

# the in-between

## hybrid arts laboratories as places to question

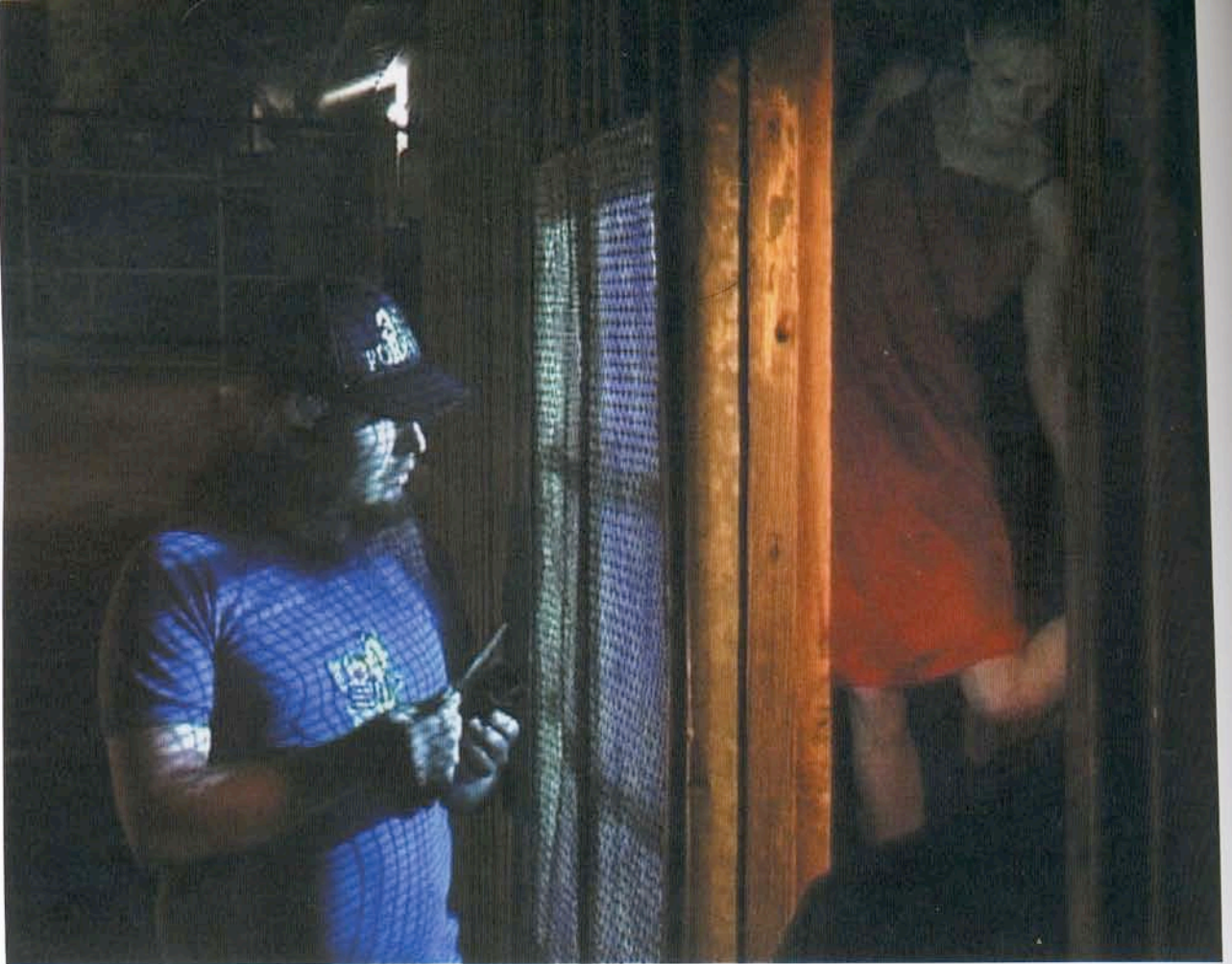
Hybrid arts laboratories – both funded and semi-funded – are dotting themselves around the Australian arts landscape. The claims made for these laboratories are many – to seed diverse methodologies, to generate collaborations, to foster interdisciplinary practices, to negotiate identities, to provide mentoring, to create community, to exchange ideas and knowledge. And most of them involve time away from the everyday, where experience can be intensified and where a new set of meetings between artists can take place. Perhaps most striking is a desire, indeed perhaps a necessity on the part of both artists and administrators to locate and nurture the fragile practice of those artists that work the in-between. The laboratory is an experimental place for a mode of artmaking that struggles to exist between one artform and another, one identity and another, one technology and another, or one world and another.

