Sustainability and the Material Imagination in Australian Cultural Organisations

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A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

University of Technology Sydney
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
Table of Contents

Declaration i
Acknowledgements vii
List of publications ix
List of figures x
Abstract xi

INTRODUCTION 1
The museum as a social and material process 1
Forums for the future: Responding to sustainability 2
Aims of the research 4
Material thinking and the material imagination 5
Concepts, practices and embodiments of sustainability 6
New modes of research and knowledge creation 9
Places, Objects and Events: A heuristic 10
An outline of the thesis: Chapter synopsis 11

CHAPTER ONE: The material is material (thinking through things) 19
Introduction: Establishing the research territory 19

PART ONE 20
Meaning in matter: Making, displaying and collecting 20
A material culture perspective: Reconciling binaries between art and design 24
Perspectives on agency: The capacity to make a difference 28

PART TWO 34
The sustainability problématique: A research priority 34
The research outline 38
Positioning the inquiry: Preliminary groundwork and selective sampling 41
The research process: A multi-site ethnography 46
The research approach: On being interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary 48
The purpose of the study 49
Chapter conclusion 51

CHAPTER TWO: Museums as sites of stasis and transformation 53
Introduction: The field of knowledge production 53

PART ONE 54
The museum as a dynamic cultural and political construct 54
Museum transformations: The contemporary museum as "problem solver“ 58
Museums as "values" brands: Cultural longevity and economic viability 61

**PART TWO** 64
An exploratory framework of places, objects and events 64
Place: Theoretical perspectives to inform a methodology 65
Object: Theoretical perspectives to inform a methodology 72
Event: Theoretical perspectives to inform a methodology 79
Chapter conclusion 85

**CHAPTER THREE: Walking in the field** 87
Introduction: The research strategy 87
Multi-site ethnography 88
Data collection and analysis: Listening to the voice of the organisation 92
Writing the accounts: Thick description 94
Transdisciplinarity: Ethnography as complex thinking 96
Chapter conclusion 100

**CHAPTER FOUR: Design (Informing)** 103
Field Study No. 1 Powerhouse Museum 103
Introduction 103
A map for the journey 104
OBJECT 107

_EcoLogic: An overview_ 107
Complicated materiality: The unexpected efficacy of a crushed car 109
Object agency and authenticity: Engaging the collection 113
Assembling climate change through material culture 117
Vital materiality and the 'Argyle' chair 120

EVENT 122
Developing the exhibition while meeting resistance 122
A counter-narrative within the 'social imaginary' 124
Designing the exhibition for a broad and general audience 125
Curating climate change: A risk management optic 128
Exhibition narratives of (re)design 131

PLACE 135
Charting the origins of the museum 135
A late 20th century 'modern' museum 138
The global-local: Reinventing the 'Dreaming House' 141
Chapter conclusion 143
CHAPTER FIVE: Design (Engaging) 147
Field Study No. 2 Casula Powerhouse 147
Introduction 147
A map for the journey 148
EVENT 151
Building trust and inclusivity within the community 151
Creative producers and a community curatorium 154
Empowering community through programming: *Body Pacifica* 158
Bringing ecology into the social mix 160
Exploring new programming: Environmental sustainability 161
Art and the everyday: Co-operative networks 164
PLACE 168
Social, cultural and environmental flows 168
Multiculturalism and environmental belonging 171
Rekindling old knowledge: Foraging in Western Sydney 176
Negotiating, mediating and translating the non-human world 178
Caring for place in 21st century suburban Australia 181
OBJECT 184
The Trickster effect: Art beyond aesthetics 184
Evolving challenges for sustainability at the Art Centre 188
Chapter conclusion 190

CHAPTER SIX: Design (Inspiring) 195
Field Study No. 3 Bundanon Trust 195
Introduction 195
A map for the journey 197
PLACE 199
Bundanon Trust: A regional creative retreat 199
The evolving mission: New opportunities and challenges 201
Bringing the environment and sustainability into the frame 205
EVENT 211
Between the microscopic and telescopic: *SiteWorks* 211
An artist’s response to place 217
The learning self at Bundanon Trust 219
Trialling a new program: *Touched by the Earth* 222
Place-based, immersive and embodied experience 223
OBJECT 227
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List of publications

Journal Articles

Book Chapters

Conference Presentations

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
List of figures

**Figure 1.**
Images collated from the Powerhouse Museum Field Study.
From top left to bottom right:
- a) Entrance to the *EcoLogic* exhibition. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
- d) Powerhouse Museum interior. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
- e) An early 20th century photograph looking north towards the original Ultimo Tram Depot on the left. Photo: Mitchell State Library.
- f) Entrance to the *EcoLogic* exhibition. Photo: Tania Leimbach.

**Figure 2.**
Images collated from the Casula Powerhouse Art Centre Field Study.
From top left to bottom right:
- 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.
- d) Diego Bonetto’s ‘weedy tour’. Photo: Available under Creative Commons License.
- f) A ‘Facebook Wall’ illustrating community networks, from Diego Bonetto’s exhibition at Casula Powerhouse Art Centre. Photo: Tania Leimbach.

**Figure 3.**
Images collated from the Bundanon Trust Field Study.
From top left to bottom right:
- a) Students from the *Touched by the Earth* program, return to the homestead after the ‘River Journey’. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
- b) Students drawing on the banks of the Shoalhaven River. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
- e) Groups of people gathered for *SiteWorks* 2013. Photo: Tania Leimbach.
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