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LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

Land Dialogues: Contemporary Australian Photography (in Dialogue with Land)

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ABSTRACT
The work presented in the 2016 exhibition *Land Dialogues – Contemporary Australian Photography (in Dialogue with Land)*, can be read as a contemporary post-photographic project seeking to challenge the enduring traditions of landscape photography. In a wider context, Land Dialogues seeks to challenge the established values associated with our culture of consumption and anxiety, particularly the culturally constructed (and supported) separation between human beings, non-human beings and the earth systems in which we all live. Artists represented in Land Dialogues employ a variety of photographic methods to address themes including global warming, ecological estrangement, the perception of nature, biodiversity loss, alternative histories and the relationships between human and non-human beings. The new and varied approaches for communicating these themes are symbolic of a wider cultural shift that is taking place as the realities of global warming sink in. It is becoming clear that some fundamental assumptions about the relationship between modern capitalist societies and the Earth’s life systems are flawed. There is a growing cultural movement seeking to question the traditions and values of consumption and excess associated with a capitalist consumer society, in a bid to move towards a culture of ecological awareness and respectful earthly stewardship.
Land Dialogues – Contemporary Australian Photography (in Dialogue with Land) joins the large international and interdisciplinary dialogue seeking to challenge and dismantle the accepted assumptions that human culture exists somewhere outside of, and in opposition with, the rest of the biophysical world. The exhibition is the coalescence of a number of contrasting voices finding common ground through the medium of images, each with the shared desire of offering new ways to value, understand and represent the world in which we live.

Land Dialogues is not representative of an overall direction or doctrine of photographic practice in Australia; nor is Land Dialogues a complete picture of the expansive field of photographic practice engaged with or embedded in land or place based issues. The Land Dialogues exhibition is a broad survey of new directions and possibilities for photography in a period of cultural change. The artists featured in Land Dialogues are Renata Buziak, James Farley, Amy Findlay, Christine
McFetridge, Christopher Orchard, Jacob Raupach, Kate Robertson, Felix Wilson and Carolyn Young. They represent a mix of regional and metropolitan artists from Queensland, New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory, Victoria and Tasmania, and are from varying career levels and discipline backgrounds. Each artist represents a unique direction forward and approach to engaging with land through personal experience and practice. The curated voices may or may not be related to each other, they may harmonize or clash with one another and at different times, some may even contradict others. This is deliberate. *Land Dialogues* aims to highlight the existence of infinite possibilities in practice and knowledge, each forming and breaking connections with one another at different points. *Land Dialogues* is more concerned with establishing channels for continued communication and exploration than it is about dictating specific modes of practice. It seeks to suggest a culture maturing in its knowledge of the vast challenges ahead, and accepting that the changes needed to survive cannot be reactionary, shallow or quick fix. This exhibition moves towards accepting that we all live beneath the long shadow of anthropogenic impact upon the earth. Rather than denying this traumatic reality, or dreaming up an easy out, we collectively need to process the anxiety that comes with this knowledge in order to start living cautiously, treading lightly and working calmly towards solutions beneath the shade.
It is not my intention to speak towards each of the artists individually, nor will I delve into the various links I perceive between their work or expand on the implications these have for the wider cultural/critical discourse. I wish only to contextualize the framework around which I based the curation of this exhibition, in order to show how these examples of contemporary photographic practice are situated within both the contemporary field of Australian landscape photography, and the wider technological, philosophical and critical discourse affecting change in the global community at this time. I will focus on clarifying the terminology of the post-photographic moment, which is the unifying factor allowing these artists to employ seemingly disparate mode of investigation in the pursuit of similar topics. The notion of a post-photographic moment will be expanded into a theory of wider cultural change, based upon the argument that energy, technology and culture are inextricably linked, but forward by cultural theorist Barry Lord. I will also address the
communication strategies behind new the approach to positive messages around climate change, as outlined by climate psychologist, Per Espen Stoknes. Finally, these various threads will be bound together through the wider influence on my curatorial position in the eco-critical philosophy of Glen Albrecht, Timothy Morton, Val Plumwood and Deborah Bird Rose.

