Art & Globalization: Urban Futures and Aesthetic Relations Symposium
12 August 2009, RMIT University

List of Papers

KEYNOTE: Dr Kevin Murray, Adjunct Professor, School of Art, RMIT University

Living up to those below: A new ethics of north–south collaboration

What Boaventura Sousa de Santos calls 'abyssal thinking' has cleaved the world into two radically unequal halves. Progressive enlightened cultures sought to modernise backward societies shrouded in ignorance. The superior values of the North transcended the lowly motives of the South. Alternatively, nostalgia for a rural idyll sustained the stresses of development in industrial cities. Such thinking was premised on the other as distant, on the other side of time and space.

The process of urbanisation has kneaded this divide into a pastry of differences thrown together. The Global South is not a distant mass, but someone who cleans your office at night. New codes of civility have to be developed in getting to know the Kenyan taxi driver taking you across town. On a global scale, the imperative of North–South dialogue has been brought to a head with the Kyoto Protocol, which brings together rich and poor countries to the bargaining table as equals.

The friction of these two halves rubbing against each other is a powerful source for art. This paper covers the example of abajismo, a creative movement in Chile that draws from the culture of the Peruvian migrant, working in markets and cleaning homes. Locally, it considers how Australian designers have begun to work with village artisans that have moved into urban factories. What emerges here is a poverty aesthetic that aligns the information economy with arts of necessity.

These new relationships between rich and poor are blessed and cursed by their ethical status. The Fair Trade paradigm offers consumers an opportunity to support producers. But as this system becomes inevitably commodified, we need artists to aerate these relationships, to show the other side.

Dr Kevin Murray is Adjunct Professor RMIT University, Research Fellow University of Melbourne and Adjunct Research Fellow Monash University. He was previously Director of Craft Victoria where he developed the South Project, a program of south–south cultural dialogue. He has curated many exhibitions, specialising in speculative themes, and written widely on Australia's place in the South, including the recent 'After the Missionaries' issues of Artlink. Now he is involved in developing a Code of Practice for Craft–Design Collaborations. More information is at www.kitezh.com.

The Singapore Arts Festival and the aestheticization of the urban landscape
Dr Chris Hudson
chris.hudson@rmit.edu.au

A dominant thread in the narrative of Singapore has been the relentless drive to develop the city-state as an economic powerhouse and a global city. Since the 1990s a crucial part of the strategy to intensify global links, dispel Singapore's reputation for being boring, and absorb the production and consumption of culture into the national economy, has been to reinscribe Singapore as exciting, innovative and creative. The key to this agenda to make the city-state attractive to global elites and the creative classes, has been the reinvention of Singapore as a “Global City for the Arts”.

The Worldwide Festival Singapore 2009, the Global Festival of Indian Dance and Music, the International Tamil Film Awards, the ‘On the White’ Visual Art Exhibition, the Flute Festival, the Night Festival, the World Gourmet Summit, and the Singapore Food Festival, amongst others, are all being staged this year. The main event, however, is without doubt the Singapore Arts Festival—a month long spectacle attracting the best of international and local theatrical performance.
Theatre and other forms of performance are part of the symbolic economy. As Zukin has argued, the symbolic economy unifies material practices of finance, labour, art, performance, and design. The Singapore Arts Festival has precipitated material change and the redesign of public space. The ‘Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay’ performance complex is a spectacular example of spatial transformation. The reconstruction of the urban landscape has also incorporated new forms of aestheticization. With a focus on the 2009 Singapore Arts Festival, this paper will examine the ways in which the aestheticization of the urban landscape provides the space where economics, culture and politics intersect. It will also consider the implications of spatial and aesthetic change for the control of both space and culture.

Keywords: Aesthetics; theatre; urban landscape; cultural production; Singapore.

Dr Chris Hudson is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Media and Communication. She was awarded an Australian Research Council Discovery grant for the period 2009-2011. The project is entitled: Theatre in the Asia-Pacific: Regional Culture in a Modern Global Context. Chris is investigating Singapore arts and theatre culture and the aestheticization of urban space.

