

Performance and Discipline in Architecture: Investigating the Spatial Politics of Contested Australian Landscapes

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Abstract

This design research examines how site-specific performance can activate engagement with the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes. The research has been carried out through a series of iterative performances situated within a variety of contested spatial contexts, each centred on the semiotic potential of pianos as cultural artefacts of European origins. Emerging from the iterative project work are a series of four operations that include *Spatial Inversions*, *Instrumentalising*, *Spatial Tuning* and *Cultural Burning*. Synthesized as a concluding performance within the decommissioned Pentridge Prison, the research offers this combined set of operations as a methodological contribution to the field of *critical spatial practice*¹, with capacity to activate new spatio-political formations and critical engagement in the spatial politics of contested landscapes. Consistent across the body of iterative project work is an exploration of the performative relations between spectatorship, action, and spatial contexts. In investigating these performative relations, research data collected includes video, audio and photographic performance documentation, diagramming, surveys, interviews, journaling, and structured reflective writing. The data collected has been interpreted using multiple modes of analysis, including reflective analysis, semiotic analysis, critical discourse analysis, and phenomenological analysis. The project work is framed within an existing field of practice in which a variety of creative practitioners engage pianos as performative devices to renegotiate situations, subjects and environments. Providing an overview of research undertaken over a period of five years between 2012-17, this paper contributes to design research by providing new creative practice knowledge to how site-specific performance can activate engagement in the spatial politics of contested urban and rural landscapes of Australia.

Introduction

Situated within the field of critical spatial practice, the following paper provides an overview of four spatial operations generated from research exploring of the cultural, ethical, and political resonances of juxtaposing pianos within a variety of sites in Australia.

Commencing with *Spatial Inversions* that emerged from preliminary performances situated in nineteenth century landmark buildings of Melbourne's Flinders Street Station and the Princess Street Theatre, followed by the operations of *Instrumentalising*, *Spatial Tuning* and *Cultural Burning* that emerged from a phase of investigative engagement with the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes at Hobart's municipal rubbish dump and on a property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people.

While the four operations are addressed separately and chronologically in the order in which they emerged (see table 1 & 2), their formation, actualisation and value are by no means linear or autonomous. Rather, the operations run through the projects to resurface and recombine in both cumulative and cyclical ways. Foregrounded with a final summative performance situated with D-Division of Melbourne's decommissioned Pentridge Prison titled *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations*, the research offers the emergent potential of cumulative cyclical operations as a method for activating new spatio-political formations and critical

engagement in the spatial politics of contested landscapes. Emerging through the performative re-contextualisation of contested landscapes, this process of practice-based enquiry provides insights into the conflicting claims, territorialisations, values, and temporal attributes that constitute spaces of conflict.

No.	Title	Date	Site	Instrument(s)	Action	Spatial Context	Political Concern
RESEARCH PHASE 1 _ URBAN LANDMARKS							
1.	Duration	October 2012	Flinders Street Station ballroom, Melbourne	2 Grand Pianos	Piano Recital	Dilapidated historical ballroom within privatised public building	The impact of privatising public infrastructure
2.	The Princess Theatre Inversion	April 2014	The Princess Theatre, Melbourne	2 Grand Pianos	Piano Recital	19 th century proscenium theatre	Hierarchies of dominant forms of cultural production
RESEARCH PHASE 2 _ CONTESTED AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPES							
3.	Instrumental	September 2015	Culpra Station, Rural New South Wales	1 Upright Piano	Piano Tuning	Property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people	Ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia
4.	Tuning Space	June 2016	McRobies Rubbish Dump, Hobart, Tasmania	1 Upright Piano	Piano Tuning	Municipal rubbish dump / landfill site wedged in Mt Wellington national park	The environmental impact of consumer cultures
5.	Cultural Burn	October 2016	Culpra Station, Rural New South Wales	1 Upright Piano	Piano Burning	Property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people	Ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia

