Art in the Aftermath: The Work of Repair

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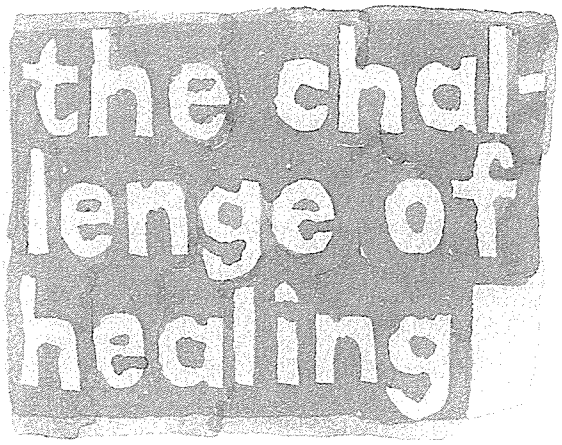
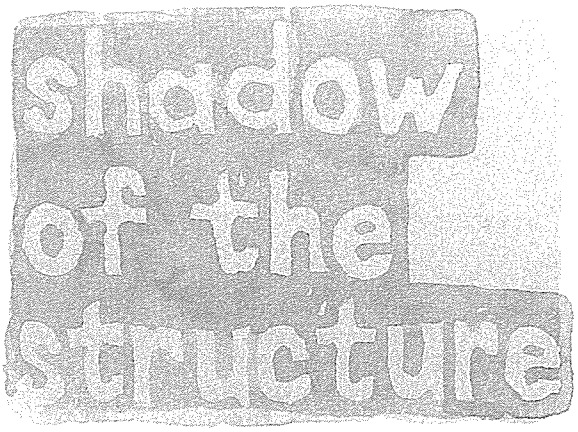
War, terror attacks, exile, states of emergency, natural disasters, transport accidents: we now live it seems, in a more or less continuous state of mediatised emergency and traumatic aftermath.

Many would argue that we are desensitised to both the affects that each of these ought to produce, as well as to the empathy we would otherwise feel for those caught up in disaster by this onslaught of images broadcast, webcast and printed. Various writers have suggested that we are simply overwhelmed by exposure to this image stream, suffering a traumatic numbing that marks what has been called the 'death experience', that is, the replacement of firsthand personal experience by forms of mediatised, vicarious experience that foreclose the sensory impression of the immediate, the shock of the unexpected or the thrill of the surprising thing that unsettles the banality of the everyday. Arguably, an important role for art in this context is the restoration of the reality of experience in the face of the growing unreality of the world.

Julie Gough
The Lost World (Part 2)
Detail from site specific installation
Courtesy of the artist



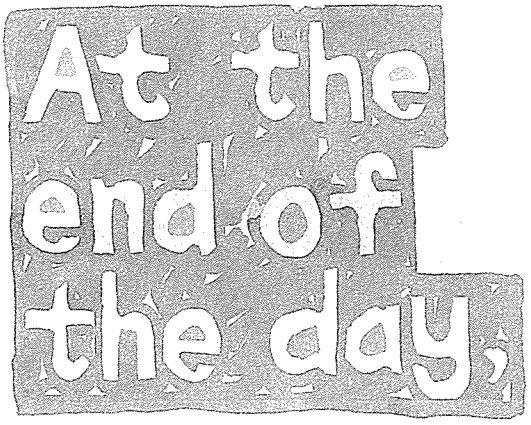


However, many people — artists and audiences alike — have a firsthand relation to trauma. Viewers might be refugees or migrants (given the radical uprooting migration can entail) watching the wars, arrests and disappearances, the earthquakes or disasters of whatever kind, happening in their homelands, to their families, to people they know or to whom they feel a particular empathy. Or viewers might witness the trauma ongoing in our own Australian backyard. I think here for example, of asylum-seekers held for indeterminate periods of mandatory detention in the Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney, or of Aboriginal people who live with the trauma of the Stolen Generations, and beyond that, the dispossession of Aboriginal land and culture. Viewers might ourselves be survivors of child sexual assault or domestic violence memories of which are reawakened by watching news of violent crime such as rape or murder. The sources of trauma are many and varied, and for people who have suffered it, mediatised public culture is something other than spectacle.

