Site specific performance, the piano and the emergence of cyclical operations in critical spatial practice

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Declaration

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I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the
work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted
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the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried
out since the official commencement date of the approved research
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party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have
been followed.

Campbell Drake
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Abstract

This research is situated within the field of critical spatial practice and examines how site specific performance can activate engagement in the spatial politics of contested urban and rural landscapes in Australia. Carried out through a series of iterative performances, the practice-based research uses pianos as performative, spatial and semiotic instruments to explore interactions between spatial conditions, cultural practices, communities and their environments.

The research explores the cultural, ethical and political resonance of juxtaposing the piano - as a cultural artefact of western origins - within a variety of Australian sites. The practice research has evolved through three phases of project investigations: firstly, through the spatial exploration of two 19th century urban landmark buildings - Melbourne’s Flinders Street Station ballroom and the Princess Street Theatre; secondly, through a phase of investigative engagement with the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes, at Hobart’s municipal rubbish dump and a property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people, and into a third and final phase which sees the learnings accumulated and synthesised within the abandoned 19th century Pentridge Prison in Melbourne.

Explicating a conceptual and locational progression from the urban piano recitals of Phase One, to three regionally situated piano experimentations of Phase Two which are then synthesised in Phase Three, the practice research enacts an iterative design process from which has emerged four critical spatial operations: Inverting, Instrumentalising, Spatial Tuning and Cultural Burning. The research offers this combined set of cyclical operations as a methodological contribution to the field of critical spatial practice, with capacity to activate new spatio-political formations and critical engagement in the spatial politics of contested landscapes.
Fig. 0.1 *Duration*, 2012  
Image courtesy of Greta Costello

Fig. 0.2 *The Princess Theatre Inversion*, 2014

Fig. 0.3 *Instrumental*, 2015  
Image courtesy of Greta Costello

Fig. 0.4 *Spatial Tuning*, 2016

Fig. 0.5 *Cultural Burn*, 2016
Form of the Document

This doctoral research is centered upon an iterative series of six site specific performance works that constitute the body of the research. Structured as three research phases, the emphasis of the project work is reflected in the form of this document. The three major projects of Phase Two: Instrumental (2015), Spatial Tuning (2016), and Cultural Burn (2016) are presented as independent chapters, introduced by two preliminary projects of Phase One; Duration (2012) and The Princess Theatre Inversion (2014), and concluding with the summative project of Phase Three; The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations (2017). As the research is practice led with findings evidenced within the project work, this document is intended to be read in parallel with performance documentation provided as hyperlinks embedded within each chapter.

Performance Documentation

Research Phase One: Urban Landmarks

Project 1: Duration, Flinders Street Station ballroom, 2012
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11QbX4p2Pl0

Project 2: The Princess Theatre Inversion, 2014
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkRiitjm0s0

Research Phase Two: Contested Australian Landscapes

Project 3: Instrumental, Culpra Station, 2015
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kr5hpicrAJA

Project 4: Spatial Tuning, McRobies Recycling Centre, 2016
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=02hNDituAx0&feature=youtu.be

Project 5: Cultural Burn, Culpra Station, 2016
https://youtu.be/5LjarpziEAc

Research Phase Three: The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations

Project 6: The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations, Pentridge Prison, 2017
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Bibliography

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Fig 1.1 James Carey & Campbell Drake, *East West Trajectory*, Depot, 2008
1.1 The Field of Research: Critical Spatial Practice

Prior to commencing this doctoral research, I had developed a body of work that explored relationships between architecture and site specific art implemented within buildings scheduled for demolition. Over a six year period between 2005-12, and largely in collaboration with designer/artist James Carey, I had produced a series of six site specific interventions in redundant buildings scheduled for demolition, that included two houses (Blundell House, 2005, Surf Street House, 2006), an office building (Stanley Street, 2006), a bus depot (East West Trajectory, 2007), a council estate (Embodied Text, 2009) and a former school (Planar Shift, 2012). These works, along with the body of iterative project work that forms the core of this research, are situated within a field of practice known as ‘critical spatial practice’ that is characterised by ‘spatial aspects of interdisciplinary processes or practices that operate between arts and architecture.’

According to Jane Rendell, ‘this field of practice aims to transgress the limits of art and architecture and engages with both the social and the aesthetic.’

In speculating on the agency of critical spatial practice situated within iconic architectural spaces of cultural significance, this field of research can be further contextualised through the exemplary works of Rachel Whiteread’s House (1993) and Roger Hiorn’s Seizure (2009). Both House and Seizure are creative interventions situated within council houses scheduled for demolition. Seeking to ‘question and transform the social conditions of the sites into which they intervene,’ both works operate within the fleeting space between building and renewal to provide a critical engagement with architectural and urban political processes, thus stimulating public debate. Reliant upon the final act of erasure through demolition, House and Seizure act on both the symbolic and sensorial levels to reach wide public audiences, suggesting how critical spatial practice can constitute an activate engagement in the spatial politics of contested urban landscapes.

A point of departure that is central to orienting this research within the field of critical spatial practice is the project titled Embodied Text that I installed within an obsolete council estate in North London, just prior to its demolition in 2009. Commissioned by Tell Tale Projects, Embodied Text was one of twenty site specific artworks implemented with the iconic Market Estate ‘that celebrated a colourful and rich last memory of the estate.’ The aim of this work was to critically investigate the relations between spatial politics and contemporary arts practice within the context of post-war social housing in the UK. Extending upon the operative potential of situating creative interventions within contested spaces of national significance, this doctoral research is framed by a shift in practice emphasis from site specific ‘art’ to site specific ‘performance.’
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According to leading scholars in this field, it is understood that site specific performance originated from one of two fields: (1) from the field of theatre, moving from the stage into the public domain; or (2) that of site specific art converging with performance practices outside of traditional theatre space. In positioning the field of research in relation to these two distinctions, this research proposes to situate the project within a third category; that of site specific art and architectural practices converging with performance practices outside of traditional theatre space to enable the emergence of critical spatial practice. Coming into the project with less prior experience in relation to music performance, sound and explicitly time based works, the project seeks to test the boundaries, procedures and assumptions situated between the disciplines of performance and architecture.

In establishing the key aims of the research and new opportunities for the field of critical spatial practice that I seek to engage, two specific concerns are foregrounded as directly influencing and shaping the focus of this research. These concerns are: (1) to provide insights into the complex networks, multiple logics, rich contradictions and spatial politics at the intersection of performance and architectural practices (2) to explore how critical spatial practice can activate new spatio-political formations and critical insights into the spatial politics of contested urban and rural landscapes in Australia. (3) to test the boundaries and procedures of my own disciplinary knowledge situated between architecture and site specific art practice.

1.2 On Methodology:

In setting out to explore how site specific performance can activate engagement in the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes, my practice based research methodology emerged though a series of spatially led, site-specific performances situated within a variety of urban and rural settings.

Influenced by Donald Schon’s *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action,* practice based research is understood as an evolving, reflective and responsive process, where the unpredictable outcomes, critical reflections, and limitations of one research project spark an idea that prompts the next research project. Within this sequential and cyclical research practice is a critical refinement and re-orientation of a specific research question that is used to interrogate a targeted aspect of the field under investigation.

Drawing on my background as a practising architect, in combination with experience implementing large scale installations within buildings scheduled for demolition, the research commenced with a focus on iconic architectural spaces in urban contexts. Seeking to interrogate the boundaries of architectural processes and procedures through the development of new approaches to site specific creative practice, the research is practice based, as it was carried out through a series of inter-related projects in the form of investigative spatial performances. Within this study, it is understood that practice knowledge is produced by intersecting architectural and site-specific art practices to develop new approaches to critical spatial practice. While the spatial practice is the primary method for generating new practice knowledge, a multiplicity of supplementary research methods have been used for generating, collecting and analysing data. These supplementary methods include post-performance questionnaires, interviews, unsolicited reviews in the media, documentation of the work via video, audio and photographic recordings, structured reflective writing, diagramming, and my own phenomenological observations.

Phase one of the research, titled Urban Landmarks, commenced with a focus on iconic architectural spaces in Melbourne’s city centre. Emerging from these early studies is a methodological understanding that historical architecture can be mobilised as a reference point within critical spatial practice that has the capacity to reveal insights into the interactions and entanglements between people and their environments. Seeking to place pressure on conventional modes of artistic and architectural production and consumption, the research combines the performative potential of re-appropriating landmark buildings with site specific performance located within historical spaces of cultural significance. Situated at the centre of the two early works are performance spaces within heritage buildings, suggesting that the impact and value of such projects are tied to the performativity of architecture, to reveal moments of social, cultural and political significance.

In outlining the methodology, it is important to foreground the non-linear trajectory from which the research methodology emerged. The two early projects of phase one, carried out within the Flinders Street Station Ballroom (*Duration*) and The Princess Theatre (*The Princess Theatre Inversion*), were centred on formal piano recitals by professional pianists performing recognised minimalist compositions, including Simeon Ten Holt’s *Canto Ostinato* and Steve Reich’s *Piano Phase.* Emerging from these early investigations are insights into: (1) the cultural authority of the piano that affords, enables and facilitates access to contested spaces considered off limits to the public; (2) the contemporary cultural role of historic architectural spaces and Australian landscapes within creative practice; (3) the notion of absence and presence and the ability of site specific performance to collapse the distance between passive spectators and their immediate environments; (4) the operation of inverting spatial conventions to explore the effects of shifting normative relationships between spectators, performers and spatial contexts; and (5) the importance of performance documentation, the camera, and the disjuncture between the live event and performance documentation.
Emerging from research phase one is the recognition of the symbolic potential of the piano as a cultural artefact that has evolved from a particular western historical lineage. Central to the semiotic potential of the piano as a research instrument is a questioning of how meanings are formed through the construction of ecological relationships between the piano, cultural practices, and a variety of contested spatial contexts. Using surveys and interviews with performers and audience members in combination with my own phenomenological observations, an interpretive framework has been developed that combines phenomenological and semiotic analysis to understand and interpret the piano, the performer, and the landscape as signs, as well as the meanings of these signs, and the interaction of these signs and sign systems.  

Honing in on the semiotic framework, the three later projects of research phase two mark a notable shift in the research methodology, from negotiating architectural interiors in urban environments, to situating performances outdoors within contested Australian landscapes. Parallel with the locational shift from the urban centre of Melbourne to regional settings in Tasmania and New South Wales is a change in the types of pianos selected, from grand pianos to salvaged uprights, and a shift in the mode of interaction with the piano, from formal recitals with professional pianists, to less conventional interactions, including two staged tunings (Instrumental & Spatial Tuning) and one piano burning (Cultural Burn). Through the juxtaposition of the piano and Australian landscapes, the instrument is used to mediate between human and non-human interaction; while, liberated from its role in the historical buildings in the two early works, the piano is employed as a registration device in different contexts to provoke and register aesthetic, cultural, ethical, and political questions and concerns in resonant ways.

As a practitioner-researcher trained as an architect, with limited knowledge of music and performance practices, my chosen research methodology provides a critique of normative attitudes to architecture and performance practice through a gradual deconstruction of dominant modes of piano performance, and a re-situation of the instrument within contested Australian landscapes. Both critical and spatial, the practice based research methodology is aligned with Jane Rendell's definition of critical spatial practice in that it operates between the disciplines of art and architecture, within a mode of site specific creative practice that seeks to question and transform the social conditions of the sites into which they intervene, as well as test the boundaries and procedures of my own disciplines. The term critical is drawn from critical theory, which was developed by a group of theorists and philosophers called the Frankfurt school; they sought to rethink 'Marxist ideas in relation to shifts in society, culture and economy.' Providing an orientation to the effective potential of practice-based research in the field of critical spatial practice, my own critical approach to practice based research is understood as a form of knowledge that is reflective rather than objectifying, to take into account my own procedures and methods.

Structured sequentially, this dissertation reflects the processual order in which the five research projects were produced. The chronological sequencing of the projects enacts the scoring system of western musical notation and as such, privileges a particular organisational model. While selecting a research instrument and a structure that evokes the conventions of Australian colonialism, the research challenges the western colonial regime through the inversion and adaptation of dominant modes of cultural production. Through an active engagement with spatial politics of contested landscapes, the research reinforces a critical standpoint, and seeks not only to reflect and describe existing conditions, but also to transform and imagine something different.

Throughout the development of this body of research produced over a five year period are various collaborations and interactions with pianists, piano tuners, sound engineers, videographers, film editors, curators, land owners, academic institutions, galleries, local councils, park rangers, Aboriginal communities, philanthropic organisations, radio stations, and funding bodies. Moving beyond traditional expectations of object/spectator relations, the research looks at relationships produced by intersecting art and architectural processes ‘in which the work is considered less as a set of things or objects than as a series of exchanges that take place between people though such processes as collaboration.'

11 Rendell. Art and Architecture
12 Ibid.
14 Ibid
15 Ibid
16 Ibid. Page 2.
Consistent across the body of iterative project work is an exploration of the performative relations between spectatorship, action, and spatial contexts. In investigating these performative relations, research data collected includes video, audio and photographic performance documentation, diagramming, surveys, interviews, journaling, and structured reflective writing. The data collected has been interpreted using multiple modes of analysis, including reflective analysis, semiotic analysis, critical discourse analysis, and phenomenological analysis.

As mentioned earlier within this section, semiotic analysis is focused on the piano as a cultural artefact of western colonial origins and the meanings produced by situating the instrument at the centre of a series of site specific performances within a variety of politically charged environments. Extending on the performative, spatial and semiotic potential of the piano as a research instrument, performance documentation and phenomenological observations are interpreted using critical discourse analysis, and cross referenced to audience and performer surveys and interviews.

Critical discourse analysis is understood as a method of analysis which explores power relations within the ‘meanings produced by language and communication, the contexts and processes of these meanings and practices caused by these meanings.’ In adopting critical discourse analysis as an interpretive framework, language and communication are understood as both text and sound, and are inclusive of the broader historical context of the piano and the socio-political situations in which the various projects take place. Using critical discourse analysis, the research methodology aims to identify and interpret how various meaning-making processes are produced within site specific performance, and their relationship to human and non-human interaction and environments.

Inciting the generative potential of producing new knowledge through a recursive process of practice-based research and critical theory, a chain of theoretical frameworks have been developed that are used to interpret and structure the development of new critical spatial practice knowledge. According to Raymond Lucas, critical discourse analysis allows for close reading of a set of works within a certain theoretical framework. Informed by theorists, including Miwon Kwon, Murray Schafer, Philip Auslander, Félix Guattari and Jacques Rancière, the project works are interpreted and framed by drawing on different yet interrelated theoretical frameworks, in order to investigate how site specific performance can activate new spatio-political formations and critical insights in the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes.

As an extension of Miwon Kwon’s writings on site-specific art and locational identity, the project titled Instrumental draws on the concept of the fragmented site as a theoretical framework to explore the multiple locations that constitute an effective field of critical spatial practice. Suggesting the ‘site is not simply a geographical location or architectural setting but a network of social relations,’ this research repositions Kwon’s concept to establish a spatial semiotics and phenomenological interpretative framework that decenters the primacy of the live performance event; instead, it is suggested that the operative potential of site specific performance exists as a cumulative field, inclusive of pre-performance negotiations and post-performance distribution.

Adapting the theory of acoustic ecologies as a form of critical discourse analysis of sound, Murray Schafer’s concept is activated as a theoretical framework to analyse the performative relations between the piano, spatial politics, and contested Australian landscapes. The term acoustic ecologies was coined by Schafer and is defined as a discipline studying the relationship mediated through sound between human beings and their environments.

In developing the term, Schafer devised a new terminology for soundscape studies. He defines background sounds as ‘keynotes,’ foreground sounds as ‘signal sounds,’ and sounds that are particularly regarded by a community are ‘soundmarks.’ Schafer’s terminology helps to express the idea that the sound of a particular locality (its keynotes, sound signals and soundmarks) can express a community’s identity, to the extent that a site can be read and characterised by sounds. Beyond the audible spectrum, Schafer also developed the concept of ‘acoustic coloration.’ This term describes how the ‘echoes and reverberations that occur as sounds are...
absorbed and reflected from surfaces within an environment, and the effects of weather related factors such as temperature, wind and humidity.24 Exploring complex networks, multiple logics and rich contradictions, the project work is interpreted through an analysis of the keynotes, sound signals, soundmarks and acoustic colorations produced within each of the performance works. Seeking to bridge the gap between the textual and contextual analysis, the project work is interpreted through an analysis of the keynotes, sound signals, soundmarks and acoustic colorations produced within each of the performance works. Seeking to bridge the gap between the textual and contextual analysis of site specific performance, Schafer’s terminology is adapted as an interpretive framework to analyse performance as a critical practice that is capable of constructing, reproducing and contesting the cultural identity of contested landscapes.20

Extending from the immediacy of the live event to address the tensions between live performance and performance documentation, this research draws on Philip Auslander’s concept of liveness. In light of Peggy Phelan’s famous assertion that ‘Performance’s being becomes itself through disappearance and can be defined as representation without reproduction,’27 Philip Auslander writes ‘there remains a strong tendency in performance theory to place live performance and mediated or technologized forms in opposition to one another.’28 Auslander’s concept of liveness is introduced in Chapter 3 through a close reading of the performance titled Instrumental; this framework extends the research from the field of theatre studies to that of site specific performance. Auslander’s theory is mobilised as a theoretical framework for critical discourse analysis to unpack the tensions and motivations for capturing and exhibiting site specific performance as sound and video within gallery, academic, main stream media and online platforms.

Chapter 4, titled Spatial Tuning, questions how artistic experimentations can be used to understand the issues around the acts of crossing borders and shifting boundaries; the exploration draws on the ‘dynamics of deterritorialisation as elaborated within architectural and urban spatial discourse’29 to address issues of ownership, the policing of boundaries, and rights of exclusion and inclusion, that are revealed within site specific performance practice. Expanding the sites of research from geographic co-ordinates to the subjective realm, the practice research addressed in Chapter 5 is also framed by Félix Guattari’s concept of ethico-aesthetics,30 which is used to explore how aesthetic practices such as site specific performance can produce new political subjectivities through the crossing of experiential boundaries.

Chapter 5, titled Cultural Burn, further addresses the critical intersection of ethics and aesthetics; the analysis is oriented through a critique of Jacques Rancière’s concept of the ‘distribution of the sensible.’31 This concept seeks to reconfigure the relationship between art and politics by bringing together the ‘necessary junction between aesthetic practices and political practices.’32 Exploring the intersection of aesthetic practices and spatial politics, the research project addressed in Chapter 5 constructs a juxtaposition between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices, in order to test the ability of site specific performance to re-distribute the sensible by transcending the limitations of what is ‘perceptible, understandable and therefore artistically conceivable.’33 Consistent with Rancière’s work on aesthetics that opposes and redefines the fixity of historical categorisation, the operative potential of intersecting critical theory with practice based research is to engender social and political transformation through a re-ordering of the senses.34

By explicating the generative potential of a hybridised methodology, the combination of practice based research, critical theory, and multi-modal analysis seeks to provide new creative practice knowledge to the field of critical spatial practice. The research tests the boundaries of my own disciplines through the development of a generative and interdisciplinary methodology, and thus intersects architectural and site specific practices with the potential to activate new spatial-political formations, providing critical insights into the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes.

26 Ibid.
29 Miwon Kwon. One Place after Another. Page 8.
34 Coombs. ‘Activism, Art and Social Practice.’
Fig. 1.8 Markiyan Matsiukh, *Piano for Berkut*, 2012

Fig. 1.9 Anna Lockwood, *Burning Piano*, 1968

Fig. 1.10 Yoshita Yamashita, *Burning Piano*, 2008
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Fig 1.11 Ludovico Einaudi
Elegy for the Arctic, 2014

Fig 1.12 Richard McLester,
Piano In the Sea, 2008

Fig 1.13 Chiharu Shiota, In Silence, 2011
1.3 Community of Practice

Structured chronologically, the three projects that constitute the main body of the research in phase two are contextualised within a particular community of practitioners that incorporate pianos within their site specific performance works.

The project titled Instrumental (Chapter 3), that took place on a property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people, places an upright piano within an iconic Australian landscape, and is visually reminiscent of Ross Bolleter’s Ruined Piano Sanctuary in York, Western Australia. While Bolleter’s work is commonly interpreted through a Buddhist lens of life, death and impermanence, Instrumental draws upon the symbolic colonial associations of the upright piano as a device to renegotiate the duplicitous spatial politics of Indigenous and non-Indigenous locational identity within Culpra Station.

Following on from Instrumental the project titled Spatial Tuning (Chapter 4), sees a piano tuned on the boundary between a national park and Hobart’s municipal tip, to explore the concept of body and territory as expressive matter within site specific performance. Spatial Tuning explores site specific piano performance as a form of political protest, and the ability of the piano to enter spaces of conflict is considered in relationship to Markiyan Matsekh’s Piano for Berkut (2012) and Ludovico Einaudi Elegy for the Arctic (2014).

Project Five; Cultural Burn (Chapter 5), sees a return to Culpra Station to burn the piano that was used during Instrumental. Juxtaposing the Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning with the burning of a western colonial artefact, Cultural Burn shares qualities with the work of other practitioners who burn pianos as part of their site specific performance works. Tracing the origins of this community of practice to the work of Arman, Annea Lockwood and Yoshita Yamashita, Cultural Burn is discussed in relation to the work In Silence (2011) by Chiharu Shiota and Douglas Gordon’s The End of Civilization (2012).

In addition to the carefully curated community of practice in which this research has been contextualised and positioned, is a considerable cannon of the use of the piano within conceptual and contemporary art performance. Notable omissions from within this cannon that have been examined and deemed not as relevant to the research, are the works of John Cage and Rebecca Horn. While the piano works of Cage and Horn are by no means discounted for their value and contribution, the foundation of these works do not engage with the specifics of site and are therefore considered secondary references to the particular field of critical spatial practice in which this research is situated.
1.4 Outline of chapters

RESEARCH PHASE 1 _ URBAN LANDMARKS

Chapter 2: Preliminary Projects in Iconic Architectural Spaces

Project 1: Duration

Duration took place in the Flinders Street Station ballroom on the evening of the 19th October 2012 and consisted of a 90 minute performance of Simeon Ten Holt’s ‘Canto Ostinato’ performed on two grand pianos by pianists Elizabeth Drake and Caroline Almonte. Due to occupational health and safety concerns of Metro officials, it was understood from the outset that a public audience would not be granted access to the ballroom. Instead a film crew captured the performance and broadcast it live to the Federation Square Screen and the world wide web. Through the staging of Duration within the Flinders Street Station ballroom and the broadcast to Federation square and the station’s platforms, the project offers a critique of the impact of privatising public infrastructure. In addressing Duration as the first of five performance works this sub-chapter outlines the origins of the research trajectory and methodology and identifies the emergence of Spatial Inversions as an operation for investigating the relations between spectators, performers and architectural environments.

Project 2: The Princess Theatre Inversion

Extending the critical insights, concerns and operation of inverting space that emerged from Duration, is a second site specific performance titled The Princess Theatre Inversion that took place in 2014. Further exploring the cultural authority of the piano and its capacity to facilitate permissions and entry to architectural spaces of historical significance, The Princess Theatre Inversion investigates the operative potential of inverting conventional relationships between performers, audiences and architecture.

Figure 1.16 Duration, 2012

Figure 1.17 The Princess Theatre Inversion, 2014

Centered on the interactions between the piano as cultural artefact, an audience as community, and the Princess Theatre as a landmark building, this project explores how site specific performance can collapse the distance between passive spectators and their immediate environments through an immersive sensory engagement with the spatio-temporalities of architecture. Materialising from The Princess Theatre Inversion to re-orient the second research phase, is the recognition of the semiotic implications of the piano as a cultural artefact of western origins. Emerging from this concern to inform each of the three projects to follow is the operation of Instrumentalising.
1.4 Outline of Chapters

RESEARCH PHASE 2 _ CONTESTED AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPES

Chapter 3: Instrumental

Chapter Three is centred on the performance titled Instrumental. This site specific performance took place on a property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for the Aboriginal people. Produced in collaboration with the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation in 2015, Instrumental comprises a professional piano tuner attempting to tune a broken upright piano outdoors in the blazing midday sun. Drawing on the semiotic potential of the piano as a cultural artifact of western colonial origins, Instrumental focuses on the juxtaposition of the piano and the Australian bush to examine the duplicitous spatial politics of inter-cultural land ownership.

Commencing with a close reading of the immediate experience of producing Instrumental, this chapter speculates on the ability of site specific performance to re-negotiate spatial politics, followed by an examination of the motivations and critical operations behind mediatising or documenting site specific performance for the purposes of reproducing, distributing and exhibiting within institutional research frameworks. Tracing Instrumental from conception to realisation and on to dissemination as exhibition and publication, this chapter as a whole investigates how site specific performance can reach multiple audiences across various creative platforms through cumulative fields of discursive operation. Emerging from Instrumental is the critical spatial operation of spatial tuning.