I have decided in this discussion of hybrid arts laboratories to focus on this notion of the in-between for two reasons. First, it opens up the conception of hybrid arts directly into an experience of place rather than a definition of form and secondly, because it leads artists towards negotiated outcomes rather than immediate production. To begin with, however, let me take account of Sarah Miller's claim that there are no sets of signature skills or specific media by which hybrid arts can be identified: '(they) cannot be described in terms of their 'thingness', (yet) they may well be understood as an unruly paradigm for art making'.<sup>1</sup> The 'thing' may not be a material artefact, but it could, as Elizabeth Grosz suggests, be understood as 'a question, as provocation, incitement or enigma', which generates invention, assessment of the configuration of matter, and moves towards action or process.<sup>2</sup> In this expanded meaning of the 'thing' hybrid arts practice is a series of questions: What might be done, and how might we do it? What will be the results of what we do? What marks might we leave or how might we act in concert with others? The answer to these questions inevitably leads to another 'thing' or two.

Between this thing or that, one artist or another, there is a space-time that is 'the in-between, formed by juxtapositions and experiments, formed by realignments or new arrangements, [that] threatens to open itself up as new, to facilitate transformations in the identities that constitute it'.<sup>3</sup> What Grosz describes as a mode of thinking has a history in the contemporary avant-garde, those of the performance art generation. This disseminative, open mode of making work, according to Henry Sayre, changed the nature of the art object since: 'there is, in this relation to the outside, a sense that the

work is being driven by forces other than the author, that it is informed, as it were, by its chance collisions with whatever occurs at its margins'.<sup>4</sup> By tumbling the practice of art against its outside, more recent hybrid practice has displaced historical forms and modes and become connected to technological or other modes of social and artistic practice. This heterogeneity on the outside of conventional ideas, art and institutions characterises hybrid arts practice but also explains why time for gathering up those dissipative energies into one location is so significant in the arts laboratory.

In Australia, early rumblings of dissatisfaction with traditional conceptions of theatre and the visual arts were provoked by performance artists from the 1970s onwards. By the early 1990s, the impact of digital technologies on the nature of both the artwork and the kind of collaboration that artists were having with technicians and scientists placed them at the frontiers of experimentation with new modes of communication. Public support for hybrid arts came with the establishment of the New Media Arts Board of the Australia Council in 1998, which actually began as the Hybrid Arts Committee (1994-6) – an offshoot of the Performing Arts Board. While the New Media Arts Board, by virtue of its name, is clearly identified with the interactions between artists and new technologies, its support for laboratories, workshops or residencies has been designed to encourage other combinations and meanings for interaction across arts media. What seems unique in relation to the model of the arts laboratory is official recognition and funding for projects that focus on process not product. As Andrew Donovan, the Manager of the New Media Arts Board claims, the artists who attend laboratories are trusted to produce their own



outcomes, which they inevitably do.<sup>5</sup> Indeed for the Board, laboratory initiatives are about longer term goals that may lay the foundations for hybrid arts practice over the next decade, particularly in so far as they enable artists to meet across geographical or state borders and to construct nationally-based collaborations or projects.

