

Retelling: *Remanence*

Joan Grounds with Barbara Campbell

I think of Barbara Campbell's body of work as comprised of the remanent material left in the bottom of a glass beaker after the excess and redundant material is boiled off. I always imagine Barbara's hands taking the beaker and shaking out the crystallised material. Then, with a magnifier, she examines the minutiae of the facets on each separate element. In the extreme rigour of this process of shuffling and examining the elements, she often inserts an astringent element of humour. When the humour comes, it is the bang at the end of a chain reaction, the inevitable and remarkable result of the combination of certain elements in a particular order. *Remanence* is the product of Campbell's particular rigour as a researcher, the quirky subjects of her research and the intense scrutiny she applies to the material that results in clear and unforgettable memories of the transitory events that made up the performance.

I started work on Remanence with two artefacts. One was an article about a Perth woman who could find precious minerals by dangling a pendulum over a map. The other was an unedited bit of video footage I'd taken of my grandfather, then aged 95, divining for water in his backyard in Manly, Moreton Bay. I wanted to find a place for these objects in the university. I snooped around map rooms, came across scientists looking very carefully at petrified wood, and stood at the locked door of the Paleomagnetism Laboratory. And finally I found a collection of rock samples at the bottom of the Edgeworth David building. It amused me that in constructing this building, bedrock would have been blasted away for the foundations and now the basement was filled with rocks from all over the world. I made a video that combined my grandfather's divining with these rock samples. It was projected onto paper screens on the retaining wall opposite the Woolley building.

The artist projects her film on the side of the building, and solid matter becomes liquid, begins to move. In the projection, Barbara's grandfather is dowsing for water. He walks a few steps and his forked branch moves from an erect position to point down. He has located water. If there is any surprise about the image, it is that it is so very ordinary. If there is magic, it is in the transformation of materials by means of projected light and movement.

The string of a dowsing pendulum gives a subtle but noticeable downward pull just before it begins to rotate. The downward pull is the ghost of a motion (not unlike the feel of the first nibble by a minnow on a simple hook baited with a worm, the fishing line wrapped around the finger). A similar movement occurs with a forked branch in the hands that rests in the crook between the thumb and the forefinger, with the single end of the branch pointing up. From many experienced dowsers' accounts, the initial movement of successful location is this heaviness, or downward pull. Whatever the causative phenomena is, and no matter how ordinary the activity appears in this film, the sensation is awe-inspiring. The somatic downward pull of the dowsing implement to find subterranean forces is one of the powerful central images in *Remanence*.

My grandfather was a farmer and would dowse for water for the farm. It was a practical operation like everything else he did. When I videoed him dowsing in Brisbane he started by pulling a bit of hibiscus branch off the bush. He was a tall man once and suffered from poor circulation in old age. You can see in the video he has trouble walking. It's like that hibiscus branch pulls him forward and then it suddenly points down.

In the second part of the projected film, the camera is stationary. Tall compactuses open up to reveal their contents, creating a slow and steady horizontal movement across the film frame. The sound of the compactuses creaking overlays all the film loops. This looks like a library stack; instead of books there are rocks on the shelves. It could be a departmental stack just behind the wall on which the image is projected, and the image could be an x-ray through the skin of the building. The rocks look dusty; this is a rarefied yet neglected atmosphere. The image is slightly claustrophobic.

The Woolley Building where the performance was sited is bulky and, to my contemporary eye, overbuilt. Like so many of the older buildings at Sydney University, it is positioned somewhere between a monument and a fortress. As a monument, this building seems to affirm the eternal supremacy of scientific thought and methodology. As a fortress I imagine it as a vain attempt to exclude the invisible forces arising out of the earth: magnetic energies or harmful gases from underground streams running over various metals in rocks. There would be plenty of water under this site, possibly in the form of running water. Sydney is crisscrossed with underground streams and waterways, and at the bottom of this fall in the land, just near this building, there is a huge water-hungry cottonwood tree with a magnificent crown, proof of abundant water.