Chapter 4: Spatial Tuning: The body and territory

Chapter Four is centered on the site specific performance titled Spatial Tuning that took place at a municipal rubbish dump in the city of Hobart, Tasmania in 2016. The performance stages the juxtaposition of an outdoor piano tuning and a live audience on the contested boundary between the Mount Wellington National Park and the McRobies rubbish dump in Hobart. Spatial Tuning extends upon the work of Markiyan Matsekh’s Piano for Berkut (2012) and Ludovico Einaudi’s Elegy for the Arctic (2014) to explore the concept of body and territory as expressive matter within site specific performance. Chapter Four is structured in four parts. Part one describes pre-performance negotiations with local authorities, and addresses issues of ownership, the policing of boundaries, rights of exclusion and inclusion, and the ‘dynamics of deterriorialization as elaborated within architectural and urban spatial discourse.’ Part two describes the live performance ‘event’ and explores the relations between landscape, bodily absence and perception by questioning how site specific performance can collapse the distance between passive spectators and contested landscapes through an immersive sensory engagement with the spatio-temporalities of constructed environments. Part three positions the research within a community of practice in which pianos are used as performative, spatial and semiotic devices to intervene within ‘the most dominated of dominated spaces.’ Finally, part four draws on Felix Guattari’s concept of ethico-aesthetics to explore how aesthetic practices such as site specific performance can produce new political subjectivities through the crossing of experiential boundaries. The chapter as a whole offers insights into the relations between aesthetic practices, human and non-human interaction, and spatial politics, by questioning how artistic experimentations can be used to understand the issues around the acts of crossing borders and shifting boundaries. Revealed within Spatial Tuning is a propensity to preserve the harmony of the piano from which emerged the operation of Cultural Burning.
Chapter 5: Cultural Burn

Chapter Five is centred on the performance titled Cultural Burn, which was the second of two site specific performances that took place on Culpra Station. This chapter describes and reflects on a return to Culpra Station in 2016 to burn a piano in an ephemeral billabong. Chapter Five is structured in three parts. Part one examines the motivations for burning the instrument on Barkanji Country, and contextualises it within an existing community of practice in which a range of creative practitioners incorporate burning pianos in their performance works (Arman, Lockwood, Shiota, Gordon). Part two draws a comparison between the Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning, and the burning of pianos within contemporary arts practice. Questioning the ongoing impact of colonialism, part three outlines the circumstances for returning to Culpra Station, followed by a close reading of the live Cultural Burn event in relation to the staged juxtaposition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices, the piano and the Australian bush. Using place, space, landscape, technology (instrument) and community (audience, performer, tuner) as multiple agents, this chapter draws parallels between the ability of site specific performance to rename things differently, and Rancière’s concept of the distribution of the sensible,38 to offer insights into the relations between aesthetic practices and spatial politics specific to an Australian rural context.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations

Chapter 6 is centred on a sixth and final investigative spatial performance that was undertaken to explicate the potential of accumulating cyclical operations in critical spatial practice. Titled The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations, this performance was staged as a concluding gesture at the notorious D-Division of the former HM Pentridge Prison complex in Coburg. Exploring the cultural, ethical, and political resonances produced through the performative reappropriation of an abandoned gaol, The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations provides insights into the complex networks, multiple logics, and rich contradictions at the intersection of performance and architectural practice. Questioning the ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia, the research curates material, spatial and acoustic disciplines to reveal the limitations of traditional architectural and musical practices in relation to controlling the dynamics of natural environmental systems.

Structured in two acts, The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations was produced in the medium in which the research was generated, and offers an intensification of the research value through an embodied encounter with the critical spatial operations of Inverting Space, Instrumentalising and Spatial Tuning. Through the spatial co-production of cultural practices, community and a contested urban landscape, this performance evokes a heightened and embodied presence with the temporal attributes of spatial politics, to demonstrate a methodological contribution to the field of critical spatial practice through the enactment of the cumulative potential of cyclical operations.

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### 1.5 Outline of Projects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Instrument(s)</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Spatial Context</th>
<th>Political Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
<td>Flinders Street Station, Melbourne</td>
<td>2 Grand Pianos</td>
<td>Piano Recital</td>
<td>Dilapidated historical ballroom within privatised public building</td>
<td>The impact of privatising public infrastructure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The Princess Theatre Inversion</td>
<td>April 2014</td>
<td>The Princess Theatre, Melbourne</td>
<td>2 Grand Pianos</td>
<td>Piano Recital</td>
<td>19th century proscenium theatre</td>
<td>Hierarchies of dominant forms of cultural production</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**RESEARCH PHASE 2 _ CONTESTED AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Instrument(s)</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Spatial Context</th>
<th>Political Concern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td>September 2015</td>
<td>Culpra Station, Rural New South Wales</td>
<td>1 Upright Piano</td>
<td>Piano Tuning</td>
<td>Property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people</td>
<td>Ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Tuning Space</td>
<td>June 2016</td>
<td>McRobies Rubbish Dump, Hobart, Tasmania</td>
<td>1 Upright Piano</td>
<td>Piano Tuning</td>
<td>Municipal rubbish dump / landfill site wedged in Mt Wellington national park</td>
<td>The environmental impact of consumer cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Cultural Burn</td>
<td>October 2016</td>
<td>Culpra Station, Rural New South Wales</td>
<td>1 Upright Piano</td>
<td>Piano Burning</td>
<td>Property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people</td>
<td>Ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## 1.6 Summary of Operations in Practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operation</th>
<th>Operative Effect</th>
<th>Activating engagement in</th>
<th>Value to Critical Spatial Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Spatial Inversion</td>
<td>Inverting conventional relationships between performers, audiences and environments</td>
<td>Questioning the normative spatial conditions of western theatre and dominant modes of cultural production</td>
<td>Method for destabilising hegemonic structures through embodied encounter and active engagement with dominant forms of cultural production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Instrumentalising</td>
<td>Instrumentalising – reframes and assigns non human agents an active role</td>
<td>Questioning the instrumental logic and legacy of colonisation</td>
<td>Method for reframing and assigning non human agents an active role in the renegotiation and activation of new spatio-political formations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Spatial Tuning</td>
<td>Spatial Tuning: producing immersive sensory engagement with the spatio temporalities of contested environments</td>
<td>Questioning the environmental impact of consumer culture.</td>
<td>Method for producing immersive sensory engagement with the spatio-temporalities of contested environments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cumulative set of cyclical operations:</strong></td>
<td>Activates critical engagement with spatial politics</td>
<td>Developing a critically engaged spatial practice</td>
<td>combined set of cyclical operations as a methodological contribution to the field of critical spatial practice, with capacity to activate new spatio-political formations and critical engagement in the spatial politics of contested landscapes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RESEARCH PHASE ONE: URBAN LANDMARKS
Fig 2.1 *Duration*,
Flanders Street Station ballroom, 2012
Performed by Elizabeth Drake & Caroline Almonte
Chapter 2_ Urban Landmarks: Two Preliminary Projects

Project Synopsis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th><strong>Duration</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project No.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Phase</td>
<td>Phase One _ Urban Landmarks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>October 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>Flinders Street Station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>Victorian Government / Metro Trains (Operators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance site</td>
<td>Dilapidated Flinders Street Station ballroom situated on 3rd floor of administration building on Flinders Street Audio-visual broadcast to Federation Square public screen Audio broadcast to Flinders Street Station Concourse and Platforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Conditions</td>
<td>Current building completed in 1909 Designed by Architects Fawcett and Ashworth Redbrick French Renaissance style 13 platforms *Prior to Duration, the ballroom had been closed to public programming since 1983.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical Instruments</td>
<td>2 x Grand Pianos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Devices</td>
<td>The camera set and live feed Federation Square Screen Flinders Street Station Public Announcement System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performers</td>
<td>2 Pianists (Elizabeth Drake &amp; Caroline Almonte)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>Canto Ostinato by Simeon Ten Holt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>90 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience (Live)</td>
<td>No public audience allowed in ballroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>Professional Film crew / 90 minute video <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11QbX4p2Pl0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11QbX4p2Pl0</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience 2 (Live Mediated)</td>
<td>General Public at Federation Square Screen (Audio &amp; Visual) General Public online (Audio &amp; Visual) General Public on stations platforms (Audio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution / Exhibition (secondary showings)</td>
<td>Federation Square Screen The Age Webisodes / Youtube Academic conferences: RMIT PRS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience 2 (Mediated)</td>
<td>General Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umbrella Project</td>
<td>Contemporary Site Investigations Flinders Street Station</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding Bodies</td>
<td>City of Melbourne Public Art Commission Netwealth Fiona and Sidney Myer Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Procedures</td>
<td>Piano Recital Reappropriation of landmark building Broadcast to Fedsquare, Station PA &amp; Internet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activated Concerns</td>
<td>Spatial politics of privatised public infrastructure The pianos ability to enter contested spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Operation</td>
<td>Spatial Inversion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 2: Preliminary Projects

Project 1: Duration, Flinders Street Station

This research commenced in 2012 with a creative project titled *Contemporary Site Investigations: Flinders Street Station*. Funded by the City of Melbourne public art commission, this site specific arts project saw six artists occupy the redundant, off limits spaces of Flinders Street Station to create a series of site specific art and performance works. The six artists came together from a range of creative backgrounds, including sculpture, architecture, composition, music, and video art. Prior to 2012, the group of artists had undertaken a series of site specific art projects situated across a variety of sites, spaces and locations in and around Melbourne. Consistent to each of the projects was a mode of site specific practice in which the artists suspended predetermined outcomes in preference for art works and performances derived from and of the site.

Contemporary Site Investigations: Flinders Street Station commenced in September 2012 with a five-week investigative residency. Each of the contributing artists gravitated to a specific room or space of interest in which to develop a site specific work. Equipped with nothing but a loose working methodology which preferences a rendering of immaterial qualities by means of reordering, revealing or highlighting existing spatial conditions, the project engaged with ‘the dynamic, hence temporal, nature of space’ suggesting ‘that spatial production must be understood as part of an evolving sequence, with no fixed start or finish, and that multiple actors contribute at various stages’.

Over the period of one month, Contemporary Site Investigations saw the creation of six creative outcomes across five iconic architectural spaces. These spaces included: the clock tower (*Metronomic* by Cam Robbins); the gymnasium (*In the Left Corner* by Robbie Rowlands); the mail room (*Domestic Occupation* by James Carey); the ballroom (*Duration* by Elizabeth Drake & Caroline Almonte, plus *Circadian Rhythms* by Jeremy Taylor); and my own contribution on the steps of Flinders Street Station (*Past and Present* by Campbell Drake). Of the six creative interventions, it is the event titled *Duration*, performed by Elizabeth Drake & Caroline Almonte that took place within the ballroom, that I wish to address, in relation to how site specific performance can activate critical engagement in the politics of space within contested landmark buildings in urban contexts.

![Fig 2.2 Flinders Street Station](image)
Duration: Contemporary Site Investigations: Flinders Street Station

Duration took place in the Flinders Street Station ballroom on the evening of the 19th October 2012, and consisted of a 90 minute performance of Simeon Ten Holt’s ‘Canto Ostinato’ performed on two grand pianos by Elizabeth Drake and Caroline Almonte. Due to health and safety constraints, a public audience was not permitted entry to the ballroom and instead, a film crew captured the performance and broadcast it live to the Federation Square Screen, the internet and station’s public announcement system.

In addressing Duration as the first of an iterative body of project work in the field of site specific performance, it is first important to establish my role(s) in the conception, production and realisation of this project. As referenced earlier, Duration was one of six works commissioned as part of Contemporary Site Investigations. My roles in substantiating the project as a whole included: instigating the collaboration; writing the grant application (with assistance from the project team); co-curator (a contentious term in relation to creative collectives); project coordinator; producer; negotiator; financial officer; sponsorship manager; media liaison; and performance designer.

Flinders Street Station: Historical Context

In introducing Duration as a precursor to the three performance works that constitute Phase Two of this body of research, it is important to first establish the historical and political context in which Duration took place. Flinders Street Station is located in Melbourne on the corner of Swanston and Flinders Street. Running parallel to the Yarra River, the station covers two city blocks and extends from Swanton Street in the North to Queen Street in the South. The Station serves the entire metropolitan rail network inclusive of suburban rail services, and V/Line regional rail, and is the busiest station on Melbourne’s metropolitan network with over 100,000 daily entries per weekday.42 Listed on the Victorian Heritage Register, Flinders Street Station was the first railway station in an Australian city and in the late 1920s was the world’s busiest passenger station. The main station building, with its prominent dome, arched entrance, tower, and clocks was completed in 1909 is a cultural icon of Melbourne and one of the city’s most recognisable landmarks.43

Following the debacle of privatising Victoria’s public transport system in the 1990s, by 2012, almost half of the Flinders Street Station complex had been cordoned off and left to deteriorate. Despite best attempts to reclaim these spaces for public use, Contemporary Site Investigations was the first creative programming within these coveted spaces in over 29 years. Of all the off-limit spaces of Flinders Street Station, it is the ball room that attracts incomparable public fascination and intrigue. Since its conception as a concert hall in 1910, this space has hosted lectures, meetings, drama, opera, orchestra, and dance. Purpose built for performance, the ballroom contains a vaulted ceiling and double glazed windows which provide excellent acoustic qualities that are ideal for the performing arts.


Site Specific Performance

While I was responsible for designing and producing the performance of *Duration*, it is important to note that I was not responsible for selecting the music, as I have no musical training, and my technical knowledge of classical music can at best be described as limited. The music selection of *Canto Ostinato* by Simeon Ten Holt emerged from discussions with my mentor, collaborator and aunt, Elizabeth Drake. In selecting the music, several factors were considered. We wanted a piece of music that would resonate with the spatial qualities of the station and surrounds, and a composition that was spatially oriented, and would be used as a tool to sound out the spatial/acoustic qualities of the dilapidated ballroom. *Canto Ostinato* met these criteria, and was also selected for the pragmatic reason of funding constraints. The piece was performance ready, having been performed at the Iwaki Auditorium on four grand pianos in 2011, at the 2010 Perth International Arts Festival, and in the Adelaide Railway Station at Womad in 2012.

Described as a unity of disparate elements, *Canto Ostinato* was composed in 1974, and is considered to be minimal in origin, because of the repetitive, obstinate nature of the piece.

Ten Holt usually uses the term ‘genetic code’ to describe his work, probably because of the typical build-up of the piece. In contrast to a high percentage of modern classical music which is not tonal and/or consonant, *Canto Ostinato* contains tonal harmonies and does not become (very) dissonant. Another typical aspect is the fact that one can hear the same or similar bass figures and harmonies throughout the piece, which explains the title. If one word had to catch the essence of *Canto Ostinato*, it might be ‘meditative,’ as the different sections are similar, but generate different emotional reactions.

Fig 2.5 *Duration* Diagram
Obtaining Access

In the early 1900s, in addition to acting as Victoria’s largest transport hub, Flinders Street Station in its earliest conception was a hive of social activity and public programming, which included dances, a working gymnasium, and a kindergarten. As mentioned above, through the sale of Victoria’s public assets and infrastructure in the 1990s by the Kennett government, Melbourne’s public transport network was in the hands of private transport operators — first Connex, then Metro trains. The consequence of privatisation was that the maintenance of historic buildings such as the heritage listed administration building was deemed too expensive, thus they fell into disrepair and were cordoned off. In developing creative programs within these historic spaces, Contemporary Site Investigations sought to reveal ‘the traces of people who have inhabited it in the past, the stories of partially erased or contested inhabitations – and to raise the issue of ownership.’

According to Gay McAuley, ‘anyone setting out to make a site based performance must of necessity enter into negotiations with the owners of the site, those who currently occupy it, and those who have control over it’, in substantiating the performance design for Duration, Flinders Street Station was no exception. As we were the first group to be granted permission to use these spaces in nearly thirty years, we had to factor in a number of contingencies. This constraint demonstrates that ‘a serious engagement with place necessitated by site based performance practice is likely to involve engagement with weighty matters which are themselves at the heart of major political conflicts.’

The first contingency was timing. In November 2011, the Victorian Premier announced an international design competition to ‘breathe new life into a Melbourne landmark,’ stating “We are looking for the world’s best ideas to restore and reinvigorate the Flinders Street Station precinct, including the station concourse, platforms and historic administration building.” The placing of this landmark building under the spotlight of renewed media, political, and public attention brought about a timely opportunity to approach the custodians of the station, Metro Trains, to obtain permission for creative programming to reactivate latent public space. As the project was funded by the City of Melbourne, Metro Trains were fast to recognise the marketing potential, and granted access.

Another factor contributing to gaining access to these coveted spaces was the participating artists’ combined expertise in dealing with creative interventions into buildings scheduled for demolition. These collaborative projects included Blundell House, Surf Street House, and especially Depot, that was commissioned by the Dandenong City Council. Whether in partnership with local councils or private owners, these projects had been realised through the team’s experience in managing OHS protocols, public liability insurances, risk assessment and public audiences, without incident. Another factor in our success was my own status as a registered architect, experienced in realising built works. This provided an aura of authority, enabling us to reassure risk averse project partners, who signed off on a month long creative residency of site specific investigation in the off-limits areas of Flinders Street Station.

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48 Gay McAuley, ‘Site-Specific Performance: Place, Memory and the Creative Agency of the Spectator,’ *Arts Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association* 27 (2005): 30
49 Ibid. 30
50 Ibid. 31
52 Ibid.
54 http://merricks-beach-house-installation.blogspot.com.au
55 http://depot-installation.blogspot.com.au

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Fig. 2.7 *Depot* Flyer, 2008
Community of Practice: Site Specific (Piano) Performance

Central to being granted access to the Flinders Street Station ballroom was the perceived cultural authority of the piano as an unthreatening cultural object, one that both the City of Melbourne and Metro Trains may have considered would convey an elevated public image by association. While the historical and cultural context of the piano will be explored in Chapter Three, it is the semiotic, spatial and performative potential of piano that has informed both the research methodology and the community of practice. In engaging the performative, spatial and semiotic potential of the piano as a cultural artefact, this research is specifically informed by, and contributes to, a community of practitioners who utilise pianos within their site specific performance works. Unpacked in detail within Chapters Three, Four and Five, the project work is contextualized within a range of historical and contemporary performance works, from across the fields of performance, performance art, video art, installation, scenography, and stunts. While varied in their approaches, this community of practice draws on the politics of a variety of spatial contexts through a material engagement with the performative, spatial and symbolic potentials of the piano.

Due to occupational health and safety concerns of Metro officials in relation to deteriorating plaster ceiling, it was understood from the outset that a public audience would not be granted access to the ballroom. The task at hand became how to produce an engaging public art work for a diverse audience whilst the public remained situated outside the station complex. From within the apparent contradiction of performance without audience, emerged a key research question; ‘What is the potential of inverting the conventional spatial relations of performance?’ Deploying a film crew to capture and broadcast the performance to the Federation Square Screen, to the internet and to the station’s platforms, Duration sought to invert and externalize the ballroom so the public could encounter the hidden spaces without actually physically entering them. This spatial inversion of traditional audience performer relationships aimed to reveal the material and immaterial spatial qualities laden with the historical context and acoustic specificity from the ballroom to the public areas of the station.

Fig 2.8 Piano entering Flinders Street ballroom. Duration, 2012
Duration: The Bump in

As Duration was to be the first performance in the ballroom in 29 years, the project attracted unanticipated media attention. This media coverage included The Age online, publishing a six-part webisode series focusing on each of the artists that was released daily in the lead up to the Friday night launch. The Herald Sun covered the delivery of the pianos into the complex. On the morning of the launch, two grand pianos arrived at the loading dock at the rear of Flinders Street Station. With the Herald Sun photographer positioned on platform 2, the pianos were wheeled across platform 1, down the ramp to the awaiting lift. Much to the annoyance of the burly piano movers, and despite having twice measured the service lift, the cumbersome and heavy pianos did not fit in the elevator. The piano movers scoped the six flights of stairs leading to the ballroom on the second level. Despite their physical stature, the piano movers declined my invitation to carry them up the stairs and instead decided to load them back into the truck. Jumping on the phone, I called the head office and before the removals had time to load up and drive away, the two pianos were reluctantly maneuvered to the base of the stair case. One step at a time, the two shiny black grands were lifted up the six flights of stairs before finally being wheeled into the ballroom.

When the pianos arrived in the ballroom, after their arduous passage into the building, I felt a huge sense of achievement in recognition that irrespective of the performance event to follow, the temporal presence of the pianos within the ballroom in combination with the media interest, had re-activated a historic urban landmark. Cordoned off with hazard tape, the shiny black pianos sat juxtaposed against the crumbling plasterwork and delaminated parquetry floor signaling a form of anticipated renewal. Emerging from the project is an understanding of the piano as artifice tied to its capacity to enter politically charged and historically significant spaces.

The emphasis of the live mediated audience situated at Federations Square provoked an arrangement of the ballroom configured primarily for the cameras. The pianos were positioned centre left, interlocking so pianists could face each other, maintaining visual contact. In consultation with the film crew, the cameras were positioned at the northern end of ballroom with a second camera positioned on the balcony at the southern end.

* Please open and watch performance documentation now : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11QbX4p2Pl0

The Launch

On an unseasonably warm October evening, the timing of the performance was such that it commenced during peak hour traffic around half an hour before twilight. The cyclical nature of the music mixed with the sounds of trains and traffic below seemingly syncopated with the movement of thousands of pedestrians. Amongst the peeling paint and crumbling plaster, pianists Elizabeth Drake and Caroline Almonte performed a ninety-minute performance of Simeon ten Holt’s *Canto Ostinato*.

Taking place during peak hour traffic, ‘the audience, previously conceived as a viewer or beholder, was repositioned as a co-producer or participant.’ Claire Bishop suggests this form of ‘participatory engagement tends to be expressed most forcefully in the live encounter between embodied actors in particular contexts.’ Exploiting the spatial context of the station, and the embodied actors as the general public, *Duration* sought to produce a transformative moment defined by Henri Lefebvre as ‘a fleeting, intensely euphoric sensation which appeared as a point of rupture which revealed the totality of possibilities of daily existence.’

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59 Ibid.

**Duration, Flinders Street Station & Spatial Politics**

Claire Bishop, discussing participatory art and the politics of spectatorship, writes that 'Collective projects are more difficult to market than works by individual artists, and less likely to be “works” than a fragmented array of social events or performances.' Reflecting on the potential of cohesive fragmentation in relation to how site specific performance can actively engage in spatial politics, the research produced at Flinders Street Station suggests that *Duration* was reliant on the discursive potential of the performance, forms of spectatorship, and the iconic ballroom.

As the first creative programming in the ballroom in 29 years, the capacity of *Duration* to actively engage in the spatial politics of Flinders Street Station is tied to the ability of temporal practice to intervene in and critique contested spaces of cultural significance. In the liminal space between dilapidation and renewal, *Duration* suggests that site specific performance can activate new spatio-political formations in the relations between the public and the urban realm. *Conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations,* *Duration* represents a form of critical spatial practice that moves beyond traditional expectations of object/spectator relations to provoke newfound connections between existing architectural environments, site specific investigations, and the public realm.

Our inability to gain permission for a live public audience to enter the ballroom to attend the performance provides insights into the inner mechanisms of privatised public infrastructure. Such is the pervasive nature of neoliberal tendencies to privatise public assets. This limitation suggests that, while the industry partners involved in Contemporary Site Investigations appeared, in this case, to be open to creative programming, their aim was transparently driven by public relations and a desire to capitalise on creative collateral. Dubious of corporate entities involved in this research project, the research artists in Contemporary Site Investigations presented a form of critical spatial practice in which the station was re-contextualised through performative action to critique the spatial politics of privatisation. Furthermore, in developing a creative practice research project within the station complex, *Duration* brought about a temporal destabilisation of privatised public infrastructure, momentarily returning the ballroom to the public realm.

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*Fig 2.15 Analytical model highlighting the spatial configuration of *Duration*.*
Emergent Operations

In reflecting on the methods that emerged from the Flinders Street Station ballroom via *Duration*, a series of insights and concerns are identified as the origins for the critical spatial practice methodology that would unfold in Research Phase Two. These insights include: (1) the ability of the piano to gain access to contested spaces of historical significance; (2) the operative potential of re-appropriating iconic spaces of architecture through performative intervention; (3) the operative potential of inverting conventional spatial arrangements between spectators, performers and architectural environments; and (4) the role of performance documentation in relation to reproduction and distribution to wide public audiences.

These four insights that emerged from *Duration* share a seemingly non-threatening perception of the piano and its potential as a subversive device that can enter contested spaces not usually granted access to the public. This ability of the piano to unlock coveted spaces is tied to the historical legacy of the piano, that has emerged through a particular historical lineage, explored and addressed in detail in Chapter Three.

In re-contextualising the iconic ballroom through the staging of *Duration*, Flinders Street Station was reframed by assigning it an active role. This re-visiting of remembered spaces through site specific creative practice elevated public engagement, through a commitment to material practice that temporally re-activated the derelict ballroom. The re-appropriation of landmark buildings through site specific performance generates an emergent research methodology that plays on the intrigue of accessing spaces normally off-limits to the public.

Emergent Operations

Informing the four research projects to follow, is the critical spatial operation of inverting space that emerged from *Duration*. This operation came into being through the re-distribution of a public audience from a live to a televised encounter with the performance. While the spatial inversion emerged from pragmatic considerations, the inversion of traditional audience-to-performer relations brought with it the re-distribution of an intimate encounter with a conventional piano recital to an expanded form of spectatorship via the Federation Square screen, the internet, and the public announcement system. The inversion of traditional audience-to-performer spatial relations questions normative modes of audience engagement and dominant forms of cultural production, bringing into focus the role of technology and performance documentation in relation to reproduction and distribution to reach extended public audiences.
An Investigative Spatial Performance

Featuring

Elizabeth Drake
Vanessa Tomlinson

Performing

Piano Phase
by Steve Reich

Produced by

Campbell Drake

Limited Audience
RSVP essential:
campbell@cdstudio.com.au
ph: 0431903866

Friday 9th May at 6:45 pm
The Princess Theatre
163 Spring Street, Melbourne VIC 3000
*Entry from Little Bourke Street

The Princess Theatre Inversion

Fig 2.16 Invitation to The Princess Theatre Inversion, 2014
## Project Synopsis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>The Princess Theatre Inversion</th>
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<tr>
<td>Project No.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Phase</td>
<td>Phase 1 _ Urban Landmarks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>April 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>The Princess Theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>The Mariner Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performance Site</td>
<td>19th Century proscenium theatre, theatre stage, loading dock and service entry * No audience access to auditorium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Conditions</td>
<td>Opened in 1854 – Rebuilt in 1886 Designed by William Pitt Second Empire style Capacity 1488 seats * oldest continuous entertainment site on mainland Australia * first sliding or retractable roof and ceiling in Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musical Instruments</td>
<td>2 x Grand Pianos</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technical Devices</td>
<td>Three Cameras (Behind/In-front/Above audience) Synchronised Lighting / Lighting Technician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performers</td>
<td>2 Pianists (Elizabeth Drake &amp; Vanessa Tomlinson)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Composition</td>
<td>Piano Phase by Steve Reich</td>
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<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>25 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audience 1 (Live)</td>
<td>An invited audience of 100 people</td>
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<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>3 fixed camera angles / 20 minute video <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkR%C3%BCtjm0s0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkRütjm0s0</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience 2 (Mediated)</td>
<td>Situation 2014 attendees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umbrella Project</td>
<td>Self-Initiated</td>
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<td>Funding Body</td>
<td>Self-Funded</td>
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<tr>
<td>Key Procedures</td>
<td>Piano Recital Reappropriation of landmark building Inversion of conventional socio-architectural theatre relations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activated Concerns</td>
<td>Hierarchies of dominant forms of cultural production</td>
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<td>Critical Spatial Operation</td>
<td>Spatial Inversion</td>
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Project 2: The Princess Theatre Inversion

Extending upon the Spatial Inversion operation that emerged from Duration, is a second site specific performance titled The Princess Theatre Inversion that took place in 2014. Further exploring the cultural authority of the piano and its capacity to enter spaces of historical and cultural significance, The Princess Theatre Inversion investigates the operative potential of inverting conventional relationships between performers, audiences and architecture.