The idea of a hybrid arts laboratory is not, of course, an entirely novel idea – the experimental Polish theatre guru Jerzy Grotowski created research laboratories in the 1970s and before that there were interdisciplinary schools, such as the Bauhaus, or artistic collaborations between poets, painters and film-makers, such as the early surrealists. And there is an intriguing history of famous artists' residency programs and retreats. Artists' colonies, perhaps the origins of the counter-culture, occurred at Monte Verita, Switzerland where alternative philosophers, dancers, painters and poets, such as Rudolf Laban and Emil Nolde met to work together, to dance and to debate in the summers of 1913-1914.

We vied with each other in soaring through the air .  
- Mary Wigman <sup>6</sup>

The summers at Black Mountain College in the US during the 1940s and 1950s drew together artists and thinkers such as Walter Gropius, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Willem de Kooning. And today, residential laboratory programs include the well-respected Banff Arts program in Canada and Dasarts in Holland as a centre for advanced research in theatre and dance studies. 'Dasarts is not concerned with technical skills, either students (12-14 in one block) have them beforehand or can get them elsewhere. Rather it is about the art of teaching and the teaching of art.' Its aim is to 'create a place where connections are made – between theatre and society, theory and practice, where the particles of knowledge can be seen as a whole' and help to shape the theatre of the future'.<sup>7</sup> Even single artforms are facilitated by residency programs such as choreographic workshops at Jacob's Pillow, for fifty years nurturing modern dance in the US, or in Australia, the national writers centre Varuna offers 26 fellowships each year; 'the space and time offered by writing retreats in an environment dedicated to writers and writing is treasured'.<sup>8</sup> And earlier this year, Australia hosted a major international conference for Res Artis, a network of organisations which 'provide artists with facilities and conditions conducive to creative work' and that aim 'to sustain or improve the quality of artistic endeavours in any culture'.<sup>9</sup>

So perhaps it is not surprising that a residency or laboratory model which suggests a specific time and place for artmaking has been chosen to bring artists together who work in marginal forms. Funded by the Australia Council, *Time\_Space* began in 2002 and has engaged a range of practitioners in 'practical collaborative exercises and critical discussions with peers and facilitators around notions of hybrid arts practice.'<sup>10</sup> In the first two years located at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, an on-campus program intensified the experience of dislocation shared between the 20 artists and team of facilitators. In 2004, the program was relocated to inner-city Adelaide and access to other resources as well as the pleasures of living in shared accommodation within the city seemed to strengthen the workshop's conceptual development. Of the two-week workshop, about 8-9 days were spent on working out how artists could collaborate by providing them with a series of structured challenges. In the first 24 hours a five minute individual performance/presentation, two days later a ten minute performance devised in pairs, and then multipliers after that of scale and duration. Facilitator Lyndal Jones introduced the artists to a psychoanalytic mode of critiquing or assessing their responses to new work while Marianne Weems from the Builders Association in New York provided a strong multimedia dramaturgical focus. Artists within the group also organised other workshops or exchanges. The lab was a safe place to critique work as well as to share methodologies and validate alternative practice. From the perspective of Teresa Crea, the facilitator for *Time\_Space* 2004, this is also a political act because the market-driven system of cultural production has forced art and performance to become more product-orientated. Members of her company, Parallelo, established their own artists' residency project in a suburban house cum butcher shop where they lived for a month. These performers in residence invited the public to visit them or to watch various actions or events in progress.

I went to the outside world. And here became there. And there became here and now. Time remained. Space changed.  
- Kerrin Rowlands<sup>11</sup>

Outcomes from *Time\_Space* laboratories are sometimes immediate, whereas others are ongoing. Most notable is the sense of each artist emerging from isolation. Jody Kingston talks about her 'mongrel practice' now having a tradition and history within which it is developing.<sup>12</sup> Steve Mayhew describes the workshop as affirming of his approach to directing young people but also 'invigorating' because it was a 24-hour 14-day time loop of artistic interactions. Julie Vulcan who attended both *TPS*1 and 3 also valued the 'round-the-clock' space to play and explore away from the pressures of everyday life as an artist. She became conscious of a community of peers who can provide 'outside eyes', be 'generous' or help to scrutinise and provoke one's artistic 'intentions'. The connections made are as much informal as formal but could lead to future collaborations, and perhaps eventually shift a larger cultural dynamics. None of the artists saw the process as necessarily political nor indeed producing a particular aesthetic, rather the value was



