



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF TRADITIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

TRADITIONAL DWELLINGS AND SETTLEMENTS
WORKING PAPER SERIES

COLONIAL & POSTCOLONIAL TRADITIONS

Campbell Drake

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COLONIAL & POSTCOLONIAL TRADITIONS

- Cultural Burning and the Ongoing Impact of Colonialism in Australia** 1
Campbell Drake
- Evoking the Past, Building the Present** 22
Vishvesh Kandolkar
- The Pedra do Sal and the Hidden Landscape of Portuguese Hegemony in Rio de Janeiro** 36
James Steele
- Nkandla or Bust: Neo-Traditions, Politics, and the Fire-Pool** 51
Debbie Whelan
- Homeownership, Design, and Postcolonial Citizenship: Comparing Two Emergency Programs in Portugal** 71
Rui Aristides

**TRADITIONAL DWELLINGS AND SETTLEMENTS
WORKING PAPER SERIES**

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Traditional Dwellings and Settlements
Working Paper Series

**CULTURAL BURNING AND THE ONGOING
IMPACT OF COLONIALISM IN AUSTRALIA**

Campbell Drake

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CULTURAL BURNING AND THE ONGOING IMPACT OF COLONIALISM IN AUSTRALIA



Exploring the duplicitous spatial politics of intercultural land ownership in Australia, I question the ongoing impact of colonialism through a critique of the politics of traditional Australian cultural practices and environments. Intersecting architectural and performance practices, this design research examines how site-specific performance can activate engagement in the spatial politics of contested landscapes. The paper is centered on a performance event titled Cultural Burn that took place in 2016, on an 8000-hectare property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation¹ as part of a compensatory land bank established for the dispossession of Aboriginal people. Drawing a comparison between the traditional Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning,² and the burning of a western cultural artefact,³ the research explores the cultural, ethical and political resonance of burning a piano on Barkanji⁴ Country⁵ within an ephemeral billabong.⁶

*Structured in three parts, part one examines the motivations for burning the instrument and contextualizes it within an existing community of practice in which a range of creative practitioners incorporate burning pianos in their performance works. Part two draws a comparison between the Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning, and the burning of pianos within contemporary arts practice. It draws on Jacques Rancière's concept of *The Distribution of the Sensible* as an analytical framework within which to explore the operative potential of intersecting aesthetic and political practices within the field of site-specific performance.⁷ Further, the research builds on the concept of 'acoustic ecologies;' part three provides a close reading of the live Cultural Burn event in relation to the staged juxtaposition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices, the piano, and the Australian bush.⁸ Subverting common understandings of two traditional cultural forms, I seek to address how we are positioned at the interface of different knowledge systems, histories, traditions, and cultural practices.⁹*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the twelve-month period between September 2015 and September 2016, I produced two site specific performances in quick succession. Both performances were situated in iconic and contested Australian landscapes, and involved the staged tuning of salvaged pianos. The first performance, titled *Instrumental*, sought to renegotiate the politics of space specific to an Australian rural context by the staged tuning of a broken piano on Culpra Station. This site is unique because it is an 8,000-hectare property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people.¹⁰ The second performance, titled *Spatial Tuning*, saw the staged tuning of a piano on the boundary between Hobart's municipal rubbish dump and the Mount Wellington National Park. This second piece sought to negotiate the spatial politics that frame the environmental impact of human consumption and waste.

Where the piano used in *Spatial Tuning* had been donated to a recycling center attached to the municipal rubbish dump, the piano used for *Instrumental* had remained at Culpra Station following an Indigenous led mapping workshop titled *Interpretive Wonderings*.¹¹ While I had been granted permission by the Culpra Milli

Aboriginal Corporation to leave the piano on Culpra Station, I felt the need to return to the property to remove or relocate the piano elsewhere.

My motivation to remove the piano from Culpra Station emerged from a number of contributing factors. First, I had become explicitly aware of the symbolic connotations of pianos in relation to an Australian context, and tied to a western colonial heritage. Leaving the broken piano on a property that had been acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation and was intended to be in partial compensation for the dispossession of Aboriginal people seemed increasingly inappropriate and insensitive, and an unnecessary daily reminder of Australia's regrettable colonial past.

We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were stolen generations — this blemished chapter in our nation's history.

-Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's "Sorry Speech," 13 FEB 2008¹²

A second consideration emerged from reflective analysis and peer review of both *Instrumental* and *Spatial Tuning* —my propensity to preserve the harmony of the piano through the act of tuning. This propensity to preserve the harmony of the piano reflects my own cultural heritage as a man of British colonial origins with a predisposition to safeguard the piano, in a denial of the environmental realities of the Australian landscape. I was eager to explore this propensity further through alternative modes of interaction with the piano. This consideration led to extensive research into a community of practice in which a variety of practitioners have burnt pianos as part of their performance practice.