Table 1: Projects

Operation	Operative Effect	Activating engagement in	Value to Critical Spatial Practice
1. Spatial Inversion	<i>Inverting</i> conventional relationships between performers, audiences, the piano and environments	Questioning the normative spatial conditions of western theatre and dominant modes of cultural production	Method for destabilising hegemonic structures through embodied encounter and activation of critical insights into dominant forms of cultural production
2. Instrumentalising	<i>Instrumentalising</i> : reframes and assigns non-human agents an active role in the production of performative spatial condition	Questioning the instrumental logic and legacy of colonisation	Method for reframing and assigning non-human agents an active role in the renegotiation and activation of new spatio-political formations.
3. Spatial Tuning	<i>Spatial Tuning</i> : producing immersive sensory engagement with the spatio temporalities of contested environments	Questioning the environmental impact of consumer culture.	Method for producing immersive sensory engagement with the spatio-temporalities of contested environments
4. Cultural Burning	<i>Cultural Burning</i> : Provokes recalibration between cross cultural binaries stuck in particular forms of categorization	Questioning the ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia and the duplicitous spatial politics of intercultural land ownership.	Method for recalibrating cross-cultural binaries stuck in particular forms of categorization
<i>Cyclical suite of operations:</i> <i>Spatial Inversion</i> <i>Instrumentalising</i> <i>Spatial Tuning</i> <i>Cultural Burning</i>	Activates critical engagement with spatial politics	Spatial politics within a variety of contested environments in urban and rural contexts.	Combined set of cyclical operations as a methodological contribution to the field of critical spatial practice, with capacity to activate new spatio-political formations and critical engagement in the spatial politics of contested landscapes.

Table 2: Summary of Operations

Operation #01: Spatial Inversions

The research commenced with two preliminary performance works that took place within the nineteenth century landmark buildings of Melbourne's Flinders Street Station and the Princess Street Theatre. Providing an overview of the origins of the research trajectory, these early studies revealed how the cultural authority of the piano could enable researchers to enter landmark buildings usually considered off limits to the public.

Questioning relationships of power within the spatial arrangements of dominant modes of cultural production, *Spatial Inversions* incites an active political engagement in the spatial relations between performers, audiences and environments. This operation emerged from the *Duration* project through the restrictions imposed on having a live audience attend a 90-minute performance of *Canto Ostinato* within the Flinders Street Station ballroom. In response, a film crew was used to broadcast the performance from the ballroom to the Federation Square screen, to the internet, and via the public announcement system to the stations' thirteen platforms and public concourse. Through the inversion of conventional spatial arrangements between the performers and audiences, *Duration* temporarily enabled the reactivation of privatized public infrastructure, returning the ballroom to the public realm.



Figure 1: *Duration*, Flinders Street Station Ballroom, 2012, Image by Greta Costello.

This operation of introducing a spatial inversion was further developed and enacted within a second project titled *The Princess Theatre Inversion*. Re-appropriating The Princess Theatre, this project questions conventional socio-architectural spatial relations by inverting the relationships between performers, the audience and the theatre. With an audience of one hundred people on the stage, facing two grand pianos and an empty auditorium, the performance was activated through a twenty-minute performance of Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*. Exploring the spatial politics of the proscenium theatre as a dominant hierarchical form of cultural production, the inversion that took place within The Princess Theatre temporarily destabilises socio-architectural hierarchies through an embodied encounter with the spatio-temporalities of the built environment.



Figure 2: *The Princess Theatre Inversion*, Princess Theatre, 2014, Image by Campbell Drake.

In the early project works of *Duration* and *The Princess Theatre Inversion*, the spatial inversions re-cast conventional relationships between performers, audiences and environments. Questioning the impact of privatising public assets (in *Duration*) and normative spatial conditions of the western theatre (in *The Princess Theatre Inversion*), this inversion of spatial relations is a method of destabilising hegemonic structures and activating audience engagement with, and potential reflection upon, dominant forms of cultural production.

