeles

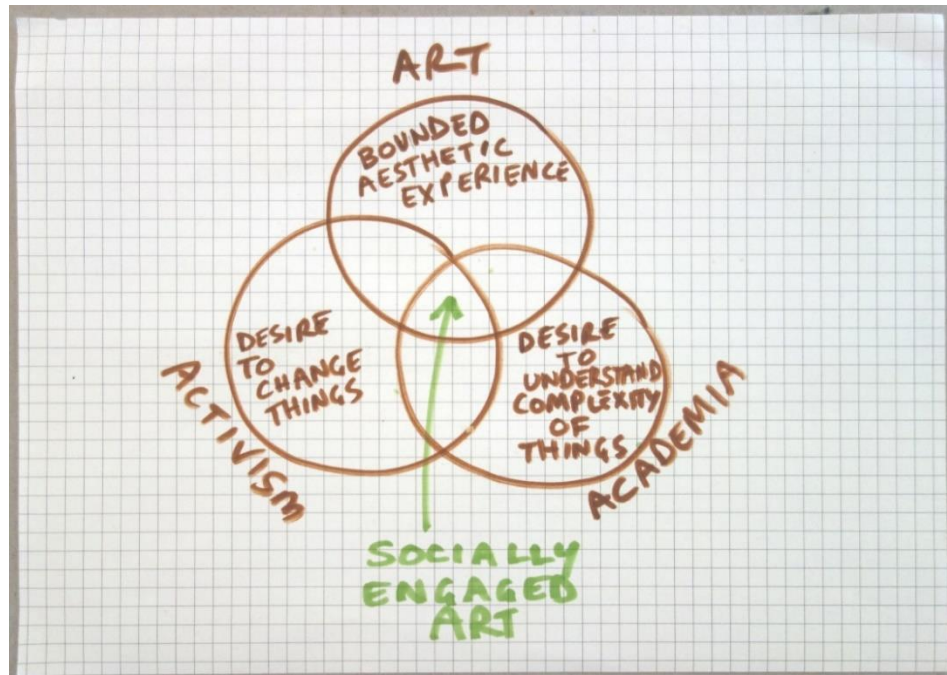
The two examples cited are both participatory works, both have social/political goals, yet they couldn't be more different. In the first, the artist or artists are not identified; in the second, Sierra is firmly at the centre as the creator of the work. One is located 'in the field', the other in the gallery. The participants in Sierra's work are the 'material', the work is antagonistic, the setting is institutional and the documentation of the work is sold on the art market. These two examples sit at opposite ends of the SEA spectrum.



2.3 Kim Williams and Therese Quinn, 1999, *Accounts Payable*
Telephone, sound, typewriters, printed paper roll

My own work, while swept up in the movement for ecological justice, operates across both participatory community practice and gallery-based art practice. In 1999, using an approach in which the 'social' situation was constructed for the gallery audience, I made a site-specific work based on the gallery space itself. *Accounts Payable* examined the history of that space,

formerly the Wollongong City Council administrative building and Council Chambers. The room in question was the 'Accounts Payable' section, housing numerous staff who worked the telephones and typewriters. My collaborator Therese Quinn and I recorded interviews with a group of former staff from this section, who related stories and histories of the workplace. We recreated the workplace with objects and recorded voices; gallery visitors could hear workers' stories by listening through an old telephone receiver. This work resides somewhere between the community mural and Sierra's gallery work that critiques social relations: it is a work that evokes the social history of the gallery through dialogic engagement with the former workers through an autonomous artistic gesture.



2.4 Lucas Ihlein, 2014, *Socially Engaged Art in a Venn diagram*

The current works of this PhD take a different approach. Rather than working specifically within the institutional framework of the gallery, I develop my work (with key collaborator Lucas Ihlein) in a direct, process-based engagement with communities 'in the field', which sometimes leads to gallery exhibitions. *Sugar vs the Reef?*, *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*, *Kiribati Fisheries Blog*, and *Mapping the Islands: How can art and science*

save the Great Barrier Reef? are all durational, participatory, interdisciplinary projects. Lucas Ihlein's Venn diagram (figure 2.4) neatly illustrates the intersecting worlds in which our own SEA practices sit. As artists working within the academy, research plays a significant role. While a desire for understanding is not exclusive to academic endeavour, the institution demands that we seek a nuanced view of the circumstances in which we are working in order to contribute meaningfully to both academic and public discourse. Consequently, the borders between the artworld, the academic institution and the world of activism are porous. At times, those roles are defined through certain activities, such as writing a scholarly essay or exhibiting in a gallery or negotiating with politicians. Yet at the same time, we render the worlds mutable by shifting back and forth, resisting a singular identity.

For the project *Sugar vs the Reef?* we function as advocates for agricultural practices that we believe are highly beneficial for the environment. We do this by utilising both arts and non-arts strategies. The collaborative project *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* embraces a number of motivations: walking as a way of knowing, walking as conceptual art, walking as community building, walking as environmental activism, walking as a form of decolonisation. Working across disciplines in *Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef?*, we take a political stance in an arts/science project to articulate the relationship between fossil-fuel extraction, climate change and their impacts on the Great Barrier Reef. *Kiribati Fisheries Blog* engages with people in Kiribati through both community development and arts strategies to look at plastics pollution in coastal environments.

In these projects, I attempt to walk a fine line between the ethical demands of social engagement and a critical autonomy that enables the works to reside in their own space beyond the framework of community development. In other words, the works demand a place in the world as 'art', to be perceived and accepted as such by both art and non-art audiences. Yet, as an artist, I work in ambiguous territory, in spaces and places of 'real life', as well as in the gallery. Influential artist and educator Allan Kaprow writes of his delight in ambiguity:

Most artists, of course, are less keenly interested in ambiguity of identity and purpose than I am. Open-endedness, to me, is democratic and challenges the mind ... When art as a practice is intentionally blurred with the multitude of other identities and activities we like to call life, it becomes subject to all the problems, conditions and limitations of those activities, as well as their unique freedoms. (Kaprow in Lacy 1995, 157)

The freedoms Kaprow refers to are the freedoms to practise art anywhere and in any form, not exclusively within the boundaries of the artworld. This freedom is precisely what I explore through my research: does working in real-life situations within communities over time enable artists to contribute meaningfully to environmental dialogues and to build on the repertoire of art practices?

Role models

A number of artists, some of whom are still practising today, have pioneered different strands of socially engaged art through their focus on the environmental, the social and the political. The Harrisons' focus on environmental projects, and Suzanne Lacy's concern with social issues, have stretched definitions of art in practices operating both outside and inside the gallery walls. Their works show how the methods of socially engaged art offer new ways of approaching social and environmental problems.

The Harrisons

The work of the Harrisons is sometimes practical, sometimes utopian, and sometimes ironic. Always, it is a plea for change. It beseeches the human species to come to use natural resources in intelligent ways, to begin to encounter the planet Earth in artful ways. (Adcock 1992, 41)

Sugar vs the Reef? owes a debt to the pioneering environmental art practice of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison. Since the early 1970s the Harrisons have been collaborating on local, national and international environmental projects, working across a broad range of disciplines in order to offer insights and to propose solutions to small and large-scale environmental problems. Their work is based on the guiding principle that any action they

take should be of ecological benefit. They work by invitation, usually in specific geographic areas, maintaining their freedom “to define the problem and determine the product” (Whiston-Spirn in Harrison and Harrison 2016, 434). They go to the place to see, research, think, speak with and work with a diverse range of people and disciplines. By doing so the Harrisons build an ecological picture, then propose scenarios and solutions through mapping, dialogue, data visualisation, negotiation, installation, storytelling and poetry. Their works last as long as they are welcome by those who invite them and until they have reached the limit of their capacity to contribute.

By the mid 1970s, the Harrisons had formulated their practice through the definition of a “fundamental contract” (Whiston-Spirn in Harrison and Harrison 2016, 434). They begin by asking the question, “How big is here?” This is an important question for the Harrisons. Scholar of landscape architecture Anne Whiston-Spirn summarises the research questions contained within “how big is here?”:

What ecosystems are present, what is their state of health, and how are they entangled with human activities? What is the territory or field of play required to understand a problem and address the solution? What are the pertinent ecosystems and political and social systems? What processes sustain those systems and what territories (fields) and boundaries (frames) do those processes create? (Whiston-Spirn in Harrison and Harrison 2016, 434-435)

Flowing from these questions, the Harrisons use a defined set of research methods based on observation, dialogue and mapping. Yet these are not detached methods: “They look for what a place has to tell them—to what stories it holds. They heed the feelings it evokes” (Whiston-Spirn cited in Harrison and Harrison 2016, 435). Dialogues with each other, with the place, with residents, with other disciplinary practitioners and with officials often lead to new discoveries and hidden misconceptions (2016, 435). While the Harrisons work across many disciplines and are informed by the sciences, they retain their identity as artists, using the poetics of their art practice to think about ecological issues, while also exhibiting the artefacts generated by the conceptual framing of those issues. Newton Harrison says of their work:

In the context of the art world, our works do, in fact, behave like works of art. When they're exhibited in City Hall, however, they read as inspired proposals in poetic form, and the art aspect is not discussed. (Harrison in Adcock 1992, 39)

In this statement Harrison articulates features of socially engaged art: the ambiguity of artists crossing disciplinary boundaries, making works that are informed by other disciplines and that don't necessarily look like art. Then there is the blurring of physical boundaries: moving between gallery and civic space. Artist and educator Pablo Helguera explains the value of boundary crossing:

Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity. It is this temporary snatching away of subjects into the realm of art-making that brings new insights to a particular problem or condition, and in turn makes it visible to other disciplines. (Helguera 2011, 5)

For the Harrisons, mapping is a key method used to identify what they call the 'field of play'. Re-mapping allows the Harrisons to "discover the overlooked and to create a new whole" (Harrison and Harrison 2016, 436). Mapping was a key strategy in the project *A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland* (1994-95). In 1994, the Harrisons were invited by the Cultural Council of South Holland to respond to plans by the Government of Holland to build 600 000 new houses in the 'Green Heart'. This centuries-old agricultural heartland of Holland is ringed by seven major cities that generate significant economic activity. The Harrisons search for metaphors to inform their thinking, planning and design work. For this project, they explored the metaphor of the 'Green Heart' as a recognisable cultural and historical landmark. On a large map of Holland, they imposed the housing development on the Green Heart, then printed the map backwards, triggering an outraged response from visitors to their studio in Holland.



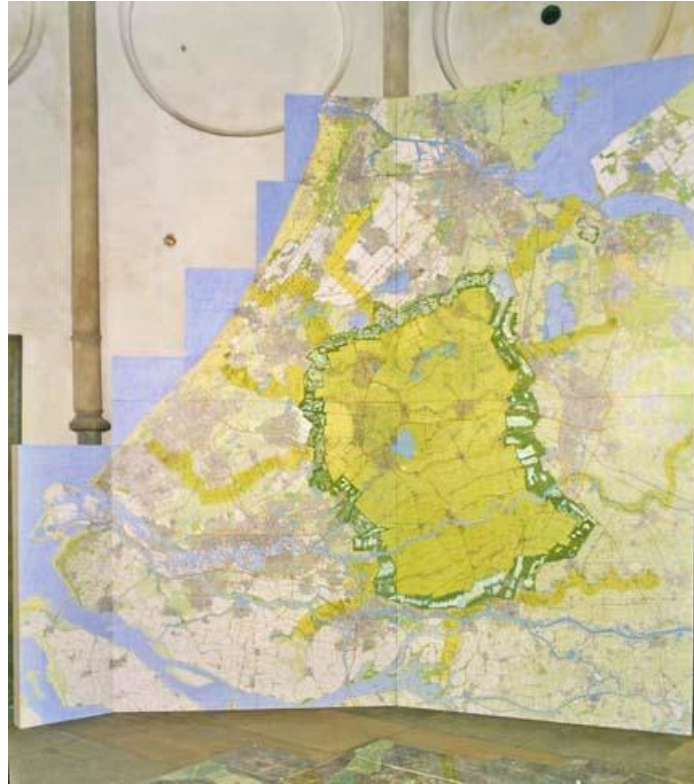
2.5 Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, 1995, *A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland* Map of Holland printed backwards, showing how the proposed housing development splits the 'Green Heart' into three sections (Image courtesy of theharrisonstudio.net)

Of this action, Newton Harrison said:

In response to our big map of the developed Green Heart, many asked, "Why did you print our map backward?" Our response was, "Because we think you're designing your country backward." To that, all responded, in one way or another, "If this is backward, what's forward?" (Harrison and Harrison 2016, 260)

Working with landscape architects, sociologists and city officials, they proposed an alternative vision for the 800 square kilometre heart and its surrounding cities. Their vision preserved the Green Heart as an agricultural space, encouraging biodiversity through a biodiversity 'corridor' surrounding the heartland and within the urban communities of the

surrounding cities. Additionally the cultural integrity of each of the cities was preserved through the placement of the housing.



2.6 Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, 1995, *A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland*, first proposal
Showing the 'Green Heart' preserved with a surrounding biodiversity corridor
(Image courtesy of theharrisonstudio.net)

In 1995 the Minister of the Environment incorporated much of the Harrisons' proposal in the Government planning strategies. At that stage a new Government was elected and the proposal was shelved. In 1999 the plans were re-presented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Environment and Forestry and accepted, with modifications. As a result of its preservation, "in 2005 the European Regional Development Group declared the Green Heart of Holland one of the seven most valuable open spaces in this large region and in need of continued protection" (Harrison and Harrison 2019).

This project illustrates the scale and ambition at which the Harrisons have at times operated, and encapsulates their working methods. As collaborating artists, Lucas Ihlein and I acknowledge the influence of the Harrisons; they are exemplary models, combining an

ethical approach to social engagement, an ability to utilise art methods as a way of revealing insights and stimulating discussion, and an understanding that working across disciplines expands the knowledge base and scope of their work. Maps, metaphor and narrative are their dialogic ‘tools’. As artists working with environmental questions, Ihlein and I are influenced by the Harrisons’ stated principle: “Any resolution ennobles both the place in question and the people at work” (Centre for the Study of the Force Majeure 2018, 6).

Returning to the question ‘how big is here?’, the Harrisons take an ecosystem view of the sites in which they are working. Newton Harrison acknowledges that early in their careers, the Harrisons often worked on a small scale, until their reputation grew to a point where they were invited to think on more ambitious scales in projects such as *A Vision for the Green Heart of Holland*. In this project they were asked to look at a specific problem in a specific country and studied all the conditions that would make an alternative solution viable. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 I show, through discussion of my collaborative environmental projects, how working in specific areas offers the potential to transfer knowledge and working methods horizontally, across sites, through amplification. For example, the agricultural practices we support, using arts strategies, in the project *Sugar vs the Reef?* are focused on a particular geographic area. Yet those practices, if amplified broadly enough, could be transferred to other regions that share similar issues. Similarly, the method of walking-as-art as a way of enacting care for waterways in *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* can be transferred across sites to any location. In this way, I offer a contribution to both environmental discourse and art methodologies through the stories that emerge from these works, told in the following chapters.

Suzanne Lacy

Seeing art as a neutral meeting ground for people of different backgrounds, feminists in the seventies attempted artistic crossovers among races and classes. Collaboration was a valued practice of infinitely varying possibilities, one that highlighted the relational aspects of art. By the end of the seventies feminists had formulated precise activist strategies and aesthetic criteria for their art. (Lacy 1995, 27)

I now turn to the artist Suzanne Lacy, to acknowledge her significant contribution to socially engaged art and, in turn, my own art practice. Since the 1970s, Lacy has created small- and large-scale durational works with a focus on social issues. Her description of the relationships between collaboration and feminism speaks of the milieu in which she forged her practice, along with mentorship by Judy Chicago and Allan Kaprow at California Institute for the Arts. Chicago had a significant influence on Lacy's feminist art practice, while Kaprow's "experimental approach to eroding the borders between life and art inspired her to create performances 'with' people, rather than 'for' or 'about' them" (Phelan 2019, 60).



2.7 Suzanne Lacy, 1979, *Making it Safe*. Courtesy Suzanne Lacy Studio.

Lacy's ability to mobilise communities through performative, dialogic events offers precedents to my own past and present practice. Her collaborative practice straddles performance, video and photo installation, scholarly writing and theatrical community actions. For several years from 1977, Lacy collaborated with artist Leslie Labowitz, refining their ideas "concerning media and the successful construction of action-oriented feminist performance" (Roth 1988, 44). In an early work, *Making it Safe* (1979), Lacy was commissioned by a community organisation to raise public awareness of violence against

women. She used a range of strategies, including speak-outs, pop-up exhibitions, guerilla actions, and small dinner events. The project culminated in a large outdoor dinner performance for the two hundred and fifty women who were involved in the project.

Through the 1980s Lacy continued to construct collaborative performances and events centred around women's issues: rape, prostitution, violence against women, ageing. These performances were part of a range of strategies Lacy used to bring issues to light and to disrupt stereotypes. Media action and policy negotiations as well as performance and events were used to organise and empower women to speak out about specific issues. Over three months in 1983-84 she worked with women from many backgrounds who participated in the planning, production, fundraising and publicity for the performative event, *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*. The event, held on La Jolla Beach, California, attracted over one thousand audience members. In the performance, 154 women over 65 years of age, dressed in white, proceeded down the stairs from the clifftop on to two adjacent beaches.



2.8 Suzanne Lacy and Sharon Allen, 1983-84, *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*.
Photo by Barbara T. Smith.

Participants sat at white-cloth covered tables discussing their lives, their relationships, their hopes and their fears. Audiences watched first from the cliffs, a sound score created by Susan Stone reiterating for them the conversations held on the beach below. Later, the audience was invited to walk down onto the beach for a closer listen and to experience a space of active contemplation that Lacy and the women created. (Lacy 2020)

Throughout the following decades, Lacy orchestrated dialogues on many social issues. She demonstrated a long-term commitment to *The Oakland Projects* (1991-2001), engaging with youth in the Oakland area of California through a series of performances, installations and political actions (Lacy 2019a). In this project, eight major works were developed, in collaboration with other artists and young people, that addressed systemic issues around the relationships of youth to police and other institutions. Of this complex project Lacy says:

I would say that this body of work looks at the intersection between politics, performance and publics. It is a search to understand—Can you make art that is life-like, or can you make life that is like art? (Lacy, 2019b)



2.9 Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby, Chris Johnson, 1993-94, *The Roof is on Fire*, from *The Oakland Projects*, 1991-2001. Courtesy Suzanne Lacy; photo by Nathan Bennett.

The Roof is on Fire (1993–94) emerged from *The Oakland Projects*. The work was a multifaceted collaboration with Oakland youths. According to scholar of performance studies, Peggy Phelan, “workshops focused on how they could gain control of a media narrative that depicted many of them, especially the young black men, as ‘super predators’” (Phelan 2019, 63). In a performative event on a rooftop garage, 220 high school students sat in one hundred cars, talking with teachers, police officers, parents and civic representatives, while audience members moved among the cars, listening to the conversations. In this structured environment, the teenagers controlled the conversation. The ‘performance’ was carefully constructed as a safe place in which to hold difficult conversations. In both examples—*Whisper, the Waves, the Wind* and *The Roof is on Fire*—Lacy takes dialogue and frames it as a performative art event. In this process, the stories and the exchanges between people are made public, opening up avenues for a broader understanding of the issues of marginalised communities (such as older women and black youth). Suzanne Lacy’s influence continues today in the ways in which socially engaged art brings communities together. Although she has worked in a number of countries, Lacy engages deeply with communities. Peggy Phelan says:

Remarkably, in today’s international art world where it is common for peripatetic artists to create work with only a veneer of site specificity, Lacy’s art springs from her capacity to establish real bonds with a community. She often maintains contact with her collaborators for years after they have worked on a project together. The longevity of her relationships reflects an ethical regard for the lives of people often ignored in mainstream art history and practice. (Phelan 2019, 60)

Lacy’s practice informed my own work as a community arts practitioner during the two decades from 1990. Between 1995 and 2002, I was closely involved with the Multicultural Women’s Network in Wollongong. This project continues today in various forms and is a testament to the sustained leadership of Therese Quinn, artist and community worker with the Wollongong Women’s Information Service. Through the Network, practitioners from the visual and performing arts have worked with women of all ages and cultural backgrounds to foster cross-cultural dialogue. Multi-arts strategies are utilised in workshops, events and performances. I worked as artswoker and facilitator on major

performances such as *A Better Life* (2002). This brought stories of migration and settlement to public attention through a theatrical work devised with and performed by the women. As co-facilitator of the group over seven years, I acted as choir director, musical arranger, instrumentalist, graphic designer, set designer and lighting designer. As feminist practitioners, our intention for this migrant and refugee network was to provide the settings and support for women to build skills, strength and confidence, both individually and collectively. As artworkers, we worked ‘with’ rather than ‘for’ the women. While socially engaged art in general does not specifically uphold feminism, my own values offer a feminist perspective to the collaborative SEA projects I undertake.



2.10 Kim Williams, 1994, flyer for *Women's Business*, Multicultural Women's Network, Wollongong

Events such as ‘Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers’ and ‘Seed and Song’ from the *Sugar vs the Reef?* project, and workshops and orchestrated gatherings in the *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* project, take their cues from practitioners such as Lacy. They blur art and life through performative strategies, drawing groups of people together through long-term, durational engagement. These events and activities will be discussed in detail in following chapters. While Lacy’s work firmly resides in the human realm, I take her work further by activating social processes within projects that have an environmental focus.

Techniques / spectrum of socially engaged art today

In 2015, Alexis Frasz and Holly Sidford (Helicon Collaborative, USA) conducted an extensive research project, *Mapping the landscape of socially engaged artistic practice* (published 2017), supported by the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. Their research aimed to provide coherence to an otherwise disparate and disconnected set of practices. The survey also outlined connections between practitioners and attempted to give legitimacy to the field of SEA practice. This in turn provided a useful reference tool for funding bodies (Frasz and Sidford 2017, 4-7). Through extensive interviews, focus groups and literature reviews, their report outlines common attributes, as well as methodological differences within SEA. Broadly, they describe the commonalities:

- A belief in the responsibility and capacity of the artist to effect social or cultural change. The artworks are not intended solely for an art audience.
- SEA utilises many strategies and forms in addition to traditional art methods and often operates outside of gallery environments.
- The creation of work often involves collaboration with communities and/or other disciplines. Process is central to the work and the work occurs over time.
- The work may be about social, political or economic issues, but not necessarily. SEA has many different origins—political movements, high-art influences such as Joseph Beuys, community arts, popular socio/political commentary. (Frasz and Sidford 2017, 11-12)

Additionally, they offer a set of nine ‘variations’ to illustrate the spectrum of socially engaged art practice (2017, 15-17):

Aesthetics:	social	—————	fine art
Role/function of the artist:	facilitator	—————	primary creative agent
Origin of the artist:	rooted in	—————	from outside
Definition of the work:	process	—————	product
Direction of influence:	inward to community	—————	outward to others
Origin of the work:	community-generated	—————	outside generated
Place:	place-specific	—————	non-place specific
Issue:	single issue	—————	multi-issue
Duration:	short-term	—————	long-term

2.11 Helicon Collaborative, 2017, a spectrum of socially engaged art

Reflecting on my own work, it becomes apparent that my practice resides within Frasz and Sidford’s framework. Each project, and aspects of each project, sit in different positions along the spectra. However, even within a single project, such as *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*, there is a great deal of movement across this framework. The aesthetics of the project range between the social and fine art, and the function of the artist is *both* as facilitator and as primary creative agent. The artists play different roles when they facilitate a community creek walk, and when they are creating and curating works for an exhibition about creeks.

Finally, Frasz and Sidford offer a “checklist of non-artistic skills” (2017, 20) that are used by practitioners. Alongside their list, I offer my own:

Helicon Collaborative checklist of skills	My checklist of skills
Cultural competency—understanding different cultural viewpoints and working to overcome unconscious bias	Inclusivity —understanding different cultural viewpoints and working to overcome unconscious bias and build trust; encouraging collaboration and participation
Respect for different kinds of knowledge/expertise	Respect for different kinds of knowledge/expertise; willingness to share authorship
Listening with respect, and being humble	Listening with respect, and being humble; showing curiosity and a desire to learn about the place and people
Power and influencer analysis	Seeking connections across all levels of the social context of the project
“Human” relational skills like empathy, reciprocity, humor	“Human” relational skills like empathy, reciprocity, humor
Ability to deal with delicate power dynamics	Ability to deal with delicate power dynamics; ability to accommodate different views; ability to resolve conflicts
Meeting facilitation	Meeting facilitation
Relationship / partnership building	Relationship / partnership building
Fundraising	Grant writing and fundraising
Organizing / leadership	Organising / leadership
Knowing multiple languages (literally and figuratively)	Knowing the language of the specific discipline or milieu in which you are working
Policymaking	Lobbying decision-makers
	Flexibility and adaptability

This meta-analysis shows how socially engaged art extends beyond the borders of purely representational art. At first glance the items in the checklist may look like the skills required of a community development worker. Yet, for artists working in the field of socially engaged art, those skills add to and complement the 'art' skills that are brought into projects, and demonstrate the complexity of socially engaged art processes. The relationships with the communities we work within are established and developed using the abovementioned social skills. Those skills are as integral to the artworks as are skills in spatial or graphic design, music or performance, drawing or construction. My own additions to the checklist arise from the direct experiences of projects that I am involved in. "Willingness to share authorship", for example, is perhaps not universal to practitioners of socially engaged art. Santiago Sierra's artwork, mentioned earlier in this chapter, is clearly attributed to a single author. Similarly, the Harrisons claim sole authorship of their work. In a gallery context I will claim authorship, along with my artist collaborators, yet the work 'in the field' is attributed to all key participants.

In this chapter I have offered an account of socially engaged art through its historical precedents and its social and political contexts, through case studies of key practitioners and through a current analysis of the spectrum of this practice. In the following chapters I present fine-grained accounts of first-hand experiences of socially engaged art, outlining the ways in which both social and artistic skills are utilised. Chapter 3 discusses the major project *Sugar vs the Reef?*, showing how I use these skills in a specific setting. Together these practices and observations offer a model for socially engaged practice within an environmental context.

Chapter 3: Growing



3.1 Kim Williams, 2018, *Lucerne (Medicago sativa)*
Ink on paper

March 2018: *Queensland has always struck me as a place that teems with plant and animal life. Sleeping in the Mattssons' farmhouse, it felt as though the biology were enveloping us. Geckos chirped; birds woke us; moisture penetrated our pores. The nearby field of soybeans looked orderly but at any moment could become untamed if the human processes of control ceased. If we were all frozen with inertia in our beds, the outside would slowly move in and colonise the calm orderliness of the house. If the fans ceased to circulate overhead, the mould would rise and fur our bodies. Our ears would host the geckos and their young. The snakes would find a warm home behind the oven. The grasses would migrate up the stairs and carpet the lounge room. Soil would begin to form as the plants cycled through growth and decomposition and we would be naturally absorbed into this cycle and become a useful part of the ecosystem.*

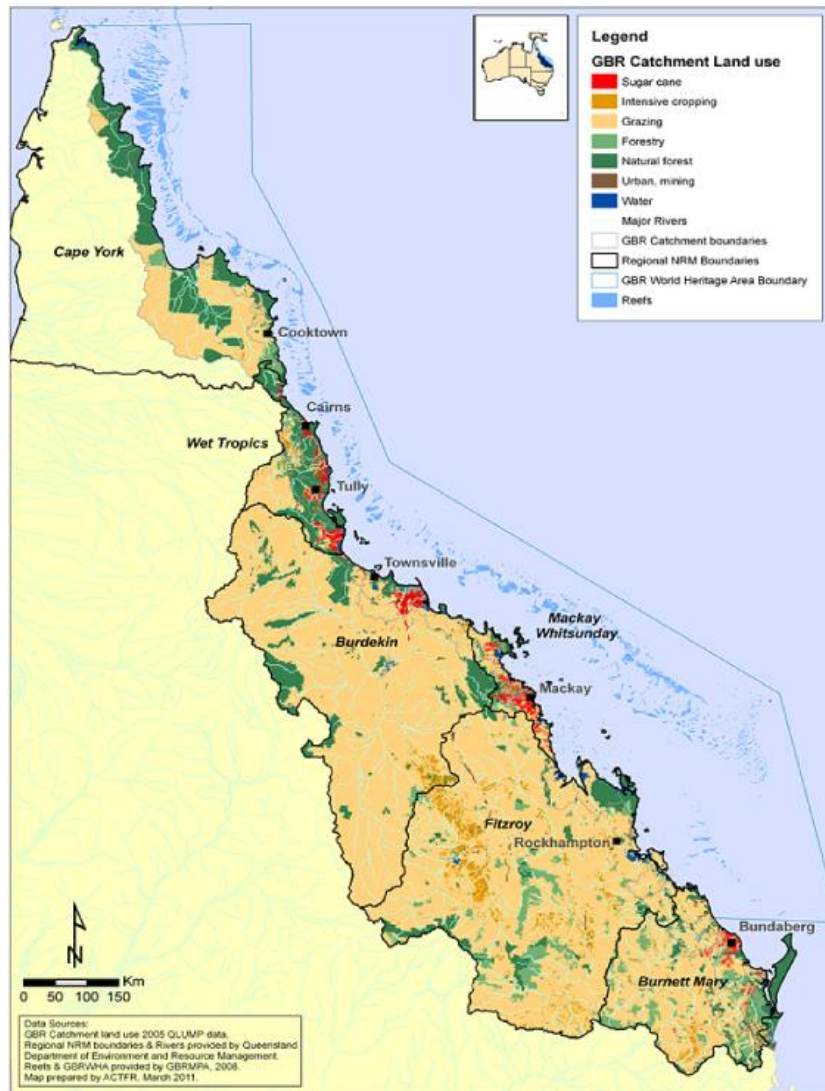
GROWING

This chapter discusses the project *Sugar vs the Reef?*, a collaborative socially engaged art project based in Mackay, Queensland. Taking our cues from the Harrisons' and Lacy's methods, Lucas Ihlein and I operate as both artists and agricultural facilitators in this major durational work. *Sugar vs the Reef?* coincides with a heightened public awareness of the overarching impact of climate change on the Great Barrier Reef and indeed reefs worldwide.

While global action on global warming is glacially slow, our state and federal governments have turned their attention (and funding) to a more tangible issue affecting the Great Barrier Reef: water quality. The Coral Sea is affected by land-based agricultural practices, particularly run-off, making corals more vulnerable to bleaching and mortality. Yet, farmers are also innovators in this environment. *Sugar vs the Reef?* focuses on innovative agricultural practices that reduce farming impacts on the Great Barrier Reef. As artists, we work with farmers to highlight these practices in unique ways.

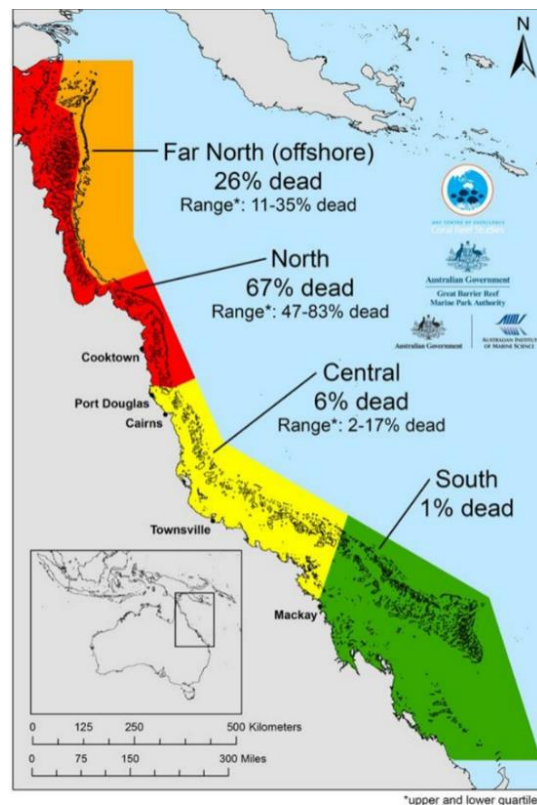
More than 88% of Queensland's land area is used for primary production (Queensland Department of Agriculture and Fisheries 2018). Mackay is the centre of a coastal region dominated by sugarcane cropping. Sugarcane is ideally suited to the hot, wet coastal climate and sugarcane growing regions are dotted along much of the Queensland coastline, adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef. Conventional sugarcane farming practices, using extensive synthetic fertilizer, pesticide and herbicide inputs, deliver poor environmental

outcomes for the Great Barrier Reef, as nitrates, phosphates and sediments are carried out to sea during heavy rainfall, affecting water quality. *Sugar vs the Reef?* looks at ways of working with farmers to amplify regenerative agriculture practices across the sugarcane cropping industry. Regenerative agriculture methods build healthy soils that require fewer chemical inputs, thereby improving both terrestrial and marine environmental outcomes.



3.2 Great Barrier Reef catchment showing land use

Source: Brodie and Waterhouse (2012)



3.3 Coral mortality following 2016 bleaching event
Source: NOAA Coral Reef Watch

We acknowledged that a great deal of work is being done by reef scientists who have decades of experience in the study of the Reef. There is now a large body of scientific knowledge of the environmental pressures on the Reef. Eminent reef scientists Terry Hughes (ABC interview, 16 March 2017) and Charlie Veron (ABC radio interview, 19 October 2016) keep the issue in people's minds by making strong public statements in the popular press. Rather than focusing our efforts in an area dense with scientific research, our attention instead moved towards the land adjacent to the coast. While carbon emissions from the burning of fossil fuels are the major cause of global warming, other practices have also made lasting impacts. Deforestation, desertification and soil degradation have reduced the capacity of the land to absorb carbon dioxide. *Sugar vs the Reef?* brings soil to the centre of discussions about farming practices, highlighting the key role that healthy soil plays in a sustainable future. Art contributes an embodied experience to the work already happening on the ground.

In this chapter I focus on the agricultural practices we amplify through our art practice and the ways in which we have collaborated with farmers and communities. The discussion shows how socially engaged art can play a critical role in a complex environmental project such as *Sugar vs the Reef?* I argue that, by collaborating across disciplines—with farmers, soil scientists and natural resource managers—as artists, we contribute to environmental knowledge by activating public discourses. To contextualise the project, I will offer a brief background to the complex web of environmental, political, economic and cultural issues in this territory. I will then discuss our work in this sphere, which is directed toward humans and human practices on land. When we began this project, farmers were our central focus, particularly those farmers who are trying to build a future for farming and the environment more generally through regenerative agriculture. Subsequent chapters tease out other aspects of this project: working across cultures, dialogic engagement and the role of music and ‘making’ in socially engaged art.

Background: P.A. Yeomans

The forerunner to *Sugar vs the Reef?* is *The Yeomans Project* (2011-2014), a long-buried project from the 1970s by conceptual artist Ian Milliss, brought back to life in a collaboration with Lucas Ihlein in 2011. Engineer and inventor P.A. Yeomans pioneered a system of sustainable agriculture that controlled flows of water over pasture via carefully placed channels that follow the contours of the land. He developed ploughs and rippers to cut these channels. He named this process of keeping water on the ground the ‘Keyline’ method of land management. Keyline planning takes advantage of the natural topography of the land. The layout and position of farm dams, irrigation areas, roads, fences, farm buildings and tree lines is determined by the form and shape of the land. Though not embraced by mainstream farming, Keyline principles have been adopted on farms around the world and absorbed into permaculture systems design by David Holmgren and Bill Mollison, co-originators of the permaculture concept (Ferguson and Lovell 2014).

Yeomans’ work came to the attention of Ian Milliss in the early 1970s. At the time, large scale works of land art by artists such as Michael Heizer and Christo and Jeanne-Claude were part of the art milieu. Milliss examined the social context of art, reaching the

conclusion that creativity was not the sole province of artists (like Heizer and Christo); Yeomans' work seemed to him an example of art practice on a grand scale. For Milliss, farmers are cultural practitioners of no less value than artists (Milliss 2017). All the characteristics of 'art' were present in Yeomans' work: he had built a world of media, writing, and education around his practice. Milliss decided that he would curate P. A. Yeomans as an artist and proposed the idea to Daniel Thomas, then curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In 1976 Thomas agreed to stage Milliss's P. A. Yeomans exhibition, as it fitted into the framework of conceptual art. The directors of the gallery supported the show, but the trustees disagreed; they regarded it as a commercial trade fair. The Yeomans exhibition was cancelled at the last minute (Milliss, 2017).

In 2011, Milliss and Ihlein devised a re-staging of the cancelled exhibition, showing a Yeomans plough signage, paraphernalia, Yeoman's books, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales trustees' minute book which documented the cancellation of the 1976 exhibition. In 2013-14, Milliss and Ihlein held the exhibition *The Yeomans Project* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Additionally they held a number of community events, with public tours to Keyline farms, showcasing this farming system to members of the public and cultivating networks in the regenerative agriculture community. I attended one of the farm tours.

Retired farmer John Sweet, himself an advocate of P. A. Yeomans' Keyline methods, heard about *The Yeomans Project* and invited Lucas Ihlein to Mackay to discuss his ideas for saving the Great Barrier Reef. Sweet's dream was to transform the agricultural practices of Queensland farmers, using Keyline principles along the entire Queensland coastline. In his view, farmers would in turn become sustainability custodians of the Great Barrier Reef, shifting the common perception of farmers as environmental vandals. This splendidly ambitious and provocative idea was a temptation that Ihlein could not refuse. They met in 2014 and a period of meetings and grant applications followed. In 2015, Sweet introduced Ihlein to sugarcane farmer Simon Mattsson, whose farm is located in Marian in the Pioneer Valley of Mackay. Mattsson is one of a growing number of sugarcane farmers who are developing sustainable alternatives to the established industrial practices in sugarcane farming. He is dedicated to farming innovation through regenerative agriculture. In 2014, he was awarded a Nuffield Scholarship, a prestigious farming fellowship that enabled him to

travel overseas to learn from other farmers. He has a keen focus on soil health, and in particular the microbial activity necessary to sustaining soil health and productivity.

In 2016, Ihlein received significant funding for the *Sugar vs the Reef?* project from the Australian Research Council. At his invitation I became a collaborator in the project. Over the subsequent three and a half years *Sugar vs the Reef?* became an intense focus for us. We began travelling back and forth to Mackay, working closely with Sweet and Mattsson.

What's in a name?

Sugar vs the Reef? is a provocative title. It deliberately asks a rhetorical question to stimulate discussion about the controversial relationship between coastal sugarcane farming in Queensland and its impact on the Great Barrier Reef. When Ihlein was awarded Australian Research Council funding for the project, it was one of a number of projects that provoked an indignant attack by *Daily Telegraph* journalist Natasha Bitá. Her front page article decried the funding of arcane projects at taxpayers' expense (Bitá 2016). The article cited economist Michael Potter, who asks, "Would it not be a better investment to fund research into cures for disease, major social problems, and ways to boost the Australian economy?" In response to the article, university officials and colleagues sent expressions of support to Dr Ihlein, and *Sugar vs the Reef?* continued. Since then, the academic community has shown strong support for the project as an example of sustained engagement toward grassroots change within a community.

Sugar: the story

Sugarcane is a perennial grass. It grows, it is harvested, and then it regrows. A single plant can usually be harvested over three or four growing cycles. It is ideally suited to the high rainfall of the tropics and warm sub-tropics. The main product of sugarcane is sugar, a global commodity with a chequered history. Sugar brings with it tales of riches, slavery and racism. Originally grown in New Guinea and the Indian subcontinent and exported to Europe, sugarcane cropping expanded across the globe from the late fifteenth century onwards (Johnson et al. 2007, 900-901). From its early uses as a luxury food that only the very

wealthy could afford during the Middle Ages, sugar has become a cheap, ubiquitous ingredient in today's Western diet.



3.4 South Sea Islanders planting sugarcane, Bingera, Queensland, 1897
(Photo: Queensland Historical Atlas)

In Australia, the sugar industry was established in the second half of the nineteenth century along the Queensland and Northern New South Wales coastline. It was a way for colonial settlers to establish 'ownership' of the land and reinforce British dominance over this newly settled colony. To satisfy the labour needs of this rapidly expanding industry, a burgeoning Pacific Islands slave trade provided a steady supply of South Sea Islanders, who were coerced or kidnapped from their countries by slave traders and put to work in forced labour conditions on cane farms (Affeldt 2017, 440-444). Not only were the sugar plantations reliant on slave labour, those lands under planting were taken from the traditional Aboriginal owners. Today, the Yuwibara Aboriginal people and Australian South Sea Islanders living in Mackay are rarely mentioned in contemporary farming conversations. Yet these communities have a central place in the narratives of sugarcane farming. As we came to know the sugar industry better, we became aware that this less visible side to the story was also important to include in our work.

Sugar: bad for your health

Sugarcane farmers in Australia today are a beleaguered lot. They grow a food crop known to cause tooth decay, as well as contributing to a number of other health conditions such as heart and kidney disease and obesity (Johnson et al. 2007, 902). Used extensively in the Western diet, sugar is consumed directly or as an additive in processed foods. It has become the focus of debates about the obesity 'crisis' in Australia: the Australian Bureau of Statistics records show that in 2014-15, 64% of the adult population was overweight or obese, defined by Body Mass Index measures (ABS 2015). In recent years there has been a campaign within Government and organisations such as the Heart Foundation (2015) for the introduction of a sugar tax to place a financial disincentive on foods and drinks high in added sugar. The tax would have a knock-on effect on sugarcane farmers, who are already struggling under the financial burden of high costs and low returns on their crops.

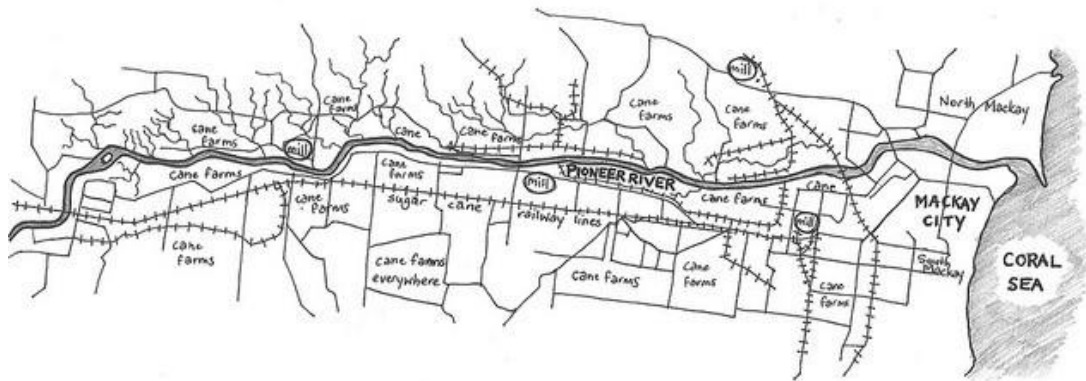
Sugar: bad for the soil

Contemporary sugarcane farming methods have reduced soil quality over many decades. As a consequence, crop yields have declined (Garside et al. 2005). This was not always the case. Prior to the advent of industrial farming methods, fields were allowed to lie fallow, and planting was cyclic. In the 1980s, output restrictions were lifted and the industry was deregulated. Farmers were pressured by the sugar mills to increase their yields so that the mills could increase sugar production, in theory creating more wealth for all. Farming became intensive, with chemical inputs used to fertilise crops and to manage pests and ensure turnover, yet this ultimately robbed the soil of its healthy biology. Additionally, soils became compacted with the advent of increasingly heavy machinery. Today we are seeing the consequences of decades of such practices in declining yields, poor soil health in the field and declining profits for farmers (Mattsson, interview September 2016). This has been documented over decades of sugar production (Garside et al. 2005).

