Title of paper:

Fresh water, salt water: socially engaged art, collaboration and the environment

Authors:

Kim Williams – PhD candidate, School of the Arts, English and Media, University of Wollongong

Dr Lucas Ihlein - Senior Lecturer, School of the Arts, English and Media, University of Wollongong

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Recently I went for a walk along the Ruta de la Costa, a coastal stretch of the Camino de Santiago, from San Sebastian to Bilbao in northern Spain. For over a thousand years pilgrims have been walking this route on a journey of faith, from hamlet to hamlet, from church to church, from drinking fountain to drinking fountain. Today, thousands of faithful and secular citizens walk the Camino on their own journeys of discovery. The Camino is still a right of way, faithfully preserved through countryside, villages and even cities. Ageing drinking fountains are dotted along the route to provide spring water to pilgrims.

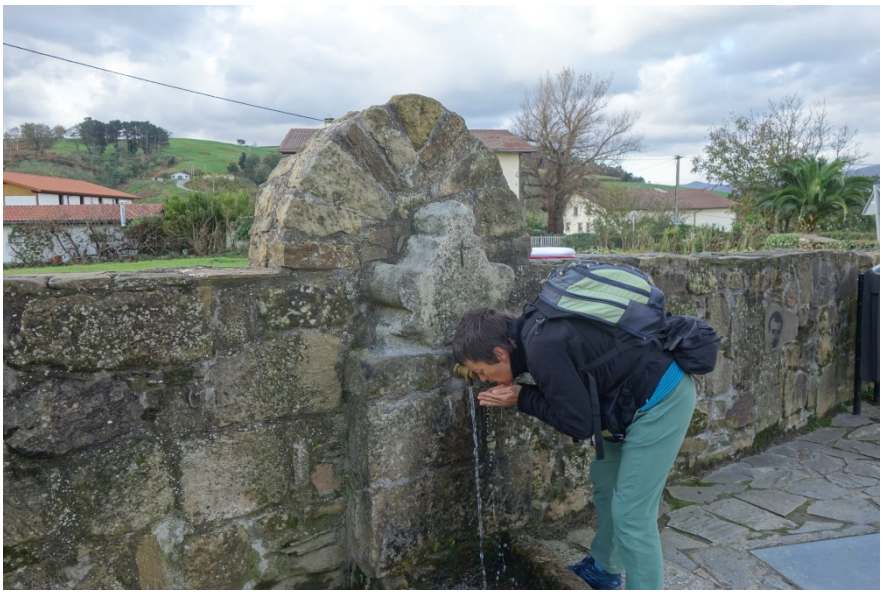

Fig.1: Author drinking from a village fountain on the Ruta de la Costa, northern Spain

As Australians, accustomed to the restrictions of passage imposed by private property, the Camino is a pleasing affirmation of the rights of the walker over the property owner. The ritual offering of water from the drinking fountains sits outside municipal water infrastructures, offering a reminder of earlier and simpler forms of water engineering. Between San Sebastian and Bilbao, the Camino runs through spectacular rural countryside, where the mountains of the Pyrenees plunge into the Bay of Biscay. The deep valleys formed by the mountains funnel water along rivers that flow out to the sea. At many of these river mouths, ancient towns and villages are located for their proximity to the potable water of the river and to the bounty of fish in the bay. Today, no doubt, most water supplies are treated and purified for consumption. Walking the steep terrain from one village to another, farms, forests, and vineyards show people at work in this landscape. I walk in an intimate engagement with the land with an outsider's gaze.

Walking through this place of rivers and sea is a reminder of two places in Australia, located at the nexus of fresh and salt water, in which the authors have a deep physical and social engagement. Through the art projects *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* this paper discusses the ways in which artists use the methods of social engagement and collaboration to promote environmental care for land and water. As artists, we engage with both places through structured aesthetic experiences involving local communities. In doing so, we contribute to the discourse surrounding the methodologies of collaboration and socially engaged art practice.

Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra is a local creek-walking project in Wollongong, a regional city ninety kilometres south of Sydney. Artists Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein and Brogan Bunt invite friends and members of the community to participate in 'noticing' walks. Starting at the sea, we walk upstream along creeks to bring attention to the intersections of human development with suburban waterways and their riparian ecosystems. *Sugar vs the Reef?* is a large-scale cultural/agricultural project. Artists Lucas Ihlein and Kim Williams work closely with sugarcane farmers and community groups in Mackay, Queensland. Through the methods of socially engaged art, we highlight innovations in regenerative agriculture and the environmental benefits of these practices to the Great Barrier Reef. At the same time, we bring together cultures who played a key role in the formation of the sugar cane industry.

Art in a changing climate

The current geological epoch, the 'Anthropocene', describes the recent period of human history in which humans have made a lasting impact on the Earth's systems (Zalasiewicz et al.). While this classification confirms the degree to which human actions influence climate, international governmental commitments to reduce CO_2 emissions are mixed. In Australia, successive Federal Governments invoke the binary of the economy versus the environment to forestall decisive action on climate change. Consider, for example, the current Queensland government's efforts to protect the Great Barrier Reef while simultaneously facilitating Australia's largest coalmine in the Galilee Basin, citing the need to stimulate jobs and growth. Conversely, some decision-makers are slowly accepting the realities of climate change. Judge Brian Preston in the New South Wales Land and Environment Court rejected the proposed Rocky Hill coalmine near the town of Gloucester in New South Wales. He rejected the proposal on two grounds: it would have an impact on the social fabric of the community and 'the construction and operation of the mine, and the transportation and combustion of the coal from the mine, will result in the emission of greenhouse gases, which will contribute to climate change' (Hannam).

In this contested arena, it is not surprising that many artists are participating in grass-roots responses to environmental and social issues. Writer and curator Nato Thompson speaks of 'the inevitable tide of cultural producers who are frustrated with art's impotence and who are eager to make a tangible change in the world' ('Socially Engaged Art' 86). The projects we are involved in are part of a broad movement for cultural change driven by an acceptance of the idea that humans are fundamentally influencing planetary systems and that the impact of human actions is accelerating climate change. In response, many artists are instead developing new alliances across academic and non-academic disciplines to contribute to practices of environmental care. For this reason, we work with the methods of social engagement and collaboration on the premise that these methods may have a broader influence on cultural change than a strictly gallery-based approach to art practice. This paper supports the idea that art can play a significant role, through collaboration with academic and

non-academic disciplines, in finding new ways to both think and act in this time of rapid environmental change.