Operation #02: Instrumentalising

The operation of *Instrumentalising*² emerged from the 2015 performance that took place as part of *Interpretive Wonderings*;³ a critical cartographies workshop on a property known as Culpra Station that was acquired as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people. The project is titled *Instrumental* and is the first of three spatial investigations that provide a considered engagement with the semiotic resonance of the piano as a critical instrument to activate engagement in spatial politics. This project took place on land intended to be a compensatory land bank for Aboriginal people, and brought about an opportunity to explore the semiotic potential of the piano as a cultural artifice to engage in the spatial politics of land, Indigenous Country and the ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia. The project *Instrumental* features a local tuner attempting to tune a broken upright piano outdoors on Culpra Station.



Figure 3: *Instrumental*, Culpra Station, 2015, Image by Greta Costello.

The title of the work is both a framing device and an operation. The operation of *Instrumentalising* actively engages with the spatial politics of Culpra Station through a sustained encounter with the spatio-temporalities of the duplicitous locational identity of a contested Australian landscape. *Instrumentalising* seeks to poetically problematize the instrumental logic of colonialism in Australia by reframing and assigning non-human agents an active role in the renegotiation and activation of new socio-political formations.

Adapting Murray Schafer's theory of *acoustic ecologies* as a form of critical discourse analysis of sound, *Instrumental* bough about the use of this concept as a theoretical framework to analyse the performative relations between the piano, a piano tuner and the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes. The term acoustic ecologies was coined by Schafer and is defined as a discipline studying the relationship mediated through sound between human beings and their environments.⁴ In developing the term, Schafer devised a new terminology for soundscape studies. He defines background sounds as 'keynotes,' foreground sounds as 'signal sounds,' and sounds that are particularly regarded by a community are 'soundmarks.' Schafer's terminology helps to express the idea that the sound of a particular locality (its keynotes, sound signals and soundmarks) can express a community's identity, to the extent that a site can be read and characterised by sounds.⁵ Beyond the audible spectrum, Schafer also developed the concept of 'acoustic coloration.' This term describes how the 'echoes and reverberations that occur as sounds are absorbed and reflected from surfaces within an environment, and the effects of weather related factors such as temperature, wind and humidity.'⁶ Exploring complex networks, multiple logics and rich contradictions, the project work is interpreted through an analysis of the *keynotes*, *sound signals*, *soundmarks* and *acoustic colorations* produced within each of the performance works. Seeking 'to bridge the gap between the textual and contextual analysis of site specific performance,'⁷ Schafer's terminology is adapted as an interpretive framework to analyse performance as a critical practice that is capable of constructing, reproducing and contesting the cultural identity of contested landscapes.⁸

Operation #03: *Spatial Tuning*

From the initial questioning of the ongoing impact of colonialism, the research expanded to question the environmental impact of consumer culture. A fourth performance project titled *Spatial Tuning* that took place at a municipal landfill site in Hobart, Tasmania, involved the staged tuning of a piano situated outdoors, within the contested boundary between the Mount Wellington National Park and the McRobies Gully Waste Recycling Centre.⁹ In shifting the emphasis from Indigenous to environmental politics, this project revealed that the symbolic connotations of the piano are contingent on the situation in which the spatial tuning takes place.



Figure 4: *Spatial Tuning*, McRobies Gully Waste Recycling Centre, Hobart, 2016. Image by Campbell Drake.

The operation of *Spatial Tuning* activates engagement with environmental spatial politics by provoking an immersive sensory engagement with the impact of urban waste on the Tasmanian landscape. By actively engaging in the relations between aesthetic practices, human and non-human interaction, and spatial politics, *Spatial Tuning* questions how artistic experimentations can be used to understand the issues around the acts of crossing borders and shifting boundaries. Exemplary projects that undertake a form of *Spatial Tuning* in which pianos are used as performative, spatial and semiotic devices to intervene within dominated spaces of conflict include Markiyam Matsekh's *Piano for Berkut* (2012) and Ludovico Einaudi's *Elegy for the Arctic* (2014).



