

The GEO Project:
A New Dialogue About Art and the Environment
By Alison Kubler

Contemporary art sometimes has the appearance of existing solely in response to itself in a self-perpetuating relationship. Indeed, the criticism levelled at contemporary art - that it is often self-referential (art about art) and elitist, preaching to the converted, or those initiated in art theory - is a criticism that frequently leaves the artist out of the equation. 'Contemporary art' after all as a descriptor, is a term in flux; it is an idiom applied to myriad forms, mediums and genres. Where then do these mixed meanings leave the artist?

Perhaps the real challenge for contemporary art and artists might not be how art ought to be perceived or interpreted, but rather how art might find and retain relevance in relation to the formidable dominance of popular culture, which seems to permeate all aspects of contemporary life, whether we like it or not. This triumph of the 'popular' begs the question: is popular 'culture', with all that it defines, art made democratic? If so, can contemporary art make a place for itself and the ideas it explores within the 'culture'? If we still like to believe that art can change the world (did we ever believe this to be so?), then our demands for contemporary art must be much greater than ever before. In a world where the media is dominated by reports of the behaviour of vacuous celebrities or fallen football heroes, *can* art make a difference? Can art truly be revolutionary? So many questions, and here are a few more.

Is there an issue more pressing or demanding of our collective attention than care for our environment? As a species we stand on the brink of an unknowable future entirely dependent on our careful management of the natural world. We must ask ourselves, will our generation/s neglect expedite the demise of our world as we know it today? Faced with such weighty philosophical and practical questions, where might contemporary artists find a place and relevance for their practice?

The GEO Project goes some way to addressing this conundrum. GEO offers an eclectic approach to the theme of art and environment, ecology and geography through the presentation of four unique exhibitions, whose individual themes overlap and connect at the same time that they explore the far reaching

possibilities of what art might be, from a technologically savvy installation to ephemeral interactions with the natural world and printmaking studies exploring botanical illustrations. GEO offers new ways in which to begin fresh dialogues about art and artists, and the environment.

Antarctica - A Place in the Wilderness is an exhibition of silver gelatin photography by Australian artist Judy Parrott. Produced while the artist was in residence for six weeks on an Arts Fellowship at Casey Station in 2006, the photographs are exhibited alongside found objects. The exhibition also incorporates a sound component alongside Braille versions of the artist's diary designed to extend the exhibition experience to a visually impaired audience.

Antarctica is a continent that looms large in the collective psyche, predominantly because it is a place that most of us will never have the opportunity to visit. Antarctica is instead a land traversed in dreams, the ultimate romantic destination for so many armchair travellers, frustrated adventurers, the last great frontier. Remote and isolated, Antarctica is a Utopia of sorts. An unspoilt wilderness, inhospitable to all but the most hardy of intrepid human beings, such as those undertaking study at Casey Station (one of three Australian research stations), Antarctica embodies concepts of purity and pristine nature. Its characteristically harsh climactic conditions have ensured it is immune to the blight of tourism's carbon footprint so that Antarctica is an unsullied blank canvas onto which we may project our inner explorer's dreams. It is fitting then that Parrott ensured that the visually impaired might be able to vicariously experience her own epic journey through the use of Braille.

Antarctica is a land made entirely of ice - ice that must be cracked by immensely strong ships in order to be navigated; ice that flows and freezes as it has for centuries. For most of the year Antarctica is completely cut off from the rest of the world, in extremis. As a result of this natural exile, this is a continent that has produced a unique ecosystem that has evolved in response to the extreme conditions. At the bottom of the earth, Antarctica is the earth's companion bookend to its grammatical and polar opposite, the Arctic. Two snow capped poles that hold the earth on its axis as it were. Their existence is vital.

Judy Parrott's photographs operate both as important photo documents as well as highly aesthetic black and white images. The silver gelatin medium, a highly aesthetic traditional analogue technique, lends itself to the very arcane character

of the special places Parrott has documented - each with their secret histories, known and shared by a select few. Her photographs capture fleeting geographies because, after all, Antarctica is in constant flux, melting and cracking apart to reform elsewhere, like an ephemeral artwork. Similarly, Parrott's photographs of the individuals that people this tough place are simultaneously respectful and fascinating; her photographic essay allows a rare insight into the daily life and routines on this harsh continent. Parrott observes, 'Walking on the Antarctic plateau is like floating on a giant, white disc suspended in space. No smells, no sounds, no colour, no taste. It is the physical manifestation of the sixth sense, that empty place where we find our intuition.'¹ Her photographs offer the keenness of her own experience and whet the appetite in the viewer for discovery of similar romantic and epic, yet intimate, journeys. Most importantly, these are images that remind us why we must be ever ecologically vigilant.

With a similar concept at its heart, *Habitus - Habitat* serves as the documentation of a selection of public artworks created as part of a series of artist residencies carried out in conjunction with the development of six walking tracks by the Environmental Protection Agency in Queensland. The Great Walks of Queensland are six walking tracks administered by the Queensland Government's Environmental Protection Agency through some of the state's most beautiful natural areas: Fraser Island, Gold Coast Hinterland, Sunshine Coast Hinterland, Wet Tropics, Mackay Highlands and the Whitsundays.

