Rosemary Laing
Co-belonging with the landscape

Landscape changes; it is restless. It moves with the wind and rhymes with the seasons. It burns and floods. It is spatial, offering the visitor several perspectives that can be contradictory, paradoxical and durational. Landscape is also a 'situation', a complex interplay of historical and environmental conditions. Landscape has a past, present and future; it is never the same as it used to be. When we gaze out over a bay, or ponder an Indigenous site, we can't help but wonder what it used to look like, how it used to be occupied, what tragedies and serendipities happened there. Landscape can be both a place of belonging and a destination, and depending on one's perspective, it can embody the familiarity of home and the promise of adventure; the discomfort of displacement or the tragedy of invasion. Landscape is formed as much by natural forces as it is by human knowledge.

Prior to the colonisation of Australia, our territory was imagined to be a great southern land of weird flora and fauna. The early explorers, like Charles Sturt (1795-1869), sought to find an inland sea. Colonial painters like John Glover (1767-1849), depicted the Australian landscape and Indigenous peoples in sublime harmony. Artists such as Hans Heysen (1877-1968) ushered in a national approach to Australian painting, celebrating both light and indigenous vegetation. Throughout this period of Australian art, nature was something to archive, document, overcome and settle. The continent was considered 'terra nullius'. If the Indigenous people were included in this picture, it was as a token part of a 'native landscape'. This colonialist point of view both exoticised the continent, while underscoring the impulse to own it.

In contemporary Australia, senses of nature are multiple, marked not only by the proximity to large areas of wilderness, the mythical stories of this land prior to colonisation, and the violence of colonisation itself, but also by the Indigenous connection to country. The question of how to belong in the landscape of Australia is a prevailing issue. Despite the historic Federal High Court ruling in the 'Mabo' case, acknowledging Indigenous peoples as the original titleholders of land, a long-awaited Treaty and constitutional recognition continues to elude the Parliament. Australia has one of the highest immigrant populations in the world so that the question of arrival, and of making oneself at home in the landscape, continues to be part of the everyday reality. Lastly, we have one of the world's harshest policies for asylum seekers. In the political imaginary of contemporary Australia, land is conceived as a border that has to be protected.

Rosemary Laing introduces us to these histories by creating projects in the Australian landscape. These projects are sustained by her continuing search for understanding the multiple attitudes to belonging in the landscape. Miwon Kwon has argued that today 'feeling out of place is the cultural symptom of late capitalism's political and social reality', so much so, that to be 'situated'

is to be displaced.[1] In Australia, the notion of displacement has a history that goes back to colonisation. Questions of who owns the land, how we inhabit it, and who feels displaced, are an intrinsic part of the Australian consciousness. Laing's work also asks how we encounter the landscape; who or what is out of place; who or what does not belong; are 'we' the alien? This sense of being 'out of place' is one of the prevailing themes at TarraWarra Museum of Art, since our 2012 symposium *The Landscape Awry*, which proposed that sometimes one has to turn things upside down in order to understand them. In Laing's work, the images are inherently connected to specific places that have complex histories and unique natural conditions. Yet the introduction of elements from our 'settled' environment – carpet, clothing, architectural structures, newspapers and the like – creates a disjunction. Something is literally awry. Although these items are carefully positioned to flow with the compositional logic of place, their co-location with the landscape is one of being out of place.

In his theorisation of the montage in Jean Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinema* (1998), Jacques Rancière discusses the ways in which heterogeneous elements find what he calls a 'common measure', either through symbolic or dialectical means.[2] He names this 'co-belonging', an expression of being both apart and together. The leaps across the non-narrative sequences in Godard's film create what Rancière terms, a fraternity of metaphors. In Laing's photographic sequences, a new set of relations is composed, so that former meanings of both landscape and settlement are turned upside down. Laing brings together different bodies of knowledge that are at once commensurable and incommensurable. The photographs both make sense and do not make sense. Rather than being either situated or displaced, the images express states of co-belonging.

Laing choreographs situations in the landscape, invoking a unique set of circumstances that reflect upon historic, social, environmental, economic and material conditions. Artists such as Francis Alÿs, Lida Abdul and Allora & Calzadilla have also choreographed actions and people in diverse contexts in order to invent new modes of artistic communication, which then result in a photographic or video outcome.[3] As Claire Doherty has discussed, there is a first and second audience for such works, from the participants who experience the original situation, often located outside the gallery or museum, to the visitors who see the photographic or video outcome.[4] Distinguishing this work from the earlier Situationist International (1957-1972), described by Guy Debord as 'playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects'[5], Doherty argues that rather than being site specific, art has shifted from a