2. PIANO BURNING AS PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

The origins of this field of performance practice that involves the burning of pianos are often attributed to the French born American artist Arman. The destruction of musical instruments, often by fire, was a recurrent theme in Arman's work and two of his most celebrated works that involve the burning of pianos are *Piano de Néron* (Nero's Piano) 1965 and *Piano Flamboyant* (Flaming Piano), 1966 (see figure 1). New Zealand artist Annea Lockwood wrote a piece called *Piano Burning* in 1968 (see figure 2). The composition specifies performers use upright piano that is beyond repair. In the composer's words,

Piano burning should really be done with an upright piano; the structure is much more beautiful than that of a grand when you watch it burn. The piano must always be one that's irretrievable, that nobody could work on, that no tuner or rebuilder could possibly bring back. It's got to be a truly defunct piano.¹³



Fig. 1: Arman, *Piano Flamboyant*, 1966



Fig. 2: Annea Lockwood, *Piano Burning*, 1968.

Contesting dominant forms of cultural production, Lockwood's and Arman's works are characteristic of a form of piano performance in which pianos are situated in unexpected settings and set on fire. Yoshita Yamashita first performed *Burning Piano* in 1973¹⁴ (see figure 3) and 35 years later he re-watched the film and was inspired to repeat the performance. Situated on a beach in Japan, Yamashita played the burning piano wearing a protective firefighter's uniform. Yamashita's work is characteristic of a group of piano performances in which the piano is situated in an unexpected setting, set on fire, and then played.

While the works of Arman, Lockwood, and Yamashita can be loosely grouped under the banner of site specific performance, it can also be argued that the site in which the works occurred is not the dominant feature of the performance, therefore does not determine the meaning of the work. Rather than the site being the dominant signifier through the reframing of the existing environment, the works of Arman, Lockwood, and Yamashita are all intended to be replicated elsewhere, suggesting that the production of meaning does not change when the works are moved to alternative sites.

In counterpoint to the first three works cited from the late 60s and early 70s are the more recent works of Chiharu Shiota and Gordon Douglas. Both Shiota's and Douglas's works involve the burning of grand pianos; however, I would argue that the significance and meaning of these works are determined by the context in which the act of burning took place in conjunction with the semiotic register of the piano as a cultural artifact of western origins.

In 2011, Shiota set fire to a piano on a street of Hobart, Tasmania as part her work titled *In Silence* (see figure 4) that was commissioned for the 2011 Mona Foma Arts Festival. According to Shiota, “the inspiration came from a childhood experience when she saw a charred piano amidst the ruins of a neighbor’s house which had burnt down in the night.”¹⁵ While the motivations for burning the piano are conceivably drawn from Shiota’s childhood experiences, it is in a very different political context that I wish to interpret her work. First, a Japanese artist burning a cultural artifact of western origins in Tasmania is framed by the symbolic violence of the Second World War and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On August 6 and 9, 1945, during the final stage of World War II, the United States dropped nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killing at least 129,000 people. This catastrophic event remains the only use of nuclear weapons during warfare in history.¹⁶



Fig. 3: Yoshita Yamashita, *Burning Piano* 2008. Fig. 4: Shiota Chiharu, *In Silence*, Mona Foma, 2011.

I propose a secondary interpretation that the work can be read as a form of protest in relation to Tasmania’s colonial history and the treatment of Aboriginal Tasmanians during this period.

The Aboriginal Tasmanians, known as the Palawa, are the Indigenous people of the State of Tasmania. “Before British colonization in 1803, there were an estimated 3,000 to 15,000 Palawa.”¹⁷ The Palawa population was severely depleted in the nineteenth century due to introduced disease.¹⁸ By 1830, in Tasmania scholars recall that, “disease had killed most of them but warfare and private violence had also been devastating.”¹⁹ Some historians regard the Black War as one of the earliest recorded modern genocides. Historian James Boyce writes:

By 1833, Christian missionary George Augustus Robinson had persuaded approximately 200 surviving Aboriginal Tasmanians to surrender themselves, with assurances that they would be protected, provided for, and eventually have their lands returned to them. These 'assurances' were false, and the survivors were moved to Wybalenna Aboriginal

Establishment on Flinders Island. In 1847, the last 47 living inhabitants of Wybalenna were transferred to Oyster Cove, south of Hobart. Two individuals, Truganini (1812–1876) and Fanny Cochrane Smith (1834–1905), are separately considered to have been the last people solely of Tasmanian descent.²⁰

This traumatic history suggests that Shiota’s act of burning of the piano creates a temporal reframing of the existing environment, that is, the colonial sandstone architecture of Hobart. Emerging from this reframing are the immaterial remnants of “this blemished chapter in our nation’s [Australia] history.”²¹ Furthermore, while the artist is not immediately visible within the photographic documentation of the performance, a human presence is implied in relation to the ignition of the burning instrument. This implied presence draws the spectator to consider who set the piano alight. In provoking such consideration, the artist’s identity, historical heritage, nationality, and perhaps even gender, are implicated in the destructive act and the geographic context in which burning takes place.