The Great Walks Art and Environment Program was an innovative public art initiative that included seven art residencies designed to allow artists to physically experience the walks and interpret different environments through their practice. Curated by Beth Jackson, *Habitus - Habitat* features a selection of those commissioned works and photographic documentation of temporary ephemeral works created on location by artists Craig Walsh, Elizabeth Woods, Fiona Foley, Jill Chism, Brian Robinson, Shane Fitzgerald, Glen Skien and Marian Drew.

In addition, the exhibition features artworks produced by local artists as part of the regional workshops conducted at six regional art galleries: KickArts Contemporary Arts, Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Artspace Mackay, Hervey Bay Regional Gallery, University of the Sunshine Coast Gallery and Gold Coast City Art Gallery, alongside a suite of photographs interpreting all of the Great Walks. While exploring the exciting possibilities for ephemeral work, *Habitus - Habitat* has a larger agenda that involves extending a general awareness of our unique

natural habitat through the cultural intervention of contemporary art. What could be more uplifting than to embark on a walk through the bush and to encounter an artwork that might literally stop you in your tracks, leaving no environmental footprint?

Exercise for the body *and* the mind, The Great Walks Art and Environment Program is an engagement with the natural world in the great Romantic tradition reinterpreted for a contemporary context. The Australian bush, or rather the idea of the bush, is arguably deeply embedded in the collective national psyche and yet, for the vast majority of Australians, a tangible physical experience of the bush is far from a regular reality. As a nation, we are more sedentary and urban than ever before, bound to cities and towns. At the same time, visits to museums and galleries have increased exponentially nationally, so it would seem entirely logical and innovative to combine an experience of the natural environment with an encounter with contemporary art. *Habitus - Habitat* presents thought-provoking works such as Fiona Foley's politically loaded and provocative work *Signpost II* (the derogatory words 'white trash' spelt out in thrift store clothing; literal 'white trash' on the pure white sands of Fraser Island) alongside Elizabeth Woods' delicate interventions and additions to the 'carpet' of the forest floor.

The Great Walks Art and Environment Program also explored the tensions between ephemeral installations and documented practice, between intimate and personal experiences and shared collective engagements with nature. Taking art out of the conventional museum or gallery construct raises questions about how art functions traditionally and what we understand the function of these formal spaces for viewing art to be. Creating art *outside* of these formal constructs, and then bringing it back to the gallery in the form of documented engagements and interactions, encourages the viewer to reconsider the potential for contemporary art to challenge accepted definitions and boundaries. Marian Drew's evocative photographs drawn with light are, for example, the product of a kind of performance, a performance that exists only in reproduction. These images rely on the viewer to imagine the artist creating her drawings alone, in the dark, in the bush. The physical object that remains from this temporary act is a record of one artist's intimate engagement with nature. Importantly, by inviting local artists at exhibition destinations to collaborate and respond, the Great Walks project also celebrates the notion of community, recognising that true ecological and environmental awareness is a shared responsibility.

Replant: a new generation of botanical art is all about shared experience. *Replant* is an artists' exploration of the remarkable world of plants in the tropical north of Australia. The term 'botanical art' usually conjures up images of finely rendered watercolours of plant specimens identified by their Latin names displayed in polite Victorian salons. Instead, *Replant* explodes the rarefied botanical art tradition, by inviting six contemporary artists to engage intimately with the natural environment and translate their observations to prints while exploring important cross cultural collaborations between indigenous and non-indigenous artists.

Replant brought together a unique team of professionals that included artists Deborah Wurrkidj from Maningrida; Fiona Hall from Adelaide; Irene Mungatopi from the Tiwi Islands; Judy Watson from Brisbane; Marita Sambono from Daly River; and Winsome Jobling from Darwin. The larger project included Ethno botanist Glenn Wightman from the Northern Territory Herbarium, Darwin; print makers Basil Hall, Jo Diggins and Natasha Rowell from Basil Hall Editions in Darwin; photographer Peter Eve from Darwin; Angus Cameron and Rosemary Cameron from Nomad Art Productions in Darwin; and Dr Greg Leach, Director of Wildlife in the Northern Territory.

In March 2006, having first assembled at the Northern Territory Herbarium (where important cross-cultural and interdisciplinary research is ongoing) to view the collections and consult with resident botanists, this eclectic group of artists set out for Daly River, 230 kilometres southwest of Darwin, just as the river began to flood. Central to *Replant* was the artists' intimate interactions with the native flora and environment, and the unique characteristics of the species of plants that survive and prosper through the climatic extremes of monsoonal rains, dry weather and wild fires.