Sugar: bad for the farmers

In the Pioneer Valley of Mackay, where sugarcane is extensively grown, many debt-burdened farmers rely on the chemical input system. It is their only way to guarantee any

kind of crop yield from year to year. Our conversations with farmers in Mackay indicate that debt levels are putting a great strain on families. Some farmers work second jobs, while others struggle to make ends meet. More than 80% of sugar produced in Australia is exported as raw sugar overseas (Department of Agriculture Water and the Environment 2019). Sugar is a global commodity and as such, the price fluctuates with international benchmarks. Because of this, the farmers at the production end of the chain have little control over the earnings from their crops.



3.5 Kim Williams, 2018, hand drawn map of the Pioneer Valley, Mackay

Farmers are tied to a specific sugar mill in their district. Until it was sold to a large German company in 2019, the Marian mill in the Pioneer valley of Mackay was owned by local cane growers. There was no surplus money to put into the maintenance and improvement of the mill; therefore mill breakdowns were frequent during the cane-crushing season. Mill breakdowns stall the harvesting crews, who rotate their services from farm to farm, and the cycle of production grinds to a halt. In 2016, the Marian mill experienced repeated breakdowns, frustrating farmer Simon Mattsson, who had grown his best crop in two decades. In January 2017, Mattsson reported that 10% of his crop was still sitting unharvested in the field due to the vagaries of weather and milling breakdowns. The remaining crop deteriorated to the point where it could not be harvested.

Sugar: bad for the Reef



3.6 Run-off from sugarcane farm during a rain event
(Photo: CSIRO)

The bulk of sugar produced in Australia is grown on or near the coast in Queensland, adjacent to the Great Barrier Reef in the Coral Sea. During rain events, chemical and fertiliser inputs to sugarcane crops leach into the waterways that run into the Coral Sea, exacerbating the conditions that cause coral bleaching. In October 2016 Ihlein and I met with environmental scientist Jon Brodie at James Cook University in Townsville. Brodie is the Chief Research Scientist, Centre for Tropical Water and Aquatic Ecosystem Research. For many decades, he has studied the impacts of land-based agriculture on the Great Barrier Reef. He summarised some of the issues caused by sugarcane farming in our meeting.

1. Urea (nitrate) fertiliser run-off from sugarcane farming is the major run-off problem in the Pioneer catchment of Mackay. Ten percent of applied nitrogen is lost to the river.
2. Nitrogen fertilises the algae that are eaten by larval Crown of Thorns starfish. The increase in nitrogen in the marine environment creates ideal conditions for the Crown of Thorns to proliferate. Mature Crown of Thorns starfish eat coral. In normal populations, they help to keep a balance of coral varieties. In plague proportions during an outbreak, however, they consume coral faster than it can grow. One

female Crown of Thorns starfish can produce 60 000 000 eggs annually. Crown of Thorns starfish have been recorded to live up to eight years in aquaria.

3. Coral disease is partly caused by nitrogen inputs (and possibly phosphorus too—another fertiliser by-product in run-off).
4. Poor water quality (and hotter water) makes coral more susceptible to coral bleaching. (Brodie 2016, 442)



3.7 Crown of Thorns starfish
(Photo: Kim Williams)

Jon Brodie has spent many years advising State and Federal Government ministers on water quality in the Great Barrier Reef. In his experience, successive governments have always fallen short of following the recommended measures to fix water quality. Brodie is aware that water quality is a problem for the reef, but acknowledges that, after successive mass-bleaching events, the overarching issue is global warming. In his view, the Reef will not survive unless immediate action is taken to reduce carbon emissions. His view is echoed by reef scientist Professor Terry Hughes, who points to global warming as the primary cause of severe and recurring coral bleaching events. In 2017, Hughes said that “securing a future for

coral reefs, including intensively managed ones such as the Great Barrier Reef, ultimately requires urgent and rapid action to reduce global warming” (Hughes et al. 2017, 376).

These warnings by respected experts are sobering, yet for us they reinforce the value of promoting the environmental benefits of regenerative agriculture. Regenerative agriculture builds healthy soil. Healthy soil sequesters carbon (Lal et al. 2007). Our work in this project attempts to demonstrate the capacity of good agricultural practices, such as the Keyline method, to reduce CO₂ emissions. If these practices were widely adopted, the benefits to ecologies such as reef systems could be far-reaching.

Artists and farmers come together

The historical background to the sugar industry and the impact of sugarcane farming on the Great Barrier Reef sets the scene for our immersion as artists in this complex terrain of agriculture, politics and environmental management. In 2016 we began working with farmers and other collaborators to activate dialogues about alternative farming practices. In September 2016, we travelled to Mackay in Central Queensland and lived in the community for two months, instigating meetings and responding to the many connections provided by John Sweet. Sweet is passionate about a healthy environment and a healthy society. He has a particular vision that he has enlisted our help with: to ‘fix’ the Great Barrier Reef through regenerative agriculture. Sweet’s extensive networks in both the farming and the wider communities opened doors for us. We met with politicians and sugar industry officials, reef scientists and soil scientists, civic and cultural leaders, environmental activists and the townspeople of Mackay. By following Sweet’s leads, we built momentum for a number of different activities, which all have their origins in the idea of agricultural transformation. Living in the Mackay community gave us the opportunity to get to know ‘the territory’ and to make ourselves known. Meetings with industry stakeholders, politicians, scientists, environmentalists and other farmers were part of a busy schedule of activities, which put us into the picture as artists who were working in the area of agriculture and its relationship to the Great Barrier Reef (*Sugar vs the Reef?* blog, 13 October 2016 and 23 March 2017). We were sympathetic to farmers—the financial predicament of many sugarcane farmers who are locked in a cycle of debt cannot be separated from the high rates of suicide in the

farming community. Rather than taking an oppositional position to sugarcane farming (World Wildlife Fund 2015), we worked to articulate more nuanced views of agriculture by collaborating with farmers and highlighting the positive environmental benefits of regenerative agriculture.

Travelling back and forth from Wollongong to Mackay, we sustained our engagement over three and a half years. In order to amplify the benefits of regenerative agriculture—to the soil, to the sustainability of agriculture, to human health, to waterways, to the Great Barrier Reef and ultimately to the changing climate—we learned about the sugar industry and its issues, formed relationships with people, and co-created ‘interventions’, utilising both social and artistic skills.

Making connections and joining forces

Sugar vs the Reef? is an art project that is entirely dependent on co-operation and exchange between people. It evolved organically through the circumstances and opportunities that arose ‘on the ground’. Working alongside Sweet and Mattsson, we brought attention to alternative practices that build healthy soil and reduce the need for synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. To extend Mattsson’s and others’ work, we circulated in their world and engaged in a wide spectrum of activities: staging cultural events, facilitating community planting days, meeting with reef scientists and policy makers, touring farms, liaising with local organisations and lobbying politicians. We developed close working and personal relationships with a core group of people. Cultural connectors (John and Christene Sweet), farmers (Simon and Susie Mattsson, Allan and Liz McLean, Michael and John Attard), Australian South Sea Islanders (Starrett Vea Vea and Jemal Davis), Yuwibara Aboriginal elders (Phillip Kemp, Deb Netuschil, George and Robyn Tonga), natural resource managers and educators (Kellie Galletly, Kate Finch, Tegan McBride) and media producers (Cherrie Hughes and Jac Koetze) became central to our engagement and reach within the community of Mackay.



3.8 Some of our colleagues in Mackay

(L-R, top to bottom): John Sweet, Christene Sweet, Simon Mattsson, Susie Mattsson, Starrett Veave, Kellie Galletly, Uncle George Tonga, Aunty Deb Netuschil, Uncle Phillip Kemp, Kate Finch, Jemal Davis, Tegan McBride, Allan McLean, Cherrie Hughes, Michael Attard

As artists we were many things; organisers, conduits, catalysts, facilitators, designers, listeners, submission writers. Operating the project through the auspices of the university, our academic credentials also provided leverage in many circumstances (Ihle et al. 2018). We shaped the *Sugar vs the Reef?* project in ways that to us constitute a socially engaged art practice, while at the same time bringing together a range of disciplines in particular formations which enable the work of regenerative agricultural practitioners to be highlighted, promoted and celebrated in a public realm through collaborative engagement.

Farmers as innovators: the ground beneath our feet

Over many decades, soil health and crop yields on most sugarcane farms have robbed the soil of its 'biology', the microorganisms necessary to delivering nutrients to plants and maximising water retention. Can we learn from the microbial communities that nourish the food that nourishes us? Could we base our decisions on this fundamental link—that in order to best nourish life itself, we must keep the system that supports life healthy? Simon

Mattsson knows a great deal about soil. He regularly attends conferences and symposia, and presented a talk on soil health at the United Nations Environment Assembly in March 2019 (Nairobi, Kenya). Mattsson is a communicator and educator, naturally at ease with public speaking and skilled in simplifying complex science to the layperson. He founded the Central Queensland Soil Health Systems organisation, a group of like-minded farmers in the Mackay district who are dedicated not only to developing and refining their own regenerative agricultural practices, but also to sharing their knowledge and continuing their own education with Soil Health Field Days and other events. He and his colleagues know that healthy soil is fundamental to sustainable agriculture.

At the same time as using conventional sugarcane farming methods, Mattsson has experimented with different plant species on his sugarcane farm, with a view to improving his soil. His experiments attempt to maximise crop yield while working towards more environmentally sensitive practices (Mattsson 2016b). Mattsson now cycles his soil through a range of plants to put nutrients back into the soil. Doing so increases soil carbon and moisture holding capacity and creates a better environment for healthy soil microbes. Healthy soil produces healthy crops, requiring less in the way of synthetic pesticides and fertilisers. This is a key tenet of regenerative agriculture. Mattsson outlines the five key principles of regenerative agriculture:

1. Maximise plant diversity for maximum potential biological influence.
2. Maintain organic cover on the surface to protect from erosion and to regulate temperature, providing the biological community with a more even climate.
3. Always keep a living root in the soil—biology needs living roots and living roots need biology.
4. Minimise soil disturbance, apart from animal impact.
5. Incorporate animals into the system—grazing animals are essential for plant regeneration systems. (Mattsson 2019)



3.9 Simon Mattsson on his farm, standing in a dual crop of sugarcane and sunflowers
(Photo: Summer Rain)

In 2015, Mattsson's experiments also led to dual cropping of sunflowers and sugarcane, planted in alternating rows. From an agricultural perspective, these two plants are good companions: the sunflowers grow quickly, shading the soil from weeds. Once they reach maturity, the sunflowers can be harvested without damaging the sugarcane. The remaining sunflower stalks can then be utilised as mulch, further enhancing the soil biology and helping to retain moisture for the sugarcane to thrive with fewer chemical additives than would otherwise be needed to maximise yield and sugar content in the cane. Mattsson is passionate about the role of agriculture and food production in society, looking for ways to transmit agricultural knowledge across the broader community. For Mattsson, growing sunflowers with sugarcane led to an unexpected outcome, as the cultural value of sunflowers emerged. Sunflowers are eye-catching; people began visiting the farms to take photographs and Mattsson quickly saw their appeal as a tourist attraction. Recognising the opportunity to engage the public in the story of soil health, he organised a small event in 2015, *Sunset in the Sunflowers*, which had a positive response. Framed around an agricultural method, this event inspired the next stage of our work.

Art as embodied experience

Through numerous meetings and conversations with our farmer collaborators, we began to see how we, as artists, might work at the intersection of art and agriculture to demonstrate these innovative farming practices in public spaces. To do so, we used a range of methods that are considered ‘fringe’ by many farmers in Mackay, yet are slowly gaining traction (ABC News 2019a) as climate change and sustainability increasingly factor into the public conversation. Working with our colleagues in Mackay, we designed artworks that brought agricultural methods to light through participatory cultural events. The public, celebratory nature of these artworks and events offered audiences and participants tangible, meaningful experiences of regenerative agriculture in action. In turn, they helped to shape public opinion and paved the way for these methods to attract broader uptake.

Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers

Mackay is a city surrounded by farms, yet much of the population of this region has little connection to or in-depth knowledge of agriculture. Only 2.2% of Australia’s workforce now works in agricultural industries (Binks et al. 2018, 2). While the cycles of sugar production and processing are obvious markers in the calendar—bare paddocks, paddocks full of mature cane, harvesting machinery, passing cane trains, the sweet smell from the ‘crush’ at the sugar mills during harvest time—the fundamentals of agriculture are largely lost to a community that derives significant employment from mining and related industries.

Following from Mattsson’s *Sunset in the Sunflowers* event, we joined forces to organise a major cultural event on his farm in 2017. We designed the space—a large circular amphitheatre carved into a multispecies crop of sunflowers and sugarcane—to bring visitors into a space surrounded by blooming sunflowers. The event organisation took several months and involved all the logistics of any major outdoor cultural event: ticketing, public transport, equipment hire, publicity, documentation, booking of performers and guest speakers, catering, staffing, safety, hygiene. Largely organised over the phone, through video conferencing and around the farm table, the event was planned not only to be an enjoyable cultural event on a working farm, but also as an educational platform, offering the embodied experience of regenerative agriculture. In addition to the sculptural work of

‘carving’ the amphitheatre, we designed and built composting toilets on-site, in the interests of building healthy soil. The ‘making’ of this event as a large work of land art is discussed in Chapter 8.



3.10 *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, July 2017, Mackay
(Photo: Jac Kotze/Flow Motion Media)

Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers was held on 30 July 2017. Yuwibara elder Veronica Ah-Wang offered a Welcome to Country, followed by a symphony orchestra, a jazz band, and a South Sea Islander dance troupe, who entertained the audience while they enjoyed locally sourced food and drink. The event provided a backdrop for Mattsson to talk about soil health. We screened a video documentary that was in production at the time of the event. It was shown strategically at sunset, when the sky was dark enough and after the guests had been entertained and fed. The documentary was well received by the audience and continues to resonate through online platforms (see Portfolio).

This event was the beginning of our efforts to gain a broader reach, beyond the farming community, to connect members of the public to regenerative agriculture being practised on their doorstep. *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* demonstrated the benefits of the collaboration and knowledge exchange so central to *Sugar vs the Reef?* The knowledge we gained about farming and soil enabled us to contribute meaningfully to activities that lead to ground-up, rather than top-down shifts in agricultural practices. We offered the audience

an embodied cultural experience by bringing them into the midst of a crop to tell the story of regenerative agriculture.



3.11 *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, July 2017, Mackay
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

The next stage of the *Sugar vs the Reef?* project unfolded when Ihlein proposed a work of ‘land art’ to the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens: a large circular multispecies crop of sunflowers and sugarcane—a sculpture made from living plants that would be grown in successive cycles. The project was named *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* and the agricultural site became known as ‘The Beacon’. This positive circular shape was a deliberate echo of the negative circular space created by carving an amphitheatre in a crop for *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, forging a formal relationship between the two sites. The Botanic Gardens would work as a site for public cultural/agricultural events over 20 months, extending the public engagement that began with *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* in an accessible public setting.

An interlude: art meets agriculture



3.12 Agnes Denes, 1982, *Wheatfield—a Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill*

The idea of growing a crop in an unlikely space echoes earlier works of agricultural land art. In 1982, Agnes Denes grew two acres of wheat in lower Manhattan (*Wheatfield—a Confrontation: Battery Park Landfill*), bringing in two hundred truckloads of soil and cultivating, planting and harvesting the crop by hand with a small group of volunteers. Subsequently, the harvested crop was exhibited in many countries and the seeds were distributed to exhibition attendees. In 2005, Lauren Bon regenerated an old industrial site in Los Angeles by trucking in soil and planting a million corn seeds (*Not a Cornfield*, 2005). These were high contrast projects, situating agriculture within an urban context.

Of *Wheatfield*, Denes says:

Manhattan is the richest, most professional, most congested and, without a doubt, most fascinating island in the world. To attempt to plant, sustain and harvest 2 acres of wheat here, wasting valuable real estate and obstructing the 'machinery' by going against the system, was an effrontery that made it the

powerful paradox I had sought for the calling to account. It was insane. It was impossible. But it did call people's attention to having to rethink their priorities and realize that unless human values were reassessed, the quality of life, even life itself, was in danger ... *Wheatfield* was a symbol, a universal concept ... (Denes 1982/2019)

Through this work, Denes made a political statement, invoking ideas of "food, energy, commerce, trade" while at the same time referencing "mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological concerns" (Denes, 1982/2019). As a work of 'land art', this work marks a radical departure from the masculine gestures of the earlier American land artists such as Michael Heizer and Robert Smithson, whose interventions in rural settings made permanent marks on those landscapes. Denes, on the other hand, created a temporary, site-specific work in an urban setting, shifting the idea of land art from the purely aesthetic gesture to a political gesture with an aesthetic impact. Like Denes' *Wheatfield*, the *Watershed Land Art Project* was a site-specific temporary work: an agricultural crop grown in a non-agricultural site as a way of drawing attention to its embodied ideas. Duration is important to both works, as crops are cultivated to grow, reach maturity and be harvested.

Duration is also a key condition of the Harrisons' project, *Sagehen: A Proving Ground* (2011-ongoing). In this work, the Harrisons use planting as a way of determining future outcomes for native species in a changing climate. The project was originally located in the Sierra Nevada mountains in California as an ecosystem adaptation experiment. It was subsequently moved to the University of California Santa Cruz Arboretum in 2018. Lucas Ihlein and I visited the Arboretum with Newton Harrison, where he showed us the second iteration of the *Sagehen* project. Three geodesic domes host specific Indigenous plant species, kept in controlled conditions to determine the ability of these species to adapt to three different climate change scenarios. One of the domes is set up under today's climatic conditions, one offers erratic climatic conditions and the third has heavy rainfall. The experiment aims to identify which plant species will best thrive in a changing climatic environment. These species could then be propagated to underpin local ecosystem adaptation in a future climate scenario. The Arboretum has committed their support to this as a fifty year experimental project (Harrison and Harrison 2019).



3.13 Lucas Ihlein and Newton Harrison standing in the *Future Garden for the Central Coast of California*, 2018
University of California Santa Cruz Arboretum (photo: Kim Williams)

In this work, the Harrisons demonstrate future ecological possibilities in a hybrid art/science experiment. Their work takes on a sculptural form that pays homage to architecture (the geodesic domes were designed by Buckminster Fuller), while functioning as a scientific testing ground that is accessible to the public. Our work in *Sugar vs the Reef?* functions somewhat differently: while *Sagehen: A Proving Ground* is located in a public setting, it functions as an artwork that is ‘exhibited’ to the public. We, on the other hand, contribute a new method to environmental dialogues in our socially engaged artwork. The *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* uses participatory public engagement to demonstrate and teach basic principles of applied soil science.

Watershed: The Botanic Gardens Land Art Project



3.14 Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein marking out the circular site for 'The Beacon' land art project, February 2018
Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens (photo: Jac Kotze/Flow Motion Media)

The *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* works in a similar vein to *Wheatfield* and *Not a Cornfield*—telling an agri/cultural story through a crop grown in an unlikely setting. While the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens grows many plant species from around the world, it is flanked by fields of sugarcane. A defining image of Mackay, and indeed many of the sugarcane growing regions of Queensland, is the solid walls of sugarcane. Their density and uniformity give the paddocks of cane the look of green sculptural 'blocks', bisected by roads. Mackay Airport is also bordered by canefields—it is hard for the interstate or international visitor to ignore the visual dominance of this monocultural crop. By contrast, a multispecies crop of sunflowers and sugarcane, grown in a circular shape in the Botanic Gardens, is strikingly different from the visual monotony of endless fields of sugarcane. It stands out from the diverse species of the Botanic Gardens through its sculptural, symmetrical shape.



3.15 'The Beacon', planted with legumes, April 2018
(Photo: Jac Kotze/Flow Motion Media)

After initial community meetings in January and February 2018, we began the cyclic process of planting and harvesting at 'The Beacon' using regenerative agriculture methods. We framed these plantings as living artworks, with careful consideration given to the sculptural forms of the crops and the shaping of the land, while at the same time demonstrating an entirely different approach to farming compared with what could be seen in nearby canefields. 'The Beacon' was both an artwork and a site for community participation, discussion, and cultural events designed to bring the many aspects of the agriculture and its cultural histories into focus. From March 2018 to October 2019, we staged a public agricultural process, inviting the community to participate in each of the planting and harvesting stages of a regenerative agriculture approach to cropping. We forged connections between the present-day sugarcane farmers and the local Australian South Sea Islander and Aboriginal communities. Over the course of the crop rotations, the past was acknowledged through the cultural activities surrounding the work, while the day-to-day agricultural processes were undertaken through a co-operative effort between Australian South Sea Islanders, Yuwibara elders, farmers, educators and artists.

The cycle of planting and harvesting



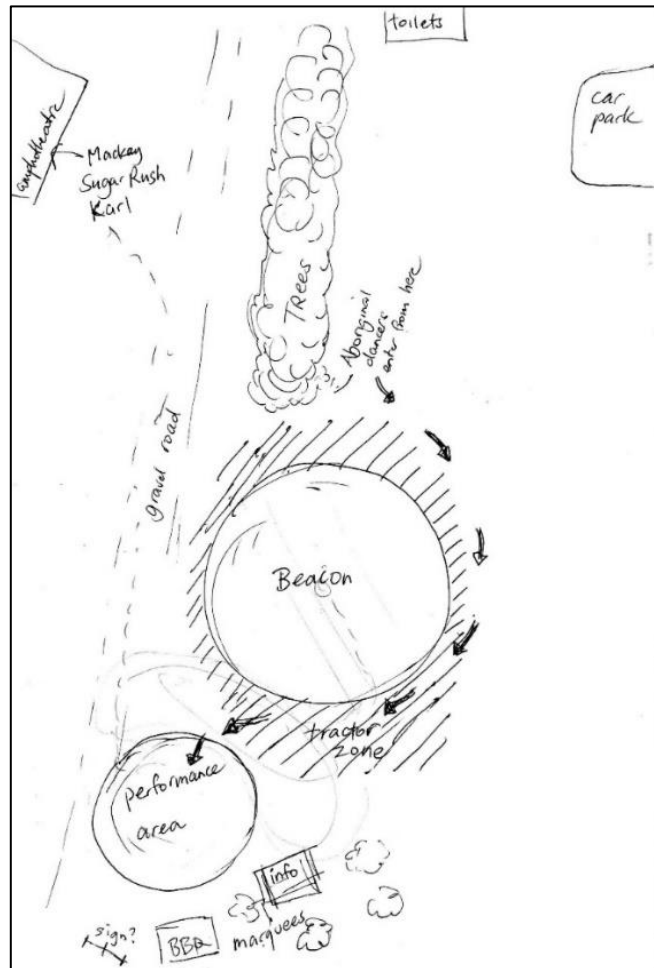
3.16 Lucas Ihlein with budding gardeners, community legume planting event in 'The Beacon', Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens, March 2018
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

March 2018: After preparing the site with some light tilling and natural inputs, we held the first community planting day. A range of legumes were planted to add nitrogen to the soil. Simon Mattsson explained the benefits and procedures to the participants, who then worked with the artists and farmers to plant the large circular site by hand. I wrote the first song in the cycle, 'The Legume Song' (see Portfolio), which the artists and participants sang together.

May 2018: The mixed legume crop reached maturity; the plants were ploughed back into the soil with a flail mulcher by colleagues in Mackay, in readiness for the planting of a winter cover crop, which was subsequently slashed in readiness for the planting of the key crops, sunflowers and sugarcane.

August 2018: We staged a major agricultural/cultural event, *Seed and Song*, at 'The Beacon'. The community planting of sunflowers and sugarcane brought the Yuwibara traditional

owners and the Australian South Sea Islander community into the space, with a Welcome to Country, talks by elders and dance performances from both groups to precede the planting. Artists and audience sang the second song in the cycle, 'The Planting Song' (see Portfolio). Uncle Doug Mooney led the cane planting process, 'the old way' and the audience then participated in the planting of the sunflowers (see video documentation in Portfolio).



3.17 Kim Williams, Site plan, *Seed and Song* planting event, 2018



3.18 Uncle Doug Mooney and Kellie Galletly working the cane planter, *Seed and Song*, August 2018
(Photo: Robert Bole)



3.19 *Seed and Song*, Community planting of sunflowers and sugarcane at 'The Beacon', August 2018
(Photo: Robert Bole).

September/October 2018: The fast-growing sunflowers drew members of the public to 'The Beacon', which they often passed on their daily walks in the Botanic Gardens. Sugarcane and sunflowers, planted in alternate rows, grow well as companions. The sunflowers

reached maturity in two months, growing quickly over the top of the sugarcane, shading out weeds and helping to hold moisture in the soil.



3.20 'The Beacon', November 2018, a week prior to the *Sunflower and Song* harvest event
(Photo: Willem Reichard)

October 2018: The exhibition *Sugar vs the Reef?* opened at Mackay's regional gallery, *Artspace*. Farmers, Yuwibara custodians and Australian South Sea Islanders joined the art crowd. Artist talks at the Gallery and at 'The Beacon' joined the agricultural and the art community across both sites.



3.21 Sunflowers coming in to bloom at 'The Beacon', November 2018
(Photo: Kim Williams)

November 2018: The penultimate event of the agricultural cycle, *Sunflower and Song*, once again brought farmers, Australian South Sea Islanders, Yuwibara custodians and members of the public together in a major cultural event, where the ritual harvest of the sunflowers was accompanied by performances, educational videos and talks. The event crossed day and evening, beginning with a smoking ceremony by Uncle George Tonga. This was followed by stories and dances by the Diranga Gangali Aboriginal Dance group. Artists and audience sang the third song in the cycle, 'The Harvest Song'. As the sun set, the sunflower harvest commenced, with farmers harvesting the flowers and children passing the flowers to the audience. The harvest was followed by a performance by the Sakwolo Islander Dancers, short talks on soil health and environmental management, video screenings and live music (see video documentation of event in Portfolio).



3.22 The evening harvest at the *Sunflower and Song* harvest event, Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens, November 2018
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Once the sunflowers were harvested and the remaining stalks knocked over to provide mulch for the soil, the sugarcane was then able to access more direct sunlight and go through its own natural growth cycle over the following year.

October 2019: The sugarcane harvest was the final ‘event’ of the agricultural cycle. Titled *Old Ways, New Ways*, this phase of the project brought members of the Italian and Maltese communities into the project to join together with the Australian South Sea Islander and Yuwibara Aboriginal communities. As successive generations of Australian South Sea Islander, Maltese and Italian communities were foundational to cane farming in Mackay, we brought these communities together to celebrate their connections. They demonstrated cutting the cane by hand, ‘the old way’, in a practice that demonstrated the capacity of regenerative agriculture to build chemical-free, healthy soil, ‘the new way’. Artists and audience sang the final song in the cycle, ‘The Harvest Tarantella’ (see Portfolio). Prior to the event, young members of these communities interviewed their parents and grandparents in a video of early cane farming stories, shown at sundown during the event.



3.23 Demonstrating cane-cutting by hand 'the old way', using a cane knife, *Old Ways New Ways sugarcane harvest event* at 'The Beacon', October 2019
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

November 2019 onwards: The sugarcane harvest brought the agricultural cycle to a close and the site was returned to the custodianship of the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens, at their request. As the many groups involved in the project expressed interest in 'The Beacon' as an ongoing cultural/agricultural site, we began negotiations with the Botanic Gardens staff to relocate 'The Beacon' close to the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander meeting hut, where the Australian South Sea Islander community could establish a cross-cultural agricultural meeting place.

The *Watershed Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* has both contributed to improved environmental outcomes and expanded the boundaries of socially engaged art. The project provided a physical site ('The Beacon') for numerous activities to promote understanding of better environmental practices, reaching both young and old. Yet through these cycles of planting and harvesting, our work expanded beyond the borders of the site into the realms of negotiation and advocacy.



3.24 Enjoying a 'pot luck' dinner during the *Old Ways, New Ways* sugarcane harvest event, October 2019
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Educating through demonstration—a proposal

As the Queensland State Government considers regulating cane farming practices to mitigate run-off impacts on the Great Barrier Reef (ABC News 2019b), we continued to build a public profile for regenerative agriculture. In January 2019, our farmer colleague John Sweet brought Federal MP for Mackay George Christensen and State Member for Mirani, Stephen Andrew, to 'The Beacon' to show evidence of sustainable sugarcane farming practices. Subsequently, Stephen Andrew made a representation to Queensland Parliament on behalf of farmers practising regenerative agriculture (August 2019). He was accompanied by Mackay sugarcane farming brothers John and Michael Attard, two of our colleagues in the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*. The Attard brothers delivered a presentation in Parliament on their biological farming practices. Between our work with farmers and tighter government regulations, we hope that there will be a broader uptake of farming methods that will build not only healthier soil, but also a healthier community and a healthier Great Barrier Reef.

I have presented a linear story of our collaborations with Sweet and Mattsson, but there are many other strands that are important to the larger context of this work. On one of our early visits to Mackay, in September 2016, Simon Mattsson, John Sweet, Lucas Ihlein and I held a meeting. The idea of a Demonstration Farm emerged. Demonstration Farms are one form of peer-to-peer learning (Bellotti and Rochecouste 2014) that expands on the work that Mattsson was already doing with his farmer group, Central Queensland Soil Health Systems. Mattsson sees a future for himself as an educator as well as farmer; his dedication to research and development in regenerative agriculture paves the way for a Demonstration Farm on his property. Done properly and given adequate resources, a facility like this would enable sanctioned research and development of regenerative agriculture methods and provide a bona fide platform for farmers, soil biologists and educators to extend the principles of regenerative agriculture to not only the farming community but also the broader public.

Together we wrote a submission and met with the local State Member of Parliament, Jim Pearce. Following up, we lobbied local Federal M.P. George Christensen in March 2017 and met with staff from Central Queensland University to discuss a potential partnership. Soon after, the Federal Government allocated \$444 million to the Great Barrier Reef Foundation to 'fix' water quality in the Great Barrier Reef. We believed that farmers practising regenerative agriculture were in an ideal position to take up funding, as their methods reduce chemical run-off to the Coral Sea, improving coral resilience. Our colleagues in Mackay advocated for a Demonstration Farm, but at this stage the project remains unfunded. It is a long-term vision that requires substantial resources to establish (see portfolio for architectural model). It may or may not be realised. As an alternative, I subsequently conceived of a Farmer-to-Farmer mentoring program that is more flexible and less expensive than a purpose-built Demonstration Farm, but would achieve similar educational outcomes:

FARMER-TO-FARMER MENTORING PROGRAM

Kim Williams

Steps:

1. Farmers and Mentor Farmers nominate themselves for the program
2. Farmer is linked with a Mentor Farmer
3. Farmer dedicates a portion of their own land for trial
4. Farmer works on their own land with Mentor Farmer to prepare and plant trial crops using regenerative agricultural principles

How does it work?

- a) Each region has a pool of local Mentor Farmers
- b) Farmer and Mentor are both funded for the trial: farmer gets equivalent of what they would earn from a conventional crop in order to fund the work; mentor farmer is paid on an hourly basis
- c) An agreement is made for a minimum time period for trial (with opt-out clause)
- d) Soil and carbon testing is done before, during and after trial
- e) If trial is successful the trainee farmer can become a mentor themselves
- f) Mentors can 'tag-team'; multiple mentors can work as advisers on any one farm

Advantages:

- Learning occurs 'hands-on' on farmer's own land
- Farmer has 'buy-in' and participates in the process from beginning to end
- Farmer has support to deal with issues that arise
- They receive encouragement and advice from their mentor in situ
- This 'mobile' model would require far less start-up funding than a conventional demonstration farm
- Farmers and Mentors can be matched based on proximity to each other
- Trial farmer could be part of educational Soil Health Field Days across the district
- Mentor system can be scaled up as knowledge is passed on

3.25 Kim Williams, 2019, *Farmer-to-Farmer Mentoring Program*

My experience working within the social milieu of the sugarcane industry enabled me to conceive of this mentoring model. It is a socially-engaged-art infused response to an environmental problem.

Working across disciplines to make things happen

Sugar vs the Reef? attempts to create a bridge between the two worlds of socially engaged art and farming. While some of our activities, such as the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*, have an obvious cycle, from successive planting and harvesting events over eighteen months, our work in Mackay could hypothetically continue into the future. There is a great deal of work to be done that may benefit from our input, both as artists and as scholars. Lucas Ihlein reflects on his role as an artist/interlocutor in this space:

The method of socially-engaged art employed by the project shuttles between the outcomes-focused priorities of environmental management on the one hand, and the deliberately non-instrumental ethics of the environmental humanities on the other. Socially engaged artists do this by embracing our own disciplinary ambiguity. Our way of working allows practical experiments in the field (such as collaborations with farmers and engineers working with the materiality of plants and soil) to co-exist with unresolvable philosophical, ethical and aesthetic discussions. (Ihlein and Williams 2016, 17)

The practical activities we undertake ‘in the field’ translate across environments, into exhibitions and into the academy (Ihlein et al. 2018). As artists, we see this mobility across contexts as mutually beneficial: scholarly discourse and gallery-based art practice support and amplify the work we do ‘in the field’, which in turn expands the definitions of art and allows us to contribute to both environmental and creative scholarship.

We work with farmers to explore the intersections of culture and agriculture, to amplify environmental innovation and to stretch the definitions of art practice by working in an agricultural space. Simon Mattsson and John Sweet both recognise the value in collaborating with artists who come from outside the area to ‘make things happen’. Their

ideas were augmented through our negotiation skills and our ability to bring agricultural practices into the public realm. To this end, the artists and farmers formed a symbiotic relationship. Often we were asked why we, as artists, were working in this sphere. We responded by explaining the expanded role of contemporary artists, as people who work within communities on particular issues as well as people who produce ‘things’ for exhibition.

Working with Mattsson and Sweet also involved learning the basic principles of sugarcane farming, soil biology, and alternative farming methods. Access to their knowledge was crucial to our ability to engage with people from the worlds of agriculture and reef management. Mattsson spent many hours patiently explaining aspects of farming and soil science to us. Armed with this information we more readily engaged in discussion with people who could in turn further advance our knowledge. Mattsson enthusiastically supported the strategies we used to increase awareness and knowledge of regenerative farming practices in the public arena. There is always risk in innovation, particularly for farmers who are living on credit. Mattsson is taking a risk, as are other farmers in the region who are experimenting with various ways of making sugarcane farming more sustainable. Whether this experimentation is for altruistic or economic reasons for the farmer was of little concern to us—we promoted these practices as having an environmental benefit for all.

Sugar vs the Reef? began with an invitation and proceeded with an attitude of exploration and a desire to contribute to environmental discourse. It is a robustly ‘hands-on’ project of negotiation and advocacy. As artists working within a local community, we looked at the complexities of sugarcane farming on the Great Barrier Reef coastline, shone a light on specific issues, entered into discussion with people, and with them explored ways of responding to those issues.

In the unfolding of this project since 2016, we attended dozens of meetings with people from the worlds of farming, industry, natural resource management, science, politics, education and activism. We built ongoing working and personal relationships with farming families, Indigenous custodians, Australian South Sea Islanders and other community

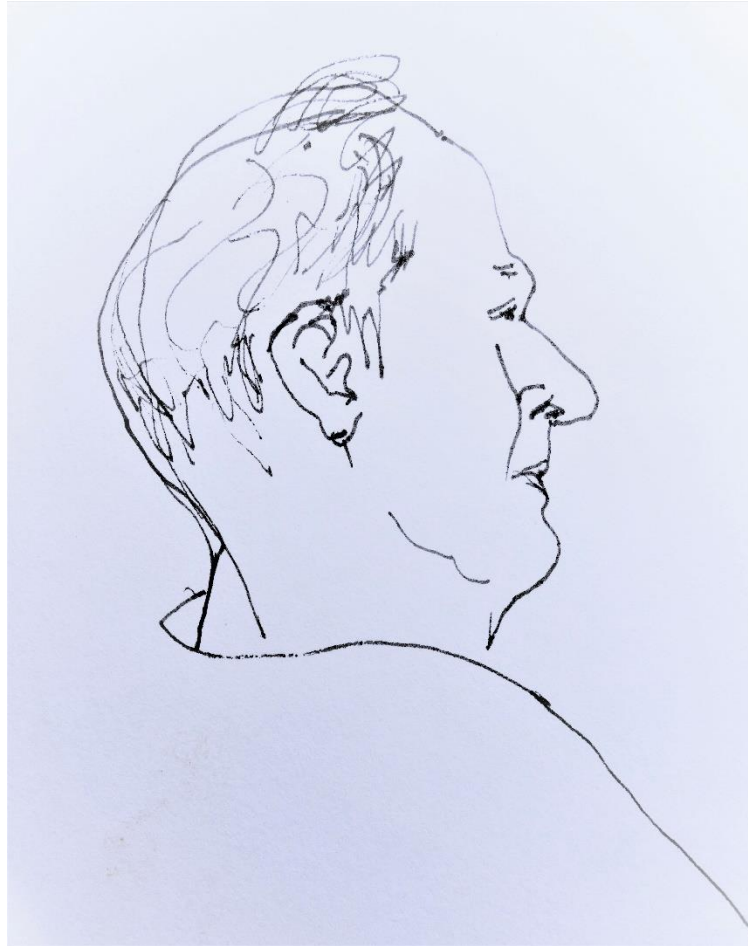
members. We staged performances, held planting and harvesting events and a major exhibition, and gave public talks and interviews on radio, newspaper and television. We made posters, banners, booklets, composting toilets, works of botanical land art. We grew crops, recorded music, and made videos and artworks for exhibition. Some of these activities are discussed in following chapters, through key methods of *Talking*, *Connecting* and *Making*. These methods came out of the relational experiences of working ‘on the ground’, through a mediation between process and product. The work has helped to educate the general public in better ways of practising agriculture. Through our collaborative activities, we have helped to put regenerative agricultural on the map in Mackay. Our local networks and advocates, particularly John Sweet, worked tirelessly to bring our work to the attention of decision-makers and the media, reflecting a ‘bottom-up’ approach to change. As a result, environmental discourses surrounding better environmental practices have been amplified through advocacy by local politicians in Parliament and through increasing traction in the popular press. The following chapter discusses the key strategy of *talking* in our work, identifying some of the ways in which environmental dialogues are activated through the methods of socially engaged art.



3.26 Stages of ‘The Beacon’ from February to November 2018

Marking out, mulching, planting legumes, fully grown legumes, planting sugarcane and sunflowers, sunflowers growing, sunflowers at full height, after sunflower harvest. (Aerial photos: Jac Koetze and Willem Reichard)

Chapter 4: Talking



4.1 Kim Williams, 2016, sketch of farmer Rudy Mattsson
Pen on paper

19th March 2017: *Over the past week in Mackay we had meetings with the Mayor; the Australian South Sea Islander community; Federal MP George Christensen; Kate Finch from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority; the Director of the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens; our Event Manager Kim Kleidon; Regional Arts Development Officer Fiona Vuibeqa, and Yuwibara traditional owners George and Robyn Tonga.*

We went to meet the Mayor unprepared, having been told that he was easygoing. Instead, he was a time-pressured official who needed a dot-point agenda from us. The meeting was short and disappointing. Surprisingly, George Christensen had more time for us than the Mayor; he was polite and listened carefully to what we had to say. In his own way, he was

quite helpful, offering us some contacts to follow up. Nevertheless, we had to stay focused on our agenda and be mindful of his busy schedule.

Our meeting with Yuwibara elders George and Robyn Tonga was much more relaxed. There was no hurry—we talked for nearly two hours. We allowed the meeting to flow on, because that was the right thing to do. They yarned with us, telling us old stories. We were able to make comments and jokes and ask questions freely without the fear of going off-message. But we had to take the time to listen.

Dialogue

Art historian Grant Kester's preferred term for socially engaged art is 'dialogic' art, emphasising the centrality of talking to this field of practice. Our works would not exist without dialogue. 'Dialogue' is a conversation between two or more people, where listening is part of the exchange. The 'craft' of dialogue involves creating the conditions for talking and listening, holding tension and not trying to resolve it. This chapter discusses the foundational methods of talking and listening, as ways of building socially engaged art projects. Talking and listening in our work comes in many forms, in both formal and informal settings: meetings, negotiations, advocacy, problem solving, relationship building, inclusion, teaching and learning, planning, public speaking, and day-to-day communication. It is only by taking the time to talk and listen that relationships can develop to the point where collaborative action can occur.

In this chapter I highlight the functions of dialogue in socially engaged art through a focus on the *Sugar vs the Reef?* project. I look at ways in which, as artists, we became immersed in communities and brought issues to light by learning the language of the territory in which we were operating. This enabled us to become credible partners in a complex environment. I discuss the ways in which we enabled conversation to 'drift' across boundaries in order to reach different sectors of the public and how situated dialogue worked to bring communities together. I also return to the work of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison (the Harrisons), Suzanne Lacy and WochenKlausur to more closely examine ways in which they utilise dialogue in their art practices.

Finally, I discuss how gender bias in the social contexts both surrounding and within this project impacted my 'voice' and how I eventually negotiated a way of working within the

male-dominated sphere of agriculture. I argue that, through dialogue across disciplines, artists play a critical role in complex environmental projects. In other words, the dialogic methods of socially engaged art enable artists to insert themselves into negotiations and conversations to offer new insights and approaches to environmental problems. The many situations in which human interactions take place in *Sugar vs the Reef?* contribute living examples to the field of knowledge of socially engaged art.

Dialogue as method—talking and listening

Sugar vs the Reef? began with a phone call and a belief that a shift in agricultural practices could bring about large-scale environmental transformation. While our advocacy for improved agricultural practices is evident through the many public agricultural events we have staged for *Sugar vs the Reef?*, we began as newcomers to the world of sugarcane farming and natural resource management. My first sustained period in Mackay occurred in late 2016, when Lucas Ihlein and I spent two months living in the town. By living in the community and inserting ourselves into the farming and resource management worlds, we were able to begin an open-ended process of engagement to ‘learn’ the territory we had entered. We did this by talking, asking questions and listening. In an academic context, this could be defined as ‘field research’, in which we enter as outsiders into a world we wish to learn about and become familiar with (Chugtai and Myers 2017).

Working by invitation

Importantly for us, our point of entrance for *Sugar vs the Reef?* was an invitation by John Sweet. It was Sweet’s strongly-held convictions and his extensive networks in the agricultural and natural resource management spheres that propelled us to visit Queensland. Having already seen the work that Ihlein and Ian Milliss had done for *The Yeomans Project* (2011-13), Sweet believed that artists could offer new ways of approaching the agricultural problems in the sugarcane industry and, by extension, the problems in the Great Barrier Reef.



4.2 Central Queensland Soil Health Systems soil health field day—artists talking with farmers Lucas Ihlein, Kim Williams and farmers amongst a multispecies crop of sugarcane and legumes, Mackay, Queensland, 2016 (Photo: Laura Fisher)

‘Working by invitation’ is a condition of engagement for Helen Mayer Harrison (1927-2018) and Newton Harrison (b.1932) in their many projects around the world:

Typically, they agree to go to such a place to see, think, speak, research and engage a broad spectrum of people and groups ... The agenda is created by the artists in discourse with the larger community. Thus, the Harrisons see themselves simultaneously as guests and co-workers. They stay only as long as the invitation continues, or until they deem that they have done all that is possible for them to do. (Harrison and Harrison 2019)

The Harrisons serve as role models for our own work. An invitation legitimises our presence as artists who come from outside the focus community or site. It also sets up the conditions for respectful relationships: an invitation implies that you are worthy of being invited, that you may have something to offer and that you are welcome. John Sweet’s invitation offered a point of entry. From that point he became our local ‘broker’, providing many connections and introductions to people he thought we should meet. This experience contrasts with

other projects I have been involved in, where I have entered communities via projects run by arts organisations within local councils. *Bellambi Safe Streets Project* (2002-05) was one such work in which artists were employed to work with specific communities to increase ‘public amenity’ through participatory artmaking. In this case, I was employed by the Department of Housing and Wollongong City Council to lead a team of artists, working with residents of a public housing estate. Although well-intentioned, this top-down approach meant that our presence was not always welcome in what was generally regarded as a ‘disadvantaged community’. By contrast, the project *Sugar vs the Reef?* was allowed to develop through a ‘grassroots’ set of connections that offered us introductions to a broad range of people in the farming and natural resource management spheres.