Centered on the interactions between the piano as cultural artefact, an audience as community, and the Princess Theatre as an urban landmark, this project explores how site specific performance might activate new spatio-political formations though a critical engagement in the spatial politics of a proscenium theatre.

Leading scholars writing on site specific performance practices are quick to point out the limitations of engaging critically with the theatre; however, The Princess Theatre Inversion contests this principle and instead seeks to provide a critique of the theatre as a dominant mode of cultural production. Rather than attempting to develop a narrative based critique on the stage with a live audience, the research instead challenges the hegemonic structures of traditional theatre space through an attempt to destabilise conventional social and architectural spatial relationships.

Project Origins

The context in which this project emerged as an extension to Contemporary Site Investigations: Flinders Street Station was through an invitation by Melbourne Festival director Josephine Ridge to develop a new work for the 2013 Melbourne Festival. Extending upon this invitation, I approached the Mariner Group about staging a piano performance within a redundant space that had previously been used by the Melbourne Theatre Company at the rear of the Forum Theatre. Within this meeting I showed Jason Mariner the performance documentation from Duration, that had taken place as part of Contemporary Site Investigations. Mariner advised that he was already aware of the work due to the media coverage and multiple screenings of the performance documentation at Federation Square. While the space at the rear of the forum was deemed unsuitable due to noise complaints from an increased residential population with the CBD, Mariner instead offered me an opportunity to produce a new performance work within The Princess Theatre in exchange for media coverage of the aging theatre.

The Princess Theatre: Historical context

Melbourne’s iconic Princess Theatre is regarded by many as one of Melbourne’s most spectacular landmarks. Opened in 1886, and designed in the style of the French Second Empire, the theatre is of rendered brick with a slate roof. It has a symmetrical facade with three dominant pavilion bays, each roofed with mansard domes crowned with elaborate cast iron cresting. The facade is balustraded with urns, and contains a frieze of festoons, giant order Corinthian pilasters and attached columns. The central bay features a pediment containing the British coat of arms, surmounted by a figure of Fame and couchant lions. At the time of opening the Princess Theatre was greatly admired for its luxurious interior, electric lighting and opening roof for ventilation. This ingenious, roll back roof required an eight meter wide circular opening in the ceiling to slide open and two sliding sections of gabled roof to move apart.
In addition to the *Canto Ostinato* performance in the Flinders Street Station ballroom, a second (and little recognised) performance of Steve Reich’s *Piano Phase* by Elizabeth Drake and Vanessa Tomlinson took place. This performance was on the Saturday morning following the live televised broadcast to Federation Square. With a small audience of six people in the ballroom, *Piano Phase* was broadcast to the station’s platforms and concourse through the station’s public announcement system. While there is no recorded evidence of this piece, due to technical deficiencies on the day of the performance, witnessing this piece first hand while watching trains entering and leaving the platforms below had a profound effect on me, and helped me to understand how site specific performance can produce a heightened sensory engagement with the temporalities of immediate environments. When the opportunity presented itself to produce a second project at the Princess Theatre, I approached pianist Elizabeth Drake to re-perform *Piano Phase* with a live audience of one hundred people. Extending upon the research from Flinders Street Station, *The Princess Theatre Inversion* explores how site specific performance actively engages in the spatial politics of urban landmarks of national significance.

Like *Duration*, *The Princess Theatre Inversion* adopted two grand pianos as instruments to renegotiate the relations between spectatorship, action and spatial context. The project that was devised was to invite an audience of one hundred people to take part in an investigative spatial performance which challenged traditional audience, performer and theatre spatial interactions.
Chapter 2: Preliminary Projects

Fig. 2.18 The Princess Theatre Auditorium
The Event

Rather than entering the theatre through the main entrance off Spring Street, the audience was asked to queue up at the service entry on Little Bourke Street. At exactly 8 p.m., the side door opened, and the audience moved into the loading dock. The intent was for the audience, clustered together, to be aware of what Fischer-Lichtes refers to as emergent community through the corporeality of performance. While the audience waited in the loading dock, an usher announced the commencement of the performance, and requested everyone to remain silent while entering the theatre.

Moving through the oversized steel doors to stage right, the audience were guided through darkness towards one hundred blue seats spotlit from above, lightly obscured in stage fog. Filing into the rows and instructed to leave no free seats, the audience took their places side by side, in close enough proximity for the broader members of the audience to touch shoulders. Once seated, the spot light above the audience was gradually dimmed, leaving the audience in complete darkness, unknowingly facing the empty auditorium of the Princess Theatre.

* Please open and watch performance documentation now: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NkRiitjm0s0

In the darkness, pianists Elizabeth Drake and Vanessa Tomlinson made their way to two grand pianos interlocked on stage right. Taking their positions at the pianos and cued by the first hint of light from a second spot light above, the performers commenced a twenty minute recital of Reich’s Piano Phase. As the music progressed and phased, synchronised lighting gradually introduced the audience to the empty auditorium. The lush red velvet seating and crystal chandelier emerging from the darkness as a foggy apparition, hyper-real under full house lights.

It slowly revealed itself and its architectural form as well as its decoration. The lighting highlighted areas that you would usually ignore or consider as a given.

At the halfway point of the 20 minute recital, the lighting sequence was reversed. Removing definition from the auditorium once again submerging the audience into darkness, completing the music and lighting sequence with the spot light returned over the audience.

The music had the drowsy mania of bees, the chandelier the honey from the roof of the hive caught in the suspended moment before the fall. A poem in seeing what was already there, till my eyes closed from the lushness of the empty theatre. I didn’t feel like talking. Just walking in the dark.
Chapter 2: Preliminary Projects

Fig 2.21. The Princess Theatre Inversion, still from video.

Fig 2.22. The Princess Theatre Inversion, still from video.
The Princess Theatre Inversion: Theatre and Spatial Politics

In seeking an active engagement with the spatial politics of the proscenium theatre, the Princess Theatre Inversion sought to provide critical insights into a dominant form of cultural production. An intervention within the theatre in order to critique the relations between human and non-human interaction raises the question of what spatio-political formations were activated through the inversion of conventional spatial relationships between the performers, the audience and the architectural environment of the theatre.

First, it was revealed that despite inverting the physical relations between the stage, the audience, the performers and the auditorium, the conventions of normative behaviour within this context were not shifted, and the audience assumed their passive role, remaining seated on the stage. In surveys conducted post performance, it was noted that while half the audience had previously attended the Princess Theatre, over 50% had no idea they were sitting on the stage. With the visual cues removed by blacking out the exit lights to create complete darkness, the audience was unable to locate themselves. Some noted that they thought the performance was some kind of prank and they had been led into a warehouse space adjacent to the theatre.

The adjustment of customary access to the auditorium from the front door of Princess Street to the service entry of Little Bourke, in combination with the removal of exit signs, suggests that re-appropriating normative architectural cues provokes a disassociative impulse and feeling of disorientation. This disorientation suggests that the temporal deterritorialisation of theatrical convention destabilises the relations between the theatre, the performers and spectatorship, evoking a condition that Jacque Rancière refers to as ‘a third thing.’

Activating an awareness of this ‘third thing,’ The Princess Theatre Inversion provokes a spatial condition in which the performers, the theatre and the audience might experience each other anew. In a post performance survey that followed, one audience member noted ‘The performance provoked a sensory engagement in which the architecture became dynamic in the participation of space. The work provoked me to reflect on myself as through the theatre was reconstructed as ‘having eyes.’ It is the reference to the theatre as having eyes that resonate with Rancière’s ‘third thing;’ he writes; ‘It is not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator, it is the third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one, but which subsists between them.’

While Rancière’s ‘Emancipated Spectator’ is focused on hierarchical relationships and issues of equality played out between spectators and performers, The Princess Theatre Inversion extends this relational concern through its emphasis on a third performative agent; that of the role of the built environment within dominant modes of cultural production. By assigning the built environment an active role through the staging of the inverted performance, the assumption that architectural environments are passive, static, and immobile, is questioned, and re-framed by the viewers’ gaze to produce a heightened present. De-theatricalising the theatre and re-theatricalising the everyday, the relations between viewers and objects are temporally destabilised, opening up the potential for performative interaction in which the audience oscillates from the meditative drone of the music to a renewed sense of presence. By focusing the attention of the audience on the empty auditorium and the two pianists, the conspicuously framed absence of the auditorium can provoke a temporal transformation in which spectators may become aware of their own presence in relation to the performers, the audience and the built environment. Extending this operative potential of presence, Gabriella Giannachi writes:

where the operation of presence should occur is where the listener is made to encounter what is in front or before them, so that they may become alert to what is around them, meaning their environment. This is also where the subject relocates, or presents in space and time in order to re-encounter themselves in the other or as the other.

—Ibid.

Thea Brejzek, Performative Spaces Lecture, University of Technology Sydney, September 2016.

Chapter 2: Preliminary Projects

Research Project 02
‘The Princess Theatre Inversion’
Piano Phase by Steve Reich
The Princess Theatre
2014

Fig 2.23 The Princess Theatre Inversion diagram #01
Emergent Operations
Emerging from *The Princess Theatre Inversion* is the critical spatial operation of Spatial Inversions and Instrumentalising that informed a working methodology and gave rise to an evolving form of critical spatial practice concerned with activating engagement with the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes.

In this first phase of the research, the piano and music selected in both *Duration* and *The Princess Theatre Inversion* are recognisably drawn from a music canon of minimalist composition that commands a certain type of formalised spectatorship. Confirming this mode of formalised spectatorship, the research explores unconventional spatial configurations between audience, performers, and space, enabling an interruption of normative modes of audience engagement. This detour is further enhanced by the audience being pre-informed or presently informed of certain elements in the event dramaturgy, such as the music selection (Reich/Glass) or the way in which to enter the space (side entry/silence). The information received by the audience provoked a preconception of the way in which the performance may be carried out. The research attempts to engage, then shift away from the preconception of traditional modes of performance, forcing the audience to relocate in relation to the performer, the space, and fellow audience members.

Fundamental to understanding the conceptual and locational progression from the urban piano recitals of *Duration* and *The Princess Theatre Inversion*, to three regionally situated piano experimentations of Research Phase Two, was the way in which the two preliminary projects engaged with the political implications of the piano in a limited way. Working generatively with this semiotic inflection, the prospective projects addressed in the preceding three chapters, actively engage with these implications across a variety of contexts, including the piano’s implied relation to Australian colonial history, and the ongoing impact of colonialism.
Chapter 2: Preliminary Projects

Fig 2.25 The Princess Theatre Inversion, 2014

Fig 2.26 The Princess Theatre Inversion, still from video
RESEARCH PHASE TWO:
CONTESTED AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPES
Fig. 3.1 *Instrumental*, Culpra Station, 2015
Image courtesy of Greta Costello.
Chapter 3.0 : Instrumental

Project Synopsis

Title | Instrumental
--- | ---
Project No. | 3
Research Phase | Phase Two : Contested Australian Landscapes
Date | September 2015
Site | Culpra Station, regional New South Wales
Owner | The Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation
Purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation
Research Phase | Phase 2 : Contested Australian Landscapes
Performance Site | Outdoors, in a setting of dead gumtrees
Site Conditions | 8000 hectare property in the NSW Mallee bordering the Murray River and the Kemondok National Park. The land is situated in Barkanji Country and has a number of significant Aboriginal sites including burial sites, hearths, scarred trees, an ochre quarry, middens and a fish trap. Formerly used for grazing and cropping, the land was first farmed in 1887. Culpra Station was purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation in 2002 as a land bank for Aboriginal people and is managed by the Culpra Mill Aboriginal Corporation.
Landscape | The property is home to locally significant fauna including kangaroos, emus, echidnas, and the endangered Regent parrot. Red-gum forests, watery billabongs, mallee scrub in fields of red sand, gnarled box and tangled lignum spread across wide heavy black soil plains and wetlands. The property was in flood at the time of this performance.
Musical Instrument | 1 x Broken Upright Piano
Technical Devices | 2 x digital video cameras
2 x Audio zoom
Performer | 1 x Piano Tuner (Geoff Quennell)
Composition | piano tuning only (no composition)
Duration | 20 minutes
Audience 1 (Live) | Informal audience of 5 Interpretive Wonderings participants
Documentation | 1 fixed / 1 roaming camera angles / 20 minute video
Audience 2 (Mediated) | The Mildura Arts Centre / ABC Radio national listeners / Academic readership of Unlikely Journal & OAR Journal
Umbrella Project | Interpretive Wonderings
Funding Bodies | Mildura Rural City Council / The Mildura Arts Centre / Local Land Services / The University of Technology Sydney
Subject | Spatial Politics of intercultural land ownership
Key Procedures | Piano Tuning
Juxtaposition of western cultural artefact within contested Australian landscape
Instrumentalising the piano as a colonial artefact
Activated concerns | Ongoing impact of colonialism / Duplicitous spatial politics of intercultural landownership
Emergent Operation | Instrumentalising

Instrumental: Performance and the cumulative potential of distributed sites

Exploring the relations between the site of research production and the site of distribution, this chapter is a critical comparison of the immediate experience of conducting research in a specific place/space and the sites at which practice-based research are published and exhibited. Extending Miwon Kwon’s assertion that ‘site is not simply a geographical location or architectural setting but a network of social relations,’ my research is situated within the field of critical spatial practice and examines how site specific performance can actively engage in the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes. Carried out as a series of iterative performances, the practice-based research methodology uses salvaged pianos as a device to renegotiate the politics of space through the re-appropriation of contested Australian landscapes.

This chapter is focused on a performance titled Instrumental, that took place in 2015, on an 8000-hectare property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for the Aboriginal people of the Barkanji nation. Produced in collaboration with the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation (CMAC) in 2015, Instrumental came about through an invitation to participate in a critical cartographies workshop, and features a professional piano tuner attempting to tune a broken upright piano outdoors in the blazing midday sun. Drawing on the semiotic potential of the piano as a cultural artifact of western colonial origins, this research stages a juxtaposition of the piano and the Australian bush to examine cultural semantics unique to the site’s political and spatial contexts.

Here I build upon Henri Lefebvre’s assertion that ‘there is a politics of space because space is political’ to provide insights into the relations between aesthetic practices, human and non-human interaction, and the politics of Indigenous and non-Indigenous space. Part one of the chapter provides a close reading of the immediate experience of producing Instrumental and speculates on the ability of site specific performance to re-negotiate spatial politics. Part two examines the motivations and critical operations behind mediatising or documenting site specific performance for the purposes of exhibiting (and evidencing) within institutional research frameworks. Tracing Instrumental from conception to realisation and on to dissemination as exhibition and publication, this paper investigates the efficacy and impact of sites of research production and sites of research distribution as cumulative fields of discursive operation.

Fig 3.2 Interpretive Wonderings
Invitation
PART 1: THE RESEARCH SITE IN A SPECIFIC PLACE & SPACE.

Instrumental is the title of a creative research project that is situated at the intersection of spatial design, performance and sound. Taking place in September 2015 during an Indigenous-led mapping workshop titled Interpretive Wonderings, the project involves the staged tuning of a broken upright piano situated outdoors on Culpra Station in rural New South Wales.

The research is framed within an existing field of practice in which a variety of creative practitioners engage pianos as performative devices to renegotiate situations, subjects and environments. Instrumental is both critical and spatial; a specific type of practice coined by Jane Rendell as ‘critical spatial practice – work that intervenes into a site in order to critique that site.’ Instrumental extends upon the work of Ross Bolleter’s Ruined Piano Sanctuary (2000), Richard McLester’s The Piano is the Sea (2008), and Yosuke Yamashita’s Burning Piano (1973/2008); whilst varied in their approaches, these works engage the politics of a given spatial context by leveraging and exploiting the symbolic associations of the piano. Extending on the semiotic, spatial and performative potentials of the piano, Instrumental explores how site specific performance can activate engagement the spatial politics of rural Australia.

Site 1 : The production of research in the field

Inspired by a body of critical cartographic work that approaches mapping as ‘performative, participatory and political,’ Interpretive Wonderings was structured in two parts across two sites of research. Part one consisted of a three-day mapping workshop in the field on Culpra Station, followed by part two: a curated exhibition of mapping outcomes exhibited at the Mildura Arts Centre. In all, thirty Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants were invited to Culpra Station to produce creative interpretations of Barkanji Country.

The project had emerged through discussions with Barry Pearce, Aboriginal Elder and secretary of the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation, in which he expressed a desire to develop alternate representations of Culpra Station that express an Indigenous perspective of land and Country. Produced in collaboration with the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation, the University of Technology Sydney, Monash University, RMIT University and the Mildura Arts Centre, Interpretive Wonderings commenced with an open call for expressions of interest. In response, participants submitted mapping proposals in a range of media with the only stipulation that a relationship to the specificity of Barkanji Country was demonstrable.

82 See Andrea Buttner’s recent show which speaks of pianos, destruction and masculinity. http://en.artcontemporain-languedocroussillon.fr/evenement-939.html
My engagement with the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation and Culpra Station pre-dated my role as an Interpretive Wonderings participant; it was established over a two year period in which I worked in a research capacity exploring participatory design methods and opportunities for developing enterprises which drew on the local knowledge and business capabilities of the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation. While conducting this research, I was fortunate to visit Culpra Station on several occasions. Each time, Barry, Betty and Sophia Pearce of the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation shared their knowledge and histories of the property from which I developed insights into an Indigenous sensibility to land and Country from a Barkandji perspective.

The statutory body for overseeing land acquisitions is the Indigenous Land Corporation, 'for the purpose of building a secure and sustainable land bank for Indigenous people.' The acquisition of Culpra Station was made possible by the Aboriginal Land Act of 1983 (ALRA), which laid the foundations for the return of land to Indigenous Australians by the Commonwealth, state or territory governments of Australia based on recognition of dispossession. ALRA is a statutory land rights regime that partly compensates Aboriginal people for historical dispossession of their lands. ALRA recognises that land is of spiritual, social, cultural and economic importance to Aboriginal people, and is underpinned by the principle of self-determination.

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The earliest evidence of human occupation within the vicinity of Culpra Station is an Aboriginal midden that has been carbon dated to 16,250 +/- 540 years before the present. This midden is most likely to have been created by the Aboriginal people of the Barkandji and Kureinji language groups that continued to occupy the region of the Central Murray near present day Culpra Station at the time of the first contact with Europeans. The earliest written records of Culpra Station indicate that area was first visited by the ‘explorer Captain James Sturt during his 1829-31 expedition of the Murrumbidgee and Murray Rivers. The proximity of the Murray River and diversity of soil types have attracted cropping and grazing since the property was first delineated in 1846. Early records indicate that at least some of the land now recognised as Culpra Station was owned by David Wickett in 1887 and remained in the Wickett Family until its sale to the Burns family circa 1980. In more recent times, in 2002, the property was purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation ‘for the purpose of building a secure and sustainable land bank for Indigenous people.

The statutory body for overseeing land acquisitions is the Indigenous Land Corporation, which was established in 1995 under ALRA by the Federal Government, to assist Indigenous Australians to acquire land and manage Indigenous-held land sustainably and in a manner that provides cultural, social, economic and environmental benefits for themselves and future generations. Following the purchase of Culpra Station in 2002, the land was first managed, then granted to the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation, who continue to manage the property under the ethos of protecting the land from practices and actions that may be damaging to both its environmental and heritage value.

Reflected in the provenance of Culpra Station are traces of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous occupation and cultural practices dating back 20,000 years. The colonial and modern pastoralist histories have left some obvious marks on the land today, including laser-levelled pastures, redundant irrigation channels, farming infrastructure, and the remnants of a former homestead. Alongside the pastoralist history, the land at Culpra Station has a number of significant Aboriginal historical and cultural sites, including burial sites, hearths, scarred trees, an ochre quarry, middens, and a fish trap.

In making reference to the provenance of Culpra Station in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous ownership and demarcation, it is interesting to consider Paul Groth’s assertion that ‘landscape denotes the interaction of people and place: a social group and its spaces, particularly the spaces to which the group belongs and from which its members derive some part of their shared identity and meaning.” But which group and which identity are we referring to? Which space and time? Could the same landscape be synonymous with the identity of both Aboriginal and white farming communities? If so, how could this duplicitous politics of space be better understood? Seeking an active engagement with such questions, the invitation to take part in Interpretive Wonderings brought about an opportunity to further investigate the duplicitous spatial politics of inter-cultural ownership.
The semiotic register of the piano

At the time of submitting a mapping proposal for Interpretive Wonderings, I was developing a body of practice based research that investigated how site specific performance can actively engage in the spatial politics of contested urban and rural landscapes in Australia. This creative practice had been developed through a series of site specific performances staged within urban landmarks including Melbourne’s Flinders Street Station ballroom (Duration) and the Princess Theatre (The Princess Theatre Inversion). Central to the research methodology within this body of work was the utilisation and exploration of the piano as a performative, spatial and semiotic device to renegotiate the relations between spectatorship, action and contested spatial contexts. This working methodology is exemplified in the performance titled Duration that took place within the dilapidated Flinders Street Station ballroom in October 2012. Empty for thirty years as a consequence of the privatisation of state assets, Duration featured a ninety minute performance of Canto Ostinato by Simeon Ten Holt, performed on two grand pianos, demonstrating the semiotic potential of the piano to renegotiate contested spaces of cultural significance.

The invitation to take part in Interpretive Wonderings presented an opportunity to extend my research from the urban context of Melbourne’s inner city to the rural context of an Indigenous led mapping workshop on Culpra Station.

Prior to taking part in Interpretive Wonderings, I had been working with the symbolic implications of the piano in a limited way. The pianos selected for performances staged within the Flinders Street Station ballroom (Duration) and the Princess Theatre (The Princess Theatre Inversion) were all concert grand pianos upon which formal recitals had been played by professional musicians. The move from iconic architectural spaces, purpose built for performance, to a rural landscape setting, affected both the type of piano selected and the mode of pianist-to-instrument interaction, marking a methodological shift. While it cannot be denied that certain pragmatic concerns influenced these decisions — availability, cost, permissions, and the logistics of transporting a grand piano to a remote region of Australia — what is revealed in this variation from grand to upright piano is the conventions of the piano in relation to spatial context. A number of factors emerged. First, as the environmental and political context changed from urban to rural settings, salvaged upright pianos were selected in place of grand pianos, suggesting that the symbolic register of piano types (grand and upright) is tied to particular historical lineages in space and time. 92 Secondly, in the shift from controlled interior environments to an externalised landscape, the mode of interaction with the piano was modified from a formal recital to a staged tuning, in order to highlight a spatial negotiation between the piano, the pianist and the immediate environment.

In relation to Instrumental, ‘tuning’ is both a process and a concept. Usually taking place within a controlled interior environment, the act of tuning the piano outdoors can be interpreted as being an ironic symbol of, or satirical commentary on, the colonial desire to combat the harsh landscape and conditions presented by Australian environments. The staging on a property intended to be a compensatory land bank for Indigenous people, meant that the site brought about an opportunity to explore the semiotic potential of the piano as a colonial artifact in relation to land, Indigenous Country,93 and Australian post-colonial politics.

Informed by the perceived cultural identity of the piano as a colonial instrument, the preliminary proposal for Instrumental was to transport and locate an upright piano within Culpra Station’s dilapidated former homestead. Reflecting in the preliminary proposal to house the piano is my own cultural heritage as a man of British colonial origins with a predisposition to safeguard the piano, in a denial of the environmental realities of the Australian landscape. The first piano arrived in Australia in 1788 with the first fleet, and was once considered ‘the cultural heart and soul of the colonial home. It occupied the parlour, a place for families and their guests to gather, entertain and socialize, as well as a place to retreat into private solace.’94 Historically an object of desire, status and ‘civilization,’ pianos have in recent times been replaced with alternate forms of entertainment, including the television,95 personal computers, and smart phones. While we might imagine the piano’s place in the modern home has become redundant, and indeed, these instruments are often gifted for free, the symbolic recognition of the piano in Australia as part of a western cultural heritage means it has retained a perceived identity that is tied to a British colonial past.

In considering the symbolic register of an upright piano and Australian rural settings, it seems pertinent to contextualise the work in relation to Ross Bolleter’s Ruined Piano Sanctuary. Beginning the project as an art installation in 2005, Ross Bolleter relocated forty pianos to a property outside the town of York in rural Western Australia. In various states of dilapidation and decay, the pianos are scattered across the farm site, in dry fields and under gum trees. Over a period of thirty years Bolleter has explored the timbral possibilities of ruined pianos. He writes:

... old pianos that have been exposed to the elements of time and weather acquire novel and unexpected musical possibilities. A piano is ruined (rather than neglected or devastated) when it has been abandoned to all weathers and has become a decaying box of unpredictable dongs, tonks and dedoomps. The notes that don’t work are at least as interesting as those that do.96

Bolleter is a practicing Zen Buddhist, and The Ruined Piano Sanctuary is most commonly interpreted through a Buddhist lens within the cycle of life, death and renewal.97 Visually and symbolically reminiscent of a Buddhist stupa, the pianos each weather at their own pace under the prevailing winds and rain and within the whole environment in which they are placed. Informed by Bolleter’s aesthetic resonance, my first task in the realisation of Instrumental was to source a piano within the vicinity of the site. Using the Internet, I located a piano on a farm in the country town of Barham, about 400 km downstream. The owners said it was stored in an old farm house, and had not been played in over 50 years. I drove 800km from Sydney, purchased the piano for $100, loaded it into the tray of a dual cab ute, and transported it to the site.