**Image Three** - Installation View of *Land Dialogues – Contemporary Australian Photography (In Dialogue with Land)*, as installed at Wagga Wagga Art Gallery, 19th March – 5th June, 2016. Photographed by James Farley

**Australian Landscape Photography**

The role of landscape photography in Australia’s history has been erratic and fractured due to the many forms of practice it encompasses. In *Photography and Australia*, Helen Ennis suggests that the only unifying feature of landscape photography is that it “Has been the practice of settler Australians and the expression of a settler-colonial culture” (Ennis 2007, 51). Ennis suggests that photography in Australia was vital to the process of colonization, where the
Australian land was used as a tool to construct a sense of national identity. This is evident in the earliest images of Australia, where photography was employed to document new lands or property ripe for settlement, cultivation and development, and later as a tool for classifying and collecting the land, its flora and fauna so that it may find its way into the popular imagination (Ennis, 61). In The Photograph and Australia, Judy Annear extends the use of photography as a colonial tool for place-making into the expedition and travel photography of the latter half of the 1800’s and into the wilderness photography that dominated Australian landscape practice well into the twentieth century (Annear, 2015). Historically, Australian wilderness photography is inextricably linked to the environmental conservation movement and the promotion of a duty of care. However, wilderness photography is also implicated in furthering the perceived human/nature divide, not to mention its role as a driving force behind the promotion of tourism, where economic and aesthetic interests are often prioritized above ecological concerns. In Photography and Landscape, (2012) Rod Giblett argues that the imported European aesthetic traditions of the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful which have been adopted by touristic and wilderness photography are flawed. Giblett states “they create unrealistic expectations of aesthetically pleasing or aestheticized landscapes that bear little relation to the lives of people, indigenous or not, who live on or near them and who rely upon them for their livelihoods” (Giblett and Tolonen, 2012). Giblett is one of many voices (see Bright 1985, Palmer 2013, Orchard 2016) calling for new modes of photographing, representing and relating to the world that challenges the enduring traditions of Enlightenment thinking, upon which the colonial foundations of Australia were built. A great deal of this colonialist mentality continues to permeate through Australian culture and photographic practice today.
In the contemporary context of twenty-first century Australia, ideas of national identity, community and self are constantly evolving due to globalized capitalism, technological innovation and globally interconnected information networks, not to mention anthropogenic climate change, mass extinction and the destabilization of multiple earth life systems. In this time of great transition, it is increasingly clear that no notion of nationhood, nor its relationship to the land can ever be fixed or static, rather, they must be protean and constantly emerging. The artists represented in the Land Dialogues exhibition are responding to these changes in a number of ways.

The aforementioned factors of global change also have dramatic implications on the medium of images, which despite numerous shortcomings, is still being used to construct culturally specific relationships, narratives and systems of value between humans (individual and communal) and the land. The curatorial guidelines of the Land Dialogues exhibition carefully avoided imagery that overtly seeks to contribute to any furthering of Australian national identity drawn solely from the features of the land. Instead, Land Dialogues focuses on photographic practice that expands upon or challenges the tradition of representation by engaging in speculative and experimental dialogue with earth systems traditionally called nature and reduced to a flattened image called landscape. The motivation for this exhibition falls in line with the emergent eco-critical and new materialist agenda of radically reinvigorating discussions around the lived reality of life on this planet, and how these must change if life on earth is to continue (Gibson, 2015). In order to promote new modes of ecological understanding and value through photographic representation, the traditions of making and reading landscape photography must change to incorporate more than just photographic representations of land in the “what we saw” or “what this place looks like” tradition of documentary or aestheticized landscape photography. It must include and promote dialogue between all aspects of life on earth, including human and non-human beings. It must transcend ideas of place in terms of isolated realms like metropolitan or regional, considering instead a more interconnected, interdependent and ethical understanding. It must include life at all scales and across both space and time, from the planetary to the microscopic, from the immediate to the geological. Finally, it must accept that there may be limits to photographic representation, but must not stop pursuing these limits.
Image Five. James Farley. *In the garden (Wagga Wagga)*, 2015, Archival Inkjet Print, 70 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the Artist.
What is Post Photography?

