

## 4.0 Thesis Conclusion

### 4.1 The research question

The research question that forms the basis of this thesis was **in the common ground shared between art and science, what are the connections between fieldwork and walking in the field?** The Thesis as a whole has examined how the two disciplines of science and art cross in the specific area of fieldwork and walking in the natural sciences and in contemporary art. I considered this space shared *in-between* in four ways. Firstly how scientists understand the field and what they identify as their experience of the field<sup>1</sup>, i.e. in a scientific way. Secondly I have examined how this “field” is seen through the wider lens of society and how science is thus placed within society, i.e. in a cultural way. Thirdly I focused on a site (in this case a non-urban site in the Kimberley). If a scientific understanding of place was used as a starting point then the specificity of the ecology of one place was important: my artwork came out of an understanding of the environmental issues of a place, i.e., in a specific place. And finally, the space of connection between art and science in this project included the field itself as an *opportunity for change* or a *place of expectation and growth*, i.e. as a metaphorical space. **fieldwork/fieldwalking** was based upon an understanding that the field was a place of imaginative and ethical engagement with the world. It is important to understand that my goal was ultimately to *talk through* issues arising from these “fields” in artworks – both as the process of art *practised* in the field and as presented as distinct “art objects” in the gallery.

The sub-questions of the Thesis set out to test in what ways it was possible to create artworks with certain characteristics. The questions were:

- Is it possible to re-imagine non-urban places that are local, emplaced, and embodied? Within the canon of Australian contemporary art, can a non-urban place be talked about that is not nostalgic?
- Is it possible to have a *conversation* with the nonhuman?



**Figures 4.1 and 4.2. Images from *Walking around taking photographs*, digital print installation series, 2006. Unidentified animal diggings.**

<sup>1</sup> This includes how social scientists have interpreted scientific practices although I have only been able to allude to this indirectly.

- Is it possible to have a such conversation with a field scientist? If it is framed in terms of some sort of exchange then my aim is to add something to the scientific community as well as to be influenced by it.
- Is it possible to successfully transform the experience of “elsewhere” to somewhere (i.e. from the field to the gallery). Where, in the continuum of representation, translation and transformation, does the artwork of the Thesis sit?
- Is it possible to reconcile the “emptiness” of Euro-Australian belonging and its relationship with an Aboriginal past, present and future?

I argued in the Exegesis why and how art might be made that fulfils these conditions. Non-urban art in Australia should be based upon places that are re-imagined as local, emplaced and embodied.



**Figure 4.3** Image from *Walking around taking photographs, digital print installation series, 2006. The eighteenth bookcrossing July 2005 to July 2006.*

It is important that we carefully separate out what we value from the yearning to return to a past condition: an Eden before “the Fall”. The artworks produced in *fieldwork/fieldwalking* aimed to be free of a desire to return to a condition of any perceived balance of nature. Avoiding such thinking protects us from paralysis that comes from not being able to turn back the clock. To admit mistakes *and to value certain conditions above others* (e.g., the issue of cane toad invasion in Section 3.1) one must make *more complicated* stories that take into account human and non-human agents in an environment. The artworks should be both more applied and ethical in their operation. The artworks of *fieldwork/fieldwalking* strive to be free of the domination of a static objective science but grounded in the specificity of places and their ecologies. Artworks like *Sleepwalking* and the *night vision* series for example sought to account for both the ordinariness and strangeness of experiences in non-urban areas.



**Figure 4.4** Image from *Walking around taking photographs, digital print installation series, 2006. The eighteenth bookcrossing July 2005 to July 2006.*

## 4.2 Major findings

The sub-questions of the Thesis permeate the artworks created and the various sections of the Exegesis so in the following Section 4.2, I have combined them under a number of major findings.

### 4.2.1 *Fieldwork and fieldwalking that is art and science*

The project was framed around experiences in non-urban areas. The non-urban can offer intense and specific experiences with heightened materiality and direct engagement with nonhuman agents. This was borne out in the fieldwork undertaken in the project. All the fieldwork was done on foot. As part of the project I identified plants and animals and looked at changes in the environment over seasons. I also investigated the aesthetic nature of *the walkingcountry*. Thus the fieldwork (including walking) was both art and natural history. A clear example of this combination of methods can be seen in the second half of the sound art walk *To Meander and back* (see Section 3.5 and Appendix A.2) where I describe what I am sensing as I walk. This type of fieldwork closely resembles the ecological and scientific walking categories that I derived from the ideas of Bennett (2005).

