



Sohan Ariel Hayes & Michael Woodley, *Birndi Wirndi – Worlds Apart*, 2010, dual channel HD video, PAL, with 2-channel audio, stereo, 14 mins duration archival video, images, text, architectural model (foamcore and inkjet print), 8 x 3.5m; installation view, *Spaced: art out of place*, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 2012; image courtesy the artists

Spaced: out West

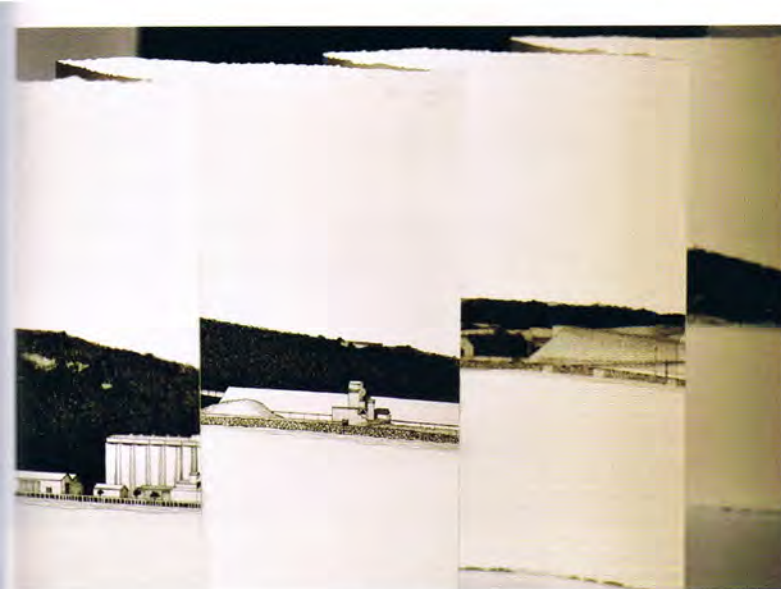
REBECCA COATES

For a girl from the Eastern seaboard, Western Australia, as they say, is another world. Vast expanses and distances: it's a state whose urban-scape is sprawlingly immense, whilst beyond its coastal perimeter extends an even vaster, and more sparsely populated interior. In many ways, it's still the 'wild west', as the flight from Melbourne to Perth reinforces. Vast mining wealth, whose lobbying power has changed prime ministers; big characters, whose prominence and larger-than-life antics have most recently manifested in Gina Rinehart's very public pantomime of family injunctions and legal suppressions. A state politically focused on wheat-belt agriculture, despite the economic dominance of mining and urbanism.

Within this context, over the weekend of 4 to 5 February 2012, IASKA launched its inaugural biennial event at the Fremantle Arts Centre in Perth. *Spaced: art out of place* was heralded as an 'international biennial event of socially engaged art'.¹ Twenty-one Australian and international artists and collectives spent time in sixteen regional Western Australian communities as part of the IASKA program over the last two years. Their residencies were developed in partnership with local arts groups and other organisations in remote parts of Western Australia. IASKA's articulated goal was to explore the 'relationship between globalisation and local identity', placing artists in communities, in order to 'consider their social and physical environments'. Their work was presented as the *Spaced* exhibition in Fremantle, and is intended to tour regionally and nationally. It draws on the model of earlier IASKA projects involving artists who had residencies in Kellerberrin (a wheatbelt town of about 1000 people, 200 kilometres east of Perth) and whose work was curated by Marco

Marcon, IASKA's director, into two touring exhibitions.

A two-day symposium accompanied the exhibition featuring international and Australian keynote speakers that interwove project presentations made by residency artists and hosting representatives. Speakers included David Cross (NZ), who forensically analysed Heather and Ivan Morison's *Journée des barricades* (2008), in which car wrecks, discarded furniture and other urban detritus barricaded an intersection in downtown Wellington for twenty-four hours as part of the *One Day Sculpture* series in 2008. His presentation highlighted the need for a clear curatorial vision willing to take risks with the unknown, and illustrated the tenacious advocacy role that was required to overcome hurdles and red tape. Zara Stanhope (Aust) proposed the model of artist as ethnographer as a useful frame in considering socially-based art, as the discipline does not rely on artistic production. Margo Handwerker (USA) contextualised IASKA's work with developments in the US and internationally, while discussing the role of participation and engagement for communities and audiences alike. She questioned the purpose of the exhibition in relation to socially-based practice, and the role of documentation in this sort of work. Handwerker also questioned whether training in methods of anthropology and sociology, public and environmental affairs, grant writing or non-profit management was equally useful for students of social art practice, as the teaching of drawing, sculpture or art. Other speakers included Ian Hunter (UK), who spoke about art and agriculture, and Ian Tully (Aust), who talked about his initiation of ACRE (Australia's Creative Rural Economy) as a platform for rural-based projects promoting art and agriculture. Offering a



