

**The Sixth International Conference on
Transdisciplinary Imaging at the Intersections between
Art, Science and Culture**

DARK EDEN

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Conference Chair: Professor Paul Thomas, Art and Design, UNSW Sydney

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**A shadow zone, a spectral landscape, a cemetery, zombieland.
The debris of an old image culture, or compost for a new one?**

The cultural moment now dubbed “Contemporary” is defined by the networked saturation of images. By the diffusion, dissemination and inundation of frictionless image production. By image hacking, image consumption and image commerce on social media and in platform capitalism. By 24/7 crisis news, doom-scrolling and misinformation spread by web influencers. By CCTV and drone surveillance. By massive multiplayer online gaming. By “deepfake” hoaxes and simulations that augment reality and contribute to the relentlessly cynical campaigning of our 21st century political twitter “newspeak”. Is not this cornucopia and unprecedented availability of mediated imagery a kind of Eden? If so, it is a dark Eden. Metaphorically fertile as a forest that is so thick with its tentacular edicts that the light that penetrates cannot escape its web; or perhaps, and more likely, that its mutated growth is now dependent on a black rather than bright light. Its darkness might be that of the pall of ash-filled smoke shrouding a burning continent.

Conference papers addressed the general topic from any angle (direct or oblique), but were asked to consider at least one of the following areas:

- Expanded image
- Remediated image
- Hypermediacy
- Expanded film
- Imaging science
- Computer vision
- Networked image
- Immersion
- Speculative realism
- The invisible, the subliminal, the inaudible or subaudial
- Infraworld
- Enlightenment and the post-truth era
- Augmented reality
- Artificial intelligence, or intelligent systems



The Work of Art in the Age of the Australian Misanthropocene

Mark Titmarsh

Abstract

This article navigates the placelessness of the contemporary Australian situation: un-grounded, on stolen land and mediated by the latest stage of post colonial capitalism and its surveillance state. This first appears in the chimera of virtual and mediated relationships between the state, the gallery, the place of art, the art of landscape, cartographic mapping of place, and ultimately the scenographic navigation of the globe. Contemporary placelessness, mediated through a network of screens and integrated information channels, becomes the last act of the Anthropos in the Anthropocene.

On multiple screens and devices across the country appears an image of a virtual gallery during the Covid lockdown of 2020. The gallery is empty.

VOMA, the virtual online museum of art¹, is an entirely new structure, made from pixel 'bricks and mortar', that will be used to exhibit both historical and contemporary art from online galleries. The structure of the virtual space was designed by Emily Mann, as if VOMA's architecture was physical. However VOMA's plans for exhibitions did not *take place*.

In the same way the Gulf War did not *take place*, all we got to know about the war was in the form of heavily edited, highly technical, constructed imagery. Images, mostly taken from the nose cones of smart bombs as they plummeted towards their targets, created the impression of an unstoppable war machine and functioned as a form of total propaganda. This made it impossible to distinguish between the experience of real events in an actual conflict, stylized selective misrepresentations, and a third option, the realm of simulation and simulacra, neither true or false, both true and false. As Baudrillard argued at the time, the events and violence of the Gulf War actually happened, but did not 'take place'². The place it 'took' was somewhere beyond and between the desert of the real.³

If Baudrillard were still alive he may have written in our time,
Covid will not take place,
Covid is not taking place,
Covid did not take place.