Socially engaged art

The projects *Sugar vs the Reef?* and *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* (hereafter *WOTI*) sit within the field of contemporary art practice called socially engaged art (SEA). It is a broad set of practices that have evolved through the late twentieth century influences of avant-garde art, early feminist art and education theory, environmental and land art and the Community Arts movement in the 1970s (Helguera ix and Bishop 163). Artist and educator Pablo Helguera defines socially engaged art as 'a hybrid, multi-disciplinary activity that exists somewhere between art and non-art, and its state may be permanently unresolved. SEA depends on actual—not imagined or hypothetical—social action' (8).

Art historian Grant Kester points to the political instability of the early twenty-first century to account for the recent upsurge of art practitioners who are developing 'a set of positive practices directed toward the world beyond the gallery walls, linking new forms of intersubjective experience with social or political activism' (9). Thompson regards SEA as part of a new social order that models 'ways of life that emphasise participation, challenge power, and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theatre and visual arts' (*Living as Form* 19).

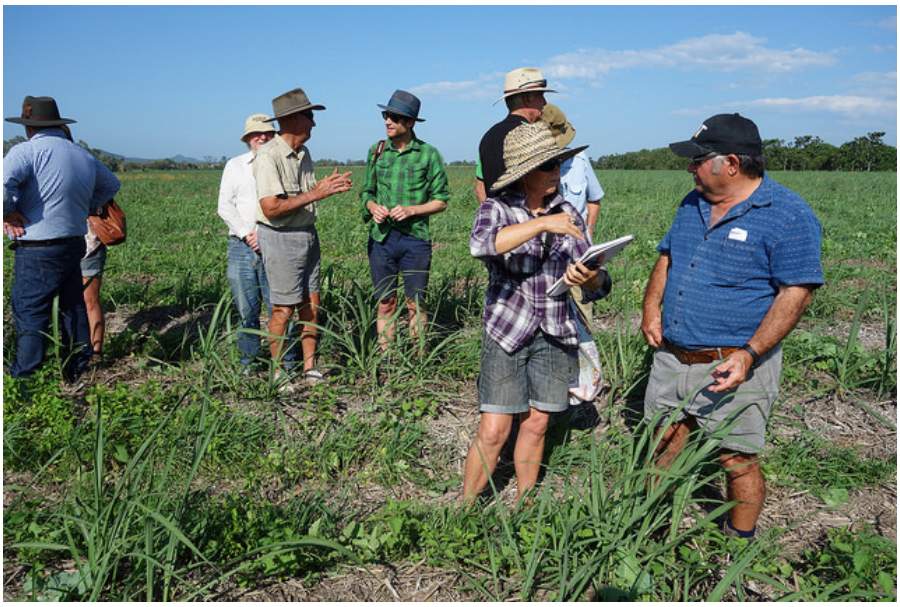

Fig. 2: Central Queensland Soil Health Systems soil health field day – artists talking with farmers, Mackay, Queensland (photo: Laura Fisher)

Socially engaged art aims to bring about cultural change or improve social conditions; it is process-based rather than product-driven. The artwork emerges through the interaction of participants or collaborators. SEA projects are usually durational; the process of engagement over time with communities, places and specific issues is the artwork. Many strategies may be utilised, including those skills associated with traditional art forms. Artefacts often play a role—they are part of the generative processes of socially engaged art. In the field of socially

engaged art meetings, blogs, walks, pamphlets, events, conversations, workshops, performance, visual arts, photography, design, education, videography and skills exchange are just some of the tangible activities that may occur in the course of a durational project. They are the 'stuff' of socially engaged art. While our work is situated in a place and in a community, gallery exhibitions augment those social encounters. We create a permeable membrane between the two spaces to bring audiences and participants into contact with both worlds. The gallery allows us the space for reflection and a means with which to conceptualise some of the issues we are dealing with.

Working collaboratively

Collaboration is a key method in these projects, which straddle academic and non-academic communities in an effort to contribute to both scholarly and public discourses. This paper focuses particularly on our collaboration with non-academic communities who have a deep investment in the social and cultural contexts in which the projects occur.

While both *WOTI* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* operate in specific places and in specific communities, the artists also work within an academic institution and therefore benefit from knowledge connections across academic disciplines. Moving back and forth between the academy and the project sites, this working method can be seen as:

> … an opportunity for the democratisation of knowledge production, bringing the academic scholar's expertise and know-how into productive alliance with that of others to produce mutually beneficial outcomes, and turning it into a thoroughly *social* practice. (Ang and Mar 113)

The strategies we use within the projects are direct responses to in-situ involvement, guided by our accumulated artistic experience and our work in the academy. According to Helguera,

> Artists who wish to work with communities, for whatever reason, can greatly benefit from the knowledge accumulated by various disciplines – such as sociology, education, linguistics and ethnography – to make informed decisions about how to engage and construct meaningful exchanges and experiences. (xiii)

Pioneering environmental artists Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison look at ecological issues through other disciplinary lenses, as engaged observers. This perspective allows them to bring fresh approaches to particular problems:

> As artists, we have an odd advantage. Unimpeded, we dance across the disciplines and practice seeing with the eyes of a stranger. (Centre for the Study of the Force Majeure 2018:5)

By working with and understanding the language and fields of knowledge of other disciplines, both academic and non-academic, I argue that artists can influence environmental discourses by asking new questions and producing new insights. In turn, this feeds into existing discourse around socially engaged art. *WOTI* and *Sugar vs the Reef?* do this in different ways.

Walking upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra

WOTI is a collaborative art project that began as a way of better knowing our local environment. Artists Kim Williams, Lucas Ihlein and Brogan Bunt, with friends and

community members, investigate local creeks through the practice of walking. In this project, we form a community of interest and open up dialogues about our local waterways.