At other times when I took out objects to be stranded in the landscape I did so with a focus on sculptural and aesthetic qualities. In the *fieldwork/fieldwalking* project I continually compared and contrasted the differences between an artist and a scientist in the field. Using both artistic and scientific fieldwork techniques enabled me to develop significant and interesting works of art



**Figures 4.5 and 4.6. Images from *Walking around taking photographs*, digital print installation series, 2006. *The eighteenth bookcrossing* July 2005 to July 2006.**

### 4.2.2 *Walking as bodily and social practice*

An initial difference between art walking in urban and non-urban areas is that techniques such as psychogeography and the *dérive* (etc.) that are focused around human worlds are less successful. And my dissatisfaction with the walking styles of wilderness walkers such as Fulton and Long prompted me to research the idea of wilderness as opposed to wilderness and the use of wonder as a potent force in my work. In

other words, my walking contained the right mix of discipline and wildness, attention and distraction, investigation and reverie, responsibility and play. Brian Massumi puts it thus:

I like the notion of 'walking as controlled falling'. It's something of a proverb, and Laurie Anderson, among others, has used it. It conveys the sense that freedom, or the ability to move forward and to transit through life, isn't necessarily about escaping from constraints. There are always constraints. When we walk, we're dealing with the constraints of gravity. There's also the constraints of balance, and a need for equilibrium. But, at the same time, to walk you need to throw off the equilibrium, you have to let yourself go into a fall, then you cut it off and regain the balance. You move forward by playing with the constraints, not to avoid them. There's an openness of movement, even though there's no escaping constraints (Brian Massumi interviewed in Zournazi, 2003).

Massumi is alluding to the similarities between walking and operating effectively and ethically in a complex world. This is the additional important reason why walking was central to the project. Its *connection to the everyday* and as ordinary activity allowed me to make *connections between art and the possibilities for social change*. Such *connections* are a vital aspect of environmental art.



**Figures 4.7 and 4.8. Images from *Walking around taking photographs*, digital print installation series, 2006. *The eighteenth bookcrossing* July 2005 to July 2006.**

### 4.2.3 FutureNatural

I termed what might happen in the future to a society's understanding of the boundary between culture and nature or the human and the nonhuman (or more-than-human) as the *FutureNatural*. By researching the intersecting space of science and art and specifically through the process of walking in the field I have identified that the *FutureNatural* is a changeable condition. It will be more *living* than *dead*, more appreciative of a wider suite of agents in situations, more appreciative of the connections and interdependencies between the human and nonhuman and less focused on the destructive boundaries of rigid definitions of nature and culture. The *FutureNatural* disturbs both the "objectivity" of science and the notion of the balance of nature held by society in general and by many environmentalists. My work continues to straddle the boundaries between science, environmentalism and critical theory. Scientific facts are not the only criteria for judging environmental debates and the processes and assumptions of science itself also need to be drawn into wider debates about environmental issues. Such an interpretation of the *FutureNatural* overcomes some

of the limitations of both a science that seeks a truth framed by resourcism and a constructivist position that empties nature of its forceful, physical and material dispositions. In *fieldwork/fieldwalking* I used wildness as a motif to re-imagine the boundary between nature and culture as something that is changeable and alive.

#### 4.2.4 Ordinary wilderness

The artworks created in *fieldwork/fieldwalking* contrast with the work of other walking artists such as Hamish Fulton and Richard Long that are frequently based on sublime wilderness experiences. The sublime was not the most common or strongest type of experience in *the walkingcountry*. Much of one's time in the field is involved in pragmatic and bodily encounters. Some of the aesthetic experiences are local and ephemeral. Wildness and the delight of wonder are more appropriate than the fear and awe of the sublime. Based on my experiences I formulated and applied the concept of ordinary wilderness to my work. Ordinary wilderness asks the questions:

- What happens if “wilderness experiences” are mundane?
- What happens if wild things have an autonomy outside of our control?
- What happens if wildness is as much inside us as it is where our rubbish ends up?

I reframed my experience of what is purportedly a wilderness area by highlighting the real physical conditions and the cultural concepts that join it back into the rest of the world. I used scientific processes in this project as a method of approach to places, but because I also wanted to unfix the rigidity of science and highlight wild things, my work departed from the “scientific realm” at that point.