Working independently and collaboratively, keeping in mind important cultural considerations and guided by traditional knowledge custodians, the six artists sought to accumulate a shared vision of the natural world realised through printmaking traditions, as well as Indigenous traditions. Angus Cameron, Coordinator of *Replant* and Director of Nomad Art Productions, observed:

Protocols, cultural sensitivity and awareness were key elements of Replant. As in the plant world, the sharing of knowledge and cultural exchange grew only when the elements were right. The gathering of the six female artists reflects the traditional role of women as gatherers of food and holders of knowledge,

combined with the rise of printmaking as a significant medium for Indigenous artists.²

Traditionally Aboriginal women are responsible for collecting and gathering food and this important aspect of indigenous culture is reflected in the work of Deborah Wurrkidj, Irene Mungatopi and Marita Sambono, as well as that of Judy Watson. Scientific botanical classifications take on new meaning when plants become life-giving food sources for communities. Working closely together, the artists shared ideas and acute observations of the unique flora and environment, collaborating with master printmaker Basil Hall in a temporarily erected field printmaking studio at Merrepen Art Centre. At the conclusion of their intensive field study, the group returned to Darwin to Hall's professional studio to resolve the work and further develop their concepts, producing a body of work that explores the scientific, cultural and social.

What emerged was six unique perspectives, marked by each artist's characteristic style and approach. These are not fusty botanical illustrations destined for the pages of unread books, rather these are works that sparkle with an immediacy and energy garnered from the artists' direct engagement with the specimens. Displayed on gallery walls they serve as important records of largely unseen aspects of the environment. Like Judy Parrott's photographs, or the temporary artworks created through the The Great Walks Art and Environment Program, the botanical prints that emerged from the *Replant* project draw our attention to myriad unseen, untouched and unknowable natural wonders, mediated and represented by artists. The specimens found and recorded for *Replant* serve as a warning about the need to create sustainable environments so that we never reach the disastrous situation whereby the only way we may see these natural wonders is inside a Herbarium.

Similarly, the idea of a shared experience of the world is pivotal to *Intimate Transactions*, an installation created by the Transmute Collective that also draws on themes of ecology, seeking to explore ecological consciousness and mutual experience. The Transmute Collective's method and medium are, however, far removed from the strategies employed by an artist such as Judy Parrott or those artists participating in *Habitus - Habitat*. *Intimate Transactions* consists of an interactive installation that allows two people in geographically separate spaces to interact simultaneously using only their bodies. Each remote participant uses a physical interface called a 'Bodyshelf'. By reclining and gently moving their bodies

around on this piece of 'smart furniture', they engage in a series of intimate transactions or mute conversations with another person remotely located on another 'Bodyshef'.

These interactions or transactions are designed to 'influence an evolving world' and are communicated by digital imagery, multi-channel sound and tactile 'feedback'. The shared experience allows both participants over a period of time to gradually develop a form of sensory intimacy with the other, despite the fact that they are geographically separated and cannot physically see or hear each other.

The work hinges on the possibility that if one were to interact for long enough in this virtual realm, with someone unseen and unheard, one may start to influence their actions and reactions. Metaphorically, the work also asks us to consider how the actions of someone in a remote environment may have an impact on another environment, a concept understood as the 'Butterfly Effect':

...the idea that a butterfly's wings might create tiny changes in the atmosphere that may ultimately alter the path of a tornado or delay, accelerate or even prevent the occurrence of a tornado in a certain location. The flapping wing represents a small change in the initial condition of the system, which causes a chain of events leading to large-scale alterations of events. Had the butterfly not flapped its wings, the trajectory of the system might have been vastly different. Of course the butterfly cannot literally cause a tornado.³

Intimate Transactions may only be a cyber environment, but it suggests the possibility that these subtle transactions may be the start of ongoing dialogues across time and space, the beginning of new collaborations and a demonstration of technology's larger capacity to connect human beings to one another, as well as humanity's larger capacity for ecological consciousness.

This interaction of beings at a remove was once the stuff of science fiction novels or fantasy film, and yet here it is now, a reality. Contemporary life is filled with virtual realms such as Second Life, MySpace and Facebook - it is entirely normal for grown adults to have avatars of themselves that interact in imagined worlds. So, how does an artwork such as this change our understanding of contemporary art? Indeed, *is* this art or something else? Is it evolutionary or revolutionary, and how might we harness what *Intimate Transactions* teaches us to greatest effect? Can the actions of someone remote from our own self teach us something new

about the world? Maybe what GEO teaches us through these four distinct projects, is that art and artists *can* make a difference. By virtue of offering new ways in which to actually see the world around us, collectively we may be able to arrive at new artistic strategies for environmental sustainability. GEO makes a place for diverse artistic practice, from the arcane (printmaking) to the futuristic (cyber space), within contemporary life, demonstrating that art has the capacity to make a difference.

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¹ Judy Parrott, Caption for image from the exhibition *Antarctica – A Place in the Wilderness* 2006

² Angus Cameron, 'Replant: a new generation of botanical art'. *Nomad Art* October 2006. 5 June 2008 URL: <http://www.nomadart.com.au/newsreplant.php>

³ 'Butterfly effect'. *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopaedia* 5 June 2008. URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterfly_effect