The Transient City: consciousness and culture
Dr Maggie McCormick
maggie.mccormick@rmit.edu.au

This paper will focus on changing characteristics of urban consciousness. Changes in consciousness are re-casting our understanding of urban space, contemporary culture and aesthetic in what is the first urban century, but also an Asian century. I argue that clues to shifts in consciousness can be found in the practice of Chinese artists and curators emerging from the rapid urbanisation of China and equally from China’s capacity to re-imagine itself. Given the global impact of China, lessons learnt from its compressed experience can help to clarify cultural reviews taking place more broadly. My research draws together urban theory and art practice and uses transience as a key tool of analysis through the integration of the "rhythm-analysis" of Henri Lefebvre and the "relational aesthetic" of Nicolas Bourriaud with the cultural theory of Wu Hung, the curatorial theory of Hou Hanru and the artistic theory of Ai Wei Wei. I argue that shifts in perceptions of scale and fakeness are creating a collective state of “urbaness” that turns current paradigms up side down. A new consciousness is emerging from new understandings of scale brought about by increased mobility combined with a re-sighting of blind spots that reveal fake foundations of current cultural paradigms. Implicit in this is an aesthetic that grows out of “transphilia” or a love of transience and a sense of ‘feeling at home’ within the experience of constant change. Words like multi-cultural, trans-cultural, inter-cultural are no longer adequate descriptions of the transformation of cultural identity that is in progress. Equally it cannot be assumed that its associated aesthetic is homogenised or westernised. As Wu Hung observes in his writings on contemporary China, far from being problematic this is a time “rich with possibilities for creating new human values and aesthetic standards” (Wu Hung, Transience: Chinese experimental art at the end of the twentieth century, University of Chicago 1999, p 128). This paper explores the potential of these “new human values” and “aesthetic standards” to transform our understanding of what might be meant by the word ‘urban’ in a globalized world, today and in the future.

Keywords: transience; consciousness; urbaness; China; transformation.

Dr Maggie McCormick is an artist and independent curator who has exhibited, undertaken art projects, published and presented papers in Australia, Europe and Asia. She is a course co-ordinator, Master of Arts-Art in Public Space, RMIT University, and a tutor in the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at The University of Melbourne.

The Art of being Urban: rethinking cartographies of personalisation
Dr Larissa Hjorth
larissa.hjorth@rmit.edu.au

In a global period whereby the ‘personal’ is no longer associated with people but with affective technologies (Shirky 2008; Lasen 2004), the old feminist adage of the ‘personal is political’ takes on new dimensions of meaning. Through the rise of social, networked media such as Web 2.0—characterized by Social Networking Systems (SNS like Facebook)—concurrent to the force of user created content (UCC), how we experience a
sense of place, locality and globality is dramatically transforming. In particular, with the emergence of UCC ‘vernacular creativity’ (Burgess) there is a need rethink intimacy, creativity, authorship and labour (social, creative, affective and emotional) in terms of how we imagine and practice art within the context of urbanity.

In order to explore these concerns, this paper deploys the notion of ‘cartographies of personalisation’ as way to reconceptualise some issues around art and urbanity. Cartographies of personalisation are as much geographic and spatial as they are emotional and socio-cultural. These topographies are marked by the interior, intimate and contingent practices that can both challenge and reinforce gendered performativity around labour and intimacy. While these cartographies of personalisation can be noted as part of a global move towards ‘emotional capitalism’ (Illouz 2007) exemplified by Web 2.0, UCC and SNS, this phenomenon is particularly prevalent in the rise of gendered mobile media in the Asia-Pacific; so much so that the symbol of the region’s twenty-first century status has arguably become the female ‘produser’ (Bruns 2005) — whereby consumers become active co-producers — of mobile media (Matsuda 2005; Hjorth 2003a, 2003b). Through the conspicuous symbol of the mobile media user, we can gain insight into how gender, labour and lifestyle are being reconfigured in the region.

Drawing from my recent into mobile media UCC in the Asia-Pacific over seven years, I will reconsider how emerging practices such as keitai shôsetsu (mobile phone novels) reflect, expand and remediate older media practices. In particular, I explore some of the possibilities and limits of this phenomenon, in the wake of the death of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 2002), and how it is impacting upon twenty-first century paradigms for creative practice and labour.

Keywords: Personalisation; mobile media; user created content (UCC); emotional/affective labour; new media.

