The Sixth International Conference on Transdisciplinary Imaging at the Intersections between Art, Science and Culture

Dark Eden

Sydney, AUSTRALIA: 6 – 8 November 2020

Conference Chair: Professor Paul Thomas, Art and Design, UNSW Sydney
Co-Chairs: Dr David Eastwood, Art and Design, UNSW Sydney
                              Dr Chelsea Lehmann, National Art School, Sydney
Proceedings Chair: Dr Edward Colless, VCA, University of Melbourne

A shadow zone, a spectral landscape, a cemetery, zombieland. The debris of an old image culture, or compost for a new one?

The cultural moment now dubbed "Contemporary" is defined by the networked saturation of images. By the diffusion, dissemination and inundation of frictionless image production. By image hacking, image consumption and image commerce on social media and in platform capitalism. By 24/7 crisis news, doom-scrolling and misinformation spread by web influencers. By CCTV and drone surveillance. By massive multiplayer online gaming. By "deepfake" hoaxes and simulations that augment reality and contribute to the relentlessly cynical campaigning of our 21st century political twitter "newspeak". Is not this cornucopia and unprecedented availability of mediated imagery a kind of Eden? If so, it is a dark Eden. Metaphorically fertile as a forest that is so thick with its tentacular edicts that the light that penetrates cannot escape its web; or perhaps, and more likely, that its mutated growth is now dependent on a black rather than bright light. Its darkness might be that of the pall of ash-filled smoke shrouding a burning continent.

Conference papers addressed the general topic from any angle (direct or oblique), but were asked to consider at least one of the following areas:

- Expanded image
- Remediated image
- Hypermediacy
- Expanded film
- Imaging science
- Computer vision
- Networked image
- Immersion
- Speculative realism
- The invisible, the subliminal, the inaudible or subaudial
- Infraworld
- Enlightenment and the post-truth era
- Augmented reality
- Artificial intelligence, or intelligent systems

Image courtesy of Paul Thomas

Situating images

Margaret Roberts

Traditionally, sighted people recognise places through remembering what they look like, easily moving in and out of live and remembered imagery as we navigate. But a new normalcy is emerging as, especially in cities, whole places we remember disappear, leaving memory images of places hanging in the air. Conversely, new places appear, apparently out of nowhere, and recognition in both cases depends on finding a context for understanding what has happened. This new normalcy underlies the curiosity I felt about the fresh floor of the Blue Mountains City Art Gallery (BMCAG) when I was invited to make an artwork there last year: what was this place before it took on the expansive freshness of a public gallery, and how can the presence of that earlier place be recognised, despite its apparent invisibility? (1)

I thought that in spite of this invisibility, there may be some people who could 'see in the dark', and who an artwork may be able to situate so as to reconnect image with place. This became more likely when I discovered that the gallery is known locally as being on the same city block as an old school that had been there for most of last century. While no physical traces of the old building are left, the location of its footprint could be calculated from Council records because the outline and location of the town block the two places share is unchanged. A mid-century aerial photo was found in the gallery archives and I was also given the architectural plans for the recent construction of the cultural centre of which the gallery is a part. By overlaying these images, I calculated a more precise location for the school and realised that the footprint of the old school is almost entirely within the footprint of the gallery floor, enabling me to mark out the school footprint on the gallery floor in black tape. I expected that many local people would remember the school from when they studied or worked there twenty or more years ago, and could perhaps stand on the expansive floor and not just wonder or even imagine what was there before, as I had, but also realise they are literally occupying their old school and the current gallery simultaneously. I named the work *We went to school here* (2020) after them, knowing that, while they take for granted the continuity between the floor where their feet are located and what they see in the gallery around them, they could also employ their remembered images of the old school to create a similar but different sort of continuity between where they are standing and what they remember their old school to be.

They would be like the time traveller in H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), for whom the location of the machine remains constant while its appearance changes as time speeds by. For Wells' traveller, spatial continuity is maintained between the actual place of the machine and what he sees from it, but for those of us who watch the film (or read the book), the spatial discontinuity between where we are located and where the traveller is located is so normal that we pay no attention to it. I thought that we might start to see these normalcies when, as visitors to the artwork, we let ourselves see that we also occupy the now-invisible old school even when many visitors may not see it in quite the way that the school's ex-staff and students can through their remembered images of it.

