Balancing and Becoming: The Flow, Speculative Wayfaring and Participatory Live Art

Klare Lanson, February 2021

Figure 1: Sculptural representation of the Murray

2020 was a disruptive year due to the global pandemic event of Covid-19. We worked in isolation, supported remote schooling, minded our own beeswax, and craved connections that were physically social rather than digitally mediated through platforms like Teams and hangouts in the Zoomiverse. Participatory Live Art Project *theWay~theWater~theWalk* is an installation experience that was process-based and gamified, speaking to the tensions of balance and disruption in the Murray Darling Basin. With a few Covid related hiccups in the development phases of this project, it gained momentum and by the end of the year was ready for its first public performance at Castlemaine Art Museum (CAM). CAM, under the direction of Naomi Cass and chaired by renowned artist researcher Chris McAuliffe, is programming a welcomed increase of local performance and live art practice.

With dynamic, collaborative and interdisciplinary forms of contemporary art, Punctum Inc supports the development of experimental works that socially engage with community, and this project was no exception. Conceptually directed by artist Jude Anderson, with sound art by Jacques Soddell and online simulator design work by Georgia Symons, this project sought to make visible the environmental impact on the people from 40 First Nations, 35 endangered species and almost 100 different species of waterbirds. Social, political and economic relationships with *gatjin*[1] are complex and multivalent. Human interventions geared towards socio-economic development through divergent water management systems are significantly impacting the river's drainage basin and the related complex ecosystem, a dip in the Earth's surface. I'm aware of standing here as a participant who has dipped into a creative encounter. This writerly engagement in self reflexivity as a participant is an attempt to interpret the various elements of the artworks in play. And play was key to this project, where upon arrival, participants were informed of the framework via a formal spoken word gallery welcome, instructed to don white curatorial gloves, and choose a displayed quote

[1] I acknowledge that I am writing on Dja Dja Wurrung land and am using Jaara language as a literary device of speculation towards more bilingual communication (Gatjin=Water). I thank and pay my respects to the Dhelkunya Dja Land Management Board for their Report (2018) and for the inclusion of the glossary of Jaara words, of which I am drawing on specifically for this review.

which spoke to them emotionally. This process of deliberation and *wurrekang*,[2] informed participants of how they would be entangled with the work, and also amplified the position of the colonial museum construct.

Through action-based instructions, participants became actors in a complex network assemblage of materiality, time, technology and space. We were invited to perform these

Figure 2: Role Play introductory space

multisensorial roles to highlight agential power from different perspectives. The Big Almond addresses the farming impacts of selling almonds at an industrial level, in particular reference to bees.[3] The Little Almond. The Big Cotton. The Scientist. The Politician. The list poem goes on. Information dissemination occurs through conversation with the 'water system workers' along the way, and *wurrekang* with participants about First Nation peoples, financial market gain, irrigation, farming communities, tourism. The impact these roles have on this more-than-human installative ecosystem simulates how alternative choices played out in real life can change the outcomes that occur—through a weave of individual, performative and behavioural actions. We acknowledge this as the complexity that creates the wicked problem. Ironically, as a participant with a love of writing and poetic digital storytelling I choose a quote that connects, flipped the card over and was subsequently transformed into The Reporter. It was the perfect cover. I had just entered a physical roleplaying game (RPG). A puzzle of sorts. There is comfortability in playing the role of other, the self takes secondary position, a resting place. There is also an enhancement in the ability to be reflexive, where the mind and body is in an altered state and can interpret surroundings in diverse ways, utilising all the senses. Pen hits the page, and the words begin to flow like water.
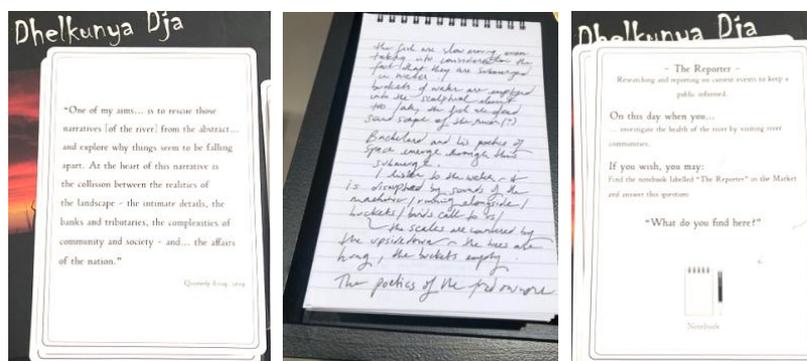

Figure 3: The Reporter

[2] Wurrekang=Talk
[3] This author has since given up honey, having learnt via a friend that one teaspoon of honey equates to one week's unpaid bee labour.