Larissa Hjorth is an artist, digital ethnographer and senior lecturer in the Games Programs at RMIT University. From 2009 she will be an ARC Discovery Research Fellow exploring online communities in the Asia-Pacific. Since 2000, Hjorth has been researching and publishing on gendered customising of mobile communication, gaming and virtual communities in the Asia-Pacific — these studies are outlined in her book, Mobile Media in the Asia-Pacific (London, Routledge, 2009). Hjorth has published widely on the topic in national and International journals in journals such as Games and Culture journal, Convergence journal, Journal of Intercultural Studies, Continuum, ACCESS, Fibreculture and Southern Review and recently co-edited two Routledge anthologies, Games of Locality: Gaming cultures in the Asia-Pacific (with Dean Chan) and Mobile technologies: from Telecommunication to Media (with Gerard Goggin).

Picturing a multicultural self: young Australian Muslims and the problem of hybridity
Chloe Patton
chloe.patton@rmit.edu.au

In most parts of the world significant migratory flows of the latter part of the twentieth century have called into question monocultural narratives of nationhood. The advances in transport and telecommunications technologies that allow migrants to maintain meaningful and enduring links with distant homelands mean that the cultural identities of diasporic communities can no longer be understood according to the Manichean binaries of “home” and “host”, “us” and “them”. As a result, diasporic subjectivity is often said to reside in a “third space” that is neither Self nor Other, but, as Homi Bhabha puts it, “something else besides”. The cultural practices of individuals and groups often support such claims through the observable intermingling of cultural forms that is part of the everyday social landscape of urban spaces. These realities are not always reflected in everyday understandings of cultural identity, however, nor do they necessarily form the basis of public policy where issues of cultural identity are at stake. Nowhere, perhaps, is this more apparent than in the case of Western diasporic Muslim identities.

This paper seeks to explore theoretical questions concerning hybrid cultural belonging through the analysis of photographic self-portraits produced for a 2006 exhibition entitled “I am a Muslim Australian”. Drawing on sociological theorisations of embodied identity performance, it looks at how young Muslims living in Melbourne negotiated the task of representing their sense of self-identity to a wide public audience in the wake of the Cronulla riots and other events they experienced as assaults on their right to belong in Australia. Several participants sought to express their self-proclaimed sense of “multicultural” identity through their images. A central aim of this paper is to therefore provide a “bottom-up” contribution to recent theoretical debates over the usefulness of hybridity as an analytical tool for scholars concerned with the cultural.
Place, space and identity: past and present in Eleanor Dark’s Sydney
Professor Harriet Edquist
harriet.edquist@rmit.edu.au

This paper examines Eleanor Dark’s fiction from the 1930s and 1940s, for what it tells us about literature, history, identity and place. By attending to where action takes place in her novels we find a particular engagement with Sydney and its origins, as they are represented in the landscape, in urban form, in language and in maps. In four interwar novels Road to Coolami (1936); Waterway (1938); The Timeless Land (1941); A Little Company (1945), Dark’s constructs a literary map of Sydney in which the past sits beside the present, refusing to be silent, and this juxtaposition of past and present provides one of the most powerful tools for social and cultural critique in her work. Dark’s multilayered map of Sydney, a palimpsest where the past and present co-exist in an uneasy relationship, achieves, as Brenton Doecke puts it, ‘a radical perspective that confronts the existing order of things, challenging what is’. Dark shows us how to read a city in history, how to interrogate a map for what is not represented as much as for what is. Most of all, Dark seeks through her novels to understand our place in the world as Australians.

Keywords: Sydney; geography; maps; literature; Eleanor Dark.

Roadside Art: Geographies of the EastLink Tollway
Ashley Perry
ashley.perry@rmit.edu.au

Like all major Australian cities, Melbourne has been thoroughly conquered and shaped by the automobile. Across a large, complex and frequently congested network of roads, the city’s drivers travel 88 million kilometres every day. Consequently, cars occupy a central position within the city’s urban consciousness. As an object of desire, a status symbol, a creator of freedom and trauma, the car and its associated cultural practices and symbolic meanings have become enmeshed within the material and imagined landscape of Melbourne.

