

Puppetry as a healing art: a view through the lens of practice

Ian Cuming



Fig (i) *The tree of trees*. Photo by author 2017.

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University of Melbourne

Committee chair:

Prof Jon Cattapan

Supervisors:

Dr Kim Dunphy

Prof Barbara Bolt

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Declaration page

This thesis comprises:

- i only my own original work towards the degree of Master of Fine Arts by Research.
- ii fewer than the maximum number of 25,000 words, exclusive of front matter, figure captions and references.
- iii a creative work in the form of a 15 minute video by the same title as this dissertation, being 50% of the total project output (Cuming, 2018a).

signed by the author

A handwritten signature in brown ink, consisting of a stylized 'K' followed by a large, sweeping flourish that ends in a hook.

Acknowledgement of country

I wish to acknowledge and pay respect to the custodians of the land in which I live and work and upon which my forebears have lived and worked for four generations, in particular the people of the Kulin and Wiradjuri nations and their Elders past and present and generally to the First Nations People of Australia and the Torres Strait Islands as a whole, to their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this country.

Abstract

This artistic practice-as-research has two presentational components: a fifteen minute video titled “Puppetry as a healing art: a view through the lens of practice” (the video <https://vimeo.com/274432050>) and a dissertation by the same title. Viewing the video first engages the practice: the practice is the lens that focuses the research. The video as *praxis*—the nexus of theory and practice—introduces the author’s puppetry practice. Two other non-presentational praxes—t’ai chi and puppetry—have also been integral to the process of this research, relieving and informing the production of both the writing and the video.

Using these four praxes I have investigated four decades of my puppetry practice in the following way: Firstly, the video enabled me to engage memory and archive in a multi-modal way. Drawing from video essay as an inquiry method, the video inquires into the constructive, performative and relational aspects of my puppetry practice. Through the video I reveal some of the experiential and phenomenological dimensions of my puppetry praxis, in particular the *attentional* and *intentional* processes that generate form, drive content and bring people together, a process I refer to as *cathexis*. Secondly, T’ai chi as a method relieved the mind and the body of the memory-laden, screen-focussed inquiry and balanced the yin of the video with the yang of the writing as iteration and re-iteration informed edit and re-edit. Writing as an inquiry method relies on the auto-ethnographic layered account for the life-cycle structure of the writing—egg , caterpillar, cocoon, butterfly, egg— and weaves four epistemological strands—healing, puppetry, ecology and culture—and four methodological approaches— video, t’ai chi, writing and puppetry—through a series of puppet case studies. These exemplify aspects of practice: *Punch and Judy*, *The Sugar Ant*, *Socrates*, *Seagrass*, *Birds*, *Weedy Seadragon* and *Anguila Australis*. Finally, Puppetry as an inquiry method played a cameo role when a newspaper puppetry workshop with my post-graduate research

cohort momentarily cocooned and transformed the praxical focus of the inquiry. This relatively minor engagement revealed puppetry as construction and performance in a circle.

The epistemology commences with healing and leads towards puppetry because without an understanding of healing my praxis makes little sense. Ecology and culture then build on the foundation of puppetry as healing. Axiologically this privileges healing, focusses puppetry and places culture within an ecological frame. The value of this research may be found in the way it models how we attend to ideas, objects and people, how we encourage, how we honour and how we engage. This research finds that the principle of *liveliness* may serve as an ethical direction finder for the creative process, optimising personal efficacy at each stage in the creative cycle. In this *holistic* way—from conception and dreaming, through to construction, performance, exhibition and evaluation—puppetry playfully engages us in a meaningful experience of personal, cultural and ecological healing.

Keywords: Puppetry; Creative arts; Culture; Ecology; Holistic; Healing; First Nations; Liveliness.

Dedication

This Masters of Fine Arts research project is dedicated to the memory of my father, industrial scientist and environmental activist Dr Brian David Cuming OAM, who dedicated his life to nurturing conscience in his family and community, and to articulating the case for the conservation of the Mornington Peninsula and Westernport Bay.



Fig (ii) *Dr Brian David Cuming OAM*
10. 1. 1928 - 23. 5. 2017

Acknowledgements

Family, friends and community have supported and enabled the creative risk undertaken at each stage of my development, in particular my parents Nanette Cuming OAM and Dr Brian Cuming OAM who have always backed me. Mum's community work and her passion for Australian native plants and Dad's political activism for the conservation of local and global ecology have strongly influenced me. Various others including my siblings, Richard, Pip and Rohan, my cousin Robin, my daughter Mayra and her mum Lynne have always encouraged me to do well and be well. Vanessa Roche has collaborated in breaking new ground for all the right reasons. Graeme Perkins has walked the walk and maintained the faith mindfully. Robyn McCreery has partnered me on beach walks with dogs, videoing my t'ai chi practice and listening endlessly to the whole loopy story.

Psychodrama therapist and author Bernadette Hoey keeps an eye on my progress still, offering insight and wisdom. Musician and music therapist Greg Stebbing with whom I co-created the Seagrass Project always shows an interest. Dance and movement therapist Dr Heather Hill has valued and encouraged my puppetry in various contexts, embracing and endorsing the direct therapeutic potential it promises. The graduate research cohort and staff of the former Centre for Cultural Partnerships at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) have resourced and guided me in re-engaging the academy after a long time in *the field*. Special appreciation is due to my supervisory committee: Jon Cattapan, Kim Dunphy and Barb Bolt without whom I would have fallen through the cracks.

My gratitude pours out to all of these people and to the many friends, audience members, workshop participants and community volunteers whose participation in over four decades of performances, workshops and cultural programs have motivated, animated and informed my life, my art and my practice.

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Egg

The sun is warm. He takes to the air. His flight is buoyant. His attention is riveted on her as they both rise towards union. Their bodies come together. Their wings work hard to maintain elevation as they convulse and fall. Finding ground and grass, they roll and separate. She stands for a moment in a quiet shudder of recognition that something has changed, a transformation from emptiness to fullness, from stillness to movement. Inside her an awareness of new life already pulsing as she flies upwards in a dream. She loves to fly. She flaps and glides. She's looking for a tree, a branch, a leaf. A place to lay her eggs.

* * *

Conception

Human movement begins as the first cell divides at conception, life's first most mysterious transformation. Body, soul and sentience commence biologically, spiritually and relationally in that moment as we start dancing the dance that makes us who we are and who we may become. This incredible event occurs within the context of the choices and circumstance of mother and father, of culture and ecology on Earth, companioned by sun and moon, sweetly nestled in a universe of mystery.

The exponential cell production that follows creates the body along with symphonically orchestrated brainstem arousal systems, emotionally charged chemical exchanges between receptors and ligands responding to our multi-modal sensory interactions with the outside world. All of this from the moment of *sperm-bites-egg* constitutes movement towards a life of creative collaboration and cultural engagement. The journey to establish identity through relationship to parents and grandparents, siblings and cousins, friends and lovers, teachers, mentors and colleagues over a lifetime is empirically an emotional one.

Family and community is the ground within which the seed of relational being sets its roots. Having grown from that seed my work as an artist is central to who I am and how I relate to the world. My work is at one with my life and vice versa.



Fig (iii) *The movement of conception*. Life drawing by author 1994.

...
*Over
& over
I dream
As a child
I am at home
In the back yard
Of my childhood home
A Cloud of swirling colour
Rolls up behind the house to fill the sky*
*My family all run to safety
And I would join them
But I am only able
To move slowly
Too slowly
So slow
I will
Die*
...

In 1977 I leapt wholeheartedly into a career in puppetry, working with a series of significant mentors and generally conducting my business in the field as a practitioner, learning my craft from other practitioners. I felt proud of being a part of such a rich tradition. Gradually, as life and art inspired my development, I found that what is called tradition is constantly being re-created in the hands of practitioners such as myself. As I innovated and tested new puppetry forms, my work on the planet found personally meaningful form (Cuming, 1999a; 1999b).

I trained in acting and community theatre at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) to broaden my horizons. Learning about Commedia dell'arte, Basel mask, Neutral mask and clowning gave me a valuable perspective on puppetry as a form. Learning about body-focused movement systems including acrobatics, T'ai chi, Yoga, Zen, Laban and Feldenkrais not only kept me grounded as an artist, it enabled me to link these forms. I became intrigued

with an attentional continuum from the body focus of acting, through projection via the mask to the out-of-body experience of puppetry—from the body to the object.

One of the beautiful paradoxes of puppetry is that to work is to play. The sincere student of puppetry must learn this most basic principle first. It is a way of going about things. It is a process of releasing what is known in order to embrace a greater mystery. Mastery of this principle unlocks performance, construction and the dreaming process. Ultimately it may all be dreaming from the moment of conception.



Fig (iv) *Focussing Intention—from the Body to the Object*. Video screenshots by author 2017 include artwork ‘Men at Camp’ by Barney Daniels and photo of Cheng Man Ching.

Video Praxis

Because art-making has been central to my life since early childhood, my work as a researcher is inevitably *artistic*. The principal creative artefact of this research is a short video (referred to in this dissertation as *the Video*) titled: *Puppetry as a healing art: a view through the lens of practice* (Cuming, 2018a). Representing puppetry as a constructive, performative and relational art form, the Video reveals experiential and phenomenological aspects of practice, in particular the attentional and intentional processes that generate form, drive content and bring people together.

