

SALA Festival Patron's Art Writer's Award

Intimacy of Strangers

Commissioned Essay 2018

Published in:

IMPRINT
Volume 53, Number 3
Print Council of Australia, Melbourne
September 2018, p10 - 12

Authored by:

Melinda Rackham
Artist and Author
Adelaide and APY Lands

August 2018

Intimacy of Strangersⁱ

The Insta and snap me mores of late capitalism epitomize our planetary condition of post-certainty. Precarity reigns as we accelerate into earth's sixth great extinction event. Industry ruptures, extracts, spills and contaminates; Antarctic glaciers hemorrhage into fossil fuel heated oceans; and world leaders gamble national security on a tweet.

Despite our global domination, we small, soft-skinned, vulnerable humans, have difficulty comprehending the magnitude and inevitability of Anthropogenic climate change. And despite decades of postulation that evolution and survival occur through symbiosis, by collaborative becomingⁱⁱ, we are still committed to competitive individualism.

Life, as we know it, will end. Complex systems of landscapes, species and cultures are in rapid decline. Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh names our era *The Great Derangement*, reiterating that climate crisis is also a crisis of culture and imaginationⁱⁱⁱ. While 20th and 21st century art and literary movements actively engaged with revolution, modernism and cyberspace, few artists or writers have faced this spectre in our midst. Then a decade ago, *The Dark Mountain Manifesto* asked what no-one dared utter: *What happens when we stop pretending our lifestyle can be made sustainable?* Heeding the call, across the globe multidisciplinary mycelial networks begun to surface—thinking, making and writing on our planetary predicament.

The Rare Earth Artists Lab (REAL), has come together in this spirit to create ephemeral and experimental art actions that unfold and explore current and future environmental concerns in both gallery and public realms^{iv}. Although they work across a broad range of media, Georgina Willoughby, John Blines and Michele Lane converge as printmakers—drawn to a practice which historically has disseminated alternative ideas and shared once rarefied knowledge with all. REAL embraces varied platforms, with Blines expanding printmaking's definition as transference of an image from a matrix to another surface, to include the matrix of pixels in digital image or video.

Collaborative practice requires leaving your ego at the door. As activists their overarching concern for the environment enables them to let go of being right, willingly sit in discomfort, trust each other, and change tack when conditions shift. Sharing commitment, data, passion, images and techniques builds a whole greater than the sum of its parts. We may see aspects of their individual practices—Lane's subversive etching of layered conflicted human/planetary interfaces; Willoughby's potent in-situ drawing/print processes of place and placelessness; and Blines' dynamic feedback models of documentation/erasure in wellbeing and identity; however there is no individual voice. The greater reward in this process of sequential multi-perspectival assembly is in achieving unforeseen breakthroughs which Lane describes as a very addictive *Epiphanic Kick*.

Grounded in *Conceptual* and *Environmental Art*, REAL's 2017 *Rare Earth* exhibition unites the ephemeral with the geographic in idea, action and archive. Within the generous connected spaces of their Light Square Gallery installation, archival and documentary elements coalesce into a *grid*, a *flow* and an *immersion*, permeated by interdependent soundscapes. Visitors are drawn along an aesthetic pathway into factual and speculative sensory zones of monochrome and colour, contemplation and action, silence and cacophony.

We are greeted by *Archive*, a gridded array of black and white photographs—astute perceptions selected from etchings, drawings and journals of field trips to natural, transitional and industrial landscapes. Codified into six levels beginning with our planet's geological strata, complex interrelationships of life on earth are built between water, humanity, industry, migration, cyclical forces, and a future unknown. Elements prod, poke, coax and slap the viewer to seek unique narrative and sensate connections, garnering identification with our own lived experience.

Propelled by the incessant hum of barely discernable human voices, *Tipping Point*, a twenty-six metre Fluxus barcode visually accelerates across the threshold of no return. Texts embedded in true barcode sans serif, jostle with the older serif fonts of historical extracts. Both density and intensity increase along the timeline from right to left (counter intuitive in western cultures) forcing the viewer to simultaneously read the work backwards and forwards. We must change perspective, turning our heads sideways, to interpret the provocative and meditative forest of texts sourced from the antiquities and contemporary ecological discussions. Time shifts and phrases oscillate, underpinned by a relentless soundscape of metronomic anxiety: boldness ⇔ outline ⇔ legibility ⇔ dissolution.

REAL's process is of open-ended reconstructed iterations—continually incorporating an empathic consultative mode faithful to local conditions. For the *Rare Earth* exhibition they asked through traditional and social media 'What will be important in the Future?' and integrated the phrases with spoken soundscapes received in response to construct the darkened, contained *Twilight* space. Intimately illuminating the visitor body, *Twilight's* immersive ocean of floating ideas, spoken+seen+fleeting+proud, dips in and out of shadows. Variant fonts, hues, sizes and orientation, on occasion become playful, symbolic renderings, such as buzzy, yellow *B E E S* fluttering across surfaces. While children dance with coloured ribbons of text, others sit to listen and read communal thoughts. These proposals command nuanced deliberation for, in post-certainty, we do not know if a new and clever idea will be useful or accidentally cause more damage.