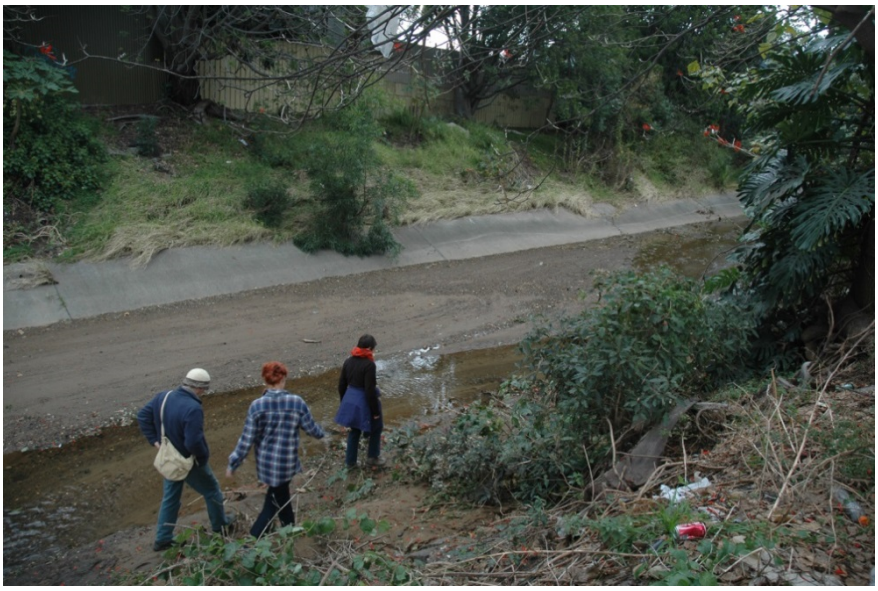

Fig. 3: Walking along Cabbage Tree Creek (photo: Vincent Bicego)

The fifty or more creeks in our region originate in the steep forested escarpment that flanks the developed coastal plain. They flow through suburban housing, industrial tracts, urban centres, and farmland. They are compromised by development, diversion, silting, erosion, weed infestation, property encroachment, rubbish dumping and pollutants. They are in parts built over, diverted, weed-infested, rubbish strewn and largely forgotten. Their value as a precious water resource has been lost—the Illawarra's drinking water comes from three dams, sequestered from human habitation above the escarpment. Through the embodied act of walking and noticing, this project underscores the environmental consequences of human activity: the waterways of the Illawarra are largely undrinkable.

There is a single rule that governs our approach in this project: start at the mouth of a creek and walk upstream. The artwork is both a durational act (walking up creeks) and a creative response to the act of walking up creeks. It is a social activity, walking and talking with collaborators and guests. *WOTI* does not adopt an overt environmental activist position of remediation; we demonstrate interest in all aspects of creeks through the method of 'ground truthing', yet it is a concerned interest. Through creek-walking, we call for a recognition of the importance of these streams and a remediation of our relationship to them, as climate change brings more extreme impacts to the world around us. How does walking along creeks achieve this? Environmental geographer Lesley Instone provides some answers to this:

> Surely we don't have time to dawdle in the face of the urgent politics of global change? But in another sense, walking might be exactly what we need. The slow, engaged and engaging attributes of walking might indeed help to enhance our connectedness with the world in embodied and creative ways. The mode of walking and wayfinding appropriate to the Anthropocene isn't a headlong rush to get somewhere 'better' or the conceit of thinking that we have the answers.

> Rather it's a studied movement of the here and now, a fragmentary, wandering, lively, embodied and relational process. A respectful movement that puts emphasis on sensory, contingent and fragile encounters conjured through making our way, alongside others through time and space. (qtd in Gibson et al. 137)

Like Instone, we suggest that these acts of being in the here and now are useful counterpoints to the spectre of a future shaped by climate change. While it is not focused on a conventional model of land-care, *WOTI* immerses people in the land as 'witnesses', gathering a sense of 'knowing', and by implication, caring, along the way. The project is observational rather than remedial; to this point we have not sought to actively intervene in the environmental issues of waterways. Rather, we have opened up the space to experience our local places through walking, learning and exchange. We re-discover and uncover waterways, truly 'seeing' them for the first time.

Making other knowledges available by inviting Aboriginal elders and specialists such as botanists to host walks offer important ways of looking at and being with a place. These are 'slow' events, reflecting what art historian Grant Kester terms a 'dialogical' approach to art. We gather at the mouth of a creek with friends, colleagues and interested newcomers. We talk and listen as we slowly amble, stopping at obstacles or points of interest, regrouping and usually having lunch somewhere along the creek. A new community forms in the moment of the shared action; a friendly and cheerful atmosphere prevails, and our only intention is to follow, or attempt to follow, the creek until we collectively decide to stop.

Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra has a legacy that reaches back through earlier practices. On the home page of the *WOTI* blog, Lucas Ihlein writes:

> In *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop describes this sort of practice as possessing a 'double finality' or 'double ontology'—i.e. it is work which speaks to an autonomous disciplinary field of art, and to the realpolitik of the world-beyond-the-artworld.

WOTI can be traced back to conceptual practices and to earlier traditions of walking as a conscious political or artistic act, for example the Situationist International movement's 'dérive' walks and the practices of Richard Long, Hamish Fulton and Janet Cardiff, who have paved the way for a multitude of contemporary artists who walk as a cultural practice. Although we define *WOTI* as a local exploration, it is based on a 'score' that could be performed anywhere by anyone. The work connects us to a loose community of people who take an interest in their local waterways. Our participation in the *Fluid States: Performing Mobilities* conference and exhibition in Melbourne (2015) led to a community walk on the Edwards Creek in the northern suburbs of Melbourne and the formation of the nascent *International Creek Walking Network* (ICWAN). This is a conceptual movement: we consider anyone who walks along creeks to be eligible for membership.