Post-photography is a moment in practice grounded in the globally connected and infinitely reproducible image/information culture of modern western society. Its roots can be found in two places; the first lies in the semiotic understanding that photographs, just like the written language, are coded and decoded through the interpretation of culturally constructed signs. (Sonesson, 2014) Although similar to the postmodernist/poststructuralist critique of language, post-photography does not have to be postmodern art photography, nor photography at all if you accept the post-medium condition put forward by Rosaline Krauss (2000). The second is in the implications in a visual world after the advent of digital imaging. The foundations for this understanding of post-photography are laid out in the critical text, *The Reconfigured Eye – Visual Truth in the Photographic Era of Post-Photographic* by William J. Mitchell (1994). Mitchell focuses largely on the ontological implications of digital technological developments, with a keen interest on their implications to the already problematic notion of truth in photography. For Mitchell, the fundamental differences between traditional photographic images, created by the interaction of light and chemical process, and the digital equivalent, is their relationship to that which is photographed. Mitchell gives the following definition of the post-photographic moment as a new era in photography’s ever evolving social and technological history.

We can identify certain historical moments at which the sudden crystallisation of a new technology (such as painting, printing, photography or computing) provides the nucleus for new forms of social and cultural practice and marks the beginning of a new era of artistic exploration. The end of the 1830s – the moment of Daguerre and Fox Talbot – was one of these. And the opening of the 1990s will be remembered as another – the time at which the computer processed digital image began to supersede the image fixed on silver based photographic emulsion. (Mitchell 1994, 20)
Mitchell suggests that just as photography displaced painting in the early 19th century, digital photographic technologies have displaced our understanding of photography entirely because the digital imaging technologies allow for the intentional creation (and dissemination) of images that may not bear any causal relationship to that which they depict (Mitchell, 30-31). Or as Martha Rosler says when reflecting on the implications on an image’s ability to bear truth, “Post-photographic practice at a minimum can be said to have abandoned any interest in indexicality and perhaps, just as importantly, in the privileged viewpoint of ‘witness’ – and therefore any embeddedness in a particular moment in time and space” (Rosler, 2004). The ever increasing malleability of the digital image has led us into the post-photographic moment, a new era in photography’s ever evolving social, artistic and technological history.

In the recent publication *Post-Photography – The Artist with a Camera*, Robert Shore (2014) shares the view that we have entered the post-photographic moment,
however is less concerned about the decentering of the photographer, the photograph and relationship with the real. Shore extends the inquiry to the post-photographic moment into a large survey of contemporary practitioners engaged in various practice around the world. This collection of artists is broken down into five categories based around a single idea or mode of creation and each artist is given space to outline their own practice rather than Shore suggesting any single aesthetic framework or curatorial vision to the collective (Shore, 2014). There can be no single authoritative voice on the post-photographic moment because it is necessarily flexible and multifaceted. As Rosler and Mitchell address, the post-photographic moment highlights and extends existing issues for any context where the truth or indexicality of an image is paramount; such as journalism, traditional documentary or scientific classification, however, photography has always faced such problems. In the ever evolving field of artistic practice and investigation, the post-photographic moment is ripe with opportunity and potential that must be explored. In what I have witnessed of post-photographic practice so far, I would put forward the following characteristics of this moment, but would advise taking them as lines in the dirt rather than a path etched on a map.

- The post-photographic moment does not elevate or celebrate any one style or idea from photography’s past, but is informed by that past in its entirety. It embraces not just the canonical figures of a constructed history, but encourages the exploration of counter narratives that have been largely outside the frame of historical focus.
- Both post-photographic artists and audiences are increasingly fluent in the visual language as both participate in the creation and dissemination of images in an increasingly regular fashion. This leads to a reduced space between artist and audience, due largely to the endless flow of visual data via online networks.
- Post-photography is inclusive of all current photographic practice and theory and welcomes images or processes not traditionally considered ‘photographic’, including but not limited to image appropriation, pixel drawing, data mining and computational imaging.
The post-photographic moment allows artists to be less inclined to develop a canonical style, instead utilizing the unlimited access to photographic technology, history and technique to experiment with any and all aspects of the medium of images. Often adopting or combining whichever options are deemed necessary to meet a specific personal, social, political or aesthetic intent.