The disruption in *theWay~theWater~theWalk* which I mentioned earlier is in relation to the management systems that are impacting the natural waterway environment of the Murray Darling Basin. The blue of water connects us to geolocation—spheres for the Darling River and blocks for the Murray. The silent struggles of the performative fish physicalise an affective haunting via what could be called Process Art,[4] involving choice-driven movement actions in tandem. Astonishing performances by Briega Young and Josian Lulham actualise a kind of speculative fabulation,[5] a situation that these *wirrap*[6] may very well experience in the Murray Darling Basin.

Figure 4: Swimming in and through the Darling River

The fish interact with sculptural components of the Darling, entangled with salt, *galka darrak*[7] and industrial scale plastic tubing made for the market economy. Simultaneously, a young teen interacts with the works, in role play simulation mode, wayfaring in the space by connecting with the objects as per the written instructions and therefore making knowledge (Figure 4, far right). The movement of the *wirrap* is slow and methodical as they too become wayfarers—heading upriver on their quest for food or perhaps simply going home to where they *maram*.[8] It is exhaustingly durational unpaid labour, as they navigate the manmade changes to environment—technological machinations used to divert the waterway; the waste and debris that is left behind. I hear the sound of the electronic water pump system in the soundscape alongside trickling *gatjin*[9] and human conversation. I think to report on this and scribble a few more notes.

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[4] *Process Art* is art that can also be child-directed, choice-driven, and celebrates the experience of discovery over outcome.
[5] See Donna Haraway.
[6] Wirrap=Fish
[7] Galka Darrak=Tree Branches
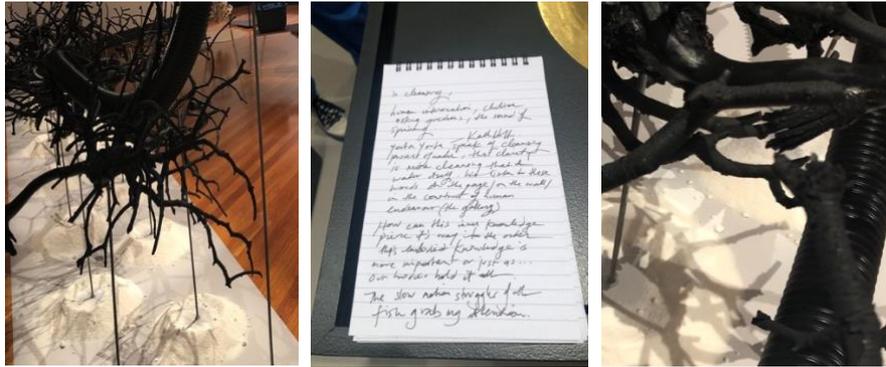[8] Maram=Shelter
[9] Gatjin=Water

Figure 5: Shadow tracings and reflective poetics

Walking throughout the space, I encounter the famous poetic words hung on the wall—thinkers, writers, poets and artists responding to environment and place. Included are First Nation words framed on the walls of the Museum and provide much needed context. Sporadic ambient soundscape of the acoustic basin environment can be heard occasionally, an affective atmosphere. As a practice of soundscape ecology, networked listening represents the more-than-human assemblage of this geolocation. We listen to children's voices asking questions, and parents trying to answer. Irrigation machinery is mixed with field recordings of birds[10] and water.

There is a nod to the Fluxus art movement of the 1960's and 1970s within this work, which was known to privilege process over the finished artefact. This sensory journey of systemic storytelling was durational, tangential, disruptive and interactive—a highly gamified performance experience. As an installation it was as complex as the water management problem in the Murray Darling Basin, mimicking both the river basin and the human disruption (including technology of course). The online simulator answers the question "Can it be kept in balance?" with systems 'collapses' occurring throughout the duration of the installative experience. Whilst I earwitnessed this cacophony of sound in real time, unfortunately when I searched Punctum's YouTube channel, it too had collapsed.