**FACING PAGE:** *Time\_Space* 1 participants Mick Byrne and Rebecca Youdell. **ABOVE:** Keith Armstrong (director) *Transact (Flesh/Skin/Bone)* 2002, performance, poetics of bodily fragility established via processes of dynamic ecological exchange by the Transmute Collective at Solar Circuit lab in Tasmania. © Keith Armstrong/ Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2004.

in testing relationships or continuing to foster and to question what to do. Contemporary performance, Crea suggests, is a fragile ecology that needs intergenerational renewal at the grassroots. If TPS3 creates new networks then its benefits might take ten years; however interest in these laboratories is evident from other artists and organisations around the world, such as the Kitchen, the well-established performance space in New York.

A project focused on the in-between of intercultural and interdisciplinary arts practice is emerging within The Cultural Diversity Cluster currently facilitated by the Australian Performance Laboratory based at Flinders University Drama Centre for the Australia Council Multicultural Advisory Committee. The very term hybridity has often been closely associated with cultural identity but Australian critic Jacqueline Loh suggests there are two approaches to its use within multicultural arts – happy hybridity and intentional hybridity. Happy hybridity celebrates ‘the so-called innovativeness of border crossings’ but leads, however, to ‘consolidation of the dominant structures – in this case the discourse of hegemonic multiculturalism.’<sup>13</sup> By way of contrast, intentional hybridity motivates and locates arts practice and racialised identities within a field of contested power relations where borders are more difficult to cross. Happy hybridity leads to ‘harmonious fusion’ and proliferation of differences within an unbounded culture whereas ‘intentional hybridity stresses its strategic use as a mode of intervention and politicisation.’<sup>14</sup> In a sense, the Cultural Diversity Cluster is a strategic intervention that wants to stay open to the outside, to the margins of Australian cultural practices. The process for this laboratory involves a more sustained number of meetings between 8 selected artists over time (until July 2005) and all the investigations will cluster around the theme of death.<sup>15</sup> As Julie Holledge, the research convenor of this project, suggests, ‘death is the focus, because it allows cultural difference to surface. Practices and images of death throw people back on their limits, into rituals and taboos and excessive emotion whether tears or laughter.’ The debut retreat organised in 2003 at Port Willunga is to be followed by episodes of time spent in the different studios available at Flinders. Each artist will collaborate with others or mentor a group of emerging artists while three full-time researchers investigate their processes. ‘It will be a question of finding the points of difficulty and allowing them to challenge us. Or of asking where does loss of meaning emerge as an artwork, image or sound goes from one culture to another? And where do our practices clash?’ says Holledge.

The time to reflect, to question and to truly engage in the creation of interdisciplinary work from a thematic point of view is a gift which unfortunately doesn’t come along for us artists very often.