WOTI is one of a number of collaborative community projects that highlight the cultural and environmental value of sub/urban waterways, using different methods. Begun in 2008, *L.A. Creek Freak: Towards Healthy Southern Californian Streams, Creeks, Rivers and Neighbourhoods* is a collaboration between Jessica Hall and Joe Linton. Their blog is a public forum for postings on a wide range of material, which focuses on governance of and care for urban waterways. In New York, Marie Lorenz takes passengers to row and drift on the waterways of the New York harbour in a rowboat she built herself. *Tide and Current Taxi*

has been in progress for over ten years. Writer Meredith Davis suggests that this type of exploration ‘converts the mostly commercial spaces of the urban waterways into a social setting, one where gift exchange replaces capitalist exchange’ as well as ‘re-imagining the experience of landscape as a collaborative, multi-sensory activity instead of one that centres around the individual, preferably isolated, viewer’ (33). Like *Tide and Current Taxi, WOTI* is an immersive collaborative activity, which highlights ways in which the contemporary sub/urban landscape is inextricably tied to human histories and practices.

Fig.4: Negotiating a tricky section of Byarong Creek, 2017 (photo: Vincent Bicego)

WOTI takes certain cues from the Situationist International movement (1957-72). The creek walk is a contemporary version of a particular Situationist activity: the dérive, an urban exploration in which small groups of people suspend their everyday routines to literally drift through cities ‘and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there’ (Debord). The geography of landforms and human infrastructure around creeks determine our movements during a *WOTI* walk. There is no fixed end point or intended ‘outcome’. Walking along a creek in the Illawarra inevitably raises questions of land ownership and public rights of way, as it almost invariably involves trespassing. *WOTI* has evolved through the environmental and political questions that emerged from the act of walking and talking. These ideas are invoked by experiencing first-hand the way human settlement co-exists with or displaces the landscape.

The *Twelve Creek Walks* (2017) guidebook was written and illustrated by the artist-collaborators. It plays a dual role as artwork and as an ‘aid’ to walking along specific creeks. Should this guidebook be actively utilised, the user would quickly become aware of the difficulty of faithfully following any creek in this region. Through the guidebook, we highlight land ownership laws in New South Wales, which prevent public right of way through much of what, should be, to our minds, common land. Inevitably, these laws find us ‘trespassing’ along creek banks.

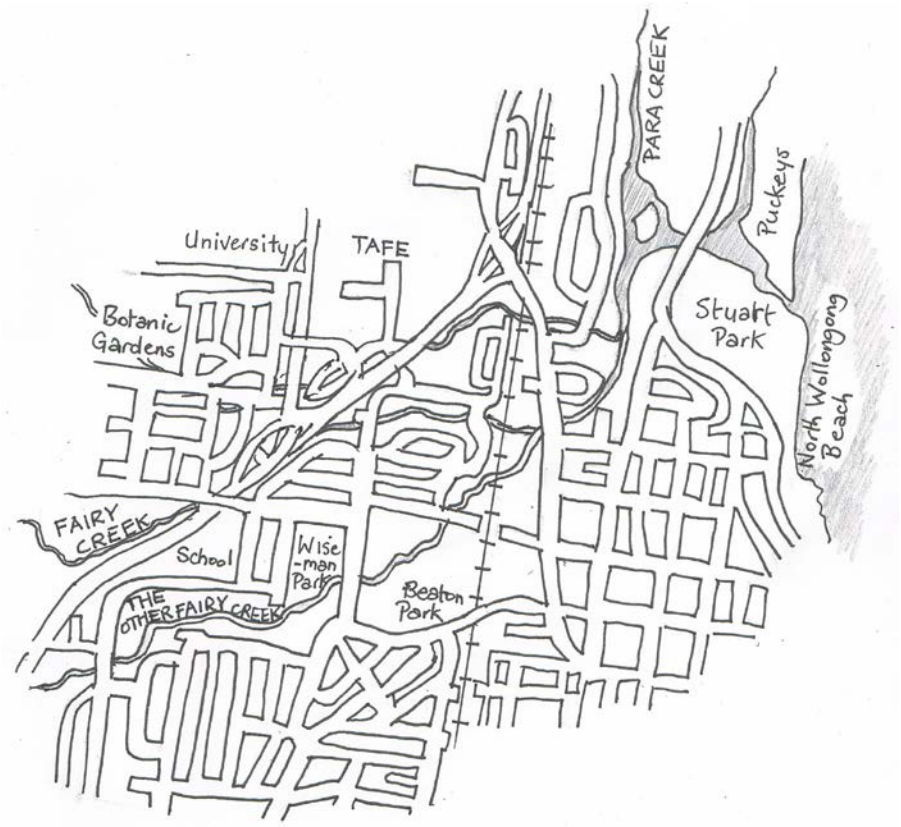

Fig. 5: Hand-drawn map of Fairy Creek, *Twelve Creek Walks'*, WOTI creek walking guidebook, 2017

Walking brings us into contact with the contested edges of public and private ownership, which overlay Indigenous land rights. It is a way of perceiving these boundaries and territories, where the physical edges of land and water forms meet and human histories and practices sit alongside and often in opposition to each other. In the foreword, we say:

> Dividing, fencing and 'owning' land and water - these are constructs which are very new in Australia. Clearly, the dominant property ownership system imported from Europe 230 years ago does not align with the human-land systems developed over many thousands of years by Aboriginal peoples prior to invasion … While we cannot simply do away with the current legal system, that does not mean we have to agree with the idea that it is 'right' for a creek to be privately owned … We believe that creeks belong to everyone, but most of all, creeks belong to themselves. (Williams et al. 6-7)

Artefacts such as *Twelve Creek Walks* have a number of functions: disguised as a utilitarian bushwalking aide, the book doubles as an art object in the gallery and a political manifesto. In this way, *WOTI* delivers a subtle message through an array of literal and metaphoric devices.

Walking into the gallery

While the geographic and social encounters of WOTI creek walks are the 'live' artworks, we also use gallery exhibitions to bring attention to the value of waterways in the landscape. Artefacts created for the gallery do a number of things: some serve as representations and documentations of walking experiences, while some evoke 'place' with video or photographs or found objects. There are macroscopic and microscopic views of the landscape, and 'tools' that humorously engage with the idea of creek walking as an activity that requires 'equipment'. Through these artefacts, we respond to creek walking as a practice, highlighting the physical as well as the cultural and environmental overlays of the complex landscape through which creeks of the Illawarra region flow. They are more than simply records of rule-bound walks; they are meditations on physical encounters with a place.