4.3 Farmer Simon Mattsson, community activist John Sweet, Kim Williams, Kate Finch from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and Lucas Ihlein, 2018
(Photo: selfie by Lucas Ihlein)

The first step for us, upon arriving in Mackay, Queensland, was to ‘learn’ the territory in which we were operating. That process began by living for a period in the community, meeting with farmers, scientists, community leaders and natural resource managers, attending agricultural field days and events, visiting farms and sugar mills and shaking hands

with anyone whom John Sweet thought we should meet. Through these encounters we developed knowledge of the sugar industry, of regenerative agriculture and soil biology and of the complex politics surrounding land-based practices and their impact on the Great Barrier Reef. According to Pablo Helguera, “socially engaged art-making crosses overtly into other disciplines and tries to influence the public sphere in its language and processes” (2011, xv). Learning the ‘language’ of the worlds we entered, through conversation, in turn enabled us to insert ourselves into this world as credible interlocutors. We began using that language and knowledge in the context of our own work, working with farming collaborators to create hybrid cultural and agricultural forms to offer the public experiences of sustainable agriculture. This work in turn supported and built on our art practice, as artists working in an environmental context through socially engaged art.



4.4 The artists giving a ‘shed talk’ at Central Queensland Soil Health Systems soil health field day, September 2016
(Photo: Laura Fisher)

Holding tension

In late 2016 Ihlein negotiated with the Director of the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens to create a work of agricultural 'land art' in the Gardens, called the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*, discussed in the previous chapter. The Director consented to the proposal, agreeing that it met many of the Gardens' public education and engagement objectives. Soon after, we received a strongly-worded email from the chairperson of a volunteer group, the Friends of the Botanic Gardens, who were upset at not being consulted by the Botanic Gardens staff before the project was signed off. The Friends fundamentally disagreed with our proposal, citing a number of environmental issues that they believed a sugarcane crop would present. Understandably, they had a sense of ownership of the Gardens, as some of the older members had helped to found the Gardens in 2003. They had firm views about what was acceptable practice in a Botanic Garden.

Prior to this turn of events, we had only vague knowledge of the group. While the director held firm and maintained his support for the *Watershed* project, the Friends maintained their opposition. Our efforts to connect with them were rebuffed. We invited them to a meeting with us at the Botanic Gardens, but no-one attended. Our frustration lay in *not* having the opportunity to talk with the Friends of the Botanic Gardens. We felt sure that, through dialogue, we could discuss our rationale and demonstrate the value of our work. This was not to be. The project subsequently moved through two years of preparation, plantings, harvestings and cultural events, validating environmentally sustainable agricultural methods. We still do not know what the Friends think about this.

Coming from outside the community, we were not familiar with the social hierarchy at the Botanic Gardens. Placing oneself in a situation of potential conflict and difficulty is part of relationship-building in our work. These missteps cannot always be avoided. In her discussion of *The Yeomans Project* and *Sugar vs the Reef?*, sociologist Laura Fisher writes:

While *The Yeomans Project* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* are strongly motivated by a concern with environmental problems, the terrain in which they stage their practice is social. Most of us won't risk engaging with the social and political frictions that are at play in this terrain, because we feel vulnerable to

aggression, exclusion and embarrassment. For the artists however, the shared experience of such interpersonal risks is potentially very productive.

(Fisher 2017, 112)

A challenge for this kind of social practice is to resist the temptation to resolve all tensions. There is no single answer to the many competing factors at play in Mackay. Our approach has been to navigate through the tensions that are apparent in this region, in an attempt to open up opportunities and dialogue around regenerative agriculture. This has sometimes involved putting our own personal political views aside, in order to negotiate with people in positions of power, such as conservative Federal Member for Mackay George Christensen. While his views on certain issues such as coal mining, climate change and gun control are squarely at odds with our own, he is a strong supporter of farming in the region. Consequently, we have been able to talk with him about regenerative farming and advocate for the expansion of these practices.



4.5 Simon Mattsson, Lucas Ihlein, John Sweet and Kim Williams meet with Federal MP George Christensen in his Mackay office, March 2017
(George Christensen at centre, photo: George's dad)

There are many competing ideologies in Mackay. There are those who vigorously defend coal mining, as it means jobs for locals. There are those who actively campaign against coal mining for its adverse environmental impacts. There are those who strongly defend chemical-dependent farming practices. For others, human and ecological health can only be attained through organic farming methods. Then there are the additional complexities of the impacts of human practices on the Great Barrier Reef: tourism (which needs a healthy Reef, tourist infrastructure and commercial access to dive sites); commercial fishers (who need to catch as many fish as possible within commercial limits); coal export (which needs port terminals and shipping channels dredged through the Reef); coal mining (which emits greenhouse gases that raise sea surface temperatures, causing coral mortality); and farming (which produces sedimentary and chemical run-off that weakens coral populations). All of these practices impact the Great Barrier Reef (which needs stable sea temperatures and clean water for a thriving marine ecosystem).

Conversational drift

How do we, as artists, talk about these ‘big’ environmental problems? We do this by slowly building a community and by creating situations in which to talk about ideas. We have done this by staging public events ‘on-site’ as a direct way of demonstrating principles of regenerative agriculture. Moving between the work ‘on the ground’ and the gallery has drawn different audiences into contact with our work (Williams 2019b). For the 2018-19 exhibition *Sugar vs the Reef?* at Artspace Mackay, we made a body of artworks that built a picture of the world we are engaging with in Mackay. The works ranged from documentary videos, aerial photographs, intimate botanical drawings and objects, to maps and diagrams. In this exhibition we opened up dialogue across the broader community by outlining problems and solutions through diagrammatic representations of the ‘big problems’, discussed later in this section.

The Harrisons coined the phrase ‘conversational drift’ to describe the effect of storytelling through diagrams and maps in their negotiations with officials. For them, the ways that ideas are presented shape perceptions and open the space for dialogue:

When we get up and tell stories to the Croatian Water Department, the storytelling is what causes the conversational drift. After we've told our stories, those government officials see our images differently. The conversation drifts and the idea of purifying the whole river system seems more real and less difficult. (Newton Harrison in Adcock 1992, 39)



4.6 Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison discussing a proposal for Karl Marx Allee project, c.1994-97
(Photo courtesy Newton Harrison, Harrison archives, Stanford University)

The above image shows Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison standing in front of one of their diagrammatic proposals. Helen Mayer Harrison refers to the wall diagram/map while talking to officials. The diagram is a tool, while the Harrisons are the 'actors' who bring their proposals alive through storytelling and conversation. Helen Mayer Harrison reflects on the place of metaphor in their practice: "Now, our culture has turned into an accounting culture and has put aside the power of the bard to transform beliefs. Our work indexes both the bardic and the visual traditions of Western culture" (Harrison in Adcock 1992, 39). Metaphor is a key device for the Harrisons; it is a way of articulating whole systems. They are critical of modernism's specialisation of knowledge: "We feel that to

know more and more about something out of the context in which that something occurs leads to less and less understanding of the something, since everything exists in context” (Helen Mayer Harrison in Solnit 1990, 53). For the Harrisons, conversation is a primary metaphor. Solnit asserts that “they view conversation as improvisation, and have proposed the universe itself as a vast conversation. Within that framework their own ongoing conversation enriches the meaning of their work” (Solnit 1990, 53). The Harrisons’ two ‘characters’ have engaged in continuing dialogue over many years as a way of articulating and distilling ideas through the compressed form of poetry. This dialogue is written and then sometimes performed. In *Breathing Space for the Sava River* (1989-90), a fragment of their poetic exchange reads:

I said
Then do you value the direction of its becoming
You said
The river is like nature or for that matter a proton
Its existence itself is part of a larger discourse
And its discourse like any discourse
Is the sum of its improvisations at any moment
And therefore the direction of its becoming is theoretically
Invisible
I said
Forgetting the question of indeterminacy
Do you value the discourse about and around this river
As best you can understand it
You said
I fear for this river’s well-being
I said
Then let us find a way to join the conversation
(Harrison and Harrison 2016, 219)

Their poetic conversations, along with their maps, diagrams and installations, are designed to “‘bring forth a new state of mind’, because the state of mind that created a problem is unlikely to solve that problem and may even prevent people from perceiving it at all”

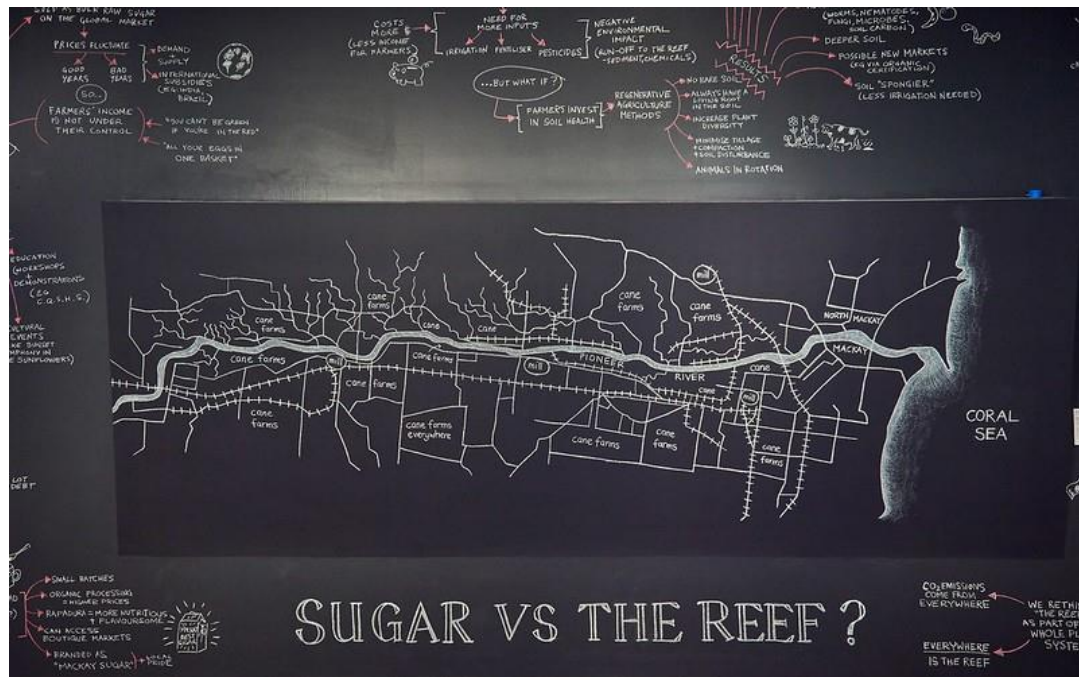
(Whiston Spirn in Harrison and Harrison 2016, 436). They retain their identity as artists; the Harrisons defend museums and galleries as sites for storytelling, maintaining that museum settings enable their projects to move towards realisation. The conversations that result from their exhibitions are also important to them. Those conversations might appear in newspapers and the exhibition may, as a result, ‘drift’ elsewhere into other public places such as town halls, further amplifying the public discussion (Adcock 1992, 41).



4.7 Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, artists' talk at the *Sugar vs the Reef?* exhibition, October 2018, Artspace Mackay
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

In late 2018 into early 2019, we installed *Sugar vs the Reef?* at Artspace, the Regional Gallery of Mackay. This photograph shows Lucas Ihlein and me talking with guests, including farmers, at the opening night of the exhibition. This ‘artists’ talk’ became a conversation in which the works in the exhibition triggered discussions about soil health and regenerative agriculture in the context of the sugar industry. This was helped along by the presence of our main farmer collaborators, Simon Mattsson and John Sweet. It was a ‘hybrid’ presentation: on one hand, we invited the works to be looked at through an aesthetic lens,

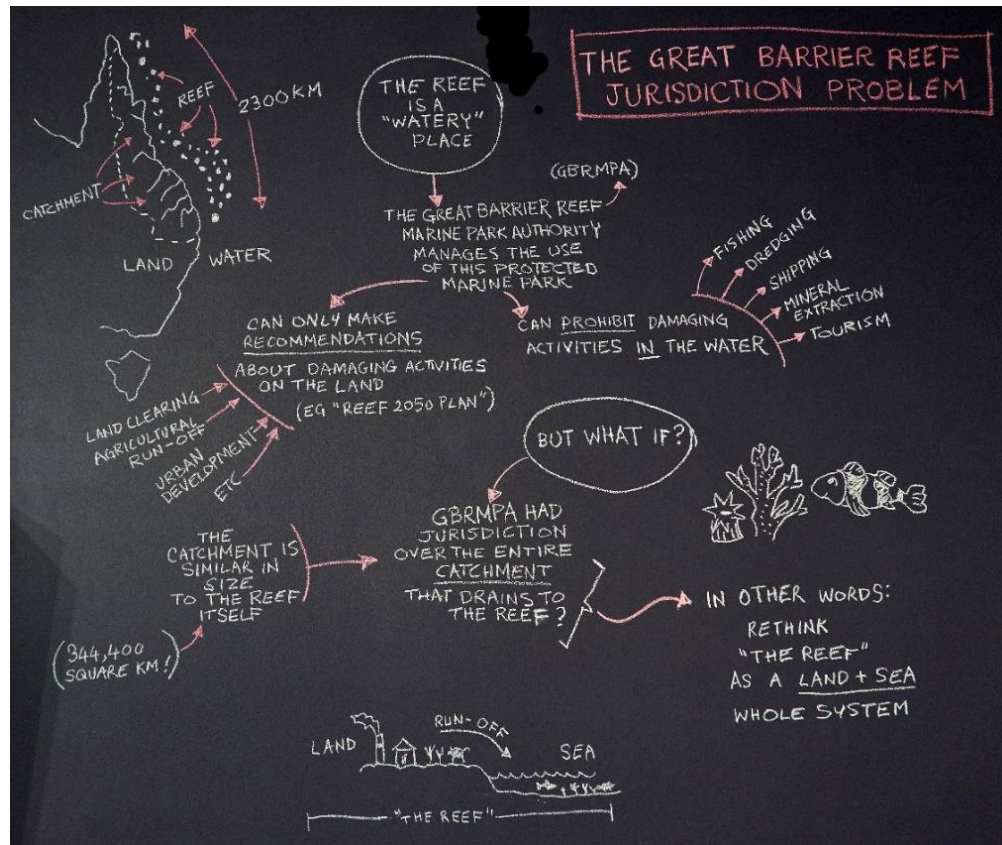
while on the other, we ‘drifted’ from the hermetics of the artworld to the external world from which these images were derived—agriculture and its interactions with land and sea. Over its course, the exhibition drew in farmers, politicians and natural resource managers—people who don’t often visit galleries.



4.8 Lucas Ihlein and Kim Williams, 2018, *A social ecology of sugarcane in Central Queensland* (detail), from the exhibition *Sugar vs the Reef?* Artspace, Mackay, 2018-19 (Photo: Jim Cullen)

One of the works in the exhibition, *A social ecology of sugarcane in Central Queensland* (2018), most clearly reflects the dialogical nature of our work ‘in the field’. A central geographical map of the Pioneer Valley of Mackay triggered the development of a surrounding diagram—five ‘problems’ that became conceptualised and graphically articulated. The diagram is a synthesis of the ‘big-picture’ issues that we engaged with through *Sugar vs the Reef?* It identifies the major environmental, social and cultural issues for this region. These issues are conceived as national or global issues, indicating the interconnection between global commodities, soil health, environmental management and climate change. Each issue is reasoned through to a set of proposed solutions. This

reframing strategy sparked many conversations about the complex issues that farmers and natural resource managers hold in tension.



4.9 Lucas Ihlein, 2018, *A social ecology of sugarcane in Central Queensland* (detail), from the exhibition *Sugar vs the Reef?* Artspace, Mackay, 2018-19
(Photo: Jim Cullen)

The above diagram shows one of the ‘problems’ in the scheme of the artwork (see portfolio). In the manner of the Harrisons, it offers a ‘big picture’ view of an ecosystem (the Great Barrier Reef and its adjacent land catchment) and a way of reframing the land-based problems that have contributed to the declining health of this major ecosystem. In this case, the proposed solution is quite simple: to view both land and sea as part of a whole system and allow the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority jurisdiction over both. Given the complexity of regulations and the vested interests in land systems, such as farming, industry and natural resource management, this is a controversial idea, aired in the ‘safe space’ of

the art gallery. Over the three months of the exhibition, our local broker John Sweet drew many key visitors to the gallery as a way of bringing them into the conversation.



4.10 John Sweet and MP George Christensen with farmers Richard Prior and Allan McLean at the *Sugar vs the Reef?* exhibition, Artspace Mackay, 2019
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

The exhibition ran concurrently with the harvest phase of the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* at the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens. The planting site, 'The Beacon', was the starting point of many conversations about regenerative agriculture, as well as a site for teaching and learning. Some of the audiences for the gallery exhibition were people who may not be regular gallery-goers—farmers, for example—who came to the exhibition via the web of connections in the ecological realm in which the project sits. A kind of osmosis occurred that brought non-traditional gallery audiences in, and also took traditional gallery audiences out 'into the field' via talks and events held *in situ* at 'The Beacon'. The conversations that 'drifted' back and forth between gallery and agricultural/cultural site allowed us to talk about agriculture as a cultural practice and broaden the dialogue across a wider spectrum of the community.



4.11 State MP for Mirani Stephen Andrew speaks in support of regenerative agriculture at the *Old Ways, New Ways* harvest event, 'The Beacon', October 2019
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Situated dialogue

These practices of conversation connect to works by artists Suzanne Lacy and the Austrian artist collective WochenKlausur. Their approach to conversation extends the discussion of the 'craft' of dialogue and the importance of creating the conditions for talking and listening. The artists devise situations in which to discuss entrenched problems, sometimes enabling competing views to be held in tension in a managed space. These constructed situations are designed to open up new ways of relating between people.

Suzanne Lacy's ten year work, *The Oakland Projects* (1991-2001, collaborating with Chris Johnson, Annice Jacoby, Unique Holland and Julio Morales), involved young people, schools, government agencies, social services and the police force to explore the underlying issues for young people in the Oakland area of San Francisco. Lacy says of the work:

It had a political analysis that was developed over time with people in the community and with the artists I worked with. It was not so much about doing good, as investigating what I would now call 'deep strategies' of art practice.

(Lacy 2019b)

These “deep strategies” involve creating dialogic situations within and between communities through arts methods, enabling participants to take part in the creative process of production and providing educational opportunities to empower participants (Jordan 2013, 160).



4.12 Suzanne Lacy, Julio Cesar Morales and Unique Holland, 1997-99, *Code 33: Emergency Clear the Air!* From *The Oakland Projects*, 1991-2001. Courtesy Suzanne Lacy; photo by Chris Johnson.

One of the eight major works in this project, *Code 33: Emergency Clear the Air!* (1997-99), brought young people and police together on a rooftop carpark in Oakland to engage in structured dialogues. Dance performances and video portraits added to the atmosphere of this ‘event’. With the participants sitting in cars, small group discussions between police officers and young people addressed their troubled relationships, while members of the public roamed through the carpark to witness “the spontaneous but carefully moderated dialogue between youth and police” (Lacy 2019). The discussions were often uncomfortable, as participants aired their passionate views, exposing the different viewpoints of youth and police. The audience then fed these conversations back to the participants. The work involved a considerable development phase that incorporated media and leadership training, mentoring, and a police-training package. This was designed to build

communication skills in the youth of the Oakland area and to break down some of the communication barriers between them and the police. Artist and writer Sarah Hotchkiss says of Lacy's approach:

Dialogue is at the root of most of Lacy's work, a simple premise that becomes radical in its expression: painfully raw conversations about violence, sex, racial profiling, ageism and religion. Lacy is not present in all of these conversations, and yet she creates the conditions for them, breaking down hierarchies between artist and volunteer, audience and performer, speaker and listener. (Hotchkiss 2019)

Unlike the Harrisons and Lacy and her collaborators, whose projects can span months and years, the artist collective WochenKlausur take a structured, pragmatic approach to their projects. They seek long-term concrete solutions to specific problems in targeted short-term interventions of usually eight weeks, setting up situations in which to bring people into open dialogue.



4.13 Wochenklausur, 1994, image from the work *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women*
(Photo courtesy of Wochenklausur)

The work *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women* (1994) sought a concrete solution to the problem of homelessness for the drug-addicted street sex workers of Zurich (Kester 2004, 99). Every day for two weeks, four different experts or officials were sent out in a boat on Lake Zurich to enter into dialogue without public scrutiny. Over this period, politicians, lawyers, the mayor, councillors, media representatives, medical professionals and social workers discussed the issues affecting these marginalised women. Normally, in the daily course of their profession, these representatives are expected “to speak in a definitive and contentious manner in a public space in which the dialogue was viewed as a contest of wills” (Kester 2004, 110-111). According to art historian Grant Kester, the strategy of placing officials together in the informal and unlikely setting of the boat stripped away the structures that demand these behaviours and created a space for knowledge exchange and productive discourse. The result of this intervention was improved services and the creation of a permanent Women’s Shelter for the target group.

Kester refers to German philosopher Jurgen Habermas’s concept of an ‘ideal speech situation’ (2004, 110) in relation to WochenKlausur’s structured dialogues. Habermas characterised a particular form of speech interaction—rational deliberation—as ‘discourse’. This style of interaction could be used intentionally to explore questions, disagreements and assumptions with the aim of eventually coming to a “rationally motivated agreement” (Blake 1995, 356). According to educational philosopher Nigel Blake:

[Habermas’s] ideal speech situation would require that anyone could participate in the given dialogue, that they could call into question any proposal, that any new proposal might be mooted and that all participants might express their attitudes, wishes and needs relative to the dialogue; nor ought anyone be hindered by compulsion from doing these things.
(Blake 1995, 357)

However, the ‘ideal speech situation’ is a philosophical aim that is difficult to achieve and is dependent on the absence of emotive points of view, aggression, vested interest and unequal power relations. Interestingly, the sex workers in WochenKlausur’s project were not invited to the boat meetings; decisions were made on their behalf, reflecting the artist

collective's tight orchestration of these meetings between targeted officials. WochenKlausur set out to find concrete solutions and achieve results, whereas Suzanne Lacy takes a more fluid, longer-term approach that explores better understanding within and between communities. By setting up specific conditions that enable constructive dialogue, says Kester, "dialogical works can challenge the dominant representations of a given community and create a more complex understanding of, and empathy for, that community among a broader public" (Kester 2004, 115).

Situated dialogue at 'The Beacon'

In the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*, we worked across different sectors of the community in order to open up dialogue about agricultural practices and cultural relationships. 'The Beacon' provided an ideal setting in which to both demonstrate and educate in different aspects of land management, and to bring different communities together to celebrate their shared histories. Over the course of the project we received funding from the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA), natural resource managers Reef Catchments, and the Regional Arts Development Fund of the Mackay Regional Council. GBRMPA manages and protects the Great Barrier Reef, while Reef Catchments advocates and facilitates good land management practices in relation to the Reef. Education is a key strategy for both. Our ability to reach audiences and use cultural events as educational platforms enabled us to form close working relationships with both organisations. We were involved in the Future Leaders Eco-Challenge schools education program run by GBRMPA in 2018 and 2019. Educator and colleague Kellie Galletly, Simon Mattsson and Lucas Ihlein each ran agricultural learning activities at 'The Beacon'. Schoolchildren participated in hands-on activities designed to engage them in the world of sustainable agriculture. Galletly uses a place-based, hands-on approach when working with children. She calls this "imaginative ecological learning" (Judson 2015), using a three-stage approach:

1. Talking and exchanging knowledge and experiences
2. Hands-on modelling activity
3. Applying learning to create a new model

Her workshop began by inviting schoolchildren to think about their experiences in the watershed of the Pioneer Valley of Mackay. What places had they been to, what did they see and do? Creating a model of the valley and discussing biodiversity values and ecological relationships at each end of the valley (the hinterland and the Great Barrier Reef) set the scene for the children to create a healthy watershed between the two. Through the hands-on activity of creating a topographic model with soil, then imaginatively modelling farms that provide ecosystem services—e.g. trees, polycultures, ground cover—and simulating rainfall, the children were able to see the impact of good agricultural practices on rainfall run-off into the waterway connecting the land to the sea. They then put their learning into their own words.



4.14 Kellie Galletly working with school students on a run-off model at 'The Beacon', *Future Leaders' Eco Challenge*, Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, March 2019
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Galletly's workshop forms part of the overall picture of 'The Beacon' as a site for exchange, conversation and hands-on learning. By drawing in people from diverse cultures, backgrounds and age groups, we transmitted knowledge of regenerative agriculture through embodied experiences of these methods.

Learning and exchange

One of the aims for the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* was to include those communities who otherwise do not speak within the space of regenerative agriculture. In particular we were interested in working alongside the Yuwibara traditional owners, and Australian South Sea Islander, Italian and Maltese communities, who share close links through their roles in the establishment of the sugarcane industry.



4.15 Artists and farmers meet with members of the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association, January 2018

We began to connect with the Yuwibara and Australian South Sea Islander communities prior to the *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* cultural event on Simon and Susie Mattsson's farm in July 2017. As these relationships developed, so too did our involvement with each other. We invited these communities in to the second phase of our work in Mackay, the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*. Hearing stories of earlier cane farming methods from Yuwibara elders and Australian South Sea Islanders led us to incorporate these methods into the planting and harvesting processes at the site of the project, 'The Beacon'. These stages of planting and harvesting were marked by four

agri/cultural events, in which the Yuwibara and Australian South Sea Islander communities played a significant role.



4.16 Lucas Ihlein, John Sweet and Kim Williams meeting with Yuwibara elders Robyn and George Tonga in 2017



4.17 Carmel Baretta speaks at the opening of *Old Ways New Ways* sugarcane harvest event, with members of the Italian, Maltese and Australian South Sea Islander communities and the artists looking on
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

In early 2019, we began to plan for the final phase of the agricultural cycle, the sugarcane harvest. Along with our Mackay collaborators, we devised a participatory project and event called *Old Ways New Ways*. Starrett Ve a Ve a (chairperson of the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association) invited local representatives of the Maltese, Italian and Yuwibara communities to be involved. The final harvest event at 'The Beacon' celebrated the 'old ways' of early cane farming methods on a crop produced with regenerative agriculture methods, the 'new ways'. The event was a mixture of public speeches, displays of historical photographs and artefacts, demonstrations of hand-cutting sugarcane 'the old way', song, communal dining, and relaxed conversation (see portfolio). In a video made for the event, younger generations interviewed their parents and grandparents to learn about their elders' lives in earlier days. The event celebrated the older people of these communities, who proudly shared stories with each other and with the audience. *Old Ways New Ways* enabled people to reconnect across cultures. We did this through the close involvement of community representatives during the organisation of the event, through participatory activities and, just as importantly, through the design of the event space. Spatially, guests were able to mingle easily and to talk together over a shared meal during the event. Temporally, the running schedule allowed space during the event for these conversations and reconnections to occur. The site of 'The Beacon' and the participatory nature of the agri/cultural events held there created the space for learning and exchange: the stories, displays and demonstrations of earlier times and old methods offered audiences a rich history of people, places and practices, while the regenerative agriculture methods we used demonstrated innovations in farming to those communities.

Who gets to talk?

Throughout these works and conversations I am always aware of my position as a woman working in a male-dominated milieu, whether that of regenerative farming, or that of socially engaged art. While the focus of the discussions in this thesis is mainly outward-looking, I share the following story to acknowledge some of the personal challenges that artists may face in this field of practice.

In Mackay, we were artists working with the land, a practice that has a long history. Looking back in time from 'The Beacon', the Earthworks by American land artists of the late 1960s seem a world away. The impulses that drove American artists from their studios and into the landscape in the 1960s appear to have little similarity to the environmental imperatives that have driven us to work with the earth today. In her study of the politics of land use in the American West, writer, art critic and curator Lucy Lippard (2014) takes the reader through a hybrid tale of resource extraction, colonisation, capitalism, ecological destruction, and artistic responses to land and nature. Her own contemporaries—Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, Walter de Maria, Nancy Holt, Charles Ross, James Turrell (who 'purchased' a volcanic crater) —began to exit the city in the late 1960s to create ambitious and often grandiose 'earthworks'. Lippard says:

All of the artists are white; all but one are men (sporting cowboy boots and ten-gallon hats), as it is rare for women artists ... to raise the thousands of dollars it takes to create such monumental works. (Lippard 2014, 81-82)

Though sympathetic to the visions of the artists at the time, Lippard acknowledges that, from today's ecological perspective, the Land Art methods of the late 1960s are outdated: "I argue now for the nearby, a microview of land and art, grassroots connections rather than macro pronouncements" (Lippard 2014, 88). The early works of male artistry echo the colonial impositions of the extractive industries on the land, moving earth around and claiming space on a grand scale. Today, a more environmentally conscious approach comes from artists who are thinking about reclamation on a grand scale. Lippard notes that women artists play a stronger role here, referring to artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles:

She pointed out almost forty years ago that it's no accident that so many women artists have tackled the handling of waste, maintenance, and cleaning up after civilization. Nature or nurture? Women identify with "nature", not because of "essentialism", but because we share with nature the dominant culture's attempts at control. (Lippard 2014, 82)

How do we work with nature without destroying it? In my early years as an art student, I admired the works of the American land artists, and in fact sculpted several outdoor works

(on a far smaller scale) that did, indeed, intervene in soil and tree. Today, any intervention in the land needs careful consideration. What is the consequence of our actions? Are we destroying habitat or are we having a positive impact? For *Sugar vs the Reef?* our sculptural interventions in agriculture were, in my view, constructive works of environmental reparation, in the way they actively built soil health and demonstrated and taught regenerative agricultural methods. The project brought together the aesthetic considerations of artists working at a large scale in nature while at the same time bringing good environmental practice to the fore. The processes and events within the living agricultural works (*Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* and 'The Beacon') are the result of decades of experience in the arts, in social practice and in construction and 'making'. I have, over a long period, built many traditionally 'male' skills.

Despite my own skills, competencies and lived experiences, I was subjected to gender bias early in the *Sugar vs the Reef?* project. The agricultural community in Mackay is largely heteronormative. Many farming families operate on gendered lines and the Mattsson farming family is no exception. While Simon Mattsson does most of the day-to-day outdoors farmwork, he is also a public figure who circulates in the world of conferences and field days, as both an innovator and a skilled public speaker. While there are strong female voices in the worlds of farming (for example, the Women in Cane group, Mackay) and natural resource management, the sphere of regenerative agriculture is dominated by men and Mattsson fits easily into this milieu. Susie Mattsson, on the other hand, shies away from attention and supports Simon and the family in the role of 'farmer's wife'. This allows Simon to make his mark in the world of agricultural innovation, to build his public reputation, to take up speaking engagements around Australia and overseas—to be someone who is written and talked about and remembered.

I entered this world with little social capital: I am an older, diminutive woman without children or husband. I am an artist and an outsider who, at first, had little knowledge of sugarcane farming and regenerative agriculture. By early 2017, I was getting to know the people in the agricultural and natural resource management worlds. At that time, we formed a team to organise a major cultural event on Mattsson's farm to promote regenerative agriculture. Ihlein and I, along with Simon and Susie Mattsson and an event

manager, spent several months organising *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*. I was instrumental in designing the amphitheatre space and infrastructure for the event. As artists, Ihlein and I approached this work as a giant living sculpture in which the audience would have an immersive experience in the midst of a crop of sunflowers. The time already spent in Mackay the previous year and the complex organisational tasks leading up to the event showed that I was clearly embedded and invested in the project.

Ihlein commissioned a media producer to create a short documentary about the collaboration between farmers and artists and the environmental and cultural background to *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*. The documentary was made before, during and after the cultural event, which was held on the Mattssons' farm in July 2017. These forms of documentation serve as the legacy of the project—the events are 'live' artworks and cannot be recreated; therefore photographs and videos tell the story afterwards. The documentary 'stands in' for the actual work, and therefore has great power to shape the story and the role of the protagonists.

The producer of the *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* documentary created an heroic story of two men (artist and farmer) coming together to pioneer agricultural transformation. It is a positive story that belies the day-to-day difficulties in farming and the barriers to change. It neatly encapsulates the story of Australia's shifting demographic and the distance from most people to farming and life on the land. The documentary shows the artist's connection to farming and illustrates the role of the artist in working alongside farmers to connect the general public to the land on which their food grows.

But where was I? Despite my ongoing involvement in the project and months of teamwork, organising *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, I was not included in the draft of the documentary. As a key document of this project, the video as it stood wrote me out of the story. After viewing a screening of the documentary, I later conveyed my disappointment at being excluded to Ihlein. The situation was addressed through talking. The following day, with Ihlein's support, I voiced my case for inclusion to the core event group. Arguing for my right to be made visible was awkward and uncomfortable. This confronting moment revealed the gender bias firmly in place in this world—no one was aware of my omission

from the documentary. Ultimately I was included in the video after some new shooting and editing.



4.18 Simon Mattsson, Lucas Ihlein and Kim Williams take the microphone at the *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* event, July 2017
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

In her research of gender in the firefighting services in New South Wales and California over four years, social geographer Christine Eriksen explores the ways in which women working in the profession have adapted to a traditionally masculine workplace. She says:

The challenges many women face when striving to gain recognition for their fire fighting competencies are often a result of subliminal behaviour by men who, in theory, condone equal opportunities in the workplace but have never questioned the ways in which their own behaviour reproduces inequalities and sexism. (Eriksen 2013, 130)

In her many interviews with women working at different levels in the firefighting services, Eriksen finds repeated stories of latent discrimination, of women having to 'prove'

themselves to be as competent as their male counterparts, but most insidiously, the unseen impact of male privilege:

Part of the problem is that it is very difficult to get the issue of privilege on the agenda because it is so well legitimated. Privilege is not recognised as such by many of those who have it. Privilege appears to be natural. Therefore it is necessary to 'unmask' privilege and make it more visible so that its consequences can be addressed. (Pease in Eriksen 2013, 131)

Gender bias is one such form of privilege. As a woman, I have often had to 'prove' myself in male-dominated workplaces. It took time for me to be accepted into the Mackay community. It also took time for me to gain the confidence and knowledge to use my voice in this agricultural story. At the point when the *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* documentary was being produced, I didn't really count. I had to 'prove' myself with our collaborators in Queensland through many different contributions to the *Sugar vs the Reef?* project, sometimes through hard physical work (throwing haybales around and wielding a sledgehammer), designing and building structures, writing proposals, writing songs, organising events and eventually, public speaking. Although Ihlein and I discuss our roles within the collaboration frequently, and have openly examined the tensions that have arisen regarding gender and authority and privilege, gender is not something I have felt free to discuss with our collaborators in Mackay. It has, rather, been a process of gaining acceptance over time. As the project progressed, my confidence increased, along with a greater sense of co-ownership of the project and a more equal public profile alongside my male counterparts.

What began as an invitation from John Sweet to Lucas Ihlein grew into a project that involved many people who came to respect each others' abilities. These days, our collaborators in Mackay recognise the part that I play in our work together. In part this is due to our long-term presence in Mackay and the many situations in which I participated fully, showed commitment, generated ideas, spoke as a representative in public settings, and led the way. Our continued dialogue built mutual trust and respect.

Talking

This chapter has examined the place of dialogue in socially engaged art. I am interested in the way in which new connections between people are established, big ideas are discussed in different settings, and, in some cases, direct social change occurs. In reality, of course, human interactions take many different forms and communication is often difficult and messy. As artists working both inside and outside of our own communities, we aim to be ‘ourselves’ and at the same time behave as professionals in our dealings with people. We are funded to do our work; when we are ‘on the job’ we dialogue with awareness and integrity within the unpredictable and inconsistent realm of ‘life’. This is the paradox of a practice that intentionally blurs art and life.



4.19 Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, interviewed by Tegan Philpott on ABC Tropical North radio, November 2018

The work we do may appear similar at times to social work or activism or political lobbying, yet we define ourselves through the discourse of art. To do so, we cultivate “the capacity to think critically and creatively across disciplinary boundaries” (Kester 2004, 101). To the artworld, we appear as authors of projects such as *Sugar vs the Reef?* Yet they are deeply collaborative works that are built on communication and exchange across disciplines and

cultures. To our farmer colleagues in Mackay, we are collaborators who can 'make things happen' by creating unique situations in which to amplify their work.

Soon after beginning our work in Mackay, it became apparent that the Australian South Sea Islander and Yuwibara Aboriginal communities were a key part of the story of sugar. To establish the sugarcane industry in Mackay, the Yuwibara people were forcibly removed from their lands, while South Sea Islanders were put to work in slave-like conditions on the early sugarcane farms. We began to recognise the importance of telling a new story: through a focus on regenerative agriculture, we could build working relationships between contemporary farming cultures and the Yuwibara and Australian South Sea Islander cultures. This coincided with a project I began in Kiribati, working with local Indigenous communities. In the following chapter, *Connecting*, I discuss the implications of working across cultures, within communities, in the projects *Kiribati Fisheries Blog* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* In doing so, I look at ways in which cultural considerations build an ethics of art practice and contribute to environmental justice.

Chapter 5: Connecting



5.1 Kim Williams, 2018, *Gastropod shell*
Watercolour pencil and ink on paper

Buariki, Kiribati, 28th November 2016: *Our meeting in the maneaba with the village executive committee began very late, around 9pm. We all sat cross-legged on woven mats on the hard concrete floor. I had no real idea of what was going on. People from the committee would arrive and sit down in what seemed like specific places. We would wait for endless amounts of time and then someone else would arrive and sit down. Eventually the head person stood and delivered a long ceremonial greeting. Ben responded formally with an equally long greeting. There are distinct protocols about which I could only guess. After the speeches, the women and men broke into separate groups, with Tarateiti facilitating the women's meeting and Ben the men's. Rutiana and Kiriua assisted by taking notes and drawing up the plans of action generated by the meetings. I was given permission to film the proceedings, so I did my best in the dim evening light.*

After what seemed like an eternity, the meetings closed and we prepared for bed on the concrete floor of the maneaba. Aurélie and I set up our inflatable mats and mosquito nets, while our i-Kiribati colleagues slept on the woven mats with a mosquito coil. We had asked that the generator that was powering the lights in the maneaba be switched off for the night, but somehow that didn't happen, so we tried to sleep under the fluorescent lights, with the loud chugging and the diesel smell of the nearby generator. In the middle of the

night, the generator mercifully ran out of fuel and sputtered to a stop, taking the lights out with it. It rained during the night, making the air feel a bit less oppressive.

Introduction

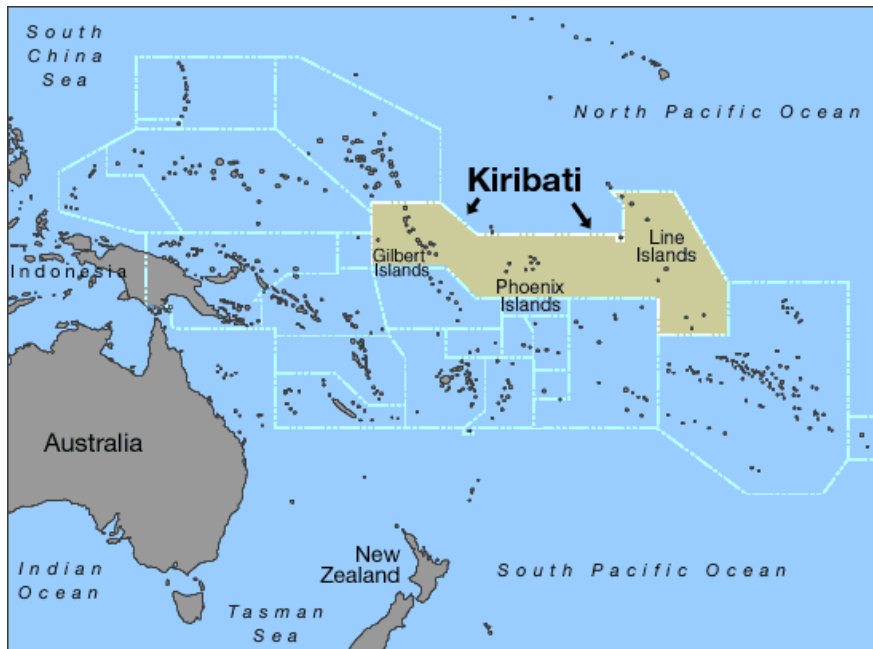
In this chapter, I discuss the implications and possibilities of working across cultures within the field of socially engaged art. Central to my practice of socially engaged art is a concern with cultural recognition and cultural protocols. In reflecting on the projects *Kiribati Fisheries Blog* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* I show how, as an ‘outsider’ and researcher, I worked with culturally diverse groups and explored ways of bringing cultures together. Throughout these projects I have been aware of the need to engage with shifts towards the decolonisation of environmental and cultural structures within Australia and the Pacific.

This chapter begins with a geographic, cultural and environmental overview of the Republic of Kiribati. My involvement in the *Kiribati Fisheries Blog* project was brief and speculative. Although plans to extend my work in Kiribati into a deeper engagement with remote village communities did not come to fruition, the experience helped me to critically reflect on methods of community engagement as they apply across diverse projects. I briefly outline my involvement in the Community Based Fisheries Management Program, followed by a consideration of differing cultural viewpoints and a discussion of *decolonisation* as a core approach in the performance and analysis of my work. I turn to the Archipelagic thought of Epeli Hau’ofa and the concept of a ‘sea of islands’ to draw together some strategies for understanding environmental practice in the Pacific.

Through the *Kiribati Fisheries Blog* project, I realised the potential of song as a means of working across cultures—it subsequently became a core thread in other projects. In this chapter I discuss the ways in which music emerged in my work in Kiribati and in Queensland for *Sugar vs the Reef?* The second half of this chapter returns to Mackay, Queensland, where our work brought farmers, Australian South Sea Islanders and Yuwibara Aboriginal custodians together in public settings. A discussion of communal singing in *Sugar vs the Reef?* introduces song as a key method for connecting cultures. In this section I contend that music creates social bonds and connects people to the big picture aims of environmental projects. Singing and songwriting as a method for working collaboratively across academic

disciplines is further discussed in Chapter 6, through the project *Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef?*

Entering from the outside—*Kiribati Fisheries Blog*



5.2 Republic of Kiribati map
(Source: Office of the President, Republic of Kiribati)

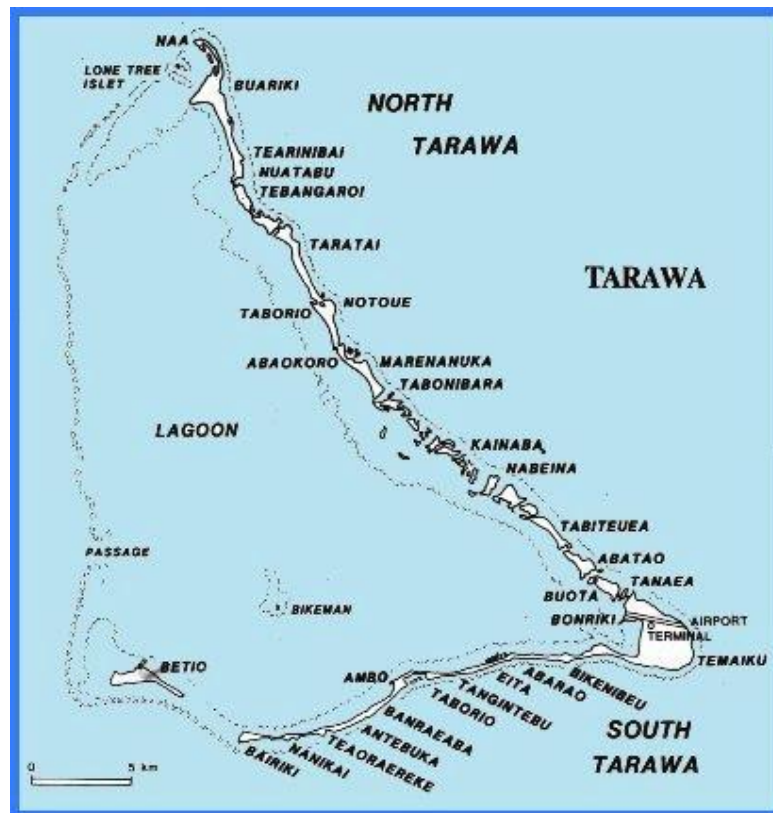
Kiribati Fisheries Blog was a short-term scoping project that came about through a collaboration between myself, Lucas Ihlein, and fisheries experts from the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS) at the University of Wollongong. ANCORS is a research institute focused on training and education in ocean law and policy, maritime security and marine resources management (University of Wollongong website, 2019). Through a small university grant, I was able to travel to Kiribati in November/December 2016 with environmental social scientist and economist Aurélie Delisle to observe daily life and communal practices in both the urban and the remote islands of Kiribati. My role was to offer an artist's perspective on the Community Based Fisheries Management (CBFM) program in the Outer Islands of Kiribati. I was also there as a

videographer to take video footage for a proposed training video of the CBFM program, to be disseminated amongst other remote communities in Kiribati. Although I had ambitions for this project to extend beyond its initial phase, the planning, execution and aftermath of *Kiribati Fisheries Blog* formed a powerful and noteworthy experience within the research period of this PhD, feeding across and into other projects.