The parallels between Covid and the Gulf War continue. In the Gulf War, which functioned as a subset of the ‘War on Terror’, there was a state of exception, where the normal operations of state and human liberty were suspended. In the so called ‘War on Covid’ another state of exception is invoked:

In a state of exception, the state authorities curtail freedoms in the name of ‘safety’ that they alone can ostensibly guarantee. Quarantines, lockdowns, and governmental monitoring all over the world ... (are maintained) like... the plague in 18th-century Europe. ‘(It) is the moment ... when the spatial partitioning and subdivision of a population is taken to its extreme point, where dangerous communications, disorderly communities, and forbidden contacts can no longer appear’ (Foucault).⁴

In Australia Covid did not ‘take place’, instead it ‘gave’ an informational contagion as surveillance capitalism merged seamlessly with state surveillance. Through metaphors provided by the Covid Safe app⁵ we can say that our relations with technology are inseparable from our coming into being, they design and seek to predetermine our socio-communicative (well) being. Yet it is an uncanny kind of (well) being since it is dissociated from any sense of location. The moment of blue tooth handshake is not tied to a specific place, only the fact that there has been a rendezvous of viral proximity. In this way the truth of being has become unbound from place, since place has become an environment of code-space, a world of techno-mediation.

A similar yet pre-digital kind of de-localisation happened almost 250 years ago with the crash landing of Cook on the east coast of Terra Incognita. With the eyes that were available to him he who saw a non-place, not a utopia, but a *terra nullius*. This moment of engagement between different worlds set up a template for a series of mis-en-placements, colonisations, and now decolonisations that operate at the level of land and subjectivity.

Like Covid and the Gulf War, Australia did not take place, the informational handshake never occurred and consequently we have never been Australian. It could have been different if the opening act had been well played. But ‘250 years ago, Captain James Cook and his men shot the Gweagal warrior Cooman, stole his shield and spears, and took them back to England in a presciently violent opening act of Australian east coast Aboriginal and European contact.’⁶

When Cook penetrated Terra Incognita, or New Holland or Southern Gondwana, or any other way you might name this very unusual place, he brought with him the maps of Modernity. As a man of the 18th Century Enlightenment, his mode of visual engagement was aesthetic and possessive, a derivation of the popular latin saying, *vidi, vidi, vici*: I came, I saw, I conquered.

In this kind of looking as investigation,

‘Nature’ stands always to one side, ‘presenting’ the landscape as an ‘ob-ject’ and the ‘observer’ stands always to the other, positing themselves as a ‘subject’ at liberty. ... the promotion of landscape has gone hand in hand with the geometric division of space ... into a homogenous isotropic, and infinite expanse, free of both topographical boundaries, and symbolic assignations, and obeying the laws of optics alone.⁷

It was with this kind of objectified looking that meant Cook and the first European settlers would overlook what was already *there* and ‘see’ only an empty unclaimed *terra nullius*.

The same landscape-way of looking, scraping a slice out of the visual field, continues into our own time where the mining and resource industry ‘sees’ only underground spaces for commercialisation, vast quarries at Juukan Gorge, instead of 46,000 years of culture, art and ceremony to be maintained.

In this context of disrespectful destruction, we could come to hate Australia⁸, to be misanthropic towards dominant Australian business practices and the cultural stereotypes of what it means to be a relaxed and contented Australian. To be misanthropic, and Australian, linked in to anthropocenic climate change, via extractive industries, means we are misanthropes in the Anthropocene, or a Misanthropocene.⁹

But as they say, you often have to hit rock bottom before you can change, and it is almost with a sense of hope that Corey Wakeling suggests via ‘Misanthropology’ that a disgust for the human condition in our current global crisis can become a transformative act.¹⁰

In this way Australia is disgusting because it has become another kind of colonial ‘nonplace’ where the failure of the Enlightenment project, of modernity itself, is being played out as the failure of colonialism, both the crude legalistic version of *terra nullius* and the networked variety of data colonisation carried out in the back end of social media.

An early move to sidestep the dead end of modernity and its one world vision was first attempted in the 1980s with postmodernism, which can now be re-appraised in the light of current discourses around the anti-Modern. Bruno Latour uses the term a-modern,¹¹ to identify the interconnectedness of modernity, globalization and coloniality to propose an alternative mode of existence that is multiple, plural and open to otherness.