Fig. 6: Kim Williams, 2017, 'Mullet Creek', video, water, soil, glass beaker, case (photo: Bernie Fischer)

At the same time as bringing the outside world of creeks into the gallery, we have also taken the 'artworld' back outside by inviting gallery audiences to join us on community creek walks. These community walks were followed by 'walkshops' in which walkers returned to the gallery to discuss their experience and to playfully experiment with ways of evoking those experiences. By creating porous boundaries between interior and exterior spaces, we draw avant-garde practice and social engagement together, moving back and forth between forms and methods.

Sugar vs the Reef?

Sugar vs the Reef? is a large-scale, process-based artwork. It is underpinned by close working relationships between artists and farmers in Mackay Queensland. Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein work with farmer-collaborators, sugarcane farmer Simon Mattsson and retired cattle farmer John Sweet to amplify the benefits of regenerative agriculture to the broader community.

John Sweet had heard about *The Yeomans Project* (2011-14), a collaboration between artists Ian Milliss and Lucas Ihlein. Engineer and farmer P.A. Yeomans (1905-84) invented the Keyline method of agriculture. By 'sculpting' the land with contoured channels using his Keyline method of agriculture, Yeomans found a way of effectively drought-proofing farms through a system of natural water retention. Milliss and Ihlein brought Yeomans' agricultural innovations into the sphere of art to highlight farming as a cultural practice, in an exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (*The Yeomans Project*, 2013). Ihlein and Milliss also held a series of public farm tours to showcase Yeomans' systems in situ and to connect people to practices of regenerative agriculture.

John Sweet adopted P.A.Yeomans' Keyline method on his own farm in the 1980s. Sweet invited Ihlein to Queensland in 2014 to discuss his ambitious vision of saving the Great Barrier Reef by implementing the Keyline system on farms along the entire Queensland coast. *Sugar vs the Reef?* was born and Williams became involved in 2016 at the invitation of Ihlein.

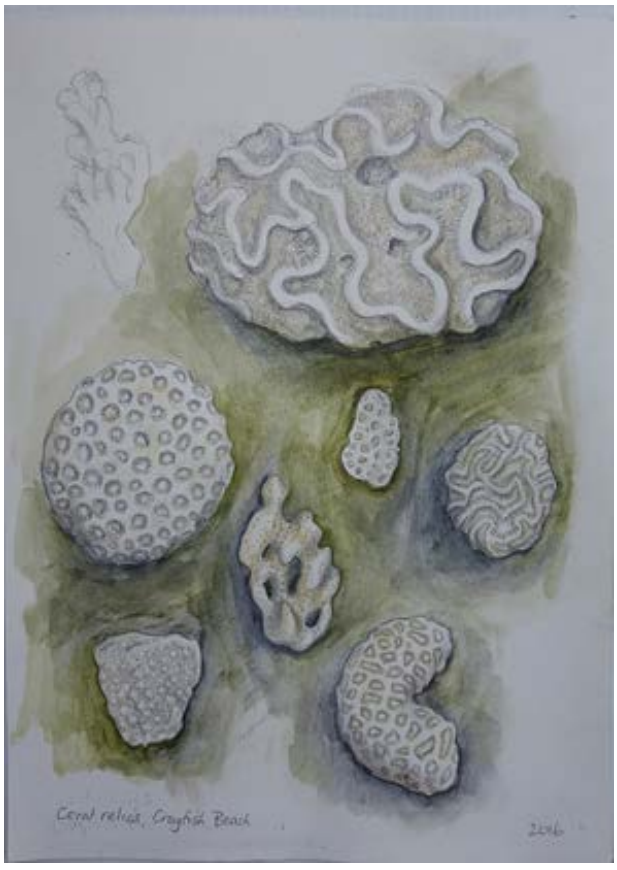

Fig. 7: Kim Williams, 2016, 'Coral relics, Crayfish Beach', watercolour and pencil

Sugar vs the Reef? engages with the complexities of sugar cane farming in the Mackay region in Queensland. While it is the backbone of many coastal communities in Queensland, sugarcane farming has known impacts that are of both national and global concern. The nutritional issues of sugar (over-) consumption, the practices of monocultural industrial cropping and their impact on the Great Barrier Reef give sugarcane farmers a bad reputation. Chemical fertilisers and pesticides, used extensively on sugarcane farms, leach into waterways during rain events and flow into the Coral Sea, exacerbating the conditions for outbreaks of Crown-of-Thorns starfish in the Great Barrier Reef.

We are sympathetic to farmers—the financial predicament of many sugar cane farmers who are locked in a cycle of debt cannot be separated from the high rates of suicide in the farming community. Rather than taking an oppositional stance to sugarcane farming, we are instead working to articulate more nuanced views of agriculture by collaborating with regenerative agriculture practitioners and highlighting the positive environmental benefits of regenerative agriculture.

Simon Mattsson is a farmer dedicated to innovation through regenerative agriculture. Through his own learning experiences, he has recognised that the foundation of sustainable agriculture is healthy soil. Over many decades, soil health and crop yields on most sugar cane farms have declined through overuse of chemical inputs: pesticides and fertilisers rob the soil of its 'biology', the microorganisms necessary to deliver nutrients to plants and maximise water retention. Mattsson's experiments attempt to maximise crop yield as well as working towards more environmentally sensitive practices.

As artists, we work alongside John Sweet and Simon Mattsson, bringing attention to alternative practices that build healthy soil and reduce the need for synthetic fertilisers and pesticides. To highlight Mattsson's and others' work, we involve ourselves in a world of sugar industry officials, politicians, reef scientists, soil scientists, cultural leaders, the Yuwibara traditional owners, the Australian South Sea Islander community, environmental activists, food growing networks and the townspeople of Mackay. We engage in a wide spectrum of activities, staging cultural events, meeting with reef scientists and policy makers, touring farms, liaising with local organisations, lobbying politicians.