From both environmental and cultural perspectives, going to Kiribati gave me a brief but revealing experience. I came away with a more nuanced understanding of the pressures faced by this society, as well as a first-hand glimpse of daily life within the very real contexts of climate change and sea level rise. Through my experiences in Kiribati, I interrogated commonly held perspectives of Kiribati as a static society, held at the mercy of the rising sea. Like many, my initial perspective was shaped by prevailing climate discourses, coupled with an unfamiliarity with the worldviews and experiences of Pacific Islanders. Yet what I actually saw and eventually came to understand was the fluidity of Kiribati society; a highly mobile population that flows across islands and continents. I also glimpsed the potential for socially engaged art to play a meaningful role in finding local solutions to the ongoing issue of terrestrial and marine plastics pollution.

Land and water

The Republic of Kiribati (pronounced 'Ki-ri-bus') is comprised of thirty-three coral atolls and reef islands. There are three main island groups—the Gilbert Islands, the Phoenix Islands and the Line Islands—spread across the equator in the central Pacific. From the air, these slivers of land hugging pellucid lagoons are astonishingly beautiful and delicate, surrounded by the vast deep blue of the Pacific Ocean. They look uninhabited. Yet on the ground, on the main island chain of South Tarawa, this couldn't be further from the truth. With an average width of 450 metres and a length of just over 30 kilometres, South Tarawa is home to over 55 000 people. Being the 'urban centre' of Kiribati, overcrowding, pollution, poverty and poor sanitation are striking. The heat is constant and perspiration flows in the thick salt air.



5.3 Map of Tarawa atoll, showing the chain of islands hugging a large internal lagoon. South Tarawa is the urban centre of Kiribati; North Tarawa is called 'the Outer Islands'.
Source: <http://www.janeresture.com/tarawa/>

The sea looms large in the story of Kiribati. The islands of the Republic are slender filaments of land. On the 'main' island of Tarawa, the highest point of land is less than three metres above sea level. Many villages are protected by sea walls that are often breached by the king tides that occur twice a year. Fresh water is scarce and precious. One metre under the surface of the coral dust which forms the islands, a 'lens' of fresh water floats on the denser salt water beneath it. Most fresh water is accessed through village wells, and as a result water supplies become undrinkable when king tides flood the wells with salt water. As sea levels rise with climate change, this is a more common occurrence in the low-lying villages (Institute for Sustainable Futures 2011, 7).



5.4 A king tide floods the village of Ambo in 2016
During this event the fresh water supply in wells was disrupted for three months
(Photo: Nokia Moote)

The i-Kiribati are a seafaring people, traditionally reliant on fish as a staple diet (Delisle et al. 2016, 5). The porous volcanic coral dust of the islands supports a limited range of locally-grown staples, such as taro, coconuts, breadfruit and bananas to supplement the traditional diet of fish. Plastic-packaged, imported foods are now commonplace with the advent of modernisation and economic development (Delisle et al. 2016, 19). While there are now garbage collecting initiatives in the urban centres, waste collecting strategies are relatively new to a culture whose waste was for centuries organic. Human practices on land and in the water have a noticeable impact in Kiribati, as raw human sewage enters the local fishing grounds and plastic waste litters land and shore. As the population grows, coastal fish stocks dwindle, while further out to sea, large fishing fleets from countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Korea, the United States and Spain trawl the deep ocean in Kiribati waters, paying the Kiribati Government for fishing access fees, which bring in over 70% of government revenue (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations 2010; Delisle et al. 2016, 5).

Community Based Fisheries Management

To address the very real issue of coastal fishing sustainability, ANCORS team members collaborated with Kiribati Fisheries staff to introduce a Community Based Fisheries

Management (CBFM) program in the Outer Islands of Kiribati. Supported by ANCORS, local i-Kiribati staff work within specific villages to implement the CBFM program, in close consultation with village members. As local populations increase and coastal fish stocks dwindle, the program trains communities to monitor and manage their own fishing grounds so that artisanal fishing, the principal subsistence industry, can be managed at a sustainable level. I was asked to film the proceedings of the CBFM meetings for a short educational video that could then be used to introduce the CBFM program to other remote villages.



5.5 Fishermen repair a fish trap made from coral rubble, Buariki, Kiribati, 2016
(Photo: Kim Williams)

With Aurélie Delisle and the local CBFM team, I travelled by boat to the Outer Islands of North Tarawa. We stayed in two of the villages, Buariki and Tabonibara. During the CBFM meetings in the two villages, I observed the CBFM team's attention to the strict cultural protocols in the villages. My role as videographer explained my presence there as a non-Indigenous guest and enabled me to contribute to this community initiative.



5.6 CBFM meeting with women in the maneaba (village meeting hut), Tabonibara, Kiribati, November 2016
(Photo: Kim Williams)

I was invited to participate in the women's meetings during the CBFM gatherings. The women raised the issue of plastic waste directly with me. There are no waste management systems in the Outer Islands. The traditional diet is now mixed with imported, packaged foods that have limited nutritional value. Plastic packaging pollutes both the land and marine environments. I was asked for advice on ways to manage plastic waste. This surprised me—I have no expertise in plastic waste management. Nevertheless, I took the request seriously and applied my experience as an artist to the problem. Given the circumstances and the slow pace of change in Kiribati, I suggested local repurposing strategies as an immediate and potentially effective way of addressing the issue. Working through an interpreter, I offered some simple suggestions for creative repurposing, demonstrating plastic twine-making. This was taken up immediately, given the women were already experts in weaving and twine-making. It drew on our shared expertise as artists and makers, connecting us through the shared experience of crafting by hand. In turn, engaging with the problem of plastics pollution presented me with some possibilities for extending the role of socially engaged art practices in this environment. (Currently I am an exhibiting artist in the 2020 Sydney Biennale, in collaboration with Lucas Ihlein, working by invitation on the theme of plastics).



5.7 Joinery technique with hand-made coconut twine used in Kiribati, 2016
(Photo: Kim Williams)

The direct engagement with local women and their making practices informed my approach to socially engaged art. I began to reflect on my motivations for working in Kiribati and to consider the broader colonial implications of working within other cultures. I realised I needed to understand more of the cultural contexts for thinking across cultures, and across the Pacific. In addressing the larger context of working in the Pacific, via a conceptual framework that emerges from the Islands themselves, I wanted to know what the implications of cross-cultural practices might be for practitioners of socially engaged art who are working to extend their communities of practice. The lessons learnt in Kiribati generated specific cross-cultural ways of working with people, communities and song in Mackay.



5.8 Goatfish drying in the sun, Buariki, Kiribati, 2016
(Photo: Kim Williams)

A sea of islands or islands in the sea

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea. The sea
has locked them up. The sea is History.
(Derek Walcott, excerpt from the poem 'The Sea is History', 2007)

My initial view of Kiribati and its people was of a country whose fate is determined by external mechanisms that are embedded within and come from outside—aid, education, health, infrastructure, Christianity, and climate change. Soon after, I began to see the country differently, challenged by conversations with people in Kiribati and the words of Indigenous writers such as Epeli Hau'ofa.

Prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century and the British colonial administration at the turn of the twentieth century, the i-Kiribati maintained their own customs and spiritual practices (Grimble 1952). As Christian influence spread, traditional culture changed irrevocably. Today's society is dominated by the Catholic

church, while many other denominations are spread across the atolls (Commonwealth Secretariat 2019). Christianity is interwoven with traditional beliefs and practices. International aid agencies are a thick and permanent presence in Kiribati, working across health, social, educational, economic and environmental matters. People from outside the Island form views of the Kiribati culture which are constructed in part by the very systems put in place by colonial organisations.

Epeli Hau'ofa (1939-2009), a Tongan/Fijian anthropologist who wrote extensively about the Pacific Islands, makes the impact of the colonial legacy on Kiribati society clear. His work gives an insight into the economic systems that evolved through colonial occupation and have shaped the current class structures in Island societies (Hau'ofa 2008). Hau'ofa describes the contemporary situation in many Pacific Islands as one in which their fate is tied to a dependency on aid from wealthy and powerful nations such as Australia and New Zealand. These countries appear to be benefactors but also have a great deal to gain by enforcing regional security and controlling access to resources. Most of the benefits from wealthy nations do not reach ordinary i-Kiribati people, who are looked down upon by those in power, both inside and outside of Kiribati (Hau'ofa 2018, 103). According to Hau'ofa, "it is a belittling view that has been unwittingly propagated mostly by social scientists who have sincere concern for the welfare of Pacific peoples" (Hau'ofa 2018, 104). This view hinges on the idea that Pacific nations are too small, isolated and under-resourced to ever be able to function independently of an entrenched system of aid and dependence (Hau'ofa 2018, 104-5).

Hau'ofa counters this deterministic view with an expanded view of Polynesia and Micronesia. As a visitor coming from a large continent, I experience islands such as the atolls of Kiribati as tiny fragments of land surrounded by a vast ocean. As Hau'ofa points out, I make my judgment only on the land that I see in the midst of that ocean. Yet the stories and traditions of Oceanic peoples offer a different worldview:

Their universe comprised not only land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of

powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny.
(Hau'ofa 2018, 106)

Some Pacific Indigenous ancestral worldviews saw the Pacific as “a sea of islands”, while the continental view was of “islands in a far sea”. The colonial imposition of boundaries that defined states and territories further reinforced this view (Hau'ofa 2018, 107). Yet today's Oceanic peoples—and this is the point of Hau'ofa's argument—defy the limiting stereotype of dependency and helplessness by instead traversing those boundaries, moving freely between countries, in a flow of goods and culture, employment and kinship that challenges the limiting views of confined dependency (Hau'ofa 2018, 109-110).

Taken up as part of the ‘spatial turn’ in the humanities and social sciences, the worldview of a ‘sea of islands’ contributed to a concept of ‘archipelagic thinking’ (Pugh 2013, 12).

Geographer Jonathan Pugh describes the world as a constellation of archipelagos, rather than continents and islands: “Not only are there more obvious cases, like the Caribbean or Philippines, but Canada and Australia are archipelagos composed of thousands of island-island movements” (Pugh 2013, 10). Considering what it would mean to ‘think with the archipelago’, Pugh echoes the work of St Lucian poet Derek Walcott (1930-2017), whose poems emphasised the creativity within island movements as “generative and inter-connective spaces of metamorphosis, of material practices, culture and politics” (Pugh 2013, 10). Understanding this perspective unsettled my earlier view of Kiribati as a place of “singularity, isolation, dependency and peripherality” (Pugh 2013, 11).

Island nations such as Kiribati and Tuvalu have become the face of media representations of sea level rise and global campaigns for climate action. In their study of global narratives of climate change affecting Tuvalu, social scientists Farbotko and Lazrus argue that “ideas about climate refugees have become dominant interpretations of the social consequences of projected sea-level rise” (Farbotko and Lazrus 2012, 385). Yet for Farbotko and Lazrus, these representations are problematic as they cast Indigenous people in developing countries as “intensely rooted in the territory in which they live, like plant species, as a kind of force of nature—while wealthy westerners uncritically embrace their own freedom to be

highly mobile global citizens, decoupled from nature” (2012, 384). While climate migration measures in the future may be necessary and appropriate, they argue that ‘refugee’ discourses construct unequal power relations and rob people of their human right to self-determination (2012, 382).

Returning to Hau’ofa’s account of highly mobile Island societies, the reality of those Island cultures contradicts western media portrayals of ‘stuck’ victimhood. People move freely between countries for work, education and family obligations and by doing so create an economic and cultural flow. Islanders themselves insist on their right to “equity, identity and human rights” (Tiimon in Farbotko and Lazrus 2012, 383) in discussions of future climate migration. ‘Migration with dignity’ (Uriam 2016) is the term many Islanders use when discussing the prospect of permanently leaving their homeland in the future—the right to preserve culture and traditions, the provision of opportunities, and reparations for the losses caused by the nations who have fuelled climate change and sea-level rise.

Decolonisation

Important to the broader contexts of working across cultures in socially engaged art is the movement towards ‘decolonisation’. *Process* is central in the practice of SEA; as socially engaged arts practitioners and researchers, working across cultures requires particular care. For my own research and practice, the ways in which I work are critical to forging equitable and meaningful relationships. These relationships are in turn fundamental to an engagement with environmental issues. What is gained by doing this kind of work? Does it help? Who benefits?

Maori educational theorist Linda Tuhiwai-Smith critiques historical Western practices that “deny the validity of indigenous peoples’ claim to existence, to land and territories, to the right of self-determination, to the survival of our languages and forms of cultural knowledge, to our natural resources and systems for living within our environments” (Tuhiwai-Smith 1999, 1). For Tuhiwai-Smith, *decolonisation* “is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels” (1999, 20). She contends that, for researchers, “one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practice” (1999,

20). The framework of academic research, regarded with deep suspicion by many Indigenous cultures, is a Western activity “that has something at stake” (1999, 5). Tuhiwai Smith proposes therefore that any theories and knowledges developed are shared with the subjects or communities of research. She reminds us that “the challenge is always to demystify, to decolonise” (1999,16). This is particularly relevant at a time when sea level rise from climate change adds a new layer of complexity to the future of Pacific nations and their relationships with wealthy western neighbours. In Kiribati, I was alert to my place as an outsider, as an i-Matang (white person) and in particular as a researcher visiting an Indigenous community. Usually an academic researcher’s presence in a community and the activities we undertake are made possible through our funding (in this case a Global Challenges grant from the University of Wollongong). As a white academic researcher, entering a culture different to my own, I was in a position of power. Therefore, in this context, I learnt to practise as a listener as much as an observer. My task was to work with the day-to-day aspirations of people, being careful to respect social and cultural conventions: in short, to work *with* rather than *for*.

Working with the Community Based Fisheries Management Program in Kiribati, I observed a research relationship between ANCORS and Indigenous communities that is conceived and implemented with careful attention to the strict cultural protocols of those communities. The program and the team are structured to offer maximum agency to the villages within which the program has been adopted. The local CBFM staff, all i-Kiribati, lead the work in the villages, while University of Wollongong staff play a background role (Delisle et al. 2016). Tarateiti Uriam, a Resource Management officer for the Coastal Fisheries Programme in Kiribati, is one of the local i-Kiribati staff who deliver the CBFM program in the Outer Islands. Tarateiti interviewed me in Australia prior to my trip to Kiribati. She asked me who I was, what I did and why I wanted to go to Kiribati. These are very reasonable questions to be asked by someone from a nation that experiences the constant comings and goings of well-meaning aid workers and volunteers from wealthy nations. Tarateiti was most keenly interested in hearing stories of the local community development work I have done through the arts. She wanted to hear concrete examples of strategies I had used and activities that I had instigated with community groups. I talked to her about some of my work with young

people and women from culturally diverse backgrounds, using music, performance and visual arts to explore stories and issues important to their lives. Additionally, I shared my experiences running a Men's Shed for men of eastern and western European backgrounds, facilitating projects that developed practical skills, as well as social connections. Tarateiti outlined what she considered to be key issues in Kiribati—the empowerment of women, the engagement of unemployed young men, and plastic waste. My experience was relevant to these issues and Tarateiti said she looked forward to collaborating with me. This initial, informal interview demonstrated one of the strategies used by ANCORS to ensure a respectful relationship between ANCORS staff and their i-Kiribati colleagues.



5.9 Tarateiti Uriam at the Coastal Fisheries Division office, Tanaea, Tarawa
(Photo: Kim Williams)

Healthy village, healthy fish

While in Kiribati, I recognised the value of introducing music as a way of connecting with people. Kiribati has strong oral and aural traditions. Churches of many denominations are central to the contemporary social structure; prior to the arrival of Western Christian missionaries, Kiribati was an oral culture, placing great value on oratory skills (Grimble 1952, 102-103). Today, both secular and religious music pervades the air in the streets of Tarawa, the 'urban' capital island of Kiribati. On Sundays, as you walk past the open-sided maneabas (meeting huts), church choral singing punctuates the contemporary island music played by most young people on their devices. Passengers can often be heard singing to the pop music blaring from the small white public transport minivans that ply their route along the main road of South Tarawa.

While staying in the town of Banreaba in South Tarawa, I took the opportunity to teach a group of young women a simple song from Australia. This was a form of cultural exchange, a way of 'giving back' to the staff in my accommodation who had told me so many stories of their own culture and lives. They quickly learned the song and readily adopted the harmonies. Within moments, our group 'performance' of the song had been filmed on a phone and was uploaded to social media, where it quickly spread around the local networks. Teaching a song deepened the bonds I had formed with these women. For us all, it was a joyful and memorable experience. Music presented itself as a central method for connecting communities to the issues of nutrition and plastic waste. This experience drew on my past work in community arts, working extensively across cultures and bringing cultures together through song.

My ambitions to return to Kiribati after my first visit were based on a passion and sense of urgency to collaborate further. I devised a project called *Healthy village, healthy fish*, in which artists would collaborate with villagers, fisheries experts and nutritionists to discuss nutritional patterns and to devise ways of creatively repurposing plastic. Parallel to this we would use existing popular cultural forms, working with young people to produce a music video about these issues. After several unsuccessful attempts at gaining funding for *Healthy village, healthy fish* I had to abandon my plans. I was bitterly disappointed, yet this led me

to reflect on my position as a well-intentioned outsider. The failure of the project to move beyond scoping stage points to some of the considerations of working in collaborative and socially engaged modes across cultures and outside one's own geographical area. This kind of community-building work is long-term and the pace of change is very slow. My sincere desire to make a difference within the confines of short-term funding structures and a PhD candidacy were in hindsight unrealistic. There are lessons to be learnt from ANCORS, whose work in Kiribati has developed slowly, over many years. Their methods of engagement are carefully considered and culturally appropriate. Local Fisheries staff lead the work in communities, supported by Australian-based ANCORS staff who visit Kiribati. Any future possibilities would be need to be viewed as long-term initiatives, led by the i-Kiribati. Meanwhile, the seed of an idea about plastic waste resides with the women of Tabonibara and the spectre of climate change in Kiribati is held aloft in the humid air by a chorus of voices.



5.10 Octopus for sale, South Tarawa
(Photo: Kim Williams)

Connecting cultures in *Sugar vs the Reef?*

I now turn to the implications of cross-cultural flow within the project *Sugar vs the Reef?* As discussed in the previous chapter, Lucas Ihlein and I worked with farmers in Mackay, Queensland, who are changing the face of monocultural industrial agriculture through the adoption of regenerative agriculture farming practices. While *Sugar vs the Reef?* began as an environmentally-focused project, we soon realised that there were underlying histories of the sugarcane industry that needed to be brought to light. Over three and a half years, we worked to bring the Yuwibara traditional owners and the Australian South Sea Islander community into the frame of agriculture, to acknowledge that the sugarcane industry in Queensland contains many social, political and environmental stories.

In 2019, we also began collaborating with the Italian and Maltese communities, at the suggestion of Starrett Vea Vea, our main Australian South Sea Islander colleague. Our key platform for connecting cultures was through performative, participatory events. Within these events, communal singing was a means of defining a common purpose: to care for the land and sea. At the same time, the involvement of diverse communities expanded environmental dialogues in Mackay, introducing regenerative agriculture methods more broadly into the Italian and Maltese farming communities.

Bringing histories to the surface

Sugar was introduced to Australia on the arrival of the First Fleet, but sugarcane was not successfully grown on Australian soil until 1862 in Brisbane, after which plantations spread along the Queensland coast and into northern New South Wales (Australian Cane Farmers 2006). Settlement of the 'empty' north through the proliferation of sugarcane plantations was a British colonial defense against a feared movement of Asian immigrants onto Australian soil. Cheap labour was originally ensured by a supply of "convicts, ticket-of-leave holders, emancipists and indentured servants" (Australian Sugar Heritage Centre 2010).

When convict transportation from England ended in 1868 (National Library of Australia), a new source of cheap labour was needed to service the growing sugar industry. The practice of 'blackbirding' became common: the co-option, coercion and at times kidnapping of

Pacific Islanders, brought to Australia on ships and put to work on sugarcane farms up and down the coast (Affeldt 2014, 506). Between 1863 and 1904, 62 000 South Sea Islanders were transported to Australia to work in the sugarcane industry (Miller 2010). 'Blackbirding' was eventually phased out by the early twentieth century, when it was banned and many Pacific Islanders were deported back to their countries of origin through the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901 (Affeldt 2014, 507). This was a legacy of Federation, as the labour movement sought to improve employment practices by abolishing slavery, yet it was also bound up in racist sentiment. Employing Pacific Islanders in the cane fields did not fit with emerging views of a White Australia (Affeldt 2014, 507). The *Pacific Island Labourer Act* of 1901 led to the deportation of most South Sea Islanders from 1906, though a few thousand were allowed to remain—those who had arrived prior to 1879 or who had applied for and were granted certificates of exemption (National Archives of Australia 2019).



5.11 South Sea Islanders loading sugarcane on a Queensland cane farm, c.1890
(Photo: Queensland Historical Atlas)

Today there is still a significant population of Pacific Islander descendants of the original sugar labourers living in Queensland towns and cities, many of whom share both South Sea Islander and Aboriginal heritage. In Mackay, some of the older Australian South Sea

Islanders and Yuwibara people of the region remember their own and their parents' and grandparents' experiences. The Yuwibara elders, who are working hard to retrieve their nearly-lost language, recall their families' exclusion from their traditional lands and how alliances were formed between the marginalised Aboriginal and South Sea Islander communities (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, State Library of Queensland 2019). Some of the older people we connected with worked on the sugarcane farms before the industry was mechanised and are still able to wield a cane knife in the old way of cane harvesting. Contemporary mechanisation means that one or two people, usually the farm owners, can replace the work of many labourers. Consequently very few Australian South Sea Islanders or Aboriginal people have an ongoing presence in the sugarcane farming industry today.

The sugarcane farmers we work with don't tend to talk about the 'dark' history of their industry. We wanted to address this gap. We felt that it was important to take a more inclusive approach by bringing the farming, Aboriginal and South Sea Islander communities together to bring about cultural recognition of the deep connections of the Yuwibara custodians to the land co-opted for farms and the central role of South Sea Islanders in the establishment of the sugar industry. This meant involving everyone in our planning and decision-making processes.

Our initial connection with the Australian South Sea Islander community was formed in late 2016. Meeting with the Mackay and District South Sea Islander Association, we began looking at ways of working together with the community in our project. Planning for our first major agri/cultural event, *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, was well underway. We engaged the Sakwolo Islander Dancers performance group for the event, which attracted over two hundred guests from the broader Mackay community. Opening the event with a Welcome to Country by Yuwibara traditional owner Veronica Ah-Wang and continuing with a performance by the Sakwolo Islander Dancers meant that these communities were literally at the centre of agriculture, in terms of the connections these cultures have to Country and to sugarcane farming. At the same time as bringing regenerative agriculture into the public realm, we were able to publicly acknowledge the Aboriginal custodians and the Australian South Sea Islanders in both the contemporary and historical frameworks.



5.12 Sakwolo Islander Dancers with audience members, *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, July 2017
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Subsequently, we worked with representatives of both communities, as well as the Italian and Maltese communities, in the planning and execution of events and activities. Planned as a work of agricultural land art, the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* had grown out of *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* and was located in an accessible public space in the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens on the fringe of the city. The project site, 'The Beacon', was in close proximity to the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association (MADASSIA) meeting hut. This enabled a close working association with MADASSIA, who were responsible for much of the care and maintenance of the crops. The work was 'owned' by many people: artists, farmers, educators, MADASSIA and the Yuwibara people, who gave us permission to work on their land.



5.13 Uncle Doug Mooney and Starrett Ve a Ve a speak during the *Seed and Song* planting event at ‘The Beacon’,
Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project, August 2018, Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens
 (Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

While we attempted to conscientiously observe cultural protocols, occasionally we stumbled. To build interest and participation in this project, we began by convening a community meeting at the MADASSIA hut in early February 2018. Australian South Sea Islanders, Yuwibara elders, farmers, natural resource managers and community members attended the meeting. I chaired the meeting, during which the attendees showed strong interest in being a part of the forthcoming agricultural land art project in the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens. Each person took a turn to introduce themselves. One of the Yuwibara elders introduced himself and offered to welcome us to his country. It was a gentle reminder of our omission and responsibility to pay respect to the traditional owners. This moment highlighted one of the disadvantages of coming in from ‘outside’ to work in a community. In our excitement at meeting new people and bringing them together in a new project, we omitted an important part of the process. Afterwards, I apologised to the elders, who graciously accepted my apology.



5.14 Public meeting at Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Hut, with Yuwibara traditional custodians, Australian South Sea Islanders, Natural Resource Managers, farmers and community members, February 2018.

Subsequently, over the duration of the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*, we worked closely with the Yuwibara, Australian South Sea Islander and regenerative farming communities. We were able to extend the cultural connections in the final stage of the project for the sugarcane harvest public event—titled *Old Ways, New Ways*—in October 2019. In the months prior to the event, we worked closely with Starrett Veve, chairperson of the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association, media specialist Cherrie Hughes, and Carmel Barretta (Mackay and District Italian Association and the Mackay Maltese Club) and Marice Perna (Mackay and District Italian Association) to bring together the Australian South Sea Islander, the Italian and the Maltese communities. Representatives of these communities expressed their delight, saying that this was the first time that the three communities had come together. *Old Ways, New Ways* provided an opportunity for the older members of these communities to celebrate their hard work establishing the sugarcane industry, and their support for each other in doing so.

Connecting through performance

The four major public events held during the course of the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* blended agricultural and cultural activities: planting, harvesting, singing and dancing. The potential of music as a way into working with communities in Kiribati became a reality in Mackay, Queensland. Singing together was a joyful and playful means of connecting people across cultures and bringing our shared environmental activities into musical form. Later, music was also to form the social catalyst for the members of the *Mapping the Islands* project team (discussed in Chapter 6), forging connections across academic cultures.

Music is a valuable tool in the 'suite' of socially engaged art methods I employ, bringing cultural and environmental stories into the public realm through the universal language of song. The influence of singing and music came about through my earlier involvement in community arts. Working for the Multicultural Women's Network in Wollongong for seven years, I gained valuable experience as leader of a women's choir. This amateur, grassroots ensemble brought women from diverse backgrounds together, many of them migrants who came to Wollongong in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and worked at the Port Kembla steelworks or in the textile industry. They brought with them traditional songs from their home countries. I arranged those songs as choral and instrumental works, which we would perform at local events. Singing songs from many different musical traditions was a way for women to feel a sense of pride in their own cultures. Singing them together gave women a sense of belonging in which they could share joy, share stories, laugh and learn.

In Queensland, for *Sugar vs the Reef?*, music entered our processes organically. Contemporary mechanisation in sugarcane farming means that our farmer collaborator, Simon Mattsson, has no employees at all. Mattsson can handle every process with his own machinery except for the harvest, which is outsourced to people who also operate very large machinery. Similarly, brothers Michael and John Attard, who have refined the art of bio-fertiliser brewing on their sugarcane farm, revel in their thrifty, do-it-yourself work practices. Prior to mechanisation, many workers were required to service plantations. This meant that whole families could work together in the field: mothers, fathers, grandmothers,

and children. The gruelling, repetitive work of agricultural slave labour led to diverse working song traditions. Songs from across the sugar-producing nations, sung by the labourers in the canefields in countries such as India, Hawaii, and the Caribbean, tell simple stories of work routines, hardship and loss (Centre for Labour Education and Research 2015). Early footage of caneworkers shows women, children and men all working closely together. Singing was a rhythmic accompaniment to the backbreaking labour and could be sung by everyone, sometimes in a call and response pattern.

Our efforts to make connections with the Australian South Sea Islander community in Mackay led me to research some of these stories and traditions within Australia. Today's sugarcane farmers, mostly of Anglo-European descent, do not talk about the practices of 'blackbirding' and slavery that underpinned the establishment of sugarcane plantations (Affeldt 2017). Nor do they talk about the Yuwibara people, traditional owners of the Mackay region. 'The Beacon' offered a 'place' for the farmers, Australian South Sea Islanders and Yuwibara people to come together. It served multiple purposes: as a work of land art, as an agricultural demonstration plot and as a site on which to bring the history of sugarcane labour back into the picture.



5.15 'The Beacon', a 30 metre diameter agricultural demonstration site, with people planting legumes to build soil health, March 2018
(Photo: Jac Kotze)

The size of the site was key to this. 'The Beacon' was a circular area of thirty metres in diameter: large enough to create a visual impact as a work of agricultural land art, but small enough to carry out most of the agricultural processes by hand. This meant that we could create situations in which the Australian South Sea Islander and the Yuwibara communities could be invited to return to the story of land practices. To do this, we needed to create 'events' in, around and on 'The Beacon' with which to demonstrate some of those early practices. 'The Beacon' was sited in an undeveloped section of the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens. A former sugarcane farm, this area had soil that was degraded and compacted, and required a great deal of attention prior to the planting of the signature work—a dual crop of sunflowers and sugarcane. We followed regenerative agriculture methods by nourishing the soil in phases through a number of applications and plantings. This created the opportunity to stage a legume planting event in March 2018 to begin that process. We structured this event to be performative as well as agricultural.

To enhance the performative aspect of the event, I wrote 'The Legume Song', a call and response song adapted from a sugarcane workers' song from Barbados. In the lead-up to the event, we gained publicity through local media channels, including the local Indigenous radio station. We performed the song in the studio, along with the radio interviewer, and our Australian South Sea Islander and farmer colleagues Starrett Vea Vea and Simon Mattsson. On the day of the planting event, we sang the song with the participants to mark the planting occasion. Subsequently, I wrote two more iterations of the song—'The Planting Song' and 'The Harvest Song'. These songs marked three phases of the project and were performed with audience participation, at the *Legume Planting* event (March 2018), the *Seed and Song* planting event (August 2018), and the sunflower harvest event, *Sunflower and Song* (November 2018). Each iteration offered an acknowledgement of Country and the idea that *all* people who were participating in the planting and harvesting events were contributing to healthier soil and water. Later, we recorded 'The Planting Song' in a local recording studio, bringing in children from farming and Islander families to participate in the song. This became the soundtrack for the short video documentary of the *Seed and Song* event, which was then shown in a major exhibition we held at Artspace, the Regional Gallery in Mackay (see online Portfolio). I wrote a fourth song, the 'Mackay Tarantella', for the final

event in the agricultural cycle—the *Old Ways, New Ways* harvest event in October 2019. The song celebrates the many Maltese, Italian and Australian South Sea Islander families who had come from across the seas and worked hard to establish the sugarcane industry in Queensland.



5.16 Bringing people together to sing 'The Planting Song' during the *Seed and Song* planting event, 'The Beacon', *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*, August 2018
(Photo: Michael Kane)

The Planting Song, by Kim Williams, *Seed and Song* planting event, August 2018

Left column: call

Right column: response

Verse 1

*Today the ground on which we stand
Has always been Aboriginal land
We're growing healthy plants and soil
Chemical free is better for all*

*We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun*

Chorus

*Oh, oh, oh, oh
Oh, oh, oh, oh*

*We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun*

Verse 2

*Peas and beans enrich the soil
With air and sunshine and a little bit of toil
Worms and fungi and nematodes too
We work to make a happy underground zoo*

*We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun*

Chorus

*Oh, oh, oh, oh
Oh, oh, oh, oh*

*We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun*

Verse 3

*Mackay is ready to lead the way
Regenerative agriculture's here to stay
Sun and water, flower and leaf
We sing good health to the Barrier Reef*

*We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun
We plant the seeds in the winter sun*

Chorus: (repeat x 4 to end)

Singing and music perform a key social function: connecting people through the shared experience of singing together. Of the effect of music, British psychiatrist Anthony Storr wrote: “It can make all the people feel the same thing at the same time, and transmute what might be a trivial occasion into something which appears highly significant” (Storr 1991, 7). In the context of the planting and harvest events at ‘The Beacon’, collective singing brought significance to the group activity of planting seeds on a cultural and agricultural site. It brought people of different ages, backgrounds and cultures together in a shared moment. Singing together marked the occasion, taking the event beyond the bounds of a prosaic activity (planting seeds) and elevating it as an important cultural gesture. The lyrics of the songs I wrote express both the cultural intent (acknowledging the Traditional owners) and the environmental intent (building healthy soil, healthy environment, healthy Reef) through shared action. The music—its call and response pattern, its rhythm and melody—evokes the work of planting and harvesting and tending the soil, while acknowledging the social history of forced labour.



5.17 Farmer Simon Mattsson, radio presenter Charmaine Miller, Mackay and District South Sea Islander chairman Starrett Vea Vea and artists Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein singing and talking on My105.9FM Chilli Hot Country 'n Legends radio station, Mackay, 2018

In this way, the songs perform a common function of music, explained by ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes:

Its effectiveness may be twofold; not only does [music] act as a ready means for the identification of different ethnic or social groups, but it has potent emotional connotations and can be used to assert and negotiate identity in a particularly powerful manner. (Stokes 1994, 8 in Durrant and Himonides 1998, 65)

The participatory songs I wrote do two things: they signify the collective identity of the singers in that place at that time, while simultaneously performing a lyric that acknowledges cultural ownership (Yuwibara Aboriginal land) and singing a melody that refers to slave labour musical forms, referencing other forms of 'belonging'. During the events we also incorporated traditional dances, songs and stories by Yuwibara custodians and Sakwolo Islander Dancers to emphasise the importance of those cultures in the agricultural space.



5.18 Aunty Deb Netuschil leads the Diranga Gangali Aboriginal Dancers
Accompanied by Lyndon Francis on the didgeridoo, while elder Veronica Ah-Wang looks on,
Sunflower and Song harvest event at 'The Beacon', November 2018 (photo: Cherrie Hughes)



5.19 Diranga Gangali Aboriginal Dancers performing at *Seed and Song* planting event, August 2018, *Watershed Land Art Project*, Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens
(Photo: Robert Bole)

By working with farmers, Australian South Sea Islanders, Yuwibara traditional owners, Maltese and Italian communities we brought people together to put their hands into the soil and celebrate. At a time when climate urgency demands a rethinking of how we relate to nature, we reinforced connections to land and sea with stories told through song, dance and performance.



5.20 Re-enacting 'smoko', the 'old way', during *Old Ways, New Ways* sugarcane harvest event, October 2019
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Through a discussion of some of the cultural and environmental aspects at play in both Kiribati and Mackay, this chapter has drawn attention to some of the ethical implications of working across cultures within socially engaged art, and ways in which researchers might understand their role, entering into communities from ‘outside’. By focusing on the role of music in my socially engaged art practice, I have shown how singing, as one of a ‘suite’ of methods, connects people from many cultures together through participation. Songs written *for that particular event and for those particular people* resulted in a shared sense of ‘belonging’. In this respect, singing and performance formalised the occasion and created a positive and joyful atmosphere in which guests could play a part in both cultural and agricultural activities and learn about beneficial ecological practices.

In the following chapter, *Collaborating*, I develop these ideas further. I show how music catalysed a productive collaborative relationship across academic cultures in the project *Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef?* This chapter looks at the mechanics of interdisciplinary collaboration as a method through concrete examples of collaboration in action.

Chapter 6: Collaborating



6.1 Kim Williams, 2018, The Blue Spotted Rays band poster
Watercolour and watercolour pencil on paper

Tuesday 5th June, Three Isles: *We're standing on the shore when I see an eagle ray fly out of the water—an astonishing sight. I walk around to the south side of the island, where Sarah and the Indonesian researchers are doing drone surveys. The rock platforms have lots of old coral pieces embedded in them, a process of deep time. As the sand forms into rock the coral shards are slowly incorporated into the structure. I decide to walk out on the fringing reef in calf-deep water, on a receding tide. Over a distance of maybe 250 metres, four reef sharks cross my path in the shallows.*

Once the drone surveys are completed, Sarah and I return to the Kalinda research vessel in the small support boat, the Antares. The Kalinda rocks from side to side constantly, making it a challenge to move about on the vessel. A few of us have been suffering seasickness. After lunch, we prepare for a scuba dive. We motor to the south side of the island in the Antares, then flop backwards into the sea, submerging to drift along the bommies on the current. This area of fringing reef has much more life than where we dived yesterday, which was mainly dead or algae-covered coral. There are large bommies with a fair bit of live coral and lots of fish that the marine scientists later identify: fusiliers, lionfish, snapper, parrotfish, hawksbill turtles, groupers, damselfish, batfish, sea cucumbers and seaworms, blue spotted rays, halimeda, polychaetes, foraminiferida, gastropods, ascidians, acropora, annelids, nudibranch, whip coral, anemones.

In the evening, we relax in the small dining area on the Kalinda, noodling around on guitars. Mick the cook is casually strumming the only song he knows: Creedence Clearwater's 'Bad Moon Rising'. Raf and I begin playing the song, then Leah and Sarah join in the singing. We decide to change the lyrics and soon we are writing a new song together, about the life around us in the sea and the importance of saving the Reef.

Interdisciplinary collaboration

Without the diverse cooperation of artists, activists, and social and natural scientists ... it is impossible to explore and retrace the unwanted consequences of our collective actions. (Latour 2010, 229)

From the outset of this PhD, collaboration has been a central working method. My aim has been to trace what collaboration across both academic and non-academic communities could bring to real-world environmental issues. Throughout this series of research projects I have drawn on the scholarly work and the field methodologies of other disciplines to inform my research and practice. The *Kiribati Fisheries Blog* project (discussed in the previous chapter) involved collaborations with environmental social scientist Aurélie Delisle and fisheries management expert Quentin Hanich in the Community Based Fisheries

Management Program in Kiribati. I was able to observe, '*in situ*', the field methods used by Delisle, while their scholarly publications and field reports offered insights into the social structures and cultural practices of the i-Kiribati (Delisle et al. 2016). Working within the farming community in Queensland (Chapters 3, 4, 5) enabled me both to participate in the 'field' methods of regenerative agriculture and to access the science of soil biology through Soil Health Field Days and through conversations with Simon Mattsson.

This chapter specifically discusses collaboration across academic disciplines in the project *Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef?* While collaboration with other practitioners is a key method of the other three research projects, *Mapping the Islands* offers a particular study of the unique conditions within universities and the ways in which artists play a role in environmental projects generated within the academy. Exchanging ideas and methods through conversation and careful listening, we slowly explore what it means to work together "without privileging any one discourse" (Shildrick et al. 2017, 1). As collaborators, we engage with environmental themes, while simultaneously examining our work together in a meta-analysis of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Mapping the Islands is an ongoing project, begun in late 2017, in which we attempt to build a new kind of practice through a deep engagement between collaborators within the framework of a University. The initial phase of the project, a research trip to the central and northern Great Barrier Reef, was funded by the Global Challenges program at the University of Wollongong. We explore *how* to collaborate across disciplines and through this, aim to find shared ways of advocating for the protection of marine environments.

Our team of two artists (myself and Lucas Ihlein), coastal geomorphologist Sarah Hamylton and human geographer Leah Gibbs began by asking the question: what new methods can an interdisciplinary team bring to environmental issues that a single discipline cannot? Through the process of working together, parallel questions emerged: how can we work together? What does it mean to collaborate across disciplines? These are open questions that we continue to investigate.

There is some interchange in the terminology used to describe collaboration across disciplines. Environmental humanities scholar Jesse Peterson defines ‘interdisciplinary’ research as “that which integrates and synthesises tools or concepts taken from more than one discipline” (Peterson 2019, 69). Transdisciplinary research is conceptualised by sustainability scholar Tina Lynn Evans in the following way:

Transdisciplinary research draws upon disciplinary methods of knowledge-making as a means to generate and synthesise new knowledge, but transcends the disciplines in its drive to approximate the complex reality of its subjects of study. Transdisciplinary work is integrative, socially relevant, and oriented toward problem solving. (Evans 2015, 74)

Our *Mapping the Islands* team began by combining and learning from each other’s methods, aligning with an ‘interdisciplinary’ working model. I therefore use the term ‘interdisciplinary’ throughout this chapter.

This chapter, then, teases out aspects of this interdisciplinary collaboration through examples of our work. To begin, I offer a context for the project within the academy. I then outline the *Mapping the Islands* project with an historical background to the current pressures on the Great Barrier Reef, followed by the story of a research trip from which both creative and scholarly work emerged. I show how a collaborative ‘team’ identity was forged through music and song, which extended into collaborative writing, studio recording and visual design. I draw on passages from a co-authored publication that examines interdisciplinary collaboration as a method. Through this discussion, I demonstrate some of the ways in which our collaborative team seeks to broaden both scholarly and public access to pressing environmental problems. In doing so, I demonstrate how artists, through our ‘toolkit’ of practical and dialogic methods, play a critical role in activating environmental discourse.

In the academy

Many scholars now argue for the necessity of cooperation across academic disciplines to address the increasing complexity of global social and environmental problems (Castree

2017; Evans 2015; Godemann 2008; Latour 2010). Environmental education scholar Jasmin Godemann contends that universities face the difficult but necessary task of reorganising their existing structures and aims to take an active part “in a future-oriented global framework of responsibility” (Godemann 2008, 626). Evans concurs, emphasising the need for interdisciplinarity, in both research and education praxis (Evans 2015, 71). To achieve this, discipline-based structures must be called into question. Exploring the historical disciplinary divides between the sciences and the humanities, geographer Noel Castree argues for a new way forward:

What is now required is a new means of combining expertise across the “three cultures” divide [natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities].

Epistemic communities need do so not merely to collaborate but to unsettle each other so that a new *modus operandi* emerges. A more inclusive, more multidisciplinary, more dialogical global change research deserves to become influential worldwide. (Castree 2017, 65)

Castree refers to the limits of traditional disciplinary methods in a rapidly changing world. He infers that the coming together of disciplines will not only usefully combine expertise but also allow different methods to emerge. The trend towards academic collaboration echoes the growing trend of artists working collaboratively within and across disciplines to act more directly on social, political and environmental issues. Collaboration between artists is not new, and each collaborative relationship is unique. Some collaborations, like the Harrisons, who worked together for over 45 years, are enduring. Others form and reform, with various combinations of people (WochenKlausur, Suzanne Lacy and collaborators) over many years. Claims to authorship also vary: some groups, such as General Idea (1967-94), were generally not identified by individual names. All of their works, even individual projects, were attributed to General Idea. A commonality across these groups, however, is the experience of *working together*, creating works through collective processes. The Harrisons provide their own perspective, as artists who have collaborated for decades with the sciences: “As artists, we have an odd advantage. Unimpeded, we dance across the disciplines and practice seeing with the eyes of a stranger” (Centre for the Study of the Force Majeure 2018, 5).

