

Luck is an accident waiting to happen.

An Essay by Mike Stubbs.

As I type these words, I imagine how they will be read and interpreted. You the reader are somewhere and sometime else. They are written on a train between Liverpool and Lincoln, two and half hours, coast to coast, this is an electronic journal. I have the technological tools of wireless and computer and camera to remain in contact with the remotest parts of the world. As Marc Auge puts it,

*“The individual can thus live rather oddly in an intellectual, musical or visual environment that is wholly independent of his physical surroundings”*.

If I had taken my motorbike it might have seemed a little faster and the sensation of passing through the atmosphere more exhilarating. However, I wouldn’t have been able to write down these thoughts. If I had taken a train traversing Australia, Sydney – Perth, beach to beach, it would take about three days, mostly across desert, the red centre, and more time to write, more words or perhaps better chosen.

I never made that journey, or the tourist pilgrimage to Uluru, still known by most of us Poms as Ayres Rock. Shaun Gladwell and Vernon Ah Kee are not Poms and they may have been there. I don’t know. I think Shaun likes motorbikes, I’m guessing they both like surfing. I am assuming that they both are interested making popular iconography from Australian contemporary culture their own, a reclamation, re-processing and experiments in the landscape.

We are conjoined in reading this through text, interpreting its meaning in shared space. The dream of collective living might be with most of us soon, re-defining our concepts of time and embodiment. Distance learning we can access a ‘globalised’ version the world. Yet mostly in this transitionary period we enjoy a living hell overload of digital communications. Even if we know something about somewhere else, our ability to affect change is limited; mostly we are simply confused with social media ‘attentiveness’.

Earlier this morning walking in the park I heard two birds tweeting - perhaps mating calls. I was disappointed to find my smartphone could discover no app to identify this birdsong nor bird. I suspected it a Blackbird, a great tune and clear, reminding me of the distinctive sound of Bellbirds (which adventurer, Captain Cook wrote of its song "it seemed to be like small bells most exquisitely tuned”. I re-call hearing them in Merri Creek, Melbourne, near where I lived. Have people heard Bellbirds the same way for centuries? Did the Koori occupants of the land, the Wurundjeri-willam tribe gain the same pleasure in hearing these sounds as they ‘camped’ in the same place where picnic-tables now stand? Around 1837 they were encouraged to be less nomadic and ‘settle’ by the by the bend of the Yarra by the English formed Aboriginal Protection Society, this experiment failed as the community contracted disease, fought with the immigrant settlers and then moved on within ten years. Melbourne city sprawled and grew to become ‘the most liveable city’ in 2007.

If the success of the city was implicit in the success of industrial revolution, so was motorised transport and cinema. Not only accelerating production and communication but also shrinking perceptions of space. Re-imagining time and place through distributed representation and story: precursors to current electronic connectivity and our age of the Internet. Yet time travel and its representations are relative. In the future will we look back at our current real-time connectedness and realise it as slow as travelling the Atlantic on an ocean liner?

As a self-declared and conflicted petrol head, I fully identify with much of Australian culture and the desire to race headlong into the next space and as an ex resident I miss many of the clichés of what makes it great: gum trees, wildlife, beer, barbeques, beach and ….the Ute. Our own addiction to a culture of burning carbon fuel to little practical end, mobility and speed, features in much imagery in western cinema: *Man with a Movie Camera, Vanishing Point, Brewster McCloud, Fast and Furious.* Motorised journeys across sweeping horizons and infinite landscapes are even more recurrent in Australian cinematic iconography: *Priscilla of the Desert* a subversive transgressive jaunt and the Mad Max trilogy form loved and popular icons confirming modern white Australian identity and the fetishisation of car racing, fuel and survivalism in relation to landscape. *Picnic on Hanging Rock* and *Walkabout* are significant in communicating new concepts of time and space though the perspective of the fearful settler attempting to make sense of a new relationship to a vast landscape, which has become a new home, with new people.

Shaun Gladwell’s *Interceptor Surf Sequence* is documentation of a performance action which might be deemed both an attempt to graft imagery of surfing and car culture quite literally, both symbolic stunt and dance, the work is suggestive of chariot racing and a need to dominate the environment. Surfing the desert on the roof of his DIY Mad Max, Interceptor, laden with what seems like enough fuel for eternity and driving towards the horizon (Vanishing Point). The work not only is an image but a distillation of an act proving adventure, skill and risk, strongly relating to Gladwell’s earlier work, as a skater and exponent of simple movement in space (i.e. parcours) as artform of its own.

Incidental movement and the pleasure in observation can traverse cultural formation, language and values. In its organised form sport often loses its basic sense of play, yet enough remains of those values to make sport useful to breaking down international barriers and allows us to speak across political contexts. Surfing is a lifestyle choice but also forms an organised sport industry (Red Bull endorsed) with an international competition. Unsurprisingly its modern iteration rarely references its Polynesian or Hawain roots ‘discovered’ by Captain Cook in the late 18th century.

As a crap surfer but someone who enjoys the surf, I had the misfortune to witness institutional racism on Bondi Beach one Australia Day. This took place not long after the Cronella riots in 2006 interviewed by a Channel 10 news crew trying to stir up hatred for the “Lebbos” (Lebanese traditional owners of the that part of Bondi beach). Pissed hoons both trashed and trashing the beach (customised Utes in the car park), sun bronzed surfers in the background, foreground broken beer bottles and furling Ozzie (predominantly British) flags in the breeze. Living the dream at others expense, we are all the original owners of the land, across time, at some point or other.

It was enough to make you want to shoot ….a surfboard…or make art like Vernon Ah Kee, and I wasn't from around there! Despite the jibe and parody of idiot white culture, the aesthetic and material presence of *Cantchant* does bind our experience of play, water, pleasure, submersion and drowning. Vernon's re-appropriated surf boards mash up stereotypes and slogans of white culture with imagery from Vernon’s own family. The board is a canvas. Overtones of *Strange Fruit*, made famous by Billie Holiday and reminiscent of Derek Krekler’s series of photographs *White Goods,* offset any glib parody, references abound to physical abuse and incarceration. Many of the motifs re-appropriated also strongly reference current approaches to privatisation, land use and the annexing of new immigrants or refugees today. This condition cannot be separated from the formation the Nation of modern Australia nor the British penal colonial system.

This is part of Australian history of some 213 years, a shallow overlay across an early culture possibly 40,000 years old. And now we as battle to make sense of distributed self and the concept of no-place (Auge), this suggests a new condition. From the inner space of our subjective consciousness to the understanding of ourselves as international citizens on a global scale, micro to macro, landscapes are considered and revaluated; space is reconfigured into new and challenging architectures. It is within the shared experience of these structures that we re-tell dominant narratives and create information. Space is a socially constructed framework that through the capabilities of successive new technologies can be built and re-built to our own will.

Contesting and provoking new understandings of existing spaces is a responsibility and here we see two artists re-configuring their own positions in that landscape, highlighting the complex condition of Australian identity.

Go on, live the dream in the lucky country.

**Mike Stubbs**

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