In the interests of dialogical exchange, we often suspend our own political positions and opinions in order to facilitate conversations and create opportunities. Open dialogue often gives us a way 'in' to deeper conversations and fruitful collaborations. We listen more than we talk, as we attempt to 'learn' the industry and its associated issues. As 'outsiders' who do not live in this place, we act as brokers and negotiators in meetings and encounters. Many tensions are at play: jobs and livelihoods, such as farming and coal mining, are often set in opposition to environmental care. Our task is to work within those tensions to find ways of creating nuanced dialogues. In her discussion of this project and its forerunner, sociologist Laura Fisher writes:

> While *The Yeomans Project* and *Sugar vs. the Reef?* are strongly motivated by a concern with environmental problems, the terrain in which they stage their practice is social. Most of us won't risk engaging with the social and political frictions that are at play in this terrain, because we feel vulnerable to aggression, exclusion and embarrassment. For the artists however, the shared experience of such interpersonal risks is potentially very productive. (112)

At this point of tension, we work with natural resource management organisations such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority and Reef Catchments to bridge the gap between land-based practices and healthy marine ecosystems. As such, they have become important allies. Our work attempts to demonstrate the economic and environmental benefits of agricultural practices that rely less on chemical inputs and more on understanding the workings of complex natural systems. In the long term, regenerative agriculture practices have the potential to be of greater economic benefit and therefore of social benefit to farmers.

Bridging cultures

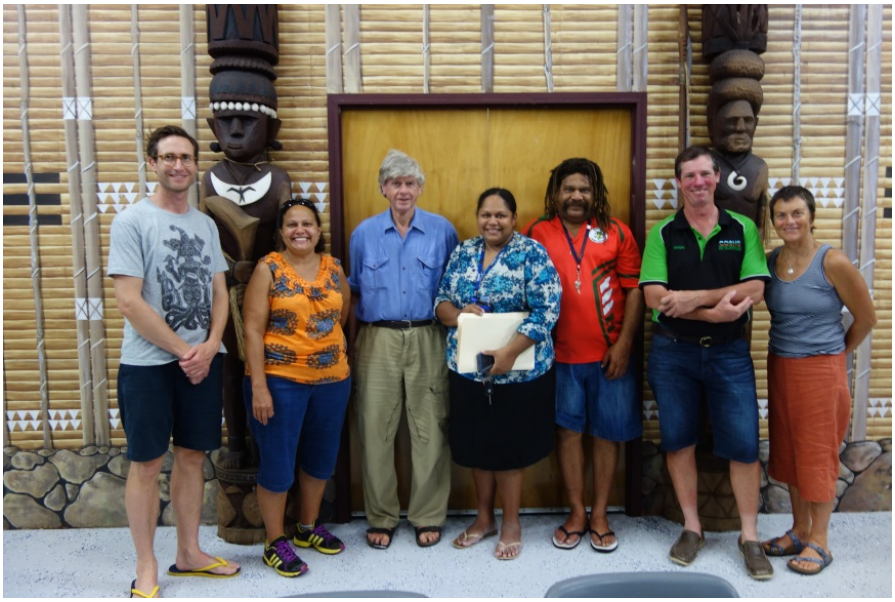

Fig. 8: Artists and farmers meet with members of the
Mackay and District South Sea Islander Association in 2017 (unknown photographer)

Connecting with and working with the local Yuwibara Aboriginal and Australian South Sea Islander communities acknowledges the prominent place of these communities in the region. During the 1860s, the sugar industry was established up and down the Queensland coast. Aboriginal inhabitants were marginalised and displaced, while South Sea Islanders were forcibly removed from their homelands, in the notorious practice of 'blackbirding' (Affeldt 506),and shipped to Australia to work in slave-like conditions in the canefields. Today a significant population of Aboriginal and Australian South Sea Islanders reside in Mackay—very few are involved in the contemporary sugar industry. We bring these communities together with farmers to take regenerative agriculture forward by acknowledging the cultural histories of sugarcane farming. To do so, we collaborate with farmers, Yuwibara custodians and Australian South Sea Islanders in our planning, decision-making and day-to-day processes.

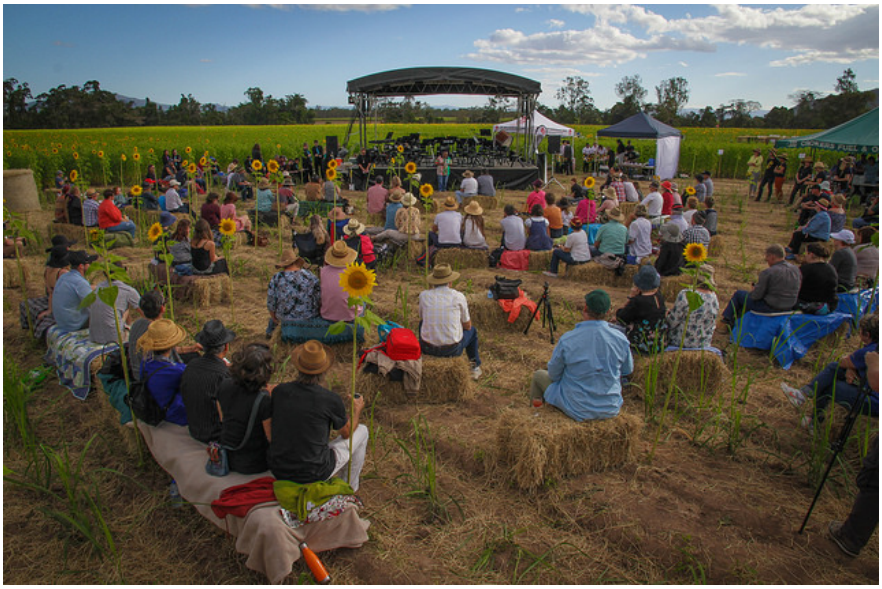

Fig. 9: *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers'*, July 2017 (photo: Cherrie Hughes)

In July 2017, we staged an event in a multispecies crop of sunflowers and sugarcane on Simon Mattsson's farm. We designed and carved a circular amphitheatre within the crop to create a performance space. *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers* brought a diverse group of people from the broader Mackay community together to enjoy a cultural event, placing them in close proximity to the issues that we are exploring. We served local produce, designed and built composting toilets to feed the soil and were entertained by local performers. The beauty of the sunflowers, the performances of guest artists, the fine food and drink were all lures to a broader objective—bringing regenerative agriculture into public view, acknowledging the Yuwibara people and celebrating the key role of South Sea Islanders in the formation of the sugar industry. This large event was made possible through the connections and participation of local community networks.