Broadly speaking, my inquiry method is artistic practice-as-research or practice-led research. Video is the creative *praxis*—the nexus of theory and practice—that leads the research. T'ai chi, writing and puppetry are complementary praxes. Teacher and researcher Brad Haseman says “The ‘practice’ in ‘practice-led research’ is primary – it is not an optional extra; it is the necessary pre-condition of engagement in performative research.” (Haseman, 2006, p. 103). Nelson citing Haseman proffers that: “artistic praxis is ‘performative’ in that it impacts upon us, does something to us, changes us in all manner of ways (aesthetically, perceptually, ethically, emotionally, even physically)” (Nelson, 2013, p. 56). As we will see in the case study of *Socrates* this impact may be considerable. Dean and Smith also citing Haseman state that “[i]n performative research ‘practice is the principal research activity’ (Haseman 2006: 103) where both the artwork itself and the surrounding practices are research” (Dean & Smith, 2009, p. 6).

Barret and Bolt (2007) introduce artistic research as a new species of research and Nelson (2013) again citing Haseman says that “artistic- researchers do not merely ‘think’ their way through or out of a problem, but rather they ‘practice’ to a resolution” (p.10-11). Artistic researchers Elizabeth Grierson and Laura Brearley propose a model for “undertaking creative research from a hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition in which being in the world comes before knowing the world and in which knowledge production is framed as a process of materialisation” within which “[o]penness to the flow of ideas and associations while remaining alert and receptive is a characteristic of the reflective practice of artist as researcher” (Grierson & Brearly, 2009, p. 11). Heron and Reason (1997) outline four ways of knowing—practical, experiential, presentational and propositional—in their participatory inquiry paradigm. They propose that “practical knowledge is in an important sense primary (Heron, 1996)” explaining that it “fulfils the three prior forms of knowing” (p. 281).

As a teenager I took black and white photographs on a Kodak *instamatic*, developing and printing them myself in an adhoc bathroom dark room. As a young adult, I explored super 8 film, 3D stop motion, 2D animation and digital video. Each of these modalities has informed the intellectual, constructive and performative approach I have taken to puppetry and ultimately to this research. Within my video praxis a deeply felt intuitive response to memory and archive aligned images, music and words, intoned colour and sound and regulated speed and opacity. The resultant Video expresses the detail and reveals the texture, the ambience and the purpose of my puppetry work (Cuming, 2018a).

In attempting to express the experience of my work I felt that video would better convey its multiple dimensions than writing alone. Puppetry as a visual art form demands to be seen. Video is perfect for allowing the inclusion of archival video, photos, written text, spoken word and music and thereby my praxis as a whole. Like puppetry, video is a *performance* medium that perpetuates the ephemeral.

The Video in both content and structure exemplifies significant elements of practice tracing their diverse lineages. Starting with family, this tracing-of-origin unfolds as visual tributes to a series of mentors, puppets and projects from early on in my career. The section on Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater features footage of Elka Schumann's museum tour and of the *Sourdough Philosophy Circus and Pageant*. It is followed by images of the work of Welfare State International, a UK-based company whose co-founder John Fox was influenced by Schumann. I met each of them in Australia as I got started in puppetry. Their large-scale outdoor political theatre inspired me.

Predominantly, the Video represents my puppetry practice directly and constitutes a continuum of its form in various ways. Firstly, my preferred approach to making a puppet is to assemble material and then to play. In a similar way the archival materials are the stuff

with which I play. The shape and texture, the weight, the momentum and the feeling of the archival materials all inform the Video. The resultant construct is a timeline—as distinct from a three-dimensional image—however the process of playing is similar. Responding to the images within the archive I juxtapose and assemble them according to an inner felt-sense of what *works*. Secondly, improvisation has always been my preferred performance form so rather than following a script I am following an organic flow. This approach to making the Video is akin to that taken by Ritchard (2016, p. 238) who articulates his intention as “[n]ot to narrate, or even describe the river, but to use film to find a nonfiction form that acknowledges the river, writes the river”. Assembling thematically aligned images from the archive enabled the production of experiential islands of footage. Progressive iterations amplified and then reduced these islands to clarify distinct practice forms.

The impetus to document my work in puppetry would usually arise as a project unfolded. As preparations indicated that a significant event was about to occur I would make arrangements to record the event. These acts of documenting were intrinsically attached to worlds of emergent meaning and threads of connection to circumstance and experience. These meanings and connections inevitably culminated as the camera was picked up, the lens was directed and the record button was pressed.

Stern (2004) reminds us that memory is always anchored in the present, suggesting that: “present moments are holistic happenings” and that “[t]he present moment is a gestalt ... is felt as a whole (p. 35). He suggests: “The past assumes many forms: e.g., schemas, representations, models, preconceptions, expectations, original phantasies”, clarifying that “the present determines which pieces of the past will be chosen to be re-assembled. Past and present are always operating on each other” (p.31). During this research, by revisiting

fragments of the past, I have endeavoured to capture phenomenologically the gift they offer in the present. Stern explains:

Phenomenology is the study of things as they appear to consciousness, as they seem when they are in mind. This includes perceptions, sensations, feelings, memories, dreams, phantasies, expectations, ideas - whatever occupies the mental stage ... the mental landscape we see and are in at any given moment (Stern, 2004, p. 8).

Stern's use of the term mental *landscape* is echoed by John Heron and Peter Reason who suggest that the "experiential encounter with the presence of the world is the ground of our being and knowing" (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 276). The *Seagrass Project* (Cuming et al., 1989; 1991) fused me to the landscape of my own local patch of the Earth, the land of my conception and the country of my forebears, albeit as a newcomer here. Uncle Ted Lovett's welcome to country for the *Twilight Ceremony* of the Lake Bolac Eel Festival 2008 provides another terrestrial echo: "The law of the land is the very heart of our existence, that is what land means to us" (Cuming, 2008). The Video represents the mental landscape of my praxis. It is the sacred ground upon which I stand.

That sacredness is tethered to my praxis which is in turn anchored to the world of people and to nature. Ecology as a central metaphor within my work and celebration as an approach each inform the production of the Video. Ecology embraces the notion of evolution and lineage as applied to my arts practice and thence to the Video. Celebration, by drawing attention to the wonders and the intricacies of nature, invites participation. In homage to my puppetry career the Video is a 'parade' of people, forms, content and context that invites the viewer to enjoin and appreciate the process my work.

Two other film makers inform my approach to the Video: John Bresland and Dianne Reid. Bresland is a video essayist who offers the idea that video as essay “pushes toward some insight or some truth”, and that the “asking—whether inscribed in ancient mud, printed on paper, or streamed thirty frames per second—is central to the essay, is the essay” (Bresland, 2010). Reid is primarily a dancer who talks of translating the “kinaesthetic intimacy of dance and the body to the screen—to make [her] sweat bead on the surface of the screen” (Barret & Bolt, 2007, p. 47). In the spirit of Bresland’s ancient asking and in alliance with Reid’s kinaesthetic perspiration, it is my hope that the truth-seeking heart of my praxis pulses clear and strong through every frame of the Video and that the playful and fervent aspirations shared with many communities reach out through the screen to infuse the viewer not only with impressions of puppetry as technique but with the very essence of the work as I have experienced it.

Healing

Budgets for arts projects usually have an underlying social purpose. Artists are often engaged to reach out to people who are culturally isolated. This requires being emotionally vulnerable and openly compassionate towards community collaborators, demanding authentic presence in every creative relationship. Committed empathy exacts of us an experiential awareness of the *other* mirrored by an equal sense of self. Ultimately the challenges faced by the other become ones own. Consciously developing this capacity led me to value healing as an core purpose within my work. What follows is an exploration of some of the dimensions of the concept of healing as I have encountered it.

Moreno. In 1984/85 I was an actor and community educator with Playback Theatre Melbourne. Playback was developed by Jonathan Fox as a community-based theatre form

that re-enacts audience stories. It is a gentle and accessible derivative of the *psychodrama* method developed by psychiatrist Jakob Moreno (Moreno & Fox, 1987; Fox, 2006).

I first experienced psychodrama when Australian practitioner Max Clayton conducted a training session for the Playback company. I found that was enthralled from the first moment by an intense, meaningful and wholesome sensory engagement. Around that time Playback Theatre founder Jonathan Fox conducted a workshop introducing Moreno's sociometric method. We were invited to locate and experience ourselves within a landscape from the mountains to the sea. I took this task seriously as I engaged and explored all aspects of the landscape wholeheartedly. This fully immersive and personally resonant experience of metaphor captivated me that day and pulses through me still. The investment I made in that process has steadily yielded surprising personal and creative dividends.

In the early 1990's a Playback Theatre colleague brought psychodrama therapist Bernadette Hoey to talk puppets with me. Hoey used puppets in her counselling practice with children so our shared interest in puppetry and in Moreno led to some interesting collaborations. As I gathered a group of local artists and like minds to celebrate winter solstice in a former housing commission estate on the outskirts of Hastings, Hoey eagerly joined us, setting up a story telling tent with her kit of puppet helpers. For four years this artist-initiated event engaged local organisations including the West Park Primary School, Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services and the local Hastings Shire Council.