Another performance that draws on the semiotic register of the burning of a piano in relation to the politics of tradition, site, geographic context, and artistic identity is a video installation titled *The End of Civilization* (see figure 5) produced in 2012 by Scottish artist Douglas Gordon. Centered on the burning of a grand piano in the remote Cumbrian countryside on the border between Scotland and England, the work explores the symbolic order of the piano in relation to spatio-historical narratives and the politics of tradition. According to the artist’s statement, “*The End of Civilization* is both a celebration and a warning — of fire as a symbol of optimism and hope, but also of risk, danger, and destruction.”²² Gordon writes:

The piano started to represent for me the ultimate symbol of western civilization. Not only is it an instrument, it's a beautiful object that works as a sculpture but it has another function entirely.

...

I wanted to do something with a piano in a landscape of some significance and I suppose, as a Scotsman, there's nothing more significant than the border. I thought it was beautiful to look from one country into another and I liked the idea that Hadrian's Wall is, under a certain interpretation, a great end of civilization... I was overwhelmed to be in a landscape of such beauty, and with such a huge unfathomable history.²³



Fig. 5: Photograph of *The End of Civilization* (Source: Douglas Gordan, 2012).

By burning an instrument synonymous with western cultural heritage, *The End of Civilization* evokes multiple histories in time and space. While Gordan makes reference to Hadrian's Wall and the end of the Roman Empire, the work can also be interpreted as a provocation for Scottish Independence, or perhaps an even more bleak commentary on the end of humanity as we move into the epoch of the Anthropocene.

The meaning of Gordon's work is framed by a combination of two registers: the semiotic register of the piano and a challenge to the existing spatio-historical context of Hadrian's Wall and the piano as a cultural artifact synonymous with western civilization. In setting fire to the piano, Gordan also evokes the traditional cultural practice of lighting beacons as a sign of warning or admonition.

He writes, "In the country, a system of beacon fires was at one time established to warn of incursions by the English."²⁴ Gordan, a Scottish artist re-enacting this traditional practice, invites an interpretive reading of the work as a form of nationalist protest. At the intersection of aesthetics and political practices, *The End of Civilization* evokes multiple histories tied to its contested geopolitical context. In comparing Gordan's work with *Cultural Burn*, I foreground the juxtaposition of traditional cultural practices and the burning of the piano to evoke a post-colonial context.

3. CULTURAL BURNING AS ABORIGINAL LAND MANAGEMENT

In 2015, I received a proposal from a colleague, Jacqueline Goethe, to collaborate with filmmaker Victor Steffenson on an Indigenous-led mapping project titled *Interpretive Wonderings*. Over a period of five years, Goethe had forged a close relationship with Steffenson and an organization known as Firesticks. Firesticks is an,

Indigenous-led network that aims to re-invigorate the use of cultural burning by facilitating cultural learning pathways to fire and land management. The Firesticks project applies contemporary and Aboriginal fire practices to enhance biodiversity, connectivity and landscape resilience.²⁵

The term *cultural burning* is used to describe burning practices used by Aboriginal people to enhance the health of land and its people. Cultural burning means different things to different people. It could include burning (or preventing burning) for the health of particular species such as native grasses, emu, black grevillea, potoroo, bushfoods, threatened species, or biodiversity in general. It may involve patch burning to create different fire intervals across the country or it could be used for fuel and hazard reduction. It may be used to increase access and amenity for people or as a part of culture heritage management. It is ceremony to welcome people to country or it could also be as simple as a campfire around which people gather to share, learn, and celebrate.²⁶

The Firesticks project has led to a number of cultural burning collaborations between Aboriginal Land Councils and government organizations, including New South Wales (NSW) Parks and Wildlife, in which traditional knowledge specific to the management of traditional lands has been exchanged between Aboriginals elders and park rangers. This process of bringing together traditional knowledge with statutory mechanisms is often cited as a de-colonizing act, in which the knowledge and opinions of Aboriginal people are re-positioned within mainstream governance. Furthermore, bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to exchange knowledge of land management has opened up opportunities for Aboriginal employment and advancement with organizations such as NSW Parks and Wildlife.