These characteristics are present in the work of all artists featured in the *Land Dialogues* exhibition. *Land Dialogues* takes into account the technological/ cultural shifts that set the stage for the current post-photographic moment, in conjunction with a wider view towards the changing technological and cultural relationship with the biophysical world. This is addressed through the argument put forward by cultural theorist Barry Lord in *Art & Energy: How Culture Changes* (2014). I am interested in exploring a parallel narrative between the technological/ cultural implications of the post-photographic moment and the cycles of technological and cultural change as outlined by Lord. I believe that the contemporary shift in practice through the post-photographic moment and highlighted in *Land Dialogues*, is indicative of a changing culture. Perhaps the characteristics of experimentation, openness, self-reflection and inclusiveness will continue to expand outside the realm of artistic discourse to be embraced by the emergent cultures of stewardship as a whole.
Towards a Culture of Stewardship.

In *Art & Energy: How Culture Changes* (2014), Lord explores the correlation between developments in a culture’s sources of energy and the effects on the corresponding cultural values. This project linking energy and culture is based upon four fundamental principles.

- A culture cannot arise or continue without the energy source that enables that culture to be practiced.
- Getting and retaining access to sufficient energy requires adopting certain values and acknowledging certain priorities, while abandoning, denying or suppressing others.
- The values and meanings entailed by that energy source become a basic component of the value system of that culture.
- If the energy source changes, then the values and meanings at the base of that culture will change. Energy transition is an engine of cultural change.

(Lord, 2014)

Photography first makes an appearance in the early 19th Century, during what Lord calls the Culture of Production. This is the period of the Industrial Revolution; which began as coal became the dominant source of energy. The next significant change in energy lead to the Culture of Electrification, still based largely on coal but in a transformative way, leading to advancements across all fields of cultural practice, eventually leading to such revelations as digitization. In a quick side note, it is important to note that in Lord’s theory of cultures, multiple cultures often overlap and feed into one another, they can also exist simultaneously in different locations due to the constantly emerging and developing needs for energy around the globe, as well as the relatively slow speed of innovation and cultural change. After electrification and digitization, the next significant cultural shift is called the Culture of Consumption, earning its name thanks to the value shift away from production to consumption, associated with the adoption of oil and gas as primary sources of energy.
Lord argues that the culture of consumption dramatically affected not just what we buy and how much, it changed our cultural priorities and taste in people, things, events and ideas, for better and for worse. We still sit within the culture of consumption today, however a second culture has emerged... the culture of anxiety. This culture exists in response to nuclear energy (and the destructive power associated with it), terrorism (and its political links with control of oil, gas and social power) and the threat of global warming, (which is a consequence of all previous sources of energy to date.)

We currently sit nervously in a culture of anxiety, faced with the big questions posed by anthropogenic climate change, in addition to an increasing demand for cheap energy and a global community that wants to continue to advance. In order to do so, Lord suggests that one possible direction for the future is the emergence of a culture of stewardship. Lord expresses his hopes that this emerging culture will incorporate...
the best aspects of all the previous cultures, while introducing new values that are (or will be) associated with the widespread adoption of renewable energy. There are many barriers to the emergence of this culture; technological limits, political and corporate agendas and resistance from individuals whose ways of life could appear threatened by the current solutions. Now I am not naïve enough to think the arts can really impact any of these challenges head on, it will take a monumental interdisciplinary, multi-directional, multi-cultural movement to implement and manage any effective change on the scale that is needed. However, I do believe that the arts will play a significant role in inspiring people to work towards and support these changes. Artists can start dreaming, testing and challenging the possible futures for a culture of stewardship that is yet to fully emerge, as artists have done in all previous periods of cultural change.