If we look at postmodern art as an important precursor of this we would go back to reconsider Imants Tillers and Tim Johnson whose work as a variation on landscape painting opened up productive relationships to place in the context of indigenous sovereignties.¹²

The story having been retold so many times now, begins almost like a fairy tale, with Imants Tillers’ mythic painting, *The Nine Shots*, which he painted in 1985 by re-composing elements from two other paintings by the German artist, Georg Baselitz and the indigenous Australian Michael Nelson Jagamarra.

Without any permission (from either artist), Tiller’s used magazine images of Jagamarra’s painting *Five Stories* (1984) which depicted a sacred entity, Wanampi the rainbow serpent. Consequently ‘there were attacks on Tillers for his “theft” of the image, and there were serious ramifications for Jagamarra, because he was entrusted with these stories and his duty was to look after and protect them.’¹³

Both men were in the position of having to rectify a damaging wound. For Jagamara it was profoundly metaphysical, for Tillers it was both professional and philosophical. The situation was ‘resolved’ by the artists eventually meeting and beginning to work together on collaborative paintings, producing 24 co-signed works between 2001 and 2017.

Gordon Bennet, as the hero of the story, intervenes in his painting *The Nine Ricochets* (1990), made an articulate response to Tillers *Nine Shots*, meeting him at various visual and conceptual levels. Bennett, an urban indigenous artist from Brisbane, cast Tillers engagement with aboriginal art as a form of colonisation, equating it with a type of visual massacre. He made the point by featuring in his painting an image of a frontier massacre which implied that Tillers was doing something similar at an aesthetic level, that is violently tearing indigenous art from its cultural context, dismembering it for the sake of an invasive aesthetic, resulting in art world notoriety and financial success. Bennett reversed the dynamic by appropri-

ating Tillers' Latvian cultural heritage, quoting a section from another Tillers painting that referred to a Latvian fairytale.

For Bennett and Tillers, the appropriation genie once invoked tends to multiply and play games on all those who participate in its magic. So it is hardly ironic that Bennet himself was caught up in cultural sensitivities around the use of traditionally owned images in his own painting, eventually requiring him to travel to Maningrida in the Northern Territory to repair cultural ties with traditional owners.¹⁴ In this context Rex Butler makes the argument that the appropriator is appropriated in return by that which they appropriate.¹⁵ He goes on to suggest that,

White Australians have always seen in aboriginality the possibility of a genuine Australian culture. Perhaps the two most notable examples of this were the Jindyworobak poets of the 1940s who retold Aboriginal myths in a romantic, lyrical style and the painter Margaret Preston who in the 1920s began to use the flat, unmodulated colours of Aboriginal bark paintings in her woodblock prints. It was only in the 1980s, however, that 'aboriginality' was taken up as the centrepiece of a new aesthetic of appropriation.¹⁶

So the final part of this postmodern fable is Tim Johnsons' journey to the Papunya community in Central Australia in the early 1980s.



Figure 1: Installation view, *Re/production*, 16 Albermarle Project Space, Sydney, photo by John Cruthers

Five works on show at 16 Albermarle Project Space in Sydney in 2020¹⁷ show the transition Johnson went through in his years at Papunya, (Figure 1). In this image, reading it from bottom left moving around clockwise we see Johnson's photo of Papunya artists under a tree, a painting made from a photo of Papunya artists materials, a painting from a photo of artists standing around a Papunya dot painting, Papunya dots in his representational depiction of Papunya artists, and finally a painting co-painted with Papunya artist Turkey Tolson where Johnson did the dots and Tolson the dreaming story. The final controversial step took place in a collaborative painting, *Untitled* 1983, where Turkey Tolson reversed their previous mode of collaboration by asking Johnson to paint the story, while Tulson painted the figurative elements (Figure 2).



Figure 2, Tim Johnson and Turkey Tolson Tjupurrula, *Untitled* 1983, acrylic on canvas

Even though Johnson had permission and encouragement from an elder to use the dreaming story depicted, this was no protection against the anger that would result from an uninitiated non-indigenous person painting and eventually selling aspects of Dreaming. Australia has over 200 clan groups and nations, so because one person from one nation might offer protection it does not mean that an audience made up of many people from many different indigenous nations will accept it in the same way, in fact many saw it as another type of (visual) colonisation.