By foregrounding the traditional Aboriginal land management practices of cultural burning within the context of burning of a piano on Barkanji country, the research explores the relations between the staged juxtaposition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices, a western cultural artifact (the piano), and the duplicitous spatial politics of intercultural ownership specific to Culpra Station. In setting up a framework

to explore these relations, I draw on Jacques Rancière's concept of *the distribution of the sensible*²⁷ as an analytical framework to explore how site specific performance can activate engagement in the politics of tradition specific to an Australian post colonial context.

4. THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE

In 2006, Jaques Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* was published. This book sought to reconfigure the relationship between art and politics by bringing together the "necessary junction between aesthetic practices and political practices."²⁸ Within this text, Rancière establishes a typology of artistic practices distinguished by three regimes, which he defines as ethical, poetic, and aesthetic. The third, resistant typology, the aesthetic regime, "expands the political field and reshapes our ideas of who can participate in politics, and what activity is even thinkable as political."²⁹

Politics is commonly understood as "the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power."³⁰ While accepting this definition, Rancière proposes a second form of politics, which he calls *real politics*.³¹ According to Rancière, real politics are not restricted to governance and politicians, and instead "revolve around what is seen and what can be said, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time."³²

In outlining the operative potential of real politics within the aesthetic regime, Rancière proposes that "knowledge and societal activities" are predetermined by certain historical and political contingencies. Rancière defines (and opposes) these predetermined knowledge systems as *the distribution of the sensible*. Challenging the fixity of historical categorization, Rancière proposes that aesthetic practices are capable of disrupting the distribution of the sensible meaning to transgress the limitations of what is "perceptible, understandable and therefore artistically conceivable." Advocating creative intervention that can redistribute the sensible, Rancieire suggests that intersecting aesthetic and political practices can produce a reordering of the senses. The effect of reordering the senses engenders a social change akin to Guattari's production of political subjectivity, suggesting how aesthetic practices such as site specific performance can activate engagement in spatial politics.

In alluding to how site specific performance practice can activate engagement in spatial politics by intervening in the distribution of the sensible, I will now provide a close reading of *Cultural Burn* through an analysis of the relations between the "delimitation of space and time, the visible and the invisible, speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience."³³

5. CULTURAL BURN: THE RE-DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE

At the time of returning to Culpra Station in the spring of 2016, much of the state of New South Wales was in flood and underwater. The station property borders the Murray River, and was inundated with water to flood levels not seen since 2011. Arriving on the property in a two-wheel drive hire car, no sooner did I come off the bitumen and onto the dirt roads than I realized I was in for a serious mission.

The hire car I was driving had balding tires and was a front wheel drive. It felt as if the engine was dragging me across rather than along the ground. Sliding this way and that, with wheels spinning, I was mindful to hit the wetter, muddier sections of the road with sufficient speed to ensure enough momentum to pass through. An hour later, I was somewhat surprised when I arrived on the laser-levelled high plain within walking distance of the campsite and the piano.

By this stage the wheels of the car were so caked in mud that I no longer risked driving on the dirt road. Instead I skimmed along next to it, attempting to knock off the mud attached to the bottom of the vehicle on the saltbush and short grass as I passed. Turning onto the final stretch of dirt track, I was led along the ridge of the flood plain where the river passed parallel in the opposite direction. Passing the remnants of the former homestead with its adjoining stockyards, I hit a particularly deep section of mud followed by a shallow ditch, and the car came to an abrupt halt. I attempted to reverse back but the tires had no traction and instead spun in place, completely bogged. I was going nowhere.



Figs. 6a & 6b: Hire car on Culpra Station. (Source: author, 2016).

Content that I had made it within range of the piano, I abandoned the car and made my way down to the flood plain. Where twelve months before, fifty people had camped under the red gum canopy, it was now completely underwater (see figure 7). I could make out the camp kitchen located on the edge of the body of water, and picking my way around a series of lagoons, careful to walk heavily to avoid any snakes, I arrived at the piano.



Fig. 7: Culpra Station Camp Site under water, 2016.

The piano had been stored under a tarpaulin next to the camp kitchen. Having remained outside in the elements for a period of twelve months, it showed considerable signs of distress (see figures 8a & 8b). From the flood marks on the ground I could see the waters were receding. Like a marker at a flood crossing, the piano too had indications of higher waters. Whilst already broken in its first appearance on Culpra Station within *Instrumental*, the piano was now looking considerably worse for wear. Missing keys, peeling veneer and a number of local insects including a colony of fire ants and several species of spiders had made their home in the instrument.