In this way, the work asks all visitors, not only ex-staff and students, to stretch such normalcies and consider continuities between the place we stand in now and images remembered of it from an earlier time. How such normalcies might affect how we value things, place(s) especially, is suggested by Hans Belting's

discussion of how images were read in the European Middle Ages, before around 1500. In *Likeness and Presence* (1990), he explains that the holy paintings he calls 'cult images' were understood at that time to show holy figures as present in the place of their beholders, thereby communicating the importance of that shared place. His account is that, back then, before the 'crisis of the image in the beginning of the modern age' (as he titled the chapter), the image:

> had been assigned a special reality and taken literally as a visible manifestation of the sacred person. Afterwards, the image was, in the first place, made subject to the general laws of nature, including optics, and so was assigned wholly to the realm of sense perception. Now the same laws were to apply to the image as to the natural perception of the outside world. It became a simulated window in which either a saint or a family member would appear in a portrait.(2)

Belting discusses 16th-century artworks to illustrate how art and artists of the time accommodated the transition from that traditional belief in the miraculous, to a new belief in the natural, alluding to the broader paradigm change accompanying the scientific revolution that was at that time discrediting the old thinking as superstitious and irrational, and leading people to instead understand existing images as either historical curiosities from a past era, or as windows onto somewhere else. This new understanding of what we see when we look at pictures changed the location of the contents of their images from the places where the pictures exist and are looked at, to somewhere else. In transferring viewer attention away from the place where they are located looking at the image, this new mode of interpretation suggests how images were adapting to the paradigm changes that ushered in the modern era.

This is because one of the changes brought by the modern era is the devaluation of place, discussed by sociologist Anthony Giddens in his account of modernity and its consequences.(3) What Belting calls the historic 'crisis of the image' within an art historical discussion, resembles the disembedding of space from place that Giddens identifies as the mechanism that lifts 'social relations out of their "situatedness" in specific locales'(4). In his account, disembedding enabled the progressive substitution of our ancestors' traditional trust in the place in which they are located, with a modern trust in expert systems and symbolic tokens. Though Giddens does not discuss any role played by imagery or art in this process, Belting's 'crisis of the image' suggests how Giddens' disembedding mechanisms may have played out in the realm of images at the same time as paintings lost their immediate physical context in churches during the Reformation (when paintings were often removed and destroyed or taken for private collections) and became increasingly dependent for their meaning and value on the growing art historical expertise of provenance and discourse.

Identifying such overlaps between disciplinary frameworks enables speculation on how, through their form and its interpretation, artworks could engage directly with serious issues of the day, and it is this engagement that motivates many artists, myself included. As Belting links artwork to Giddens' mechanisms of social change, so Giddens provides a link to likely social and political consequences of that change. In Giddens' account, these consequences are the generation of the institutions of modernity that appeared in Europe in the 17th century and spread throughout the globe via colonisation and globalisation, fostering and spreading modernity's many high-risk consequences in the process. One of the high-consequence risks Giddens sees in this historic devaluation of place is the environmental exhaustion that is increasingly evident now, four centuries later, prompting him to look to a post modernity generated by the invention of new ways of valuing place.

In making this artwork in the Council gallery, I hoped it could pushback against the role images may now play in that modern devaluation of place, by constructing a situation in which the image directs attention towards the place in which it is situated with the viewer, making it a model for how viewers could revalue place within their own lives. While pushbacks like this may seem to have little impact on their own, I think

of it as one of the many 'low-input units' carried out "on the ground" that Giddens favours in his discussion of the generation of new ways of valuing place.(5) As such, it would join the many other artworks constructed during the last century to also challenge the modern spatial paradigm in one way or another. One example is Helena Almeida's *Inhabited Drawing* (1975), composed of a photograph and one horsehair attached to its surface. The two hands in the photograph appear to engage with the horsehair on the surface of the print, making a transition between the virtual space in the image and the physical place the printed photograph occupies.(6) While we may expect to interpret the photographic image as disembedding the space of the pictured hands from the location of the printed image, the horsehair contradicts that expectation by connecting that space to the place of the print, by making the surface read as a screen between the two spaces, punctured by the continuity of the horsehair and the tip of the pen in the image. The horsehair thus acts as a bridge between the normal elsewhere of the image and the presence here of the photographic print. It links the space of the image to the place of the print to create a surprise awareness of the presence of place. Viewers may experience slight amusement or shock at being made visible by the work in this way, at seeing that the work 'sees us back' in the invisible place we thought we occupied.

In the gallery where my work was located, visiting staff and students of the former school had the potential to function as a kind of bridge themselves by deciding to use their recalled images to 'see' that the place they can picture is right here in the place where they now are. They may then see that the place where they now are can be seen as singular with multiple occupancies—as the gallery, a school, and so on—and as a place that is continuous through such occupancies. They may see that the space of the place that is not itself visible can still be recognised by their decision to place their remembered images where they were generated years ago. And other visitors without those remembered images can imagine what it might be like to do this as well.