- multimedia artist r e a <sup>16</sup>

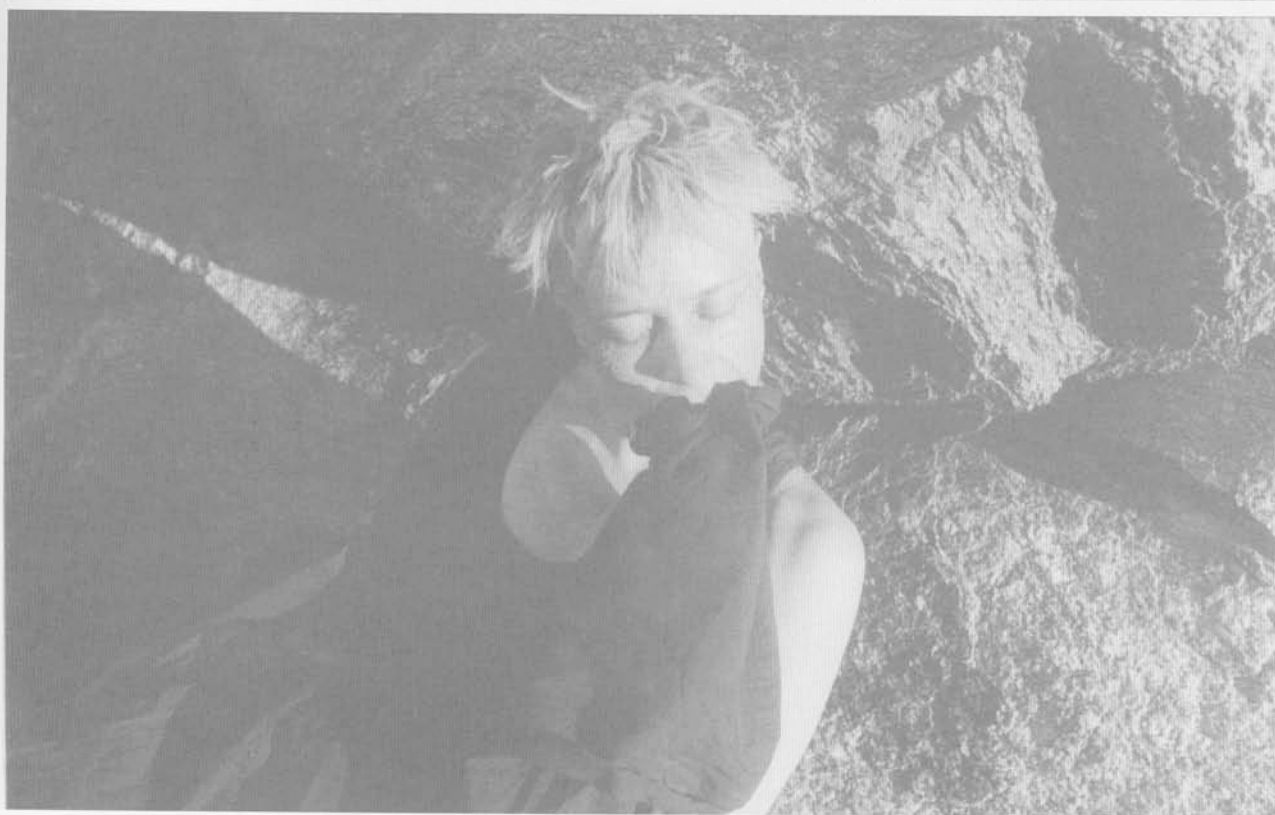
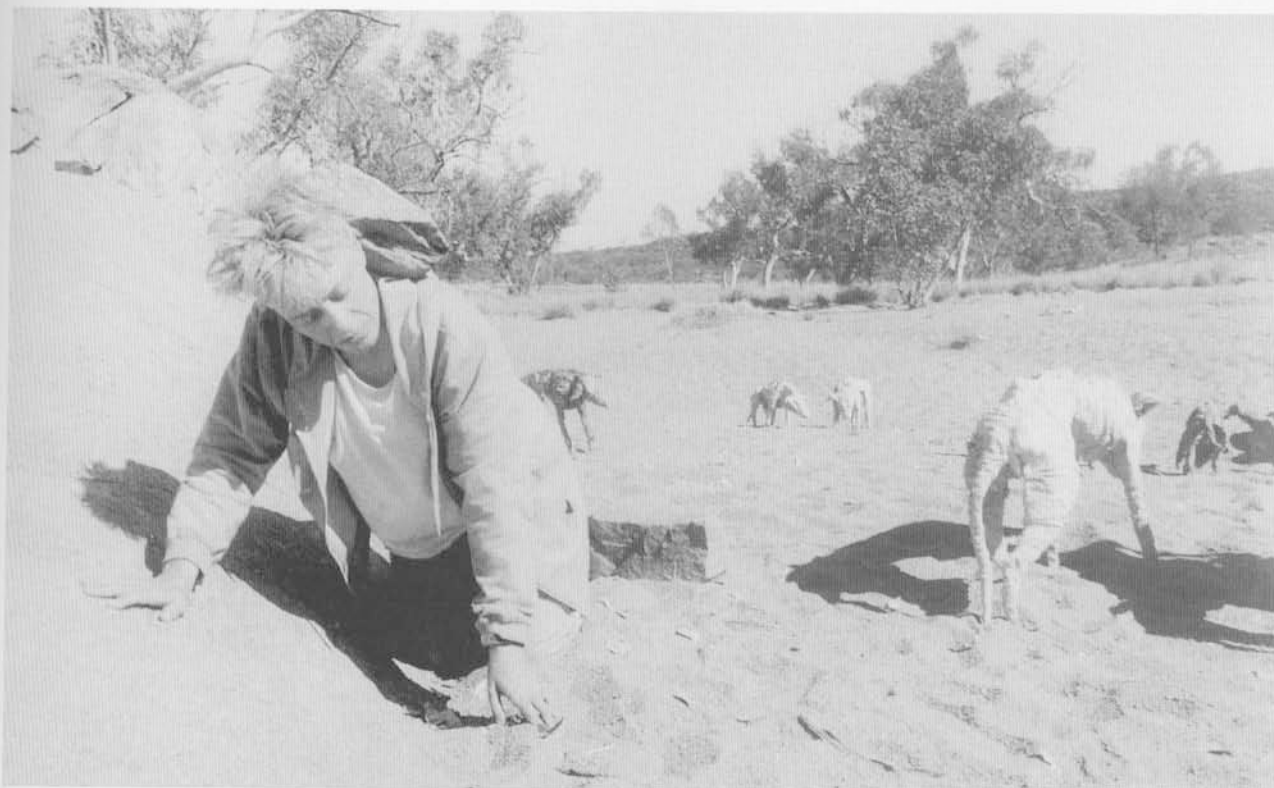
Hybrid arts practice, as a material process, emerges from an in-between that is only partly about the specificity of different media or cultural identity. It can also negotiate the space between nature and culture, by working with how what is natural – whether biological or geological evolution – is folded into and with the technological – those instruments or functions invented by humans to manipulate nature. Other Australian arts laboratories have occurred in remote, somewhat romantic, non-urban locations where cultural practices are folded into an in-between of nature and culture. A less high profile project, certainly in funding terms, was Triple Alice, a three year laboratory convened by performance artist Tess de Quincey in the Central Desert that drew together more than 80 artists, including international and self-funded performance artists from France, Holland, Germany, Denmark and the UK.<sup>17</sup> As both site-specific performance and hybrid arts practice, this project was organised around three laboratories – performance (in particular Body Weather, a system of movement training derived from Butoh); words (involving poets, academics and other writers); and visual artists (including new media). The focus of these laboratories and indeed the gathering itself was to undertake ‘intensely embodied and emplaced work in the real space of Hamilton Downs’ an old cattle station, while relating via the virtual space of the Internet to others elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Both the methodology of Body Weather, which takes as a starting point the experience of the ground beneath the feet, and the intense physical environment, that was as much geographical as cultural, were a means, according to de Quincey’s early vision, of mapping the future of artistic, cultural and media practice.