Fig. 8a & 8b: (8a) Location of piano next to Culpra Station camp kitchen. (8b) Missing piano keys. (Source: author, 2016).

6. CULTURAL BURN: THE EVENT

Before I revisited the piano in the flood plain of Culpra Station, I had considered drowning or burying the piano. Such a gesture was inspired by the work of Richard McLester, *Piano in the Sea* (see figure 9) But burying the piano on a property that was home to a number of Aboriginal burial sites³⁴ seemed insensitive and heavy handed. Opportunistically, I instead decided to combine both the act of burning and the act of drowning by locating the piano within the billabong³⁵ and setting it alight.

I first moved the piano away from the camp kitchen³⁶ to avoid burning it down as well. Finding two pieces of old corrugated iron, I dragged them into the water as a kind of raft or stabilizing device. Inch by inch I walked the piano into the water, several times almost dropping the instrument on its back, where I would not be able to retrieve it on my own. After moving the piano around ten meters along my makeshift corrugated iron platform, I was struck by its sheer weight; while it was designed to be ambulatory, it was definitely not intended to be moved by one person.

As I moved the piano into the billabong, the camera frame I had established on the bank determined its position, suggesting I should move the piano this way or that. Whilst negotiating the lens, at some point I decided it necessary to remove my shoes so as to take the piano into deeper water. In doing I slashed my toe on the rusted metal. Once the piano was in position (see figure 10), I grabbed a jerry can full of unleaded petrol and doused the piano in fuel. Mindful to keep my distance, I separated the fuel source from the piano I was about to set alight. I moved back quickly, recapped the gerrycan and grabbed a pre-prepared fire stick. I lit the tip of it and then I touched the piano with the naked flame from a distance of around two meters. The

piano caught alight and the petrol vapor trapped within the piano ignited. I flinched and moved back to the bank where the camera was rolling (see figure 11).³⁷



Fig. 9: Richard McLester, *Piano in the Sea*, 2008



Fig. 10: Piano in position (Source: author, 2016).

It was an unusually still afternoon in the gully. Leaves in the distance shimmered, but the sound of wind-rustling gum leaves was absent. The flames took to the piano with an enthusiasm I had not anticipated (see figure 12). As the fire progressed, the internal wires could be heard first expanding, then snapping, amplified by the reverberation of the internal soundboard with an almost synthetic resonance. With the fallboard down, the keys did not ignite and instead let off a thick and yellowish sulphurous colored smoke. As the fire took hold internally, flames shot out of the top, licking at the flood line marked on the gum trees behind like a horizontal datum. Burning hottest on the inside, the fire opened up and broke through the detailing on the front board. Chunks of burning piano embers broke off and plunged into the shallows with a fizzing sound that created concentric ripples on the surface of the water. Both destructive and protecting, the water acted as a sort of protective barrier from the fire spreading. As the fire engulfed the piano, natural oils within the larger structural timbers popped and echoed a vast distance across the water and adjacent pools.



Fig. 11: Filming *Cultural Burn*. (Source: author, 2016).



Fig. 12: *Cultural Burn*. (Source: author, 2016).

As the piano burned hotter, the sound became louder and echoed further from the source. The burning reflection on the water doubled the visual effect and although they were drowned out, the birdcalls from the gum trees above formed a kind of peripheral symphonic accompaniment. To my surprise, the abundant bird life did not leave; they seemed oblivious; perhaps they were accustomed to the sound of fire. A fish even flopped around in the shallows some meters from the piano.

After forty-five minutes, the camera timed out, followed shortly after by the audio recorder, which had exhausted its battery life. The fire peaked but did not burn through. The piano did not collapse as expected. The vertical orientation of its structure with its feet sitting in the water resisted the flames. After my technology died, I sat and observed. It was a performance for one person; just the birds, the flies, and me. Oscillating between roles, I asked myself, was I a spectator? A performer? Perhaps, both? Can a site specific performance activate engagement with the politics of tradition if witnessed live by only one person?

Eventually I too left. The piano continued to burn much longer than I had expected. Even though I had left, the performance continued as an ongoing dialogue between the piano and the landscape, the fire and the elements of water and air, between Indigenous notions of country and colonial histories.

7. CULTURAL BURN: AN ACOUSTIC ECOLOGY

The term *acoustic ecology*, coined by Murray Schafer, is a discipline studying the relationship mediated through sound between human beings and their environments.³⁸ 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 characterized by sounds.³⁹

Adopting Schafer’s terminology, the *keynotes* or background sounds were characterized by water birds, frogs croaking, and a multitude of insect noises. The *sound signals* or foreground sounds were dominated by the piano burning intermittently, overlaid with the sound of bird calls and flies passing within the range of the microphone. Lastly, the *soundmarks*, or sounds that are particularly regarded by a community, are defined by the distinctive sound of fire and the calls of native birds endemic to Culpra Station.