I hoped that linking those recalled images with the place that generated them would acknowledge the regard many locals have for the place that preceded the gallery, and, in this way, to not so much pit old school against new gallery, but to restore a regard for place that could instead work against places being so routinely destroyed and reconstructed as if they are of no consequence. That regard is not foreign to the place the gallery and school share. Before it was a school, the place was a colonial house, and before the place was flattened to build that house, it was a 'sloping spur' on the side of a mountain at a time when a different paradigm ruled in this location,(7) before it was challenged by the new paradigm brought by the colonising British. As I understand it, that Indigenous paradigm has an entirely different regard for place, a reminder that the destruction and reconstruction of places need not be seen as inevitable.

I think of the work I made in the gallery is a small compromise between such paradigms. Unable to stop the 'development' brought here by the British, the work nevertheless asks people to rethink the places this development creates as being multiples of a singular place that has a history, that is chameleon-like in the way it changes appearances with every occupancy, even though each occupancy is also commonly referred to as *a* place, and also seen as singular, partly because it is so hard to visualise an earlier place being there once it has been destroyed.

The work proposes that images can play a role in this rethinking, by being turned toward place rather than away from it. While the images the work appeals to are not standard images shared by screen or print—they are images in people's memories generated from the experience of being in a place at a different time and kept in living memory rather than on film or memory card—they are the 'mental images' that Hans Belting discusses in more recent work.(8) He distinguishes mental images from pictures conveyed to us by media that make them visible to anyone looking at them as well as shareable with others, crediting mental images with having the living medium of the mind and body instead.

Even though remembered images are not so directly shareable as images seen printed or on screens and are more open to interpretation when described in words, I am more concerned with the possibility of refunctioning them to restore some of the trust in and regard for the place where they are seen, by directing attention towards that place rather than away from it. The work does that by setting up a situation in which viewers can locate themselves in the place, if not the complete situation, that generated the remembered images, supported by a found situation that may make it easier for visitors to rethink relationships between place and image. For example, because memory images are formed and stored in the living body, they might retain more of the original embeddedness of space and place than standard shareable images, partly because they are also embedded with our other senses. Normalised interpretations of images might also be challenged in this situation by the work's replacement of the expected spatial distanciation of modern images with a temporal distance instead. In addition, my first impulse in making the work may have some effect: the simple conjunction of 'places' (the doubling of the place of the gallery with the place of what I discovered to be the school) directing attention to the common place that is normally forgotten in understandings of galleries as well as of images.

Alongside that found situation, two other factors needed to be brought on board to convert my initial curiosity about the BMCAG floor into an artwork—showing where the old building was, and showing regard for people's memories of it. The latter is achieved by giving memory images a key role in the work. Finding the place that generated remembered images can be more difficult when its occupancies or appearances change so readily. Even when a place has been significantly changed, as happened with the school and the gallery, there may still be visual evidence remaining of the place as it was that will help locate where visual memories of the place were formed. This is the case with the gallery because it exists on the same block as the previous building (the school), with its distinct natural topography and streetscape of neighbouring buildings. However, that information doesn't identify where on the block the school was located and, in any case, neither the streetscape nor the topography is visible from the gallery itself. In the absence of those traditional markers of place, given that both the memories and the place still exist, the marking out in tape of the school footprint on the floor of the gallery gives people confidence about bringing them together—about re-situating their memories in the place that generated them.

Notes

(1) This essay adapts and extends the text accompanying the work when exhibited, which is now available on the website documenting it: http://margaretroberts.org/Wewent.html.
(2) Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art,* University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1994, p. 471.
(3) Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press: Cambridge UK, 1990.
(4) Giddens, *Consequences,* p53
(5) Giddens, *Consequences,* p164
(6) An image of Inhabited Drawing 1975 is available on:
https://www.thescopes.org/assets/Uploads/364b7212a3/03-128-Roberts-11-08.pdf p. 129.
(7) 'a sloping spur branching off from the main western ridge line', as described in Banksia Heritage + Archaeology, *Froma,* Katoomba: Stage 1 archaeological excavations. Report to the Blue Mountains City Council. BHA pO5~17/2A, November 2006, (3.1 last paragraph), p. 11.
(8) Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images* (2001), translated by Thomas Dunlap, Princeton University Press: Princeton and Oxford, 2011.

Author:
Dr Margaret Roberts is an installation artist, a co-founder of Articulate project space and a lecturer at the National Art School in Sydney. More details are on margaretroberts.org