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[1] Miwon Kwon, 'The Wrong Place' in *Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation*, (ed. Claire Doherty), London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004, p. 35.
[2] Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, London: Verso, 2007. p. 57.
[3] Claire Doherty, 'The New Situationists' in *Contemporary Art from Studio to Situation*, (ed. Claire Doherty), London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004
[4] ibid. p. 8.
[5] Guy Debord , 'Theory of the *Dérive*' in *Situationist International Anthology*, (ed. Ken Knabb), Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995, p. 50.

fixed location, to one that, in the words of Kwon, is 'constituted through social, economic, cultural and political processes'.[6] Such artworks are not located in a single place, but rather take the form of interactive activities, collective actions, and spatial experiences. They are constitutive rather than absolute; propositional rather than conclusive. Rosemary Laing's *mise-en-scènes* are not public events or performances, but they forge a compositional dialogue with the natural environment that provokes a social, economic and environmental conscience.

Laing's photographs are conceived in series, so that each photograph is a part of a larger cluster of images that are often arranged in specific sequences. Moreover, the spatial tableaux and the photographic outcome have an intrinsic connection. The installations cannot be seen without the photographic apparatus and yet each *mise-en-scène* is presented from a variety of perspectives and angles, so that we cannot necessarily rely on the photographic outcome to be 'truthful'. The photograph is not simply documentation. It is an activator. In many respects Laing places us in the landscape, so that we feel part of the image. She does this through both the size and relative height of the image, along with the point of view and our relation with the horizon line. Laing tests the limits of the photograph, and also provokes the viewer to rearticulate their connection to landscape, and re-energise it. She comes to be the interlocutor between the histories and meanings embedded in landscape, the installation, the photograph and the viewer.

The works arise from the artist's travels and associated research, her interest in Australian literature and painting, and perhaps unexpectedly, her long-standing enthusiasm for science fiction films. How do we devour the landscape? Science fiction has given rise to many stories of vampiric attacks both of and by nature. Inspiring the title of a work in Laing's series *Buddens* (2017), H.G. Well's story *The Flowering of the Strange Orchid* describes a plant with vampiric dimensions. Vampires come back from the dead, they plot at night, they have unquenched thirst for the blood of the living and they are monstrous. Yet they are also the outsiders. Many science fiction tales describe the vampire or alien as the one who does not conform, the one who is different from the general population. It is thought that in Eastern Europe, vampiric lore was applied to those in society who had lead sinful lives. In the *Buddens* series, a river of second-hand clothing winds through the Australian bush, following the natural stream of the water below. The vibrant red, orange, purple and yellow rivulets of colour are enigmatic: where are the people who wore these clothes? Will the verdant bush gradually take over? Who is the corpse here – the hidden water, the missing people, the bush? The water has transmogrified into a river of largely cotton clothing: cotton, the industry that sucks the water from our rivers for its irrigation. The vampiric gaze is turned around – it is not nature, but the settler who is the alien.

The stream covered in clothes in the *Buddens* series leads down to Wreck Bay, on the south coast of New South Wales (NSW), the site of multiple ship disasters. Historically these waters

[6] Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002, p. 10.

were used to transport convicts, goods, troops and settlers up and down the coast and they are littered with relics from shipwrecks. Symbolically, Wreck Bay encapsulates the failure of colonisation: the fragments of colonial arrival and departure. It is also the site of Wreck Bay Village, which is owned by the Aboriginal community, many of whom descend from the Wreck Bay Aboriginal Reserve. Nearby is the Booderee National Park, deriving from the Aboriginal word from the Dhurga language meaning 'bay of plenty' or 'plenty of fish'. There is an intermingling of stories on this coastline, including stories of Aboriginal people assisting shipwrecks. The roof truss in *Walter Hood* (2017) and *Still life with teapot and daisies* (2017) is like a piece of wreckage in amongst the trees, as if torn by the winds from an urban development on the outskirts of a city. Recalling the upside down house in the series *leak* (2010), it meets a natural A-frame in the foliage, yet the two don't make a safe house. The fraternity of metaphors – the flow of people, water, clothes and the unsafe house – co-belong in the landscape, expressing an inability to protect people.

The idea of a natural disaster in the Australian landscape occupies the same intensity for Laing as the human or 'unnatural' disasters invoked by *Buddens*. They each speak of the endless transformation of the landscape, its unfolding stories and its capacity to conjure anxiety and fear, along with the role of media sensationalism. When Laing first tackled this subject in her 1988 *Natural Disasters* series, it was from the point of view of the media phenomenon. Slicing together imagery from media coverage of the Ash Wednesday fires, the series was more to do with the slipstream of spectacle in the wake of the bicentennial of Australia. At the time, competing propositions about our cultural identity jostled for attention: 200 years of settlement, Aboriginal calls for recognition, the tourist panorama, and the sensationalism of fire in the landscape. The series *weather* (2006), located on the south coast of NSW, was inspired by the impact of coastal storms on the area. The flash of red fish netting snagged unawares by the battered grey melaleucas in *weather (Eden) #1* also signals the historic Indigenous and colonial whaling in the area and the more recent slow demise of the fishing industry. These images seem haunted.