In her book *Who Calls the Tune*, Hoey (1997) presents a series of case studies that evidence a curious chain of command from child through puppets or dolls to the therapist. This methodological chain extends through Hoey to her teacher Max Clayton who in turn trained under Moreno. Clayton in the foreword to Hoey's book says: "She has dedicated herself to the development of means by which children may experience a renewed love of



Fig (v) Bernadette Hoey. Photo by author 2017.

life, and, in doing so, free themselves from deep-seated pains, anger and despair.” The *means* he refers to is surely the use of puppets to engage children in the processes of psychodrama, echoing Moreno’s own suggestion regarding the value of dolls:

The doll does not have the often unpleasant counter-spontaneity which real human beings have, but it has still some physical and tangible reality which pure fantasy companions do not have. In the half real, half mechanical doll world the child can act as an uninhibited ruler (Moreno, 1945, p. 298).

With such insights Moreno’s psychodrama method set the metaphorical stage for dolls and puppets to be used in therapy. Moreno (1945) citing an earlier work proclaims: "A

truly therapeutic procedure cannot have less an objective than the whole of mankind". This vision propelled his own work and it inspired those who worked with him.

Moreno envisioned an holistic therapy that modelled life and valued the "here-and-now encounter" (Moreno & Fox, 1987, p. 3). Moreno's *Stegreiftheater* (theatre of spontaneity), founded in Vienna in 1921, encompassed the notion of *weihetheater* (theatre of consecration) and enshrined spontaneity as its modus operandi: "freedom of a subject cannot be attained by an act of will. It grows by degrees as the result of training in spontaneity" (Fox 2006, Moreno 1987). Hoey's therapeutic practice adapted Moreno's psychodramatic methods by using puppets or dolls to play the roles of auxiliary egos: "The whole psychodrama technique depends, for its healing power, on the director's ability to honour the protagonist's inner world." (Hoey, 1997, p. 5). Gestalt Therapy founder Fritz Perls cut his teeth with Moreno but apparently failed to acknowledge him (Hoey, 1997, p. 8). McNiff (2004) is critical of Perls for various reasons, however he concedes: "[w]ith its gritty focus on the present moment, gestalt therapy helped to liberate psychology from an obsessive focus on the past" (p. 83). The author suggests by way of setting the record straight that the *gritty focus on the present moment* that liberated psychology actually came from Moreno.

Cathexis. In this exegesis I use the word *cathexis* to refer to the process of conferring attention onto an idea or object in motion. Cathexis is the attentional process via which puppetry focuses intention and generates relationship and therefore the potential for healing (Cuming & Hill, 2017). This concept is key to understanding the puppetry process as both construction and performance. By joining object and idea, the concept of cathexis helps to differentiate the being from the doing, the living thing from the intentional act and thereby the form from the content of my work with puppets. The questions *what is it?* and *how does it move?* motivate this research.

Hoffer (2005) helps us unlock the word cathexis by explaining that Freud used the German verb “besetzen” meaning “to occupy” and the noun “besetzung” meaning “the occupation” (p. 1127) which were both translated by Strachey as “cathexis”, an English word with a Greek root meaning “to occupy, hold fast, hold back, check, restrain, control” (p. 1131). Hoffer expresses the view that the root “besetz” offers more nuanced possibilities than cathexis allows and ought to have been anglicised to retain the subtleties of meaning conferred by Freud. Cathexis as I am using it may retain some of those subtleties of being both dynamic process and state—an attentional process via which physical and emotional energy is invested in ideas, objects and people.

Cathexis as an attentional process also reveals and focuses intention in the present moment as movement. Through spontaneous play with puppets, pre-conscious intention becomes conscious as inner experiencing is externalised. As we attend via the senses to the person, the object or the idea outside of ourselves, that person, object or idea can be said to occupy us. As we move a puppet we activate this process. As we construct a puppet the same applies. Cathexis of performance and cathexis of construction rely on the same system.

For infant humans this attending begins in the womb. Stern (2010) proposes that the brainstem arousal systems are activated in the human foetus by five to six weeks (p. 101). It is the arousal systems that govern our body chemistry via the senses. Observing babies with their mothers Stern (2002) identified play periods as being seconds to minutes long within which he observed what he called “vitality affects [that] exist in all subjective experience, at all ages, and in all domains and modalities” (p. 13). He observed distinctive “vitality forms” (Stern, 2010, p. 63) involving the sensory cortex, the brainstem and the amygdala that generated “time shapes” (Stern, 2002, p. 13) in the intersubjective responses between mother

and baby, describing the present moment as a “lived emotional drama that traces a temporal shape like a passing musical phrase” (Stern, 2004, p. 4).

Referring to neonate capacities for mind-to-mind relating Stern says: “This continuous cocreative dialogue with other minds is what I am calling the intersubjective matrix” (Stern, 2004, p. 77). Trevarthen (2001) assures us:

Infants are born ready to begin learning collaboratively how the society around them knows and uses meaning in the world, and how it makes a narrative of the circumstances in which collective life can be sustained and transformed from generation to generation (Harris, 1998; Trevarthen, 1988; Trevarthen & Logotheti, 1987) (p. 111).

Trevarthen says of this exchange that it is: “fundamentally intersubjective and emotional, valuable to both infant and adult in itself as an interpersonal exchange of feelings and states of animation, no matter what the language content (Bateson, 1979; Stern, 1974; Trevarthen, 1979)” (Trevarthen, 2001 p. 103). To better understand the pre- and post-natal origins of that initial state Trevarthen’s model of self is of particular interest. He identifies the infants own body as consisting of an “internal milieu” of emotions and feelings and an “external milieu” of relationship to objects and people. To objects he ascribes “aesthetic emotions” and to people “moral emotions” (Trevarthen, 2001, p. 107). The relationship between the internal milieu and the external milieu is the relational domain of cathexis. According to Stern the interaction between infant and mother also gives rise to identity: “a differentiated self is a condition of intersubjectivity. Without it there would only be fusion (Rochat and Morgan, 1995; Stern, 1985)” (Stern, 2004, p. 77). He says human babies are born with a capacity “to participate in another’s mind state” (Stern, 2004, p. 85) and, citing Trevarthen and Hubley, that this develops by age 7-9 months into a capacity for “a more

elaborate form of intersubjectivity—what Trevarthen & Hubley (1978) have called “secondary intersubjectivity” (see also Stern 2000)” (p. 86). Trevarthen says of the infant’s experience of secondary intersubjectivity: “Once joint purposes are defined with regard for particular objects or objectives, the consciousness that is shared becomes a progressively enriched consciousness of mutually recognized meanings” (Trevarthen, 2001, p. 110).

The phrase “objects or objectives” in this context evokes for me the richly layered experience of puppetry as a kind of secondary intersubjectivity where the objects and objectives to which we attend are animated by Stern’s vitality affects.

Puppetry as healing. Lett (1993) introduces the creative arts therapies as holistic and multi-modal meaning making. McNiff (2004) says that “personifying images, gestures, and other artistic expressions enables them to act as ‘agencies’ of transformation” (McNiff, 2004, p. 85). Drawing on these, the author proposes the puppet as a multi-modal meaning-maker and an agent of transformation both within and beyond the therapeutic context.

Puppetry readily integrates into play therapy, gestalt, cognitive behavioural therapy and narrative therapy and is used for assessment, diagnosis and treatment in counselling and psychotherapy (Butler et al., 2009). In narrative therapy puppets are used to facilitate the key principle of externalisation: “The principle of externalization is aimed at helping clients view them-selves as separate from their problems. In effect, they are encouraged to see that they are not the problem; the problem is the problem (White, 2004; White & Epston)” (p. 225).

In a discussion of mirror neurons, empathy, intentionality, graspability and container metaphors, Trimingham (2013) refers to puppets as material anchors. “Puppetry is an example of a space of shared cognition almost entirely dependent on expanding thought through the use of material objects “(Trimingham 2013, p. 9).

Through my puppetry praxis I have called attention to the local environment as part of the global environment by inviting people to become actively involved in creative projects that focus on local species of flora and fauna. Spending time outside observing, discussing and sharing ideas, talking to experts, reading books and viewing video, we inform our project and focus our cathexis. This either strengthens an existing relationship to nature or generates a new one. Abram (1996), in discussing the disjunction between modern humans and nature, identifies that: “the source of stress lies in the relation between the human community and the natural landscape” (p. 21). Creative action develops that relationship and relieves the stress by giving us an opportunity to respond. Gergen (2009) tells us that “[a]s the conception of relational being is grasped, so are new forms of action invited, new forms of life made intelligible, and a more promising view of our global future made apparent” (p. 6). Puppetry is such a new form of action. Construction enables us to learn collaboratively about the world in an imaginatively engaged way. Performance affords us an emotionally expressive and empathically charged experience as we attend to materials, movement and conscience. Working together in a playful way we recreate our world as we would have it.