It is a relief to return to the image of the dowsing man in an airy suburban back garden. The looped film creates an edited rhythm. These two sets of images, the dowsing man and the shelves of rocks, establish a binary set of opposing themes in this performance. The empirical investigations of the dowser are often maligned by scientific methodology and philosophy, yet are proven again and again in their most pragmatic form; that of successfully divining water for wells, and the like. In opposition to the dowsing image are the neat samples of rock, stone and mineral, no doubt labelled with detailed provenance; each specimen the subject of countless man-hours of rigorous scientific investigation within the defined and monitored discipline of geology or geophysics. 'Esoteric' is a relative term.

I did a post-graduate course in library management so I became quite familiar with Melvil Dewey's system of classification. On the library shelves, books on dowsing start with 133 which puts them in the 'Paranormal Phenomena' division of the 'Philosophy and Psychology' class, while the books on geomagnetism start with 530 putting them in the 'Physics' division of the 'Natural Science and Mathematics' class. Dowsing happens but it can't be explained whereas geomagnetism, which is just another approach to reading rocks, can be explained, so is given greater authority.

The second sympathetic somatic pull in this work is upwards. The twinned central image in *Remanence* comes from the five white paper scrolls that appear to rise up the facade of the building. On these long sheets of heavy paper, a fire is lit to burn contour lines, maps of magnetic fields, some of the lay lines that cross the globe and lie under the surface of the oceans and the earth's crust. In the combustion of materials, fire often appears to burn up, hungry for more oxygen and fuel. Up the scrolls, the flames slowly, very slowly, burn along their designated path, the burning retarded by saltpetre.

I found a recipe for 'glow pictures', a kind of singed drawing, in a 1939 book titled Fortunes in Formulas. It explains how to apply a solution of saltpetre, gum arabic and water to paper with a writing pen. The drawn lines will burn but not the paper. It's hard to find saltpetre. A man in the Chemistry Department gave me some. I still don't know how the formula works exactly. I think the saltpetre acts as an accelerant to keep the gum arabic burning. I had drawn lines describing the earth's magnetic fields onto sheets of paper. During sections of the video, I moved each piece of paper along a track into the projected light of the video, and then lit the glow line at the base of that

piece of paper. This sequence was repeated until all the glow lines were lit. The slowly burning lines seemed to have a will of their own. It was hard to keep them alight, partly because it had rained that morning and the wall behind the screens was still holding moisture.

Barbara scales the work. Dressed in a lab coat she is a small figure at the base of the building. She rolls out the scrolls along their tracks in rhythm with the moving compactuses. She lights and tends the burning sheets of paper. The paper is very long and as the fire progresses they become giant readouts of earth energies. The dark burnt edges become graphs. There is no fast theatrical pace here; the forces, the materials and the conditions under which the performance is enacted determine the duration of the action. It is not unlike a setting sun over a vast expanse of water, affirming each time one witnesses it that the earth is revolving in its own time.

And like the sun on the cusp between day and night, the performance ended when the fire burnt out.

The ‘associative readings’ of a time-based artwork are rarely the same in any account of it. If Barbara tells me about one of her performances, I am often amazed by the content and intent she describes compared with my own immediate sensate experience of a work, or the descriptive fictions others have related to me.

Many artists think and create by association, associations that might simply arise from some kind of memory bank or immediate link between something outside the work and something incorporated in the work. ‘Associative readings’ are as various and rich as is individual difference. When an engaged audience witnesses a performance, strong associations are formed between it and their memories, concepts, physical and psychological phenomena, a new creative cycle is begun. Some of what we as artists give back to those who witness our work is the power to carry that associative process forward, forward into the mix of that person’s own set of unique material for association with all of the elements of ‘our’ work. This begins a new cycle of association. From this give and take, loose overlapping groups of cultures in process are formed.

Each person who adds something to the retelling of a temporal work like performance is becoming a part of it in some way and, with the retelling, the performance is becoming a part of them. This essay is admittedly a distorted version of the ‘true’ account, but it is an attempt to show some of what I ‘made’ from the work as well as a description of the events as they unfolded on the night of the performance. My account of this work is true to my own associative and mnemonic processes that have arisen because I witnessed *Remanence* and then swapped associations with others in the audience who had different views, and with Barbara. I believe that this is one important way that the processes of art making and exchange become culture in process.

I am heartened by the knowledge that *Remanence* will be re-performed again in 2002 and the living processes of the retelling of *Remanence* will begin again.