Instead, there is for many people an affective or emotional resonance between images, stories and experience. This resonance brings things that are thematically or otherwise unrelated into a relationship organised solely by affect, that is, by the creation of patterns of feeling which over time, become familiar and taken for granted. This process of pattern creation by things that are, on the face of it, unrelated, gives rise to a complex circuitry in which the effects of events concatenate to produce the present as a terrain of trauma. This 'present' is further complicated by the question of intergenerational transmission of trauma, as when a Holocaust survivor or a member of the Stolen Generations is unable to speak of their experiences to their children, but nevertheless cannot help but transmit wordlessly — by their attitudes, moods, reactions, silences and all those other irrepressible manifestations of emotional memory — something of the nature of that experience.

In this optic, which acknowledges the pervasiveness of traumatic experience, it might be that art is one means by which trauma can be processed, and the unspeakable begin to be publicly articulated and responded to.

One project which performs something of this work is *1001 nights cast* (21 June 2005 to 17 March 2008), a durational performance by Sydney artist Barbara Campbell, who scanned the media for stories about the Middle East each morning over the life of the work. Campbell selected a word or short phrase which would serve as a prompt for a writer, hand-coloured it and posted to the website in the hope that



by that afternoon, she would have a story for webcast at precisely sunset, wherever she was in the world. Campbell became a contemporary Sheherazade, needing to be fed stories by writers to perform each evening and so fend off her own death, made more imminent by the death of her partner, fellow artist Neil Roberts in a tragic accident in 2002.

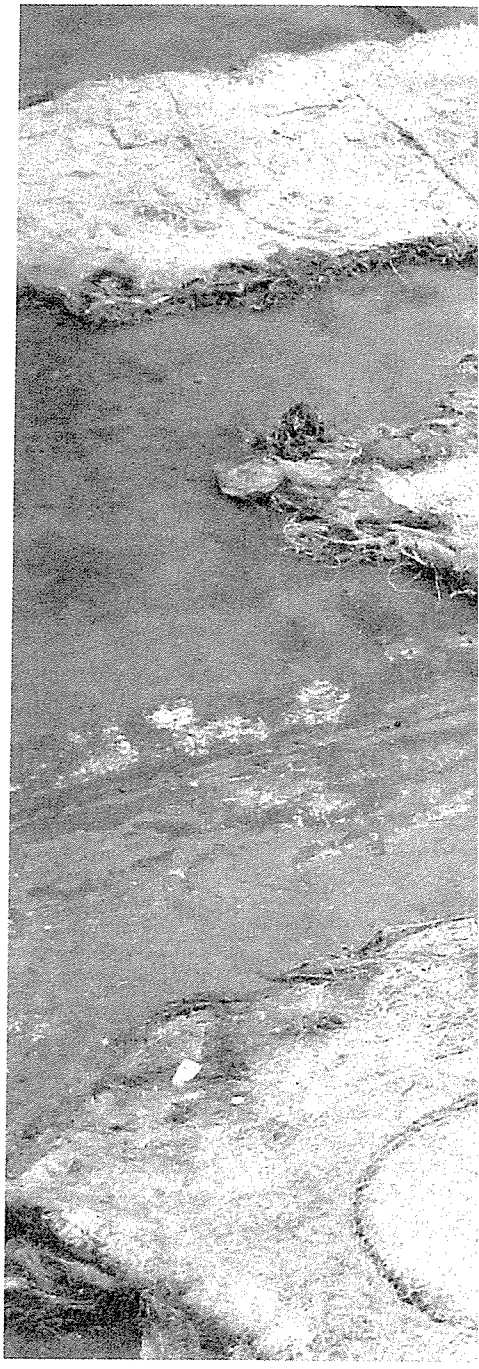
Viewers at remote locations were engaged in a kind of parallel processing by means of these stories that addressed, directly or indirectly and sometimes by denial, disavowal or repression, the news of the day as it involved that quasi-fictional, phantasmatic western construction, the 'Middle East', home to the original Sheherazade. 'Processing' here becomes not simply the treatment of information but takes on the more emotional cast of the processing of trauma by transforming images and affects into words which can be both understood by and shared with others, helping to modulate their unbearable intensity. The prompts perform as cut up writing, making explicit our relationship to news media — the way attention will be caught by a fragment containing in itself a multiplicity of reference deposited in the lap of our own everyday life as if destined for us personally. Thus the Middle East resonates through new contexts as it catches on them and attaches to them, generating ever more story in the process.