9When Aboriginal people use the English word ‘Country’ it is meant in a special way. For Aboriginal people culture, nature and land are all linked. Aboriginal communities have a cultural connection to the land, which is based on each community’s distinct culture, traditions and laws. Country takes in everything within the landscape—landforms, waters, air, trees, rocks, plants, animals, foods, medicines, minerals, stories and special places. Community connections include cultural practices, knowledge, songs, stories and art, as well as all people: past, present and future. These custodial relationships may determine who can speak for particular Country. These concepts are central to Aboriginal spirituality and continue to contribute to Aboriginal identity. Source from http://www.visitmungo.com.au/aboriginal-country. This definition of Country has been selected for its specific relevance to Culpra Station and the Barkanji nation having originated from Lake Mungo; a site of Barkanji cultural significance that was pivotal in substantiating the largest native title claim in New South Wales history that was awarded to the Barkanji people in August 2016.

93When Aboriginal people use the English word ‘Country’ it is meant in a special way. For Aboriginal people culture, nature and land are all linked. Aboriginal communities have a cultural connection to the land, which is based on each community’s distinct culture, traditions and laws. Country takes in everything within the landscape—landforms, waters, air, trees, rocks, plants, animals, foods, medicines, minerals, stories and special places. Community connections include cultural practices, knowledge, songs, stories and art, as well as all people: past, present and future. These custodial relationships may determine who can speak for particular Country. These concepts are central to Aboriginal spirituality and continue to contribute to Aboriginal identity. Source from http://www.visitmungo.com.au/aboriginal-country. This definition of Country has been selected for its specific relevance to Culpra Station and the Barkanji nation having originated from Lake Mungo; a site of Barkanji cultural significance that was pivotal in substantiating the largest native title claim in New South Wales history that was awarded to the Barkanji people in August 2016.


95The Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) estimate 99% of Australian homes have a working television set.


When I arrived, I decided it was inappropriate to place the piano in the former homestead. Restricting the performance to the homestead seemed reductive in comparison to the expansive context of the 8000 hectare property. If the spatial context I had intended to explore was that of Barkanji Country, the homestead that was once occupied by farming families was the wrong environment in which to situate a site specific performance. So I spent several days driving around, exploring the diverse landscape in search of an appropriate site. Following a discussion with members of the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation, I was directed to a particular area of Culpra Station dominated by a forest of dead gum trees. The gum trees had suffered in the statewide drought of the early 2000s, and their ghostly appearance produced an ‘almost spooky’ atmosphere, where I decided to locate the piano. By situating the piano on the black soil country surrounded by gnarled black box trees, I hoped that an environmental dialogue was evoked between the piano and Barkanji Country. Visually reminiscent of Bolleter’s work, this dialogue presented the piano as vulnerable and exposed, awaiting to be subsumed by the environmental realities of the Australian landscape, which are also evoked by its proximity to the dead gum trees.

However, in contrast to Bolleter’s ruined pianos that, in a sense, give in to their environment, I commissioned a local piano tuner from Mildura, forty kilometers away, to tune the salvaged piano for thirty minutes to the best of his ability, in the blazing midday sun. As the instrument had not been played in over fifty years and had a cracked sound board, the act of tuning and tightening strings only put additional pressure on the internal mechanisms, which slid in and out of tune as the tuner moved through the keys from one end to the other. As he toiled away, the piano resisted. It denied its new situation, and could not maintain harmony in a foreign environment. Like the desire to house the piano in the homestead, the act of tuning could be conceived as re-enacting the colonial preoccupation with fighting against the land and what was perceived as a hostile, harsh and foreign environment. By contrast, Bolleter’s ruined pianos passively give way to these conditions, and performances using them have relished and celebrated the new sounds created by their gradual transformation by their environment. In Instrumental, the tuner, a solitary figure in the landscape, is not a recognised “noise musician” or “sound performer,” but becomes an almost absurd caricature of his colonial forbears.

Fig 3.12 Piano at performance site, Culpra Station, 2015
Image courtesy of Greta Costello
Fig. 3.13 Instrumental.
Culpa Station 2015. Image courtesy of Greta Costello.
On Tuning: An acoustic ecology

Usually taking place within a controlled and internalised environment, ‘piano tuning involves listening to the sound of two notes played simultaneously (a two-note chord) and “navigating” between sequences of chords in which one note is already tuned and the other has to be adjusted.99 The placement of the piano outdoors inverts conventional tuning practice. This inversion repositions the pianist to piano (human to non-human) interaction by assigning the environment (non-human) a more active role in the tuning process. The active role of the environment is determined by the sonic and spatial qualities of the landscape, the acoustic ecology within which the tuner recalibrates the instrument.

The term ‘acoustic ecology,’ coined by Murray Schafer, is a discipline studying the relationship mediated through sound between human beings and their environments. In developing the term, Schafer devised a new terminology for soundscape studies. He defines background sounds as ‘keynotes,’ foreground sounds as ‘signal sounds,’ and sounds that are particularly regarded by a community are ‘soundmarks.’ Schafer’s terminology helps to express the idea that the sound of a particular locality (its keynotes, sound signals and soundmarks) can express a community’s identity to the extent that a site can be read and characterised by sounds.100

Adopting Schafer’s terminology, the keynotes were characterised by the wind rustling through the gum leaves and long grass, the sound signals were made up of the single notes of the piano, and the soundmarks were distinctive of native bird calls. As the tuner played and tuned each of the notes, the existing sounds of the landscape were seemingly amplified as a form of symphonic accompaniment. Beyond the audible spectrum, Schafer also developed the concept of ‘acoustic coloration.’ This term describes the ‘echoes and reverberations that occur as sound is absorbed and reflected from surfaces within an environment, and the effects of weather related factors such as temperature, wind and humidity.’101 Synonymous with the holistic notion of Indigenous Country, the acoustic coloration produced by Instrumental is inclusive of human and non-human presence and the effects of material and immaterial composition. Reflected by the surrounding tree trunks and absorbed by the tuner and the spectators, the sound signals were equally influenced by the wind and rising heat of sandy soils, such that ‘the sound arriving at the ear is the analogue of the current state of the physical environment, charged by each interaction with the environment.’102

In the act of tuning the piano within this environment, the landscape (or Country) comes to speak through the instrument, highlighting ‘the duplicity of landscape: referring to the tension between thing and idea—matter and meaning, place and ideology.’103 SWATting flies from their eyes, a small party of onlookers took shelter in the shade of the vehicles in silence. One unfortunate spectator sitting on an ant’s nest suppressed his urge to call out and disturb the meditative space produced as the tuner went about his futile task. According to one audience member, Instrumental ‘produced a space of meditative contemplation’ in which the act of tuning the piano allowed the landscape to speak through the instrument as the piano was tuned to the wind and the birds.104 The concept of ‘tuning space’ emerges from the immediate experience of conducting research in a specific place/space; the distance between passive spectators and constructed environments is collapsed to recalibrate the spatio-temporalities of landscape.

Whilst the immediate effect of the live event can be verified, the impact of producing such a performative spatial condition for a live audience of six people can at best be described as limited. From this close reading of the immediate experience of conducting research in a specific place/space, I turn to the sites at which practice-based research outputs are published and exhibited in order to tease out the relations between the site of research production and the site of distribution.
PART 2:
THE SITE(S) OF RESEARCH DISTRIBUTION

Performance documentation/post-production/dissemination

In mediatising site specific performance for the purposes of exhibiting, artist researchers have questioned the motivations, critical operations, and impact of evidencing artistic and practice based research within institutional research frameworks.105 Informed by Peggy Phelan’s famous declaration that ‘performance’s being becomes itself through disappearance,’106 I understood from the outset that the research output generated from the live performance of Instrumental would be exhibited at the Mildura Arts Centre in the form of video documentation. Although only a small live audience was present, the fact that the performance documentation would be disseminated in a gallery context shifted the emphasis of the performance design to one of performance for camera, rather than performance for a live audience.


In the essay ‘Against Ontology: Making Distinctions between the Live and the Mediatized’ Philip Auslander critiques Peggy Phelan’s assertion that ‘Performance’s being becomes itself through disappearance and can be defined as representation without reproduction.’ Auslander unpacks the tensions between two modes of performance, the live and the mediatised, arguing that ‘there remains a strong tendency in performance theory to place live performance and mediatized or technologized forms in opposition to one another.’ Problematising this inherent dichotomy, Auslander suggests this opposition is focused on two primary issues: reproduction and distribution. In focusing on the notion of reproduction and distribution in relation to sites of research, we must first consider the method by which Instrumental was documented, then the modes in which it was distributed to secondary audiences.

Reproduction: Performance documentation & post-production

The documentation was captured using three digital cameras and two audio recorders. Two of the cameras recorded moving images; one was set in a fixed position and the other roamed. The fixed camera was positioned to one side of the piano and used a wide longitudinal lens; the camera view framed the piano in the middle foreground, surrounded by dead, twisted gum trees. The second video camera captured close-up imagery of the tuner working the piano, combined with cutaways of surrounding vegetation and ephemera. Two audio recorders were situated within the base of the piano out of camera view. I had a limited budget for post-production and a conceptual emphasis on a ‘dogme 95’ aesthetic, by which I mean the video documentation was designed to capture the event in real time, on location, with minimal editing post-performance. The result was a 26 minute single screen video. Emphasising the difference between performative elements, the video output is black and white, providing contrast and juxtaposition between the instrument, the tuner and the landscape.

In the opening sequence of the video, the piano tuner enters the frame as though from side stage, armed with a box of tuning implements. Placing the tool box on the ground, he removes the timber facing to expose the keyboard and internal mechanics. Returning to the tool box, he removes a selection of utensils and a small note book in which he records the piano’s make and model. Starting with middle C, the tuner systematically moves first down and then up the keys, tuning the piano with the use of his tuning lever, wedges and mute sticks. Seeking to enhance the notion of acoustic coloration, the performance frame alternates between the fixed camera and...
fragmented close-ups of the tuner and the surrounding natural environment. Of equal emphasis with the visual/ocular representation are the sonic qualities of the video. As the audio recorder was placed inside the piano, the audio output is dominated by the sound of the tuner striking incremental keys, drowning out the keynotes – the wind and sound notes of the birds that were audible in the live production. Finishing with the highest notes to the far right of the piano, the tuner packs away his tools, reassembles the piano, picks up his tool box and exits the frame.

While it is easy to describe Instrumental as a video work bound by a computer screen, it is very hard to judge the reception of the video while displayed at the Mildura Arts Centre as part of the Interpretive Wonderings exhibition. It is important to know about the reception of the work within the context of the gallery in order to evaluate and compare the efficacy and impact of sites of research production and sites of research distribution. This evaluation was assessed through the following close reading of the Interpretive Wonderings exhibition.

**Interpretive Wonderings exhibition: (Distribution)**

Exhibited over an eight week period between February and April 2016, the Interpretive Wonderings exhibition featured twenty works across three white cube galleries. Led by curatorial designer Sven Mehzoud, the exhibition design strategy differentiated each of the three gallery spaces. The first room, titled ‘The Map Room,’ was presented as a cabinet of curiosities or Wunderkammer, complete with fragments of colonial furniture, antique maps and a boardroom table. The second and largest of the gallery spaces was titled ‘The Sculpture Room,’ and featured two video works, a rusted out car, sculptural artifacts, wall paintings and a large ink drawing. The third gallery, titled ‘Windows to the World,’ in which Instrumental was exhibited, featured a collection of five 40 inch television monitors tilted at various angles, surrounded by a series of wall hung works including paintings, prints and photographs. Exhibited as part of the television ‘cluster,’ Instrumental was positioned alongside video works by Mick Douglas and Sam Trubridge. While taking different approaches to their subject, these three works featured documentation of events that took place during the workshop at Culpra Station. In teasing out the relations between the site of research production and the site of distribution, a comparison of the three events as witnessed live with the display of Instrumental at the Mildura Arts Centre reveals that there are limitations when reproducing performance as video within a gallery context.
Considered an inherently spatial investigation, *Instrumental* was intended to be exhibited as a 1:1 wall projection with the piano and the tuner represented ‘life size.’ Instead, the work was scaled down to a 40 inch monitor, thus changing the apparent spatial relationships between the tuner, the piano and the landscape, and changing the bodily engagement which I hoped for from a life-size encounter. Equally important in terms of scale, the audio output of *Instrumental* was played to headphones rather than being amplified in surround sound, which I had initially intended. This changed the multisensory potential of the work, relegating the performance documentation to an ocular mode of expression that contrasted with the acoustic ecology experienced in the live event.

Second, the quantity, quality and diversity of works selected within a group showing of this nature provides a multifarious and somewhat convoluted mode of exhibition that masks the potential clarity of any one work, a claim which is echoed in writing on contemporary exhibition making. For example, according to Claire Bishop, ‘collective projects are more difficult to market than works by individual artists, and less likely to be ‘works’ than a fragmented array of social events, publications or performances.’111 I intended to open a transformative space of encounter through collaboration and participation between creative practitioners, community members and Barkanji Country. Yet the legibility of this intent relies on the discursive synergy of the works in combination with the multiple outcomes,112 which are materialised across Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural contexts, creative disciplines and exploratory mappings.

Whilst *Instrumental* was displayed in, for me, less than ideal circumstances, the benefits of exhibiting as part of Interpretive Wonderings at the Mildura Arts Centre extend from the production and exhibition of the artworks to the visibility and credibility it created for the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation in relation to building capacity at Culpra Station. In co-producing the Interpretive Wonderings exhibition, the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation were able to forge new relationships with a number of statutory bodies, enabling them to move closer to achieving their aim of ‘boosting the local Aboriginal community’s connection to country and the understanding of the local landscape and environment.’113 In addition to the benefits afforded to the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation, Interpretive Wonderings demonstrates that Indigenous and non-Indigenous creative partnerships can transcend cultural boundaries to lend weight in practical terms to a larger project of reconciliation through mutual understanding.114


113 Environment and Heritage Management Plan (DRAFT), 1

PART 3:

CUMULATIVE SITES OF RESEARCH OUTPUT

While the legibility of any one work exhibited as part of Interpretive Wonderings was limited in its initial reception and reach, *Instrumental* went on to be distributed through a number of unanticipated research platforms. These platforms included radio, invited lectures, conferences, publications and a second exhibition. It is here, in the fragmented and cumulative discursive potential of the research sites and research outputs, that the impact of the piece as practice based research can be explored.

In addition to exhibiting *Instrumental* as a video work, an image of *Instrumental* captured by photographer Greta Costello during the live event was selected for the marketing coverage of the larger exhibition. The image appeared on a life size banner at the entrance to the exhibition at the Mildura Arts Centre. In addition to the photograph, *Instrumental* was featured in *Unlikely Journal for Creative Arts*, issue no. 2, *The Koori Mail*, and presented at academic conferences: Performance Studies International (PSI) #22, *Performance Climates* at Melbourne University, and *Performing Mobilities* and Practice Research Symposia at RMIT in Melbourne.

One of the more unexpected outputs was that *Instrumental* was featured on ABC Radio National. Hosted by presenter Michael Mackenzie, and titled ‘More than one way to map Country,’ the broadcast consisted of an interview with Interpretive Wondering’s project partners, Jock Gilbert and Sophia Pearce. Making reference to a 30 second clip of *Instrumental* found online, Mackenzie describes the opening sequence of the video:

> In this film you see a white bloke walk onto screen... There is a piano, an upright piano just sitting, in the middle of Culpra Station. Out there in the bush. There is no other reference points to civilisation, if you can call it that, than the piano. And then this is what happens. Have a listen to this... (Audio clip of piano tuning). He is actually tuning the piano here. Then he packs up all the things he has used to tune the piano in his bag and he walks off and that’s it. What’s that all about Jock?

Jock Gilbert responds:

> Campbell is interested in the juxtaposition between the piano as a colonial device and this idea of Country. And it’s particularly beautiful, almost spooky, you’d describe that part of the property. The piano is sitting on the black soil plain, in amongst some black box trees that have suffered quite badly through the drought of the early 2000s... And it’s looking at how we take the idea of performance and take it slightly out of context and what the response is.

Mackenzie replied, ‘Ever so slightly. Yes, you are right. It’s great, I liked it and I think it is strange and therefore quite compelling and obviously that is part of the project, to get people thinking about landscape in different ways.

As I had no formal training in sound and a limited musical vocabulary, the act of listening to *Instrumental* unexpectedly broadcast on national radio, changed my understanding of the work and reoriented my practice. This reorientation shifted my practice from being predominantly ocularcentric to instead combine both the visual and the aural within a multimodal spatial practice that sought to produce ocular-acoustic affect. The insights that emerged from the radio broadcast is an example of a reflective feedback mechanism specific to practice based research; one that resulted in a recalibrated practice for a previously unimagined audience.

In referring to the variety of platforms in which the work was featured, *Instrumental* adheres to Kwon’s understanding of the fragmented site: one in which the power of site specific performance to engage with spatial politics exists across a number of sites, including the live event, the exhibition, the virtual space of YouTube, and perhaps most potently, in its discursive potential within traditional forms of research production; namely academic journals and conferences, in which it appears.
In distributing the research outputs across a variety of traditional and non-traditional research platforms, each iteration affords a reflective re-positioning that allows for the emergence of new interpretations and understandings. For example, in the translation from the live event to the video work exhibited in the gallery, *Instrumental* was reframed and reworked for a gallery based audience. Similarly, in re-presenting *Instrumental* at a series of academic conferences, the work was re-contextualised within a broader community of practice underpinned by current discourse on site specific performance practice. In addition, the conference platform provided an opportunity for receiving feedback from a network of affiliated artist researchers on how the work is perceived in relation to a specific field of research. Extending from the conference presentations was an iterative body of practice based research that culminated as a series of articles published within peer reviewed journals. Whilst I am not suggesting that traditional academic platforms such as conferences or journal articles are more effective than or antithetical to the live event or exhibition, what I am suggesting is that each iteration has its own merits that are tailored in relation to spectatorship (or readership), that is determined by the site of research production or distribution. Furthermore, when comparing how *Instrumental* was produced, exhibited and published across traditional and non-traditional research platforms, it becomes apparent that work tailored for academic contexts such as conferences and journals is predominantly focused on producing meaning by contributing to pre-existing discourse, in contrast to the more immediate sensorial effect of the live performance that caters for a different form of embodied engagement. I would therefore argue that the discursive potential of practice based research lies in the way that different sites of research production and distribution converge to generate knowledge iteratively across a variety of research platforms. This sentiment is echoed within Kwon’s work on site-specific art and locational identity, that is repositioned within the discursive field of practice based research; Kwon suggests that sites of research production and sites of research output are subordinate to a discursively determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange or cultural debate. Furthermore, this site is not defined as a pre-condition, rather it is generated by the work and then verified by its convergence with an existing discursive formation.

Originally conceived as a piano recital on Barkanji Country with an invited live audience of Interpretive Wonderings participants, the work was reoriented into a spatial negotiation between a cultural artifact (the piano), a piano tuner, and the duplicitous identity of the Australian landscape. While a handful of spectators were present during the work, the staged act of tuning the piano in the landscape rendered the spectators secondary to the discursive space, which emerged through secondary showings of the video, sound and photographic documentation at the Mildura Arts Centre, on radio, in print and in online media.

Informed by the reflective and iterative processes specific to artistic and practice based research, the different sites of research interact to create a discursive framework that operates across a variety of traditional and non traditional research platforms. Emerging from this discursive framework are different forms of knowledge that reach diverse audiences within academic and non-academic contexts. Each subsequent iteration provides new opportunities for critical reflection informed by corresponding modes of interaction, engagement and spectatorship, suggesting the efficacy and impact of practice based research is defined by the convergence of sites of research production and sites of research distribution that substantiate as a cumulative field of discursive operation.
Chapter 4: Spatial Tuning
Chapter 4: Spatial Tuning

Fig 4.1: Spatial Tuning
McRobies Recycling Centre, June 2016.
## Chapter 4 : Spatial Tuning

### Project Synopsis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Spatial Tuning</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project No.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Research Phase</td>
<td>Phase Two : Contested Australian Landscapes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>June 2016</td>
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<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>The McRobies Gully Waste Management Recycling Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>The Hobart City Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Site</td>
<td>Boundary of the McRobies Gully Waste Management Recycling Centre (Municipal Rubbish Dump) and The Hobart City Reserve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site Conditions</td>
<td>Operating since 1975, The McRobies Gully Waste Management Recycling Centre spans 89 hectares and is situated south of Hobart on the urban fringe in the foothills of Mt Wellington. Surrounded by the dense eucalyptus forest of Mt Wellington National Park and the Hobart City Reserve, visual access to the site is obscured and prevented on all sides by tree covered hills.</td>
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<td>Musical Instrument</td>
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<td>Technical Devices</td>
<td>3 x digital video cameras, 1 x audio zoom</td>
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<td>Performer</td>
<td>1 x Piano Tuner (Ivo Thiemann)</td>
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<td>Umbrella Project</td>
<td>Intervening in the Anthropo[s]cene (29 June – 3 July, 2016), organized by the PSI Performance+Design working group</td>
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<td>Activated concerns</td>
<td>Environmental impact of consumer culture</td>
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<td>Spatial Tuning</td>
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Introduction

Exploring the relations between aesthetic practices, the body, and territory, this chapter explores how site specific performance can activate engagement with spatial politics through an engagement with architectural and urban processes. This chapter is centred on a site specific performance that took place on the boundary of a municipal rubbish dump in the city of Hobart, Tasmania in 2016. Titled Spatial Tuning, this practice research took place as part of a workshop titled *Intervening in the Anthropo(s)cene* that was convened by the Creative Exchange Institute at the University of Tasmania. The research is framed within an existing field of practice in which a variety of creative practitioners engage pianos as performative devices to renegotiate situations, subjects and environments. Drawing on the semiotic potential of the piano as a cultural artifact of European origins, this research project is centred on the staged juxtaposition of an outdoor piano tuning and a live audience on the contested boundary between a national park and a municipal rubbish dump in Hobart.

*Spatial Tuning* is both critical and spatial; a specific type of practice coined by Jane Rendell as ‘critical spatial practice – work that intervenes into a site in order to critique that site.’ Spatial Tuning extends upon the work of Markiyan Matsekh’s *Piano for Berkut* (2012) and Ludovico Einaudi’s *Elegy for the Arctic* (2014). Whilst varied in their approaches, these works engage the politics of a given spatial context by leveraging and exploiting the symbolic associations of the piano. Exploring the notion of body and territory as expressive matter within site specific performance, this chapter provides a critical evaluation of how crossing borders and shifting boundaries can be used as conceptual tools to activate engagement in the politics of space through the re-appropriation of contested landscapes.

The chapter is structured in three parts. Part one contextualises and positions the research within a community of practice in which pianos are used as performative, spatial and semiotic devices to intervene within ‘the most dominated of dominated spaces.’ Part two unpacks the pre-performance negotiations with local authorities to address issues of ownership, the policing of boundaries, rights of exclusion and inclusion, and the ‘dynamics of deterritorialization’ as elaborated within architectural and urban spatial discourse. Part three provides a close reading of the live performance ‘event’ to address the relations between landscape, bodily absence and perception, and questions how site specific performance can collapse the distance between passive spectators and contested landscapes.

The chapter as a whole offers insights into the relations between aesthetic practices, human and non-human interaction, and spatial politics, by questioning how artistic experimentations can be used to understand the issues around the acts of crossing borders and shifting boundaries.
Intervening in the Anthropo(s)cene

In early 2016, I received an invitation to participate in a performance studies international working group titled Intervening in the Anthropo(s)cene. Hosted by the Creative Exchange Institute at the University of Tasmania, and convened as a precursor to the 2016 Performance Studies International (PSI) conference Performance Climates. Intervening in the Anthropo(s)cene called for ‘creative proposals with which to explore and propose more meaningful understandings of landscapes – too often presented as distanced, picturesque and apolitical.’

For those not familiar with the term, the Anthropocene denotes our current geological age or epoch, ‘viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment.’ It is a term coined by geologists and adopted by social scientists, and a consistent definition is hard to come by; however, what is understood is that we have now reached an impasse where man’s environmental impact on the earth is both irreversible and influential over what was once considered the natural ecological order.

In developing a research proposal for Intervening in the Anthropo(s)cene, I first scoured satellite photography of Hobart and surrounds for sites of environmental conflict in which to stage a site specific performance that would explore the nature of adulterated and unadulterated environments through human and non-human interaction. Informed by the geological definition of the Anthropocene, in which it is estimated that over half the earth’s surface has now been altered by human intervention, I gravitated, from a distance, to Hobart city’s municipal rubbish dump. Wedged into the foothills of Mt Wellington, and occupying approximately twenty hectares on the edge of South Hobart’s city sprawl, the McRobies Gully Waste Management Centre has been in operation since 1975.

Titled Spatial Tuning, the proposal I submitted for Intervening in the Anthropo(s)cene was informed by three preceding studies exploring how specific performance can activate engagement with the spatial politics of a variety of contested sites across urban and rural contexts. Each of the studies that preceded Spatial Tuning used the piano as a semiotic, spatial and performative instrument to renegotiate the relations between spectatorship, action and contested spatial contexts. These early projects include Duration (Flinders Street Station ballroom, 2012), The Princess Theatre Inversion (Princess Theatre 2014), and Instrumental (Culpra Station, 2015). The invitation to take part in Intervening in the Anthropo(s)cene presented an opportunity to extend my research from the rural context of an Indigenous led mapping workshop to explore how site specific performance can activate engagement in the politics of space specific to waste, landfill and environmental degradation.

Expressing an intent to produce an immersive sensory engagement within the spatio-temporalities of an anthropocentric landscape, I submitted a proposal to stage a site specific performance by situating a piano tuning and an audience on the contested boundary between National Park and landfill.