The Harrisons use their considerable knowledge of the natural sciences and their work with other disciplinary practitioners to build comprehensive proposals in response to problems. They also use their vision as artists to take a broad overview of a problem as ‘outsiders’. In discussing the Harrisons, art historian William L. Fox identifies the missing link between scientific knowledge and policy response:

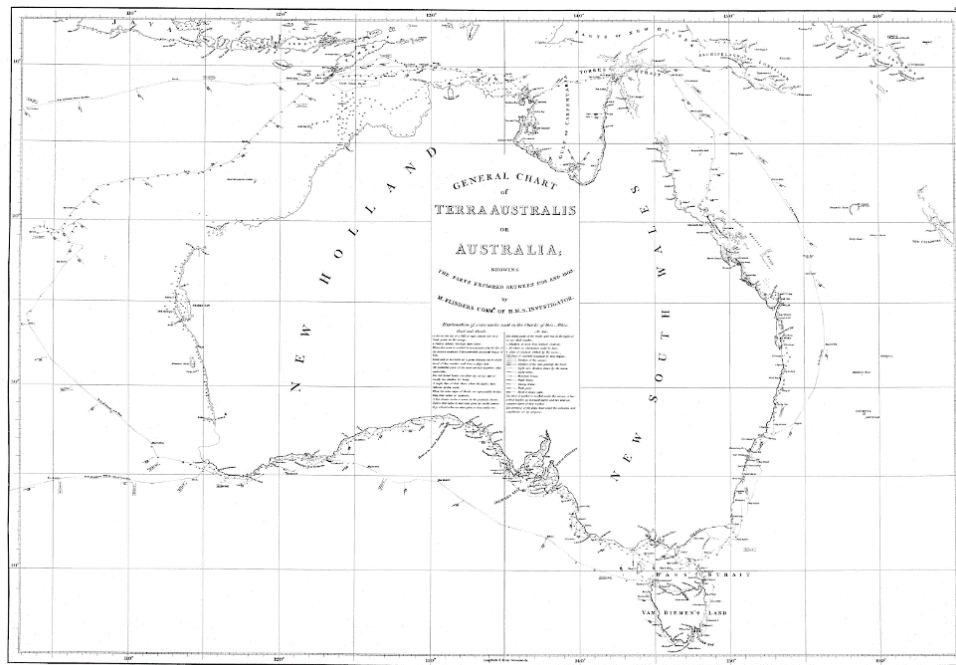
Science is terrific at collecting environmental data and creating ecological knowledge from it. But it’s a long step from scientific analysis to policymaking and political action. Helen Harrison has pointed out that the essential step in between is creating empathy for a place. If people understand the knowledge *and* care about how that works out in a specific place for which they have empathy, they are much more likely to force bureaucracies and politicians to react to the knowledge. (Fox in Harrison and Harrison 2016, 442)

Scholar of arts/science collaborations, Megan Halpern, examines the disciplinary boundaries that traditionally separate the arts, sciences and humanities. These boundaries have been formed historically as a way of differentiating methods and expertise (Halpern 2011, 923). Halpern contends that the ‘professionalisation’ of disciplines serves to maintain autonomy and monopolisation of ‘territories’ (2011, 924). Over time, the maintenance of the scholarly boundaries between art and science has reinforced the idea “that science is a superior, and even perhaps the ultimate, form of knowledge production” (2011, 924). Yet, according to Halpern, boundary-crossing is part of the everyday business of the arts and sciences. Interdisciplinary collaborations form ‘boundary objects’, “those scientific objects which both inhabit several intersecting social worlds ... and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them” (Star and Griesemer 1989, 393 in Halpern 2011, 924). In other words, “boundary objects can be understood as objects that are not fully naturalized by any one community of practice” (Stoytcheva 2013, 2). Star and Griesemer observe that, as boundary objects contain elements from the different worlds that co-own the object, “mismatches from the overlap become problems for negotiation” (Star and Griesemer 1989, 393 in Halpern 2011, 925).

It is this fertile territory that *Mapping the Islands* explores and attempts to negotiate. Our boundary object is the Great Barrier Reef in general, and several low-wooded islands in the central and northern Great Barrier Reef in particular. This 'place' stirs up many methodological viewpoints through its biological, geographic, sociological and political complexity. How do we, as collaborators, loosen our primary gaze to a point where we can find common ground? The approach that Hamylton, Gibbs, Ihlein and I have taken in the *Mapping the Islands* collaboration is a delicate dance between looking at other ways of thinking, listening to other points of view and offering our own. To do so, we engage playfully with each other in order to explore those differences and similarities. We choose to not privilege any one discipline. Rather, we have worked to generate creative and scholarly works that combine our skills in an attempt to transcend disciplinary boundaries. This approach is part of our search for new methods and new insights, a new form of interdisciplinarity. To trace the circumstances in which our collaborative work has emerged, the following section provides the backdrop for the first stage of our collaborative project, a journey to the Great Barrier Reef.

The sensorium

Until European navigators sailed the eastern coastline of Australia, the Great Barrier Reef did not exist in the European mind. Sailors encountered a complex, treacherous obstacle that hampered many a ship's passage from south to north and indeed at times brought ships to a watery end. Even as late as 1973, budding marine scientist Charlie Veron, given the task of creating a taxonomy of corals of the Great Barrier Reef, used maps drawn by Matthew Flinders in the early nineteenth century, as they were at the time the most reliable navigational references (McCalman 2013).



6.2 Matthew Flinders, Map of Australia, explored between 1798 and 1803
National Library of Australia, MAP RM 1777

Now the Reef has been thoroughly charted and a great deal is known about coral reef ecosystems. It is no longer viewed as a hazard, but rather as a precious jewel, vulnerable to human forces and the impacts of climate change. The Great Barrier Reef, in a healthy state, is a wondrous place. Environmental historian Iain McCalman describes the effect on the sensorium that the Reef typically engenders in those who visit this rich ecosystem. The term sensorium describes “the sum of a person’s perceptions, or ‘the seat of sensation’, of their interpretation of an environment” (Merchant 2012, 216). For those fortunate enough to dive or snorkel on a healthy coral reef, the sensorium is flooded with a range of sometimes overwhelming sensations: wonder, astonishment, awe, rapture, excitement (McCalman 2018). To what are we responding? A vibrant animal and plant community, certainly, but on a sensory level we are absorbing the full spectrum of colour, texture, form and movement and the interplay of these elements through our gaze. To see this is to appreciate the significance of coral reef ecosystems and the life they support, both human and animal.



6.3 Corals on the Great Barrier Reef, 2017
(Photo: Line K. Bay, Australian Institute of Marine Science)

Coral reefs support an estimated one billion people worldwide, in fisheries, tourism, coastal erosion protection and cultural practices (World Wildlife Fund 2019). The decline of the Great Barrier Reef and its future is firmly in the public view, but to date warnings from scientists have yielded little decisive action from Australian Governments. We began to wonder if an interdisciplinary practice might have greater impact on public and policy response than science can on its own.

A background to the struggle for the Great Barrier Reef over the past fifty years provides some idea of the political and environmental climate surrounding its past and future. The first serious environmental challenges to the Reef arose in the 1960s, with both private and state plans to exploit the majority of the Reef for fertiliser, cement, gas and oil (McCalman 2017, 77). From 1965 to 1975, the Australian poet Judith Wright joined forces with artist John Busst and forester Len Webb, in a decade-long campaign to protect the Great Barrier Reef. Combining their talents and resources, Wright, Busst and Webb used the power of poetic language, the persuasiveness of scientific evidence and the good fortune of political connections to battle the Queensland Government's support for the commercial exploitation of the Reef. Ultimately, they were successful and their persistence resulted in the Reef's classification as a Marine Park in 1975, with special protections. Following this,

the Great Barrier Reef achieved World Heritage status in 1981. Yet Judith Wright was under no illusions. In the 1990s, she wrote of the ever-present threats to the Great Barrier Reef: “The Reef’s fate is a microcosm of the fate of the planet. The battle to save it is itself a microcosm of the new battle within ourselves” (Wright 2014, 186).



6.4 Bleached coral on the Great Barrier Reef, 2017
(Photo: Brett Monroe Garner/Greenpeace)

The direct commercial pressures on the Reef in the 1960s and beyond, through tourism, fishing, mining and international shipping, are joined by the global phenomenon of climate change. Marine scientists Terry Hughes and Charlie Veron make it clear that the Reef is in decline and cannot recover from the increased frequency of coral bleaching events (Hughes et al. 2018). The past few years have seen successive coral bleaching events due to elevated sea surface temperatures; temperatures which are simply too hot for many corals. In their heat-stressed state, corals expel the zooxanthellae, the symbiotic microorganisms living inside coral which photosynthesise sunlight and produce the sugars which sustain their hosts. The zooxanthellae give corals their colour; corals can recover from bleaching if the sea temperature normalises, but if the sea temperature rises in another cycle, the coral may be unable to recover and eventually dies and becomes covered with algae. This results in the coral graveyards that divers and snorkelers are now accustomed to seeing on the Great

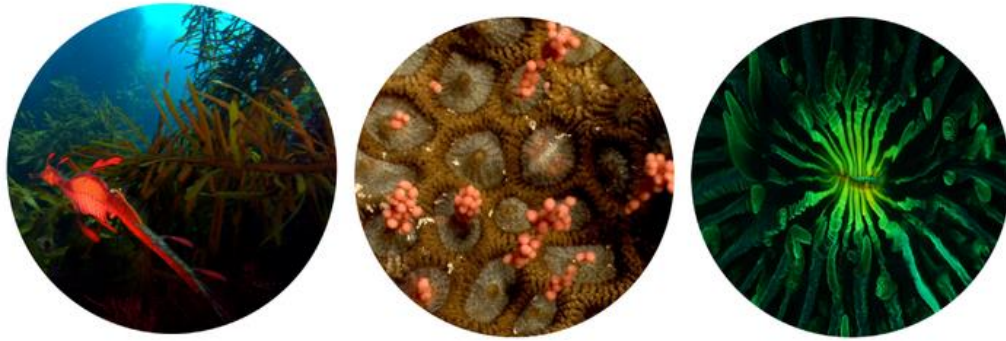
Barrier Reef. Global warming, driven in large part by greenhouse gas emissions, exacerbates elevated sea surface temperatures (Hoegh-Guldberg 1999, 839-866).

Today the challenges to the Reef are both local and global: chemical and sedimentary run-off from land, coal mining and overfishing are the responsibility of the State and Federal Governments, while climate change represents a far more complex set of global problems. Many in the scientific community are frustrated that their decades of work have not resulted in effective responses to the causes of coral reef decline. Climate scientists (Hughes et al. 2018) make it clear that while land-based practices play a role in water quality, the biggest threats to coral reefs around the world are the impacts of climate change. Despite the increased public focus on the predicament of the Great Barrier Reef, the current Federal Government has directed its energy and funding toward improving water quality from land-based practices, while simultaneously resisting calls to reduce carbon emissions from coal-based power. There is a disjuncture between scientific evidence and government policy.

Judith Wright, John Busst and Len Webb set a precedent for a multidisciplinary approach to environmental advocacy, making a successful case for the protection of the Great Barrier Reef. More recently, Australian artist Lynette Wallworth worked with coral scientists and cinematographers to create an immersive video installation (*Coral: Rekindling Venus*, 2012) for the same reason. Combined with a TEDx talk, Wallworth made a case for the necessity of coral reefs by designing a work that excites the sensorium, evoking wonder and empathy for coral ecosystems through an immersive experience of their liveliness. The title of the work refers to the global cooperation that enabled Edmund Halley to calculate the Earth's distance from the Sun using multiple observations of the Transit of Venus.

Coral: Rekindling Venus was shown simultaneously in planetariums around the world "in the hope of finding a global community" as Edmund Halley had (Wallworth 2012). Its first showing, at which I was present, evoked a sense of wonder and hope. In the enveloping space of the planetarium, the work immersed the viewer in an underwater world through the senses. I felt small, humbled. This was particularly so in a sequence that captured the annual 'coral spawn'. Corals simultaneously release their eggs and sperm in a marvel of nature that occurs on only one evening each year, determined by the cycle of the moon.

Wallworth says “corals, too, are responding to their place in the solar system” (Wallworth 2012).



6.5 Lynette Wallworth, 2012, *Coral: Rekindling Venus* (video stills)

In *Coral: Rekindling Venus*, Wallworth utilises scientific knowledge in the creation of an immersive, affective artwork. In the project *Mapping the Islands*, we take a different approach: we bring disciplines together from the outset in order to ask questions that arise from collaboration. We hope to learn something by putting ourselves in an unfamiliar situation, working together. Outcomes are not predetermined; rather, they are the result of a playful, dialogic approach in which the collaborators explore ideas together. To date, our production—song recordings, conference presentations, vinyl records, posters, scholarly articles and book chapters—is based both on responses to fieldwork and on an exploration of what it means to collaborate across disciplines.

Mapping the Islands—a seafaring tale

In recent years, marine scientists have acknowledged that science alone cannot persuade governments or policy makers of the need for robust environmental policies to protect the Great Barrier Reef (Hamylton 2018). One of our collaborators, coastal geomorphologist Sarah Hamylton, turned to interdisciplinary practices to test this idea. Hamylton felt that combining disciplinary methods to explore new approaches could potentially break old

patterns of thinking and behavior and result in paradigm shifts both in the academy and in environmental management.

Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef? first came into being as a mapping project. Hamylton proposed to remap a number of islands in the central and northern Great Barrier Reef, mapped 45 years previously in 1973, and 45 years before that in 1928. Through contemporary digital mapping techniques, changes to these islands could be observed. Hamylton opened up a collaboration across disciplines to see what others could bring to her work on coral islands and reefs. Collaboration became central to her evolving approach to science:

We have a responsibility to lead change. This responsibility raises questions, such as: how do scientists cope with the emotional burden of their knowledge? And how can these emotions galvanise us into action? ... Emotional conflicts around climate change have prompted me to revisit the reasons I became an environmental scientist. I am now using forms of expression that resonate with my personal values and add scientific authority to the argument for resisting the coal industry. (Hamilton 2018)

Human geographer Leah Gibbs, Ihlein and I were invited to participate in this project. In June 2018, Hamylton, Gibbs and I, along with marine scientist Rafael Carvalho and a group of Indonesian research students led by Nurjannah Nurdin, spent seven days on a boat on the central and northern Great Barrier Reef. We visited and worked on and around four low wooded islands. There were several aims for this expedition. Sarah Hamylton trained the Indonesian scholars from Hasanuddin University, South Sulawesi, in aerial drone mapping techniques. Carvalho led underwater video ground referencing surveys. Gibbs and I assisted in the underwater surveys. Finally, and most importantly for this particular project, Hamylton, Gibbs and I undertook exploratory collaborative activities.



6.6 Passengers and crew of the research vessel *Kalinda*, Cairns, June 2018

From the outset, we approached the collaboration as an experimental process, one that resisted the instrumental view of artists as science communicators. Beginning from the ground up, we allowed our experiences on the Great Barrier Reef to suggest ways of working together. What evolved from this trip was a journey from mapping to music and beyond, through open-ended discussion, play and experimentation. Drawing on my experiences of bringing cultures together through music, I introduced songwriting and singing. As a result, collegial relationships were formed through the joyful experience of collaborative music-making, providing a platform to express our political and environmental views and opening up new possibilities for academic research.

We spent the week moving between four different low wooded islands on a sea that was in constant motion. The research vessel rocked back and forth incessantly, causing waves of seasickness in some of the passengers. Days were spent on the islands doing aerial drone surveys, and conducting bathymetry surveys from the support vessel and scuba dive surveys of the fringing reefs. Land-based surveys of the islands were carried out on foot by circumnavigating each island.

Back on the boat, evenings were spent in the dining cabin. In this relaxed atmosphere, spontaneous singing and playing led to the collective writing of a song about our

immediate experiences of the Great Barrier Reef. Opportunistically written to the tune of the 1969 hit *Bad Moon Rising* by John Fogerty (Creedence Clearwater Revival), people contributed their ideas in good humored debates about the lyrics of the song. In under an hour, *The Reef Song* was composed (see Portfolio). The construction of the lyrics relied on the knowledge of the marine scientists and geographer and on my lyric-writing and musical skills. The song beseeches then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull to put an end to coal mining for its impact on coral reefs. The song dated quickly, as Turnbull was ousted by his own party soon after, solidifying the political barriers to climate action in the conservative party room. Subsequently, we amended the lyrics to affirm the groundswell of voices demanding action on climate change.



6.7 Rafael Carvalho, Leah Gibbs, Kim Williams, Sarah Hamylton (not in picture) writing 'The Reef Song' on board the *Kalinda* research vessel, June 2018
(Photo: Sarah Hamylton)

Collaborative writing of the lyrics to *The Reef Song* wove together marine science and environmental politics through the rhythm and meter of pop poetry. The process revealed the capacity of music to bring people together to share joy and transmit messages through the lyric and melodic power of song. Importantly, it emerged in a playful atmosphere,

where outcomes were not expected or anticipated. The song not only reflects a mutual set of experiences and sentiments; it integrates the knowledges and expertise of the group through disciplinary exchange.

Plaiting perspectives through collaborative writing

Over a week, the research vessel *Kalinda* motored between Three Isles, Two Isles, Nymph Island, and Low Wooded Island. Each of these islands offered a rich array of material for the scientist, the geographer and the artist. The wonderment of being in such a place was tempered by two stark experiences, one on land and the other underwater. At each island, we scuba dived to survey the fringing reefs. Under the water, living coral was scattered thinly amongst bleached or algae-covered dead coral. On the shores of the islands, the natural flotsam thrown up by waves, currents and winds was entangled with a vast array of human detritus: thongs, fridge doors, fluorescent tubes, and most starkly, plastics of all kinds.



6.8 Kim Williams, Found thongs arranged by colour, Three Isles
(Photo: Kim Williams)

To explore other collaborative possibilities with Gibbs and Hamylton, I read a short account of a walk I took around the perimeter of Nymph Island earlier that day. Hamylton and Gibbs agreed to do the same walk and write their own reflective accounts. Prior to the walks, Gibbs shared with us the work of Scottish author Kathleen Jamie (2005), whose observational writing is particularly alive to her surroundings:

The town's jackdaws all rise at once, swirl over the gardens clucking before they land again on the trees and rock ledges. The peregrines are all vista—their high ledge affords them a view of the entire estuary, from the mountains almost to the sea, in all its greys and blues, its reeds and its river islands. A view, if indeed they see 'views' at all, of water and air. At ebb-tide, the estuary's exposed sandbanks are long wing-shapes crowded with feeding birds. Immediately below the peregrines, however, are the pitched slate roofs of the town, and its many disused chimneys. Chimneys are the jackdaws' haunt, and I envy them their elevated life, at once part of a household and part of the wide air. (Jamie 2005, 33-34)

What could this lively writing bring to environmental scholarship? Artist and scholar David Carlin discusses the trend toward *creative nonfiction* in the academy:

Philosophers, anthropologists, environmental humanists and other scholars are increasingly experimenting with modes of writing enmeshing scientific data and critical theory with affectively charged, embodied and intimate accounts. (Carlin 2017, 1)

Carlin argues that experimentation with new ways of writing is a rejection of human/nonhuman binaries, "the confession of uncertainties and wonder looping through attempts at knowing" (2017, 8). In this spirit of experimentation, we wrote our three individual observational accounts of walks around Nymph Island (see Portfolio). They reveal a great deal about disciplinary viewpoints, yet they can only grasp fragments of knowing. In our written accounts, Hamylton was keenly aware of the geomorphology of the island, whereas Gibbs offered a broader social view of global consumption through the presence of plastic waste on the island shorelines. I used anecdote and metaphoric imagery, offering

narrative layers to the portrayal of the island. Each account is in turn speculative and informed, evocative and critical, guided by a deep curiosity about the island. Later, in a group residency at the Bundanon Trust artist-in-residence program, I wove those accounts together into a single short piece of writing, *A Walk Around Nymph Island*. I reproduce this woven text here in full in order to show an example of creative meshing of disciplinary perspectives, which then sparked further interdisciplinary writing in a scholarly context.

“A walk around Nymph Island”—Kim Williams, Sarah Hamylton and Leah Gibbs, June 2018

Moored just outside the fringing reef, we prepare to take the smaller boat to shore. Nymph Island has the promise of crocodiles; someone saw tracks on the beach earlier in the day. I ask our skipper Dan, “Could there be crocodiles on this island?” “Definitely a strong possibility” he says “with that lagoon in the middle”. “Can they swim all that way from the mainland?” I ask. “They could easily swim the twenty or thirty kilometres to Nymph Island in a day,” he says. “The young males get kicked out of home by the dominant adult male, so they head off to other places, sometimes far from home. When they’re old enough and ready to breed, they head back to the mainland to find females and a new home. But yes, there’s probably a few young males here”. “Oh” I said.

We land on the leeward side. Feet touch down on coarse sand. The water’s smooth here. Clear and turquoise. The Great Barrier Reef has 1100 islands, broadly grouped into vegetated sand cays, unvegetated sand cays and low wooded islands. Their marked geography tells the story of how they have evolved over the last 3000 years, shaped by wind, waves and storms. A large sand spit forms to the west, where waves wrap themselves around the submerged reef platform to deposit the sands they have transported from the coral fringes. This is a place where geography matters. Spanning almost 2000 km along the Queensland coastline, the location of each island dictates fundamental environmental characteristics like tidal range and cyclone frequency.

With crocodiles in mind, we avoid exploring the interior of Nymph Island and instead keep to the perimeter. Nymph Island is the third low wooded island we’ve visited this week. A pattern is emerging—we begin to predict the transitions of its character as we walk around its periphery. The beach sands along the northern aspect slowly disappear moving

eastwards, giving way to a conglomerate rubble platform on the windward side, where tall white rubble ramparts signify a recent storm or cyclone. Banks of broken corals look like giant middens, a motherlode of calcium carbonate. I pick up a shard as big and heavy as a thighbone. How many thousand tonnes of coral is here, I wonder? Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands?



6.9 Rafael Carvalho in front of coral rampart on Nymph Island, Great Barrier Reef
(Photo: Kim Williams)

*Skirting around the corner, a pair of terns ward us away from their lair. Rubble gives way to honeycomb bedrock with the native succulent herb *Sesuvium* nestled into the cracks. Mangroves creep at the water's edge. Toward the island interior, layered terraces of rubble of varying shades signify different periods of island building. Large depositional events bring a virgin white cover of rubble that slowly blackens with algae over time.*

The sand transitions to coarser materials as we go: shells and dead corals; shells, dead corals and thongs; shells, dead corals, thongs and a fridge door. The same process that builds the island brings the plastics. The windward side is exposed to the dominant south-easterly swell. And the swell brings life to the corals, sediment to the mangroves, and plastic to the beach.

Most surprising to me is how unsurprising it is. Disposable bottles, tangles of fishing nets, plastic drink crates, all seem so in place here. And I understand—or think I do—their story. Or at least part of it. Their complex source: our consumerist society, the prevalence of petro-chemical products, the near-miracle of plastics' durability, global economies, etc. And that there can be an 'etc.' in such a tragedy. That it has all become so expected. Each object offers a glimpse into the lives that brought it here. A green pen with a small business name and phone number still intact. A complicated arrangement of sturdy plastic drink crates, roped together, presumably to secure them on board. And the dishwashing liquid bottle, lying without a scratch. It's a different brand to the one I buy, but otherwise might have been brought here from my kitchen.



6.10 Flotsam on Nymph Island
(Photo: Leah Gibbs)

As we skirt around the southern side of the island, we wade along a large channel on the receding tide. Small, cobalt blue kingfishers flit around the mangroves. Just when it appears that I have the measure of these islands, something new and unexpected arises, like a

lagoon or a swathe of fallen Pandanus trees. But the anchor is up and we are away to the next smudge of low trees on the watery horizon. A crocodile lurks only in our imaginations.



6.11 Walking around Nymph Island
(Photo: Leah Gibbs)

This collaborative account was loosely adapted from a method of ‘plaiting’ disciplinary perspectives, devised by scholar and performance poet Helen Ramoutsaki (2018). In this method, authors contribute their own disciplinary perspective to an identified concept. A ‘curator’, identifying similarities and differences, examines these perspectives. New insights or ideas are identified through the synthesis of the disciplinary perspectives. The process is repeated in an iterative cycle, as a new line of inquiry is identified from the first stage. Loosely based on Ramoutsaki’s method, our own process was consciously experimental and iterative.

In this woven text, we combine both affective and cognitive ways of writing. The woven version of “A walk around Nymph Island” has multiple modes of engagement with its subject—it invites imaginative association, offers facts and figures, explains certain

phenomena and makes speculative connections (Hamylton 2018). While the individual accounts are immediate responses to an environment that show, in places, disciplinary perspectives, the woven text is a more deliberate experiment to determine whether a collaborative text may offer a fuller, more engaging account of place. This type of disciplinary 'weaving' of knowledge and perspectives was then brought more fully into the next phase of our musical collaboration. This writing experiment also paved the way for our work in co-writing scholarly texts.

Collaborating through song

Subsequent to the field trip to the Great Barrier Reef, and back on solid ground, Ihlein re-joined us and we formed a musical group, the *Blue Spotted Rays*. Following on from *The Reef Song*, I composed the song *Rock the Boat*, inspired by our stark underwater experiences. I then initiated a collaborative process with the group members to develop the song, which rallies the public to stand up for the Barrier Reef and for the Government to end coal mining. As a starting point, *Rock the Boat* led to further iterations as a result of a close collaborative engagement across disciplines. This iterative process stemmed from an attitude of *play* and *exploration*. Led by *process*, we maintained a culture of openness and experimentation, pushing ourselves out of our personal and professional comfort zones.

The traditions of political and social commentary in popular music offer a rich context for my explorations of the role of music in collaboration and socially engaged art. In Australia, the band Midnight Oil produced powerful songs of social and environmental commentary (*Blue Sky Mine*, 1990). Yothu Yindi's *Treaty* (1991) sang of Indigenous civil rights. Kev Carmody and Paul Kelly's *From Little Things Big Things Grow* (1993) built on stories previously told about the Gurindji land rights struggle, and spoke of the growing reconciliation movement. Carmody and Kelly's song continues to be recorded and performed by artists today, and is a staple of primary school classrooms.

Through our songs, we tested the impact of popular protest music on environmental discourses. We hoped to galvanise people into action by expressing ideas simply and anthemically. Crossing another disciplinary boundary, as amateur musicians, we went on to record *Rock the Boat* and *The Reef Song* in a professional recording studio, circulating the

music through digital platforms, radio interviews and the release of a vinyl single that incorporates the musical notation of *Rock the Boat* with footnotes (see Portfolio). To maximise our reach across both the academic and non-academic communities, we distributed the vinyl record to scientists, media outlets and politicians.

Rock the Boat

Verse 1:

*Say you wanna see anemones
Float around the reef awhile
Take a little time to cool it down
Gather all your friends and make a
sound*

Chorus:

*Rock the boat ... rock the boat
Rock the boat ... rock the boat*

Verse 2:

*Coral ain't made for a boilin' pot
Nemo likes the water cool not hot
Makin' way for the blue spotted ray
Wave your little fins and have your
say*

Chorus:

*Rock the boat ... rock the boat
Rock the boat ... rock the boat*

Bridge:

*Swim ... swim
We swim in a rising sea
If parrotfish had political teeth
They'd bring the colour back to
the Barrier Reef*

Chorus:

*Rock the boat ... rock the boat
Rock the boat ... rock the boat*

Verse 3:

*On and on the turtles hatch
Damselish, keep tending their patch
If you want your reefs to stick around
Better keep the carbon in the ground*

Chorus to end



6.12 The Blue Spotted Rays rehearsing, August 2018.
From left: Mystery Carnage, Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein, Sarah Hamylton, Rafael Carvalho, Leah Gibbs

To unpack the mechanics of this interdisciplinary collaboration, we co-authored a book chapter for *Sustaining Seas: Oceanic Space and the Politics of Care* (Probyn et al 2019) which traces our process through the writing of the song, *Rock the Boat*. I incorporate some passages from the book chapter into the following discussion, as it gives a sample of our different voices coming together within the single text. We drew on the work of philosopher Margrit Shildrick, who explicitly brings together research from the arts, biosciences and humanities “to explore the complexities of heart transplantation without privileging any one discourse” (Shildrick et al. 2017, 1).

Shildrick regards meaningful interdisciplinary collaboration as a form of Deleuzian ‘assemblage’ (Shildrick et al. 2017, 5), in which meaning is drawn from the connection between concepts and the arrangement of those concepts (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Shildrick found that working alongside her collaborators “breaks through disciplinary silos to enable a fuller comprehension of the significance and experience of heart transplantation in both theory and practice” (Shildrick et al. 2017, 1). Through her

experience of collaborative work Shildrick poses a number questions, which we adopted to help us examine our own collaborative process:

- What happens when people collaborate across disciplines?
- How can we do it well?
- What new insights might emerge?
- How might collaboration change the way we think?

What happens when people collaborate across disciplines?

Our ‘research’ has been a messy mix of disciplinary perspectives, a blending of scientific, cultural geographic and artistic thinking and method. Each of us has looked at a place (the Great Barrier Reef) and its issues through our own lens and then worked these methods and concepts together into something that is greater than the sum of its parts. A tension arises, between holding our own disciplinary perspectives and letting them go in order to open up new ways of thinking and working. In the book chapter, called “Sustaining the seas through interdisciplinary songwriting”, we wrote:

That no individual researcher in our team works with a full knowledge of the project’s ultimate end-point has sustained these tensions. These tensions were productive in terms of building relationships that truly incorporate different disciplinary viewpoints. This requires each collaborator to experience a degree of disciplinary discomfort, faced with unfamiliar expertise, and accept that the emphasis and focus of the project may continue to shift through time. (Williams et al. 2019)

The Reef Song was a four-way collaboration in lyric writing that directly combined all our disciplinary perspectives. Although I wrote the song *Rock the Boat*, the lyrics were informed by the knowledge of the marine scientist and the shared environmental and political viewpoints of the whole group. The process of developing and rehearsing the song involved a close engagement with each other, strengthening our group identity as we learnt how to work together. Although I was drawing the collaborators into my own methodological space, the songs allowed group play and experimentation, working outside disciplinary conventions. This sense of play allowed other ideas to emerge, such as the addition of

scholarly footnotes to the musical notation of *Rock the Boat*, incorporating a range of disciplinary perspectives (see Portfolio).

How can we do it well?

We slowly built relationships through unstructured time together, talking and sharing stories. Working well together requires trust in and respect for each other's judgment and an attitude of openness to others' ideas. So, working as a group, we became familiar with other disciplinary perspectives and practices, and accepted the limits of our own knowledge areas. Importantly, we worked to make sure that each team member was given a voice and no single discipline dominated overall, though there were different emphases at different moments. Although I was the 'junior' academic team member, I was given agency to lead the creative writing and music-making processes:

Drawing on the idea of a 'knowledge democracy', in which all actors have access to and ability to put their knowledge forward in the process of solving societal problems, Bunders et al. (2010) distinguish two dimensions of interdisciplinary collaborative research as the degree of knowledge input in the project, and the degree to which non-dominant actors are explicitly involved in the decision-making that shapes the research agenda. (Williams et al. 2020)

Music offered a focus for working together. It provided a platform for information exchange and a common knowledge base. In choosing music, a specific arts-based disciplinary approach in which none of us were experts, we all took a leap of faith, not knowing where this would lead. "Our emergent relationship of respect, and practice of listening and collaborative decision-making, helped each of us trust the process" (Williams et al. 2020). Through that process, our sense of shared purpose as a group was consolidated.

What new insights might emerge?

Returning to the concept of interdisciplinary collaboration as assemblage, the process of songwriting offered a new way to connect and arrange concepts. Margrit Shildrick likens research assemblages to the art form of assemblage devised by Schwitters, Duchamp and Picasso, in which the constitutive elements retain their identity while in combination they

simultaneously produce a new ‘fixed’ entity (Shildrick et al. 2017, 5). This concept aligns with our own experience in the creation and production of the songs. An ‘entity’ emerged from a process that combined methods and ideas into a new form that could not have come from any one of us alone. The metaphors expressed in the song *Rock the Boat* extrapolate scientific knowledge in the vernacular of popular music. For example:

[P]oetic license is taken with two scientific facts to dramatise the threat to the reef by rising sea temperatures: strictly speaking, sea surface temperatures are currently well under that of a “boilin’ pot”; and the optimal aerobic temperature for a reef fish is 29°C, not exactly “cool”. Thus, the literary conventions of songwriting compress a set of complex ecological facts into a catchy couplet that goes beyond the standard manner of science communication. (Williams et al. 2019)

We had found a new way to express “facts” about the Great Barrier Reef. As our writing moved between the creative and the academic, our scope widened, bringing in a range of methods and practices with which to arrange and articulate ideas that emerged from group processes and combined research.

How might collaboration change the way we think?

Interdisciplinary collaboration reveals striking similarities in the way artists and scientists think, a combination of intuition and reasoning. It became important for us to discuss the complementarity of the arts and sciences:

Intuitive thinking can help us see novel solutions and associations instantly, but is prone to error; reasoning checks and modifies results and represents the generally accepted ways of doing science. Scheffer et al. (2015) emphasise the value of unstructured socialising time, shared exploratory experiences, and cooperation between artists and scientists, for stimulating scientific progress by encouraging intuitive thinking. In this regard, songwriting in our project emerged as a productive approach to interdisciplinary collaboration as it created the conditions for shared structured and unstructured dialogue from

which generative discussions emerged. These went beyond educating each other about our respective disciplines, to engage in each other's disciplinary practices and also to enter into a new shared space not fully belonging to any of us. The production of a song contrasted with the standard outputs valued in many disciplines; it demanded a reconceptualisation of the validity of different output forms, including creative outputs. (Williams et al. 2019)

By insisting that none of our disciplines had precedence, we worked together from the outset to engage in an authentic collaborative research project. Three different disciplinary approaches were brought together, from which a new set of questions and methods emerged. The intuitive leaps made by one researcher would be tempered and developed through unstructured dialogue and reasoning within the group, giving ownership of the new 'fixed' entity across the research assemblage. This is messy, unstructured research that does not lead to definitive answers, challenging the expectations of the researchers, particularly the scientist.

Pushing boundaries

This project returned again and again to the idea of 'boundary' work, where disciplines co-own an object and through this negotiate the overlap of disciplinary boundaries. After professionally recording *Rock the Boat* and *The Reef Song*, we pushed *Rock the Boat* further still by engaging a professional musician to transcribe the music and lyrics of the song into musical notation. In a logical extension of the art and science already embedded in the song, Hamylton and Gibbs then added scholarly footnotes to the musical notation. The ideas and images that are compressed into a popular song of 2'40" duration were then expanded back out through the convention of scholarship (see Portfolio).

The form that this new iteration takes allows the work to operate on a number of registers: the visual, the aural, the imaginative and the critical. By combining disciplinary ideas and methods, a richness emerged from the 'conversation' between these methods. The hypothetical viewer looks at the work as a visual artefact, an arrangement of musical symbols on the page, followed by conventional blocks of text (the footnotes). They may then imagine how these symbols might sound when sung and played. Looking at the

footnotes and matching them to the lyrics of the song, another register is engaged, that of matching reasoning to a set of lyrics in a manner that is legible to the academy.

Footnoting the song offers a rich addition of marine and environmental science knowledge. Importantly, in combination with the song lyrics, the footnotes permitted us to state a political position, offering critical commentary on government policy and the influence of industry. For the marine scientist, it took a leap of faith to make public her opposition to coal mining, an industry that is supported within her Faculty. It involved a risk. Yet from a science point of view, action on climate change is desperately needed to 'save' the Great Barrier Reef. In the footnotes, we point directly to the key drivers of climate change and the politics that perpetuate them. The following is the musical notation of *Rock the Boat*, followed by the accompanying footnotes (see Portfolio for larger version):

Lucas Ihlein^a, Rafael Cabral Carvalho^b, Mystery Carnage

Rock the Boat

1. Say you wanna sea-a-me - mames Fleet around the reef at twice Take a little time to cool it down gather all your friends and make a grand Rock the boat rock-the-boat Rock the boat - rock-the-boat 2. Cool sailmak for a

Duet! Let's Name like the water can't get hot Makin' way for the blue sailing ship blow your little fans and hoist your say Rock the boat - rock the boat Rock the boat - rock the boat

Bridge: Swim swim we swim in a ri-sing sea If parrot fish had po-li-fi-cal teeth They'd bring the color back to the Barrier Reef Rock the 3, 2, 1 and on the turtles hatch!

Bridge: Swim swim we swim in a ri-sing sea If parrot fish had po-li-fi-cal teeth They'd bring the color back to the Barrier Reef Rock the 3, 2, 1 and on the turtles hatch!

Bridge: Swim swim we swim in a ri-sing sea If parrot fish had po-li-fi-cal teeth They'd bring the color back to the Barrier Reef Rock the

Dance! Fish keep twaddling their tails! If you want yer reef to stick around Better laughie carbon in the ground In the ground In the ground Rock the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo

Then let fish keep twaddling their tails! If you want yer reef to stick around Better laughie carbon in the ground In the ground In the ground Rock the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo

If you want yer reef to stick around Better laughie carbon in the ground In the ground In the ground Rock the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo - Ooo

Interdisciplinary collaboration in the future

Can artists and academics help to shape public attitudes and behaviour or government policy? It is an open question. Our collaborative work stems from a current belief that interdisciplinary collaboration may have a greater impact in the world than the work of single disciplines alone. Yet we have no evidence that our work in *Mapping the Islands* has made significant practical contributions. We can, however, contribute to scholarly discourse by combining disciplines to uncover new ways of working together and new expressions of that work. By contributing to a variety of academic journals and texts, we do two things: shape our work to specific audiences (such as the environmental humanities) by using the scholarly framework familiar to that audience, while at the same time stretching the idea of what constitutes scholarly work in that field (such as writing, recording and footnoting a song). To do so, different members of the collaborative team lead the writing process for different outlets.

We are not 'trained' to work across academic disciplines. It is an exploratory and at times uncomfortable working method. Through academic initiatives such as Global Challenges at the University of Wollongong, an artist may access other disciplinary perspectives and practices, potentially enriching the 'toolkit' of socially engaged art and creating a wider reach across both academic and non-academic communities. At this point, our exploration of interdisciplinary collaboration is just that: an exploration. We shift between process and product. As researchers, we operate in a hybrid space, one that combines discourses and moves us into the unfamiliar, on the 'boundary' between territories. The project continues to evolve, as works build upon each other and new opportunities emerge. We continue our collaboration in a spirit of experimentation and play, exploring *what* we are doing and *how* we are doing it.

The negotiation of those boundaries and the possibilities created by collaboration with other practitioners cross-pollinated with and informed my work in *Sugar vs the Reef?* Using music as a vehicle for bringing people together to express a shared set of ideas played back and forth between the two projects. Additionally, the field experiences in *Mapping the Islands* offered me greater understanding of the dynamics of the Great Barrier Reef and its

vulnerability to human impacts. Many conversations with marine scientist Sarah Hamylton and access to her scholarly field enriched my knowledge not only of marine science but also of the historical and ongoing struggle to protect the Great Barrier Reef. This connected our work on land—promoting better outcomes for the Reef through improved agricultural practices—as a terrestrial counterpart to the scientific work conducted at sea.

The impact of human practices on waterways is also evident in the project *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*, discussed in the following chapter. While *Mapping the Islands* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* seek active environmental intervention, *Waterways of the Illawarra* rather cultivates practices of care through ‘noticing’ and ‘being-with’ our local environment. Engaging with both the academic and broader communities, we approach creek-walking as a generative activity that straddles conceptual art and community engagement. As with *Mapping the Islands* and *Sugar vs the Reef?*, we build social relations through collaborative activity, but *Waterways of the Illawarra* has a distinctly local focus that demonstrates the ways in which artists work socially in their own community to develop local knowledge.

Chapter 7: Walking



7.1 Kim Williams, 2017, Cover drawing for 12 Creek Walks guidebook

17th July 2016: Picking up American Creek from the highway, we cross a footbridge to the southern bank. There's plenty of open green space in this section alongside the creek, so the going is easy. The grass is spongy and damp underfoot. Here American Creek is a deep, wide cut through the surrounding floodplain; it looks like the banks have eroded from the recent rains. Fairly soon our way is blocked by an electric fence bordering a paddock. After skirting around the back of Figtree Private Hospital, then through the grounds of a nursing home, we're back next to the creek. There are a couple of vegetable patches on the floodplain, discreetly colonising the spacious public land to make use of the rich alluvial soil. A man is tending one of the gardens. It's fenced to keep the feral deer out and it has a charming windmill ornament made from tennis ball canisters. We stop to chat and the man tells us that the floodplain gets a drenching on average once a year. He suggests that instead of

following American Creek we should turn along Brandy and Water Creek, which in his view promises a more bucolic experience with a waterfall further upstream, though he himself has never been there.

We head north-west along Brandy and Water creek, which runs along the back of the obscure suburb of Nareena Hills. The houses here are quite large. Trevor, who is visiting from Hong Kong, asks if the owners of these houses are rich. I say that they may not be rich, but they would be 'comfortable'. After a while the open land closes in. We take a foot track through a thick stand of coral trees and are eventually stopped by their large thorns. On the way back, we encounter the stench and corpses of two feral deer. Brandy and Water Creek, though not without some rubbish and pollution, is one of the cleaner-looking creeks we've walked. We don't find the fabled waterfall, instead turning back in time to drive up to the Mt Kembla summit track and walk to the lookout in the early evening. The sun is setting, leaving a soft pink hue across the horizon. We pick our way back down the track in the near dark.

Introduction

Walking came from Africa, from evolution, and from necessity, and it went everywhere, usually looking for something. (Solnit 2002, 45)

From the international (*Kiribati Fisheries Blog*) to the interstate (*Sugar vs the Reef?* and *Mapping the Islands*), I now turn to home. The spirit of the small and local comes to the fore in *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* (2014-2018), a creek-walking project led by myself, Lucas Ihlein and Brogan Bunt. *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra (WOTI)* is a process-based artwork that brings artists, friends and community members together to explore our local waterways and to 'notice' our surroundings. In this chapter, I show how socially engaged art plays out in a local environment. I discuss the significance of working locally, as a way for artists to become more enmeshed in their own communities. In particular, I find that walking allows us to slow down and to develop close ties to the land in a time of environmental urgency.

WOTI offers a counterpoint to the large-scale project *Sugar vs the Reef?* The latter is an ambitious work of agricultural transformation that involved extensive travel to work outside of our own community at specific moments and for specific periods of time. We adopted a very different approach for *WOTI*: through the loose structure of the project, we had the luxury of enacting the work at opportune moments. Inviting friends, colleagues and guests,

we simply began at the mouth of a chosen creek and walked upstream until we agreed to stop. *WOTI* is a participatory, mobile artwork that explored the physical landscape by engaging in the slow act of walking and looking, listening and talking. It allowed us to deepen social relationships and reminded us of the value of our own place. *WOTI* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* overlapped over two years, offering some balance to each other. While both projects demanded the ‘performance’ of our roles as community activators, *WOTI* allowed us to nurture our relationships at home; it offered a connection to place that grounded our work interstate and overseas. Its lighthearted nature belied the value of slow-moving journeys on foot in our landscape. Through *WOTI*, walking emerged as a key method in my ‘toolkit’ of socially engaged art practice. Drawing on avant-garde art practices and blurring the boundaries between live art and object-based art, walking presents a time and space through which collaborators and participants come to better ‘know’ their local environment.