After every significant fire near her house in Swanhaven, on the south coast of NSW, Laing takes photographs in the aftermath of the blaze, like a marker of the irreconcilable yet continuing presence of natural and unnatural disasters. In *swanfires, John and Kathy's auto services* (2002-04) and *swanfires, Chris's shed* (2002-04), there is an overwhelming sense of loss. These two images speak of the abject disaster of fire, before the clean up. They depict situations that exceed our comprehension. In *swanfires, John and Kathy's auto services*, the intersecting forms of corrugated iron – the quintessential material of rural Australia – are unexpectedly bathed in the softest of pink, their forms reflecting the tree line behind. In *effort and rush #9 (swanfires)* (2013-15), the blur of movement across tall thin tree trunks, captured in a smoky black hue, considers both the rush of the fire, and the rush of escape. It is as if the camera has become a paintbrush. The fire in *burning Ayer #12* (2003) gives us some clues to the relationship between fire and the artist's quest to reimagine belonging in the Australian landscape. The earth-encrusted items of domestic wooden furniture are from a supplier of mass-produced housing

items – a reference, once more, to the idea of 'housing', home and belonging. Their ashes fold back into the earth. The strength of the red desert plain holds its ground, as it were, as the stage for this enactment of both sacrifice and return, symbolic of the burning of colonial occupation of this land, and the renaming of Ayers Rock to Uluru. Fire comes to be a metaphor for the ways in which the Indigenous landscape refuses our presence and escapes from our control. Only the ancient burning practice of Aboriginal fire-stick farming that created savannahs for hunting is in harmony with its natural environment.

Belonging is inextricably associated with the notion of home. The domestic interior was a significant subject in Australian painting and, indeed, titles from works by Australian artists Margaret Preston (1875-1965) and Grace Cossington Smith (1892-1984) have been appropriated for works in the *Buddens* series. Home travels with the migrant. The carpets used in the series *groundspeed* (2001), contain European floral motifs, symbols of the lounge room carpets common to colonial and post-colonial settler society. Nestled in amongst the richly green moss-covered rocks, or located on a rugged shoreline of crashing waves, these symbols of making oneself at home come to speak not only about the encroachment of the built environment into landscape, but also the landscape as image into the home. Perhaps Laing's most potent response to the contested issue of being at home in Australia is *to walk on a sea of salt* (2004), where images of Woomera detention centre, combined with photographs inspired by quintessential Australian imagery and stories, remind us that home does not travel with the asylum seeker.

When we walk through a forest, density and time intermingle. We muse upon the age and location of plants – how we might measure time by scale. We look for signs of fires in the forms of charred tree trunks, and fallen branches. And our journey is as much in negotiating the undergrowth as it is glimpsing the light through the canopy. We try to find a natural pathway to guide us through, usually in vain. The forest floor often contains layers and layers of weathered leaves, containing their own microsystems of life. These spaces and places can be disorienting. On a hillside in Bundanon, NSW is a Casuarina forest sprinkled with Burrawang (cycads), an ancient plant that dates back to the Palaeozoic. The series *The Paper* (2013) was created on this hillside. Laing read Oliver Sacks's *Island of the Colourblind* (1997) which considers a puzzling link between the cycad and the islanders on the Pacific atoll of Pinegelap who are born colourblind. In *The Paper*, the forest floor is covered in newspaper and photographed after the rains. The paper has literally been pressed into the forest floor by the torrent. It has been weathered. The sensationalism, headlines, imagery and opinion merge into a feathery ground cover of soft white, cream and beige hues. It is as if the area has flooded, not with water, but with paper. Words, colour and dates are dissolved into a tonal carpet. There is no light and shadow. This misalignment suggests the death of the daily paper, and here it inevitably returns to its natural habitat, its original 'home'.

For Laing, the landscape is ground, horizon, body and knowledge. A place of arrival and departure, home and the uncanny, it is subject to climatic conditions and various systems of

knowledge. Laing invites us to co-belong in these landscapes with her, and experience an intersection of, and tension between, diverse metaphors. At times, her images unfurl the landscape as if from a library – places that hold stories of exploration, histories of exploitation and scenes of transformation. Laing's projects simultaneously situate us and displace us within our own land.

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This essay appears in the catalogue, *Rosemary Laing*, TarraWarra Museum of Art, 2017