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127 https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/anthropocene
129 The boundary between the national park and the McRobies Recycling Centre is a contested one due to Hobart City Council’s plans to expand the centre into the national park to increase its capacity to deal with a growing population of Hobart. See Hobart City Council, Development proposal and environmental management plan (DPEMP) Extension of Landfill Area – McRobies Gully Landfill, November 2015

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Fig 4.4 McRobies Gully Waste Management Centre, Hobart
Fig 4.5 McRobies Gully Waste Management Centre, Location Plan
The piano, a key to contested space

From my earlier studies, an understanding emerged that the piano had the capacity to enter contested spaces not usually accessible by the public. This ability of the piano to enter politically charged spaces, for example, the Flinders Street Ballroom that had not seen creative programming in 29 years, is tied to the perceived cultural authority of the instrument, that has emerged through a particular historical lineage. Within an Australian context, this history records the first piano arriving in Australia in 1788 with the first fleet. Once considered ‘the cultural heart and soul of the colonial home … [the piano] occupied the parlor, a place for families and their guests to gather, entertain and socialize, as well as a place to retreat into private solace.’ Historically an object of desire, status and civilisation, upright pianos, within an Australian context, have in recent times become redundant objects that are often discarded as heavy rubbish on nature strips, given away for free, or even tossed into local rubbish dumps. Whilst upright pianos no longer play a role in the modern home, having been replaced with space saving keyboards and synthesisers, the piano, as part of a western cultural heritage, has retained a perceived identity that is associated with high culture. In situating and tuning a salvaged piano on the boundary between national park and rubbish dump, Spatial Tuning aims to recontextualise and question the contemporary role of the piano, as a means to bring into focus the environmental impact of contemporary throw away culture.

130 Wolfe, “Pioneers, parlours and pianos.”
PART 1: Community of Practice: Site Specific (Piano) Performance

For the purpose of orienting Spatial Tuning within an existing field of site specific performance practice, I would like to foreground the recent works of Markiyan Matsekh and Ludovico Einaudi as a means to evidence how the piano, in conjunction with site specific performance, has the capacity to enter and renegotiate a variety of contested spatial contexts. Situated within a field of practice known as critical spatial practice, Matsekh’s Piano for Berkut, Einaudi’s Elegy for the Arctic, and my own Spatial Tuning are all characterised by ‘spatial aspects of interdisciplinary processes or practices that operate between arts and architecture.’131 According to Jane Rendell, ‘this field of practice aims to transgress the limits of art and architecture and engages with both the social and the aesthetic.’132 In developing Spatial Tuning, the research intersects urban processes of waste collection with site specific performance. By bringing together the city dump with performance practices, the adulterated landscape is assigned an active role, and becomes the means to reposition an expanded form of spatial practice that emphasises the convergence of aesthetic and ethical practices.

Piano for Berkut by Markiyan Matsekh, 2013

In November 2016, the Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych confirmed that he had decided to turn his back on a landmark pact with the EU, and keep Ukraine closely aligned with Russia.133 His announcement prompted a student gathering in Kiev’s Independence Square to sing in peaceful protest at the president’s resistance to greater integration with the EU.134 The government responded with extreme force, and on the 30th November 2016, 300 students were brutally beaten by riot police.134 In an attempt to prevent a repeat of the rally, the Interior Ministry’s special forces riot police, known as the Berkut, blocked public access to the square through the formation of a defensive human ring. Blocking access to Independence Square, the urban symbol of Ukrainian freedom, provoked further public uprising, as 10,000 people took to the streets, waving flags, singing songs, and demanding the resignation of President Viktor Yanukovych.135

As tensions mounted, pianist Markiyan Matsekh sought to defuse the potential for further violent clashes through peaceful protest. He said, “The idea is this: to lift the mood, to reply with art and goodness to the violence that was here, and to carry out a cultural revolution.” He titled his performance protest Piano for Berkut, and purchased an upright piano for 500 Hryvnia ($58.00 USD) through an advertisement posted in a local paper. Matsekh describes the lead up to the performance:

![Fig 4.9 Markiyan Matsekh, Piano for Berkut, 2013](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/30/ukraine-bloody-backlash-sanctions-eu)

[132] Ibid. 6
[133] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/30/ukraine-bloody-backlash-sanctions-eu
[134] https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/dec/05/thats-me-in-picture-ukraine-protest-piano-mats
[135] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/30/ukraine-bloody-backlash-sanctions-eu
I knew that taking the piano to the site was risky, so I told journalists to be there. I figured: if I’m going to get beaten up over a piano, it should at least make the news. The police were strict on not letting cars through. I told the piano movers that if they were stopped they should tell the police they were delivering it to someone’s house. The police bought the story, and let them into the square, where I was waiting. We took the piano out and put it in front of the line of officers. I watched for a second, but they just looked confused. I said, “Move it five metres closer! Straight away, people gathered and started playing it, and it transformed the mood into something positive. I took off my coat and started playing Chopin’s Waltz in C-sharp minor. It was about -15C, and my fingers could barely move. I only managed to play for about a minute and a half. Not my best performance.136

In citing Piano for Berkut in association with crossing borders and shifting boundaries, this project evidences the performative, spatial and semiotic potential of the piano to enter and renegotiate the most dominated of dominated spaces. In this instance, the cultural authority of the piano deterritorialises a space of conflict, which results in the reterritorialisation of public space through performative intervention. By crossing the boundary of the police line with the piano, the body and territory are used as expressive matter to shift the immaterial boundaries between the riot police and protesters.

Ludovico Einaudi — Elegy for the Arctic

Extending the notion of body and territory from the Maiden revolution in the Ukraine to an environmental protest at global warming, in June 2016, acclaimed Italian composer and pianist Ludovico Einaudi teamed up with environmental crusaders Green Peace to stage a solo piano performance on a floating platform in the Arctic.137 The timing of the concert was planned to correspond with a meeting of the Ospar Commission, which was to decide on a proposal to safeguard 10% of the Arctic Ocean. In an attempt to send a conservation message to world leaders, ‘Einaudi played a composition written for the occasion, Elegy for the Arctic, on a grand piano off the coast of Svalbard in Norway.’138

Proclaiming the performance as the most northerly grand piano performance ever held,139 the video documentation shows Einaudi afloat, with towering ice cliffs of the Brede glacier behind him. As if the epic scale of the ice cap is not enough, half way through the recital, huge sections of the polar shelf break off and crash into the sea. Einaudi, unperturbed, plays on. Harnessed to the piano stool and propped up at the shiny black piano afloat in the ocean, Einaudi’s presence, set against the magnitude of the north pole, becomes an absurdist parody.

136 Markiyan Matsiakh quote from article ‘That’s me in the picture.’ by Erica Buist, The Guardian, 2014


138 Ibid.

While varied in their approaches and the sites of intervention, both Einaudi and Matsekh cross material and immaterial borders to shift the boundaries of political space through a material engagement with the performative, spatial and semiotic potential of the piano. According to Gay McAuley, site based performance such as *Elegy for the Arctic* and *Piano for Berkut* ‘engages deeply with its chosen site and as a result tends to be drawn into engagement with the social and political issues that are inseparable from place.’

Seeking to harness this potential through an active engagement with the social, political and environmental issues specific to the McRobies rubbish dump in Hobart, *Spatial Tuning* first required significant negotiations with local authorities to obtain permissions to proceed.

**Part 2: Pre-performance negotiations**

‘Anyone setting out to make a site based performance must of necessity enter into negotiations with the owners of the site, those who currently occupy it, and those who have control over it.’

In the depths of the Tasmanian winter, I arrived in Hobart in June 2016. In sleeting rain and a chilly three degrees, I collected a hire care from the airport and headed straight for the McRobies rubbish dump. Arriving at the centre, I drove up to the entrance gate. The facility was plastered with signs stating NO UNAUTHORISED ACCESS. Gone are the childhood days when I would go with my father to the tip with a poorly laden trailer and scout around on the tip face for a treasure or two. The McRobies Gully Waste Management Centre was a veritable fortress under state authority and control. I realised that there was no way I was going to be driving through the front gate of the facility with a piano strapped to a ute to stage a performance at the tip face.

I backed away from the front gate and began to search for a back door via a rear track that would provide me with a suitable vantage looking over the tip. Driving south of the site, around and up into the hills, I found myself wandering aimlessly on a walking track next to, but hidden from, the tip. Along the track, I came across a woman walking a dog; she said that the only place that she knew of where I could get a look at the tip was on the other side of the valley, by walking in over the ridge behind the Cascade brewery.

With renewed hope, I drove back north and found a private road that took me up to a dead end carpark on a ridge overlooking the McRobies Gully. Above the carpark was a timber house. I walked up to the house and was greeted by two yapping dogs followed by a young woman. I explained that I wanted to gain access to the perimeter of the tip to stage a piano performance. Although she had lived there for some time, she said she had never been down that side of the
ridge, but she could hear the machinery at times and of course the birds. She directed me back down the road to a fire track, and to a walking path that led down toward the tip. The path was marked with a black diamond on a signpost, and I followed it around and down the escarpment. As I walked down over the ridge I could hear heavy machinery, and the cries of thousands of scavenging crows, drawing me down to towards the rubbish dump. I left the path at some point and walked directly down the hillside until I came to a forest clearing that opened up to the McRobies Gully. The scene before me was shocking. Framed by the eucalypts of the national park boundary, the scale of the twenty hectare landfill clearing was devastating. Gouged into the landscape, under the shadow of Mount Wellington, an endless flow of rubbish trucks emptied the city’s waste at the tip face as excavators picked and turned the rubbish into the mud. The site formed a natural amphitheater of epic proportions, an opportunity to stage a site specific performance that would provoke an embodied encounter with the Anthropocene.

When I reflect on the difficulties I faced in finding a vantage point over the rubbish dump, I see that the positioning of the waste management facility within the McRobies Gully had been carefully considered by local authorities. Screened from visual access on all sides, the tip is situated in a defensive position deliberately obscured from the public view. Adjacent public infrastructure such as roads and walking tracks are also positioned away from the site, as if shielding the public from the glare of urban processes, consumption and waste. This deliberate opaqueness of urban processes is reminiscent of what Bruno Latour describes as the passive detachment of human impact on the world. In my quest to collapse the distance through an immersive sensory and political engagement with this Anthropocentric spatial condition by staging of a site specific performance, I set about establishing the relevant permits and permissions. My proposal to stage *Spatial Tuning* on the boundary between the Mt Wellington National Park and the McRobbies Waste Management Centre raised a plethora of logistical and juridical concerns around obtaining the necessary entry permissions.

From the outset, I had assumed that the selected performance site was located within the Mt Wellington National Park. Using the contact details provided by a group of mountain bike riders I spoke to in the park, I contacted the park ranger, who responded with a series of questions:

- Exactly where you want to hold this event? What type of vehicle do you intend to use to transport the piano? Please also let me know the vehicle registration number.
- Whether you intend to erect any structures e.g. marquees, that would require disturbance of the ground, and your evidence of your public liability insurance to cover the event.

It wasn’t until I followed up with the attached map (Figure no. 4.15) that the park ranger informed me that while the road leading to the site was in the Mt Wellington National Park, the
The proposed performance site was actually in the Hobart City Reserve, access to which required permission from the City of Hobart.

I emailed the visitor services manager of the City of Hobart parks and city amenity, requesting access to host the event within the Reserve. As there were only twenty-four hours remaining until Spatial Tuning was scheduled to go live, the visitor services manager was less than impressed with my request to stage an event at such short notice. Perhaps due to the reputation of Mona143 and their Dark Mofo137 festival, which stage large scale creative interventions throughout the city of Hobart every June, the manager reluctantly gave formal permission.144

While the piano travelled through the Mt Wellington National Park, an audience of twenty people were instructed to use Golden Valley Road to access a private carpark close to the selected performance site. This access required additional permissions from private residents. As the performance was staged as part of Intervening in the Anthropo(s)cene, an initiative of the Creative Exchange Institute of The University of Tasmania, the City of Hobart required evidence of public liability insurance to cover the audience attending the event that was provided by The University of Tasmania. To reach the site in a vehicle laden with a piano, I was instructed to enter Mt Wellington National Park via a locked gate. I needed additional permission from the Wellington Park Management Trust to drive through the national park, then I had to collect the gate key that was managed by the Hobart City Council.

Issues of ownership, the policing of boundaries, and the rights of exclusion and inclusion are revealed in the extensive process of establishing and obtaining the necessary permits and permissions. What I had perceived to be the right of access to the Hobart City Reserve or the Mt Wellington National Park turned out to need the sanction of local authorities and community groups. The pre-performance negotiations and the permissions required to stage Spatial Tuning on the boundary of the McRobbies Waste Management Centre reveal some of the challenges that site specific performances face when renegotiating spatial politics. The pre-performance negotiations across juridical and geographic domains are an example of an expanded field of operative potential in which site specific practice is understood to operate not simply as an event within a specific location for a select audience, but within a network of “broader social, economic and political processes that organise urban life and urban space.”146

Through an engagement with Hobart City’s urban processes of waste disposal and national park management, Spatial Tuning demonstrates the ability of site specific performance to negotiate spatial politics. Irrespective of the live event, this negotiation highlights how site specific performance can activate engagement in spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes.
PART 3: Spatial Tuning — The event

On Tuning

Before describing what occurred during the Spatial Tuning event, I will outline why I chose to tune, rather than play the piano.

Emerging from the performance titled Instrumental that was described in Chapter One, the term 'tuning' is presented as a concept, a process and a framing device. While the common definition of tuning, 'the action or process of tuning something and the extent to which a musical instrument, performance, or ensemble is in tune,147 is at the centre of the performance, a secondary definition of 'tuning,' as to 'adjust or adapt (something) to a particular purpose or situation,'148 is equally relevant to the conceptual framework of the Spatial Tuning performance. Taking this definition apart, the 'something' that is adjusted or adapted within the performance is both the piano and the spatial context; the 'purpose' is to bring an audience into close proximity with the adulterated landscape; and the 'situation' is the environmental impact of human consumption. So too, the notion of being 'tuned in' that is defined as being 'sensitive to or able to understand something' and 'to tune into' meaning 'to become sensitive to,'149 resonates with the research aim of collapsing the distance between passive spectators and their immediate environments through an immersive sensory engagement with the spatio-temporalities of an anthropocentric landscape.

According to Lynda Arnold, 'the Greek philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras (570–495 BC), is often credited with identifying musical harmonic ratios related to scientific pitch, and the birth of 432 Hz tuning with his instrument called the monochord.'150 Many centuries later, composers such as Mozart and Verdi are documented as having used the 432 Hz tuning. By the end of the 1800's and early 1900's, Britain, the US and Germany challenged the 432 Hz tuning by experimenting and adopting alternate tuning frequencies. As the world became more economically and culturally interconnected in the early twentieth century, 'there was a need to set a universal pitch standard used by all, for sake of instrument makers, composers and orchestras everywhere'151 that resulted in the universal adoption of a tuning frequency of 440 Hz that is used today as the music industry standard.152

In the weeks leading up to the event, my collaborating piano tuner Ivo Thiemann and I had spent a lot of time discussing which tuning frequency we should use for Spatial Tuning. We settled upon a strategy of first tuning the piano up to 440 Hz (the frequency most commonly used for contemporary orchestras today) and then down to 432 Hz. The conceptual agenda of tuning the piano up to a present-day frequency of 440 Hz and then down to a historical frequency of 432 Hz was to effect a kind of turning back the clock. In situating the event between environmental extremes of human consumption and a national park, the differential of the sonic and visual frequencies was combined with the intent of revealing an anthropocentric condition in which contemporary society is now both implicated and contained.

The Event

On the morning of the event, I first switched hire cars (sedan for a dual cab), purchased packing straps, loaded chairs from UTAS, picked up the key to open the Mt Wellington Park gate from the City of Hobart offices, loaded the piano on to the hire car with the assistance of the piano tuner, the previous owner and the camera operator, drove up behind the Cascade brewery, unlocked the national park gate, and drove the piano down through the moors onto the fire trail. When we unloaded the piano onto the fire trail, we positioned the instrument in such a way that it was propped up on the gate overlooking the tip.

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147 https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/Tuning
148 Ibid.
149 Ibid.
151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
Fig. 4.16 Track through Mt Wellington National Park to *Spatial Tuning* performance site
Fig 4.17 Spatial Tuning

performance site overlooking McRobie tip face
Before the event, I understood that the two part tuning (440 to 432 Hz) would take approximately two hours to complete. The tuning of the piano and the documentation of the performance began at exactly 3 p.m. At the same time an audience of 18 people, made up of members of the Performance Studies International (PSI) Performance + Design Working Group, who had assembled in Hobart with the sole purpose of taking part in the Intervening in the Anthropo(s) cene workshop, left the University of Tasmania enroute to the performance site. At 3:15, I walked up the hill to collect the audience from the car park at the end of Golden Valley Road. At 3:40 the audience arrived in a mini bus and two cars. I told the audience that I would lead them back down the road, up a fire break, along a ridge and down to the performance site.

The audience were forewarned to bring appropriate shoes and warm clothing that would endure the Tasmanian winter, and also a torch should it be dark when exiting the site. I requested the audience to remain silent for the duration of the walk and performance, a vitally important condition. We set off down the road and up the fire break. I located the walking track and passed along the ridge and through a burnt out patch of eucalyptus forest. Coming to a marker, we veered right, leaving the path heading down the ridge. At this point, I realised the difficulties some audience members were having with descending the hillside on an unmarked track; but we continued the descent, picking our way through broken branches and the litter of the forest floor. From the valley floor, the sound of heavy vehicles could be heard dropping off and working
piles of rubbish. As we moved closer to the site, we heard the sound of crows and the single notes of the piano being tuned in the distance. At this point there were some signs of panic among the audience. I had clearly underestimated the difficulty of the descent, and several less able individuals turned back some 100 meters before reaching the site.

From an audience of eighteen people that set off from the car park, fifteen arrived on the access road that led down to the performance. Twenty chairs had been arranged in close proximity to the piano tuner, who sat with his back to the audience overlooking McRobies rubbish dump, framed by the forest of Mt Wellington National Park in the distance. The piano was perched against a gate next to a sign which read ‘No Unauthorized Entry – Trespassing Prohibited’ in bold red text. The audience were instructed to file into the seating without leaving a space. The ground was muddy and the legs of the chairs slowly sank into the ground. To the right of the piano, in the middle distance, was the tip face, where an excavator picked at the rubbish, next to a man unloading building waste from a truck. Their activity disturbed flocks of seagulls and crows eating at the tip face, who went to air in waves, like plumes of black and white smoke. For thirty minutes the audience sat, listened and observed the piano tuning, the machines of the tip and the birds.
Giving the audience a visual cue, I led the fifteen people back up the hill in silence, assisting less able participants over steep and slippery sections of the climb. When we reached Golden Valley Road, I motioned for everyone to continue to the vehicles, and quietly slipped back into the forest and once again descended to the performance site. The timing of the performance had been scheduled to correspond with the last of the working group flying into Hobart, and by this time it was getting dark. Ivo, the piano tuner, toiled on without adequate light to complete the desired 432 hz tuning. Around 5:15pm, he packed up his tools, indicating the spatial tuning was complete. He reassembled the piano, stood up, and walked out of the framed view, captured by one of three video camera positions.

In staging an immersive sensory engagement with the spatio-temporalities of landscape, I became aware that the entry sequence, descending the ridge, was perhaps a little too immersive for some audience members, who may have been better suited to the familiar academic environments. The question emerged: what was it that provoked a sense of panic amongst the audience? Did I imagine it? Was it the sounds of hundreds of crows taunting from above, or the noise of heavy machinery emanating from the valley floor? Was it the impending darkness, or the burnt out forest? Was it coincidental that the panic occurred moments after leaving the walking path? Or was the panic provoked by the recognition of the catastrophic impact of human waste within the natural environment?

**Analysis and Interpretation**

In the weeks following *Spatial Tuning*, I sent out an online survey to audience members, focusing on their experience and reception of the performance. I first posed a question in relation to the dramaturgical sequence of descending the escarpment. With the exception of one respondent, who recalled being overwhelmed, all expressed ‘intrigue’; as one respondent put it, ‘the walk through the national park was great dramaturgically speaking, as it slowly revealed the site of performance.’

Reflecting on the title of *Spatial Tuning*, I asked the audience to consider if space was ‘tuned’ during the performance? If so, in what way?. Answers to this question disclosed the audience’s experience of being ‘attuned’; some responses were the performance ‘attuned us to that which was out of tune with the natural environment but we were more attuned to a certain theatrics of an environment simultaneously in and out of tune’; the performance invited us, the audience, to collaborate in attuning ourselves to the contested location of the tip; and, ‘I think my interpretation was more of being the thing being tuned.’ In reconsidering the affective field from the tuning of ‘space’ to a more subjective engagement with the ‘attuning’ of oneself,
Fig. 4.24 Spatial Tuning 2016
the research resonates with Félix Guattari’s concept of ‘ethico-aesthetics’.157 Problematising the traditional binaries between aesthetic and political practices, Spatial Tuning aligns with Guattari’s ethico-aesthetic paradigm in that it seeks to destabilise dominant power structures through a subjective engagement with creative processes and aesthetic practices.158

Focusing on ‘the relationship between subjectivity and its exteriority,’159 Spatial Tuning adopts Guattari’s assertion in which the ‘production of subjectivity becomes the very existential territory on which social, ethical and aesthetic transformations must be negotiated,’160 to suggest that site specific performance can produce new political subjectivities through the crossing of experiential boundaries.

The performance design of Spatial Tuning questions the assumed passivity of the landscape by assigning the landscape a dominant and active role within the performance. In qualifying the audience’s reception of the perceived role of the landscape in the construction of meaning, I posed a survey question which asked if they considered the landscape to perform. The answer was a unanimous affirmation; however, the ways in which the landscape was perceived to perform were quite varied, with one audience member suggesting the landscape was ‘an immersive and troubled player,’161 while another thought ‘the (problematic) spatial and performative agency of the tip was amplified/ intensified through the piano tuning and collective witnessing.’162 Other audience responses reframed the landscape as a fragmented, pluralistic and performative condition, stating ‘I think it (the landscape) exists on many levels. It is the naturally occurring landscape of the park, but it also contains the human interventions of the tip,’163 and

In the moment, I sensed two landscapes: that of the tip and that of the forest surrounding it. The landscape as forest performed the wind and rustling. To me, the landscape under the tip was performed upon as though it was a body anesthetised and being cut into.164


160 Ibid. page no. 38


162 Ibid.

163 Ibid.

164 Ibid.
In challenging the perceived status of the landscape as dynamic, the national park and the rubbish dump are reframed by the viewers’ gaze to temporarily collapse the distance between passive spectatorship and the immediate environment.

In suggesting the distance between the audience and the landscape is collapsed, I mean that the performance facilitates a prolonged encounter with the rubbish dump at a proximity that is both uncommon and unfamiliar to contemporary society. In doing so, the site specific performance provokes a temporal disorientation in which a sense of being present is intensified through a recalibration of normative modes of human and non-human interaction. In suggesting that normative modes of human and non human interaction with urban processes of waste collection are recalibrated, it is assumed that a normative mode of engagement extends as far discarding rubbish in a bin or putting the bins out for collection on a weekly basis.

In redefining these normative modes of interaction, site specific performance has the capacity to open up a performative space of here and now, in which the perception of the situated audience oscillates from the meditative drone of the piano tuning to a renewed sense of embodied presence. As the attention of the audience is focused on the rubbish dump and the piano tuning, the conspicuously framed absence of the human form within the expanse of human waste sought to provoke a temporal transformation in which spectators become aware of their own presence in relation to the performance, the audience and the landscape. Using the post performance surveys to qualify such a claim, I asked the audience if ‘during the performance, whilst seated at the performance site, did you imagine or ‘project’ your self into the tip or the forest beyond, looking back at yourself seated in the audience?’ While, on reflection, the question seems poorly phrased, and the majority of the audience did not imagine or ‘project’ themselves into the tip or the forest beyond, one audience member did experience such an embodied phenomenon, stating ‘the forest was the backstage, the landscape of the tip was the mise en scene, my place of viewing suspended in between place of viewing and immersion in the performance’. This statement is echoed in Miwon Kwon’s assertion that ‘the critical capacity of intimacies are based on absence, distance and ruptures of time and space.’ Extending this operative potential of presence, Gabriella Giannachi writes:

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166 Ibid.
167 Ibid.
168 Kwon. One Place after Another. 9.
Where the operation of presence should occur is where the listener is made to encounter what is in front or before them, so that they may become alert to what is around them, meaning their environment. This is also where the subject relocates, represents in space and time in order to re-encounter themselves in the other or as the other. 169

Giannachi’s concept of operative presence and audience appraisals of the live Spatial Tuning event can yield insights into the agency of site specific performance that operates across geographic, experiential and subjective domains. In the final question of the post performance survey, I asked the audience ‘what politics of space were revealed (if any) during Spatial Tuning? And what is the agency of staging site based performances in such a way?’ 170 One audience member responded:

As an audience, or witness of the tip, I experienced my own presence and agency in the site sharply, because I was confronted with my own complicity and the politics in the making of such spaces — the landfill. What lies in the agency of making such site-responsive performance is how it can amplify/ intensify the politics of a specific location, not that the performance is specifying the limits of the location/site, but rather making the site appear. Such a site-based performance also has the potential to mobilise a collective experience of witnessing — the tip became a shared location for participants to critically reflect on questions of environmental justice. 171

The ability of site specific performance ‘to critically reflect on questions of environmental justice’ suggests noticeable similarities between Spatial Tuning and the staging the Elegy for the Arctic in front of the Brede Glacier. In both these projects, landscapes of epic proportions are assigned a dominant role in the construction of meaning. More spatially than musically oriented, both Elegy for the Arctic and Spatial Tuning are focused on the negotiation and juxtaposition of the body and the piano within formally uninhabited territories. By assigning the landscape the dominant role, the piano in both performances becomes more a symbolic mechanism than a musical device, and as such, the musicality of the performance is rendered subservient to the environment. This reorientation of performative relations between performer and context is echoed in Gay McAuley’s sentiments, in which the site becomes the dominant signifier rather than simply being that which contains the performance. 172 Whilst the similarities between the Ukrainian revolution, the melting of the North Pole, and McRobies rubbish dump, are perhaps opaque, what each of the projects evidences is the ability of the piano to enter and re-contextualise contested spaces of political significance and thus renegotiate the relations between social, political and environmental contexts.