#### 4.2.5 Herethere

A significant issue in *fieldwork/fieldwalking* was how to creatively transform the experience of elsewhere (the field) into artworks in a gallery. One of the successes of the project has been my increasing understanding of a transformative way of relating two places together. In the sound art walk *To Meander and back* the strategy was to fold and imbricate *the walkingcountry*, the gallery in Fremantle, and the space in-between together. In other words the places and the space in-between did not disappear or lose their identity but instead were interdigitated like two hands folded together. The artworks in *fieldwork/fieldwalking* have used methods of transformation in preference to strict translations of places. Seeing places as performative and as a matrix of things and events brought into relationship awakens the potential for transforming places and of being transformed by places.



**Figure 4.9** Image from *Walking around taking photographs, digital print installation series, 2006*. Fruit bats at twilight.

Moving beyond representational models of art is a crucial strategy in non-urban areas because of the pervasive presence of the nonhuman. The *herethere* artworks are part of an ongoing conversational engagement with the nonhuman in my work. A thoughtful understanding of the issues of agency and ethics and an active awareness and practical engagement with ethical issues is necessary.

#### 4.2.6 Conversations

The *fieldwork/fieldwalking* project applied Spencer's (2004) concept of conversational aesthetics to *the walkingcountry*. Occasionally agents in *the walkingcountry* (such as birds) engaged with me with interest but in many cases animals and plants responded with fear or indifference. Nevertheless Spencer's conversational aesthetics allowed me to more fully understand the conversations that I was having in *the walkingcountry* because it recognises the autonomy of other agents in an environment (whose responses can therefore include indifference). To achieve a conversational aesthetic I approached a walk as if it were a conversation. This had the advantage of breaking up the division between the subject and the object, as they are now co-constitutive. The *fieldwork/fieldwalking project* utilised the position that people come into existence through their interaction with the world.

The artworks of the *fieldwork/fieldwalking* project include those that have elements of literal as well as metaphorical conversations with the nonhuman. For example in *Four Tales from Natural History* the Torresian crows are given the opportunity to speak.



Figures 4.10 to 4.13. Images from *Walking around taking photographs*, digital print installation series, 2006. Fruit bats at twilight.

Other more metaphorical conversations in artworks included using the stories already written by scientists as anecdotes about animals in ***Zoo for the Species***. These stories were spoken on the soundtrack. But the stories presented more than just representations of animal emotions. Because they are continually repeated through human society and do not die away, the stories give the animals another opportunity for agency. These animals *force* their *vitality* upon us. Deborah Bird Rose believes that living things and ecosystems have their own integrity and “will to flourish”. She states

Our challenge in engaging in new ways of thinking and doing connectivity is to embed the human in the non-human, and to enlarge human conversations so that we may find ways to engage with and learn from the world’s own expressivity and will to flourish (Rose, 2001, p. 11).

An important contribution of ***fieldwork/fieldwalking*** has thus been art that endeavours to enlarge the conversations that we have with the world.

Creative conversations were also an important framework for relating to scientists in ***fieldwork/fieldwalking***. In the work ***Four Tales from Natural History*** Thalie Partridge converses with us about her ecological research into the importance of fire in tropical savanna ecosystems. And works in the forthcoming ***fieldwork/fieldwalking*** exhibition will also include other conversations with scientists. The idea of an artwork embodying generous and living metaphorical conversation is an important outcome of the project.

#### ***4.2.7 Silence, listening and belonging***

The work ***To Meander and back*** used silence (or the absence of human words) to redress the balance between the human and the nonhuman. In the Exegesis I identified four different processes of silence which begin with the silencing effect of colonialism and end with the process of moving *from* silence: to hear is to *take heed* – to hear other voices and then to act. This last use of silence has implications for reconciling the “emptiness” of Euro-Australian belonging (and ultimately its relationship with an Aboriginal past, present and future) because it is a listening *then* an acting. Instead of yearning for a nostalgic place in the past that sees Euro-Australians such as myself trapped in a condition of lack and a paralysis, the last process of moving *from* silence, *moves past* into a more complicated ethical position of engaging with the difficult issues of the world.

#### ***4.2.8 Contemporary practice***

Recently the curator of the 2006 Sydney Biennale Charles Merewether stated of the Australian work included in that event:

There is no doubt that I increasingly saw the issue of landscape and territory as a recurrent and urgent issue if not thread running across work that I respected... (there was) a cluster of approaches that intersect, overlap and diverge around their artistic approach towards issues concerning landscape and the mapping and naming of place and landscape in Australia (“Interview: Charles Merewether”, 2006, p. 75).



**Figures 4.14 to 4.19. Images from *Walking around taking photographs*, digital print installation series, 2006. The time of water in one valley in the Saw Range.**

It could be said that such work follows a long tradition of landscape painting in Australian art history. However, Merewether is suggesting that these works, by offering *multiple* perspectives on land and cultures, are closely tied to a global contemporary art with its agenda of investigating the world we live in (with its imbricated cultures). This investigation can be both appreciative and critical. The *fieldwork/fieldwalking* project has dealt with similar issues and is thus connected with wider concerns in contemporary art.

### 4.2.9 Boundaries of an artwork expanded

*fieldwork/fieldwalking* took a particular position with respect to the relationship between the artist, the audience, the environment and the material art object, arguing that they are of equal importance. The artworks produced in the project were part of an expanded understanding of what an artwork might be. The visits to the field site involved time engaging in recognisably artistic or scientific activities as well as time doing ordinary things. Being there and walking around was performing *the walkingcountry* and therefore formed part of a total artwork of the place. I continue to make eclogues (artworks as events that are photographed and recorded mentioned in Section 1.0). The strandings in *the walkingcountry* are another form of these eclogues.

### 4.3 Further works

The *fieldwork/fieldwalking* project has opened up a number of future directions in my work. Three examples are listed below.

- In the planning for this project I considered whether it might be possible to develop a collaborative project with a professional scientist under the auspices of the University. Whilst this did not eventuate the research process allowed me to clarify what I might want out of such an experience. Attending the *New constellations: Art, science and society* in Sydney in 2006 and seeing at first hand the *AudioNomad* collaboration between Nigel Helyer and the University of New South Wales (see Appendix A.2) has given me further impetus to pursue this area in the future. Furthermore I have re-valued my own professional abilities as a result of the work achieved in *the walkingcountry* and no doubt further artworks will develop from these learnings.
- The second potential project proposed early in the research process was the possibility of developing a Geographical Information System of *the walkingcountry*. This did not proceed as access to expertise and proprietary software was at that time unavailable or prohibitively expensive. However, since starting the project in 2003, significant advances have been made in locative media with open source software (as of 2006) now freely available via the Internet. This project is now eminently achievable. Many challenging artworks are currently being made in this area and it is a potential area for my future practice.
- Unfinished work not reported in the Exegesis includes my interactions with male bowerbirds and the contents of their bowers. I had been attempting to offer extra stones and found objects to the bowerbirds. I had begun experimenting with how far objects will be carried to the bower and how frequently objects are transferred between bowers. Some objects have been successfully integrated and other objects were indignantly ejected from the display area. I also learnt how selective the bowerbird can be. My plans for providing shiny new aluminium tags with text inscribed upon them came to nought when I discovered that the aluminium must be matt and dull in texture or else it is ignored. If it had worked then new spatial

texts would have been formed as the bird arranged them at the bower. As these interactions can only be undertaken from August to December when the bowers are active, further conversations with bowerbirds will have to wait until the next time I am in the Kimberley.



**Figures 4.20 to 4.22. Images from *Walking around taking photographs*, digital print installation series, 2006** Bower details showing metal tag in lower shot.



At this stage too I have not completely answered the sub-question: *how my art might add something to the scientific community*. There is unexplored potential in divining exactly what might constitute adding something back into the scientific community. In the last three years, the works that I have made have not achieved wide enough circulation for me to say that they have been influential within the scientific community and, despite my continuing research into art and science interaction, I have yet to resolve this question to my satisfaction. Nevertheless I have, for example, data gathered from 29 respondents to a short survey of field scientists. I have not been able yet to integrate into this into the current series of artworks but I am determined to return to this area of practice in the future.



**Figure 4.23 Image from *Walking around taking photographs*, digital print installation series, 2006.**

#### 4.4 To make tracks

To conclude, my aim in *fieldwork/fieldwalking* was to make art about walking and scientific fieldwork. Even as it nears completion the project has opened up a number of possible avenues for future work in these areas. There has also been a considerable shift in my position. I now believe being open to the world is the real meaning of coming to terms with invisible countries. And part of being open is taking action in an ethically complex world. Through its diversity the world is yet full of emancipatory spaces “left empty for encounters which may contain the potential to unfold things otherwise...” (Dewsbury, Harrison, Rose, & Wylie, 2002, p. 438). *The walkingcountry* has changed my art and as I leave it I know that its conversations will always be with me. Looking back it seemed as though I was searching for a “fieldology” – an *eager science* of moving through space seeking wonder and everyday experience in equal quantities.



**Figure 4.24 Linnaeus Tired Out after a Day in the Field.** Found reproduction of a painting by B.D. Jackson.