**Twice she had the sensation that someone had arrived. This was not true. It was a kind of impression, or perhaps a noise.**

- Julia White <sup>19</sup>

While the phenomenological experience of performance-making elaborated a fragile physical ecology among the participants, wider questions about the significance of inhabiting place emerged during the three years. Contextualising of the site took place through discussions with a meteorologist, ethno-botanist, historian and traditional art advisor, politician, and traditional owner. Over the three years interactions with the Aboriginal community slowly evolved while the impact of September 11 on travel arrangements for TA3 severely shifted the final workshop.

New Media artists Francesca Da Rimini and Agnese Trocchi performed on the aggressive angular rocks... Francesca, blindfolded, cited statistics and information regarding the nearby US military base, Pine Gap, in contrast to poetic descriptions in Italian of Agnese’s home, Rome, as she negotiated running over the rough terrain.<sup>20</sup>



*Triple Alice 1*, 1999, first of three laboratory projects held in Alice Springs, **TOP**: collaboration between installationist **Pamela Lofts** and dancer **Tess de Quincey**. Photo: Juno Gomes. **BELOW**: Collaboration between dancer **Tess de Quincey** and photographer **Juno Gomes**.



According to Antoanetta Ivanova, the curator of *Solar Circuit*, a ten-day residency on Maria Island off the coast of Tasmania, the philosophy underpinning this workshop was 'time in isolation' that could facilitate new connections between the artists, the environment and their practice.<sup>21</sup> Essential was the opportunity it gave to artists for streaming experience from both the natural environment, that was not natural in any pristine sense but subject to many interventions as well as unfamiliar, and the digital wilderness, that is the constant permutations of virtual space. It brought together 35 artists from 12 different countries with two simple but precise questions: are you willing to collaborate? What skills do you bring to share? Beginning with workshops at the Tasmanian School of Art the participants shared various skills in sound design, robotics, performance or interactive technologies before being transported to the remote quietude of Maria Island. For the high density high tech artist from Hong Kong, the disclaimer that required him to wear sunscreen every day, to watch out for poisonous snakes, to wait two days for each food shipment and to live with only one power point was a warning sign of adjustment or transformation. But these practical considerations of place were only one of the boundaries being pushed.

The shifting experience of temporality was as important to the process of discovery as any other outcome. As Ivanova explains, 'in the first three days the mind is still agitated with city-noise and the immediate challenge of the new space, but after that the mind becomes quiet and opens itself up to perceptions of life that work on other levels.'

We were reminded of the human touch in all places as a satellite passed overhead in the dusky sky... it added to a gradual sense of awareness that nothing is untouched despite its seeming isolation or rugged good looks. – Jean Poole<sup>22</sup>

One of the planned outcomes of this project was a documentary film made for the Tasmanian museum that could teach kids about ways of making contemporary art in response to the local environment and from local stories. The artists also collaborated on a webjam with a Canadian festival in which they created a symphony for the Tasmanian Devil with sound and image-streaming live to Montreal. Everyday they produced a live broadcast radio program and wrote various blogs about the site that were half-fact, half-fiction.

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ABOVE: *Triple Alice 3*, 2001, Michael Schiavello. Photo: Russell Emerson.

Given the presence of Nina Czegledy, the Chairperson of the Inter-Society for the Electronic Arts, the workshop became a significant reference point for future collaborative new media art projects. Ivanova has been able to further curatorial connections internationally that have resulted in exchange projects with both Norway and the Pompidou Centre, France. Hybrid art from this project was most characterised by the desire to establish affinities between histories and landscapes, whether through collaborative processes, interactive exhibitions and events or identifying common threads and sensibilities. The physical exchange facilitated the virtual exchanges, while the location and time led artists to do things not done before.

Australian hybrid arts has been characterised by a kind of survival mentality in which artists must remain open to one another's ideas or processes as a means of existence. Marianne Weems one of the facilitators for TPS<sup>3</sup> claimed that in New York artists would be more competitive both about the process and the outcomes. Whereas in the UK, hybridity as a term is more likely to be linked with cultural identity rather than arts practice. The significance of place cannot be underestimated within this process of art-making since, according to Edmund Casey, to be in place is to be sheltered and sustained by a containing boundary.<sup>23</sup> If only for a short time, the laboratory shelters and sustains the practice of the in-between.