Conclusion

Within the context of a community of site specific performance practice that uses the piano as device of political protest, I have demonstrated the ability of the piano to cross material and immaterial borders of the most contested of contested spaces, including police barricades during the revolution in Kiev, the Arctic, and the McRobies rubbish dump. Through this evaluation of aesthetic practices and politics in relation to the body and territory, Spatial Tuning highlights the ability of site specific performance to activate engagement in spatial politics through the recontextualisation of spaces of conflict. Proposing that the agency of site specific performance is tied to its ability to assign active roles to formally distanced environments, one member of the Spatial Tuning audience suggests that ‘the impact of man in the landscape was brought to the forefront, in a critique of the Anthropocentric disregard for country.’ 173 In recontextualising the McRobies Waste Management Centre and the Mt Wellington National Park, Spatial Tuning collapsed the distance between passive spectatorship and the immediate environment, to activate an engagement with ‘ecological perspective on consumption, individual responsibility,
non-human viewpoints and spatio-temporal transformations of the landscape. In collapsing the distance between the audience and the environment, *Spatial Tuning* temporarily destabilised spatial hegemonies to critique the political dimension of space, in which normative modes of behaviour were contested through a performative act.

Through the negotiation of urban and architectural processes necessary to obtain statutory permissions to access and stage *Spatial Tuning* on the boundary of Hobart’s municipal tip, I have demonstrated how site specific performance can intervene within dominated spaces to cross authoritarian borders and temporarily shift juridical boundaries. Emerging from the negotiations that took place with local authorities and community groups is a decentering of the primacy of the live event, that opens up the effective potential of site specific performance to include pre-performance negotiations. In opening up the practice beyond the live event, *Spatial Tuning* unveils the potential of aesthetic processes to critically and poetically build thought about the body and territory in relation to landscape, bodily absence, and perception, and demonstrates how site specific performance practice can be used for critically understanding the sets of issues around acts of crossing borders and shifting boundaries.

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Chapter 5: Cultural Burn
Chapter 5: Cultural Burn

Fig. 5.1 Cultural Burn, Culpra Station, 2016
Chapter 5 : Cultural Burn

Project Synopsis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cultural Burn</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Project No.</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Phase</td>
<td>Phase Two : Contested Australian Landscapes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>June 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site</td>
<td>Culpra Station, 8000 hectare property in regional New South Wales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner</td>
<td>The Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation Purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance Site</td>
<td>Outdoors, in an ephemeral billabong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site conditions</td>
<td>8000 hectare property in the NSW Mallee bordering the Murray River and the Kemondok National Park. The land is situated in Barkanji Country and has a number of significant Aboriginal sites including burial sites, hearths, scarred trees, an ochre quarry, middens and a fish trap. Formerly used for grazing and cropping, the land was first farmed in 1887. Culpra Station was purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation in 2002 as a land bank for Aboriginal people and is managed by the Culpra Mill Aboriginal Corporation.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Landscape</td>
<td>The property is home to locally significant fauna including kangaroos, emus, echidnas, and the endangered Regent parrot. Red-gum forests, watery billabongs, mallee scrub in fields of red sand, gnarled box and tangled lignum spread across wide heavy black soil plains and wetlands. The property was in flood at the time of this performance.</td>
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<td>Musical Instrument</td>
<td>1 x Broken Upright Piano (repurposed from Project No. 3)</td>
</tr>
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<td>Technical Devices</td>
<td>1 x digital video camera</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 x audio zoom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Performer</td>
<td>The landscape (air, water, birds wind) - No human performer</td>
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<td>Composition</td>
<td>piano burning only (no composition)</td>
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<td>Duration</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
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<td>Audience 1 (Live)</td>
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Chapter 5 : Cultural Burn

Introduction

Centered on a performance titled Cultural Burn, which was the second of two site specific performances that took place on an 8000-hectare property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation, this chapter describes and reflects on a return to Culpra Station in 2016 to burn a piano in an ephemeral billabong.

In order to explore the performative, spatial and semiotic potential of the piano, this chapter is structured in three parts. Part one examines the motivations for burning the instrument on Barkanji Country, and contextualises it within an existing community of practice in which a range of creative practitioners incorporate burning pianos in their performance works, including Arman, Anna Lockwood, Shiota, and Gordon.

Part two of the chapter draws a comparison between the Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning, and the burning of pianos within contemporary arts practice. It draws on Jacques Rancière’s concept of The Distribution of the Sensible176 as an analytical framework within which to explore the operative potential of intersecting aesthetic and political practices within the field of site specific performance.

Questioning the ongoing impact of colonisation, part three outlines the circumstances for returning to Culpra Station, followed by a close reading of the live Cultural Burn event in relation to the staged juxtaposition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices, the piano and the Australian bush.

Using place, space, landscape, technology (instrument), and community (audience, performer, tuner) as multiple agents, this chapter draws parallels between the ability of site specific performance to rename things differently, and Rancière’s concept of the distribution of the sensible, to provide insights into aesthetic practices, spatial politics and cultural semantics specific to an Australian rural context.

PART 1 : Cultural Burn

In September 2016, my work as a lecturer in Interior and Spatial Design at the University of Technology Sydney led me seven hours west to the former Aboriginal mission of Murrin Bridge. During this time I was leading an undergraduate design studio little Spatial Agency in collaboration with the Murrin Bridge Local Aboriginal Land Council, that was focused on the design and adaptive re-use of a former medical re-use of a former medical re-use of a former medical clinic into a community centre.

I had the opportunity to return to Culpra Station to produce a new project with the piano that was left on the property after producing Instrumental in 2015, as part of Interpretive Wonderings, a critical cartographies mapping project that was produced in collaboration with the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation.

Background

In the twelve month period between September 2015 and September 2016, I produced two site specific performances in quick succession. Both performances were situated in iconic and contested Australian landscapes, and involved the staged tuning of salvaged pianos. The first performance Instrumental (see Chapter One), sought to renegotiate the politics of space specific to an Australian rural context by the staged tuning of a broken piano on Culpra Station. The second performance, Spatial Tuning (see Chapter Two), saw the staged tuning of a piano on the boundary between Hobart’s municipal rubbish dump and the Mount Wellington National Park, and sought to activate engagement with the environmental impact of human consumption and waste.

Where the piano used in Spatial Tuning had been donated to a recycling centre attached to the municipal rubbish dump, the piano used for Instrumental had remained at Culpra Station following the Interpretive Wonderings mapping workshop. While I had been granted permission by the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation to leave the piano on Culpra Station, in the back of my mind was the need to return to the property to remove or relocate the piano elsewhere.

Motivations

My motivation to explore spatial politics further, and a niggling desire to remove the piano from Culpra Station, emerged from a number of contributing factors. First, having spent the best part of five years grappling with the semiotic, spatial and performative attributes of the piano as the foundation of my doctoral research, I had become explicitly aware of the symbolic connotations of pianos in relation to an Australian context, and tied to a western colonial heritage. Leaving the broken piano on a property that had been acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation and was intended to be in partial compensation for the dispossession of Aboriginal people seemed increasingly inappropriate and insensitive, and an unnecessary daily reminder of Australia’s regrettable colonial past.

We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were stolen generations — this blemished chapter in our nation’s history.

A second consideration emerged from reflective analysis and peer review of both Instrumental and Spatial Tuning — my propensity to preserve the harmony of the piano through the act of tuning. As discussed in Chapter One, this propensity to preserve the harmony of the piano reflects my own cultural heritage as a man of British colonial origins with a predisposition to safeguard the piano, in a denial of the environmental realities of the Australian landscape. I was eager to explore this propensity further through alternative modes of interaction with the piano. This consideration led to extensive research into a community of practice in which a variety of practitioners have burnt pianos as part of their performance practice.

177 Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s “Sorry Speech”, February 13, 2008
Piano burning as performance practice

The origins of this field of performance practice that involves the burning of pianos are often attributed to the French born American artist Arman. The destruction of musical instruments, often by fire, was a recurrent theme in Arman’s work and two of his most celebrated works that involve the burning of pianos are *Piano de Néron* (Nero’s Piano), 1965 and *Piano Flamboyant* (Flaming Piano), 1966.

New Zealand artist Annea Lockwood wrote a piece called Piano Burning in 1968. The composition specifies performers use upright piano that is beyond repair. In the composer’s words,

> Piano burning should really be done with an upright piano; the structure is much more beautiful than that of a grand when you watch it burn. The piano must always be one that’s irretrievable, that nobody could work on, that no tuner or rebuilder could possibly bring back. It’s got to be a truly defunct piano.179

Contesting dominant forms of cultural production, Lockwood’s and Arman’s works are characteristic of a form of piano performance in which pianos are situated in unexpected settings and set on fire.

Yoshita Yamashita first performed *Burning Piano* in 1973 and 35 years later he re-watched the film and was inspired to repeat the performance. Situated on a beach in Japan, Yamashita played the burning piano wearing a protective firefighter’s uniform. Yamashita’s work is characteristic of a group of piano performances in which the piano is situated in an unexpected setting, set on fire and then played. Yamashita’s work is characteristic of a group of piano performances in which the piano is situated in an unexpected setting, set on fire and then played.

While the works of Arman, Lockwood and Yamashita can be loosely grouped under the banner of site specific performance, it can also be argued that the site in which the works occurred is not the dominant feature of the performance, therefore does not determine the meaning of the work. Rather than the site being the dominant signifier through the reframing of the existing environment, the works of Arman, Lockwood and Yamashita are all intended to be replicated elsewhere, suggesting

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that the production of meaning does not change when the works are moved to alternative sites.

In counterpoint to the first three works cited from the late 60s and early 70s are the more recent works of Chiharu Shiota and Gordon Douglas. Both Shiota’s and Douglas’s works involve the burning of grand pianos; however, I would argue that the significance and meaning of these works are determined by the context in which the act of burning took place, in conjunction with the semiotic register of the piano as a cultural artifact of western origins.

**Piano burning as site specific performance practice**

In 2011, Shiota set fire to a piano on a street of Hobart, Tasmania as part her work titled *In Silence* that was commissioned for the 2011 Mona Foma arts festival. According to Shiota, ‘the inspiration came from a childhood experience when she saw a charred piano amidst the ruins of a neighbor’s house which had burnt down in the night.’

While the motivations for burning the piano are conceivably drawn from Shiota’s childhood experiences, it is in a very different political context that I wish to interpret her work. First, a Japanese artist burning a cultural artifact of western origins in Tasmania is framed by the symbolic violence of the Second World War and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. On August 6 and 9, 1945, during the final stage of World War II, the United States dropped nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Killing at least 129,000 people, this catastrophic event remains the only use of nuclear weapons for warfare in history.

The secondary interpretation that I would like to propose is that the work can be read as a form of protest in relation to Tasmania’s colonial history and the treatment of Aboriginal Tasmanians during this period.

The Aboriginal Tasmanians, known as the Palawa, are the Indigenous people of the State of Tasmania. ‘Before British colonisation in 1803, there were an estimated 3,000–15,000 Palawa.’ The Palawa population was severely depleted in the nineteenth century due to introduced disease. By 1830 in Tasmania, ‘Disease had killed most of them but warfare and private violence had also been devastating.’ Some historians regard the Black War as one of the earliest recorded modern genocides. Historian James Boyce writes:

> By 1833, Christian missionary George Augustus Robinson had persuaded approximately 200 surviving Aboriginal Tasmanians to surrender themselves, with assurances that they would be protected, provided for, and eventually have their lands returned to them. These ‘assurances’ were false, and the survivors were moved to Wybalenna Aboriginal Establishment on Flinders Island. In 1847, the last 47 living inhabitants of Wybalenna were transferred to Oyster Cove, south of Hobart. Two individuals, Truganini (1812–76) and Fanny Cochrane Smith (1834–1905), are separately considered to have been the last people solely of Tasmanian descent.

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181 “First Atomic Bomb Dropped on Japan; Missile Is Equal to 20,000 Tons of TNT; Truman Warns Foe of a ‘Rain of Ruin’”. The New York Times. 2 June 2013.

182 Benjamin Madley, “From Terror to Genocide: Britain’s Tasmanian Penal Colony and Australia’s History Wars”. *Journal of British Studies*. 2008, 47

183 James Bonwick, *Daily Life and Origins of the Tasmanians*, Sampson, Low, Son and Marston, London 1870


This traumatic history suggests that Shiota’s act of burning of the piano creates a temporal reframing of the existing environment, that is, the colonial sandstone architecture of Hobart. Emerging from this reframing are the immaterial remnants of ‘this blemished chapter in our nation’s history.’ Furthermore, while the artist is not immediately visible within the photographic documentation of the performance, a human presence is implied in relation to the ignition of the burning instrument. This implied presence draws the spectator to consider who set the piano alight. In provoking such consideration, the artist’s identity, historical heritage, nationality, and perhaps even gender, are implicated in the destructive act and the geographic context in which burning takes place.

Another performance which draws on the semiotic register of the burning of a piano in relation to site, geographic context, and artistic identity is a video installation titled *The End of Civilisation* produced in 2012 by Scottish artist Douglas Gordon. Centered on the burning of a grand piano in the remote Cumbrian countryside on the border between Scotland and England, the work explores the symbolic order of the piano in relation to spatio-historical narratives. According to the artist’s statement, ‘The End of Civilisation is both a celebration and a warning —of fire as a symbol of optimism and hope, but also of risk, danger, and destruction.’ Gordon writes:

The piano started to represent for me the ultimate symbol of western civilization. Not only is it an instrument, it’s a beautiful object that works as a sculpture but it has another function entirely.

..I wanted to do something with a piano in a landscape of some significance and I suppose, as a Scotsman, there’s nothing more significant than the border. I thought it was beautiful to look from one country into another and I liked the idea that Hadrian’s Wall is, under a certain interpretation, a great end of civilization... I was overwhelmed to be in a landscape of such beauty, and with such a huge unfathomable history.

By burning an instrument synonymous with western cultural heritage, *The End of Civilisation* evokes multiple histories in time and space. While Gordon makes reference to Hadrian’s Wall and the end of the Roman Empire, the work can also be interpreted as a provocation for Scottish Independence, or perhaps an even more bleak commentary on the end of humanity as we move into the epoch of the Anthropocene.

The meaning of Gordon’s work is framed by a combination of two registers: the semiotic register of the piano, and a challenge to the existing spatio-historical context of Hadrian’s Wall and the piano as a cultural artifact synonymous with western civilisation. In setting fire to the piano, Gordon also evokes the traditional cultural practice of lighting beacons as a sign of warning or
admonition. He writes, ‘In the country, a system of beacon fires was at one time established to warn of incursions by the English.’ Gordan, a Scottish artist re-enacting this traditional practice, invites an interpretive reading of the work as a form of nationalist protest. At the intersection of aesthetics and political practices, *The End of Civilisation* evokes multiple histories tied to its contested geopolitical context. In comparing Gordon’s work with *Cultural Burn*, I foreground the juxtaposition of traditional cultural practices and the burning of the piano to evoke a post-colonial context.

### Cultural burning as Aboriginal land management

In 2015, I had received a proposal from a colleague, Jacqueline Goethe, to collaborate with film maker Victor Steffenson on an interpretive mapping project titled Interpretive Wonderings. Over a period of five years, Goethe had forged a close relationship with Steffenson and an organisation known as Firesticks. Firesticks is an ‘Indigenous-led network that aims to re-invigorate the use of cultural burning by facilitating cultural learning pathways to fire and land management. The Firesticks project applies contemporary and Aboriginal fire practices to enhance biodiversity, connectivity and landscape resilience.’

The term cultural burning is used to describe burning practices used by Aboriginal people to enhance the health of land and its people. Cultural burning means different things to different people. It could include burning (or preventing burning) for the health of particular species such as native grasses, emu, black grevillea, potoroo, bushfoods, threatened species, or biodiversity in general. It may involve patch burning to create different fire intervals across the country or it could be used for fuel and hazard reduction. It may be used to increase access and amenity for people or as a part of culture heritage management. It is ceremony to welcome people to country or it could also be as simple as a campfire around which people gather to share, learn, and celebrate.

The Firesticks project has led to a number of cultural burning collaborations between Aboriginal Land Councils and government organisations, including New South Wales (NSW) Parks and Wildlife, in which traditional knowledge specific to the management of traditional lands has been exchanged between Aboriginals elders and park rangers. This process of bringing together traditional knowledge with statutory mechanisms is often cited as a de-colonising act, in which the knowledge and opinions of Aboriginal people are re-positioned within mainstream governance. Furthermore, bringing together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to exchange knowledge of land management has opened up opportunities for Aboriginal employment with organisations such as NSW Parks and Wildlife.

By foregrounding the traditional Aboriginal land management practices of cultural burning within the context of burning of a piano on Barkanji country, the research explores the relations between the staged juxtaposition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices, a western cultural artifact (the piano), and the duplicitous spatial politics of intercultural ownership specific to Culpra Station. In setting up a framework to explore these relations, I draw on Jacques Rancière’s concept of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ as an analytical framework to explore how site specific performance can contribute to cultural politics in Australia.
Chapter 5: Cultural Burn

The Distribution of the Sensible

In 2006, Jacques Rancière’s *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* was published. This book sought to reconfigure the relationship between art and politics by bringing together the ‘necessary junction between aesthetic practices and political practices.’ Within this text, Rancière establishes a typology of artistic practices distinguished by three regimes, which he defines as ethical, poetic and aesthetic. The third, resistant typology, the aesthetic regime, ‘expands the political field and reshapes our ideas of who can participate in politics, and what activity is even thinkable as political.’

Politics is commonly understood as ‘the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power.’ While accepting this definition, Rancière proposes a second form of politics which he calls ‘real politics.’ According to Rancière, ‘real politics’ are not restricted to governance and politicians, and instead ‘revolve around what is seen and what can be said, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time.’

In outlining the operative potential of ‘real politics’ within the aesthetic regime, Rancière proposes that ‘knowledge and societal activities’ are predetermined by certain historical and political contingencies. Rancière defines (and opposes) these predetermined knowledge systems as ‘the distribution of the sensible.’ Challenging the fixity of historical categorisation, Rancière proposes that aesthetic practices are capable of disrupting the distribution of the sensible meaning to transgress the limitations of what is ‘perceptible, understandable and therefore artistically conceivable.’ Advocating creative intervention that can redistribute the sensible, Rancière suggests that intersecting aesthetic and political practices can produce a reordering of the senses. The effect of reordering the senses engenders a social change akin to Guattari’s production of political subjectivity (see Chapter Two), suggesting how aesthetic practices such as site specific performance activate engagement in spatial politics.

In alluding to how site specific performance practice can activate engagement in spatial politics by intervening in the distribution of the sensible, I will now provide a close reading of *Cultural Burn* through an analysis of the relations between the ‘delimitation of space and time, the visible and the invisible, speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience.’

194 Ibid.
195 Gretchen Coombs, “Activism, Art and Social Practice.”
196 https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/politics
197 Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics*
198 Ibid.
199 Ibid.
200 Ibid.
Cultural Burn: The re-distribution of the sensible

At the time of returning to Culpra Station in the spring of 2016, much of the state of New South Wales was in flood and underwater. The station property borders the Murray River, and was inundated with water to flood levels not seen since 2011. Arriving on the property in a two wheel drive hire car, no sooner did I come off the bitumen and onto the dirt roads than I realised I was in for a serious mission.

The piano had been stored at the camp site used as the central base for Interpretive Wonderings mapping workshop in 2015. To reach the campsite I had to traverse the property from the red soils of the Mallee, down through the black dirt of the grey gum forests, through the grazing and pastoral lands, down to the red gums of Murray River flood plain. Following Big Tree Road, the journey across the property was approximately eight kilometers, crossing through upper tributaries where flood waters were rumoured to flow up country, over boundaries of the Kemondok National Park, and across the freehold parcels of Culpra Station.
The hire car I was driving had balding tires, and was a front wheel drive. It felt as if the engine was dragging me across rather than along the ground. Sliding this way and that, with wheels spinning, I was mindful to hit the wetter, muddier sections of the road with sufficient speed to ensure enough momentum to pass through. An hour later, I was somewhat surprised when I arrived on the laser-levelled high plain within walking distance of the camp site and the piano.

By this stage the wheels of the car were so caked in mud that I no longer risked driving on the dirt road. Instead I skimmed along next to it, attempting to knock off the mud attached to the bottom of the vehicle on the salt bush and short grass as I passed. Turning onto the final stretch of dirt track, I was led along the ridge of the flood plain where the river passed parallel in the opposite direction. Passing the remnants of the former homestead with its adjoining stockyards, I hit a particularly deep section of mud followed by a shallow ditch, and the car came to an abrupt halt. I attempted to reverse back but the tires had no traction and instead spun in place, completely bogged. I was going nowhere. Content that I had made it within range of the piano, I abandoned the car and made my way down to the flood plain. Where twelve months before,

fifty people had camped under the red gum canopy, it was now completely underwater. I could make out the camp kitchen located on the edge of the body of water, and picking my way around a series of lagoons, careful to walk heavily to avoid any snakes, I arrived at the piano.

The piano had been stored under a tarpaulin next to the camp kitchen. Having remained outside in the elements for a period of twelve months, it showed considerable signs of distress. From the flood marks on the ground I could see the waters were receding. Like a marker at a flood crossing, the piano too had indications of higher waters. Whilst already broken in its first appearance on
Culpra Station within Instrumental, the piano was now looking considerably worse for wear. Missing keys, peeling veneer and a number of local insects including a colony of fire ants and several species of spiders had made their home in the instrument.

Before returning to Culpra Station in 2016, I had intended to burn the piano on the levelled ground above the flood plain near to where the car was bogged. Before the property was purchased by the Indigenous Land Corporation, this laser-levelled paddock had been used by farmers for cropping. This levelled area appealed to me for a number of aesthetic and practical reasons, including: the horizontality of the clearing, which provided a clear vista of the eastern horizon and sunrise; the vantage point and distance from which I could document the piano burning; and safety reasons — I could control the fire in an open clearing should it get out of hand.

Despite all these concerns, to move the piano to the levelled area above the flood plain would have required either a tractor or at least two people strong enough to walk and drag the piano through waist deep mud and water. From the amount of water in the rivers and on the roads between Sydney and Mildura, I had anticipated the flood on Culpra Station, however, I had not anticipated the extent of the inundation. Some locals suggested the rains were equivalent to the great floods of the 1950s. Being alone on the property with a limited window of opportunity before the 10 hour journey back east to Sydney, I had very limited options for moving the piano far from its resting place in the campsite. I was however, resolute about carrying out the experiment of burning the piano to further explore the performative, spatial and semiotic potential of the piano as a device to activate engagement in the Indigenous/non Indigenous spatial politics specific to Culpra Station.
Chapter 5 : Cultural Burn

Cultural Burn: The event

Before I revisited the piano in the flood plain of Culpra Station, I had considered drowning or burying the piano. Such a gesture was inspired by the work of Richard McLester, Piano in the Sea. But burying the piano on a property that was home to a number of Aboriginal burial sites seemed insensitive and heavy handed. Similarly, in the light of the Spatial Tuning performance that I had carried out in the Hobart municipal rubbish dump, the thought of drowning the piano by discarding the instrument in the Murray River seemed contradictory to substantiating any credibility for making an environmental claim.

Opportunistically, I instead decided to combine both the act of burning and the act of drowning by locating the piano within the billabong and setting it alight. The location of the piano in the billabong was determined by the location of where the communal fire had been situated during Interpretive Wonderings, and by the position of the camera I had placed on the bank of the billabong.

I first moved the piano away from the camp kitchen to avoid burning it down as well. Finding two pieces of old corrugated iron, I dragged them into the water as a kind of raft or stabilising device. Inch by inch I walked the piano into the water, several times almost dropping the instrument on its back, where I would not be able to retrieve it on my own. After moving the piano around ten meters along my makeshift corrugated iron platform, I was struck by its sheer weight; while it was designed to be ambulatory, it was definitely not intended to be moved by one person.

As I moved the piano into the billabong, the camera frame I had established on the bank determined its position, suggesting I should move the piano this way or that. Whilst negotiating the lens, at some point I decided it necessary to remove my shoes so as to take the piano into deeper water. In doing I slashed my toe on the rusted metal. Once the piano was in position, I grabbed a jerry can full of unleaded petrol and doused the piano in fuel. Having played with petrol in my youth, I had an innate fear of the volatile substance. In the back of my mind were horror stories of people holding the fuel source that back lit from a naked flame. Mindful to keep my distance, I separated the fuel source from the piano I was about to set alight. I moved back quickly, recapped the gerrycan and grabbed a pre-prepared fire stick. I lit the tip of it, then I touched the piano with the naked flame from a distance of around two meters. The piano caught alight and the petrol vapor trapped within the piano ignited. I flinched and moved back to the bank where the camera was rolling.

* Please start performance documentation now: https://youtu.be/5LjarpziEAc
Chapter 5: Cultural Burn

Fig. 5.14 Self-portrait Cultural Burn, Culpea Station, 2016
It was an unusually still afternoon in the gully. Leaves in the distance shimmered, but the sound of wind-rustling gum leaves was absent. The flames took to the piano with an enthusiasm I had not anticipated. As the fire progressed, the internal wires could be heard first expanding, then snapping, amplified by the reverberation of the internal sound board with an almost synthetic resonance. With the fallboard down, the keys did not ignite and instead let off a thick and yellowy sulphurous colored smoke. As the fire took hold internally, flames shot out of the top, licking at the flood line marked on the gum trees behind like a horizontal datum. Burning hottest on the inside, the fire opened up and broke through the detailing on the front board. Chunks of burning piano embers broke off and plunged into the shallows with a fizzing sound that created concentric ripples on the surface of the water. Both destructive and protecting, the water acted as a sort of protective barrier from the fire spreading. As the fire engulfed the piano, natural oils within the larger structural timbers popped and echoed a vast distance across the water and adjacent pools.

As the piano burned hotter, the sound became louder and echoed further from the source. The burning reflection on the water doubled the visual effect, and although they were drowned out, the bird calls from the gum trees above formed a kind of peripheral symphonic accompaniment. To my surprise, the abundant bird life did not leave; they seemed oblivious; perhaps they were accustomed to the sound of fire. A fish even flopped around in the shallows some meters from the piano.

Fig. 5.15 Cultural Burn, Culpra Station, 2016
After forty-five minutes, the camera timed out, followed shortly after by the audio recorder, which had exhausted its battery life. The fire peaked but did not burn through. The piano did not collapse as expected. The vertical orientation of its structure with its feet sitting in the water resisted the flames. After my technology died, I sat and observed. A performance for one person. Just the birds, the flies and me. Oscillating between roles, I asked myself, was I a spectator? a performer? both?: Can a site specific performance contribute to cultural politics if witnessed live by only one person?