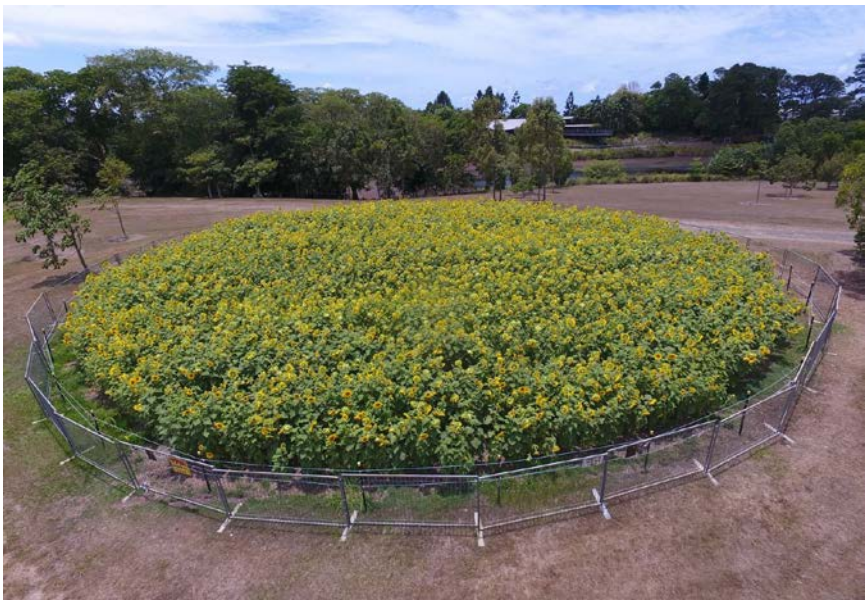

Fig. 10: 'The Beacon', a dual crop of sunflowers and sugarcane, Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project, Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens (photo: Willem Reichard)

Building on the public success of *Sunset Symphony in the Sunflowers*, which gave audiences direct contact with a working farm, the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project* (2017-19) was situated in the prominent public site of the Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens. Working with our farmer collaborators and the Aboriginal and South Sea Islander communities, we grew a multispecies crop of sugar cane and sunflowers as a work of agricultural land art. We considered the crop to be a living artwork, with careful consideration given to the sculptural forms of the crops and the shaping of the land. Over a period of eighteen months, a series of community planting and harvesting events allowed the Mackay community to participate directly in regenerative agriculture processes. From beginning to end, no synthetic chemicals were applied; soil and rainfall run-off testing demonstrated the capacity of regenerative agriculture to produce not only viable crops but also to improve soil health. In the process of cultivation, planting and harvesting the work became the site of cultural and educational events. Both the Australian South Sea Islander and the Yuwibara traditional owners worked closely with us in the *Watershed: Botanic Gardens Land Art Project*, as custodians, collaborators, performers and educators.

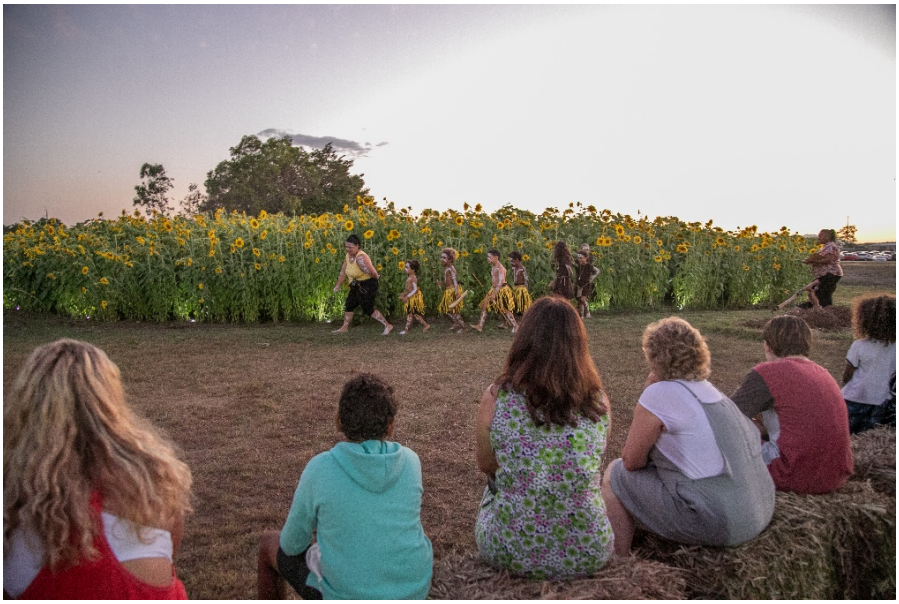

Fig. 11: The Diranga Gangali Aboriginal Dancers begin their twilight performance at the 'Sunflower and Song' harvest event, Mackay Regional Botanic Gardens, November 2018 (photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Role models

Sugar vs the Reef? owes a debt to Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison. Since the 1970s they have collaborated on international environmental projects, working across a broad range of disciplines in order to respond to large scale environmental problems. They do this through mapping, dialogue with people and groups, research, data visualisation and documentation.

> Our work begins when we perceive an anomaly in the environment that is the result of opposing beliefs or contradictory metaphors. Moments when reality no longer appears seamless and the cost of belief has become

> outrageous offer the opportunity to create new spaces—first in the mind and thereafter in everyday life.

The Harrisons' work is consciously ecological – they consider the environment to be their primary client. They work by invitation; their works lasts as long as they are welcome and until they have reached the limit of their capacity to contribute.