From this gathering place, hybrid artists cast themselves towards the future, by renegotiating the privilege and priority given to all kinds of cultural binaries. Whether visual/media/performance artist, Asian-Australian, virtual/real, immanent/transcendent, form/content, these laboratories resonate with unknown possibilities. They suggest that artistic experimentation cannot be conceived as a movement forwards without reconsidering that all 'things' are no longer either natural or cultural but rather that artists will explore the 'ground of a malleable materiality' in ways that will be 'innovative, temporal and historical'. As Gay McAuley observed of the Triple Alice project, none of the desert interactions could be regarded as without culture, since all participants are enculturated with techniques, trainings, personal histories, memories, desires and expectations, and their encounters with place involve conflicting histories, multiple occupations and departures.<sup>24</sup> The attempt to forge dialogue, or to inhabit the in-between has shaped all these hybrid arts laboratories. If from the margins or the outside comes human insight and creative invention, then these laboratories aim to ensure that the social, psychic and political dimensions of different modes of cultural production can live on in a restricted Australian art economy and culture.

**RIGHT:** Two productions from *Parallelo* hybrid media organisation in Adelaide:  
**TOP:** Jason Sweeney *Peculiar* 2003, mixed media cinema-performance, Iris Cinema, Adelaide. **BELOW:** Teresa Crea & Laurent Dupon (co-directors) *In the Time of Distance* 2003, live installation/performance, Queen's Theatre, Adelaide. Photos: Peter Heydrich.

- 1 *In Repertoire: A guide to Australian new media art*, Australia Council, Sydney, 2003, p13. Sarah Miller is director of PICA and co-curator of *Time\_Place\_Space* laboratories along with Fiona Winning (director of the Performance Space) and Julianne Pierce (director of Australian Network for Art and Technology (ANAT).
- 2 Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2001, p169.
- 3 *ibid* p94.
- 4 Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance: the American Avant-Garde since 1970*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p147.
- 5 Thank you to Andrew Donovan (New Media Arts Board); Antoanetta Ivanova (Novamedia), Teresa Crea (Parallelo), Julie Holledge (Flinders University), Steve Mayhew and Julie Vulcan who all agreed to be interviewed at short notice for this article. Also to Alex Bodman (Performance Space) and Ellie Prodromou (Australia Council) who provided me with valuable information and contacts.
- 6 Walter Sorell (ed) *The Mary Wigman Book*, Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1975, p42.
- 7 [www.dasarts.com.nl](http://www.dasarts.com.nl)
- 8 [www.varuna.com.au](http://www.varuna.com.au)
- 9 [www.resartis.org](http://www.resartis.org)
- 10 [www.tps.org.au](http://www.tps.org.au)
- 11 [www.parallelo.on.net](http://www.parallelo.on.net)
- 12 *Time\_Place\_Space* 3 Artistic Acquittal Report, unpublished p 12.
- 13 Jacqueline Lo, 'Beyond Happy Hybridity', in Ien Ang, Sharon Chalmers, Lisa Law and Mandy Thomas eds *Alter-Asians: Asian-Australian identities in art, media and popular culture*, Pluto Press, Sydney, p157-158.
- 14 *ibid* p167.
- 15 Australian Performance Laboratory <http://www.flinders.edu.au/apl/>
- 16 'Artists embrace two year experiment' *Diversity: Arts in Multicultural Australia*, Australia Council, April 2004.
- 17 [www.triplealice.net](http://www.triplealice.net)
- 18 Gay McAuley, 'Introduction to Body Weather in Central Australia', *About Performance*, 5, 2003, pvii.
- 19 Julia White, 'Drawings and Texts', *About Performance*, 5, 2003, p83.
- 20 Kristina Harrison, 'From Observer to Participant: Reflections on the Triple Alice Experience', *About Performance*, 5, 2003, p20.
- 21 [www.artschool.utas.edu.au/solar/2k2/solar2k2](http://www.artschool.utas.edu.au/solar/2k2/solar2k2)
- 22 [www.realtimearts.net/rt48/poole](http://www.realtimearts.net/rt48/poole)
- 23 Edmund Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, p
- 24 Gay McAuley, 'Introduction to Body Weather in Central Australia', *About Performance*, 5, 2003, px.

Rachel Fensham is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Literary Visual and Performance Studies at Monash University and has also worked as a writer, director, arts administrator, performer and cultural commentator over many years.