Image Nine. Jacob Raupach, Detail from Strata (More Gaps Than Record), 2016, Photographic Objects / Installation. Courtesy of the Artist.

Reframing the Message of Change.
A key aspect of the Land Dialogues exhibition was to locate these new directions in photography on a personal or community scale. Conversations about global cultures, climate change and these times of crisis often tend to become entirely abstract and
overwhelming. The threats of our current position loom large and it is easy to slip into thoughts of helplessness, which quite often lead to inaction. Climate psychologist, Per Espen Stoknes outlines a number of strategies to avoid this slip into negativity in his aptly titled book, *What We Think About – When We Try Not to Think About Climate Change* (2015). Stoknes explores the psychological defense mechanisms utilised by many people in order to protect themselves from information that is too traumatic, challenging or threatening to bear. He breaks this defense system down into what he calls the Five D’s (Distance, Doom, Dissonance, Denial, iDentity) and offers some strategies to work with these defenses, rather than against them in order to effectively communicate messages around global warming (Stoknes, 2015). He calls these strategies a New Psychology of Climate Action, and suggests that in order for communication to be successful, these guidelines should be followed.

- Make the issue feel near, human, personal, and urgent.
- Use supportive framings that do not backfire by creating negative feelings.
- Reduce cognitive dissonance by providing opportunities for consistent and visible action.
- Avoid triggering the emotional need for denial evoked through fear, guilt, self-protection.
- Reduce cultural and political polarization on the issue.

(Stoknes, 2015)

These strategies were important in developing the framework for *Land Dialogues*, as they allowed for a clear curatorial vision that avoided the types of imagery that so often invoke the defense mechanisms outlined in the Five D’s. As a curator, I am less concerned with images showing the effects of anthropogenic climate change in a direct or illustrative way, nor am I interested in documenting the sites where damage has already occurred or those sites we stand to lose. Psychologists, theorists and a growing number of artists agree, that these strategies do nothing to instigate real change, instead often leading to aestheticizing sites only for their value as images. Rather, the work focused on in *Land Dialogues* is concerned with
presenting alternative ways artists can speak beyond this anxiety, living with a mind towards cultural transition and feeling at home in the world.

A number of eco-philosophers have put forward different theories and vocabularies to help artists move toward this goal. These new directions approach a similar subject from a number of different specializations or backgrounds, however each is contributing to the growing field calling for a complete overhaul of thought and action in regard to human beings and the rest of the biophysical community of life. The work of Australian professor of sustainably, Glenn Albrecht, is just one of the voices that has been particularly useful to the process of curating an exhibition towards such an end. Albrecht has gained international attention for presenting a new vocabulary of psychological conditions known as “psychotropic conditions”\footnote{Albrecht, 2005}. One of Albrecht’s new concepts, \textit{solastalgia} has been particularly popular. \textit{Solastalgia} is a neologism created by combining the Latin word \textit{solacium} (comfort) and the Greek root –\textit{algia} (pain) (Albrecht, 2005). Albrecht describes \textit{solastalgia} as:

\begin{quote}
The pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one’s sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation. It is an intense desire for the place where one is a resident to be maintained in a state that continues to give comfort or solace. Solastalgia is not about looking back to some golden past, nor is it about seeking another place as ‘home’. It is the ‘lived experience’ of the loss of the present as manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present. In short, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at ‘home’. (Albrecht, 2005)
\end{quote}

A growing number of artists have connected with this term and it has been widely used to accompany practices that seek to express lament for the destruction and forced change of the landscape. This is explored in the catalogue essay by Albrecht for the 2012 exhibition \textit{Life in Your Hands; Art From Solastalgia} at the Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery. Albrecht reflects on the relationship between his new...
psychoterratic condition and the motivation of artists in the introductory essay to the catalogue:

Contemporary environmental art portrays the loss of species and ecosystems as something more than loss of biodiversity ... it also depicts the loss of something vital within us ... the negation of the very possibility of deriving happiness from our relationship to the environment. Artists not only sense the alienation that is occurring to human–place relationships, they attempt to depict such relationships in their art. When presented with the conceptual clarification of their inner feelings about Earth relations they are empowered by it. (Daw, R. Ed, 2012)


*Land Dialogues* seeks to focus on something beyond a sense of empowerment observed by Albrecht through the term *solastalgia*. Although a useful concept in defining the human psychological distress associated with living in a changing environment, solastalgia limits such a response to the human realm. This suggests
an overly anthropogenic position regarding climate change, by reducing the great loss of biodiversity and physical change of the land to the negative impact on how humans relate themselves to place and not addressing the realities for other life forms or ecological networks. The motivation of Land Dialogues is to move beyond anthropogenic dialogue grounded in alienation, narcissism and anxiety, heading towards dialogue that is more speculative, inclusive and open. A more fitting term in this goal, also coined by Albrecht, is soliphilia. Albrecht describes soliphilia to mean “The love of and responsibility for a place, bioregion, planet and the unity of interrelated interests within it.” (Albrecht, 2009) Soliphilia is positioned to be the antidote for Solastalgia and may be one of the most appropriate term to describe the overall direction of the Land Dialogues exhibition. Effective as it is, this term is not unique in its goal by any means. There are a number of other concepts that have been equally revealing and influential that share similar hopes and aspirations.

Australian ecofeminist philosopher, Val Plumwood, has been influential in critiquing the enduring divide that locates human beings as the outside nature, then elevating humans to a position of masters over nature and all its domains (Plumwood 2001, 2002). Deborah Bird Rose, friend and colleague of Plumwood, continues this task in a contemporary critique of anthropocentricism and expands Plumwood’s call for a new mode of humanity that includes both human and non-human beings (Rose, Gibson and Fincher, 2015). Eco-critic and philosopher, Timothy Morton, puts forward a number of influential ideas in Ecology Without Nature (2007), The Ecological Thought (2012) and the concept of Dark Ecology (2016).
Morton has proved particularly influential in the curatorial process towards this photographic exhibition due to his attempt to completely remove the concept of nature, which aligns with the goals of Land Dialogues in challenging the photographic traditions of representing nature and landscape. The fundamental objective of Morton is aptly summarized in the title of his book, Ecology without Nature. Morton aims to reveal the concept of Nature as overly holistic, constructed and damaging. The process through which this may be achieved is the Ecological Thought. For Morton, the Ecological Thought is part of a larger ecological project that moves beyond thinking ecology in terms of environment, climate change or human/non-human relationships, rather it involves conceptualizing the world as a series of dynamic, entangled and codependent beings (or objects) (Morton, 2012). For Morton, art is well suited in demonstrating the psychologically challenging aspects of thinking ecologically.
Art can help us, because it's a place in our culture that deals with intensity, shame, abjection, and loss. It also deals with reality and unreality, being and seeming. If ecology is about radical coexistence, then we must challenge our sense of what is real and what is unreal, what counts as existent and what counts as nonexistent. The idea of Nature as a holistic, healthy, real thing avoids this challenge. (2012)

Morton’s argument has evolved from *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) into *Dark Ecology* (2016), which is a way of thinking the ecological thought comfortably in the shade of an already unfolding global catastrophe. *Dark Ecology* embraces that shade, and all things mysterious, unknown, curious and open. These qualities align with the parameters of the post-photographic moment and as such represent further steps towards the emergence of new cultures of stewardship.

*Land Dialogues* seeks to combine a number of contrasting voices in a common space, the work allows for the creation of pathways for dialogues that may have otherwise never existed. My taste as both an artist and a curator has been shaped by these varying strands of thought, which are in the process of being woven together in a form of ecological thinking via photographic praxis. *Land Dialogues* is an exercise of this praxis. It is my hope that this exhibition can contribute to the growing international dialogue by showing photography’s capacity to move beyond anxiety, negativity and fear and towards a pathway that is mindful, personal and positive.

**Bibliography**

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