Barbara Campbell
the challenge of healing, writing prompt for performance #1 of 1001 nights cast 21 June 2005
Watercolour on paper, 8 x 10.5 cm

shadow of the structure, writing prompt for performance #14 of 1001 nights cast 4 July 2005
Watercolour on paper, 8 x 10.5 cm

to throw sand in our eyes, writing prompt for performance #319 of 1001 nights cast 5 May 2006
Watercolour on paper, 8 x 10.5 cm

At the end of the day, writing prompt for performance #1001 of 1001 nights cast 17 March 2008
Watercolour on paper, 8 x 10.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist



If leaving behind a violent conflict in which friends and family are still caught up is one aspect of the migrant experience, another is the intergenerational impact of uprooting. Drawing on her own family's migration to Tasmania, where they became the island's first hydroponic farmers, Sydney artist Elizabeth Day has made a series of texts grown in transplanted grasses. These works address the often painful transplantation involved in the migrant experience, especially in Australia, where in the early days of the colony convicts were forcibly deported to an unknown 'new world' for what were often trivial offences. Not only were they forced into penal servitude, but their families lived for generations afterwards with what was known in Tasmania as the 'convict stain'. Day's family were not convicts, but one of her ancestors was a judge who may have sentenced others to transportation, and she herself has worked for many years in the penal system. 'The law is not always just' reads one of Day's grass works, grown in reverse so that when it is peeled back from its casting tray, it reveals the text in the exposed tangle of roots, soil and seeds—itself suggesting the both complexity of the history of contemporary Australia and the inextricable connectedness of land and belonging. This complexity and connectedness is the underside of lawn, a powerful symbol of English colonisation covering the backyards of so many Australian homes.

The work of Tasmanian artist Julie Gough addresses the other side of the history of colonisation: the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples (including her own) and the mass killings and the destruction of cultures that this entailed. In *The Lost World (Part 2)* (2013), Gough creates an exhibition in the form of an event, setting up an exchange between the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, England, and Contemporary Art Tasmania in Hobart. She photographed the museum's collection of stone tools and filmed the 'return' of the photographs of the displaced objects (museum labels still imposed on them) to various sites in Tasmania. This film was then projected outside the museum, while inside the stone tools were exhibited in the gallery, sent back to Contemporary Art Tasmania via live webcam. Meanwhile another feed of the artist's photographs lying in the dirt and grass where once the tools themselves might have been left is relayed to Cambridge. This complex process of reciprocity Gough sets up between the museum and the 'field' exposes the cultural mistranslation between them, making palpable the theft of tools as an act of cultural dispossession. It also suggests that it is only by acknowledging the tragic consequences of our shared past that we can begin to reconstruct a new present.

All these works produce objects not as ends in themselves so much as the by-products of processes involving the deeply emotional states of loss, mourning and above all, reparation. In this respect they represent the best aspects of a 'relational aesthetic' in which the transformative power of the event becomes the point of the work.

Elizabeth Day
THE LAW IS NOT ALWAYS JUST 2011/2012
Cast grass roots on four cotton panels, 240 x 350 cm (overall)
Courtesy of the artist

FOLLOWING
Julie Gough
Sentence (Ancestor) 2007
Chair, pyrographic text and soap, 45 x 600 x 10 cm (overall)
Artbank collection, purchased 2007