1/ Mimi Tong, *View of Albany from Princess Royal Harbour*, Western Australia c. December 2009, 2010, hand drawn ink on paper, Buckram hardcovers, 43 x 616cm; image courtesy the artist



2/ Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, *The Way You Move Me*, 2011, 2 channel video projection, 5.1 channel audio, 10:30mins duration; installation view, Spaced, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 2012; image courtesy the artists and Fehily Contemporary, Melbourne

range of international perspective, theoretical insights, and an art historical framing of IASKA's activities, these presentations created a valuable context to view the Western Australian residency program and exhibition.

Like its predecessor, International Art Spaces Kellerberrin Australia, IASKA aims to form strong social engagements between artists and those living in the selected towns, reflecting the most socially, geographically and economically disadvantaged communities in Western Australia. Artists and collectives are selected from Australia and internationally. The selection criteria prioritise artistic practices that incorporate science and technology, social activism, or design and architecture. Marcon noted that the success of the residency and community engagement should not only be judged by the production of aesthetically compelling art. He also noted that his role was not that of curator in selecting artists for either residencies or the subsequent exhibition.

Socially-based, often politically charged, practice has become well established. Developed around the idea of a practice that focuses on human relations and their social rather than individual meaning, it was most prominently articulated through the writings of curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud in the 1990s. A prominent practitioner was New York-based Argentinian Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose large-scale installations and occasions, often taking the form of stages or rooms for sharing meals, cooking, reading or playing music, are often associated with Bourriaud's relational aesthetics, and were an integral part of the global biennale exhibition circuit for a time.

Organisations that focus on socially engaged artmaking have proliferated. New York's not-for-profit Creative Time is arguably the most visible exponent, focused on community development (primarily urban and New York City-based) through quality arts programming or ephemeral work. With a similar focus, the development of teaching programs such as the Michigan Institute for Contemporary Art (MICA) and a number of others working in this field reflects the increased professionalisation of this form of art.

As a philosophical position, socially engaged art encourages artists to make sense of broader, often global, economic, political, and social concerns through collaboration, engagement with others, and social partnerships. IASKA's residency program in part responds to the increasingly internationalised, professionalised, often commercialised world of contemporary art. IASKA's receipt of significant ongoing support from government and other not-for-

profit foundations recognises the role that creative practices can play in society. The challenge, as articulated by a number of speakers in the symposium, is how to translate these social ideals and actual collaborations into concrete artistic outcomes that can be meaningfully appreciated beyond their original location and context.

Mimi Tong's detailed panorama line-drawing, *View of Albany from Princess Royal Harbour* (2009), was one of the more artistically resolved works in *Spaced*. But Tong argued that she was not a 'socially engaged artist', noting that she had applied for the residency prior to the change in its terms to focus on engaging the local community in creating the work. She saw the opportunity as allowing her time to immerse herself in a particular location, with its own specific local events, issues and news. Her concertina book extended over six metres. It presented a highly detailed view of the contemporary foreshore, in the manner of early drawings and maps from the French and British 19th century documentation of the West Australian coast that she had found in the Albany library. Her inclusion of local sites, such as the Grain Silo, wind-towers, and the Albany Entertainment Centre, not only documented a familiar topography, but alluded to the controversial way that current buildings do – or don't – interact with the landscape. Whilst Tong's work was locally engaged, through local library research and the series of workshops and talks that she ran, it could not be defined as socially engaged art given that the local community were not closely involved in the production of the work itself. On the other hand, the work's strong sense of place and specific location enabled residents and visitors alike to reflect on Albany's geographic and social context through the reflective gaze of the artist at work.