Added to the acoustic ecology of *Cultural Burn* were the ‘echoes and reverberations that occur as sound is absorbed and reflected from surfaces within an environment,⁴⁰ known as ‘acoustic coloration.’ Evoking the

holistic notion of Indigenous *Country*,⁴¹ the acoustic coloration present within *Cultural Burn* is inclusive of the environment in flood and the effects of material and immaterial composition. The sound emanating from the piano burning in the billabong is reflected by the surrounding tree trunks, carried by the surface of the water, and echoed by the escarpment of the flood plain, such that “the sound arriving at the ear is the analogue of the current state of the physical environment, charged by each interaction with the environment.”⁴²

The notion of a *soundmark* in relation to a piano evokes a type of sound that we are very used to hearing and therefore anticipate from this concert instrument. These predictable piano sounds produced by conventional human interaction with the instrument are what Rancière would characterize within a musical context as *the distribution of the sensible*. Within this notion we know the ‘sensible’ causal relationship between the fingering of the keys and the corresponding sound generated from hammers on strings. We are culturally attuned to this convention by the playing of particular melodies and harmonic chords that are instantly recognizable as the language of the piano. This language is perceived as complete, and sensible to the human ear.

When the instrument is burned, the language of the piano becomes partial, and what arrives at the human ear are fragments of non-human interaction, the environment playing the piano. In the absence of normative modes of human interaction with the piano, the interaction is redefined as between the piano and the landscape. The resulting non-human to non-human interaction provokes a disruption in the distribution of the sensible, in which the landscape plays the piano and the piano speaks back its own guttural language. Coming out from the death of the instrument in the landscape, the natural element of fire that provokes the piano speaks by itself, re-distributing the sensible and reordering the senses to engage a different type of space-time that is political.

Much like Gordan’s *The End of Civilization*, *Cultural Burn* assigns the environment an active role in the making of meaning. Reframed by the performative act of burning the piano on Barkanji Country, *Cultural Burn* evokes the Aboriginal land management practices of cultural burning, and Indigenous notions of singing to country.

In Australian Indigenous societies, the land and the songs associated with it are connected intimately. Singing is the main method of transmitting knowledge in an orally based society. Songs that are specifically land based come from ancestral beings, while other songs may be used for purposes such as healing.⁴³

That night I camped out on the levelled ground above the flood plain. In the morning I woke early and returned to the billabong. This time I removed my shoes and walked cautiously across. I found the piano surprisingly intact, still standing upright (see figure 13). The cast iron frame had separated from the back

posts. The piano strings, frayed, snapped, and twisted, took on a distressed organic quality. In contrast to the piano's timbers that had been almost entirely burnt away and released into the atmosphere, the metal components of the instrument remained intact.

I sat in the morning sun and contemplated the project. Deep in thought, I heard someone calling my name from the other side of the lagoon. It was Barry and Betty Pearce, the custodians of Culpra Station. I grabbed my belongings, and waded across the lagoon and up the path to dry ground. Whilst I had received permission to both enter the property and burn the piano, in the presence of Barry and Betty, I suddenly felt guilty for what I'd done, and a variety of questions crossed my mind. Was burning the piano the equivalent to burning a flag? Or burning a book? Had I trivialized the space of Indigenous politics? Was I being insensitive or disrespectful to the plight of Indigenous custodians Barry and Betty Pearce?

Due to the floodwaters, Barry and Betty were unable to get down to the camp kitchen to see the remains of the burnt out piano. Upon hearing the news that I torched the piano in the billabong, the Elders came across as bemused, more concerned for my safety driving off the property in an inappropriate two-wheel drive vehicle than the whereabouts of the broken piano. Reassuring Barry I would return to remove the metal remnants at a later date, I left what remained of the instrument in the billabong waiting for the waters to subside.

8. CONCLUSION

Twelve months later when preparing to exhibit *Cultural Burn* at a gallery in Melbourne, it dawned on me that the remnants of the burnt piano might be an interesting addition to exhibit along side the video documentation. I picked up the phone and rang my Indigenous research partner Sophia Pearce to ask what remained of the piano on Culpra Station. She explained that in the months following my solitary act of burning, the local water authority had released an extraordinary amount of water into the Murray River for the purposes of mimicking a second flood. From her account, the river rose an additional two meters on top of the existing flood, completely submerging the campsite, kitchen and remnants of the burnt-out piano. When the waters receded, Sophia stated that all that remained in the campsite was the rusted iron frame of the piano.

