

Submission for ADPATr Creative Practice Conference

Presentation: Echo Chamber

Sarah Edwards, PhD Candidate
RMIT University, Melbourne AUSTRALIA

‘Echo Chamber’ – a place in which information, ideas, or beliefs are amplified or reinforced - was the apt title for a unique public exhibition that engaged with alternative methods to mediate between the social, cultural, historical and political forces that shaped the gallery’s current and former site. In February 2013, artist Sarah Edwards engaged the services of a museum taxidermist, a landscape architect and a sound designer in order to mediate between the former archaeology of RMIT University’s First Site Gallery (Melbourne, Australia) and its current use as a contemporary art space.

Within the gallery, they created a ‘laboratory’ in which to test, experiment with and tease out methods to re-present the history and geology of site, culminating in ‘Echo Chamber’, an immersive and site-responsive exhibition installed within the First Site space. Sarah worked one-on-one with each of the three practitioners who generously shared their skills and experience in order to discover new and alternative ways to visually respond to the history embedded within and beneath the gallery walls and floor.

Landscape architect, Heather Graham proposed they start with an 1863 Geological Survey map sourced from Museum Victoria’s library archives. This hand-coloured lithographic resource provided a visual reference from which to ‘unearth’ the geological history of the gallery site. The map had been generated as a direct result of Victoria’s Gold Rush of 1850. The discovery of abundant seams of gold led to an economic boom that stimulated the rapid growth of Melbourne into one of the world’s great metropolitan centres. This Rush attracted geologists, astronomers, biologists and artists from around the world to support the development of a new colony.

In addition to the geological and historic landscape, Heather provided Sarah with insights into ways to consider the visual relationships between the geology, sky, earth, plants and the built environment, and suggested ways in which these considerations could be applied to an enclosed gallery space. Using a Department of Primary Industry’s computer database, Heather identified the seventy-two plant species that had grown on the gallery’s former site. From this data, Sarah etched the names onto acrylic tags and suspended them from the ceiling. Although now covered by the gallery’s architecture, the tags activated the spirit of the former landscape and provided the viewer with a place to wander, reflect and contemplate what lay beneath their feet.

To further consider the former faunal assemblage of the landscape, Sarah mediated with museum taxidermist, Dean Smith who extended the ideas used in the construction of natural history habitat dioramas. The traditional habitat diorama consists of three elements: taxidermy - the art of bringing life to dead animals; the creation of three-dimensional replicas of the animal’s habitat; and the use of painting to create an illusion of space.

“The growing realization of how rapidly nature was vanishing, the recognition of the value of nature study, and the introduction of art through taxidermy into exhibition techniques set the stage for the emergence of the diorama. A growing acceptance by

scientists that nothing in nature is of isolated origin but rather is the product of complex interrelationships also fostered the diorama approach, which featured entire habitats rather than collections of individual specimens.” (Quinn 2006, 15)

Dean also directly engaged Sarah in the ‘dying’ art of animating dead forms: taxidermy. Sarah worked with Dean to prepare a Wood Duck that had died of natural means, and would have been prevalent in the marshland of the former site. Once prepared, the taxidermied duck on the gallery wall evoked strong emotions in gallery visitors. As artist, Mark Dion states: “Working with nature ... can be dangerous territory... There remains so much social discomfort and reminders of our own animality, which of course seem bound to the anxiety around our mortality.” (Landes et al 2012, 173)

Sarah worked with sound composer and designer Russell Goldsmith, to build a sonic landscape that incorporated both historic and contemporary sounds in reference to site. During WWII, RMIT University provided training for 20,000 RAAF service men and women in radio communications including Morse Code. The composition included recordings of Morse Code, radio crackle and current sounds from within and outside the gallery, in addition to the call of a locally extinct frog – the Growling Grass Frog that would have lived on the former marshland of the gallery site.

Sarah extracted the Growling Grass Frog recording from three hundred hours of archival frog calls in Museum Victoria’s natural history collection. Unfortunately, this frog has become locally extinct due to human activity. Frogs live in water and on land and breathe through their skin, so any changes in their surroundings directly impact on their livelihood; they are referred to as ‘environmental indicators’. Beginning in 1954, Dr Murray Littlejohn, (Honorary Associate Professor, Department of Zoology, the University of Melbourne) began conducting field recordings of Southern Australian frog calls for scientific bio-acoustic research. On retirement from his role at the University, he donated his entire three hundred hours of reel-to-reel frog calls to Museum Victoria.

The opportunity to expose listeners to these unique and unexpected sounds as an overlay back into the built landscape that aided their demise, might in turn increase our understanding of the impact we have made on our local environment.

The outcomes were tangible and mutually beneficial. ‘Echo Chamber’ provided each of the participating practitioners with a wider variety of methods in which to approach working with an architectural space. The successful mediation brought together a range of experts whose skills and experience are not usually engaged in a single project. Utilising the ephemeral materials of sound and light, Sarah enabled the mediation between historic and contemporary space to generate an aesthetic avenue through which to test the transformative possibilities of her installation-based conceptual art practice. The outcomes were less tangible, more poetic responses to place and site.

In conclusion, the mediation between practitioners across a range of possibly unrelated disciplines has the potential to influence and open up new possibilities in future engagement with spatial and temporal production embedded in the historic fibre of place.