

Hot talk in Central Australia

Stuart Grant

Certainly, if nothing else, *Triple Alice* effectively asks one question: what happens when you put 25 artists, writers, academics, performers, scientists, painters, historians, bureaucrats, media artists, cooks, poets, installationists, technicians, and anthropologists, from Australia's capital cities, New York, Rome, Alice Springs, Northern Territory Aboriginal settlements and various universities, onto a once deserted cattle station converted into a youth camp about 100 km northwest of Alice Springs, in the shadow of a couple of aeroplanes flying into a couple of buildings on the other side of the world, in the third of a series of annual get-togethers, with a brief to work with the place and each other?

According to creative director Tess de Quincey, you get "a fertile bed of cross-cultural, interdisciplinary practice from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous traditions in relation to the Central heartland of Australia (which) embodies a sustained commitment by a core group of artists to uncover a new cultural practice."

According to diverse past attendees, you get anything from a living topoanalysis to a potential Jonestown massacre.

According to this critic you get a boggling agglomeration of brilliance, dross, courage, dishonesty, commitment, well-meaningfulness, triumph, sadness and ignorance, all served up as a feast of dialogic art and thinking in the form of conversations. Conversations between the participants; between the participants and the place; between disciplines; between *Triple Alices* 1, 2 and 3; between cultures; between conflicting histories; between shock and habit. Conversations crackling through the hot Central Australian days, evening thunderstorms and cold nights; sustained by the forces holding grains of sand together and pushing the MacDonnell Ranges, in whose shadow this event unfolded, up out of the plain, and dribbling through a 7200 kbps internet connection.

A facile cynicism could easily dismiss the whole affair as a case of what Edward Casey characterises as "being transported to wilderness areas in vans and planes in the expectation that experiences in these areas will somehow redeem and redress our technologically overwrought (and philosophically underthought) lives" (*Getting Back into Place*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993).

A more generous reading might find a bunch of transplanted artists trying out what happens when they do their work at a youth camp in Central Australia.

Or is there something else?

Structurally, the plan is simple. It is the third of 3 comings-together of 3 interlocked laboratories: a Bodyweather laboratory [the environmentally responsive performance methodology derived and developed by De Quincey from Min Tanaka, Eds], an artists' laboratory, and a writers' laboratory, all pouring into and drawing from a central shared well of exchange and collaboration. A cursory diagnosis reveals a glaring triadomania, but a closer examination shows just how much stuff can get made, pushed, pulled and drawn together and apart, arranged, dismantled and in-formed in 3 weeks:

1. Michael Schiavello places a subvertisement, a billboard bearing the message "advertise here", on the side of a hill where no-one is ever likely to see it, and makes a video surveying the full 360 degree panorama of the scrubby landscape, ending with the billboard.
2. A group of Bodyweather practitioners compiles a performed "dictionary of atmospheres" of the place, in a process of concentrated indwellings.
3. Kim Kerze finds old rusted metal objects, the scant debris of Western inhabitation of the place, which have, he asserts, in their colours, shapes and decay, been claimed by or made part of the land, and uses them to make eerie monolithic sculptures accompanied by odd electronic noises. Exercises in strangeness.
4. Peter Fraser, Peter Snow, Tess de Quincey and Lynne Santos perform a series of 3-5 minute improvisations which conjure up embodiments of ghosts dwelling in and around the historic National Trust listed buildings of the old station.
5. Victoria Hunt snuggles into a clump of rocks in a dried up riverbed in a co-inhabitation with a death adder.
6. Keith Armstrong and Richard Manner mount an installation and performance site at a fork in a dried up riverbed, used for 3 large multimedia performances.
7. Fifteen people, descended variously from European, Aboriginal and Asian races, collaborate on a large painting in the style of Aboriginal place painting, telling the story of a group of women



Michael Schiavello, *Fire & Paper*

- walking to their traditional homeland. The Aboriginal women also dance the same walk.
8. Tess de Quincey rolls a large boulder into the dried up riverbed, smashing it onto the rocks below.
 9. Academics Edward Scheer, Kerrie Schaefer and Jane Goodall lead walks and workshops exploring various aspects of Place and Performance.
 10. I chase it around, trying to write it all down.
 11. Installationists Julia White and Anne Mosey sustain a week-long domestic inhabitation of a small pump hut, painting gum leaves, festooning tinsel, arranging and rearranging objects in the hut.
 12. Historian Dick Kimber, ethnobotanist Peter Latts and anthropologist Scott Campbell Smith tell campfire stories about the past and present of the place, and their experiences in it.

Each of these not quite randomly selected samples from the hundreds of projects, works, discussions, thoughts, encounters, problems, adventures and inquiries shares one specific significant structural feature. They, and most of the other work emerging from *Triple Alice*, are all instances of a 2-way mutual interrogation of emplacement. What happens when I do this with that person here? How is the place

revealed, changed, enhanced, damaged; and how am I affected by the encounter? What is produced?

This sort of question and answer with the place was conducted at times with great delicacy, at times with fear, brutality, naiveté, at times with pigidiot dumbheaded stupidity, and at times with refined finesse.

However, irrespective of the various skills and sensibilities of the participants, what did emerge with certainty from *Triple Alice* was a commitment to the inquiry, to the experience/experiment, in a 3 week long embodied/emplaced ethos.

And the worth of that is another question altogether.

Triple Alice 3, interdisciplinary forum & laboratory, Central Desert, Sept 17-Oct 7, www.triplealice.net

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