This kind of failure to connect has been going on since Cook arrived in ‘Botany Bay.’ He had with him a skilled Polynesian intermediary called Tupaia who was not invited to participate in negotiations on that fateful day in April 1770. Cook knew the protocols of arriving as a stranger, they were similar across most of the Pacific, and he knew the value of an intermediary and yet did not use Tupaia who was a high-ranking Tahitian, navigator, shaman and artist who successfully negotiated landings in similar circumstances at other places.¹⁸

Was it the misanthropist in Cook that ruled that day?¹⁹ Things were signaled to Cook and his men by the awaiting aboriginal warriors, but the visitors did not meet the symbolic handshake, and so five musket shots were fired off and 3 spears were thrown. One shot wounded the Gweagal warrior Cooman, forcing him to drop his shield that was taken by Cook and now sits in the British Museum. Cook’s error of negotiation on that day created a template, like a morphic resonance, continually reenacted by settlers who don’t know how to play the part of stranger waiting to be invited in.

Tillers had tried to find a mediator, a substitute for Tupaia, through the Museum without Walls, through the dotscreen of infinite publishing, the portal through which all art history arrived in Australia in the 1980s. Johnson tried to find the mediator through spirituality, linking his own search for something beyond everyday life in the spirituality of Indigenous Dreaming and eventually Buddhist philosophy and practices. The lessons he learnt in Papunya about creation stories and Country, as well as the artistic style of dot painting, eventually became his established method for painting enlightened presence on the earth. However neither of these artists found a way to satisfy the protocols of waiting and all of us are still waiting to be invited in.

Ironically in the Anthropocene there is the potential for an unusual alliance between the coloniser and the colonised since the settler-invader now experiences the loss of worlds brought on by climate change much like the indigene felt loss of worlds when the coloniser expropriated land. Similarly, in the digital domain the arrival of surveillance capitalism and machine intelligence has shifted the free world of connectivity as originally envisioned by the founders of the internet into a zone of algorithmic policing, and data profiling.

As data colonised subjects we can now identify with all first nations people of the world but particularly our closest neighbours, the Australian indigene.

But this identification gives no relief because the coloniser can't have it both ways, benefiting from territorial appropriation then attempting to become indigenous as a way of surviving in the Anthropocene.

So, what could be the nature of patient waiting leading to a possible invitation? What kind of cultural assemblage suggested by failed postmodern attempts might create a place where two ontologies, two aesthetics meet and coexist? If we are to learn from Tupaia who or what would be the mediator for such a meeting?

Postmodernity initiated the search for something beyond the so-called purity of modernity, to find what allows for multiple forms of existence, a poly-aesthetics that leaves a space for the other and does not create a singular monolithic system. Some recent attempts in this register might be found in the Karrabing Film Collective, an intergenerational mix of more than thirty members of the Belyuen community in the Northern Territory, together with anthropologist, activist and gender studies professor Elizabeth Povinelli, who has worked with the community since 1984. Together they have sought to create a model for Indigenous filmmaking and activism, by bringing together different clans and languages, conceiving works through an infrastructure of communal thinking and experimentation, and seamlessly blending fiction and documentary traditions.

Another start might be made using Stephen Muecke's conceptualisation of the West Kimberly word *gardiya* meaning someone who feels a sense of belonging to a place, who is possessed by Country and is attached to its mob, the traditional owners of that place. In return the *gardiya*, a non-indigenous person, offers certain skills and knowhow as well as a 'kind of loyalty that normally goes with family.'²⁰

We could also consider Arturo Escobar's idea of the Pluriverse, a world where many worlds fit. In his book *Designs for the Pluriverse*, he writes, we are faced with 'a crisis of a particular ... civilizational model ... where everything has to change (to be able) ... to face the interrelated crises of climate, food, energy, poverty, and meaning.'²¹ The West of which the nation state of Australia is a part, has been irretrievably linked to capitalist, patriarchal, modernity which aimed for a single globalised world. That monolithic project is collapsing before our eyes though climate change, resource depletion, ocean acidification, as well as pandemic, poverty, food and water crises.