Care also played a role as a trope with which to materialise creativity. Carefully balanced objects were positioned to be active agents of change with human participant interaction. Deceivingly simple, the sculptural works were intradependent components that were thoughtfully curated in the space. Moving physically through the spatially mapped sculptural elements was an active mobile experience within the gallery construct. Individual works were positioned to symbolise the precarious balance of commodities over nature, and how political power reduces the environment to financial markets, with little thought to the impact on the environment or First Nations culture. The para poetics of these mechanical sculptures were dynamic, and precariously

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[10] To my knowledge, in Jaara language, there is no word for the collective noun 'bird', instead birds are all represented as individuals e.g., emu, white and black cockatoos etc.

embodied. A gathering of contradictions, conflated by power, economics and social constructs—political issues that privilege humanity over environmental systems.

Figure 6: Precarious Balancing Act of Cotton and Water

So how might we speculate on an iteration towards *digital* wayfaring, to develop knowledge and generate further transmission of the work? Digital wayfaring also moves throughout space—digital spaces that highlight an embodied co-present practice.[11] It certainly lends itself well to a mediated representation and would involve a collective of digital thinkers and makers to join forces with the current team of artists. The format of gamified participation in entangled narratives involves decision making, choice in direction and interactive processes. To have a physical account of the participant experience makes for good data collection and can be utilised within the mobile gaming experience. The child leads the mother backwards into the past for future playful thinking, the love of gaming, and the ability to adapt to change.

What kind of game could this be? One to be played in between hybrid spaces[12] within our everyday,[13] or a quiet and slow immersive location media experience within the environment in question? The design choices would of course be dependent on the faltering NBN infrastructure, which is now operating much less successfully due to the increasingly accepted work-from-home practice. The motion of the fish holds the ability to tap into and harness intuition, improvisation, choice and flow. But here the flow is disrupted by a series of environmental factors. Discarded machinery parts that suck the goodness out of the basin. I follow the *wirrap* and we figure out this puzzle together.

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[11] Digital wayfaring is a concept defined by Larissa Hjorth and Sarah Pink (2015), developed through anthropologist Tim Ingold's thinking on wayfaring, for example his 2011 essays in *Being Alive*.
[12] See 2020 publications *The Routledge Companion to Mobile Media Art* and *Hybrid Play: Crossing Boundaries in Game Design, Players Identities and Play Spaces*.
[13] See also *Ambient Play*.

My son enjoyed the experience immensely, commenting to me on the walk home about instructional actions ("It felt like gaming!") to further disrupt the intricate artist-designed ecosystem for the performative aspects of the kinetic sculptures. These sculptures were interactive, involving both random and thoughtful choice-making. The young teen participant in the work enjoyed the instructions and the gamified sensibility. He was lucky enough to have played almost all of the roles, with the care and guidance of the water systems workers (including Morwenna Schenck and Anna Schwartz). Through the eyes of a child, we can further understand the intricacies of solving this mega puzzle. It is the voice of children who often show keen awareness of these cultural contradictions, in particular around the topic of environment. The role of creative thinking such as enacted throughout this project is an important tool for alternative future making.

A collective approach is key to problem solving and a further iteration of this project situated in the digital world would be another critical process of creative transmission.[14] It may also provide insightful exploration as a mobile media art experience, with a specific focus on the mobility of place within regional Australia.[15] To connect participatory art and environmental issues with mobile digital art and haptic technologies would generate greater social engagement and understandings of geographically located wicked problems. Mobile media engagement could certainly enhance the conversation, the *wurrekang* around colonialist interventions responsible for the decline of the Murray Darling Basin's ecosystem.

Klare Lanson is a writer and artist in poetry, sound and performance whose digital ethnographic PhD research examines creative digital parenting practices of working mothers. She investigates digital tensions and mobile entanglement in relation to home, place, and networked versions of self. Using online participatory encounters and socially engaged listening work that moves through mobile media studies and the philosophy of sound and listening, collaborations include *#unmaskedselfiesinsolidarity* (2020), *Home is Inside Us* (2019), *#TouchOnTouchOff* (2017), *Commute* (2015–2017), and *#wanderingcloud* (2012–2015). Recent publications include *The Journal of Public Space* (2020) and *Digital Culture & Society* (2019). Lanson is a sessional instructor of Media Cultures at RMIT's School of Design and is also co-editor of *The Routledge Companion to Mobile Media Art* (with Hjorth and de Souza e Silva, 2020).

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[14] See Kat Jungnickel (ed.), *Transmissions: Critical Tactics for Making and Communications Research* (2020)
[15] For example, see Matthew Riley and *Epiphyte* (2018) location-based AR game, designed for bushland Australia.