Liveliness. Puppetry however is more than mechanical methods of construction and operation, it is a powerful tool to be used with care. Psychiatrist Anthony Korner's principal of liveliness (Korner, 2000) helps us to understand such care. Citing Stern's “vitality affects” and Trevarthen's “intersubjectivity”, Korner identifies “liveliness” as an indicator of efficacy within the therapeutic relationship, claiming this to be of particular importance in the healing of trauma. Within the therapeutic encounter he says: “It is the liveliness felt in a situation that will determine its sustainability” (p. 739). Korner describes Stern's vitality affects as “not sights and sounds and touches and namable objects, but rather shapes, intensities, and temporal patterns—the more ‘global’ qualities of experience ... links in a primitive form of

communication ... a barometer of the atmosphere experienced in interaction with others” (p. 734). According to Korner, a feeling of “liveliness” allows “the internalisation of a potential future and therefore facilitate[s] movement or flow in that direction” (p. 739). He concludes that: “while it may be that there is a certain inevitability about the re-experiencing of trauma in therapy, it could be a mistake to think that this is an essential or therapeutic aspect of the process” (p. 739). Whilst Korner is talking explicitly about the psycho-therapeutic relationship, as distinct from the creative relationship, he builds his paper on Winnicott’s example of dancers on a music hall stage “trained to liveliness” (p. 731). This image then lends itself well to contemplating the relationship between artists and participant collaborators in community-based projects.

Encouraging us to enter into spontaneous dialogue with the image as an autonomous imaginal other, McNiff (2004) proposes that: “Healing and well-being as well as a more insightful emotional intelligence are generated by cultivating the expression of the imaginal other” (p. 83). McNiff’s dialogue, whether verbal or through movement in silence is reminiscent of puppetry.

In this way art-as-healing (McNiff, 2004), research-as-healing (Reason and Heron, 1986) and puppetry as healing (Butler et al., 2009; Hoey, 1997; Moreno 1945) all inform puppetry as cathexis. Applying the lens of cathexis to Korner’s liveliness, as we attend to creative practice we become better at it. Similarly, with Moreno’s spontaneity and Stern’s present moment, as we attend to what is happening here and now within the creative space, we develop a capacity to occupy that space.

The figure below depicts two very different approaches to drawing: the older ‘me’ reflecting upon and valuing—the younger ‘me’. Bringing these two images together in the

context of this research juxtaposes inner and outer experiencing, the singular and the collective, evoking for me a Moreno-inspired portrait of creativity and healing.



Fig (vi) *Chair sit energy 1995 and People 1961.*
Life drawing and childhood drawing by author.

Trauma. As I began working with First Nations elders and community, I began learning first hand about trauma and PTSD. R. Wilson (1997) identifies some of the ways trauma impacts on indigenous Australians:

If people have been traumatised and are still suffering from the effects of that trauma, they are re-traumatised every time something reminds them of the trauma, even people who have made some degree of recovery. And that is the case in any situation where there is a post traumatic stress disorder. Things that remind people of the trauma will bring back memories of the trauma and severe distress (Dr Jane McKendrick, Victorian Aboriginal Mental Health Network, evidence 310) (R. Wilson, 1997, p. 16).

Trauma occurring in utero or during infancy, whilst not consciously remembered may still cause PTSD, impacting on our relational and therefore cultural capacities. Trevarthen refers to the lifelong sequelae of early life trauma:

Powerful innate emotions of human relating, evident in infants, and different from those that establish and regulate attachment for care and protection, bring risks of mental illness associated with failure in collaborative intersubjectivity. The principles of infant mental health define the fundamental interpersonal needs for the whole life cycle (Trevarthen, 2001, p. 95).

Empathy. Stern discusses the role of the mirror neurons in our capacity for empathy:

Mirror neurons provide possible neurobiological mechanisms for understanding the following phenomena: reading other people's states of mind, especially intentions; resonating with another's emotion; experiencing what someone else is experiencing; and capturing an observed action so that one can imitate it—in short, empathizing with another and establishing intersubjective contact (Galles & Goldman, 1998; Rizzolatti & Arbib, 1998; Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Fogassi and Gallese, 1996; Rizzolatti, Fogassi, & Gallese, 2001) (Stern, 2004, p. 78-79).

In relation to the importance of witnessing movement, which is essentially what happens as we see a puppet move, move a puppet ourselves or even as we imagine the movement of the puppet, Stern says:

Mirror neurons sit adjacent to motor neurons ... the visual information we receive when we watch another act gets mapped onto the equivalent motor representation in our own brain by the activity of these mirror neurons ... [w]e experience the other as

if we were executing the same action, feeling the same emotion, making the same vocalization, or being touched as they are being touched (Stern, 2004, p. 79).

This photograph recently generated a conversation with the co-ordinator of a local Aboriginal gathering place and resulted in a community puppet workshop celebrating the powerful owl. Creative practice focuses local efforts to preserve the bushland habitat of this particular bird whilst bringing people together in empathic celebration. The wide-open eyes of the owl witness the movement of the researcher in a moment of mirrored inquiry.



Fig (vii) *Powerful Owl near Willem Warrain.*
Photo by author.

Trauma in our earliest lives impacts our mental health throughout the life-cycle (Trevarthen, 2001). Trauma may be caused by action we witness outside of ourselves including vocal and emotional action (Stern, 2004). This definition of trauma as witnessing extends beyond the human realm to our relational experiencing of animals, plants and even to objects (Stern, 2002; Abram, 1996).

The “intersubjective matrix” (Stern, 2004, p. 77) is the relational mesh that connects us to the world. As it is damaged so we are damaged. Caring for people directly is of course essential, however attending exclusively to the concerns of humanity without an equal concern for the environment is folly. Scientist Rachel Carson’s clarion call over half a century ago alerted us to this simple fact for reasons that might also be contemplated as trauma: “For the first time in the history of the world, every human being is now subjected to contact with dangerous chemicals, from the moment of conception until death” (Carson, 1962, p. 31). Maintaining the health of our intersubjective matrix means not only looking after the human domain, it means taking care of our environment. Caring for the environment is integral to caring for ourselves. The world outside us lives also within us.

The body-mind. Healing as I propose it here embraces life as a whole from conception in all realms of the personal through to the cultural and the ecological. Carson advocates that we focus on the molecular activity within the cells: “The transformation of matter into energy in the cell is an ever-flowing process, one of nature’s cycles of renewal, like a wheel endlessly turning” (Carson, 1962, p. 179). Reason and Heron propose that the inquiry process itself can be therapeutic: “understanding, using, and enhancing the human capacity for self-healing is the central issue in the development of holistic medical and health-care practices” (Reason & Heron, 1986, p. 125). Their proposal for intentional self-healing and enhanced wellness is predicated on the principle that “each person as a mental

and spiritual being has the potential capacity consciously and intentionally to facilitate healing in their body-mind by a variety of internal and external actions” (p. 126). Bruce McConachie acknowledges Mark Johnston as the first to coin the term body-mind stating: “The experience of art is just as real as other experiences in the material world and all experiences have consequences. Among these consequences are alterations in the neuronal connections of our *body-minds*” (Arons & May, 2012, p. 98). Candace Pert’s book *Molecules of emotion: why you feel the way you feel* explains the body-mind (Pert, 1997). In her pioneering research on the opiate receptor Pert discovered how the cell receptors throughout the body interact with the body’s own chemical messengers or ligands, establishing that the body and the mind function as a unified whole, responding to internal and external stimuli in a constant and self-regulating way. She proposes that our emotional experiencing is as one with both the mind and the body. Deepak Chopra M.D., in his introduction to Pert’s book says: “Her research has provided evidence of the biochemical basis for awareness and consciousness” (Pert, 1997, p. 9). The implications of this proposition are simply profound. Our emotional experiencing directly impacts our physiology and is absolutely central to our mental and physical well-being (Greer, 2014).

Puppetry serves as a valuable way of understanding the multi-dimensional processes of cathexis as it engages both the mind and the body. Imagining, constructing and moving puppets activates the brainstem arousal systems and the multi-modal sensory motor system, all of which inform and regulate our relational capacities (Stern, 2010). Through these systems puppetry animates and illuminates the body-mind. It informs and develops our attentional capacities such as the ability to concentrate. It relieves us of stress by inviting us to play. It relieves us of the limitations of language by occupying us with images. It relieves us of the restraints of tradition and culture by allowing us to create.

Healing begins as we conceive, construct and play in a solo personal creative space. Playing and witnessing in a two person space opens the healing possibilities considerably (Cuming & Hill, 2017). The healing potential is amplified exponentially in collaborative projects where imagining, designing, constructing, performing, exhibiting, documenting and evaluating each offer opportunities for full body-mind engagement. Heron and Reason suggest that “to heal means to make whole: we can only understand our world as a whole if we are part of it”. In the participatory worldview “meaning and mystery are restored to human experience, so that the world is once again experienced a sacred place (Reason, 1994, p. 10)” (Heron & Reason, 1997, p. 288).

White Dragon. Rarely have I been more alive to a healing purpose in my work than when I was working on a protest rally for People for Nuclear Disarmament (PND) in the early 1980s. The rally organiser wanted to portray the issue as a race between America and Russia to blow up the world, by making large puppets of their heads of state—*Reagan* and *Chernenko*—fighting over a large button. This tableau, designed to evoke fear, plainly disturbed me. The question for me was one of how to transform fear into hope, protest into celebration. My creative engine works overtime in such circumstances.