In 1989, an ecologist from the Berlin Botanic Gardens invited them to help protect a nature reserve on the Sava River in the former Yugoslavia. Flanked by industry and farmland, the Sava River suffered from chemical and industrial agriculture runoff. Working with industry, ecologists and local activists, they proposed a plan to remediate the nature corridor between the Sava and Drava Rivers to help purify the waterways. The Croatian water department ultimately accepted their proposal and the result was a considerably purer water supply for both rivers, which flushed the Danube estuary to the Black Sea.

The Harrisons coined the term *conversational drift* to describe the effect of storytelling through diagrams and maps in their negotiations with officials:

> When we get up and tell stories to the Croatian Water Department, the storytelling is what causes the conversational drift. After we've told our stories, those government officials see our images differently. The conversation drifts and the idea of purifying the whole river system seems more real and less difficult. (Harrison 39)

The Harrisons offer an exemplary model for our own work. They combine an ethical approach to social engagement and an understanding that collaborating with other fields of expertise expands the possibilities and reach of any given project. They straddle disciplinary worlds, using the poetics of their art practice to think about ecological issues, while also using the artefacts generated by the conceptual framing of their projects for exhibition.

Taking our cues from the Harrisons' methods, we have used various methods to stimulate dialogue around agricultural practices and environmental benefit. Participatory planting and harvesting events, schools' education programs and political advocacy brought regenerative agriculture into the public realm in Mackay. Working collaboratively with natural resource managers such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, we built a public profile for regenerative agriculture.

Through a major exhibition at Artspace Regional Gallery in Mackay, we brought some of the ideas and experiences from our work 'in the field' into the gallery. In the following image, we are speaking at the opening of the exhibition in October 2018. This 'artists talk' became a conversation in which the works in the exhibition triggered discussions about soil health and regenerative agriculture in the context of the sugar industry. This was helped along by the presence of our main farmer collaborators, Simon Mattsson and John Sweet. It was a 'hybrid' presentation: on one hand, we invited the works to be looked at through an aesthetic lens, while on the other, we 'drifted' from the hermetics of the artworld to the external world from which these images were derived: agriculture and its interactions with land and sea. Over its course, the exhibition drew in farmers, politicians and natural resource managers: people who don't often visit galleries.

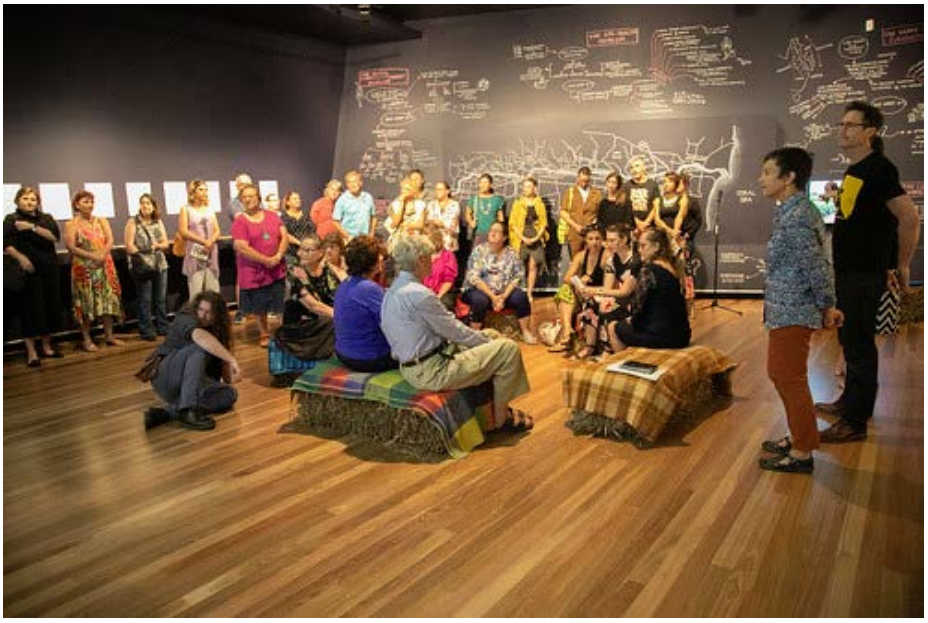

Fig. 12: Kim Williams and Lucas Ihlein, artists' talk at the *Sugar vs the Reef?* exhibition, October 2018, Artspace Mackay (photo: Cherrie Hughes)

Our farmer colleagues continue to promote regenerative agriculture and seek to influence agricultural practices more widely. An overall reduction in the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides would mean reduced nitrate and phosphate runoff to the Coral Sea. In turn, improved water quality in the Great Barrier Reef would improve coral resilience. How is this all making a difference to climate change, which is the major cause of coral bleaching? Soil health is the underlying aim of regenerative agriculture. Healthy soil effectively sequesters carbon: taken to its logical conclusion, the broad scale adoption of regenerative agricultural practices could significantly reduce global carbon emissions (Toensmeier).

Conclusion

In this paper we have examined ways in which artists collaborate with local communities and other skill areas to create artworks that aim to improve environmental practices and communicate to the wider world about better environmental care.

The two projects discussed engage with local people in the context of global transformations. While each of the projects is specific to local ecosystems, they reflect planetary concerns. *Walking Upstream: Waterways of the Illawarra* is a gentle, non-interventionist project in which the conceptual act of walking brings a focus to human relationships to water, offering up these relationships for public consideration. *Sugar vs the Reef?* is a robustly 'hands-on' project of public engagement, negotiation and advocacy.

As artists working in collaboration with other disciplines and local communities we shine a light on specific issues in each place, enter into discussion with people, and with them explore ways of responding to those issues. There are no easy solutions; the pace of change is slow and incremental; personal and political tensions, competing interests and practical barriers are as much a part of engagement as co-operation, generosity and creative exchange.

To work in this field means to take up the challenge of considering the value of the art work to be contained in the methods of working themselves as much as the outcomes. We are

engaging in the mediation between socially engaged process and art product. In the words of scholars Anne Douglas and Chris Fremantle we, like the Harrisons, are negotiating a new positioning for the arts in public life, of being artists in a profoundly relational way, working on issues that challenge the way the world is thought and acted upon.

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