Eventually I too left. The piano continued to burn much longer than I had expected. Even though I had left, the performance continued as an ongoing dialogue between the piano and the landscape, the fire and the elements of water and air, between Indigenous notions of country and colonial histories.

Cultural Burn: An acoustic ecology

To apply Murray Schafer’s ‘acoustic ecology’ 201 (see Chapter One) as a conceptual framework to analyse Cultural Burn, the keynotes or background sounds were characterised by water birds, frogs croaking and a multitude of insect noises. The sound signals or foreground sounds were dominated by the piano burning intermittently, overlaid with the sound of bird calls and flies passing within the range of the microphone. Lastly, the soundmarks, or sounds that are particularly regarded by a community, are defined by the distinctive sound of fire and the calls of native birds endemic to Culpra Station.

Added to the acoustic ecology of Cultural Burn were the ‘echoes and reverberations that occur as sound is absorbed and reflected from surfaces within an environment,’ 202 known as ‘acoustic coloration.’ Evoking the holistic notion of Indigenous Country, the acoustic coloration present within Cultural Burn is inclusive of the environment in flood and the effects of material and immaterial composition. The sound emanating from the piano burning in the billabong is reflected by the surrounding tree trunks, carried by the surface of the water, and echoed by the escarpment of the flood plain, such that ‘the sound arriving at the ear is the analogue of the current state of the physical environment, charged by each interaction with the environment.’ 203

The notion of a soundmark in relation to a piano evokes a type of sound that we are very used to hearing and therefore anticipate from this concert instrument. These predictable piano sounds produced by conventional human interaction with the instrument are what Rancière would characterise within a musical context as the distribution of the sensible. Within this notion we know the ‘sensible’ causal relationship between the fingering of the keys and the corresponding sound generated from hammers on strings. We are culturally attuned to this convention by the playing of particular melodies and harmonic chords that are instantly recognisable as the language of the piano. This language is perceived as complete, and sensible to the human ear.

When the instrument is burned, the language of the piano becomes partial, and what arrives at the human ear are fragments of non-human interaction, the environment playing the piano. In the absence of normative modes of human interaction with the piano, the interaction is redefined as between the piano and the landscape. The resulting non-human to non-human interaction provokes a disruption in the distribution of the sensible, in which the landscape plays the piano and the piano speaks back its own guttural language. Coming out from the death of the instrument in the landscape, the natural element of fire that provokes the piano speaks by itself, re-distributing the sensible and reordering the senses to engage a different type of space-time that is political.

Much like Gordon’s The End of Civilisation, Cultural Burn assigns the environment an active role in the making of meaning. Reframed by the performative act of burning the piano on Barkanji Country, Cultural Burn evokes the Aboriginal land management practices of cultural burning, and Indigenous notions of singing to country.
In Australian Indigenous societies, the land and the songs associated with it are connected intimately. Singing is the main method of transmitting knowledge in an orally based society. Songs that are specifically land based come from ancestral beings, while other songs may be used for purposes such as healing.

That night I camped out on the levelled ground above the flood plain. In the morning I woke early and returned to the billabong. This time I removed my shoes and walked cautiously across. I found the piano surprisingly intact, still standing upright. The cast iron frame had separated from the back posts. The piano strings, frayed, snapped and twisted, took on a distressed organic quality. In contrast to the piano's timbers that had been almost entirely burnt away and released into the atmosphere, the metal components of the instrument remained intact.

I sat in the morning sun and contemplated the project. Deep in thought, I heard someone calling my name from the other side of the lagoon. It was Barry and Betty Pearce, the custodians of Culpra Station. I grabbed my belongings, and waded across the lagoon and up the path to dry ground. Whilst I had received permission to both enter the property and burn the piano, in the presence of Barry and Betty, I suddenly felt guilty for what I'd done, and a variety of questions crossed my mind. Was burning the piano the equivalent to burning a flag? Or burning a book? Had I trivialised the space of Indigenous politics? Was I being insensitive or disrespectful to the plight of Indigenous custodians Barry and Betty Pearce?

Due to the flood waters, Barry and Betty were unable to get down to the camp kitchen to see the remains of the burnt out piano. Upon hearing the news that I'd torched the piano in the billabong, the Elders came across as bemused, more concerned for my safety driving off the property in an inappropriate two wheel drive vehicle than the whereabouts of the broken piano. Reassuring Barry I would return to remove the metal remnants at a later date, I left what remained of the instrument in wait of the waters subsiding.
Chapter 5 : Cultural Burn

Conclusion

Twelve months later when preparing to exhibit Cultural Burn at a gallery in Melbourne, it dawned on me that the remnants of the burnt piano might be an interesting addition to exhibit along side the video documentation. I picked up the phone and rang my Indigenous research partner Sophia Pearce to ask what remained of the piano on Culpra Station. She explained that in the months following my solitary act of burning, the local water authority had released an extraordinary amount of water into the Murray River for the purposes of mimicking a second flood. From her account, the river rose an additional two meters on top of the existing flood, completed submerging the campsite, kitchen and remnants of the burnt-out piano. When the waters receded, Sophia stated that all that remained in the camp site was the rusted iron frame of the piano.

In October 2017, on the way to Melbourne, I detoured one thousand kilometers from Sydney to Culpra Station. When I arrived at the camp site, the frame had been moved and was once again propped against the camp kitchen that had been entirely underwater earlier in the year. In the gigaliters, sediment and soils that had passed through the site, I found it puzzling that this object had resurfaced evidently too heavy for the flood water to carry away unlike the rest of the instrument. I spent some time scratching around on the ground looking for the brass pins and piano strings wishing that I had a metal detector but they were all gone, taken away claimed by the flood waters.

In re-discovering the cast iron frame, I found a certain poetic resonance within the artefact that is capable of multiple interpretations. Firstly despite my attempt to destroy the piano, and the landscapes attempt to consume it, this colonial instrument was only momentarily submerged only to resurface again dusty and worn but still intact. Secondly the remnants of the burnt out piano form a material composition that can be interpreted through a cross-cultural historical context. In decoding the piano remains in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture, Country and land, one notes the metal remnant’s alien presence within traditional Aboriginal culture. In contrast, colonial culture, in both a historical and contemporary context, has a fervent desire for metals and minerals that commonly define a non-Indigenous sensibility to land that is pursued, valued and understood as resource and in turn resourced.

Prior to carrying out Cultural Burn, this body of research had been concerned with preserving harmony through conventional human/piano interactions. Instead, the project devised for
Cultural Burn was to burn and therefore destroy the instrument in order to explore the performative potential of assigning the non-human agents of Culpra Station an active role in the negotiation of spatial politics. Against the Aboriginal land management practices of cultural burning, in which vegetation is regenerated through controlled burning, the piano was re-positioned within an ephemeral billabong and set on fire. Backdropped by gumtrees and water birds, the piano burnt for several hours, and in its death, the piano performed its final sonic act.

Since burning the instrument in 2016, I have exhibited Cultural Burn as a video work within a gallery context. Following the works release in the public domain, I have received constructive criticism that in seeking to rid the site of the instruments colonizing presence, I had, in haste, doused the instrument with petrol and set it on fire without thinking of the environmental consequence of incinerating toxic paints and materials into the waterways.

In response to such criticism, I find it necessary to qualify, that am acutely aware and stand beside the charged action of burning the piano that while ostensibly echoing the cleansing act of Aboriginal fire regimes does not come without environmental or political controversy. In tackling the gravitas of Indigenous – non-Indigenous spatial politics in Australia, it comes with no surprise that such a gesture is not devoid of controversy and however troubling the nature of this content might be, it is in my opinion not something to be shied away from.

In comparing Cultural Burn to both the Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning and to singing to Country in relation to the distribution of the sensible, several difficulties emerge. First, if we consider Rancière’s assertion that ‘the aesthetic regime sees art and politics rebuilt at the intersection between the work of art and its interpretation,’ one must consider how the work is interpreted in relation to the semiotic register of the piano, the political context of Culpra Station, and my own identity as a white male of British origins.

In unpacking these relations, Rancière suggests that the distribution of the sensible

is based in a distribution of spaces, times and forms of activity that determine the very manner in which something common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution. The distribution of the sensible reveals who can have a share in what is common to the community based on what they do and on the time and space in which the activity is performed.

In the act of juxtaposing these two forms of culture, the burning of the piano and Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning, some underlying tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories and interactions emerge. Subverting common understandings of two things, Cultural Burn resonates as political from Rancière’s perspective, in that it ‘presents familiar cultural forms combined in an unfamiliar way.’ Bringing to life his idea that ‘suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused conversely by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.’ Advocating the ability of site specific performance practice to illuminate pre-existing histories, Cultural Burn constructs new temporal materialisations between cultural practices, communities and environments that give rise to new political formations.

In bringing awareness to Indigenous and non-Indigenous forms of cultural burning, I am wary of being misunderstood as patriarchal or insensitive, and of the danger of misappropriating Aboriginal cultural heritage; however this is neither the intention nor the point. Rather, contextualising the burning of the piano on Barkanji country within the Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning is a method to problematise and engage audiences’ curiosity through a questioning of Indigenous and non-Indigenous spatial sensibilities and practices of attending to land and Country.

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206 Ibid. 12.
208 Ibid.
Furthermore, having worked extensively in remote regions as an architect specialising in sustainable development and community engagement, both domestically and internationally, I note that there is a particular sensitivity to engaging with Indigenous and non-Indigenous spatial politics. It is my understanding that this sensitivity is tied to Australia’s deplorable colonial past and inability to forge a mutual understanding and respect. As a result, the majority of non-indigenous creative practitioners in Australia have been reluctant to engage with Indigenous contexts. This inhibition may be shifting as small steps are being made across government, mining and rural sectors, and creative industries. Most notably, when the former prime minister Kevin Rudd gave a parliamentary address in 2008 on behalf of the nation of Australia, he apologised for ‘the laws and policies of successive parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss’ on Indigenous Australians.

We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.209

Accentuated through the act of burning the piano on Culpra Station, the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous spatio-cultural and environmental disciplinary regimes emerge. This contestation between disciplines, cultural practices and the dynamics of the natural environment propelled me to develop a sixth and final concluding piece titled *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations*.

209 Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s *Sorry Speech* to Parliament, 13

210 Ibid.
Chapter 6: Conclusion
The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations
Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations

Fig. 6.00 The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations,
D. Ovason, Pentridge Prison, 2017
Chapter 6: Conclusion
The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations

PART 1: A Summary of Conceptual Operations

Situated within the field of critical spatial practice, this research has explored how site specific performance can activate engagement in the spatial politics of contested landscapes of Australia. Carried out through a series of iterative performances, the practice-based research has used pianos as performative, spatial, and semiotic instruments to explore interactions between spatial conditions, cultural practices, communities, and their environments. Through an exploration of the cultural, ethical, and political resonances of juxtaposing the piano within a variety of sites in Australia, the practice research has evolved through two phases of project investigations.

Commencing with the two urban recitals of Phase One, there is a marked conceptual and locational progression to three regionally situated piano experimentations of Phase Two. This practice research development has yielded four critical spatial operations: Spatial Inversions, Instrumentalising, Spatial Tuning and Cultural Burning, enacted through an iterative design process. Research Phase One: Urban Landmarks focused attention on two preliminary performance works that took place within the nineteenth century landmark buildings of Melbourne’s Flinders Street Station and the Princess Street Theatre. Providing an overview of the origins of the research trajectory, these early studies revealed how the cultural authority of the piano enabled researchers to enter landmark buildings usually considered off limits to the public. The first critical spatial operation — Spatial Inversions — emerged through the Urban Landmark projects Duration and The Princess Theatre Inversion.

Spatial Inversions

Questioning hegemonic structures within the spatial arrangements of dominant modes of cultural production, Spatial Inversions incites an active political engagement in the spatial relations between performers, audiences and environments. This operation emerged from the Duration project through the restrictions imposed on having a live audience attend a 90-minute performance of Canto Ostinato within the Flinders Street Station ballroom. In response, a film crew was used to broadcast the performance from the ballroom to the Federation Square screen, to the internet, and via the public announcement system to the stations' thirteen platforms and public concourse. Through the inversion of conventional spatial arrangements between the performers and audiences, Duration temporarily enabled the reactivation of privatised public infrastructure, returning the ballroom to the public realm.

This operation of introducing a spatial inversion was further developed and enacted within The Princess Theatre Inversion project. Re-appropriating The Princess Theatre, this project questions conventional socio-architectural spatial relations by inverting the relationships between performers, the audience and the theatre. With an audience of one hundred people on the stage, facing two grand pianos and an empty auditorium, the performance was activated through a twenty minute performance of Steve Reich’s Piano Phase. Exploring the spatial politics of the proscenium theatre as a dominant hierarchical form of cultural production, the inversion that took place within The Princess Theatre temporarily destabilises socio-architectural hierarchies through an embodied encounter with the spatio-temporalities of the built environment.

In the early project work of Duration and The Princess Theatre Inversion, the spatial inversions re-cast conventional relationships between performers, audiences and environments. Questioning the impact of privatising public assets (in Duration) and normative spatial conditions of the western theatre (in The Princess Theatre Inversion), this inversion of spatial relations is a method of destabilising hegemonic structures and activating audience engagement with, and potential reflection upon, dominant forms of cultural production.
Instrumentalising

The operation of Instrumentalising emerged from the 2015 performance that took place as part of Interpretive Wonderings, a critical cartographies workshop on a property known as Culpra Station that was acquired as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people. The project is titled Instrumental and is the first of three spatial investigations that provide a considered engagement with the semiotic resonance of the piano as a critical instrument to activate engagement in spatial politics. This project took place on land intended to be a compensatory land bank for Aboriginal people, and brought about an opportunity to explore the semiotic potential of the piano as a cultural artifice to engage in the spatial politics of land, Indigenous Country and the ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia. The project Instrumental features a local tuner attempting to tune a broken upright piano outdoors on Culpra Station.

The title of the work is both a framing device and an operation. The operation of Instrumentalising actively engages with the spatial politics of Culpra Station through a sustained encounter with the spatio-temporalities of the duplicitous locational identity of a contested Australian landscape. Instrumentalising seeks to poetically problematize the instrumental logic of colonialism, capitalism and the global arts and education sectors. Questioning the instrumental logic of colonisation in Australia, Instrumentalising is a method to reframe and assign non-human agents with an active role in the renegotiation and activation of new socio-political formations.

Murray Schaeffer’s concept of acoustic ecologies is introduced as an analytical framework for describing how site specific performance can activate spatio-political formations within contested Australian landscapes. Schaeffer’s terminology is adapted to describe the emergence of new interactions between human and non-human agents — the piano, the performers, the audience members, and the physical environment. Across both sonic and visual spectrums, the analysis reveals optico-acoustic ecologies through which to describe the duplicitous spatial politics of inter-cultural ownership specific to the locational identity of Culpra Station.

Through a close reading of the immediate experience of producing Instrumental, Chapter Three makes evident the motivations and critical operations behind mediatising or documenting site specific performance for the purposes of archiving, exhibition and dissemination. Drawing on the writings of Philip Auslander and Peggy Phelan, this chapter proposes an expanded field of discursive potential in which the work can actively engage in spatial politics through multiple modes of dissemination and varied forms of audience engagement.

Resonating with Miwon Kwon’s writings about site specific practice and locational identity, I build upon the expansive notion of fragmented, multiple sites by repositioning it and adapting it to the field of site specific performance. Describing the unanticipated platforms in which Instrumental was broadcast, featured and published, I demonstrate that site iteration and fragmentation provides new opportunities for critical reflection. Informed by corresponding modes of interaction, engagement and spectatorship, a critical appraisal of Instrumental claims that the efficacy and impact of critical spatial practice is defined by the convergence of sites of research production and sites of research dissemination that together form a cumulative field of discursive operation.
Spatial Tuning

From the initial questioning of the ongoing impact of colonialism, the research expanded to question the environmental impact of consumer culture. The performance project titled *Spatial Tuning* that took place at a municipal landfill site in Hobart, Tasmania, involved the staged tuning of a piano situated outdoors, within the contested boundary between the Mount Wellington National Park and the McRobies Gully Waste Recycling Centre. In shifting the emphasis from Indigenous to environmental politics, this project revealed that the symbolic connotations of the piano are contingent on the situation in which the spatial tuning takes place.

The operation of *Spatial Tuning* activates engagement with environmental spatial politics by provoking an immersive sensory engagement with the impact of urban waste on the Tasmanian landscape. By actively engaging in the relations between aesthetic practices, human and non-human interaction, and spatial politics, *Spatial Tuning* questions how artistic experimentations can be used to understand the issues around the acts of crossing borders and shifting boundaries.

Consistent with my consideration of pre-performance, performance event, and post-performance analysis, I commenced the project with pre-performance negotiations with local authorities. The process of doing so raised issues of ownership, the policing of boundaries, rights of exclusion and inclusion, and the dynamics of deterritorialisation. I came to understand the ability of site specific performance to actively engage in spatial politics irrespective of the live event. In this, I learned from the works of Markiyan Matsch’s *Piano for Berkut* (2012) and Ludovico Einaudi’s *Elegy for the Arctic* (2014), as exemplary projects from my community of practice that undertake a form of Spatial Tuning in which pianos are used as performative, spatial and semiotic devices to intervene within ‘the most dominated of dominated spaces.’

Used as a title, a framing device and a process, the operation of *Spatial Tuning* is informed by Felix Guattari’s concept of ‘ethico-aesthetics’ as a framework to explore how aesthetic practices can destabilise dominant power structures to produce new political subjectivities through the crossing of experiential boundaries.

Supported by audience feedback on the live performance event in Hobart, the act of *Spatial Tuning* brings about new forms of negotiating and constructing relationships between landscape, bodily absence, and perception, through an immersive sensory engagement with the spatio-temporalities of an anthropocentric landscape. In doing so, this operation of *Spatial Tuning* fosters new perceptive sensibilities for close encounters with previously distanced landscapes, suggesting how the convergence of aesthetic and political practices can collapse the distance between passive spectators and contested landscapes.

Cultural Burning

*Burning [definition]:*
1.1 Very hot or bright.
1.2 Very keenly or deeply felt; intense.
1.3 Of urgent interest and importance; exciting or calling for debate.

*Cultural Burn* is the final performance work addressed in this dissertation, and is centered on a return to Culpra Station to burn the piano that was used earlier as the tool of negotiation in the project *Instrumental*. The motivation to burn the piano emerged from an acknowledgement of my propensity to preserve the harmony of the piano, which resulted in an eagerness to explore alternative experimental modes of piano interaction. *Cultural Burn* is informed by a community of practitioners who have burnt pianos as part of their performance practice, including Chiharu Shiota (*In Silence*, 2011) and Douglas Gordon (*The End of Civilisation*, 2012).
Through the juxtaposition of the Aboriginal land management practice of cultural burning, and the burning of pianos within contemporary arts practice, the operation of Cultural Burning activates engagement in Indigenous and non-Indigenous political sensibilities towards land and Country. Drawing on Jaques Rancière’s concept of the ‘distribution of the sensible,’ Cultural Burning intersects aesthetic and political practices to provoke a transversal condition through the juxtaposition of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural practices, artifacts and environment.

Supported by a detailed account of burning the piano on Country, the value of Cultural Burning as an operation is in its capacity to reposition environmental contexts as active participants. Proposing the landscape as a choreographer and a performer, Cultural Burning activates environmental contexts to both determine and effect the making of form and meaning. Reformulating the relations between human and non human interaction, Cultural Burning can enable environments to speak through artefacts, thus reframing the environment as active in the formulation of spatial politics.

Accumulating Cyclical Operations

Emerging from the development of an iterative series of site specific performances are four critical spatial operations; Spatial Inversions, Instrumentalising, Spatial Tuning, and Cultural Burning. Enacted within and through the development of my critical spatial practice, each of these operations revealed a particular potential to activate engagement in the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes. These operations have focused the potential of my own critical spatial practice and contribute new practice knowledge to a community of practitioners in the field of critical spatial practice.

While the four operations are addressed separately and chronologically in the order in which they emerged, their formation, actualisation and value are by no means linear or autonomous. Rather, the operations run through the projects to resurface and recombine in both cumulative and cyclical ways. The research offers the emergent potential of cumulative cyclical operations as a method for activating new spatio-political formations and critical engagement in the spatial politics of contested landscapes. Emerging through the performative re-contextualisation of contested landscapes, this process of practice based enquiry provides insights into the conflicting claims, territorialisations, values, and temporal attributes that constitute spaces of conflict.

Consistent with the practice-led mode of research enquiry, and leveraging on the live potential of an embodied encounter with spatio-temporalites of contested urban landscapes, a sixth and final investigative spatial performance was undertaken to explicate the potential of accumulating cyclical operations in critical spatial practice. Titled The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations, this performance was staged as a concluding gesture on the morning of Wednesday 18 October 2017, in D Division of the former HM Pentridge Prison complex in Coburg.

PART 2: The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations
Fig 6.01
The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations,
Act 1: Tuning
D-Division Pentridge Prison, 2017
## Project Synopsis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
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<td>Project No.</td>
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<td>Research Phase</td>
<td>Phase Three: Synthesis: Urban Landmarks in Contested Australian Landscapes</td>
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<td>Date</td>
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<td>Act 2: D-Division main building</td>
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<td>Site conditions</td>
<td>Constructed in 1894 as a women's prison, D-Division is a three story blue stone building that became dedicated to remanding prisoners in 1956 until it was closed in 1999. Comprised of 161 cells, D-Division housed many notorious prisoners such as Mark 'Chopper' Read, Ned Kelly, and Harry Power. Relocated from the Old Melbourne Goal and still intact within D-Division is the infamous hanging beam that was host to the last execution in Australia in 1967.</td>
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<td>Landscape (Urban)</td>
<td>D-Division is situated at the south-eastern corner of the former Pentridge Prison Complex. Decommissioned in 1996, the site is under development by owners, Future Estate, who have plans to transform the site into ‘a new European-style urban hub,’ Remnants of a failed development from the early 2000s sit adjacent to D-Divison and include low cost, medium density housing, and an abandoned retail strip.</td>
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<td>2 x Kawai grand pianos</td>
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<td>2 x audio zooms</td>
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<td>2 x pianists</td>
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<td>Act 2: Piano phase by Steve Reich</td>
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<td>Audience 2 (mediated)</td>
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<td>Spatial Tuning</td>
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<td>Emergent Operation</td>
<td>Spatial phasing</td>
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Chapter 6 : Conclusion

The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations

Exploring the cultural, ethical, and political resonances produced through the performative reappropriation of an abandoned gaol, The Accumulation of Cyclical Operation provides insights into the complex networks, multiple logics, and rich contradictions at the intersection of performance and architectural practice. Questioning the ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia, the research curates material, spatial and acoustic disciplines to reveal the limitations of traditional architectural and musical practices in relation to controlling the dynamics of natural environmental systems.

Structured in two acts, The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations was produced in the medium in which the research was generated, and offers an intensification of the research value through an embodied encounter with the critical spatial operations of Inverting Space, Instrumentalising and Spatial Tuning. Through the spatial co-production of cultural practices, community and a contested urban landscape, this performance evokes a heightened and embodied presence with the temporal attributes of spatial politics, to demonstrate a methodological contribution to the field of critical spatial practice through the enactment of the cumulative potential of cyclical operations.

The Site: HM Pentridge Prison

Nicknamed the ‘Bluestone College’, ‘Coburg College’, or ‘College of Knowledge’, Her Majesties Pentridge Prison was established in 1851 as a result of increased pressure on the penal system due to the gold rush and the need for a place to hold those convicted of serious offences. In the later half of the nineteenth century, ‘the prison was gradually expanded and developed in stages, reflecting both developments in penology as well as broader Government policies relating to the operation of the prison system.’

According to the Victorian Heritage Register, the former HM Prison Pentridge is:
(1) ‘Of historical significance as the largest prison complex constructed in Victoria in the nineteenth century’
(2) ‘Is of architectural and historical significance as a nineteenth century complex of buildings that demonstrates a number of phases in the development of the penal reform system.’
(3) ‘Is of architectural significance due to its monumental size and the austere Classical style of the nineteenth century prison buildings.’
(4) ‘Is of aesthetic significance due to its grim and imposing bluestone walls and towers which are important landmark features.’

In 1924, Pentridge replaced the Melbourne Gaol as the main remand and reception prison for the metropolitan area. The bodies of a number of prisoners executed at the Melbourne Gaol were exhumed and relocated to Pentridge, where they were reburied. Pentridge also became the venue for all subsequent hangings, until the last Australian prisoner to suffer the death
penalty, Ronald Ryan, was executed in D Division in 1967.\

HM Pentridge Prison was officially closed for operation in 1997, as most of the prisoners had already been relocated to Barwon Prison as part of the downgrading of Pentridge. Following the 90s trend for privatising Victoria's public assets, the land was released for private sector development. Claiming insolvency, the first round of residential development failed, and by 2017, the site was split into two parts.

Fig. 6.03
D-Division Pentridge Prison, 1997 November Mid Tier, East Wing.

The northern part of the prison, referred to as the “Pentridge Coburg” or “Pentridge Piazza”, was under development by the Shayher Group, who had owned the site since 2013. The southern part of the prison, referred to as the ‘Coburg Quarter’, bordered by Pentridge Boulevard, Stockade Avenue, Wardens Walk, and Urquhart Street, was owned by the developer Future Estate.

Drawing on the creative capital of so called early adopters, Future Estate’s ongoing development aspirations seek to transform the site into ‘a new European-style urban hub.’ While previous developments on the site had failed due to ‘the underwhelming quality of development at the former prison site,’ market forces suggest favourable forecasting for Future Estates Coburg Quarter. These forecasts are largely due to unprecedented housing prices increases within inner city Melbourne, including the suburbs of Fitzroy, Collingwood, and Carlton. Previously the centre of Melbourne’s celebrated bohemian arts scene, these areas have been rapidly gentrified since the turn of the century, and thus the stable of Melbourne’s low income creative cohort has been gradually pushed out to the suburbs of Brunswick and Coburg. ripe for profiteering, Future Estate have recognised an opportunity from this migratory trend, and began its early activation strategy to rebrand the contested site as Melbourne’s new creative hub.