As I walked up Swanston Street in Melbourne contemplating the logistics of the job on site at the Bourke Street intersection where the event would take place, a moment of vision *occupied* me and a picture of a potential future formed. Unfolding before my mind’s eye I could *see* the race for the button as it captured the attention of the gathered throng and was immediately saddened by the prospect of the doomsday scenario we were preparing to present. Then with *armageddon* imminent, *the button erupted in a cloud of smoke. A large chinese-style White Dragon emerged from it and flowed into the crowded street. A frenzy of drumming accompanied a frenzied Dragon Dance as the presidential buffoons staggered in*

bewilderment. The dragon's dance was wave-like as it swirled around the button. By now I was walking. My pace quickened as I sought to get home to write and draw. Then as I strode towards Collingwood via Fitzroy I saw the dragon changing colour. Starting at the head, the white became red and orange and yellow and green and blue and purple. Looking more closely and wondering how this might be occurring, I saw that people in the imagined crowd were throwing buckets of colour at the white dragon, chanting and dancing as the now-colourful dragon danced among them.

I consolidated the vision by designing the *White Dragon* in my head and strategically planning how to deliver the buckets of paint. As I walked it dawned on me that this image bore an uncanny resemblance to the Aboriginal *Rainbow Serpent* so I deviated on my way home to discuss the project and my emergent dragon *concept* with a passionate and respected First Nations activist. He informed me that PND were getting it wrong because uranium was a land rights issue. He warned me off going any further with the idea. PND were equally disturbed by my dragon vision and unwilling to align with the First Nations political agenda. My colourful and optimistic resolution to the tableau of doom found no ground so I walked clear of the project. The *vision* however was still very much alive for me. It held a power I knew I could trust so I buried it as one might a treasure, made a map and marked it in my heart space with a colourful 'x'.

T'ai Chi Praxis

T'ai chi T'ai chi chuan, yang style short form consists of a sequence of postures linked through movement, beginning and ending in stillness. My first teacher was Bill Zappa at the VCA who emphasised circles and referred to the Chinese classics instructing us to move like a great river while being still as a mountain. My second teacher was Jim Fizedale whose approach to the same form was more mechanical but equally founded in traditional taoist

philosophy. Fizzdales's teacher was Martin Inn whose teacher was the founder of this widely practised form: Cheng Man Ching. The significance of the lineage of my t'ai chi praxis is that—as with my puppetry praxis—practical knowing is born of practical knowing. Tradition itself is both residual and emergent.

Images of my t'ai chi practice filmed on the shores of Westernport provide structure and biogeographical context for the Video. In counterpoint to the video praxis and in order to ground and balance the research, the practice of t'ai chi afforded me a space free from an external focus, a space that allowed a conscious return to the body, enabling an experiential awareness of emptiness and inner calm. Between the letting go and the resumption of attention to the art-making, intentional space is refined and clarified.



Fig (viii) *T'ai Chi Lifescape*. Video screenshot composite and life drawing by author.

Photo by Robyn McCreery.

Caterpillar

Emerging as a grublet the caterpillar of consciousness grows fat on juicy leaves as its forebears have for time before knowing. It eats and shits and eats and shits. It moves from leaf to leaf, from twig to twig, from branch to branch, eating to its heart's content, stretching and growing, eyes bulging with the light of day, body chilled by night, mandibles resting as need be before eating some more, camouflaged green on green in case of bird.

* * *

Training

As practice is born of practice developed collaboratively with many mentors and creative practitioners over time, I recognise these and my immediate family as the foundation of my praxis and thinking. While many live yet to inspire and advise me, some have already left us: Lorraine (Lorrie) Gardner of the Gardner Puppet Theatre first employed me in 1977,



Fig (ix) Lorrie Gardner - The Gardner Puppet Theatre. Video screen shot by author.

teaching me on the job how to make and play with glove, rod and string puppets, offering me entrée to the world of puppetry and never losing interest in my work; Greg Temple, the Puppet Man, a consummate performer of the Punch and Judy, networked me into puppetry as a politically-charged community building process and hand-passed me a few significant community arts jobs early on; Peter Oyston, founding dean of the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) drama school, took me by the shoulders and told me through clenched teeth that I was *an artist*, fanning the flames of my Seagrass vision from its first spark and helping me to give it strategic form; Nigel Triffit clad me from head to toe in a black velvet cloak of invisibility, and blooded me to his process of designing, devising and directing raw iconic visual theatre for adult audiences; Aldo Gennaro lured me into to the temple of culture and gifted me the courage to transcend physical, intellectual and emotional barriers through making theatre as sacred community ritual; Ed Baxter instilled in me an appreciation for architecture, haiku poetry and law, restoring the roof above my head and the path beneath my feet; Uncle B. took me under his wing with wit and wile, introducing me to some astrology, some ceremony and some culture, sharing with me with his playful approach to serious matters; artist Frans Houkes (Cuming, 2016b) held the space of *Seagrass* with me and acted as midwife to my new *Punch and Judy*, laughing with me about Nietzsche making coins out of people and people out of coins. Whilst none of these treasures are alive to contribute to this research as they may have done a few years ago, their energies are independently enmeshed in the work I have produced, and my voice speaks for them. Cathexis here is an honouring of lineage. Cultural lineage is the relational DNA of praxis.

Engaging tradition. At the international puppet festival in Hobart in 1979 I performed my solo walkabout Puppet Tree in a *pot pourri* session. Norman Hetherington (Mr Squiggle) was there and encouraged me after seeing my Puppet Tree performance. At that

festival I met and saw many puppetry artists. Greg Temple performed his Punch and Judy. Tony Kishawi the one man band, Chris (Christof) Gregory, and I were all VCA connected and the only buskers at the festival. Heather Robb was there as a clown and would later teach me mask in Sydney. Lorrie Gardner and I attended a script workshop with Nigel Triffit with whom I would work on four major productions over a seven year period. The Tasmanian Puppet Theatre performed Nigel's *Mommas Little Horror Show*, a show I would join two years later to tour Europe with the Australian Puppet Theatre. There were so many masters at the festival including the Chinese Fukien Puppet Theatre whose glove puppetry was sublime and acrobatic. Some of the performers were several generations into their craft. Encounters and experiences with these people all effected the twenty-year-old me. I was impressed and felt blessed to be there. I absorbed it all like a sponge.

A year later in 1980 I travelled to Tokyo for another International Puppet Festival where I saw the Swedish Michael Meshcke's dynamic and balletic rod puppetry. I saw the Japanese Takeda marionettes doing a story about a Crane surviving blizzards, a beautiful and moving performance. A Japanese friend took me to see traditional Kabuki and Noh theatre and to an incredible packed basement performance of Bunraku and Downtown Boogie Woogie, where traditional tales were accompanied by powerful electric music.

At another International Puppet Festival in Adelaide in 1983 I saw Eric Bass doing a table-top hand puppet and mask show that blew me away. I saw Steve Hansen doing his walkabout Punch and Judy and loved his reparté, sound effects and visual gags. I saw the Polish company Drak's booth show with wooden glove puppets and appreciated their timing and skill. I saw Peter Schumann with Bread and Puppet Theater and their big white birds. I met Peter after the show and expressed my feeling of awe at his work.

It was in these contexts that my passion was guided by the people I admired. It was in these contexts and through these experiences that I focused my work. These experiences are my core references. These experiences are the basis for my knowing, my craft. Returning to the academy, it is this experience that I bring.

Puppetry dimensions

Having looked in some detail at puppetry as healing lets look a little more closely at the art form itself. Puppetry is the art of animating or ensouling objects by bringing them to life in movement and sound. The voices below articulate some of puppetry's incredible dimensions. Kenneth Gross' defines the word puppet:

The word derives from the Latin pupa, for little girl or doll, a word still used in entomology to describe the mysterious, more passive middle stage of an insect's metamorphosis (Gross, 2011, p. 3).

Puppetry's many forms—shadow puppets, marionettes, hand and rod puppets—have deep global roots (Miller, 1963; Simmen, 1972; Sinclair, 1995; Gross, 2011). Australia has its own rich history of puppetry with many acclaimed practitioners (Hetherington, 1974; Vella & Rickards, 1989; Milne, 2007; P. Wilson, 2007). Russian puppet master Sergei Obratsov calls the puppet “a dynamic generalization of a living being ... a real miracle” (Niculescu et al., 1965, p. 19). Gross says puppetry demands “the seriousness of the child at play, something Friedrich Nietzsche took as the chief measure of maturity” (Gross, 2011, p. 49).

For puppetry in general Miller (1963) provides an excellent summary of the art form, its cultural roots and applications including education, recreation, therapy, rehabilitation, advertising, cinema and television. Announcing puppetry as an art form, she describes puppetry as “design in motion” (p. 94) and discusses both the visual and performing arts aspects of this

idea, referring to the “psychical distance” (p. 42-44) the puppet offers. Citing Basil Milovsoroff (n.d.) she says “a puppet may be man, animal, insect, teakettle or tomorrow” (p. 20).

Further dimensions of the purposes of puppetry as an art form can be found through a rich body of literature (Coult & Kershaw, 1983; Dissanayake, 1988; Schumann, 1993; Milne, 2007; P. Wilson, 2007; Trimmingham, 2013), through the Union Internationale de la Marionette (UNIMA, 2017) and of course through living practitioners everywhere.