Figure 5: Markiyani Matsekh, *Piano for Berkut*, 2013. Photograph: Andrew Meakovsky, Oleg Matsekh and Marikiyan Matsekh

Also used as a title, a framing device and a process, the operation of *Spatial Tuning* is informed by Felix Guattari's concept of 'ethico-aesthetics'¹⁰ as a framework to explore how aesthetic practices can destabilise dominant power structures to produce new political subjectivities through the crossing of experiential boundaries.



Figure 6: Ludovico Einaudi, *Elegy for the Arctic*, 2016. Photography: Pedro Armestre / Greenpeace

Supported by audience feedback on the live performance event in Hobart, the act of *Spatial Tuning* brings about new forms of negotiating and constructing relationships between landscape, bodily absence, and perception, through an immersive sensory engagement with the spatio-temporalities of an anthropocentric landscape. In doing so, this operation of *Spatial Tuning* fosters new perceptive sensibilities for close encounters with previously distanced landscapes, suggesting how the convergence of aesthetic and political practices can collapse the distance between passive spectators and contested landscapes.

Operation #04: Cultural Burning

Cultural Burn is the fifth performance work in this series and is centred on a return to Culpra Station to burn the piano that was used earlier as the tool of negotiation in the project *Instrumental*. The motivation to burn the piano emerged from an acknowledgement of my propensity to preserve the harmony of the piano, which resulted in an eagerness to explore alternative experimental modes of piano interaction. *Cultural Burn* is informed by a community of practitioners who have burnt pianos as part of their performance practice, including Annea Lockwood (*Burning Piano*, 1968); Yoshita Yamashita (*Burning Piano*, 2008); Chiharu Shiota (*In Silence*, 2011); and Douglas Gordan (*The End of Civilisation*, 2012).



Figure 7: Annea Lockwood, *Burning Piano*, 1968.



Figure 8: Yoshita Yamashita, *Burning Piano*, 2008.



Figure 9: Douglas Gordon, *The End of Civilization*, 2012.



Figure 10: Chiharu Shiota, *In Silence*, 2011

Through the juxtaposition of the Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning, and the burning of pianos within contemporary arts practice, the operation of *Cultural Burning* activates engagement in Indigenous and non-Indigenous political sensibilities towards land and Country. Drawing on Jaques Rancière's concept of the 'distribution of the sensible',¹¹ *Cultural Burning* intersects aesthetic and political practices to provoke a transversal condition through the juxtaposition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices, artefacts and environment.



Figure 11: *Cultural Burn*, Culpra Station 2016, Photography: Campbell Drake.

Supported by a detailed account of burning the piano on Country, the value of *Cultural Burning* as an operation is in its capacity to reposition environmental contexts as active participants. Proposing the landscape as a choreographer and a performer, *Cultural Burning* activates environmental contexts to both determine and effect the making of form and meaning. Reformulating the relations between human and non-human interaction, *Cultural Burning* can enable environments to speak through artefacts, thus reframing the environment as active in the formulation of spatial politics.

The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations

Summarised in this paper are four critical operations that emerged from the development of an iterative series of five site specific performances. Enacted within and through the practice research, each of these operations revealed a particular potential to activate engagement in the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes.

Consistent with the practice-led mode of research enquiry, a sixth and final investigative spatial performance was undertaken to explicate the potential of

accumulating cyclical operations in critical spatial practice. Titled *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations*, this performance was staged as a concluding gesture on the morning of Wednesday 18 October 2017, in D Division of the former HM Pentridge Prison complex in Coburg.



Figure 12: H.M Prison Pentridge, Image courtesy of Forbidden Places.

Structured in two acts, *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations* was produced in the medium in which the research was generated and offers an intensification of the research value through an embodied encounter with the critical spatial operations of *Inverting Space*, *Instrumentalising* and *Spatial Tuning*.



Figure 13: D-Divison, Pentridge Prison, 1997, Image courtesy of Coburg Historical Society.



