
Sustainability and the Material
Imagination in Australian Cultural
Organisations

Tania Leimbach

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A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

University of Technology Sydney

Declaration

I certify that this work has not previously been submitted for a higher degree at any other institution, and that the thesis presents original research, except where otherwise indicated.

Tania Leimbach, July 2015

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List of publications

Journal Articles

Leimbach, T. 2013, 'Innovative programming and social engagement in Art Institutions: An Australian case study', *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 171-184.

Book Chapters

Leimbach, T. 2013, 'Making it visual: Growing ideas for sustainability', in N. Duxbury (ed.), *Animation of Public Space through the Arts: Toward More Sustainable Communities*, Almedina, Coimbra, pp. 237-245.

Conference Presentations

Lorber-Kasunic, J., Leimbach, T. & Abrams, S. 2013, 'The politics of design: Re-evaluating the role of speculative, critical and citizen-led design practice in Australia', Cumulus Conference: International Association of Universities and Colleges of Art, Design and Media, *More for Less. Design in an Age of Austerity*, Dublin, Ireland.

Leimbach, T. 2013, 'Sustainability is a cultural change project: Innovative programming in Australian art and design museums', Sixth International Conference on the Inclusive Museum: *Museums and Active Citizenship*, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Leimbach, T. 2011, 'Making it visual: Growing ideas for sustainability', *Animation of Public Space through the Arts: Towards More Sustainable Communities Symposium*, Centre for Social Studies (CES), University of Coimbra, Portugal.

Creative Works

Leimbach, T., Zakaria, R., Sargent, N., Leimbach, C.J. & Gerada, M. 2012, *Concrete Jungle: A Green Wall for Growing Ideas*, UTS, Public art installation for the Ultimo Pedestrian Network, Ultimo.

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- b) Powerhouse Museum interior. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
- c) Powerhouse Museum poster. Designed by Bruce Gould in G. Davison & K. Webber (eds), *Yesterday's tomorrows: The Powerhouse Museum and its precursors 1880-2005*, Powerhouse Publishing in association with UNSW Press, Sydney.
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- b) Poster promotion for *Body Pacifica*, Casula Powerhouse Art Centre.
- c) Diego Bonetto with participants on a 'weedy tour'. Photo: Available under Creative Commons License.
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- e) Drawing by Mirra Whale from her collection, *Ode to the Urban Weed*. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
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- b) Students drawing on the banks of the Shoalhaven River. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
- c) Bundanon Trust Annual Report 2011-2012.
- d) Gary Warner, *Three Poems Night*, installation at Bundanon Trust. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
- e) Groups of people gathered for *SiteWorks* 2013. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
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Abstract

Sustainability is an ongoing engagement across material, economic, moral and political orders and one that raises complex questions of intention, agency and choice. While the meaning of the term 'sustainability' is itself a matter of debate, there is resolve within the discourse toward a shared sense of responsibility for the conditions of life on the planet, now and into the future. This thesis is an attempt to understand how museums are engaging with the political and material complexities of sustainability and global environmental decline. With their collections of material culture and the capacity to interact with diverse audiences, museums have always played a role in extending public imagination. The point of focus in this investigation is the role that museums play in shaping new understanding of the interdependence of natural and cultural systems, and the creation of public encounters with concepts, practices and embodiments of sustainability.

Across three distinct settings (inner / outer metropolitan and regional), this ethnographic study offers contrasting accounts of cultural practice and an examination of connections between local conditions and global concerns. Diverse modes of cultural work, which include contemporary initiatives, projects and processes of institutional change within the Australian context, are presented. The analytical work of the thesis involves examination of how sustainability imperatives translate into cultural conversations and political processes. The tools that support the analysis are theoretical understandings of social and material agency, material thinking and new forms of public participation. A rhetorical strategy of *informing, engaging and inspiring* is used to tease out differences across the three sites and to consider how each one positions the viewer through its mode of address.

Material thinking and furthermore, a *material imagination* have designs on the material world, and manifest thinking into made matter. Drawing on Paul Carter's vision of the creative process as material thinking, sustainability is framed as an act of local invention and the cultural organisations examined in this thesis are

presented as unique forms of invention. They include scientific and socio-ecological understandings that generate a larger picture of humanity within the bio-physical world; inter-disciplinary projects that attempt to bring natures and cultures into closer dialogue through imaginative engagements; and institutional approaches that actively care for place through custodial ethics. The material culture of exhibitions and museums are evidently spaces in which social and material relations can be imaginatively examined and re-configured. Each of these examples contributes to the larger trajectory of sustainability. They also contribute to the central argument of this thesis that we need to generate closer connections between human beings and the worlds they inhabit and design. This is in order to encounter the Anthropocene, and to become much more sensitised to all modes of our material existence.

Keywords: *material culture; art and design; museums; sustainability; agency; material thinking; material imagination; Anthropocene*