Punch and Judy



Fig (x) Cruikshank Etching - *Punch and Judy*. Simmen (1975, p. 23).

Within my first year working with puppets a local musical society asked me to perform a *Punch and Judy* as part of a seaside scene in a music hall performance. Referring to various colour plates in Simmen (1975), I crafted a series of paper maché heads over plasticine, making the characters of *Punch*, *Judy*, the *Baby*, the *Neighbour*, a *French Waiter*,

the *Policeman*, the *Judge*, the *Hangman* and the *Devil*, and costumed them accordingly. The Cruikshank etchings and accompanying narrative (p. 22-26) provided me with the rudiments of a script and a starting point for the development of action. In this way Cruikshank's impressions effectively kickstarted my own *Punch and Judy* practice.

Someone made a puppet booth out of ply as a part of the music hall set but unlike the two person puppet theatre I performed in with the Gardner Puppet Theatre where we stood full height behind the curtain with our hands in the air, this booth was tiny. I had to crouch behind in a cramped space with crooked elbows and no ability to turn around. My mock stage audience were fellow performers performing with me for the real audience in the hall, a travesty of the real thing. Importantly however the invitation had motivated me to make the puppets and get started.

After performing that first show a friend asked me to perform at her engagement party. The audience were mostly slightly older than me hanging out around a pool and drinking. Judy responded to the raucous calls by my friend and her buddies to stand up for herself. So she took control and beat Punch with the solid painted wooden stick and he succumbed to the blows. The assault required paper maché surgery and a paint job the next morning. I had another gig that day. A local Punch and Judy *professor* had asked me to fill in for him at the army barracks Christmas party so with PVA glue still setting I performed with the old guy's wife before a boisterous audience. Challenged but undeterred by these experiences I was determined to succeed. I took my frame and puppets on a train and tram to busk in Bourke Street with friends. I took it to Sydney in my VW Combi Van to busk in Martin Place and at Bondi Beach. Back at home I gave it a whirl in late night venues like the Flying Trapeze Cafe and Marijuana House in Fitzroy. I started doing community arts gigs and I'd take the the Punch and Judy show with me as an ice-breaker to introduce puppetry

before inviting people to making their own puppets. Audiences generally enjoyed the show, however the old story was problematic due to the assumption of violence so eventually I shelved it. The show remained on ice for many years as I explored other forms, including my own brand of silent studio puppetry, theatre puppetry, playback theatre, parade and protest puppetry to name a few.

By considering it's historical roots, nostalgic capital, organisational politics, practitioner perspectives and abiding appetite for transgression, Reeve (2009) supplies valuable insight into the living tradition as a constantly evolving phenomenon in the hands of practitioners:

traditional forms may belong to the wider community, but the enactment of them is commonly the preserve of a few, and those few are active in deciding how the form will be enacted. To paraphrase E.P. Thompson (1963: 8), performers are present at the making of their own traditions (p. 83).

Reeve (2009, citing Williams (1983; 1991)) locates and redeems the Punch and Judy tradition as the fountainhead of Western puppetry offering a refreshing glimpse of the residual and emergent DNA of the tradition. He observes that: "The Proscenium carries the Professor's name—most Punch performers call themselves 'Professor'—and declares itself 'a Punch and Judy show'" (p. 12). His exploration of the relationship between two organisations whose principal purpose is the perpetuation of the tradition is noteworthy. Essentially the Punch and Judy Fellowship hold a hard line on maintaining control over the form and the rules practitioners must follow while the College of Professors in contrast embrace a more open view that the form itself changes as new people engage with it.

Citing Leach (1985) Reeve (2009) refers to three distinct developmental stages of the tradition: The eighteenth century "Swatchel Omis" or "swazzle men" were the original showmen

whose performances were typically political and improvisational. They made their own puppets which were then handed down from generation to generation along with a narrative that generally challenged the institutions of law, religion and marriage. The “Beach Uncles” then transformed the tradition during the twentieth century commercialising it as a holiday entertainment for children. They usually bought a set of puppets and possibly a script, playing for laughs, literally using a slapstick along with other pantomime traditions of vaudeville. The third classification according to Leach were the “counterculturalists” of the seventies and eighties who were mostly “college educated” (p. 35).

It is not sufficient to look just at the things which performers produce, the show and the puppets; we need also to consider how those things have come about, what is intended by them, how they are used and how they are received (Reeve, 2009, p. 24).



Fig (xi) *Punch and Judy*. Puppets by author. Video screenshot by Richard Cooke.

Following the Seagrass Project (see pages 53-61) I retreated from an expansive community space to count my blessings and return to solo performance work. The premise of the Seagrass Project that human activity on land impacts the sea via the waterways—a development of Jonathan Fox’s *Mountains-to-the Sea* idea—still had a strong hold on me as I re-approached the iconic *Punch and Judy Show*. Dusting off my puppet frame, the remnant *Seagrass* banners (made of bem silk), that had temporarily become house curtains, were re-purposed as my new puppet theatre curtains. Their green and rainbow colours replaced the old black and white striped curtain I had used in the past.

Putting a puppet show together from scratch is a mysterious process. Inspired by Obratsov’s use of the bare hand (Obratsov, 1950), I sought distance from the problematic and sticky violence of *Punch* by taking the *Punch* puppet off my hand altogether. For me the bare hand represented a refreshingly vulnerable model of masculinity and fatherhood. It also gave me license to use either hand for the character (*Punch* is traditionally worn on the right hand). The making of sounds may be as important as the making of puppets. One definitive noise is that of the *swazzle*, the device that produces the distinctive other-worldly squeak of the *Punch* voice. The swazzle anchors both the character and tradition. I also incorporated guitar, harmonica, whistle and kazoo into the show. Character and action are the life-force of a puppet show. Waving my hands in the air and making all sorts of noises as my friend Frans looked on, the puppets themselves expressed preferences as the work developed momentum, sending concentric ripples of change through the emergent narrative. One day my newly constructed *Crocodile* sang about having “eggs in her belly” and “nesting down by the river”, establishing not only her gender but her credentials as an ancient and respectable creature. More ripples. The character of *Judy* bounced from being the wife-as-encumbrance and nemesis to being an articulate mother and bread winner. The ripples became waves and

continued to spread as the *Baby* was re-conceived as a wilful and compassionate adventurer. Having thrown the old story out the window, my new show had no stick, no argument and no fighting, not even the threat of violence. In keeping with tradition however there was no shortage of highly charged, pantomime-inspired engagement, as understanding and misunderstanding danced from hand to hand and the audience shrieked and screamed and heckled the puppets. With the help of those audiences, the characters themselves generated a new narrative, progressively settling it into a recognisable form, whilst always keeping an ear to their audience. The ripples rippled, the hands waved and—as the Swatchel Omis would have had it—the story was never written down.

The Sugar Ant

This case study introduces puppetry as movement in the absence of character, narrative and music. It looks at the use of found objects being moved in conjunction with constructed puppets and showcases the string puppet.

Foundations. Below is a bit of history that locates the genesis of the *Sugar Ant* in an important solo project in 1983: *The Ant, the Universe and Einstein* (AUE). It evidences a very particular form of cathexis, one that encourages a plurality of experiencing. AUE was in turn based on a project from 1980: *In Terms of the ... Um* (the Um), an improvised, self-devised, solo studio piece inspired by images I had encountered in Kurasawa's film *Throne of Blood*. Performed once only at the VCA in 1980, it consisted of a collection of constructed and found objects being moved silently before an audience in an open studio.

One of these images was a plastic bottle *Raven* (Cuming, 2018a). The head, complete with a manila-card beak and small white-bead eyes, was operated by a short rod in my left hand. This had very effective omnidirectional movement. The single thickness tie-wire,



Fig (xii) *In Terms of the ... Um*. Victorian College of the Arts.
Author's notebook.

leading edge of the bem silk, flag-like wings looped around the index and little fingers of my right hand inside the bottle, enabling a quite acceptable flapping motion. The plastic pear head was contained by a fishnet stocking that stretched back over the body. Other images included *Egg People*, *Sword*, *Naked Flame*, *Flowing Water*, *Wooden Cage*, *White Flag*, and *Self*. The action with these elements for about 20 minutes was wholly impromptu. The feedback from my audience was diverse and animated. The *Um* constituted a considerable creative risk. The choice to improvise. The choice to work in silence without spoken word or music. The process of gathering the objects and constructing the images established a project and performance methodology that has informed my practice since.

The Ant, the Universe and Einstein. In 1982 as I contemplated the empty ‘project description’ box on an Australia Council application form, a nebulous notion for a solo puppetry project filled my head. As I strained to find words to empty my head and fill the box a hapless ant crawled across the page. In frustration at my inability to articulate my embryonic project idea I flicked the ant with my pencil, killing it instantly. This set in motion a process that continues to this day. That process recognises the needless violence of that act. It responds with specific creative action as an honouring of that original ant.



Fig (xiii) *Sugar Ant with author.* Photo Vicki Jones Photography.