Figure 14: D-Division Prison Yard , Image courtesy of Fairfax Media.

Act 1: Tuning

The performance commenced at 5:45am with an invited audience of fifty people asked to assemble in the darkness at the front gates of HM Pentridge Prison. The audience was led to a prison yard where an upright piano had been positioned in front of a block of fifty deck chairs, all facing the prison wall. Crowned in coils of razor wire, the wall was around five metres high, with the first four meters built of solid bluestone capped with a later addition of red brick.



Figure 15: *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations*, Act 1, D-Division Prison Yard. Image courtesy of Greta Costello.

Drawing on the method of tuning the piano that had been developed in the *Instrumental* and *Spatial Tuning* performances, the audience were presented with a man facing away from them, tuning the piano. Taking their seats, the audience sat in silence, listening and watching the tuner go about his task. In a symbolic, material and sonic dialogue, the tuner faced away from the audience in close proximity to the wall, which seemed to beckon over, through and beyond the impenetrable mass of the concrete and bluestone.



Figure 16: *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations*, Act 1, D-Division Prison Yard. Image courtesy of Greta Costello.

In the early dawn, the sunrise gave orange highlights to a purple sky. While it was relatively still in the prison yard, a fast wind in the troposphere above blew the clouds across the sky. Birds flew around in the breeze, and weeds popping through the concrete swayed. A beam of direct sunlight shot from the clouds, momentarily lighting a section of the razor wire with a distinct gold. The audience sat in a bus-like configuration, and while they were stationary, the wind-directed movement above evoked a certain forward momentum, as through the tuner was driving the performance into the wall.

By enacting the non-musical, systemic atonal quality of the tuning, the human ear of the audience dials into the discordant sound, and in the act of listening, the spatio-temporalities of the immediate prison yard, inclusive of the 'constant, unnerving threat of violence as abhorrent and meaningless as humans are able to create', has an increased proximity. According to one audience member, 'We were in this courtyard environment which had the most disciplining kind of architecture, hard and arresting. The barbed wire at the top, the blank wall, and I felt like we were bound to these seats. It was an uncomfortable experience. But as the piece went on and it was quite mesmeric.'

Returning to Schafer's acoustic ecologies as an interpretive framework, the background *keynotes* of the first Act were defined by the morning bird song, the buzzing of insects, the wind, and the sound of mounting traffic in the distance. The foregrounded *signal sounds* were dominated by the acoustic discipline of tuning the instrument that really didn't want to be restrained. In terms of Schafer's concept of 'acoustic coloration', the echoes and reverberations that reflected from the hard and arresting surfaces of the prison yard were amplified by the bluestone and concrete before they escaped and were whisked away by the turbulent air above.

After being seated for 20 minutes, the daylight in the courtyard had brightened considerably, and the audience was encouraged to move back into the building for the second act.

Act 2: Phasing

On the ground floor inside D-Division, two pianists sat in position at two interlocked grand pianos. Beneath the octagonal atrium, the participants filed into the preconfigured seating on either side of the instruments. Seated on the ground floor, spectators were presented with clear views of the ornate Victorian skylight, from which filtered light fell onto the suspended corridors on the two levels above.



Figure 17: *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations*, Act 2, D-Division Image courtesy of Greta Costello.

From one side, the hanging beam was clearly visible, overlooked by a fortified observation box that sat awkwardly at the eastern end of the atrium. On the opposite side, behind the second group of audience members, thick metal bars and a padlocked gate cordoned off half the complex on the ground floor. Once seated, a minute's silence was held, while the audience listened to the continued tuning in the courtyard outside, now accompanied by the morning song echoing from the birds

roosting in the skylight above. Breaking the pause, the pianists commenced a 25-minute recital of Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*.



Figure 18: The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations, Act 2, D-Division Image courtesy of Greta Costello.