7.2 Walking up Byarong Creek, 2017
(Photo: Vincent Bicego)

WOTI has a number of strands that emanate from the interests of the collaborators: walking as a cultural practice, as a method of socially engaged art, as a political challenge to ideas of

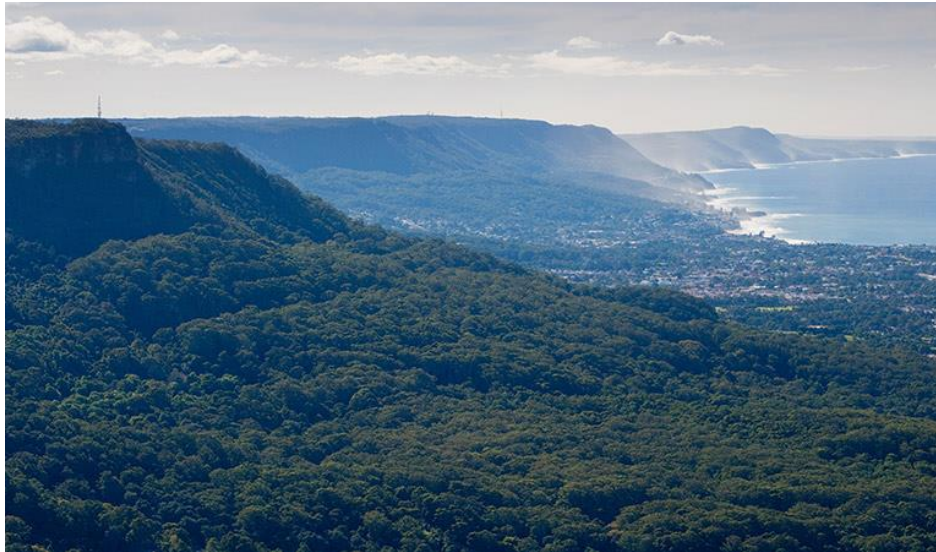
‘property’ and as a way of opening up environmental dialogues about our waterways. Over four years, *WOTI* attracted a broad range of participants: artists, historians, botanists, geographers, landcare volunteers, keen walkers, environmental managers—people from all walks of life who have enjoyed the casual expeditions with occasional guest experts. Although not all participants experienced walking as a political act, they were all aware that *something different happened* when we took time to walk together.

To set the scene, this chapter looks at some of the colonial and environmental impacts of European settlement around waterways in the Illawarra region that are revealed through the practice of walking. I then consider the idea of *decolonisation* in relation to land ownership and water ‘management’. I offer a background to the Western tradition of walking as a cultural practice through the work of historian and activist Rebecca Solnit (2002), who traces a history of Western walking from the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth to the activists of today’s cities who are getting on their feet to reclaim the streets. Artists such as Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Janet Cardiff also offer precedents for this project, as contemporary practitioners who walk, and who also translate their practice into artefacts for exhibition. Also of interest are the connections offered by other artist-led projects that focus on environmental care for waterways. Through these themes, I explore the ways in which the embodied experiences of walking along local waterways bring us in close relation to the non-human in a time of deepening environmental change. I also look at how *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* builds environmental narratives by straddling the methods of socially engaged art and gallery-based practice.

In this chapter I argue that, through the method of walking, environmental dialogues emerge within the community of walkers and through the various platforms that the project used to amplify the practice of creek-walking. *WOTI* has contributed to the field of socially engaged art by adding to the body of walking-as-art projects while at the same time raising cultural and environmental issues for participants and gallery audiences and in the academy.

Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra

A durational, participatory process-based art project, *WOTI* had a single rule, which governed our approach: start at the mouth of a creek and walk upstream. The embodied acts of walking and noticing brought attention to the intersections of human development with suburban waterways and their riparian ecosystems. Walking along creeks raised questions: what do creeks tell us about the Illawarra? What do they tell us about culture, hydrology, value, the Anthropocene, climate change? These are open questions that sometimes wove in and out of conversations between people as they walked together.



7.3 The northern Illawarra, with towns on the coastal plain between the escarpment and the Tasman Sea
(Photo: Nick Cubbin, NSW National Parks, NSW Government, 2019)

The Illawarra region spans from Helensburgh in the north to Kiama in the south. Wollongong, the central city of the Illawarra, is located ninety kilometres south of Sydney. The region is bounded to the east by the Tasman Sea and to the west by a steep escarpment, which runs for 120 kilometres, nearly parallel with the coastline, from the cliffs of the Royal National Park in the north, to the Shoalhaven River in the south. The Illawarra escarpment rises on average 300 metres above sea level. The vertical cliffs at the top of the escarpment are formed from quartz sandstone, while the forested slopes underneath are

comprised of erosion-prone shales, claystones and coal seams (Geological Sites of NSW 2019). The fifty or more creeks in the Illawarra are formed in the steep, forested escarpment to the west of the coastal plain, flowing down gullies, bisecting housing tracts, industry, farmland and commercial districts, then eventually flowing to the Tasman Sea and to Lake Illawarra.



7.4 Walking along a concreted section of Cabbage Tree Creek, 2017
(Photo: Vincent Bicego)

Exploring a creek with friends and colleagues revealed the scale and impact of human presence in the land: only the steeper faces of the escarpment have escaped development. The act of walking is an act of noticing: it is impossible to ignore the neglect of our waterways, despite remnants of great beauty scattered here and there along creeks. Along their course, the creeks are compromised by development, silting, erosion, weed infestation, property encroachment, rubbish dumping and pollutants. They are concreted in sections, diverted, built over, channelled underneath streets and parklands. Here and there local bushcare groups struggle to remediate the riparian zones of waterways in their immediate area, while downstream creeks may be repositories of garbage, or sites of furtive social activity. Attempting to walk along local creeks reveals the close rubbing together of

the built and natural environments. The waterways of the Illawarra are in many places inaccessible through fencing and lantana infestation, or they are on private property. Walking along a creek invited the walkers to rethink the value of these ancient markers in the landscape. The experience offers a very different viewpoint of the landscape and therefore opens up new ways of talking about a place and possibly, new ways of relating to each other.



7.5 Lounge setting under a causeway, on the bank of Hewitts Creek, Thirroul
(Photo: Kim Williams)

In the following discussion, I consider how the embodied activity of walking upstream engages further with the idea of *decolonisation* in relation to land ownership and water ‘management’. This flows on to the following section which discusses *WOTI* through the Western cultural traditions of walking, walking-as-art and walking in a time of environmental urgency. Through these themes, I show how this socially engaged artwork contributes to environmental knowledge and discourse by opening up dialogues in the broader community.

Not *Terra Nullius*—a place we call home

The Illawarra is home to the Wodi Wodi traditional owners. Most of the place names in the Illawarra are derivations of local Aboriginal words: Thirroul, Windang, Wollongong, Bellambi, have various meanings according to different sources. These names have other histories either obscured or written over by intensive colonial activities of timber-getting, dairy farming and coal mining.

During our first walk along Hewitt's Creek in Thirroul in 2014, a question arose for me: could the waters of these creeks become drinkable again? That the waters are undrinkable is without question: it would take the bravest soul to imbibe water from these creeks. Their value as a water resource has been lost—the Illawarra's drinking water comes from three dams on the forested plateau above the escarpment, carefully sequestered from human habitation. These catchment areas are heavily restricted to public access, with fines of up to \$44 000 for trespassing. The secured water supply renders the creeks that run down through city and suburbs excess to human need. They are therefore unprotected and mostly unloved, weed-infested 'drains'. In extreme rain events such as the 1998 floods, the creeks of the Illawarra have asserted their presence, forming raging torrents that flowed down the steep escarpment, flooding the developed areas that closely flank the creeks downstream (Hart and Pead 2018). Lives, property and habitat were lost. After the floods, the creeks were taken more seriously and engineering measures increased: more causeways, more concreting, more gabion walls.



7.6 A car surfaces in Towradgi Creek after waters subside following the Illawarra floods of 1998
(*Illawarra Mercury*, photo: Kirk Gilmour)

Whose land, whose water?

The colonial implications of this project—walking on the traditional lands of the Wodi Wodi people, adding yet another layer of trespass—led us to acknowledge local Indigenous ownership of the lands we inhabit. This raised questions: what were the priorities of the project? What were our cultural obligations, given that we recognise that colonial practices have had major impacts on the creeks that are the focus of this work? The practices that portray the creeks as ‘assets’ (albeit neglected assets) call for an alternative view: a recognition of these streams as sacred places in a land formed by a cosmology much older than ours. There are recent international legal precedents supporting the rights of nature: both the Whanganui and the Ganges Rivers were granted personhood in 2017 (Tanasescu 2017). By inviting an Indigenous worldview into the experience of walking along creeks, we sought a deeper relationship to land and water. We began a process of inviting local Aboriginal elders to walk with us, and lead the conversation, instilling a recognition of foundational ownership and ideas of custodianship and care. Aboriginal philosopher Mary Graham (1999) describes the relationship of Aboriginal people to their local place:

[E]very Aboriginal person has a part of the essence of one of the original creative spirits who formed the Australian landscape. Therefore each person

has a charter of custodianship empowering them and making them responsible for renewing that part of the flora and its fauna. (Graham 1999, 107)

Graham offers advice to the many white Australians who are searching for a new spiritual identity in relation to Aboriginal people and reconciliation. In her view:

The best way of achieving these ends is to start establishing very close ties with the land, not necessarily via ownership of property but via locally-based, inclusive, non-political, strategy-based frameworks, with a very long term aim of simply looking after the land. (Graham 1999, 107)



7.7 Traditional owner Jade Kennedy offering a Welcome to Country, Byarong Creek community walk, 2017
(Photo: Vincent Bicego)

Perhaps ‘noticing’ and ‘being with’ also offer intimate, local ways of being in a time of planetary environmental crisis. Traditional owner Jade Kennedy, who offered a Welcome to Country for a community creek walk in 2017, writes:

Learn from country ... it doesn’t have to be learn from the indigenous peoples ... but become familiar with your place ... become intimately in relationship ... you’ve got to be in relationship with the story of your place ... and your story within your place. (Kennedy in Ballard et al. 2019, 235)

Kennedy and traditional owner Uncle Les Bursill guided us to notice and come into relationship with our place, not just with the people around us. The process of meandering along creeks and noticing defined *WOTI*. The act of walking enabled us to reflect and reposition ourselves in relation to our surroundings. We also attempted to highlight and query the legal systems that have imposed so many barriers to walking our creeks. In the preface to our creek-walking 'guidebook', *12 Creek Walks* (Williams, Bunt and Ihlein 2017), we wrote:

NSW property law is complicated. If a creek runs through a suburban backyard, the creek bed and banks (but not the water flowing through it) are legally the property of the home-owner ... Dividing, fencing and "owning" land and water—these are constructs which are very new in Australia. Clearly, the dominant property ownership system imported from Europe 230 years ago does not align with the human-land systems developed over many thousands of years by Aboriginal people prior to invasion. While we cannot simply do away with the current legal system, that does not mean we have to agree with the idea that it is "right" for a creek to be privately owned ... We believe that creeks belong to everyone, but most of all, creeks belong to themselves. (Williams, Bunt and Ihlein 2017, 6)



7.8 Traditional owner Uncle Les Bursill offers a Welcome to Country and tells stories of growing up near Ooaree Creek
(Photo: Kim Williams)

In *12 Creek Walks* we openly stated our position and with that, called into question assumptions about trespass. The walks themselves enacted our opposition to colonial property law and celebrated the traditional ownership of the lands and the waterways that we crossed and recrossed. At the same time, the walks gave respectful attention to those local habitats that survive in the face of human-wrought environmental change.

Slowing down

In their ‘manifesto’ for living in the Anthropocene, scholars Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose and Ruth Fincher acknowledge “the immobilizing effect of knowing ‘the facts’ about climate change” (2015, vi) and our collective grief about climate change, habitat loss and species extinction. Citing philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood (1939-2008), Gibson et al. define two major tasks before us at this time: the first is to re-situate the human in ecological terms, the second to re-situate the non-human in ethical terms (2015, 3). To do so, we must shift our perspective, by:

cultivating the capacity for deep listening to each other, to the land, to other species and thereby learning to be affected and transformed by the body-world

we are part of ... renouncing the narcissistic defense of omnipotence and an equally narcissistic descent into despair. (2015, viii)

From this perspective the world around us is no longer a backdrop that serves human interests, but a web within which we are intimately entangled and implicated. Despair at the fate of the planet merely reinforces the idea that humans are locked in a fixed relationship with nature, unable to relinquish control. Echoing and embracing Indigenous philosophies (Graham 1999), the authors advocate small, place-based actions as a way of deepening ties with the more-than-human world.

The development practices that disregarded or actively degraded the creeks of the Illawarra invited us to rethink our relationship with the world around us. How does walking along creeks achieve this? Environmental geographer Lesley Instone provides some answers to this:

Surely we don't have time to dawdle in the face of the urgent politics of global change? But in another sense, walking might be exactly what we need. The slow, engaged and engaging attributes of walking might indeed help to enhance our connectedness with the world in embodied and creative ways. The mode of walking and wayfinding appropriate to the Anthropocene isn't a headlong rush to get somewhere 'better' or the conceit of thinking that we have the answers. Rather it's a studied movement of the here and now, a fragmentary, wandering, lively, embodied and relational process. A respectful movement that puts emphasis on sensory, contingent and fragile encounters conjured through making our way, alongside others through time and space. (Instone in Gibson et al. 2015, 137)



7.9 Community creek walk along Fairy Creek, 2018
(Photo: Kim Williams)

While it was not focused on a conventional model of land care, *WOTI* immersed people in the land as ‘witnesses’, gathering a sense of knowing, and by implication, caring, along the way. The project was observational rather than remedial; we did not seek to actively intervene in the environmental issues of waterways. Rather, we opened up the space to experience our local places through walking, learning and exchange. Through walking we discovered and uncovered waterways, truly ‘seeing’ them for the first time.

WOTI walks were leisurely ‘noticing’ walks. We gathered at the mouth of a creek with friends, colleagues and interested newcomers. We talked and listened as we slowly ambled, stopping at obstacles or points of interest, regrouping and usually having lunch somewhere along the creek. Seeing many of these creeks for the first time and consciously following their edges allowed us to constitute them as ‘entities’ in our imaginations; as meandering, continuous streams that carve a passage through landforms. They became the focus of our attention and invited us to be in the present moment, to look around. Often pushed away from the creek line by obstacles, we would detour but ultimately return to the creek.



7.10 Climbing a tricky section of upper Byarong Creek, 2018
(photo: Vincent Bicego)

A new community formed in the moment of the shared action; a friendly and cheerful atmosphere prevailed amongst an often diverse group of people and the intention of following a creek was coupled with the apparent aimlessness of doing so. Like Instone, I suggest that these acts of being in the here and now are useful counterpoints to the spectre of a future shaped by climate change. Making diverse knowledges available by inviting Aboriginal elders and specialists such as botanists to host walks offered important ways of looking at and being with a place.



7.11 Botanist Charles Huxtable identifying plant species found on Byarong Creek. WOTI 'walkshop', 2017
(Photo: Vincent Bicego)

Walking as a cultural practice

I walk for many reasons. I walk to think, to relax, to daydream, to create. I walk for solitude, I walk to socialise. I walk to feel my body in motion at its own speed, to breathe deeply, to feel the sun, wind and rain on my skin. I walk to experience the world, but especially to be immersed in the more-than-human world: the world of plants, trees, rocks, water, birds and critters. I walk to see vistas. I walk to conquer distance. I walk to be immersed *in nature*.

According to historian Rebecca Solnit, such enthusiasm reaches back to eighteenth century England: "Though many nowadays go to the fields and woods to walk, the desire to do so is largely the result of three centuries of cultivating certain beliefs, tastes, and values" (Solnit 2002, 84).

Brother and sister William and Dorothy Wordsworth undertook a gruelling midwinter walk over the Pennine Mountains to their new home in the Lake District at the turn of the nineteenth century. Despite the physical rigours of the walk, they took the opportunity to delight in the landforms around them. Solnit's research reveals that Wordsworth and his friends "are said to have founded the whole lineage of those who walk for its own sake and for the pleasure of being in the landscape, from which so much has sprung" (Solnit 2002,

82). William Wordsworth's poem, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798*, combines philosophical musings on life with appreciations of the surrounding landscapes. Essayist and poet Christopher Morley (1917) wrote:

Generally speaking, it is true that cross-country walks for the pure delight of rhythmically placing one foot before another were rare before Wordsworth. I always think of him as one of the first to employ his legs as an instrument of philosophy. (Morley 1917, in Solnit 2002, 82)

The Wordsworths' walk was made possible by the growing ease of passage through the countryside from the late 1700s, when roads improved and travellers were less vulnerable to thieves (Solnit 2002, 93). A new taste for walking in nature grew from the tradition of walking in English gardens, as the public gained access to formal spaces that gradually became larger and more culturally significant (Solnit 2002, 86). As estates grew in size, tastes evolved, "from the formal and highly structured to the informal and naturalistic" (Solnit 2002, 85). Walking became increasingly democratised into the twentieth century, as aristocratic estates became more accessible to the English public and their growing penchant for walking as a pleasure activity.



7.12 Women walking by Elterwater, Lake District, England in the 1940s
(Image: Lake District National Park, 2019)

Yet, the passage to walking and moving freely has not been equal. Access to safe spaces in which to wander has always been dependent on class or gender. Historically, women's freedom of movement has been limited to a degree "that has profoundly shaped the identities of both genders over the millennia in most parts of the world" (Solnit 2002, 234-235). Punishment and intimidation of women in many parts of the world for the simple act of taking a walk is invariably linked to the control of women's sexuality (Solnit 2002, 233). Today, in Australia, women are still vulnerable when out walking alone, as murders of women in urban centres have shown (ABC News 2016). Nevertheless, I fiercely maintain my rights to take up space outdoors, day and night, and to walk as fearlessly as any person. My walks with other women in remote parts of Australia such as the Kimberley, Cape York and Tasmania are an assertion of those rights as much as an assertion of our capacity to do those things that historically were the province of men. An awareness that I am a female collaborator leading *WOTI* informs the way we all work. As a woman, I can 'lead the way', even when in the midst of a suburb.

Walking as art

WOTI is part of a lineage that can be traced back to earlier avant-garde art practices. Since walking became a contemporary art practice, "artists have returned time and again to the walking motif, discovering that, no matter how many times it has been done, it is never done" (O'Rourke 2013, xvii). The Situationist Internationale movement (1957-72) pioneered walking as an expanded art practice. Formed in post-war Europe as a "search for a new, united and international avant-garde" to re-invigorate earlier avant-garde attempts "to achieve a revolution of life through art" (Stracey 2014, 1), this urban movement rejected capitalism and sought a reformation of the whole fabric of life, using a range of tactics (Stracey 2014, 4). Guy Debord, a leading voice of the Situationists, defined the *dérive* (or "drift") as "a technique of rapid passage through various ambiances" (Debord 1956). In a *dérive*, small groups of people suspend their everyday routines to literally drift through cities "and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there" (Debord 1956). Debord claims that the urban *dérive* is shaped by "psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that

strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones” (Debord 1956). The *dérive* is a walk for its own sake.

WOTI takes certain cues from the Situationists. *WOTI* evolved through the environmental and political questions that emerged from the act of walking and talking. The creek walk is a contemporary version of the *dérive* in the sense that the geography of landforms and human interventions determines our movements. Like the *dérive*, a *WOTI* walk is a walk for its own sake. There is no fixed end point or intended ‘outcome’. It disrupts the status quo, with respect to questions of land ownership and public rights of way: walking along a creek in the Illawarra almost invariably involves trespassing.

Although we defined *WOTI* as a local exploration, it was based on a ‘score’ that could be performed anywhere by anyone. We experienced first-hand the way human settlement coexists with or displaces the landscape. The work connected us to a fluid community of people who take an interest in their local waterways. On the home page of the *WOTI* blog, Lucas Ihlein wrote:

In *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop describes this sort of practice as possessing a “double finality” or “double ontology”—i.e. it is work which speaks to an autonomous disciplinary field of art, and to the realpolitik of the world-beyond-the-artworld. (Ihlein 2017)

In other words, we walked simultaneously as artists practising in the loose tradition of walking-as-art *and* as citizen/activists who gathered people together to assert our rights of passage along waterways. As Rebecca Solnit says:

Walking is ... the antithesis of owning. It postulates a mobile, empty-handed, shareable experience of the land. Nomads have often been disturbing to nationalism because their roving blurs and perforates the boundaries that define nations: walking does the same thing on the smaller scale of private property. (Solnit 2002, 162)

Walking as a contemporary art practice was pioneered by British artist Richard Long. His formative work, *A Line Made by Walking* (1967), was made by walking back and forth in a

field south of London. The 'map' of the walk, a pale line left in the grass from the pressure of his feet, was then photographed, making the action not only real, but iconic. From this faint mark caused by the movement of feet came an entire art career. Long has since used walking as a "means to explore relationships between time, distance, geography and measurement" (Long in O'Rourke 2013, 49).

Long has walked all over the world. He often leaves simple marks and traces in the landscape in the course of a walk, which is carefully planned to follow a designed route or a 'rule' (O'Rourke 2013, 48). The walks are also represented in gallery exhibitions: textworks, sculptural assemblages and two-dimensional wall works. The textworks often reveal the unique 'rule' underlying each walk:

F I B O N A C C I W A L K

I	I	2	3	5	8	13	21	34	55	89
M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M	M
I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I	I
L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
		S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S

CONTINUOUS WALKS ON CONSECUTIVE DAYS

SOMERSET ENGLAND 2009

7.13 Richard Long, 2009, *Fibonacci Walk*, textwork



7.14 Hamish Fulton, 2012, *Walk*, installation view at Turner Contemporary
(Photo: David Grandorge)

Another British walking artist, Hamish Fulton, also maps his walks through textual representations and photographs, and insists that the walk itself is the artwork, stating on his website: “a walk has a life of its own and does not need to be materialized into an artwork” (2020). Nevertheless, he does indeed exhibit representations of his globetrotting walks, as seen in the image above. The will to document and create artefacts helps these works ‘exist’ for others and validates walking as an art practice.

Rule-based art

Long is one of many artists since the 1960s whose practice is formulated on ‘rules’. Scholar of contemporary art, Cary Levine (2005), defines rule-based art as an exploration of “the relationship between art making and pragmatic reason.” Artists such as Ed Ruscha (*Every Building on the Sunset Strip*, 1966), Sol Lewitt (*Modular Piece T*, 1971) and On Kawara (*Postcards: I Got Up*, 1968-79) created visual artworks based on systems or rules, while performance artists such as Marina Abramović often focused on a specific intention that guided the artwork (*The Great Wall Walk*, 1988). According to Levine, “such work speaks to who we are as human beings, continually in conflict between opposing forces of conformity

and individuality, conscience and instinct, repression and desire, laws and liberties” (Levine 2005). The operational rule for *WOTI*—start at the mouth of a creek and walk upstream—gives structure to the project and by doing so focuses the work specifically on the performative interaction between walker and creek.

As in Long’s and Fulton’s work, the performance of *WOTI* walks generate ‘mappings’ of those walks. One of the more poetic ‘maps’ to be produced for *WOTI* was *Creek Poem*, by Brogan Bunt. Unlike Long’s and Fulton’s textworks, which represent specific walks with abbreviated descriptive text, Bunt’s poem instead meditates on the nature of creeks and the action of walking them, mapped by the flow of sentences down a staircase or through their placement on a page.



7.15 Brogan Bunt, 2015, *Creek Poem*, *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*
Fluid States: Performing Mobilities exhibition, VCA gallery, Melbourne

The poem reads:

There is nothing hard about walking a creek.
One starts at the sea and heads inland, following whatever path the creek suggests.
There is always some kind of path—perhaps one that children or adults with their
dogs follow.
If the creek should veer into private property or descend through pipes underground,
one only has to take a slight detour to rediscover it again.
Soon enough the creek passes into the forest and ascends across boulders until it
disappears properly beneath the escarpment cliffs.
It is hard to precisely pinpoint the place of disappearance.
There is simply the dawning uncertainty of where to walk next. (Bunt 2015)

The focus of *Creek Poem* is the difficulty and uncertainty of creek walking and the eventual ‘disappearance’ of a creek when tracing its journey upstream, against gravity, towards its headwaters (see Portfolio). Headwaters, in the Illawarra, are the small tributary streams or springs high up in the escarpment that feed the main creek and are usually subtly branched and imperceptible. For Bunt, this is a focus of interest in a paradoxical, contradictory journey: walking towards ‘points of disappearance’.

Rules and wayfinding take a different form in the works of Canadian artist Janet Cardiff. Since 1991, she has created ‘audio tours’, inviting participants to walk a route guided by her recorded voice and by photographs. The work *Her Long Black Hair* (2004) takes viewers on a journey through Central Park, New York, with Cardiff’s voice providing a narrative. The participant replicates Cardiff’s own journey, with the audio giving the sense of a real-time companion. Yet the narrative is unsettling, swinging between history and fiction, anecdote and observation. At specific points in the walk, the viewer is instructed to reflect on one of the photographs supplied in the audio kit, linking the viewer and speaker through present experience and the past documented in the photograph (Cardiff, 2019). Cardiff’s audio walks are not so easily translatable as gallery artefacts. The works are documented through photographs such as the one below (Figure 7.16), whereas Long and Fulton take a more

conventional artistic position in relation to the gallery audience, in which the representation of a walk stands alone as an artwork in the gallery in its own right.



7.16 Janet Cardiff, 2004, *Her Long Black Hair*, audio tour of Central Park, New York

While *WOTI* sits alongside the work of Long, Fulton and Cardiff within a set of practices that could be defined as ‘walking-as-art’, it does something different. We are an audience for Long’s and Fulton’s after-the-fact gallery works; we are a cinematic audience for Cardiff’s mediated tours. *WOTI*, on the other hand, brought in the audience as collaborators and gently transformed our experience of a place without being didactic. The loose informality of the work allowed participants to come and go within the series of walks. Humour was an important aspect of the project, evident in the major gallery exhibition held in 2017-18 at the Wollongong Art Gallery.

A walk into the gallery

The geographic and social encounters of *WOTI* creek walks were the ‘live’ artworks. This primary action generated ‘secondary documents’ (Adcock 1992, 39); we used art exhibitions, workshops, artist talks, blogs, public programs and conferences to bring wider attention to waterways in the landscape. As artist and scholar Karen O’Rourke says, “walking blurs the borders between representing the world and designating oneself as a piece of it, between live art and object-based art” (2013, 13). Artefacts emerged from the walks: tools, for example, which can be used on creek walks as a playful response to the physical constraints of walking in an environment altered by humans, while also intended as art objects in exhibitions (discussed further in Chapter 8).



7.17 Kim Williams, 2017, *The WOTI Good Karma bag*, for collecting rubbish along waterways
Hand-knotted bag made from baling twine for the exhibition *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*,
Wollongong Art Gallery 2017-18 (photo: Lucas Ihlein)

Photographs taken by our colleague Vincent Bicego, videos, drawings and found objects also responded to creek-walking as a practice, highlighting the physical as well as the cultural

and environmental overlays of the complex landscape through which creeks of the Illawarra region flow.

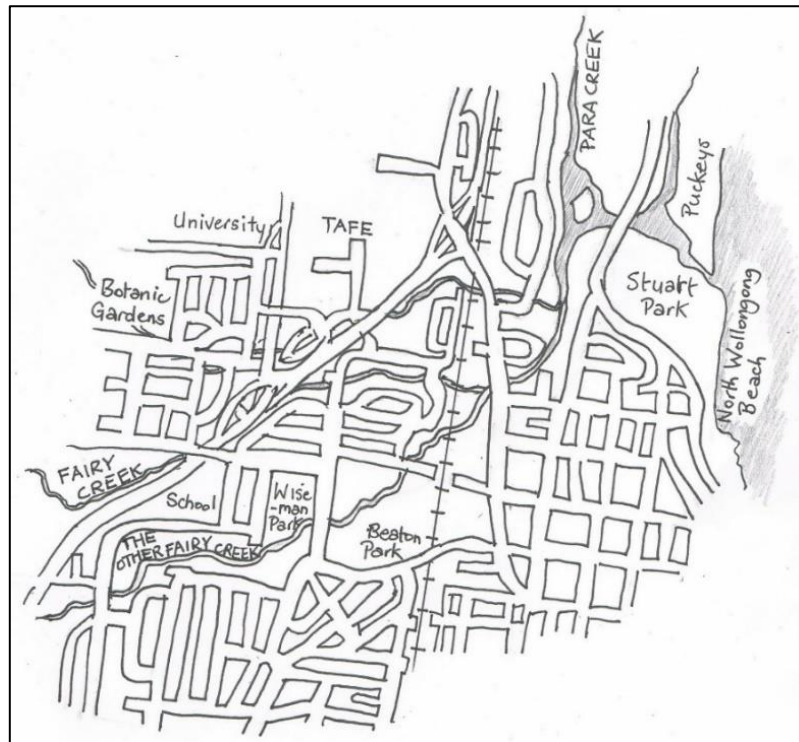


7.18 Vincent Bicego, 2017, *Mullet Creek Revisited (After Delawarr)*
Photo collage

Walking along a creek in our local environment seemed odd to the people we encountered, whose property abuts the creek. Creek banks are 'owned' by the properties that back on to them, therefore large sections of creekline are 'private'. Seeking permission to traverse people's backyards to stay on the creekline is as much a political act as it is part of the 'performance' of walking along a creek in a suburban environment. To address some of the concerns that might emerge, we wrote and illustrated *12 Creek Walks* (2017) as a creek-walking 'guide'. The 'guide' plays a dual role as an artwork and as an authentic guide to walking along specific creeks.

12 Creek Walks is not a legally approved 'guidebook', as there are legal implications to walking along creeks in New South Wales. Should the book be actively consulted, the user would quickly become aware of the difficulty of faithfully following any creek in this region.

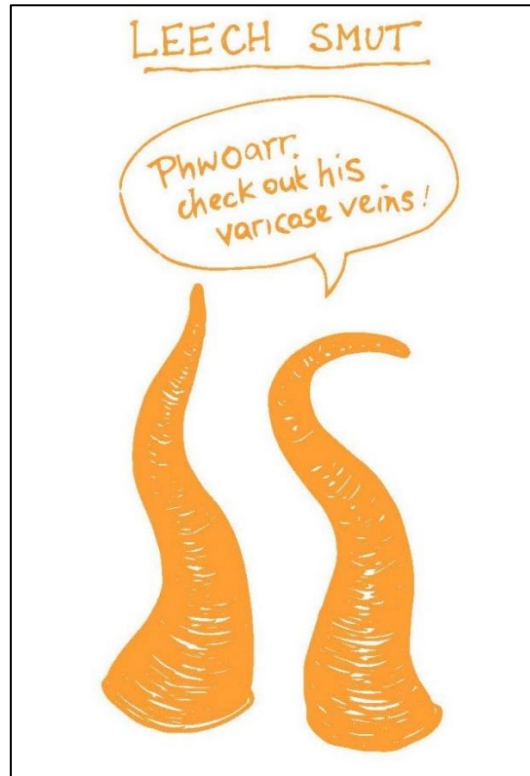
Through the book, we highlight land ownership laws in New South Wales that prevent public right of way through much of what should be, to our minds, common land. Walking brings us into contact with the contested edges of public and private ownership which overlay Indigenous land rights. Walking is a way of perceiving these boundaries and territories, where the physical edges of land and water forms meet; human histories and practices sit alongside and often in opposition to each other. Many of the outputs generated over the course of at least twenty *WOTI* walks are types of mapping, both of creeks and of the ways in which we encounter those creeks. 'Maps' are ways of organising and documenting the experiences as artworks. We then took these walks into the art gallery.



7.19 Kim Williams, 2017, Map of Fairy Creek, from the book *12 Creek Walks*
By Kim Williams, Brogan Bunt and Lucas Ihlein, published by Leech Press

For *WOTI*, our gallery works did a number of things: some served as representations and documentations of walking experiences, while some evoked 'place' with video or photographs, made and found objects (see Portfolio). The gallery artefacts created by the

artists of *WOTI* are more than simply records of rule-bound walks; they are meditations on the physical engagement with a place. The made object evoked the wry sense of humour that was key to *WOTI* and is further discussed in the context of materiality and making in Chapter 8.



7.20 Kim Williams, 2017, Illustration from *12 Creek Walks*

At the same time, we engaged with the 'artworld' to bring people from the gallery outside to join us on community creek walks. These community creek walks were followed by 'walkshops' in which walkers returned to the gallery to discuss their experiences and to playfully experiment with ways of evoking those experiences. By creating porous boundaries between interior and exterior spaces, we drew avant-garde practice and social engagement together, moving back and forth between forms and methods.



7.21 Workshopping ideas after a community creekwalk, *WOTI Walkshop*, Wollongong Art Gallery, 2017

Social engagement with waterways

WOTI can be considered through different lenses: the avant-garde tradition of walking-as-art, walking as an act of environmental care, walking as a political statement, walking as a participatory socially engaged art form. These viewpoints indicated different interests of the three core members of *WOTI*, giving a creative tension to the project. While all three members of *WOTI* worked together to facilitate community walks and workshops, at times people pursued more specific interests. Brogan Bunt enacted a number of solo walks as a kind of leafy *dérive* in the tradition of the Situationists, while Lucas Ihlein and I placed greater emphasis on the social and environmental aspects of participatory walks. The fluid nature of the project allowed different viewpoints to coexist. Walking as a method also revealed new possibilities for artist-led, community-driven projects that focus on water, pollution and development in the Illawarra and further afield. This in turn connects *WOTI* with a small international art movement that focuses public attention on water quality. Here I offer a sample of projects (by the Harrisons, Hall and Linton, Wu Mali, and Matteson and Kloecker) to show how they each share with *WOTI* some aspects of their approach. These include their use of proposals, their modes of public communication and engagement, and the way they shape community participation and dialogue.

In an early work, *Meditations on the Great Lakes of North America* (1977-80), Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison suggested a different boundary system to protect the Great Lakes, based on 'bioregional' entities rather than boundaries drawn by 'historical accident' (Adcock 1992, 37). The Harrisons said, "We wish to propose that the people of the Great Lakes Watershed of the United States and Canada withdraw from these two countries and collectively form a Dictatorship of the Ecology" (Harrison and Harrison 2016, 64). By drawing a bioregional boundary and sequestering the lakes into a single entity, the Harrisons argued that the citizens and the ecology of the Lakes would be protected from the pollutants entering the waterways under the current political boundaries. This work is an example of how the Harrisons at times proposed radical solutions to environmental problems, as a provocation to think differently.

Collaborators Jessica Hall and Joe Linton began *L.A. Creek Freak: Towards Healthy Southern Californian Streams, Creeks, Rivers and Neighbourhoods* in 2008. Their blog is a public forum for postings on a wide range of material which focuses on interest in and care for urban waterways. Through their work to protect the L.A. River, and through walking and writing, they seek to revitalise and restore the degraded stream. Having navigated the complex Californian planning and development laws, they use their blog platform to advise users on how to work with legislation to protect their streams. In this sense they work with the tools of art and activism to create empathy and social responsibility for waterways.

In 2010 Taiwanese artist Wu Mali initiated a multidisciplinary socially engaged art project, *Art as Environment: A Cultural Action at Plum Tree Creek*. Situated in the urban commuter city of Zhuwei, Wu Mali involved artists, architects and community members in a placemaking project that addresses local pollution problems in the Plum Tree Creek, near where she lived for many years.

Wu Mali recognised the connection between a river's health and the quality of life of the people living near the river. She said:

If people accepted a polluted creek, if they forgot how the creek used to be,
and if they had no awareness of the natural environment where they lived,

then no vision for a better future quality of life was possible. (Wu Mali in Tung 2018, 231)

Through a series of breakfast events, community performances, schools participation and artisan markets, the *Plum Tree Creek* project created platforms for public discussion, raising awareness of the creek's environmental problems within the local community. Through the methods of social engagement, this project fostered "ecological citizenship" with the participating community (Tung 2018, 234).



7.22 Water Bar and Public Studio
(Photo: Water Bar and Public Studio)

The Mississippi River has been the focus of the current project *Waterbar*, based in Minnesota and led by artists Shanai Matteson and Colin Kloecker. The artists work with a broad range of collaborators including First Nations Indians, artists, environmental and community organisations, universities, government agencies and water technology companies (Waterbar and Public Studio, 2019). The *Water Bar* project stimulates discussion about the disputed waters of the Mississippi River by setting up a water bar, where people from different and often opposing interest groups come together to taste water from

various sources. The setting is non-threatening and friendly, opening up the conditions for dialogue about water quality and local water stewardship.

These examples show ways in which artists and others create new possibilities around waterways. They show that, by focusing attention on waterways and by considering their importance in our landscape, we can begin to care about them. In 2014, Ihlein, Bunt and I began the project with the inaugural *WOTI* walk along Hewitt's Creek, Thirroul. My question, at that early moment in the collaboration—would it be feasible to work towards the care and remediation of a creek to a point where it could offer clean, fresh water as it would have, once upon a time?—was dismissed by Bunt as 'too environmental' a goal for what he saw as a conceptual art project. This points to a key tension: what is the role of art? Socially engaged art blurs art and life. Reflecting Claire Bishop's idea of the *double ontology* of SEA (2012, 284), I stray into what might be seen as a form of environmental activism, in which environmental dialogues are catalysed through art practice.

While *WOTI* took a gentle, non-interventionist approach, the project revealed its potential to enable a shift in perspective within our disciplines. The knowledge accessed by walking upstream along local creeks is an embodied, collective knowledge that opens the space for environmental discourse and future possibilities for a new iteration of this project. By using those methods suggested through *WOTI* and other projects—walking as embodied way of knowing, participation through events and education, proposals to civic authorities, public communication and dialogue—a new kind of engagement with waterways in the Illawarra could emerge.

Could this catchment be re-imagined and transformed from a neglected zone in the landscape to a place where the community can come to 'take the waters'? By creating a community of interest and inviting collaborative participation around a local creek, such a goal could lodge local waterways in the public imagination, restoring their cultural and environmental value. It would be an initial gesture towards the remediation of water. It would challenge Wollongong's definition of itself as a place of surf beaches and escarpment. Creeks connect these two geographic features that bracket the region and it seems logical that they should hold value as habitats, as sites of care, as places of peace and enjoyment,

activity and rest, education and health. By bringing traditional owners in from the outset, as well as people from a range of disciplines, environmental groups and interested members of the public, the neglected streams of the Illawarra could be re-imagined through a recognition of their inherent value. That is, creeks and their water become a ‘commons’, cared for by the whole community. As an artist who led *WOTI* along with Lucas Ihlein and Brogan Bunt, I could only conceive of an expanded proposal such as this through having local networks and local knowledge. In this way, *WOTI* demonstrates the value of local socially engaged art projects that offer the public a way of viewing their home environment through a different lens.

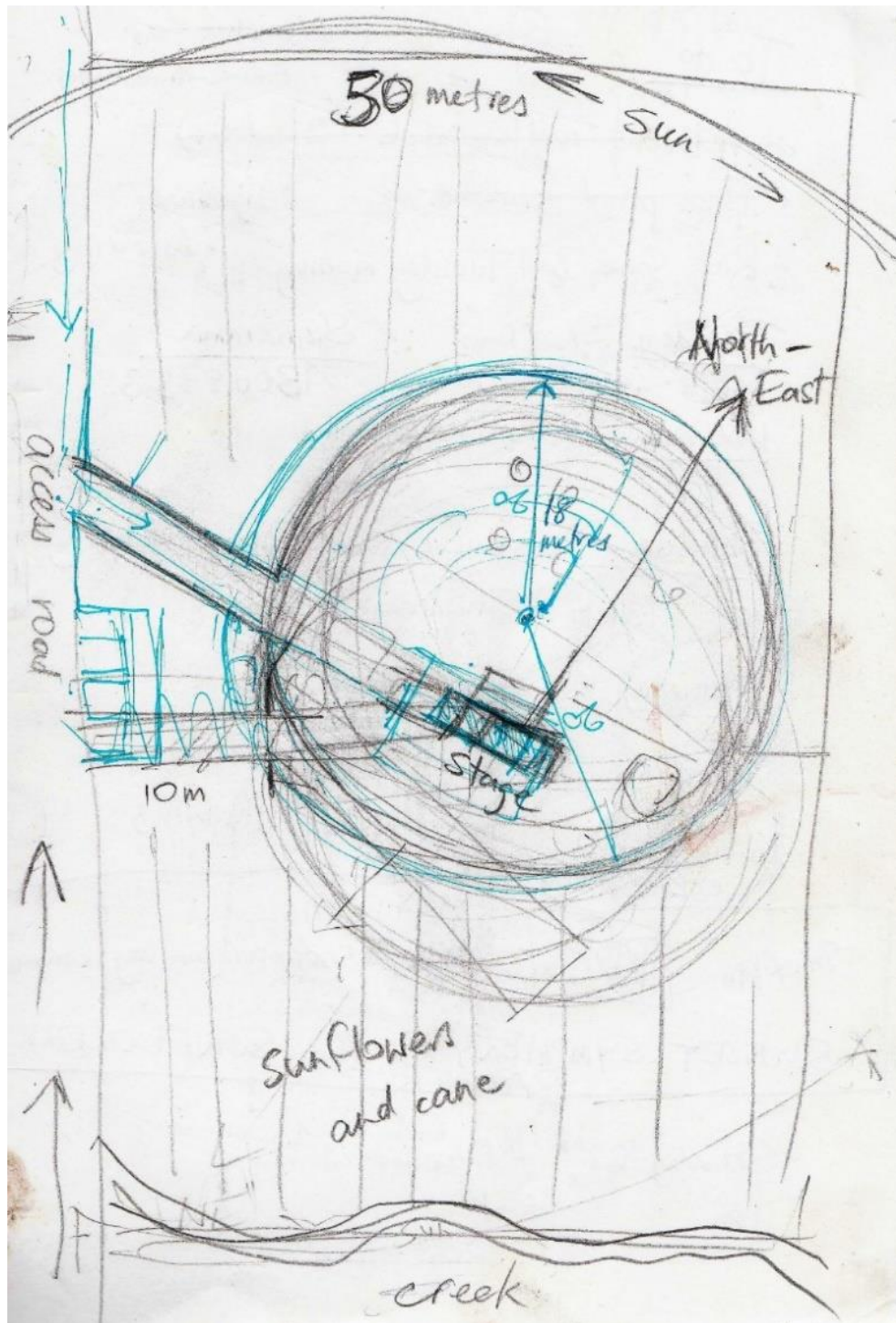


7.23 Walking through a railway viaduct during a *WOTI* community creek walk, Fairy Creek, February 2017
(Photo: Vincent Bicego)

While *WOTI* is a live, performative art project that brings people together in relation to their local environment and to each other, it is also a project that demonstrates the underlying role of ‘making’ in socially engaged art. Apparent throughout this chapter are

processes of 'making', wherein the crafting of objects and design artefacts serve not only as 'outcomes', but also play an important role in the formation of relationships themselves. The following chapter explores the role of materiality and the crafted object, in its many forms, in socially engaged art.

Chapter 8: Making



8.1 Kim Williams, 2017, design sketch for *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* amphitheatre

Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers, Marian, July 2017: *We prepared to carve out the amphitheatre in the middle of Simon's sunflower and sugarcane crop for the event that weekend. We were worried that there wouldn't be enough sunflowers in bloom by Saturday. Holding the event inside this tall crop of glorious sunflowers meant that we could wine, dine and entertain guests while at the same time giving them a first-hand experience of regenerative agriculture.*

We planned the sequence carefully and prepared all the tools: a fifty metre tape measure, wooden stakes, a long length of rope, surveyors' marking tape, mallets, a ute and a group of people to help. I needed to focus quietly, so Lucas and I spent the first couple of hours carefully measuring and marking out the circle in the midst of the tall crop, using a centre peg with a rope to inscribe the circle.