From scaled drawings, the *Sugar Ant* was first constructed using *scrumpled* newspaper, then glass jars before eventually finding form in wood, cut on a band-saw at the VCA sculpture school. Concealed within this lively wooden companion is the original vision for an ant made of glass, operated by steel chords and walking through fire. The wooden ant was always intended as a prototype for the glass ant:

Make a model in newspaper. Remember always with this process that the creature itself is magnificent and the best you will ever do is to approximate the living thing. Let this be the case. Accept that the object of the exercise is to express something for yourself. The greatest result might be to create in your puppet the illusion of life (Cuming, 1999a).

Over a period of nine months I created and gathered a series of objects including the *Sugar Ant* and a 5 metre high steel mesh and hessian mask of *Einstein*. I read stuff. I collected stuff. I played with stuff. I repurposed the wine flagon *Egg People* and the *Raven* from the *Um* and documented the process using pneumatic 3/4" video and A4 notebooks. I booked a venue and promoted a series of seven performances. Each show was unique in terms of what exactly occurred in the space however they were unified as a form. The response from the audiences was gratifying. Essentially, the absence of narrative allowed people to come up with their own. These were often reported to me after the show. It was endlessly interesting to me how people experienced in the work.

Subsequently, the *Sugar Ant* has become something of a personal totem for me, representing the sacredness of life in all of its manifestations. The *Ant*, like the blade of *Seagrass*, is an icon of the natural world. Methodologically it represents wordlessness and transparency. For me personally it resonates as an image of insignificance. For some it evokes fear. For others it is a survivor. Free from the constraints of character, narrative and concealment, the *Ant* generates relationship to the audience within the conventions of the natural. A view I expressed following the Seagrass Project regarding the value of making and playing with images of ecology is moot:

Western civilisation exhibits many addictions evident for example in our use of paper, oil and coal. Healing will come not through abstinence and denial but through the

nurturing of cultural values, starting at an individual level. Sit in the garden. Watch the grass grow. Talk to an insect (Cuming, 1991/92).

By presenting images without explanatory narratives, the audience are challenged to make up their own. Some might think this straightforward enough. Actually it requires considerable insight and the courage to play. *AUE* consolidated the *Um* as a form of cathexis that is axiologically central to my work as a whole and to this thesis. It also serves as the underlying form of the short film that accompanies this exegesis.

These quasi-shamanic studio pieces for adult audiences in the absence of script and the absence of music created an open space in which the movement of the images and the development of relationships between them provided the only structure for both the performer and the audience. In both of these instances an open studio floor was the stage. The audience occupied a fairly conventional third wall position in relation to the action. The performer was in full view the whole time without any concealment, moving amongst the object landscape as a viewable *mover* as well as being the *mover of objects*. This freedom also conferred a welcome vulnerability upon the whole experience, letting the audience in and opening a space for an authentic preverbal exchange. This preverbal experiencing is reminiscent of the relational space of the embryo and the newborn. The silence allowed the images to resonate freely for both performer and audience. Words would follow as people shared what they had seen but they saw and felt it first.

Beyond this context the *Sugar Ant* has worked extensively as a solo roving image at festivals, markets and special occasions. The special appeal of the *Sugar Ant* to people of all ages and cultural backgrounds lies in its life-like movement, its earthiness, its complexity of form combined with its simplicity of operation and its freedom from the encumbrance of voice, narrative and characterisation. The *Sugar Ant* is a resilient image that inspires a

wordless, often emotional response evoked by its insect-like appearance and movements.

These derive from the approach taken to creating the image, which in turn is a direct consequence of the attuned intention of the artist: puppetry as a process of cathexis.

Creative Insects. The *Sugar Ant* was central to a program I developed with the Hugh D.T. Williamson Foundation (HDTW) between 2004-2006. As a cameo marionette within my *Punch and Judy* show, it helped me to introduce string puppetry as a technology, and ecology as a theme to primary and secondary students and their teachers. *Creative Insects* was the working title for the program as I concluded a three year pilot phase. This pilot culminated in renowned entomologist and island biogeography theorist Edward Wilson (E. O. Wilson, 1998) delivering a satellite lecture for the Deakin series of lectures in which he articulated his vision for a global inventory of all species to be conducted by *citizen scientists*. Pertinent questions were asked by well-intended ecologists but the question of how to engage people in this process remained unanswered. Subsequently, HDTW trademarked *Bug Blitz*TM as an Australian citizen science program based on the San Diego-based E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation's program of the same name. Their logo is an ant drawn by Wilson. What I delivered over those three years to the relatively conservative HDTW and through them to the E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation was not just puppetry as an engagement methodology, but art-making as a valuable pedagogical approach.

Dance Family. One of the most remarkable responses I've had to the *Sugar Ant* came from a curious young person living within the autism spectrum who crossed the room to reach for the strings after showing no interest in other puppetry forms. This response focussed an important collaboration with between myself and dance and movement therapist Dr Heather Hill in which we explored the idea of the attentional distance afforded by the puppet being an enabling conduit for relationship. Our inquiry culminated in a workshop

with dance and movement therapy practitioners at the Fourth Australian Dance Movement Therapy Conference *Broadening the Spectrum* in 2015 (Cuming & Hill, 2017).



Fig (xiv) "Alice independently approaching the sugar ant puppet as it crept out of the box and her evident interest in moving the strings with Ian to move it's legs - making that connection".

Photo courtesy Heather Hill 2014.

As I have said already it is the preverbal space that interests me most because of its link to our earliest pre and post natal experiencing. When we hear sound or see movement that is not obviously human or animal but appears to have a life of its own, it arouses in us an unusual curiosity. Puppets focus us in this way.

Socrates the Stork

The following case study opens into some of the dimensions of puppetry as construction. *The Stork who Roared* was an adaptation of a Norwegian Folk tale about *Socrates the Stork* who flew to the end of the Earth to save the dying *Frogs*.

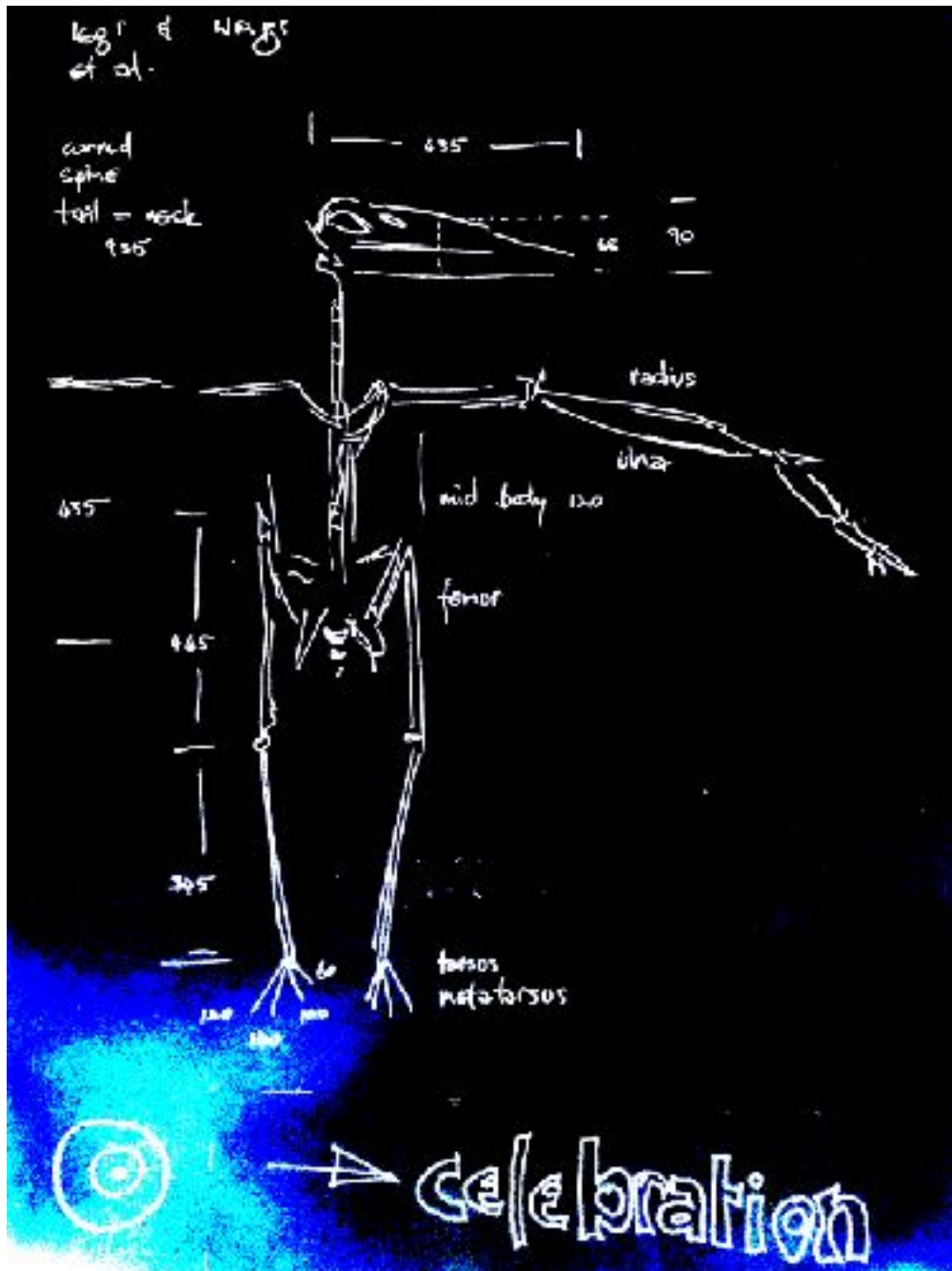


Fig (xv) Sketch for Socrates. Notebook of author.