With knowledge of the Instrumental performance I had produced on Culpra Station, in 2015, Future Estate invited me to stage a performance within the notorious D-Division complex on the former Pentridge Prison site. At the time I received the offer, my research was focused on contested Australian landscapes within rural contexts, and so I declined the offer. In 2018, when it became clear, at short notice, that an additional summative project was a necessary inclusion in the research process, I recalled this invitation and made contact with Future Estate, with a proposal to stage a performance within D-Division. Future Estate were eager to facilitate, and offered the venue at zero charge in exchange for marketing material in the form of video and photographic performance documentation. The implications of my involvement in the neoliberal strategies of the developers are discussed in the concluding remarks of this chapter. Here, it is simply noted that these kinds of exchanges became commonplace throughout my research, and I agreed to the terms.


222 Identified as “Precinct 9” and “Precinct 10” in Moreland Planning Scheme, clause 1.0 and 5.10 of clause 37.08, Schedule 1 to the Activity Centre Zone.


Pentridge D-Division

D-Division is a three storey blue stone building located on the southern edge of the former HM Pentridge Prison complex. Constructed in 1894 as a women’s prison, the building became dedicated to remanding prisoners in 1956 until it was closed in 1999. Comprising 161 cells, D-Division housed many notorious prisoners, such as Mark ‘Chopper’ Read, Ned Kelly, and Harry Power. Relocated from the Old Melbourne Gaol, and still intact within D-Division, is the infamous hanging beam. In 1967, Ronald Ryan was the last man to be hung after he was thought to have killed a guard during an attempt to escape, seeing that he may have been innocent the hangings were discontinued.

When we entered the building for the first time during a preliminary site visit in 2017, D-Division struck me as the most disciplining kind of architecture, through ‘its expression of the requirements of containment and order.’ Built in 1894, the Victorian architecture struck me as both inhumane and ethereal. With its long central axis, central crossing, and three storey vaulted ceiling, the architectural configuration of D-Division is reminiscent of a classical church built in the Middle Ages. Natural light enters D-Division from clerestory windows above, washing the internal atrium with a church-like character and atmosphere. Counter-set with the light quality, the weighty slabs of blue stone are skilfully laid throughout the ground floor. In each of the cramped cells is a single tiny window; with the knowledge that cells had been originally designed to house the inmates for a 23-hour day, the unattainable, light-filled void outside the prison doors was a constant, painful reminder of the outside world.

From the ground floor, we left the interior to enter the prison yards of D-Division. These yards had originally been divided into five sections, with a watch-tower located on the first floor of the main building as a kind of half-panopticon. In the twentieth century, with increased prisoner numbers and penal reform that no longer permitted prisoners to be restrained in their cells for 23 hours a day, these outdoor spaces were modified, and reconfigured into three larger yards by the removal of two sections of the original four-metre walls. Despite the modifications, the yards were no less forbidding. On one side, the yard was enclosed by formidable blue stone masonry three storeys high, punctuated with the tiny barred windows of the prison cells. Bounded by concrete walls adorned in razor wire and rusted metal spikes, the yards had a covered seating area and a decaying basketball hoop along one wall.

Ibid.


Accessed 21, Feb, 2018 http://urbanrelics.net/explore/main.php?g2_itemId=13864

Ibid.
Community of practice

The proposal to produce a performance within D-Division called to mind a variety of musicians who have staged performances within penitentiaries. According to a variety of sources, there is consensus that ‘the most famous prison concert and recording has to be Johnny Cash’s at Folsom Prison in 1968.’ It has been 50 years since Cash recorded his legendary live album at Folsom Prison, boosting his then-flagging career and highlighting his efforts to reform the nation’s penal system. While the performative dynamic of Cash’s live audience of inmates in an operational gaol is starkly different from that of an invited audience of mainly academics in an abandoned gaol, the aspirations of both performances to actively engage with the spatial politics of performance and discipline in architecture are consistent.

The Event

At 5:45 a.m. on an unusually warm October morning, an invited audience of fifty people assembled in the darkness at the front gates of HM Pentridge Prison. Shortly after, the audience were briefed on safety, and asked to remain silent for the duration for the performance. In a grey dawn with a threat of rain, six ushers dressed in black with pink ties led the audience down Urquhart Street away from the prison.

As we entered a vacant block though a locked gate on the south-eastern corner of the Pentridge site, the purpose of the unusual entry sequence from the southern boundary was twofold: firstly, to establish and encapsulate the austere vantage of D-Division’s eastern façade; and secondly, to frame the building in the context of the failed property development of the early 2000s, in which cheap, medium density housing, coupled with the remains of a vacant retail strip, encroached on the historical authority of the bluestone D-Division.

As they retraced the direction of entry of countless prisoners who were transported into the complex during its 150 year operation, the audience walked up a long driveway, then were instructed to enter the ground floor of a failed retail space. Passing under the skeletal remains of the metal façade, the audience negotiated an exposed concrete slab to reach a steel staircase attached to the eastern façade of D-Division. The staircase was suspended above a graveyard located on the door step of the prison building, surrounded by temporary fencing. The graveyard had been established in 1924, when:

Pentridge replaced the Melbourne Gaol as the main remand and reception prison for the metropolitan area. The bodies of a number of prisoners executed at the Melbourne Gaol were exhumed and relocated to Pentridge, where they were reburied, just east of D Division.
According to the heritage report, ‘the area adjacent to the east wall of D Division is significant as the former burial site of Ronald Ryan, and as the site where executed prisoner burial remains were reinterred in 2011, including Ned Kelly. Unprovoked, the audience spontaneously paused on the staircase to observe the rising sun casting a purple tinge behind fast moving clouds.

Entering the gloom of D-Division on the first floor, the audience faced the long double-storey atrium. Walking single file, the dim ambience was interrupted by the sound of audience footsteps on the cast iron balconies that ran the length of the building. Following the ushers along the galley, the audience passed the rows of 161 cells, and walked under the infamous hanging beam that had hosted the last execution in Australia, when Ronald Ryan was hung in 1967. ‘Adjacent to the hanging beam was a room that was twice the size of the other cells, where the man who was next in line to be hung spent his final night.’ Continuing along the building, the formality of the rectilinear planning was interrupted by the octagonal geometry of the central atrium, which opened up the building to accommodate a double staircase whereby the audience descended to the ground floor. Positioned in the centre of the landing, two shiny black grand pianos sat interlocked with fifty folding chairs aligned in a transverse configuration to either side. Slightly confused when they were presented with the waiting instruments and chairs, the audience were ushered past the pianos and out into the prison yards.

**Act 1: Tuning**

The audience were led into a vestibule, through a heavy steel gate, and out into the prison yard at the eastern end of the complex. In the yard, on a slightly raised section of concrete, I had positioned an upright piano in front of a block of fifty deck chairs, all facing the prison wall. Crowned in coils of razor wire, the wall was around five metres high, with the first four meters built of solid bluestone capped with a later addition of red brick. The piano had been salvaged from a group of local musicians who were moving house due to rental increases; while it was relatively in tune, the structural integrity of the instrument had been seriously compromised by termites that had hollowed out the timber base, that now appeared to be held together by the thin veneer of the piano’s varnish.
Drawing on the method of tuning the piano that had been developed in the Instrumental and Spatial Tuning performances, the audience were presented with a man facing away from them, tuning the piano. Like Spatial Tuning, the piano tuning had commenced well before the arrival of the audience, with the intent that the tuning was audible while the audience followed the entry sequence via the rear stair.

Taking their seats, the audience sat in silence, listening and watching the tuner go about his task. In a symbolic, material and sonic dialogue, the tuner faced away from the audience in close proximity the wall, which seemed to beckon over, through and beyond the impenetrable mass of the concrete and bluestone. It was just after six a.m., and in the early dawn, the sunrise gave orange highlights to a purple sky. While it was relatively still in the prison yard, a fast wind in the troposphere above blew the clouds across the sky. Birds flew around in the breeze, and weeds popping through the concrete swayed. A beam of direct sunlight shot from the clouds, momentarily lighting a section of the razor wire with a distinct gold. The audience sat in a bus-like configuration, and while they were stationary, the wind-directed movement above evoked a certain forward momentum, as through the tuner was driving the performance into the wall. After they were seated for 20 minutes, the daylight had brightened considerably, and the audience was encouraged to move from the prison yard back into the building for the second act.
Act 2: Phasing

As the tuner continued toiling away at the piano, the audience moved through the vestibule and into the ground floor interior of D-Division. Two pianists, Elizabeth Drake and Vanessa Tomlinson, sat in position at the two interlocked grand pianos. According to one audience member, the pianos were positioned ‘hugged together with the lids propped up; they looked almost like insects in a kind of embrace ritual around one another.’

Beneath the octagonal atrium, the participants filed into the preconfigured seating on either side of the instruments. Seated on the ground floor, spectators were presented with clear views of the ornate Victorian skylight, from which filtered light fell onto the suspended corridors on the two levels above. From one side, the hanging beam was clearly visible, overlooked by a fortified observation box that sat awkwardly at the eastern end of the atrium; it had clearly been added in a more recent, modern era. On the opposite side, behind the second group of audience members, thick metal bars and a padlocked gate cordoned off half the complex on the ground floor. Once seated, a minute’s silence was held, while the audience listened to the continued tuning in the courtyard outside, now accompanied by the morning song echoing from the birds roosting in the skylight above. Breaking the pause, the pianists commenced a 25 minute recital of Steve Reich’s Piano Phase.
Fig. 6.14
The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations
Act 2, D Division
Written in 1968, Piano Phase is a minimalist composition that is commonly referred to as ‘process music’. According to Reich, process music is defined ‘as pieces of music that are, literally, processes’; he writes, ‘the distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously.’

Reich’s phasing works generally have two identical lines of music, which begin by playing synchronously, but slowly become out of phase with one another when one of them slightly speeds up. In Piano Phase, Reich subdivides the work into three sections, with each section taking the same basic pattern, played rapidly by both pianists. The music is made up, therefore, of the results of applying the phasing process to the initial twelve-note melody—as such, it is a piece of process music.

Reich called the unexpected ways change occurred via the process ‘by-products’, formed by the superimposition of patterns. The superimpositions form sub-melodies, often spontaneously due to echo, resonance, dynamics, and tempo, and the general perception of the listener.

The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations for Critical Spatial Practice

I had seen the piece performed in the Flinders Street Station Ballroom in 2012, and the Princess Theatre in 2014, both Victorian architectures with very different purposes than this Victorian prison setting. Here, I noted a certain syncopated rhythm within D-Division between the two-tone Victorian detailing of curved timber beams, the ornate steel struts, and the painted steel cell doors. The concept of Phasing also extends from the Reich composition as a theoretical framework for unpacking the relationship between the tuning in the prison yard and the recital in the main building.

By enacting the non-musical, systemic atonal quality of the tuning in Act 1, the human ear of the audience dials into the discordant sound, and in the act of listening, the spatio-temporalities of the immediate prison yard, inclusive of the ‘constant, unnerving threat of violence as abhorrent and meaningless as humans are able to create’ has an increased proximity. According to one audience member, ‘We were in this courtyard environment which had the most disciplining kind of architecture, hard and arresting. The barbed wire at the top, the blank wall, and I felt like we were bound to these seats. It was an uncomfortable experience. But as the piece went on and it was quite mesmeric.’

Returning to Schafer’s acoustic ecologies as an interpretive framework, the background keynotes of the first Act were defined by the morning bird song, the buzzing of insects, the wind, and the sound of mounting traffic in the distance. The foregrounded signal sounds were dominated by the acoustic discipline of tuning the instrument that really didn’t want to be restrained. In terms of Schafer’s concept of ‘acoustic coloration’, the echoes and reverberations that reflected from the hard and arresting surfaces of the prison yard were amplified by the bluestone and concrete before they escaped and were whisked away by the turbulent air above.

Once seated in the ground floor of the main building in Act 2, the defining keynotes shifted to the single notes of the prison yard tuning accompanied by the morning bird song above. For twenty-five minutes of the second act, the audience were drowned in the signal sounds of Piano Phase that, according to one audience member, began to ‘transform the interior’ through a ‘complete inversion, where I suddenly saw the piano as something different, and the human interaction with the piano suddenly became this moment of freedom where the acoustics were liberated by that interaction.’ This audience account registers a spatial inversion that was potentially caused by the sonic, material and spatial phasing between the outdoor piano tuning and the indoor recital. The audience, I suggest, in phasing between the spaces of confinement, was first tuned into the single notes of the upright piano; when they were located within the recital of Act 2, they had already been attuned to the environmental surrounds. This provoked a cross referencing between instruments and the sonic practices presented within each act.
Similarly, the second conceptual operation of Instrumentalising is located within the dialectic produced within the phasing between spaces. This operation hones in on the semiotic potential of the piano as a cultural artefact to engage in the spatial politics of land, Indigenous Country, and the ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia. Questioning the instrumental logic of colonisation in Australia, Instrumentalising is a method to reframe and assign non-human agents with an active role in the renegotiation and activation of new socio-political formations. According to audience feedback, the act of tuning the decrepit instrument within the prison yard evoked a political resonance with Australian Indigenous spatial politics that was perhaps provoked by an awareness of the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous incarceration in Australia; Indigenous representation within the prison system exceeds 28 percent, despite being only three percent of the Australian population.  

Whilst I did not repeat the act of burning the piano within the prison yard (Cultural Burn, 2016) as I had initially intended to, according to members of the audience, the tuning of the colonial instrument outdoors within the prison yard brought into focus the entanglement of Indigenous and western knowledge systems and disciplinary regimes. By phasing between the highly orchestrated, disciplining interior space of the abandoned prison and the prison yard, where a tuner battled against the decay of the decrepit piano, the swirling wind and non-human actants, the performance evoked resonances of ‘disciplinary and knowledge practices between ongoing colonial regimes and Indigenous Australians’. By actively engaging in the relations between aesthetic practices, human and non-human interaction, and spatial politics, the conceptual operation of Phasing questions how performance and architectural practices can be used to understand the issues of ‘how we are positioned at the interface of different knowledge systems, histories, traditions and practices.’

The act of accumulating the conceptual operations of Spatial Inversions, Instrumentalising, Spatial Tuning, and Phasing within the setting of a nineteenth century gaol reveals the limitations of traditional architectural and musical practices to discipline the spatio temporalities and precolonial systems of the Australian landscape. Through an active engagement with the spatial politics of this contested urban landscape, *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations* reinforces a critical standpoint that seeks not only to reflect and describe our relation to the order of things as validated by western knowledge systems, but also to transform and imagine something different.
PART 3: Performance and discipline in Architecture

This research project intersects architectural and performance practices, and has examined how site specific performance can activate engagement in the spatial politics of contested urban and rural landscapes in Australia. The research was carried out through a series of iterative performances, and provides new creative practice knowledge to the field of critical spatial practice. The research methodology combines critical theory and practice-based research in order to interrogate the disciplinary boundaries of architecture and performance through the performative re-appropriation of a series of landmark buildings and contested landscapes. Hegemonic structures are questioned within the spatial arrangements of dominant modes of cultural production to incite an active political engagement in the spatial relations between performers, audiences and environments.

As it has explored the cultural, ethical, and political resonances produced by performative interventions, the research has evolved through three phases of project investigations. The first phase involved two recitals situated in nineteenth century urban landmark buildings — Melbourne’s Flinders Street Station ballroom and the Princess Street Theatre. This was followed by a phase of investigative engagement with the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes — Hobart’s municipal rubbish dump, and a property acquired by the Indigenous Land Corporation as part of a land bank established for Aboriginal people. The final summative project that draws together and synthesises cyclical and emergent operations was staged across both the indoor and outdoor spaces of a nineteenth century D-Division prison.

The research provides insights into the complex networks, multiple logics and rich contradictions of contemporary spatial politics, and extends the disciplinary boundaries of critical spatial practice through the convergence of architectural and performance practice. Extending upon Jane Rendell’s definition of critical spatial practices,243 the body of work generated within this research has questioned, and in some cases transformed, the social conditions of the sites in which my projects intervened, as well as tested the boundaries and procedures of my own disciplinary knowledge, which is situated between architecture and site specific art practice. Questioning the ongoing impact of colonialism in Australia, the research has curated material, spatial and acoustic disciplines in a variety of contested settings to reveal the limitations of traditional architectural and musical practices to discipline the spatio temporalities and precolonial systems of the Australian landscape.

Reflections on a performative methodology

Throughout my candidature, I have been party to much debate surrounding the limitations and virtues of practice-based research, with some ‘warning against the dangers of methodological introspection’244 and others championing the opportunities of a field of research ‘in a constant state of becoming’.245 Across academic institutions in Australia there are conflicting points of view on the merits of undertaking research through a practice-based methodology. Practice-based research is considered a relatively new and experimental method for producing new knowledge, and its researchers have been largely criticised by academics from Australian sandstone universities, who typically favour more traditional scholarly methods, founded on literature reviews, data sets, and modes of empirical analysis. Even within the so called young universities of Australia, which are considered world leaders in pioneering practice-based research, there are different schools of thought in terms of reflective versus generative modes of practice-based research production.

Making a case for the institutional legitimacy of generative practice-based research, my own performative methodology is understood as an evolving, reflective and responsive process, where the unpredictable outcomes, critical reflections, and limitations of one research project sparked an idea that prompted the next research project. Within this sequential and cyclical research practice, I conducted a critical refinement and re-orientation of the specific research question that was used to interrogate the targeted aspect of the field under investigation.

243 Jane Rendell, Art and Architecture


245 Ibid.
Practice, developed through a series of iterative performances, is located at the centre of the research, and is positioned as the primary method for generating new practice knowledge. However, in order to give institutional validity to the research as a whole, it became increasingly necessary to supplement the practice-based research approach with more traditional methods, including surveys, interviews, diagrams, and a more structured approach to reflective writing.

Within this body of research, the piano has been used as the primary instrument to explore spatial and political interactions between cultural practices, communities, and environments. The semiotic register of the piano as a cultural artifact of western colonial origins has been central to the development of my approach to critical spatial practice situated in an Australian context. In relation to the two projects that took place at Culpra Station (Instrumental & Cultural Burn), the reliance upon reading the piano as a colonial instrument assumes a dichotomous relationship between the piano and Aboriginal people. This binary is acknowledged as a methodological limitation, as it does not allow for transcultural practice in which musical instruments are commonly adopted, played, and mastered across cultures.

Furthermore, when the piano is situated on the border of the McRobies Gully during Spatial Tuning, audience feedback suggests that the piano was perceived as an active measuring device rather than a symbolic object. Audience members reported that the piano mediated between the human and non-human agents present during the tuning, rather than speaking of a colonial heritage. While the symbolic register shifts in relation to environmental contexts, the link to civilisation is consistent. The nationality and gender of the performer and/or artist are implicated within the dynamic semiotic register, as is the mode of interaction and even the composition played. Within these varied interpretations, an understanding of the symbolic register of the piano emerges that is not consistent or fixed, and instead changes in relation to the context in which it is situated.

Furthermore, one noted certain subjective limitations of evidencing my own phenomenological recordings, which could be challenged as speculative commentary. Accordingly, secondary modes of data collection such as post-performance surveys and audience interviews became crucial to evidencing experiential phenomena to support the research claims.

By explicating the generative potential of a hybridised methodology, the combination of practice-based research, critical theory, and multi-modal analysis provides new creative practice knowledge to the field of critical spatial practice. The boundaries of my own disciplines were tested through the development of a generative and interdisciplinary methodology, thus intersecting architectural and site-specific practices, with the potential to activate new spatio-political formations and provide critical insights into the spatial politics of contested Australian landscapes.

There is a certain paradox in positioning the research within the field of critical spatial practice, a field that seeks to intervene and challenge the power structures embedded within the spatial politics of contested urban and rural landscapes. The paradox arises in the necessary negotiations and alignments with big business and government institutions. In working alongside and accepting money from private sector property developers at Pentridge Prison, from superannuation companies and philanthropic institutions at Flinders Street Station, and from local government agencies at Culpra Station, my projects raised questions about the networked relations between neo-liberalism and contemporary arts production. Although these questions were addressed in part within the negotiations that took place at the Flinders Street ballroom in Melbourne and the McRobies Recycling Centre in Hobart, it is acknowledged that the circuits of capital are currently underexplored within this dissertation. This latent problematic hints towards future work, where critical discourse analysis can be used to further unpack the power relations within critical spatial practice.
Cumulative sites of research

In Chapter Three: *Instrumental*, I proposed that the efficacy and impact of practice-based research is defined by the convergence of sites of research production and sites of research distribution, that gather force and substantiate as a cumulative field of discursive operation. The decentering of the primacy of the live event is central to this argument within the context of site specific performance, suggesting that the operative potential of this form of critical spatial practice is located within cumulative sites of research that include pre-performance negotiations and post-performance dissemination.

In broadening the emphasis from the live event, an evaluation of project work is provided for pre-performance, performance event, and post-performance. In opening up the practice beyond the live event, it must be stated that while *Instrumental* has been widely circulated across multiple platforms, secondary showings of the two later projects situated within contested landscapes (*Spatial Tuning* and *Cultural Burn*), have, to date, been restricted to academic contexts, including presentations at the Performance Studies International *Performance Climates*[^246] and RMIT’s Practice Research Symposium[^247] and exhibited at the RMIT Design Hub. While I am not suggesting academic conferences and exhibitions are ineffectual, working with multiple sites of distribution can increase research impact through a cumulative field of discursive potential.

That said, the research project as a whole is by no means dormant or complete, with academic papers being provisionally accepted for publication in Sophia Peer Review Journal[^248], the *Performance Research* journal[^249], and the 2018 IASTE conference titled *The Politics of Tradition*[^250].

In addition to exhibiting and publishing the creative works as discrete projects, the four video works, *Instrumental*, *Spatial Tuning*, *Cultural Burn* and *The Accumulation of Cyclical Operations*, have been submitted for exhibition at the Tin Sheds gallery as part of the 2018 Annual Design Research Conference[^251] in Sydney. Intended to be appreciated, experienced and contemplated as a cumulative set of four, it is proposed to exhibit the works in large format as a series, ensuring the piano and the piano tuner are re-presented life size.

In considering the prospects for exhibiting, publishing and presenting the project work as multiple sites of distribution, there is an opportunity for further post-doctoral research, in which I propose further critical discourse analysis to explore the channels of circulation in which the works travel. This extension of the research will further decenter the primacy of the live event, by exploring forces and machinations through which future circulation and dissemination can activate engagement in spatial politics to yet previously unidentified audiences and contexts.


[^248]: [http://www.scopionetwork.com/node/815#1s](http://www.scopionetwork.com/node/815#1s)

[^249]: [http://www.performance-research.org](http://www.performance-research.org)

[^250]: [http://iaste.berkeley.edu/conferences/2018-conference](http://iaste.berkeley.edu/conferences/2018-conference)

Towards an ethico-aesthetic practice for architecture Australia

Prior to undertaking this research project, my spatial practice had been founded on architectural expertise, specialising in sustainable development in remote and environmentally sensitive locations. The opportunity to undertake practice-based research that intersects performance and architectural practices has enabled me to test the boundaries, assumptions and procedures of my own disciplinary knowledge. As I came into the project with limited prior experience with performance and sound, the opportunity to engage with the temporalities of time-based works has broadened my architectural capabilities through the contestation of dominant forms of architectural production. The research evokes multiple histories through the convergence of performance and architectural practices, and offers new creative practice knowledge though the political formations that arise from the spatio-temporalities that are activated through performative intervention.

The opportunity to work with Aboriginal communities in remote and regional contexts is relevant not only to the community of practitioners operating in the field of critical spatial practice, but also to architectural practice in Australia more broadly. It has deepened my understanding and capacity to operate within interdisciplinary and intercultural creative contexts. In offering a model for composing reconciliatory experiences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous creative practitioners and communities, I suggest that cross-cultural understanding and mutual respect can emerge through an active creative engagement with the spatial politics of Indigenous and non-Indigenous sensibilities to land and Country.

A deepening understanding of Indigenous and non-Indigenous spatial politics in Australia has fostered a number of invitations to work in collaboration with local Aboriginal Land Councils in New South Wales. These ongoing partnerships will be framed though an attentiveness to the relations between social and architectural spatial formation, and are focused on infrastructural upgrades within discrete Aboriginal communities. Underpinned by an extension of the research methodologies emerging from this body of research, new critical research strategies and architectural processes are being formulated, developed and actualised through an active engagement with the aspirations and desires of Aboriginal community members. In entering the space of Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborative practice, it is important to embrace the complex networks, multiple logics and rich contradictions that are activated through critical spatial practice. Embracing contradiction and the notion of failing forwards, my approach to a collaborative and ethical spatial practice has been reformulated through a questioning of the disciplinary boundaries of architecture, and attention to the more violate aspects of constructed environments: ‘the processes of their production, their occupation, their temporality and their relations to society and nature.’

I propose a new ethico-aesthetic approach for architecture in Australia, one that is focused on socio-architectural spatial dynamics within complex political environments, and that calls forth a shift in disciplinary emphasis from building and built form to that which exists between and around buildings, and the cultural and social activities it affords. Intersecting aesthetic and political processes in contested spatial contexts, ethico-aesthetic practices for architecture aspires to circumvent the embedded hierarchies within western disciplinary regimes. An ethico-aesthetic architectural practice offers an alternative creative means to recalibrate, rename or bring new discursive potential to Australian spatial politics, and calls into question the discipline of architecture, inclusive of the binaries between interior and exterior, orthographic convention and material composition, the relationship between environmental ‘control’ and phenomena, and the disciplinary regimes of western architectural values.

Proposing dynamic and emergent relationships between social and architectural spatial formation, an ethico-aesthetic practice of architecture contests conventional interpretations of the built environment as immovable and passive; instead, it advocates urban landscapes as performative, participatory and political. Developed through a process of practice-based enquiry, this reinvigorated practice now seeks to challenge and decolonise dominant modes of architectural production through a move towards an ethico-aesthetic practice for architecture in Australia.

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252 The intellectual property associated with the project that took place on Culpra Station is shared with the Culpra Milli Aboriginal Corporation. The traditional Barkandji knowledge, that informs the basis an understanding of Barkandji Country remains with the Barkandji nation.


254 The concept of ethico-aesthetic is drawn from the writings of Felix Guattari as a means ‘to destabilise dominant power structures through a subjective engagement with creative processes and aesthetic practices.’ see Chapter 4, Page 84
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