Then we all began to remove the sunflowers from inside the perimeter of the circle, to create a circular 'amphitheatre' for the stage and the audience. Simon wanted to bring in machinery to hasten the process, but we wanted to slow things down and do it by hand, so that we could make considered decisions along the way.

Making

As artists working in the social realm, we work with 'things' to activate dialogical processes and to catalyse public participation. 'Making' in our work occurs on large and small scales, from carving a large amphitheatre within an agricultural crop, to making a pocket-sized guidebook. Some things are made by hand, while others are outsourced and/or machine-made. These skills in making are akin to, and part of, how we 'make' relationships. The personal/human relational aspects of socially engaged art (SEA) are generally emphasised in key texts from the field; however, there is scant literature that specifically discusses the significance and function of making and materiality in socially engaged art. Titles by key authors reinforce the idea of SEA as a post-object field of practice: *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* (Doherty 2004); *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Kester 2004); *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Thompson 2012); *Art as Social Action* (Sholette and Bass 2018). It is as though the removal of materiality is what defines socially engaged art. The discourse is shaped by key theorists' focus on situation, conversation, community, and communication.

Yet 'making' is a key element of our socially engaged art 'toolkit'. A discussion of 'making' poses a challenge to SEA discourse. Through the course of these four projects, we utilised

our own and others' skills to make t-shirts, posters, large-scale photographs, sculptural objects, drawings, videos, diagrams, assemblages, vinyl records, artist books and works of agricultural land art. This list indicates the intrinsic place of 'making' in socially engaged art. The crafted object serves many purposes, involving practices ranging from symposiums, or making together, to communication through making. It is therefore time to reframe socially engaged art through the lens of 'making'.

In this penultimate chapter I consider the value of 'making' in socially engaged art through examples drawn from the projects *Mapping the Islands*, *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* I draw on sociologist Richard Sennett's history of craftsmanship to consider the role of the maker within contemporary art practice and the humanising effect of crafting with the hand and eye. I refer to other socially engaged art projects in which making and craftsmanship are an integral part of the process of building community. I also consider ideas from feminist philosophy which reflect our 'entanglement' with the more-than-human world, both literally and metaphorically. Through this chapter, I argue that tangible acts of making are intrinsic to the social processes of collaboration and socially engaged art—making engages people on a sensory level, as participants, collaborators and audiences. Making is a way of understanding, through an engagement with diverse materials. People relate on many levels through things: the made object is a relational tool that brings a liveliness to socially engaged art practice. The object, artefact, meal, action or constructed environment also brings us into closer relationship to the non-human world, through material play, learning, knowing and relating. In this chapter I regard 'making' as embodied relationality: human-with-human (catalysing environmental thinking) and human with non-human (through ideas of 'entanglement').

The impulse to make

'Making' is central to my practice. My installation *Under a Cloud* (2012) was a large gallery-based work that came out of a process of engagement with a particular place (the Darling River, Western New South Wales) and its people. The work, like the projects that make up this PhD research, spoke of a place and its ecological issues as part of the global story of human relationships to the environment. Trained in sculpture, drawing and printmaking

(Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology 1977-79), my early focus was on the 'craft' of art. At the time, although feminism was gathering pace and the art world was teetering on the cusp of postmodernism, a modernist aesthetic of 'craftsmanship' still prevailed within some institutions, including mine, amidst a lively milieu of performance art and conceptual art.



8.2 Kim Williams, 2012, *Under a Cloud*
Objects, water, clay, raw cotton, sound, video

Despite the sometimes conflicting impulses that pulled me back and forth within that milieu, I received skills and training that paid attention to craftsmanship, that is, learning how to use tools properly and making works with care and proficiency. To this day, the craft of 'making' is significant for me; it comes from a love of the interplay of hand and eye, materials, ideas and problem solving. Making is a relational process between the maker and the materials. The challenge of the current project has been to identify the ways in which this intimate relationship extends into socially engaged practice. By tracing 'craft' or 'making' across the suite of socially engaged projects that make up this PhD, I show the connection between craftsmanship and social processes.

The craftsperson

Sociologist Richard Sennett (2008) examines the history of 'craft' work and its application in vocational spheres. Sennett belongs to the philosophical school of thought known as *pragmatism*, a movement dedicated to "making philosophical sense of concrete experience" (Sennett 2008, 286-7). Influenced by the ideas of Charles Peirce and John Dewey, Sennett examines "the intimate relations between problem solving and problem finding, technique and expression, play and work" (2008, 287). Looking at 'craftsmanship' over two millennia, from early Roman brickmaking to Medieval and Renaissance guild shops, from the Industrial Revolution to contemporary labour market conditions, Sennett traces the social forces that have shaped the desire for 'good work for its own sake'.

According to Sennett, medieval guilds provided apprentices with a pathway for the mastery of specific skills. Guilds had their own social order, yet they were men's territory. Christian morality, however, also encouraged women to keep their hands busy to avoid temptations of the flesh. Needlework was therefore promoted as the appropriate remedy for women's idleness (Sennett 2008, 57). For men, their hands were employed in trades such as metals, building, jewellery and textiles. Tradition was passed along from master to apprentice over a number of years (Sennett 2008, 58). A workshop's survival was dependent on its good name and reputation; originality was a foreign concept.

During the Renaissance, however, the guild system slowly declined with the rise of the 'artist', as originality and individual 'genius' emerged from the increasingly competitive conditions in which the guilds operated. Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571) was one of those artists, whose dazzling feats of craftsmanship made him the leading goldsmith of the Renaissance (Sennett 2008, 67-73). As the artist-individual emerged, the public value of the artefact increased, according to Sennett, "because it exposed the inner character of its maker" (Sennett 2008, 69). Art and craft at that point began to separate.



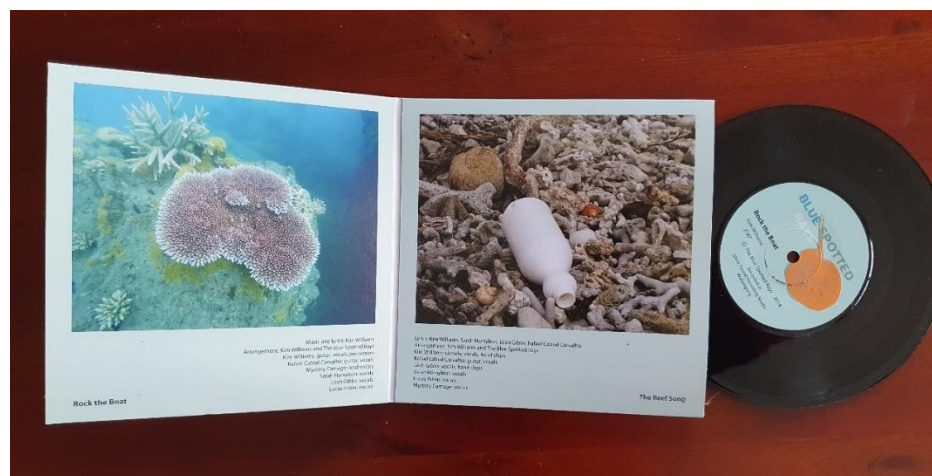
8.3 Benvenuto Cellini, *Salt Cellar*, 1540-1543, gold, Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna
(Image: Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.; artres.com)

Despite, or perhaps because of, the ubiquity of mass-produced goods today, there is something of a return to artisan goods and a pride in ‘craftsmanship’. Micro-brewing, boutique wineries, cheese-making, textiles, woodworking, to name a few examples, have a particular appeal in contemporary middle-class Australian life. These ‘crafts’ suggest a revitalisation of handwork, and an appreciation of the intimate relationship between maker and product (Coslovich 2018). Artisan and growers’ markets abound; they are pleasant social gathering places that counter the ubiquity and anonymity of chain stores and mass production. Similarly, the persistence of art practices that involve hand/eye skill—the ‘craft’ of art and their resilience in a pluralistic contemporary art world suggests an ongoing desire for the grounding qualities of making. To learn a skill and to perform that skill well, asserts Sennett, touch awareness, coordination, body memory, repetition, prehension and concentration must all be developed to achieve “the unity of head and hand” (Sennett 2008, 178). Skill development is transferable from haptic sensibility to social relations:

[T]he craft of making physical things provides insight into the techniques of experience that can shape our dealings with others. Both the difficulties and the possibilities of making things well apply to making human relationships.

Material challenges like working with resistance or managing ambiguity are instructive in understanding the resistances people harbour to one another or the uncertain boundaries between people. (Sennett 2008, 289)

The many instances of ‘making’ across the projects discussed here perform valuable social functions in the way that Sennett outlines. As collective activities, making brings people together in shared creative activity to promote, educate, articulate and embody environmental themes. The artefacts that result from the practice of making also offer tangible means with which to engage in public discourse. For example, a vinyl record containing songs about the Great Barrier Reef (made for the project *Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef?*) is a concrete object that is used as a form of gift exchange, and distributed to politicians, scientists and the media. It is a carefully orchestrated collaborative work: the record is contained within a cover design of evocative images; it is accompanied by an insert on which the musical notation of the song with scholarly footnotes articulates our environmental and political concerns. Embodied within this object is a story of combined skill and effort, an artefact that contains a multilayered set of ideas and practices.



8.4 The Blue Spotted Rays vinyl record and centrefold images, 2018.
Cover design: Kim Williams and Mystery Carnage; photos: Rafael Carvalho and Leah Gibbs

Making in socially engaged art

As stated earlier, the critical focus on the dialogic and conceptual aspects of socially engaged art conveys a sense that making and materiality are somehow obsolete in this field of practice. Yet, *making* and *dialogue* are companion processes of socially engaged art. Writer, activist, critic and artist Lucy Lippard (1973) reflects on her involvement in the Conceptual art movement in the United States, from the late 1960s into the early 1970s. Artists began rejecting the commodification of art; art was 'dematerialised' through an emphasis on concept over object. Yet these artists still worked with 'things' (Lippard 1973, xxi), despite claims to the contrary by artists like Joseph Beuys: "for me the formation of thought is already the sculpture" (Beuys in Lippard 1973, xvii).

In fact, Beuys produced a large body of work in which materials and materiality were central to his concepts. Whether an artisan market (Wu Mali), a work of agricultural land art (Williams and Ihlein), or a giant waterwheel (Metabolic Studio), materiality and physicality remain intrinsic to art-making as a way of communicating ideas and constructing social dialogues. 'Things' are useful ways to create relational situations.



8.5 Joseph Beuys, 1969, *Schlitten (Sled)*, Walker Art Center
Wooden sled, felt, fabric strips, flashlight, fat, oil paint, string; ed. 48/50. Walker Art Center
(image: ©2015 Estate of Joseph Beuys/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York)

Artisanal and craft practices are used as a means to connect urban-dwellers in Taiwanese artist Wu Mali's project *Art as Environment—A Cultural Action at Plum Tree Creek* (2011-13). The two year project, curated by Mali, in collaboration with Bamboo Curtain Studio (a creative development studio in Taipei), centered on the Plum Tree Creek waterway in the commuter city of Zhuwei. The project brought in a range of skilled practitioners to engage with residents experiencing the effects of rapid growth and urban sprawl in this humble district of New Taipei City (*Curating Cities* 2019). Through the activities of five sub-projects, Mali and her collaborators aimed to shape public experience, offering alternative ways of living by reconnecting people to each other and to their natural environment and in particular, the Plum Tree Creek. A creek that was once used for cooking, swimming and washing, Plum Tree Creek had suffered the impacts of urban development, becoming a filthy, concrete-lined waterway.



8.6 Wu Mali and Bamboo Curtain Studio, The Handcraft Market, *Art as Environment—A Cultural Action at Plum Tree Creek*
(Photo: Bamboo Curtain Studio)

Mali and collaborator Margaret Shiu drew on the philosophies of ecofeminism, social ecology and deep ecology to frame a project that aimed to re-establish “a self-sufficient and productive community” (Goto et al. 2014). One of the sub-projects, *Shaping of a Village*:

Nomadic Museum Project, provided the setting for a ‘handmade lifestyle’, reviving the public interactions that were familiar to many of the residents, who were originally from nearby rural communities. Available open space in this crowded urban environment generated a setting for community building. In this open space a ‘village square’ was created for community gatherings. Architectural models with a display of place-making designs for an ‘urban village’ were organised around a handcraft market. In this setting, skilled artisans offered services, such as gardening workshops, electrical appliance repair and shoe repair. The market promoted a repair, recycle and exchange ethos, where residents would also trade or sell home-grown and handmade products. Through this structured setting in which handmade goods catalysed social encounters, the project leader, architect Jiu-Mao Huang and his students were able to gain insight into the lives and attitudes of the participants.

The handmade, hand-grown and hand-repaired object was the ‘currency’ through which people could “imagine the transformation of Zhuwei from ‘commuter city’ to ‘urban village’ where people exchanged ideas about daily life and participated in local events” (Tung 2018, 235). This particular sub-project fostered conversations between citizens and artisans who had decades of experience in specific skill areas. Echoing Sennett’s ideas, there was a recognition of the social contribution of the craftsman through these gatherings: the idea that dedication to and deep skill in a craft builds a form of knowledge in making that is valuable to a healthy community. The ‘shaping’ of a village is underpinned by these sorts of artisanal skills that characterise a productive, self-sufficient community.

Another sub-project, *Breakfast at Plum Tree Creek*, brought people together around the growing, harvesting, cooking and sharing of food. Monthly breakfasts in different locations—amidst vegetable crops and small farms, at the local shrine, in residential buildings, and upstream beyond the urban development—brought farmers and urban residents together to cook and eat seasonal, locally grown foods, as well as to discuss different topics of conversation at each breakfast event (Goto et al. 2014).



8.7 Shi-Chin Ting, a local farmer
(Photo: Bamboo Curtain Studio)

Growing, making and sharing food in socially engaged art activates dialogue within and across cultures, as people exchange recipes and traditions. In the above image, farmer Shi-Chin Ting holds a magnificent lettuce she has grown from the soil and water of the upstream section of the Plum Tree Creek. The lettuce is the ‘raw material’ for a meal in this project. Meals are an important part of socially engaged art discourse. The making of food is an opportunity for (usually) women to display their skills, often refined over decades.

Enforcing the connection between food and land also enhances women’s skills, knowledge and practical wisdom, the care and support of daily life for families. This social ecofeminist approach expands the individual horizons and gives everyone self-confidence to join in social and political activities. (Goto et al. 2014)

According to Mali, making and eating local food together in conversation helped local communities (including herself) to understand the place where they live “and how the land and water related to our daily life and our health” (Mali in Goto et al. 2014). The residents downstream in the city lived very differently to those living in the wilder, steeper upstream area. “This helped us to understand the different aspects of the place. We knew we shared

the same river, and we needed to work together furthermore” (Mali in Goto et al. 2014). Through both *making* and *talking* together, the Plum Tree Creek was re-imagined as a public responsibility, a waterway that could be cared for by local neighbourhoods. Our own experiences ‘in the field’ echo these ideas: the communal ‘pot luck’ dinner held during the *Old Ways New Ways* sugarcane harvest event (*Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*) brought many different cooking traditions together, creating a convivial atmosphere in which people mingled and shared food and recipes. Women took pride in the craftsmanship of cooking. Whether making results in a meal, or a banner, or a crop, or a video, each involves the honing of skill, often over many years. In socially engaged art these material artefacts lubricate social processes. ‘Things’ are key to our methods of activating environmental dialogues.



8.8 Metabolic Studio, 2018, artist Lou Pesce with model of Waterwheel for *Bending the River Back into the City*
(Photo: Kim Williams)

A concern for craft and making is also central to Lauren Bon’s Metabolic Studio. Metabolic Studio promotes makerly experimentation and public participation through various workshops run on the studio premises in Los Angeles, while at the same time undertaking

large-scale environmental projects. *Bending the River Back Into the City* is a long-term, ongoing project of civic engagement. For over a decade, Metabolic Studio has been in protracted negotiation with city and government agencies to secure the rights to divert a small portion of the L.A. River flow for use on common land. To do so involves piercing the concrete jacket of the river, harvesting water from the L.A. River and passing it through a filtration system to create potable water for the public park. A crafted object—in this case a 15 metre diameter waterwheel—is the visual centerpiece of the project. It is a replica of a waterwheel that stood on the same location in the nineteenth century. The waterwheel will divert water from the L.A. River to irrigate nearby Los Angeles State Historic Park.

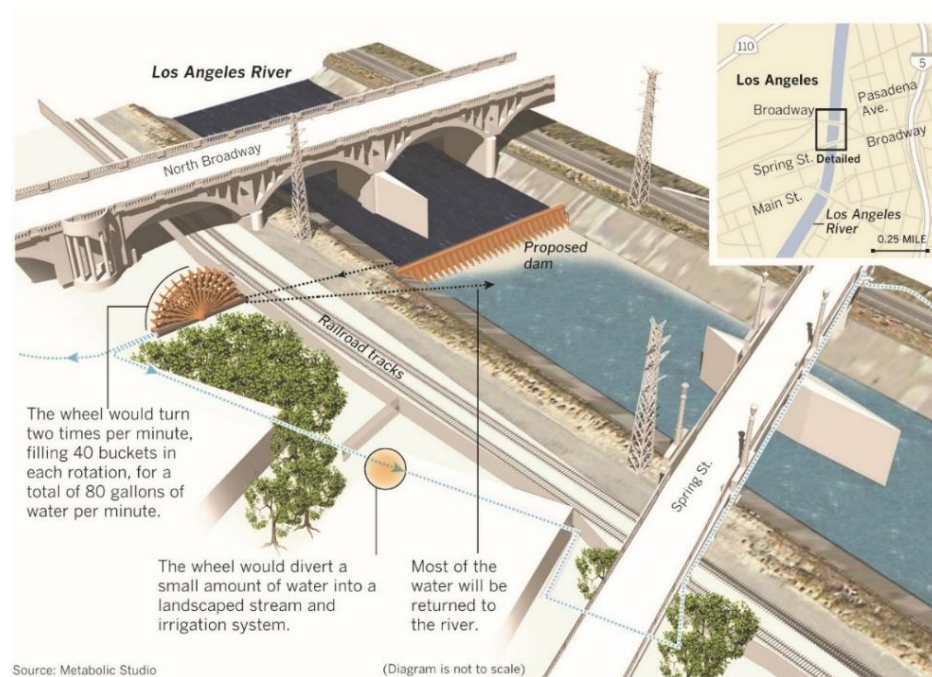
This project flows on from Bon's earlier work, *Not a Cornfield* (2005-6), in which she devised a one-year project to plant a large crop of corn on the site of an abandoned railyard that has since become part of the Los Angeles State Historic Park. Planting corn honoured the Gabrielino and Tongva tribes' custodianship of the watershed over millenia. With a large team of staff and workers, the industrial wasteland was cleared of 1600 cubic yards of waste; 33 000 cubic yards of soil was trucked in, irrigated and fertilised; 875 000 corn seeds, donated by a Hopi family, were planted (Owen Driggs 2007, 22, 27). *Not a Cornfield* was both an artwork and an exploration of the potential of a former 'wasteland'.



8.9 Metabolic Studio, 2005-6, *Not a Cornfield*, Los Angeles
(Photo: Metabolic Studio)

Of the connection between *Not a Cornfield* and *Bending the River Back Into the City*, Bon says:

Not a Cornfield began with recognizing the floodplain of the once unbridled river as a place where corn grew. *Bending the River Back Into the City* makes this ancient place a fertile floodplain once again. *Not a Cornfield* required me to buy water from the city to grow the corn ... it was only possible to reconnect the L.A. River to its floodplain symbolically. With its piercing of the L.A. River's concrete jacket and the creation of a delta for the free distribution of clean river water, *Bending the River Back Into the City* actualizes my intent.
(Metabolic Studio 2017)



8.10 Metabolic Studio, Diagram of waterwheel *in situ*, *Bending the River Back Into the City*
(Image: Metabolic Studio)

The waterwheel is a conduit for both diverting water and for making tangible the idea of a water ‘commons’. Bon says: “In proposing a device of wonder—a waterwheel and a dam and a new distribution system—I’ve been able to catalyze a change that needs to happen” (Bon in Christensen 2015, 57). No doubt a more recent technology could be employed—invisible pumps and underground pipes—were Lauren Bon merely seeking an engineering ‘solution’. The waterwheel is, though, an artistic solution to an engineering problem, a made object that contains a poetic historical reference, making the environmental and social intent highly visible.

In both *A Cultural Action at Plum Tree Creek* and *Bending the River Back Into the City*, the ‘making’ of objects is also an ‘unmaking’ of the alienating forces of urbanisation and a ‘re-making’ of the social fabric. The *Plum Tree Creek* project invites participatory ‘making’ on a small scale, by hand, while *Bending the River Back Into the City* shows artists ‘making’ at a large-scale, industrial level. The *Plum Tree Creek* project sought to reconnect people with each other and their natural environment through small-scale material exchanges: making, repairing, growing, cooking. These experiences forged connections that had been erased

over time through creeping urbanisation. *Bending the River Back Into the City*, on the other hand, reconnects people to their local river through a large-scale material intervention. Piercing the concrete jacket of the river and diverting water to a community space through a symbolic and functional ‘art’ object—a waterwheel—is the end point of a long dialogical process that was set in train by the waterwheel proposal. In both examples, the crafted objects, whether intimate or civic in scale, hand-made or manufactured, provide the link between people and place, activating environmental dialogues through socially engaged art.

Making as a way into knowing

My own art practice hinges on bringing the key methods of making and relating together. When ‘making’ enters the socially engaged art projects discussed here, it often is part of a dialogical process. There are two further strands of making: those artefacts created for use ‘in the field’ and those created for the gallery. Each site (field and gallery) is part of the whole ‘package’ of a project. Made objects therefore may have a number of characteristics: they may be promotional (posters, t-shirts), functional (composting toilets), quasi-utilitarian (creek-walking tools, creek-walking guidebooks), representational (hand-drawn maps, botanical drawings, photos and videos, musical recordings), dialogical (diagrams), or documentary (video and photographic records of events). They are either created for the site (creek, reef, agricultural plot) or they refer to the site. In each instance, the aesthetics of the objects are shaped by place and context. Works may be designed both as functional and as aesthetic objects, to be both used and experienced as artworks.

Artefacts are also points of contact; they can create settings for people in which to gather, they help to create identity; they enable dialogue; they can stimulate thinking; they can amuse; they can bring people together through concerted effort. The aesthetics of artefacts have often been determined by the demographics of a place. This is particularly the case for the project *Sugar vs the Reef?* where many of the artefacts have emerged from the processes of social engagement. T-shirts I designed for agricultural events, for example, not only advertise the event, but also create a ‘team’ identity for the wearer. The designs bear the audience in mind and at the same time clearly communicate a message.



8.11 Kim Williams, T-shirt designs for *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* (2017) and *Seed and Song* (2018) events

The idea of the made or created artefact extends back into the site as well. For example, 'The Beacon', the circular crop we grew for the *Watershed Land Art Project*, was at once a regenerative agricultural plot and a crafted artwork. It deliberately reflected the circular design of the amphitheatre we carved in a field of sunflowers for *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*. It is an unconventional shape in which to grow an agricultural crop, signifying its intent as a work of 'land art', yet it still allowed for conventional planting in sequential rows. It was sited carefully, to maximise both visibility and functionality as an agricultural demonstration site. It was scaled to allow the sculptural shape of the work to be clearly visible, and also to enable the agricultural processes and maintenance to be largely carried out by hand. In this respect, it allowed for an intimate audience engagement with those most essential acts of making: the physical processes of growing and harvesting. Participants got down on their haunches, chatting happily or working quietly in the sun, putting their hands into the soil and sowing sunflower seeds. Children and adults worked together in the 'making' of a crop. The seeds they sowed quickly germinated and within three months had grown into a thick crop of sunflowers that stood over two metres tall.

Through participation in planting and harvesting events and maintenance, the making and ownership of the work were spread across the community.



8.12 Planting sunflower seeds with children at the *Seed and Song* planting event, The Beacon', August 2018 '
(Photo: Robert Bole)

The locally grown produce and cooking for the breakfast events held for Wu Mali's *Art as Environment: A Cultural Action at the Plum Tree Creek*, the cultural cooking traditions displayed in the pot luck dinner we held for the *Old Ways New Ways* sugarcane harvest event, the actions of community planting, growing, harvesting: they are all socially engaged art processes that loosen the strict distinction between artist and audience and enable participatory making and pride in skill.



8.13 Aerial photo of 'The Beacon', September 2018, with sunflowers in the early growth phase
(Photo: Willem Reichard)

Objects and artefacts, in all their variety, create links and starting points for relations between people, and therefore serve an important purpose in these projects. *Old Ways, New Ways* (2019), the final harvest event of the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*, provided a 'stage' for older sugarcane farmers to demonstrate their manual skills in cutting sugarcane by hand. The cane knives look like historical relics, yet most sugarcane farmers own several cane knives that they use from time to time. In a performative demonstration, the older Australian South Sea Islander, Italian and Maltese men began harvesting the sugarcane crop during the event. They did this with great pride: hand-cutting is strenuous, exhausting work that requires skill and efficiency. For the inexperienced, to hold a well-worn cane knife, its wooden handle shaped by decades of use, and to bend low from the hips and knees and swing the knife in a wide arc to the base of a sturdy sugarcane stalk, is to appreciate the craftsmanship in this back-breaking work.



8.14 Uncle Doug Mooney demonstrates hand-cutting sugarcane,
Old Ways, New Ways harvest event, October 2019
 (Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Inviting the older farmers to display their manual skills in the crop and to talk about the ‘old ways’ with other audience members gave them a sense of connection to the project and to the ‘new ways’ of regenerative agriculture. Many of them, and their children, still farmed using monocultural methods, requiring extensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. They had little prior knowledge of regenerative agriculture and were impressed by the fact that we had grown a healthy crop without using chemicals. Our coming together opened up new environmental dialogues, as we connected farming practices with healthy soil and a healthy Great Barrier Reef.

Making for the gallery

The gallery exhibitions for *Sugar vs the Reef?* and *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* offered us the opportunity to document and interpret, in different ways, issues and experiences ‘in the field’. The *Sugar vs the Reef?* exhibition explores both the ‘big picture’ environmental issues of the project and closer views of plants and people and processes. *WOTI* was also represented in the gallery by macro and micro views of a place.

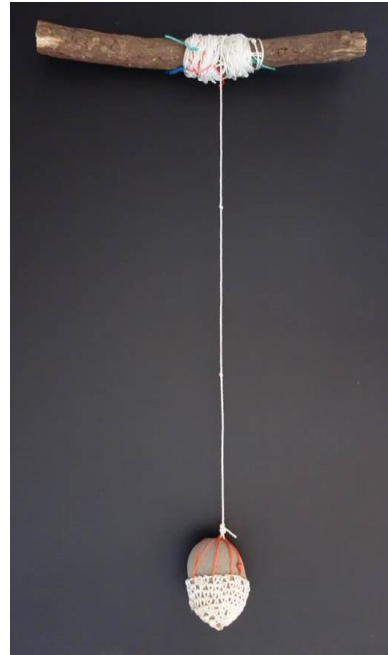
The following image shows an artwork I made for the exhibition *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*, held at the Wollongong Art Gallery in 2017-18. Called *Mullet Creek*, the work grapples with the problem of how to transport the gallery audience to that place. Sitting on an old repurposed toolcase, the glass beaker 'shows' a video of Mullet Creek through the beaker, which is filled with water from that creek. The beaker is embedded in soil from the creek edge.



8.15 Kim Williams, 2017, *Mullet Creek*
Glass beaker, video, water, soil, wooden box, *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*
(Photo: Bernie Fischer)

The use of indexical materials offers an experience of that place to the viewer. *Mullet Creek* is an object that comes from a social process, walking with others along that creek. Over the course of our many creek walks, I made a set of whimsical, conceptual creek-walking 'tools' to highlight the realities of creek-walking in our local region and the cultural tensions around land ownership and environmental care. They are modest, playful objects made

from found or re-used materials, given a consciously rustic quality and imbued with humour. They are designed as 'useful' tools that are not meant to be used.



8.16 Kim Williams, *WOTI creek walking tools*, Wollongong Art Gallery, 2017-18

Top left: *The Barbie Wire Spreader*, Barbie and Ken dolls, extendable pole, rubber bike tube

Top right: *The WOTI bathymeter*; string, rock, stick

Bottom left: *The Ponting* (detail); found cricket bat, pyrography

Bottom right: *The Good Karma rubbish collecting bag*; hand-made bag from baling twine

The *Barbie Wire Spreader* is made from found materials: Barbie and Ken dolls, a rubber bicycle tube and a camping pole. It is insulated and extendable: Barbie can push upwards with her latex-covered hands, while Ken pushes downwards at the same time, to spread barbed wire and electric fences. It is designed to help the user gain access to what we think should be common land along waterways. The *WOTI Bathymeter* is made from a rock, a stick and string, woven into a holder to contain the rock and knotted at twenty centimetre intervals. It allows the user to test the depths of waterways.



8.17 Kim Williams, the *WOTI bathymeter* in use on Towradgi Creek, 2015
(Photo: Brogan Bunt)

In a mapping activity, I paddled along Towradgi Creek, stopping at regular intervals to measure the varying depths of the creek. As I sat in the canoe and slowly lowered the *WOTI bathymeter*, I counted the knotted intervals on the string as the rock was slowly lowered to the creek-bottom. These depths were plotted on a hand-drawn map of the creek. The *WOTI bathymeter* is a crude analogue method for measuring depth. Why didn't I simply use an electronic bathymeter to measure the depth of the creek? The importance of this object lies in its making—this was much less a data collection activity than a performance of a bespoke tool, made for that time and that place.

The *Good Karma*, a hand-knotted bag made from found baling twine, enables the caring creek-walker to clean up the waterway they are exploring. Making the bag for that purpose connects the maker to the place; the design of the bag makes the pollution along creeks apparent—we can see the bottles, cans and plastic wrappers. *The Ponting* is an old weather-beaten cricket bat, signed by former Australian Test cricket captain Ricky Ponting. I found the bat on a walk along Hewitts Creek. Using a pyrography tool, I inscribed the bat with images of lantana and repurposed the bat as a tool called *The Ponting* to cleave a path through the lantana-infested riparian corridors in the Illawarra. The imagery is indexical of the place and signified our difficult encounters with lantana as we negotiated routes along the creeks of the Illawarra.



8.18 Kim Williams negotiating a way through lantana with *The Ponting*, 2017
(Photo: Blanca Azabal)

These lighthearted objects evoke the often difficult physical encounters of creek walks in the Illawarra. They are manual implements that involve the user with the more-than-human places of creeks and their surrounds. They are ‘silly’ things that make people laugh—humour is the mediator between the world of ‘high art’ and the world beyond it. For the gallery audience, the made object allows the viewer to project themselves into the physical, outdoor experience of creek-walking. Though absurd, these four tools come out of the creek

experiences. For me, as the maker, crafting these objects enabled a kind of play through which to better know and understand the physical and social circumstances of a place. The made objects allow the viewer to connect to what they may know of the Illawarra region: a place of both great natural beauty and degradation. They are social objects that invite audiences to move beyond the gallery to engage with their surroundings.

What matters

The approach to making, the object, the artefact, and the tool discussed in this chapter stems from a set of philosophical ideas that underpin my own thinking on materiality and connection-making. Feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway proposes a theory of human-material relations that focuses on ‘entangled’ life forms. She evokes the implicit connections between all creatures macroscopic and microscopic; echoing Indigenous philosophies, Haraway contends that humans’ kinship with other beings implicates us in the survival of ecosystems. She describes the connections between seemingly disconnected worlds as “symbiotic assemblages” (Haraway 2016, 60). Symbiosis is “an interaction characterised by two or more species living purposefully in direct contact with each other” (Lang and Benbow 2013). For Haraway, symbiotic assemblages are “knots of diverse intra-active relatings in dynamic, complex systems” (Haraway 2016, 60). The methodology of encounters within systems is served by the metaphor of “sympoiesis” or “making with” (2016, 78). Haraway’s invocation of “making with” resonates for me as a way of thinking about objects as part of a socially engaged practice.

In her enthusiasm for the ongoing international project *Crochet Coral Reef* (2005-), Haraway is taken by the “sympoietic knotting” (2016, 78) of participants from around the world. Australian-born twin sisters Margaret and Christine Wertheim instigated this project in 2005 at their Institute For Figuring (California). *Crochet Coral Reef* is the Wertheim sisters’ response to their concern for the Great Barrier Reef. At the invitation of galleries in the United States (Andy Warhol Museum and Chicago Cultural Center, 2007), they showed their nascent crocheted reefs. As public interest grew, so did the ‘reef’. ‘Coral making’ quickly spread to London, New York and Los Angeles, and then gradually across five continents, and has involved around 10 000 people, mostly women. People are invited to contribute to the

coral reef satellite installations by participating in workshops, where they crochet reef forms and in the process learn about mathematics, conservation, global warming and marine biology (Derouin 2017).



8.19 The Fohr Satellite Reef, Germany, with Margaret Wertheim in the background.
From the *Crochet Coral Reef* project by Margaret and Christine Wertheim
(Credit: Institute for Figuring)

Margaret Wertheim, a science writer, explains that crochet is the only method that can model and explain 'hyperbolic geometry', a branch of mathematics used to understand the crenelated structures of corals and sea slugs. Her practice illustrates the importance of 'making' as a way into 'knowing'. The Wertheim sisters emphasise the importance of 'embodied knowledge' through 'plastic forms of play' in which people are engaged with abstract theoretical ideas (hyperbolic geometry), and their relation to the living assemblages of coral reefs (Wertheim 2009).

Haraway speaks of the affective impact in the public making of *Crochet Coral Reef*:

The abstractions of the mathematics of crocheting are a kind of lure to an affective cognitive ecology stitched in fibre arts. The crochet reef is a practice of

caring without the neediness of touching by camera or hand in yet another voyage of discovery. Material play builds caring publics. (Haraway 2016, 97)

By this, Haraway infers that collective ‘making’ in *Crochet Coral Reef* builds a community of care, in sharp contrast to people’s need to ‘go there’ to the Reef and tick yet another tourist destination off their list. *Crochet Coral Reef* shines a light on a complex environmental story through the act of making. It represents a shared desire for transformative action through explorations across disciplinary boundaries and a willingness to enter into what Haraway calls the “bumptious fray”—the entanglement of life forms (2016, 99). I strongly identify with Haraway’s idea of entanglement as a way of thinking ourselves into a place of care and belonging in the more-than-human world. The projects that make up this PhD attempt to similarly make those connections through acts of making and relating.

A question at the heart of my research is, how do the methods of socially engaged art contribute to environmental knowledge and discourse? And is ‘making’ one means to help us do this? *Sugar vs the Reef?* highlights soil health and the part humans have to play in preserving healthy soil biology—the microscopic beings necessary to sustainable agriculture and to ecological health. Haraway contends that we can no longer treat ‘critters’ of any kind in isolation. In *Sugar vs the Reef?* the large-scale practice of industrial agriculture which has robbed the soil of beneficial microscopic critters threw us a challenge: can we communicate the importance of these tiny creatures and their benefit to the soil, to farmers who still use chemical-intensive practices, and to the broader community? We did this by constructing systems that build healthy soil for those critters to thrive and we demonstrated this through public engagement.

To fully involve the public in the making of healthy soil, we designed and built composting toilets for the *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* event. This created opportunities to talk about the processes occurring above the ground that influence what is happening beneath the surface. We chose not to use the chemical Portaloos that are commonly seen at outdoor events, as they did not fit with our ecological or aesthetic aims. In our view they are disconnected from the soil; we aimed to make clear the connection between our own bodies and the earth. Rather than simply talking about soil biology, we were able to create

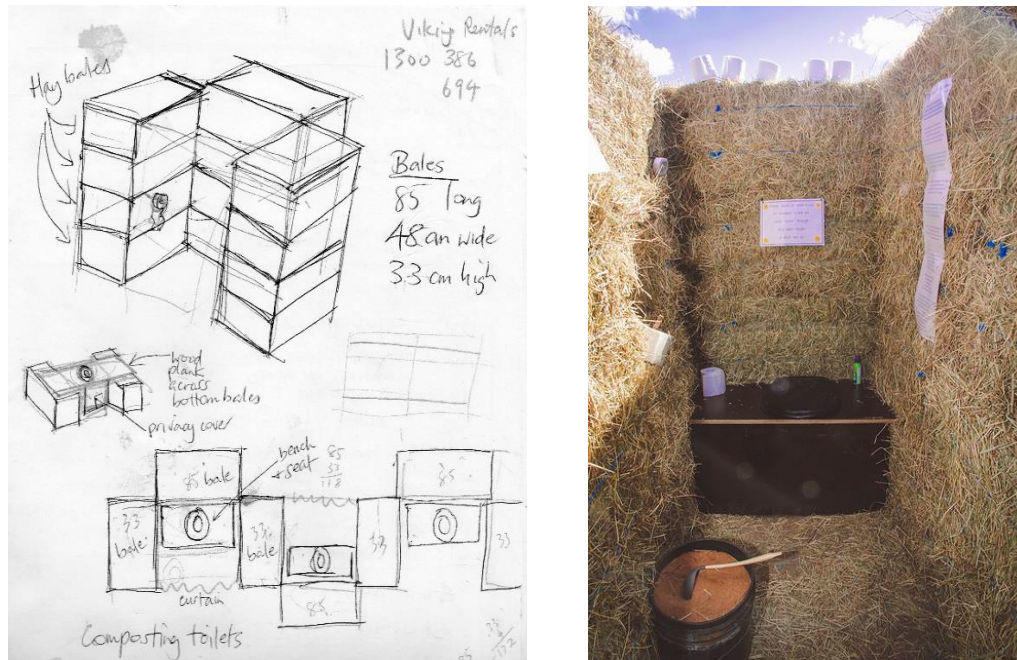
soil biology by direct deposit of ‘humanure’ (Jenkins 2019) into the soil. In making these experimental physical spaces—bespoke composting toilets, an amphitheatre in a crop of sunflowers—we hoped that they would connect the audience to the importance of what lies beneath the ground.



8.20 Digging a pit for composting toilets, *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, 2017
(Photo: Lucas Ihlein)

The toilets were designed around the materials themselves: walls built of stacked haybales, holes dug in a simple pit system, a seat on a wooden frame. Three toilets sat side by side, alternately facing front and rear. The haybales effectively dampened sound; there was no roof so that the people using the toilets could see the sky. Simon Mattsson’s partner Susie Mattsson added the finishing touches with tailored curtains, bespoke toilet roll holders and a poem that we co-wrote. The poem was a ‘shaggy dog’ tale written to amuse the person on the toilet. We wanted to make the toilets memorable: an interesting and effective design, a comfortable and enjoyable ‘user’ experience, and an awareness by the user that they were usefully contributing to the soil ecosystem. Afterwards, on the *Sugar vs the Reef?* blog, an audience member commented: “Those toilets were awesome! Very comfortable, and

absolutely NO SMELL! Much, much better than those plastic thingys! A wonderful idea!" (31 July 2017)



8.21 Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, 2017, design for composting toilets (left) and interior of toilet (right), Hay bales, baling twine, star pickets, wood, soil (Photo: Cherrie Hughes)



8.22 The finished product: composting toilets, *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* (Photo: Lucas Ihlein)

As artists working on land and sea, we attempt to convey both the larger relations between human and non-human systems—the impacts of terrestrial practices such as farming and coal mining on the Great Barrier Reef—and a fascination with the complexities of life in the soil and under the water. To link humans to those ‘systems’, we look to other scholarly disciplines for alternative ways of seeing the world. Political theorist Jane Bennett provides a way of thinking about matter in the context of environmental disorder. Bennett reasons that ‘things’, like humans, have a ‘vitality’, with agencies and tendencies of their own (Bennett 2010, viii). She contends that “the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalised matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (2010, ix). Bennett acknowledges the influence of eco and eco-feminist philosophers such as Val Plumwood and Freya Matthews, saying: “without proficiency in this countercultural kind of perceiving, the world appears as if it consists only of active human subjects who confront passive objects and their law-governed mechanisms” (2010, xiv). Bennett sets out the idea that rather than seeing ‘matter’—people, things—in hierarchy, “to begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility” (2010, 10). Bennett invites us to see humans as “inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations” (2010, 13).

Australian environmental philosopher Freya Mathews imagines a liveable future through the attitude of the ancient Chinese sage. Unlike Western philosophy’s tendency to inscribe the world through a theoretical framework, Mathews argues that the ‘strategist’ view of the sage is not shaped by an external ideation of the world, but rather by “our own immediate situation and how the influences at play in it are impinging on us, corporeally and tangibly, in the present moment” (Mathews in Gibson et al. 2015, 37-38). Strategic consciousness, as Mathews puts it, is adaptive to the existing conditions in one’s environment. As a direct descendant of Western philosophy, she argues, science has objectified and ‘managed’ nature into the current ecological crisis. For Mathews, the sage takes us down a different path, one that works with the grain of existing systems:

Food production would respond to and nourish local ecologies rather than rendering land a *tabula rasa* for industrial monoculture. Manufacture would

follow the circular, no-waste model that returns all resource materials back into the loop of production. Architecture and engineering would follow the contours of local topography and make full use of local affordances with respect to materials, energy, ventilation, water capture, cycling and dispersal. (Gibson et al. 2015, 41)

The 'strategist' looks to existing patterns in the natural world rather than attempting to overcome them. Mathews' thinking applies particularly to the non-human worlds we have been trying to 'bring to the surface' through the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*. Those worlds are manifested through the making of environments. The processes of regenerative agriculture are collaborations with soil microbiology.

Farmer Simon Mattsson often invokes the character of 'Mother Nature' when speaking publicly about farming practices. Working hands-on with plants and soil asks us all to notice and learn how 'Mother Nature' behaves. Holding events when sunflowers were in glorious bloom maximised the impact of our work. Our experience showed that people are drawn to sunflowers in their prime—the tall plants and enormous flower heads elicit joy and wonder. When in bloom, Mattsson's sunflower crops attract many tourists and visitors keen to take photographs of themselves amongst the flowers. Like Mathews' sage, we worked with the rhythm of the growing cycle for events like *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* and *Sunflower and Song*. To 'make' in collaboration with nature, public planting and harvesting events were staged around seasonal growing cycles. *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* and *Sunflower and Song* (the *Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* harvest event) were both scheduled around the anticipated date when the sunflowers would be blooming at their peak. The fluidity and unpredictability of seasonal conditions made event scheduling a compromise between plant cycles and human convenience. Plants must flower and seed to survive. If there is too little water, they will flower and seed early. This is precisely what happened to the sunflower crop in 'The Beacon' at the Botanic Gardens during a particularly dry winter in 2018. Consequently, the event we planned around the flowering of the plants, *Sunflower and Song* (November 2018), was held slightly too late in the growing cycle to catch the flowers in their prime. *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* (July 2016), on the other hand, was held a week before the majority of the sunflowers were in full bloom.

‘Making’ in conjunction with seasonal systems that are beyond our immediate control offers a connection to non-human others and teaches us much about acceptance.

Each of the collaborative projects of this PhD has involved individual and collective ‘making’ processes. For me, the making of artefacts has been a way of inviting others into the enmeshed world of humans and non-humans. The processes involved are often experimental and are always a result of immersion in the site and its issues: ‘objects’ emerge through meaningful interactions and a shared sense of purpose. Sennett’s emphasis on the importance of play and experimentation in craftsmanship echoes Haraway’s suggestion that “material play builds caring publics” (Haraway 2016, 97). For this reason, we transmit ideas through the embodied act of making, and the haptic experience of objects.