Once seated in the ground floor of the main building in Act 2, the defining *keynotes* shifted to the single notes of the prison yard tuning accompanied by the morning bird song above. For twenty-five minutes of the second act, the audience

were drowned in the *signal sounds of Piano Phase* that, according to one audience member, began to 'transform the interior' through a 'complete inversion, where I suddenly saw the piano as something different, and the human interaction with the piano suddenly became this moment of freedom where the acoustics were liberated by that interaction.'¹² This audience account registers a *spatial inversion* that was potentially caused by the sonic, material and spatial *phasing* between the outdoor piano tuning and the indoor recital. The audience, I suggest, in phasing between the spaces of confinement, was first tuned into the single notes of the upright piano; when they were located within the recital of Act 2, they had already been attuned to the environmental surrounds. This provoked a cross referencing between instruments and the sonic practices presented within each act.

Similarly, the second conceptual operation of *Instrumentalising* is located within the dialectic produced within the *phasing* between spaces. This operation hones in on the semiotic potential of the piano as a cultural artifice to engage in the spatial politics of land, Indigenous Country, and the ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia. By phasing between the highly orchestrated, disciplining interior space of the abandoned prison and the prison yard, where a tuner battled against the decay of the decrepit piano, the swirling wind and non-human actants, the performance evoked resonances of 'disciplinary and knowledge practices between ongoing colonial regimes and Indigenous Australians'¹³ that was perhaps provoked by an awareness of the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous incarceration in Australia.¹⁴

By actively engaging in the relations between aesthetic practices, human and non-human interaction, and spatial politics, *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations* questions how performance and architectural practices can be used to understand the issues of 'how we are positioned at the interface of different knowledge systems, histories, traditions and practices.'¹⁵

The act of accumulating the conceptual operations of *Spatial Inversions*, *Instrumentalising* and *Spatial Tuning* within the setting of a nineteenth century gaol provides insights into the limitations of traditional architectural and musical practices to control the dynamics of 'natural' environmental systems. Through an active engagement with the spatial politics of this contested urban landscape, *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations* reinforces a critical standpoint that seeks not only to reflect and describe our relation to the order of things as validated by western knowledge systems,¹⁶ but also to transform and imagine something different.¹⁷

References

- ¹ The author draws on Jane Rendell's definition of '*critical spatial practice*' as 'spatial aspects of interdisciplinary processes or practices that operate between arts and architecture' with the aim of transgressing the limits of art and architecture to engage 'with both the social and the aesthetic.' See Jane Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006)
- ² See Campbell Drake, "Instrumental: Performance and the Cumulative Potential of Distributed Sites," *OAR: The Oxford Artistic and Practice Based Research Platform*, Issue 1 (2017) <http://www.oarplatform.com/instrumental-performance-cumulative-potential-distributed-sites/>
- ³ see Campbell Drake and Jock Gilbert, '*Interpretive Wonderings*', *Field Work : Unlikely Journal for Creative Arts*, Issue 2 (2016)

⁴ Cited in Kendall Wrightson, "An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology," *Journal of Electroacoustic Music* 12 (1999)

⁵ Wrightson, "An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology"

⁶ Wrightson, "An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology"

⁷ <https://www.utu.fi/en/units/hum/units/musicology/research/research-fields/Pages/discourse-analysis.aspx>

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ For further detail on *Spatial Tuning* including audience reception please see forthcoming publication Drake, Campbell, 'Spatial Tuning' in *Crossing Borders, Shifting Boundaries; Image, Body and Territory*, *Sophia Peer Review Journal* (2018)

¹⁰ Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*. London: Verso, 2011.

¹² Post-event testimonial; Response number 29

¹³ Post-event testimonial; Response number 30

¹⁴ Indigenous representation within the prison system exceeds 28 percent, despite being only three percent of the Australian population. Accessed 21, Feb, 2018.
<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/law/aboriginal-prison-rates>

¹⁵ Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines* (Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007), 12.

¹⁶ Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages*

¹⁷ Rendell, *Art and Architecture*