US-based M12 Collective (Richard Saxon, Kirsten Stoltz and David Wyrick) had a very different approach to Tong. During their eight-week residence in the southern town of Denmark, the Colorado-based collective worked with historians, a local ornithology group, and others engaged with the local flora and fauna. These collaborations resulted in the creation of a site-specific architectural sculpture and functional bird hide, *Ornitarium*, that incorporated local materials and vernacular building traditions and was directly inspired by local knowledge of the region's wetlands and bird species.² For local residents, the building created on the edge of the local wetlands proved a multipurpose space: bird hide; a place of reflection aided by the materials left by the artists in a self-contained trunk; and simply a spot to gather during walks in the bush. Locally sited and made by directly interacting with various local groups, the hide could not be



1/ Nigel Helyer, *CrayVox*, 2011, plywood, digital audio electronics, 8-channel audio, 375 x 290 x 900cm

replicated in any ensuing artwork included in an exhibition following the residency. Instead, M12 presented a project that gathered together material that reflected the content and feel of the work. Taxidermied birds, instruction manuals, notes and other materials were presented in vitrines, tableaux and photographic form in an attempt to create a work from a socially engaged endeavor.

Other artists' residencies were scattered across Western Australia from the Dampier Peninsula to the Abrolhos Islands. Collaborating communities included local Indigenous groups, seasonal lobster fishermen, sheep farmers in the region of Lake Grace, or the Refugee Detention Centre residents at Leonora. Though a number of artists chose to work with Indigenous communities throughout regional Western Australia, other commitments meant that key voices from these collaborating communities were represented by others at the symposium rather than being present themselves. Only one project dealt with a particular aspect of Western Australia's most visible industries that have undergone the most radical changes, the mining communities for gas and iron ore. Sohan Ariel Hayes and Michael Woodley's *Birndi Wirndi – Worlds Apart* explored the history of Roebourne's old Victoria Hotel as a means of documenting the impact and excesses of the 1960s mining boom on the local Indigenous community. With its focus on vernacular architecture and oral histories, the work's presentation at Fremantle Art Centre could not hope to capture the political or social impact of the video projection's original siting, onto the façade of the old Roebourne pub.

Given the strength of the residency program, is an exhibition format the best medium to reflect this mode of socially based art? This is a particular issue when IASKA's own guidelines stipulate that work resulting from the residency experience does not necessarily have to be aesthetically driven. Exhibitions of this nature are clearly markers, and present a concrete result of what might otherwise be an intangible experience away from the public eye. The experience of viewing, however, is never the same as being part of a collective event,



2/ M12 Collective, *Collaborative Ornithology*, 2012, room installation of objects, photographs, digital photographic prints and vitrines: objects include Western Australian display birds on loan from The Museum of Natural History, and the Academy of Taxidermy and project ephemera, including items from the artists and their collaborators Basil Schur and Tina Smith; dimensions variable. Images courtesy the artists; installation views, *Spaced*, Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 2012

as Margo Handwerker also noted in her presentation.

Other forms may be better suited to capture the essence of these residencies undertaken in remote and distant landscapes that engage with and reflect local people. The online presence and subsequent publication of *One Day Sculpture* was one such solution for its series of twenty ephemeral site-specific projects scattered throughout the two islands of New Zealand during 2008/09.³ *One Day Sculpture* provided a welcome alternative to the curatorial frame of the biennale model, the very ubiquity and global proliferation of which appears to have stimulated IASKA to attempt to find its own alternative focus and role.

1. Marcon uses the term to refer to an event that takes place every two years, rather than 'biennale' which refers to large-scale international exhibitions, often with global aspirations. The two terms are easily confused.
2. See Barbie Greenshields's article, 'M12: Ornitharium', *Art Monthly Australia*, No. 246, December 2011/Summer 2012, p. 59.
3. *One Day Sculpture's* online presence documented each project in all their stages as they progressed, and the publication was an encyclopedic reference for the overall event, with numerous commissioned essays. The project also involved an international symposium. www.onedayssculpture.org.nz

The inaugural edition of IASKA's *Spaced: Art Out of Place*, a new international biennial event of socially engaged art brought together twenty-one Australian and international artists/collectives and sixteen regional communities for residencies, exhibitions, publications and discussions. The culminating exhibition, part of the 2012 Perth Festival, was held at Fremantle Arts Centre, Perth, 4 to 11 March 2012. www.fac.org.au www.iaska.com.au

Rebecca Coates is an independent curator, writer and lecturer based in Melbourne, and Associate Curator at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. She is completing a PhD at the University of Melbourne looking at private foundations commissioning site-specific, ephemeral art.



Flood 1, 2010, woodcut (detail)

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