In this chapter I have shown some of the ways in which making and materiality play a role in socially engaged art. The shift in emphasis from art as a commodity reflects what historian and critic Claire Bishop defines as a ‘social turn’ since the 1990s, “a shared set of desires to overturn the traditional relationship between the art object, the artist and the audience” (Bishop 2012, 2). The examples I cite are not always end points; in many cases they are the beginning, working as framing devices to enable social interaction. As can be seen from these examples, the artist is therefore often called upon to utilise a broad range of skills, their own and others, to catalyse participation and engagement through material interventions. Paying attention to the role of making in socially engaged art projects represents an opportunity to reframe the traditional opposition between conceptual (or ‘post-object’) art and the more materially focused disciplines within the visual arts.

There are many other examples of *making* throughout the projects of this research. Altogether, they were created for many different purposes: to create settings for people to gather (‘The Beacon’); to establish a group identity and to advertise events (t-shirts, banners, posters); to stimulate dialogue (*Rock the Boat* vinyl musical notation with footnotes); to delight and amuse (creek-walking ‘tools’); to convey ideas (diagrams); to offer as gifts (vinyl records); to educate (videos); to evoke emotion (music recordings); to facilitate participation (songs and plantings) and to evoke process and place (botanical drawings and maps). By talking about specific artefacts and their applications, I hope to

contribute to the body of knowledge of socially engaged methods. Yet the making of artefacts is not simply an instrumental relationship of the 'object' to its purpose. Through the process of making, we imbue the artefact with something of ourselves; the process of making itself is relational, a conversation back and forth between maker and material.

Chapter 9: Reflecting (conclusion)



9.1 Kim Williams, 2018, *Coral shard*
Watercolour pencil on paper

Boat dive, Nymph Island, 8th June 2018

I sometimes wonder whether my memory is skewed when I recall my very first Great Barrier Reef dive, on an outer reef off Cairns in 1988. I remember squealing with astonishment through the snorkel as I floated amongst a vibrant world, teeming with life. What lay under the surface of the water was a complex foreign place, one that was self-sufficient and whole.

Since then, I have seen varying degrees of bleached and dead coral over subsequent visits to the Great Barrier Reef system. The greatest number of fish congregate where there are living corals. These days they seem to outshine the coral, which as a whole entity seems marginal and struggling. Sadness tempers my joy. It is only when I come across living corals as we move from one bommie to another that curiosity and wonderment take hold. How can the organisms that build these structures orchestrate such miraculous formations? Why are the colours as they are? Why are all of the living forms so varied? I want to hear the sounds that this community makes, but all I hear are my own bubbles. I want to breathe life back into this ailing community with the same breath.

The projects discussed in this exegesis engage with local people in the context of global transformations. While each of the projects is specific to local ecosystems, they are all indexical of planetary concerns. As artists working in collaboration with other disciplines and local communities, Ihlein and I have shone a light on specific issues in each place, entered into discussion with people, and with them explored ways of responding to those issues. There are no easy solutions; tensions, competing interests and disappointment are as much a part of engagement as cooperation, generosity and creative exchange. The pace of change is slow; it requires patience and a willingness to allow the process of engagement to dictate the work. To work in the field of socially engaged art means considering the value of the artwork to be contained in the methods of working themselves as much as in the outcomes. We are engaging in the mediation between socially engaged process and art product.

Writing about living artworks

The challenge of writing this exegesis has been to resolve how a written account might ever give a complete picture of art that is “breathing, performative, action-based” (Thompson 2012b, 21). As readers of accounts of socially engaged art projects, our experience of the work is second-hand, partial, fragmented. Critics and historians may impart nuanced insights into well-known works, giving the reader the benefit of multiple perspectives. Yet writing about a long-term participatory artwork is a difficult task for anyone who wasn’t there. Accounts of socially engaged art works must be derived through external sources: documentaries, photographs, interviews, verbal and written accounts, websites, anecdotal evidence. In this written account of my own collaborative works, I have attempted to give a sense of the complexity of relational artwork through storytelling. I have done so from the perspective of someone who was not only there, but also played a central role in the constitution of the works. This final chapter considers how a critique of SEA may be undertaken, whether there is a battle between ethics and aesthetics embedded within our descriptions, and also whether it is possible to establish a template for the assessment of socially engaged art.

Drawing on these observations I conclude with a proposal for a future academy, a future way of engaging SEA practices within the institutions of art, but also a warning for how SEA might develop its practices into a future where decisions about travel, and environmental impact, are to the fore. As part of my reflection on the projects undertaken within this PhD, I consider how the materials and documentation produced for my research projects, some of which continue today, are part of the fabric of the works. What remains is a string of artefacts and documents that make only partial sense outside of their context. For this reason, an exhibition of those outputs is not an endpoint of the research. Instead, I present a portal to the works through the storytelling and images embedded in this exegesis, in conjunction with the artefacts and documents in the online portfolio.

Institutional challenges

According to Godemann, transdisciplinarity “is to be understood as the search for a universal vantage point and for universal methods, over and above all disciplines” (Godemann 2008, 628). For me this is an objective rather than a reality. I believe that a transdisciplinary vantage point can only be achieved through a fundamental shift in the structures of the academy. Evans argues for a more holistic approach to tertiary research and education:

Sustainability education, by its very nature, challenges the current hegemonic order by promoting new economic and political configurations that represent convergent paths between human fulfillment and ecological well-being. (Evans 2015, 78)

Projects such as *Mapping the Islands* flourish within a lively milieu of collaboration across disciplines, but do not necessarily challenge the current hegemonic order. At the University of Wollongong, the Global Challenges program has usefully supported a number of the experimental collaborations discussed here, yet I believe that the research and teaching university could respond more wholeheartedly to the pressing needs of our time. In this final chapter, *Reflecting*, I embrace the role of speculative practitioner and propose an educational model that would equip young artists with ‘deep generalist’ knowledge that

would enable them to effectively engage with complex issues within a research environment that is more truly universal.

Critiquing socially engaged art

There is another set of questions raised within this thesis. On what measures can we ‘judge’ socially engaged art projects? Can we apply a critical framework to art that is embedded within communities, outside of the gallery or museum? Do we judge a work on its ethical merits? Its participatory success? Historian and critic Claire Bishop observes that the social turn towards ‘participatory’ art since the 1990s has given rise to a set of practices that now constitute the avant-garde (Bishop 2012, 2):

[I]t is tempting to suggest that this art arguably forms what avant-garde we have today; artists devising social situations as a dematerialised, anti-market, politically engaged project to carry on the avant-garde call to make art a more vital part of life. (Bishop 2012, 12-13)

For example, artist Rick Lowe has demonstrated a long-term commitment to a living community in the local, community-based work *Project Row Houses* (1993-ongoing) (Thompson 2012b, 256). With other artists, Lowe purchased twenty-two ‘shotgun’ houses and restored them as community and artist spaces in an embattled neighbourhood in Houston, Texas. Of the early years establishing this project with the community, Lowe says:

We wanted to let the people around us bring up the content of what we do, and then figure out how to do it in an aesthetic way that is different and challenging. That’s our role as artists: to think about how to make things interesting, and conceptualize them in ways that add value and meaning. (Lowe 2013)

Project Row Houses is a fitting example of socially engaged art as ‘avant-garde’ if, as Claire Bishop suggests, art and life are brought more closely together through experimental methods. Lowe reflects on his motivations for working with this community: rather than creating a work that catered to the arts community, “we were trying to figure out how the arts community could serve *this* community” (Lowe 2013). This raises a further question: is

the evaluation of this kind of work in any way similar to the evaluation of an installation in a gallery? Suzanne Lacy's work *Shapes of Water, Sounds of Hope* (2016) was created in a community in Lancashire, England. The gallery representation of the project was shown at the 2018 Sydney Biennale. The viewer in one location sees the 'surrogate' of the living work in the other, from which they extrapolate the content and meaning of the project through video, photo and text displays. As such, the presentation of the work in the Biennale reflects the texture of the live work, but is not the original work. It takes on a new form with a new language appropriate to the milieu of the artworld.

During this research period, the projects *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* were both exhibited within regional galleries. The exhibitions offered objects, maps, drawings, videos and photos as adjuncts to the 'live' works. This practice of exhibiting alongside the experience on-site draws on a long history of thinking about the relationship between space- or place-based work and the gallery. In the late 1960s, American sculptor Robert Smithson developed a theory of 'non-site' to interpret the relationship of site to gallery, in which the gallery serves as the 'abstract container' or 'non-site' (Smithson in Kastner and Wallis 1998, 31). The works in exhibitions represent actual sites; the viewer's imagination locates "the gap that exists between the unprocessed, found reality of the land and its appropriation in ways that provide specific interpretations of the site" (Hogue 2004, 54). For Smithson, this sets up a 'dialectic' between site and non-site, "a process that directly engages both the empirical and the imagined, the sight and non-site" (Hogue 2004, 54). In our exhibitions, *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* and *Sugar vs the Reef?*, the gallery viewer is asked to do two things: to look at the works as art objects and at the same time to glean a sense of the living project elsewhere, beyond the gallery, making temporal shifts in their experience. In both exhibitions, we blurred those experiences by bringing gallery audiences out into 'the field' to get a feel and taste of the living work. By taking them on-site—on a creek walk or to a work of botanic land art—we brought the physicality of the living work together with the materiality of the gallery experience.

The documentation of works both on-site and within the non-site of the gallery, raises the question of the different value systems that should be employed for assessment of SEA.

Claire Bishop expresses frustration at a general tendency among critics to measure socially engaged artworks on their ethical merits rather than on their artistic outcomes (Bishop in Thompson 2012, 38-44). For her, there is a gap between social and artistic value. In Bishop's view, the emergence of the community arts movement after 1968 provides a cautionary tale; the instrumentalisation of art by governments as "a harmless branch of the welfare state ... the kindly folk who can be relied upon to mop up wherever the government wishes to absolve itself of responsibility" (Bishop in Thompson 2012b, 38). She therefore argues for the necessity of "sustaining a tension between artistic and social critiques" (Bishop 2012, 40) and favours artworks that provoke debate through disruption, antagonism, ambiguity and contradiction.

For Bishop, Jeremy Deller's work, *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), brings a critical complexity to a participatory public artwork. *The Battle of Orgreave* is a re-enactment of a violent confrontation between police and miners in the town of Orgreave, Yorkshire, during the miners' strikes of the early 1980s in England. During this period Margaret Thatcher's economic policies hobbled both the mining industry and the trade union movement (Bishop 2012, 30). In a staging that complicated a story of class struggle, Deller invited historical re-enactment groups to participate, while some of the original protagonists switched roles from miners to police. Of this work, Deller says: "I've always described it as digging up a corpse and giving it a proper post-mortem, or as a thousand-person crime re-enactment" (Deller 2016). Yet Bishop reads it differently, seeing the re-enactment as an opening of old wounds, especially apparent through the impassioned voices in the video documentary of the event by Mike Figgis (Deller and Figgis 2001). Bishop views the layered complexity of *The Battle of Orgreave* as a reason for its critical success. For her, the ambiguity of the event—a strange combination of choreographed violence and a family fair day—and Deller's directorial approach, which navigates a path between too tight a control and too little control of the re-enactment, takes the work beyond an ethical transaction between artist and public. She says:

It is precisely here that one sees the grey *artistic* work of participatory art—deciding how much or how little scripting to enforce—rather than in the *ethical* black-and-white of 'good' or 'bad' collaboration." (Bishop 2012, 33)

Like most viewers, I can admire this work through second-hand accounts and documentation. Watching Figgis' video of *The Battle of Orgreave* is how most viewers would experience the work; therefore the documentary itself must also be considered as a key part of the work. From a social perspective, it retells an important story of class struggle through the lens of art. In my own collaborative practice, I have worked to raise important questions without deliberately provoking overt confrontation or disaffection. We may work with provocative ideas yet we are diplomatic, careful to avoid shutting down dialogue. Ethics *are* important in our approach. This approach does not remove tension and difficulty from the work we do, but rather navigates through issues that may be unresolvable. At a time of rapid change to the global ecology, our central concern is our contribution as artists to better environmental practices. Working in this area, we are bound to be working with conflict and resistance. In our practice, political and artistic gestures go hand in hand, and we navigate a line between ethics and criticality. Does our work have 'merit'? It is an open question.

The question of relative merit, or perceived value, is fraught for all artists working in this field. Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera have also contributed to the discussion of 'merit'. Lacy acknowledges the tension between social processes in the arts and the desire for measurable outcomes:

However unpersuaded I might feel about whether art causes substantial change, I do think it's one of the most interesting questions to entertain in our field: How do we know we're doing what we say we're doing? (Lacy in Gonzalez et al. 2018, 44).

Lacy resists the idea of 'proof' in the arts:

When we enter social practice, we put ourselves in to a difficult position, because people expect, as they do in direct political action, measurable change ... transformation in individuals and, more complexly, in cultures and in laws— all of these things are difficult to gauge (Lacy in Gonzalez et al. 2018, 41).

Pablo Helguera agrees that ‘measuring’ effectiveness is very difficult, “because you don’t know the effect of something you learned until sometimes twenty years later” (Helguera in Gonzalez et al. 2018, 38).

Therefore, if I am to assess the merits of the projects that have made up this PhD research, I would ask myself a set of questions. The questions are not based on ‘measurable outcomes’; rather they are an invitation to reflect. Through this exegesis, they may also contribute a guideline for other artists working in this field of practice. My guiding questions are:

1. Is there skill and care in the work (whether it is a conversation, an object, a song, a piece of writing or design, or a negotiation)?
2. Does the work, as artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison say, “ennoble both the place and its people”? (Centre for the study of the Force Majeure 2018)
3. Do the artists enter and exit the project in a timely manner (if indeed there was an exit)?
4. What does the community gain from our presence? How do we evaluate this?
5. What did the artists learn? Did we extend our own practice?
6. Did we increase public awareness and knowledge of the subject we were exploring?
7. Did our work make a contribution to the subject we were exploring? How?
8. Were meaningful relationships formed?
9. How were conflicts handled?
10. Was the project conducted with ethical integrity?

Through this exegesis I have attempted to address some of these questions. I have connected my work to that of others working in the field, and I have thought about my projects through a series of guiding active verbs: Rising, Locating, Growing, Talking, Connecting, Collaborating, Walking, Making. Thinking in action has enabled me to consider my practice across diverse spaces and times. The remainder of this chapter shifts into a final reflective mode. I offer a brief assessment of each project: where it stands today and what may occur in the future. I consider the environmental and educational implications of working both in the field of SEA and in the academy. I then summarise the ways in which

this research has contributed to new knowledges in the environmental, artistic and academic fields. Finally, I reflect on what I personally have learnt, through this research, as an artist.

Up the creek—*Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra*

The practice of walking-as-art in *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* brings a community focus to human relationships to water, offering up these relationships for public consideration. This project brought together a diverse group of people, who responded to our invitations to walk upstream along local creeks. Surprisingly, there were few questions about *why* we were performing this unusual activity. Creek-walking fostered a sense of kinship between the walkers and a desire to explore local waterways which otherwise remain largely ignored.

WOTI reached a natural pause after the *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* exhibition at Wollongong Art Gallery concluded in February 2018. This is a project that could be easily picked up again at any time by reactivating the ‘creek-walking’ community we have formed. At the very beginning of this project, I asked the question “could the waters of any of these creeks become drinkable again?” Five years later, the same question returns as a provocation to take this project further.

Having had time to reflect on what was gained by this activity, I imagine that building an ongoing community of interest around local waterways is possible. The enthusiasm of our co-walkers perhaps comes from the spirit of exploration, of having a new experience in a local place, of noticing something that goes unnoticed. Should a more outcome-focused project emerge—such as creek remediation—*WOTI* would be very different. My experiences in *Mapping the Islands* have been instructive in *how* to work across many disciplines. A project of this scale would require extensive municipal negotiations and involve a diverse array of stakeholders, perhaps more akin to a project like Metabolic Studio’s *Bending the River Back into the City*. Yet whether it remained purely an experimental walking practice or a more specific environmental project, either would require acts of care and attention.



9.2 Byarong Creek community creek walk, 2017
(Photo: Vincent Bicego)

On the land—*Sugar vs the Reef?*

Our work to promote regenerative agriculture continues from a distance, as we consult with our farmer collaborators to find ways forward. The *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* came to a close in October 2019, as ‘the Beacon’ completed its agricultural cycle when we held the sugarcane harvest event, *Old Ways, New Ways*. Soil tests, rainfall sediment run-off tests and sugar content tests conducted on site offer comparisons to monocultural sugarcane farming methods. The tests yielded positive results for regenerative agriculture in all areas: organic carbon in the soil had increased since we had begun improving the soil, run-off was less on the crop than on the surrounding land, and the sugar content of the harvested sugarcane compared favourably with standard practice (see Portfolio). From this perspective, the project successfully demonstrated a chemical-free agricultural method that has benefits for human, soil and marine health.

By collaborating with farmer Simon Mattsson, we helped to increase his public profile as a regenerative agriculture and soil ‘expert’. This has led to new opportunities for Mattsson. In

March 2019, he was invited to speak about his regenerative agriculture practices at the United Nations Environmental Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya. Mattsson's message is clear: regenerative agriculture builds healthy soil. Healthy soil ensures a secure food supply into the future. Healthy soil also effectively sequesters carbon. Farmers, in his view, therefore have a key role to play in the story of climate change: taken to its logical conclusion, the broad scale adoption of regenerative agricultural practices could significantly reduce global carbon emissions (Toensmeier 2016).



9.3 Lucas Ihlein, Kim Williams and Simon Mattsson at *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, July 2017
(Photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Mattsson acknowledges our role as artists in amplifying the benefits of his regenerative agriculture practices to the public through our collaborative work in Mackay. What does this mean for us, as artists who have proudly championed Mattsson's work over four years? I have seen enough evidence 'on the ground' in Mackay and heard enough compelling science (Brodie 2016) to grasp the common sense of what farmers like Mattsson are doing. Time is a key factor: the urgent need for improved environmental practices is not matched by the actual rate at which farmers make those changes. Sugarcane farming is a marginal, risky business and farmers must be offered a convincing case for change with incentives to

do so. As Governments bow to pressure to act on behalf of the Great Barrier Reef, they inject money into improving land-based practices that impact the Reef. The Great Barrier Reef Foundation was set up by the Federal Government to address water quality issues; in 2018, \$19 million was allocated to eleven projects targeted to improve water quality in the Coral Sea (Great Barrier Reef Foundation 2019). Eventually, bottom-up initiatives like ours in tandem with top-down incentives and legislation from Government may result in a gradual change in farming practices.

We achieved a 'reach' into the community that helped promote the work of natural resource management organisations such as The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and Reef Catchments. Our collaborative work with those organisations has been mutually beneficial. Their funding and in kind support helped us to stage public cultural/agricultural events and activities that meet their educational objectives. After the final harvest event in October 2019, we came to a natural pause in the project. It was a timely exit at that point, one which we had been working towards for a year by gradually sharing the project management with our colleagues in Mackay. There is still much to do in Mackay; the work we have been doing there may take a new direction, as we work with our farmer collaborators to secure funding for agricultural trials or a demonstration farm.

There have been distinct advantages and disadvantages to coming and going from the Mackay community. While we have a deep investment in the work we have done there, stepping outside the day-to-day intensity of community engagement allowed us an emotional and intellectual breathing space and helped to maintain our critical autonomy as artists. We are now recognised by our many contacts in Mackay as artists who come from out of town to do 'good work' in Mackay. That recognition was built on long-term commitment to the community—staging public events, holding a major exhibition, speaking in public on radio and television, working closely with farmers and natural resource managers, bringing cultures together, lobbying politicians—all these things led to our acceptance in the community.

Our presence and absence from Mackay gave an ebb and flow to the project. We worked towards an event or action from afar, then travelled to Mackay for periods of intense

engagement. The gap was slowly bridged by building working relationships there. The close involvement of people living in Mackay had significant benefits: their local knowledge helped ‘get things done’ and the project was able to continue in our absence. Gradually those people began to take the lead, showing the potential for the project to take different directions as we faded from the picture.

The final harvest event at ‘The Beacon’ brought our work in the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens to a close; by agreement we relinquished the site back to the Gardens. Yet ‘the Beacon’ became a cherished gathering site. Our colleagues in the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association and the Yuwibara Aboriginal community expressed interest in maintaining the site into the future. They grasped the potential of ‘The Beacon’ as a place where art and agriculture can meet. In October 2019 we began negotiations with the Botanic Gardens staff to create a new community site, located near the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander meeting hut at the southern end of the Gardens.

Our task for *Sugar vs the Reef?* is to “ennoble both the place and its people” (Centre for the Study of the Force Majeure 2018). When I reflect on the many elements of our project in Mackay, I am convinced that our work has made a lasting impact. We have made a public case for regenerative agriculture and we have reconnected communities in the district through our art practice. Indeed, Queensland State Member for Mirani, Stephen Andrew MP, became very interested in our work after a visit to ‘the Beacon’ with our collaborator John Sweet in early 2019. Andrew subsequently made a presentation to Parliament, along with Mackay farmers John and Michael Attard, in support of regenerative agriculture (Andrew and Attard 2019). In this sense, *Sugar vs the Reef?* has had an impact in the world, beyond the artworld. Our commitment to the task of building the profile of regenerative agriculture through collaborative strategies over a period of years deepened our relationship to the people we work with and, I contend, was key to the project’s success.

Assessing this project through the critical frameworks and models of merit, stated earlier in the chapter, *Sugar vs the Reef?* shows itself as a work that offers a valuable contribution both to the field of socially engaged art practice and to environmental discourse. Our work brought issues to public attention and demonstrated good agricultural practices, using

carefully considered, inclusive methods. Through slow relationship building, we formed a local community of collaborators from different backgrounds. Working together, we learned from each other, exchanging knowledge and benefitting from the sum total of each others' skills. As artists, we learned a great deal about agriculture, its politics, its history, its science and its environmental complexity. We also learned much about respectful and inclusive ways of working across cultures. Our presence enriched the community of Mackay through the events we staged and the exhibition we held, bringing people from many cultures and political persuasions into the same arena. While we maintained an artistic autonomy in the creation of key aspects of works, we also gave careful attention to local tastes and preferences in order to make people feel welcome and included. Our decisions and actions were conducted with an attention to ethics and cultural protocols, as much as we possibly could. And importantly, we made lifelong friendships.

In the ocean—*Mapping the Islands and Kiribati Fisheries Blog*

Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef? came into being through Global Challenges, an internal University of Wollongong funding initiative that promotes collaboration across academic disciplines. *Mapping the Islands* began by experimenting with methods of collaboration to find new approaches to the intractable issues of the Great Barrier Reef. There is momentum for this project to continue, as it has proved to be a fertile collaboration that can be sustained within the academy. As the project slowly evolves, it reflects an experimental and open-ended dialogue between disciplines. We work carefully together, mindful of building and maintaining respectful relationships in which no single discipline dominates the agenda. While our physical starting point was the Great Barrier Reef, our 'community' is the academic community. There are two parallel processes occurring in this project: examining issues through interdisciplinary collaboration and examining interdisciplinary collaboration itself as a method. The exploratory nature of our work is both unsettling and exciting, as we navigate our way through the unknown. We have produced a varied range of outputs to date, which both contribute to environmental dialogues and enrich the growing field of interdisciplinary collaboration.



9.4 Leah Gibbs, Kim Williams, Sarah Hamylton and Lucas Ihlein, Bundanon Trust artist-in-residence program, *Mapping the Islands* project, 2018
(Photo: Paul Jones)

Kiribati Fisheries Blog, on the other hand, started and then stopped through institutional mechanisms. A Global Challenges grant enabled me to travel to Kiribati, working with a team member of the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security (ANCORS). The trip gave me the opportunity to meet people and assess the potential for further work there. Working within both urban and remote communities, I saw real potential for an ongoing project to address plastics pollution. This potential came from a genuine desire of villagers to find a way of dealing with their plastic waste. From my experiences in Kiribati, I proposed a new iteration: *Healthy village, healthy fish* (2017). I developed the proposal for the new project through the connections I had already formed in Kiribati. However, a series of funding applications were unsuccessful. As a result, *Healthy village, healthy fish* was never realised. Ironically, *not* returning to Kiribati to undertake the project forced me think more carefully about the implications of working within Indigenous communities as a well-meaning outsider. My experience in Kiribati gave me a strong sense of the time and resources needed to develop any meaningful and productive relationships

with those communities. To do so takes a preparedness to make an ongoing commitment to this work.



9.5 Aurélie Delisle (ANCORS) and Rutiana Teibaba at the local Fisheries office, Tanaea, Kiribati
(Photo: Kim Williams)

Coming and going

Questions of temporary versus permanent presence in a place have at times emerged in these projects. We are acutely aware of our status as ‘outsiders’ in the project *Sugar vs the Reef?*, for example, and have worked to gain acceptance by repeatedly returning to Mackay over a number of years and continuing the work when off-site. Grant Kester (2004) offers views on the inherent power relations contained in art projects that ‘enter’ into communities—indeed, the term ‘community’ is interrogated in his analysis. There can be arguments made for and against artists coming in to work within communities ‘from the outside’. Kester singles out the practice of institutional support for itinerant artist projects, which often targets artists for their artworld status rather than their connection to a particular place or issue (Kester 2004, 172). The pressure to produce work within an often limited period compromises the ability of artists to grasp the nuances of systems and

cultures with which they are unfamiliar. Kester finds a solution in artists who return to a site over a period of years and build enduring relationships with those communities.

Though supportive of the work of Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, Kester finds an unevenness in the quality of their projects. He attributes this to the degree of familiarity with the territory in which they are working. For Kester, the Harrisons' work on the watershed ecosystems in the United States has an inherently better grasp of the complexities of those systems than their projects that are located in other countries:

As a result, the mythopoeic power to generate compelling stories and visual metaphors capable of representing the possible transformation of these sites is grounded in a clearly articulated analysis of the economic, political, and institutional forces that can either impede or facilitate that transformation.

(Kester 2004, 172)

For Kester, some of the Harrisons' overseas projects are weakened by a dependence on the contacts provided by the sponsoring institution. This diminishes their "political acuity and specificity", often resulting in an identifiably "Harrison" style outcome that may not be the best response to the site (2004, 172-173). He suggests that the problems created by the system of itinerancy can be addressed by durational engagement with that site over a number of years. The cultural issues of working in other places, with other cultures, and working sensitively and respectfully within those cultures, require an awareness of the privileges of being a 'white researcher' in countries such as Kiribati. In this way ANCORS serves as a useful role model, as the work they do in Kiribati is built on sound principles of community engagement and sustained involvement over many years. This was subsequently reflected in our slow work with the Mackay community in *Sugar vs the Reef?*

In the air

Working in an academic setting offers many privileges, such as travel, that come at an environmental cost. Academic institutions generally have a very large carbon footprint. Environmental humanities scholar Ken Hiltner (University of California, Santa Barbara) audited his own institution to discover that a significant proportion of the university's

carbon emissions came from academic air travel alone. In response he organised the *Climate change: views from the humanities* conference in 2016 as a “nearly carbon neutral” conference that involved no air travel. Hiltner says:

I am firmly of the belief, given the significant environmental and cultural advantages that can come with such an approach, that most conferences in “the world in 2050” will largely take place online. The fact that an online approach can both reduce a conference’s greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by a factor of a hundred or more while also allowing a range of individuals who would not otherwise be able to attend—because of issues relating to cost, geography, time zones, accessibility, and so forth—full access to the proceedings is, as far as I am concerned, just terrific. (Hiltner 2016)

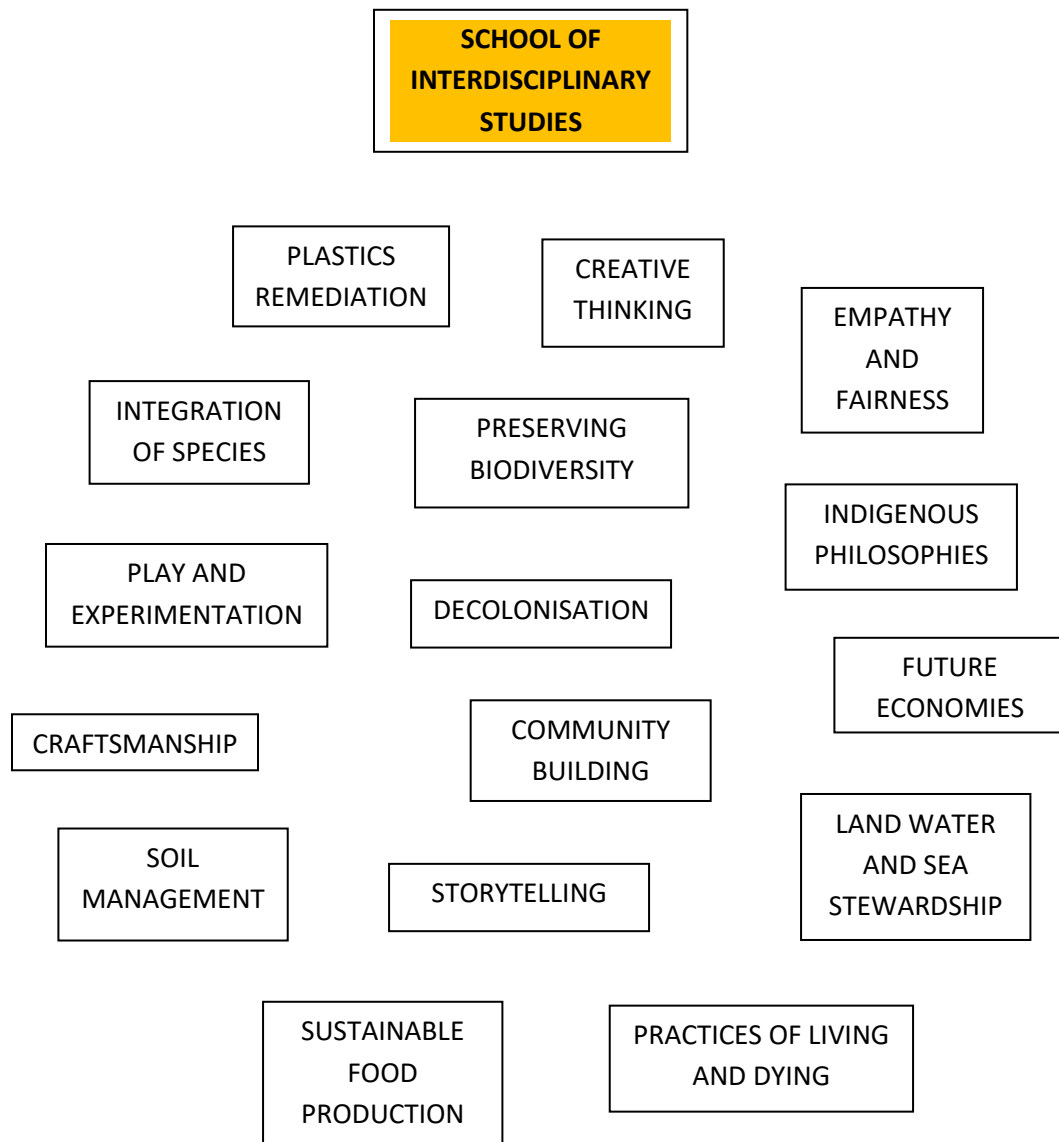
As *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* artists, Brogan Bunt, Lucas Ihlein and I participated in this conference remotely via video submission. Ihlein and I then met Hiltner in 2018, during a research trip to California, where we presented a talk at Hiltner’s invitation at the University of California, Santa Barbara. There is a richness to the experience of face-to-face meetings that cannot be matched by remote communication, yet there is a compelling need to reduce our carbon footprint in the academy. When we participate in conferences around Australia or internationally, when we travel to meet people, carbon is emitted. While we may strive to address climate change in our academic work on the one hand, we continue to contribute heavily to emissions produced through the institutional practice of academic travel. This seems increasingly extravagant in a digitally connected world. Flying to Cairns to participate in the *Mapping the Islands* research activities and flying back and forth to Mackay to continue the *Sugar vs the Reef?* project were both necessary fieldwork. While there could be an argument made for local works that involve less air travel, both of these projects have built on my own and my collaborators’ knowledge and, I believe, enriched both academic and environmental discourse. Yet the question of overall worth versus carbon emissions remains open.

In the academy

Working within the academy offers advantages and opportunities for artists. Consciously choosing a research area that more deeply explored my art practice has opened up a new set of working relationships, many of which I hope will continue into the future. This may pave the way for future collaborative projects, both in and out of the academy. As importantly, my practice flourished through working in variety of circumstances and communities, deepening my commitment as an artist to working directly in what I see as 'areas of need'.

The relationships forged through my work have informed my thinking about future academic structures that may help to dissolve the restrictions of traditional research silos. Whether enshrined as a formal structure within the tertiary framework, or as an informal cohort, interdisciplinary collaboration has the potential to loosen the structures of disciplinary thinking. Given the broad acceptance that the world's problems cannot be addressed through singular approaches, it is time to more wholeheartedly bring disciplines together to work and teach in a way that addresses some of the key areas of thinking and practice that promote healthy global ecosystems.

I therefore propose a hypothetical model of education and collaboration, one that helps us to live as members of a multi-species global community that relinquishes the project of colonisation and domination. It is a fanciful model that I hope would begin a conversation about educational priorities. The 'School of Interdisciplinary Studies' is not based on existing models; rather it is a selection of what I see as key areas for investigation. It would be a way of offering art students, for example, a more rounded education that brings them into the centre of issues, in an interdisciplinary milieu. While it may be based within a university, it would have an open access structure to allow community members to be involved without being burdened by educational debt. The school would be led by a multidisciplinary team, with a focus on the creative and the cultural as useful methods with which to think about issues.



9.6 Kim Williams, *An imaginary interdisciplinary school*

Collective grief and action

A 'School of Interdisciplinary Studies' would, I believe, better equip students for a more equitable future across species. There is no doubt that fundamental global change needs to occur, that humans need to find more balanced and reciprocal ways of living with the planet. As Australian eco-philosopher Val Plumwood said shortly before her death:

If our species does not survive the ecological crisis, it will probably be due to our failure to imagine and work out new ways to live with the earth, to rework ourselves and our high energy, high consumption and hyper-instrumental societies adaptively ... We will go onwards in a different mode of humanity, or not at all (Plumwood 2007, 1 in Gibson et al. 2015, vi)

It is time to consider our place in the world. Australian geographer Lesley Head regards this moment in time as an opportunity “to challenge the modernist framing of humans as separate from and superior to nature, and of human history as a process of continuous improvement” (Head 2016, 5). That means also facing up to feelings of grief and loss, for what has already gone and what is coming, without losing hope. Head describes these feelings as “grief for what we understood as our future—hitherto a time and place of unlimited positive possibility” (Head 2016, 5). Yet, as Head argues, feelings of loss evoked by ecological change are a Western experience. Capitalism and colonialism tread a large ecological footprint; progress and improvement have been gained by some at the expense of others: “for many people in many parts of the world, daily life is already, and has always been, infused with catastrophe and grief” (Head 2016, 8).

How do we talk about climate change in a culture of optimism that resists frank and open discussions about the socially uncomfortable and ‘negative’ topic of climate change (Head 2016, 28)? Head contends that those frank and open discussions enable a collective grieving process to occur:

Only then can emotional energy be reinvested in more creative ways. Bearing our grief will not necessarily stave off catastrophe, but it will give us a better chance of effective action. (Head 2016, 33)

Working with environmental issues is confronting; it is made easier by working with others who acknowledge similar experiences of grief. As importantly, support comes from hope: knowing that collective action is occurring across the world. As artist Suzanne Lacy says:

Social change doesn’t happen through a single person (in general), and it certainly doesn’t happen through a single art project. It happens through the

collective activity of many, many people working in many ways to push the ball up the hill in the same direction. (Lacy in Gonzalez et al. 2018, 43)

In this statement, Lacy acknowledges the arduous process of facilitating social change. Knowing this and working collaboratively across disciplines is a productive approach to working with the difficult issues of our times.

What have I learnt?

Working alongside Lucas Ihlein has created valuable opportunities for me that I would otherwise not have been able to access. His reach in the artworld and his ability to create networks and connections has offered lessons in ways of operating as an artist working in the social realm. Ihlein's work is fundamentally relational; key to this is his ability to communicate and collaborate. As a founding member of the collective Kandos School of Cultural Adaptation (KSCA), Ihlein is closely connected with a community of peers. My own peripheral involvement with KSCA has offered insight into the advantages of having a 'tribe', the kind of loose community of artists and thinkers that KSCA represents.

In May 2018 Ihlein and I travelled to California and Nevada to meet prominent socially engaged artists and scholars. These experiences led me to make comparisons between what is possible in the United States and what is possible in Australia, in terms of working on large-scale, durational projects. Headed by Lauren Bon, Metabolic Studio is a privately funded organisation, supported by the Bon family's philanthropic fund, the Annenberg Foundation. The studio is housed in a very large warehouse complex in Los Angeles. Bon employs over forty staff from many disciplinary fields—including architecture, landscape design, video, hydrology, engineering, construction and sound—to undertake large-scale socially engaged environmental projects. The resources at her disposal are considerable, enabling her to undertake ambitious, long term works. The works reflect her manifesto, that "artists need to create on the same scale that society has the capacity to destroy" (Bon 2005). Metabolic Studio operates on much larger scale than anything I have seen in Australia; Lauren Bon has the capacity and resources to take a very long view. A large cohort of multidisciplinary staff and generous funding enables Metabolic Studio to function at a sophisticated level and develop their work over long periods. In Australia, socially

engaged artists are largely dependent on short-term government funding cycles. There is a clear difference between what we are able to do and what Metabolic Studio is able to do and that therefore determines the scale on which it is possible to work. Knowing this brings our capacities as artists into perspective: we must tailor our work to the available resources and this means working on both small and larger scales. While *WOTI* operated on a small, local scale with very little funding, *Sugar vs the Reef?* received substantial funding from a number of sources and was therefore much bigger in scale.

Projects such as *Kiribati Fisheries Blog*, *Sugar vs the Reef?*, *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* and *Mapping the Islands: How can art and science save the Great Barrier Reef?* have invited me to be an active constituent, as an artist, in environmental matters. Rather than exclusively representing issues in galleries, I have actively sought to bring art more directly into life by taking on real-world challenges with people and communities. What have I learnt from these experiences? As a human being, I have learnt a great deal about working across cultures. I have deepened my practice of working in 'relation' to other beings. I have tried to practice with an understanding that humans are part of an enmeshed world and that the core work is to make those interconnections apparent. Importantly, I have deepened my own methods as an artist by being involved in socially engaged art projects: I have learnt by 'doing'.

Working collaboratively means working with both the interior spaces of one's own thinking and the external space of collective thinking. Collaborating is learning from others. It is a challenging and rich way of practising. Over the past three and a half years I produced various 'works' within these projects by my own hand, but they were produced within a context of collaborative practice and dialogue. For this reason, they are part of a larger body of co-authored work. Collaboration demands a willingness to listen and to adapt, to develop ideas together and to let go of control. What comes out of collaboration could not possibly come out of solo practice.

Socially engaged art and collaboration are both fundamentally about relationships. Both methods demand that we build relationships to others: to our collaborators, to the communities in which we are working, and to the ecologies that give us a reason for our

work. Indeed, working in the field of socially engaged art, Taiwanese artist Wu Mali states that “the role of the artist is to help forge relations” (Wu Mali in Lu 2016, 98). Relationships aren’t easy; they can be taken to a certain level, where boundaries are clear and polite transactions can occur. Yet to work deeply and effectively, relationships must deepen too. In Wollongong, we have formed close working relationships with Sarah Hamylton and Leah Gibbs through robust and fertile discussions, through producing works together. In Queensland, we have made lifelong friends with Simon and Susie Mattsson, John and Christene Sweet, Starrett Ve a Ve a, Kellie Galletly and Cherrie Hughes. A loyalty has developed from working through difficult things together, from problem sharing and problem solving together; from remaining committed despite occasional disagreements. Through our different lenses, we continue to see the big picture, of improving ecological and human health.

Contribution to knowledge

What have I contributed? This question must be reframed: what have we contributed? The projects I have discussed would not be possible without collective participation. We perform as artists, yet we enact a position of connectedness to others: to farmers, to Australian South Sea Islanders, to First Australians, to sea creatures, to the public, to creeks, to corals, to soil microbes, to villagers in Kiribati. We become a part of the place. Working from a boat on the Great Barrier Reef, we take on discomfort in order to ‘know’ and to be present. Scuba diving with scientists brings us into their world. We look through our own eyes and theirs, suddenly embracing the significance of corals. Swimming amongst a large school of pelagic fish helps us to ‘know’. Walking up creeks takes us from human habitation to tree and rock and brings both together through the thread of the creek. Working with a farmer, we plant seeds with children and families on a hot tropical day, learning about the interactions between plant roots and soil microbes. In these situations, teaching and learning occur *in situ*, and the work we do deliberately steps into the realm of education. Learning occurs through participating in, planning with, and articulating those matters we are trying to understand. Reflecting on her own work, Suzanne Lacy says: “Pedagogy in art is both part of the process, but also part of the intention of the work, because the work intends to educate in some public way” (Lacy in Gonzalez et al. 2018, 37).

At the outset of my research, I asked the questions:

- How can socially engaged art play a critical role in complex environmental projects?

I began with the hunch that, rather than being enclosed in a studio and producing work exclusively for gallery audiences, collaborating with others and working across different communities and cultures might bring greater vitality to my art practice. Based on my own previous experiences, I felt that socially engaged methods may get more directly to the problem and that, as an artist, I could play a critical role in transforming environmental practices.

Through the enactment of the four projects of this PhD, I discovered that there are many different ways of engaging with people and working with communities. By building a repertoire—a ‘suite’ of practices—Lucas Ihlein and I were able to orchestrate these practices to work in concert with each other to maximise our engagement. The active titles of each chapter reflect that suite of methods, which embrace many different approaches to particular problems or situations. As a result, a new research methodology emerged in the process of ‘doing’ these projects.

- In what ways do those methods enable us to contribute to environmental knowledge and discourse?

We use multiple platforms to transmit our knowledge and to contribute to environmental discourse. The Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens, for example, was a ‘live’ site from which we could directly engage the public in education and participation in healthy agricultural and environmental practices. Blogs offered an online platform for documentation, resources, reflection and public commentary (see Portfolio). Scholarly publications made contributions to the academy and brought academic and non-academic disciplines into our readership. Video documentation offered lively records of events and a different educational approach. Galleries, too, served as important vehicles for stimulating discourse: for both *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* and *Sugar vs the Reef?*, the combination of ‘live’ artworks and the gallery exhibitions created a porosity between the

two, as we provided opportunities for audiences to shift back and forth between the two sites.

By telling unique stories of live, socially engaged artworks, I have shown how practice-based research, in all its complexity, contributes to the collective body of work and knowledge of socially engaged art methods. Through those stories, I have made the claim that our work as artists makes an active contribution to environmental discourses. We have learnt and then demonstrated principles of regenerative agriculture (*Sugar vs the Reef?*). We have learnt and transmitted knowledge of reef ecologies (*Mapping the Islands*). We have brought local waterways to the fore to invite practices of care (*WOTI*). We have learnt ways of working across cultures to highlight global and local environmental issues (*Kiribati Fisheries Blog*). We have done this through our work in the field, in the gallery and in the academy, as we discover ways of working across communities and disciplines to “push the ball up the hill in the same direction” (Lacy in Gonzalez et al. 2018, 43). In the words of scholars Anne Douglas and Chris Fremantle (2016, 154) we, like the Harrisons, are “negotiating a new positioning for the arts in public life, of being artists in a profoundly relational way, working on issues that challenge the way the world is thought and acted upon.” As artists, we value the methods of social engagement and collaboration for their capacity to go to the heart of things, to make art a more enmeshed part of life.



9.7 *Seed and Song* planting event, ‘The Beacon’, August 2018
(Photo: Michael Kane)

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