For the annual *South Australian Living Artists Festival (SALA)* in August 2018 REAL continued their undertaking to explore communities' concerns for the future. Interrogating local history and presenting responses as in-situ commentary, the Collective sought to minimise their environmental impact in media, materials and processes. The resultant *Rare Earth: Graft* site-sensitive, eco-conscious interactive tours of post-industrial Port Adelaide, aimed to stimulate informal conversation. At dawn and dusk intimate groups wandered the historic town-centre to discover transitory projections of text and imagery on built and natural structures, photo/text paste-ups, located audio and illuminated environmental elements.

As the work is of a political nature, highly ephemeral and environmentally low-impact, Willoughby finds it fitting that *Graft* manifests in a street-art form. Little physical material was used in its inception or presentation, except for a Zine gifted to participants as a memento and as a link to the website which offers further opportunity to collect verbal, written or recorded audio responses to their central question. Even their mobile projecting unit utilised a solar powered battery. Limiting consumption in their gallery and street practices by using non-toxic materials, cleaning with plant-based products, reusing plates, incorporating found materials and dyes, REAL intend to do as little harm as possible.

But not everyone heeds this caution. As I write, in my Adelaide neighborhood a magnificent sheltering Lemon Scented Gum which feeds bees and parrots by day and flying foxes by night, is being poisoned by a property developer. This year eastern heat waves have triggered mass deaths of flying foxes - literally boiling the most vulnerable dependent pups and lactating females to death. Fires, some deliberately lit, burn across coasts and drought dried country killing native and farmed animals alike. Jared Diamond's predictions of the exceptionally fragile ecology of our continent collapsing^v, ring in my ears.

However REAL hope that a sense of urgency, funneled through their activist optimism and artistic perspective, motivates social and ecological engagement. In post-certainty, the myriad interactions that go on, in and around us in each moment, can become our guides. We are lucky. Ancestral knowing of people as a part of, rather than apart from the rhythm and shimmer of life, has not disappeared on our Continent. Passed into Arts and Environmental dialogues by Deborah Bird Rose, Yolngu experience in *being of* Arnhem Land affirms multispecies patterns of proliferation^{vi}. Bird Rose counsels us to have faith there are "patterns beyond our known patterns and that, in the midst of all that we do not know, we also gain knowledge."

Choosing not to look for a quick techno fix or retreat in despair, REAL holds that faith. Rather their print, photographic, textual, sculptural, vidoographic, sonic and immersive assemblages and public portals avow fidelity to a process of presence. By acknowledging the destruction human actions have provoked and grieving our collective losses, we can take conscious response-ability. This reckoning frees our critical and creative imagination to keep going. As Donna Haraway urges^{vii}, staying with the trouble, participating in the issues of our epoch, living and making *with* other kin rather than in humancentric myopia, is the only authentic way forward.

Survival depends on collaborative actions; on Lynn Margulis' intimacy of strangers; and on unexpected alliances such as those beautifully illustrated by Anna Tsing in her global quest for the Matsutake mushroom^{viii}. Reputed to be the first living thing to emerge from Hiroshima's nuclear denuded earth, these prized aromatic Matsutake grow around the world, unfathomably only in places devastated by humanity. Tsing's research left assumptions aside and observed vibrant networks of activity, foraging communities and alternate economies—new becomings where conventional science would see deforestation and failure.

Working in a creative state of oscillation, of endless becoming, with a sustainable practice, public engagement, interventions and ephemerality, make documentation crucial. The REAL website^{ix} archives images, videos, texts and a broad reading list from *Tipping Point*. In November 2018 a yet to be named hybrid animation, *Tipping Point* cross-pollinated with *Twilight*, will show across Adelaide Festival Centre's twenty-three metre Outdoor Media Screens. Glowing polychromatic ribbons of text, key words and phrases, leap from dense monochromatic temporality—a looming point of no return. Highly visible to crowds at major arts, music and sporting events, REAL's intent is to generate unforeseen responses, question long-held assumptions, or start conversations between strangers.

While we as a species may not thrive or even survive in the long-term, our planet's critical prognosis is bringing us the gift of intimacy with other kin. We too can change tack in our denatured world to embrace the brilliance of living in intrinsic entanglement. Let's look beneath our feet; smell with our skin; listen through the seemingly silent spring; touch the unknown and taste the kiss of life. Each curious breath, serendipitous resurgence, imaginative action, mass coral spawning or eruption of remediating fungi spores, unfolds infinity.

Endnotes:

ⁱ The title references Lynn Margulis' theory that evolution is based on symbiosis or *the long-lasting intimacy of strangers*.

ⁱⁱ Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Microcosmos: Four Billion Years of Microbial Evolution*, University of California Press, 1997.

ⁱⁱⁱ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2016.

^{iv} This essay has been composed through generous conversations and email correspondence over late 2017 and mid 2018 with REAL: John Blines, Michele Lane and Georgina Willoughby.

^v Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive*, Penguin/Allen Lane, London, 2005.

^{vi} Deborah Bird Rose, "Shimmer," in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*, ed. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, et al., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2017.

^{vii} Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016.

^{viii} Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 2015.

^{ix} <https://rareearthreal.com>