In October 2017, on the way to Melbourne, I detoured one thousand kilometers from Sydney to Culpra Station. When I arrived at the campsite, the frame had been moved and was once again propped against the camp kitchen that had been entirely underwater earlier in the year (see figure 14). In the gigaliters, sediment, and soils that had passed through the site, I found it puzzling that this object had resurfaced evidently too

heavy for the floodwater to carry away unlike the rest of the instrument. I spent some time scratching around on the ground looking for the brass pins and piano strings wishing that I had a metal detector but they were all gone, taken away claimed by the flood waters.



Fig. 13: The morning after. (Source: author 2016). Fig. 14: *Piano Remnants*. (Source: author, 2017).

In re-discovering the cast iron frame, I found a certain poetic resonance within the artefact that is capable of multiple interpretations. Firstly, despite my attempt to destroy the piano, and the landscapes attempt to consume it, this colonial instrument was only momentarily submerged only to resurface again dusty and worn but still intact. Secondly, the remnants of the burnt out piano form a material composition that can be interpreted through a cross-cultural historical context. In decoding the piano remains in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture, Country and land, one notes the metal remnant's alien presence within traditional Aboriginal culture. In contrast, colonial culture, in both a historical and contemporary context, has a fervent desire for metals and minerals that commonly define a non-Indigenous sensibility to land that is pursued, valued and understood as resource and in turn resourced.

Prior to carrying out *Cultural Burn*, my approach to performance research had been concerned with preserving harmony through conventional human/piano interactions. Instead, the project devised for *Cultural Burn* was to burn and therefore destroy the instrument in order to explore the performative potential of assigning the non-human agents of Culpra Station an active role in the negotiation of spatial politics. Against the Aboriginal land management practices of cultural burning, in which vegetation is regenerated through controlled burning, the piano was re-positioned within an ephemeral billabong and set on fire. Backdropped

by gumtrees and water birds, the piano burnt for several hours, and in its death, the piano performed its final sonic act.

In the act of juxtaposing these two forms of culture, the burning of the piano and Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning, some underlying tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories and interactions emerge. Subverting common understandings of two things, *Cultural Burn* resonates as political from Rancière's perspective, in that it "presents familiar cultural forms combined in an unfamiliar way."⁴⁴ Advocating the ability of site specific performance practice to illuminate pre-existing histories, *Cultural Burn* constructs new temporal materialisations between cultural practices, communities, and environments that give rise to new political formations.

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*, *Cultural Burning* intersects aesthetic and political practices to provoke a transversal condition through the juxtaposition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices, artifacts and environment.

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 affect 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.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ The acquisition of Culpra Station was made possible by the Aboriginal Land Act of 1983 (ALRA). ALRA is a statutory land rights regime that partly compensates Aboriginal people for historical dispossession of their lands. The statutory body for overseeing land acquisitions is the Indigenous Land Corporation which was established in 1995 under ALRA by the Federal Government

² Cultural burning defined as 'burning practices used by Aboriginal people to enhance the health of land and its people'. <http://www.firesticks.org.au>

³ The author acknowledges the practice of transculturalization in relation to musical instruments from Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures.

⁴ In August 2016, the Bankanji people were awarded the largest native title claim in New South Wales history after an 18 year struggle. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/jun/23/weve-got-to-tell-them-all-our-secrets-how-the-barkandji-won-a-landmark-battle-for-indigenous-australians>

⁵ When Aboriginal people use the English word 'Country' it is meant in a special way. For Aboriginal people culture, nature and land are all linked. Aboriginal communities have a cultural connection to the land, which is based on each community's distinct culture, traditions and laws. Country takes in everything within the landscape—landforms, waters, air, trees, rocks, plants, animals, foods, medicines, minerals, stories and special places. <http://www.visitmungo.com.au/aboriginal-country>

⁵ A billabong is 'a branch of a river forming a backwater or stagnant pool, made by water flowing from the main stream during a flood'

⁶ A billabong is 'a branch of a river forming a backwater or stagnant pool, made by water flowing from the main stream during a flood' <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/billabong>

⁶ Rancière Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*

⁷ Rancière Jacques, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, translated with an Introduction by Gabriel Rockhill, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004

⁸ 'Acoustic ecology' is a discipline studying the relationship mediated through sound between human beings and their environments. Kendall Wrightson, "An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology," *Journal of Electroacoustic Music*

⁹ Nakata Martin, *Disciplining the Savages, Savaging the Disciplines*. Canberra, ACT: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007. Page 12

¹⁰ See Drake, C.J. 2017, 'Instrumental: Performance and the Cumulative Potential of Distributed Sites', *OAR: The Oxford Artistic and Practice Based Research Platform*, no. Issue 1 (2017).