This chapter undertakes a critical account of EastLink, a newly opened 45 kilometre tolled motorway located in Melbourne’s vast eastern and south-eastern suburbs that offers the opportunity for the analysis of the subjectivities, temporalities and spatialities relating to the material cultures of driving (Merriman, 2004). At one level EastLink might be characterised as a paradigmatic ‘non-place’ (Augé, 1995) that consists of spaces of travel and exchange devoted to mobility to the exclusion of any sense of fixity, place or local identity (Augé, 1995). Challenging such a reading, however, is a series of four large-scale artworks - located either side and at various points along the length of the road - that reconfigure the performance, experience and geography of the tollway. I argue that “Ellipsoidal Freeway Structure” by James Angus, “Public Art Strategy” by Emily Floyd, “Hotel” by Callum Morton and “Desiring Machine” by Simeon Nelson, as well as an additional eight minor-scale artworks, are more than simply a component of decorative landscaping, and in a very real sense produce dynamic, contingent and topological assemblages (see Heatherington, 1997) that in turn create
meanings and effects counter to notions of a ‘placeless’ (Relph, 1976), ‘abstract’ (Lefebvre, 1991) and ‘ageographical’ (Sorkin, 1992) space otherwise easily attributable to a large piece of road infrastructure such as EastLink.

Keywords: space; driving; performance; non-place; geography.

Ashley Perry is currently undertaking postgraduate research within the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. His PhD is titled ‘Car City’: a documentary film exploring the components, experiences, geographies and politics of automobility, in relation to Melbourne, and is a filmed-based project exploring automobility and its complexity within Melbourne. He has published a paper on his project ‘Car City’: a documentary film mapping the components, modalities and malfunctions of Melbourne’s regime of automobility, for the Cities in Film: Architecture, Urban Space and the Moving Image Conference held at the University of Liverpool in March 2008.

Border Memorials: When the local rejects the global
Associate Professor SueAnne Ware
sueanne.ware@rmit.edu.au

Centuries of immigration and migration of various ‘peoples’ created incremental and dramatic shifts towards notions of globalism and the formation of pluralist societies. Forced migration practices and refugee situations are included in the diaspora of people, language and culture. (Sandercock, 2003, intro) However, what are the effects of refugees who never actually make it to their chosen places? Do our cities and in particular our spaces of memory recognize those who gave their lives in search of a better place to live or to work? If the consequences of our national actions create refugee populations, what is our responsibility to the memory of those who die trying to live and work in our country?

Memorials in the public realm are often sites of competing values and contested terrains. The built work seldom questions whom we are remembering and why. This paper will examine two anti-memorial projects, one concerning the fate of illegal refugees traveling to Australia, The Siev X Memorial Project, (Canberra, 2007) and the other speculative design work from a postgraduate studio considering the deaths of undocumented workers crossing into the United States (El Paso-Juarez, 2005). The projects are by their nature global but have very specific local political implications. Both projects reject conventional notions of memorials in the public realm as icons or celebrations of civic and national identity and question our complacency with regards to the politics and policing of international borders.

James Young writes that public memory is constructed, that understanding events depends on memory’s construction. He suggest that memory must undergo continual renewal in order for the subject of remembrance; in this instance the deaths of undocumented workers traveling into the US and Australia illegally, to stay vivid in our collective conscious. (Young 1993, 39) The memory work presented in this paper hopes to illicit discussion and renewal of this ongoing debate as well as interrogate place, space, and identity through memorial design.

The life-worlds of those affected by these tragedies and the everyday context of the public realm are significant settings for these attempts to bring about change. The resolve of the work to comment on issues within contemporary society is vital to its effectiveness. However, the work also speculates beyond comment or concerns into challenging ideas about international borders and their static nature. The urban public landscape is vital in this sense in that it is both emergent and a complex political entity. It offers ideas about democratic space and a public realm that embody certain types of social, environmental, and cultural responsibilities.

Key words: Public Art; Memorial; Activism; International Borders; Refugees.

Dr SueAnne Ware is an Associate Professor in Landscape Architecture at RMIT University. Her research and design work explores the ways in which contemporary memorial design can reflect ephemeral conditions of site and memory while maintaining its importance in the public landscape. She has published widely with regard to concepts engaging in anti-memorials and received various awards in recognition of her design work from the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects.