

FIELDWORK/FIELDWALKING

art, sauntering and science in *the walkingcountry*

**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of
Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Arts
Edith Cowan University**

by

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Abstract

fieldwork/fieldwalking is a contemporary art project exploring practices of walking and science in the field. It explores the themes of walking and fieldwork in art, and as art. Whilst the sociology of science in the laboratory has been well theorised, less has been said about the field in the natural sciences. And, equally, the most recent and provocative walking art is found in urban areas, in a fabric dominated by the patterns of human settlement. How could new walking art be made in non-urban places? The project set out to investigate how these two, fieldwork and walking, could be combined in artwork. The research question was: **in the common ground shared between art and science, what are the connections between fieldwork and walking in the field?** The project explored this and five sub-questions through photography, video, and the creation of installations and sound art walks. Much of the research revolved around one field location, *the walkingcountry* in the Kimberley of Western Australia that was visited six times over different seasons from 2004 to 2006. Activities included walking and general immersion in the place, scientific and artistic 'fieldwork' and the observation and documentation of the work of scientists at the site and in the Kimberley.

Non-urban areas 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. However the artworks created are also set in contrast to the work of other walking artists such as Hamish Fulton and Richard Long that are often based on sublime wilderness experiences. Based on my experiences I formulated and applied the concept of 'ordinary wilderness': 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. **fieldwork/fieldwalking** draws together threads from sources as diverse as recent scientific ecology, Ric Spencer's (2004) conversational aesthetics and non-representational theory in human geography to make art that questioned representational strategies and explored an expanded model of artworks where the relationships between the artist, the audience, the environment and the material art object are of equal importance.

A significant issue was how to creatively transform the experience of elsewhere (the field) into artworks in a gallery. In the sound art walk **To Meander and back (strange strolls**, Moores Building Contemporary Art Gallery (MBCAG), 2005) the strategy was to fold and imbricate *the walkingcountry*, the gallery in Fremantle, and the space in-between together. This artwork also sought to reconcile the 'emptiness' of Euro-Australian belonging by encouraging via sound and silence an understanding of place that is more living, changing and performative.

Other artworks included **Zoo for the Species** at the **National Review of Life Art** (Midland, 2003) and works in the solo exhibitions **Four Tales from Natural History** (Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, 2004), **Semi** (Spectrum Project Space/Kurb Gallery, 2004) and **fieldwork/fieldwalking** (MBCAG, 2006).

Keywords: science and art, walking, fieldwork, place, belonging, nonhuman, feral, wildness, wonder, sound art, conversational aesthetics, non-representational theory, processes of silence, *the walkingcountry*, Kimberley, Australia, site-specificity, *FutureNatural*.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

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As well as the contributing artists and all those who took 'strange strolls' specific mention needs to be made of Nyanda Smith, Minaxi May and Ric Spencer who helped especially with the **strange strolls** sound art walking project.

The Exegesis was substantially improved by the thoughts and editorial suggestions of Professor Andrew Taylor, my supervisor Dr Nien Schwarz and Nyanda Smith.

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This project would not have been possible without the generous permission and assistance of the Garstone family on whose land part of *the walkingcountry* is found.



Figures i and ii. Images from *Walking around taking photographs*, digital print installation series, 2006. *The man who mistook his wife for a hat* (Oliver Sacks, 1986) and *Labyrinths* (Borges, 1970) stranded in July 2004.

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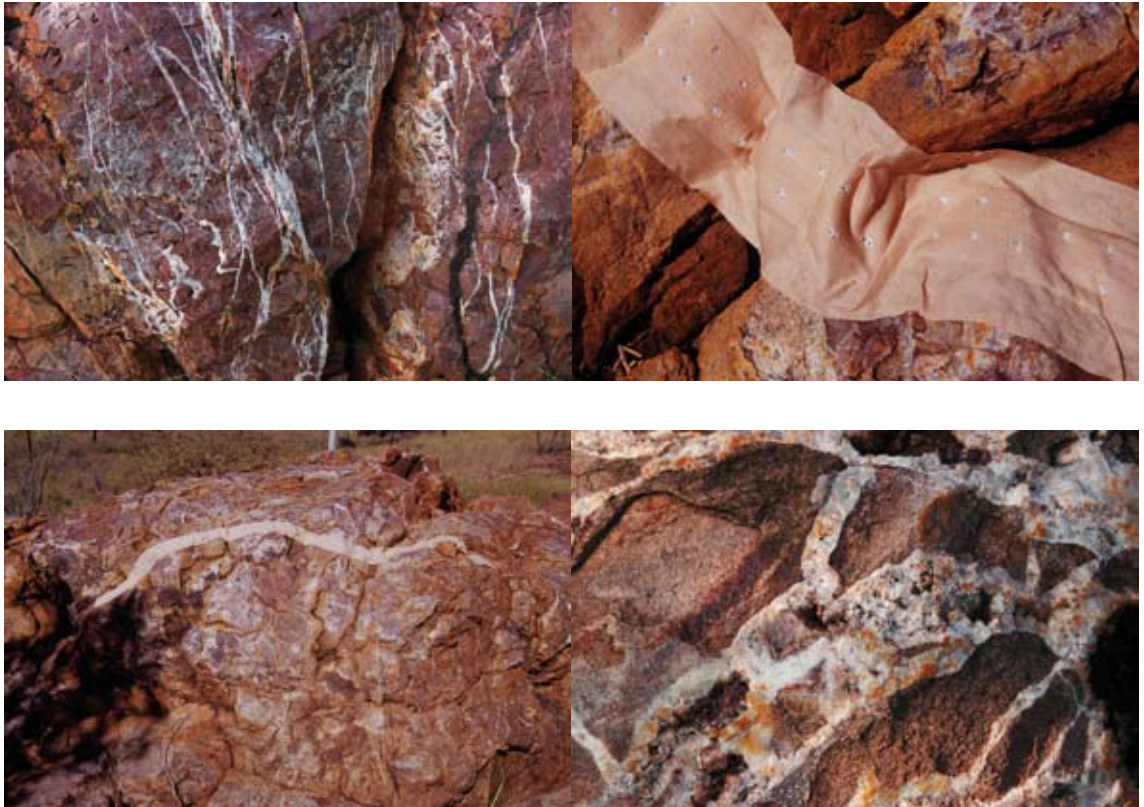


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