¹¹ See Drake, C.J. & Gilbert, J. 2016, 'Interpretive Wonderings', *Unlikely - Journal for Creative Arts*, no. 2, pp. 1-8.

¹² <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/02/13/1202760379056.html>

¹³ Lockwood, Annea (July 2009). "Bonfire of the Ivories: Visualize Your Piano-Burning". Utne Reader. Ogden Publications. Retrieved 22 April 2015.

¹⁴ Reuters (19 March 2008). "Japanese Pianist Plays the Burning Piano at a Sunset Beach." ITN Source. Retrieved 22 April 2015.

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/feb/24/artist-chiharu-shiota-installation>

¹⁶ "First Atomic Bomb Dropped on Japan; Missile Is Equal to 20,000 Tons of TNT; Truman Warns Foe of a 'Rain of Ruin'". *The New York Times*. Retrieved 2 June 2013

¹⁷ Madley, Benjamin (2008). "From Terror to Genocide: Britain's Tasmanian Penal Colony and Australia's History Wars". *Journal of British Studies*. North American Conference on British Studies. 47.

¹⁸ Bonwick, James: *Daily Life and Origins of the Tasmanians*, Sampson, Low, Son and Marston, London, 1870

¹⁹ Gare, D. *The Fuss that Never Ended: The Life and Work of Geoffrey Blainey*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003.

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- ²⁰ James Boyce, *Van Diemen's Land*, Verso Books 2009. 297.
- ²¹ Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's sorry speech to Parliament.
<http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/02/13/1202760379056.html?page=fullpage#contentSwap1>
- ²² <https://www.gagosian.com/exhibitions/douglas-gordon--september-08-2012>
- ²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/the-northerner/2012/may/22/douglas-gordon-talkin-head-cumbria-scotland>
- ²⁴ Cited in Ritchie, Leitch (1835). *Scott and Scotland*. London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 53.
- ²⁵ <http://www.firesticks.org.au>
- ²⁶ <http://www.firesticks.org.au>
- ²⁷ Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics*.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Coombs, Gretchen. "Activism, Art and Social Practice."
- ³⁰ <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/politics>
- ³¹ Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics*.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Rancière *The Politics of Aesthetics*.
- ³⁴ Environment and Heritage Management Plan (DRAFT) Culpra Station, NSW, 39-40. Prepared by Sunraysia Environmental, 2013.
- ³⁵ A billabong is 'a branch of a river forming a backwater or stagnant pool, made by water flowing from the main stream during a flood.' <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/billabong>. The word billabong comes from the Wiradjuri language of south-western New South Wales: *bila* meaning 'river,' and *bang* meaning 'continuing in time or space.' Billabong is now in common use throughout Australia. <https://www.questacon.edu.au/burarra-gathering/extra-information/billabong>
- ³⁶ A camp kitchen is an open structure constructed from timber poles and a corrugated iron roof.
- ³⁷ Performance documentation: <https://youtu.be/5LjarpziEAc>
- ³⁸ Kendall Wrightson, "An Introduction to Acoustic Ecology," *Journal of Electroacoustic Music* 12, (1999)
- ³⁹ Ibid.
- ⁴⁰ Truax, Barry, ed. *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*. Burnaby, B.C. Canada: ARC Publications, 1978.
- ⁴¹ When Aboriginal people use the English word 'Country' it is meant in a special way. For Aboriginal people, culture, nature and land are all linked. Aboriginal communities have a cultural connection to the land, which is

based on each community's distinct culture, traditions and laws. Country takes in everything within the landscape—landforms, waters, air, trees, rocks, plants, animals, foods, medicines, minerals, stories and special places. Community connections include cultural practices, knowledge, songs, stories and art, as well as all people: past, present and future. These custodial relationships may determine who can speak for particular Country. These concepts are central to Aboriginal spirituality and continue to contribute to Aboriginal identity. Source <http://www.visitmungo.com.au/aboriginal-country> * This definition of Country has been selected for its specific relevance to Culpra Station and the Bankanji nation who originated from Lake Mungo, a site of Bankanji cultural significance that was pivotal in substantiating the largest native title claim in New South Wales history, awarded to the Barkanji people in August 2016.

⁴² Truax, ed. *Handbook for Acoustic Ecology*.

⁴³ https://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/products/discussion_paper/we-have-the-song-so-we-have-the-land.pdf

⁴⁴ Coombs..”Activism, Art and Social Practice.”