Globally speaking and with a particular local inflection, Australian settler history under-lays and over-writes an evolving relationship with indigenous culture. Unpacking and confessing the crankiness and misanthropic forces of a colonial past, enable old errors to point towards potential solutions for generating a future with some future. With some of these ideas and examples, we may yet become Australian.

Notes

¹ <https://voma.space/>

² Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1995.

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra et Simulations*, 1981, Éditions Galilée; *Simulacra and Simulations*, University of Michigan Press, 1994.

⁴ Ani Maitr, "COVID-19 and the neoliberal state of exception", <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/3/29/covid-19-and-the-neoliberal-state-of-exception/> accessed 1 Dec 2020

⁵ COVIDSafe app, Australian Government, Department of Health, <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/apps-and-tools/covidsafe-app> accessed 10 Nov 2020.

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- ⁶ Paul Daley, 'The Gweagal Shield', *The Guardian*, 25 Sep 2016.
- ⁷ Francois Julien, *Living off Landscape*, Lanham, 2018, 9
- ⁸ See Adam Geczy, 'I hate Australia', *Southerly*, vol. 66, no. 3, 2006, p. 97+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, accessed 18 Mar. 2021 and his exhibition, I hate Australia, <https://repository.monash.edu/items/show/40043#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0>
- ⁹ A term coined by Joshua Clover and Juliana Spahr in their 'The #Misanthropocene: 24 Theses.'
- ¹⁰ 'Misanthropology: foreword to a speculative study of disgust for the Age of the Anthropocene', *Southerly Magazine*, Jan 25, 2016 <https://southerlylitmag.com.au/2016/01/25/misanthropology-foreword-to-a-speculative-study-of-disgust-for-the-age-of-the-anthropocene-3/>, accessed 10 Dec 2018
- ¹¹ Heather Davis and Bruno Latour, 'The Amoderns: thoughts on an impossible project', *Currents*, October 2014, <https://amodern.net/article/amoderns-impossible-project/> accessed 10 Sep 2020
- ¹² While this territory has been well travelled by many authors over the last four decades or more, it is important at this moment of potential reconciliation and truth sharing to slice through the 'well known' arguments of appropriation and post coloniality to reveal more aspects of decolonisation (versus post colonisation), in the Australian context of a nation state facing up to its own aesthetic de(con)struction.
- ¹³ Angela Philp, 'Review of Black and White Restive', 16 June 2016, *Artlink* online, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4501/black-white-26-restive/> accessed 10 Nov 2020.
- ¹⁴ Discussion with Michael Eather by phone on Tue 20 Oct 2020.
- ¹⁵ Rex Butler, 'Two Readings of Gordon Bennett's The Nine Ricochets', *Eyeline* Winter Spring, 1992, 18-22, 21
- ¹⁶ Butler, 1992, 18-22.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.16albermarle.com/exhibitions/reproduction>
- ¹⁸ Ian McClean, *Rattling Spears: A History of Indigenous Australian Art*, Reaktion, 2018, 30-33
- ¹⁹ There is much to be made of Cook's moods. On any one day and at any particular location, it could lead him in a quietistic state, to not take any revenge for 10 crew members killed and eaten by Maori. Or at the other end of the spectrum, he could react violently and murderously to the theft of one goat in Tahiti.
- ²⁰ Stephen Muecke, 'Turning into a *Gardiya*', in Chris Healy and Philip Morrissey (eds) *Reading the Country 30 Years On*, UTS epress, 4
- ²¹ Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse*, Duke Uni Press, 2018, ix-x

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