My role was to conceive, design, construct the puppetry as well as training the actor operators. *Socrates* was named after a poster from my childhood home depicting an old stork. The caption “Que Socrates me pardon ça” was etched in my memory. In the story *Socrates* wakes up from a dream of death and wanders down to the *Stork Court* where he hears that the *Frogs* are dying. There he learns that the only way to save the dying *Frogs* is to fly to the *End of the Earth* to retrieve the *Waters of life*.

This beautiful and poetic narrative defined the functions demanded a complex puppet, capable of standing, walking, flying, diving and carrying a water bottle. *Socrates* the puppet was part marionette and part rod puppet, a hybrid requiring two operators working together to give life to the puppet. Based on the skeleton of a Greater Adjutant Stork found in a basement at the Melbourne Museum, *Socrates* gave me the opportunity to learn about birds. One of the main things I learned was that bird morphology is very similar to our own.

The character of *Socrates* talked but I opted for a fixed beak. Gestural speaking felt better for the character, conveying emotion without the potential distraction of unwieldy mouth movement. This bird was special to me as a maker for being a 1:1 scale model of a greater adjutant stork. Measuring the bones in the basement of the Museum of Victoria, I designed and constructed a wooden frame as a spirit-double of the original bird, crafting for strength and lightness. The fibreglass head and beak was operated from behind by one operator holding a short half-inch diameter dowel rod with a larger diameter well-rounded palm-hugging handle. Attached flexibly to a fairly rigid 12 gauge fencing wire neck set in a curve, the head could turn in all directions and take the neck with it. A second operator moved the laminated 3 ply, fully articulated wings using half inch dowel rods. The puppet as a whole was suspended from a pulley running on a wire that spanned the performance space. The body and wings were attached to this pulley by cotton sash cord allowing the wings to extend to a full two meter wingspan. *Socrates* could fly throughout the bowl-shaped theatre space encircled by the audience with the operators in full view. The wooden legs were operated by a rocking-bar inside the body pulling strings that ran down and through the leg to a screw-eye on the foreleg. In flight the legs were held extended in the operator's hands.

The *Frogs* in contrast were relatively simple constructs made from cardboard milk cartons clad in muslin for durability. The carton mouth opened so the *Frogs* could croak as

they came back to life. Their legs were dangly wire-framed foam rubber. Their eyes were foam rubber tubes that blinked. These simple hand puppets were moved by hand directly with the operator in full view.

But what does Socrates represent? The story is about death. It begins with *Socrates* waking from a dream of *Death*. The journey he embarks on takes him to the *End of the Earth* where in the original tale he collects both the *Waters of Life* and the *Waters of Death*. The wings he hears as he returns with the waters to save the *Frogs* are the *Wings of Death* to whom he says “not yet, I have a job to do”. The conclusion of our representation of this myth saw the operator unclip *Socrates* from the pulley to carry him away once the *Frogs* were rescued from oblivion to leap and play and yes to breed. For the *Storks* the frog is food. The *Frogs*’ well-being is joined to that of the *Storks*. Death and life resonate in counterpoint and equivalence.

During construction I was under deadline pressure to complete many images and wore my knees to a pulp on the concrete floor of my shed. Oblivious to my own well-being I ended up on crutches before delivering my constructions to the performers. In my own way I had flown to the *End of the Earth* to rescue the *Frogs*. For a time I became *Socrates* the stork. Cathexis has such power as our attention is riveted by the purpose, by the object, by the call.

I’ve taken the time to look at *Socrates* for several reasons: 1. it was an important species-specific scaled model that derived from former birds and informed many future birds; 2. the collaborative method of operation was unique; 3. the process of cathexis through form and content was personally meaningful; 4. the story theme remains culturally critical; 5. the mythic narrative focused the *Seagrass Project*. The resonances of working with puppets may have deep personal echoes. Creative practice produces rich layers of context-focused learning as solutions to finding life in the puppet are found.

Cocoon

*Spinning silk to encase itself in readiness for metamorphosis, the caterpillar of
consciousness fully encloses itself and withdraws from the world
for what seems like the longest time.*

* * *

Ecology

A rudimentary grasp of the relatively young science of ecology and its evolution is helpful before we apply it in practice. As a metaphor, ecology is too easily treated superficially as other-than-human life. Within my practice it crept in unnoticed as I produced my first solo walkabout show the *Puppet Tree*, an intentional play on the word ‘puppetry’. My focus in that work was on the form ahead of the content. The story about *Minor Mouse* learning to sing reflected my own eagerness to learn my craft. Even as I created the *Sugar Ant* my attention was on form ahead of content. In *AUE* the silent improvisation with objects in a studio setting incorporating the traditional form of the string puppet kicked off an interest in life forms large and small, which in turn led me to *Einstein*, relativity and quantum science as a field. This was more of a philosophical work that contemplated an equivalence between an insect, a human and the *Universe* as life forms without attempting to enter the labyrinth of language and analysis. As a performance art work it opened a space for rich imaginal engagement with the ant as the central focus.

Hindsight enables me to trace a fascination for nature back to my earliest childhood. Pre-school drawings filed away by mum include depictions of rainbow, sky, tree, spider, bird, horse and the human form each of which I took on as serious representational challenges. Family camping holidays, family life and to a certain extent school generally encouraged me

to take an interest in the natural world, and as a teenager I came to be obsessed with reptiles and birds. With a camera I applied myself to produce images of tree, flower and spider web and later as a young adult using Super 8: flower, bee, snail and duck. Puppetry as a career then amplified this existing interest. Ecology as a consciously integrated theme within my work really commenced with the *Seagrass Project*, some ten years into my practice even though it was evidently embedded within my worldview from the very beginning.

The term “1788 ecology” specifically values Australia’s original culture and ecology (Gammage, 2011, p. 321) by recognising the year British invasion commenced. Quammen (1997) introduces ecology as a relatively young science, tracing it back to Darwin (1859) and the theory of evolution via Alfred Wallace and other intellectual stakeholders including: Thoreau (1937) who lived a philosophy of absolute freedom and wildness and advocated civil disobedience in favour of nature; Carson (1962) who explains the impact and implications of DDT bioaccumulation on Peregrine Falcons in *Silent Spring*, heralding the beginning of the modern environment movement and MacArthur & Wilson (1967) who propose the theory of island biogeography as a way to understand ecological processes. Lovelock (2000) offers the Gaia theory contemplating life on Earth as a single self-regulating organism. More recently Flannery (2012) alerts us to an unprecedented rate of species extinctions in Australia, Arons and May (2012) outline eco-criticism and eco-dramaturgy as ways of thinking about and taking action in relation to the global ecological crisis. Kumar (2012) proposes reverential ecology as a space of gratitude towards nature.

Seagrass

Building on all of these the following case study details an ecology focussed community celebration that opened a few important *praxical* doors for me. As life work it

required that I withdraw from existing work opportunities in order to create something new. The groundwork included contacting local community groups, developing a viable project proposal and applying for funding to cover project expenses.

The intention of the *Seagrass Project* was to celebrate a human-inclusive ecology and at the same time model a culture that creatively engaged and valued an inner and an outer world of nature. This case study explores what was once simply referred to as *community art* and then *community cultural development* and more recently *socially engaged art*, although it will not be my business here to interrogate those terms.



Fig (xvi) *Westernport Bay with T'ai Chi bubbles*. Video screenshot by author 2017.

By 1979 inspiration and vision were already integral to my embryonic puppetry practice when my Dad introduced me to a hotbed of political angst and argument about the impacts of port-related industry in Westernport Bay (Cuming, 2011a, 2011b). Since my teenage

years I had lived through a series of campaigns against development proposals that threatened the health of the bay as I learned of a proposal by the Hastings Sewerage Authority to pipe treated effluent across Somers beach into the sea where I spent my summers swimming, sailing and singing folk songs with friends. I felt deeply indignant about the proposal and attended a meeting at the Hastings Football Club with Dad where I heard marine scientist Dr Doug Bulthuis talk about the importance of seagrass as habitat for sea creatures. Bulthuis explained in detail how seagrass responds to dredging, boat propellers and nutrient overload among other things. I took notes and embarked on a plan of my own. My plan proposed using puppetry, clowning, music and story-telling to raise awareness about local ecology. As a first year drama student at the Victorian College of the Arts under founding dean Peter Oyston my political purpose towards social justice was accelerating and the brutal reality of port commerce plainly offended me.

Growing out of my immersive community theatre training at the VCA, the *Seagrass Project* was informed by a milieu that included West Community Theatre, the Murray River Performing Group, Theatreworks, Playback Theatre Melbourne and the Mill Theatre in Geelong. It also responded to my experiences of working with people with disabilities on several programs with the Arts Access Society including the statewide *Theorem* project and a couple of community-based projects with the Victorian Arts Council in country Victoria, each of which framed my thinking about how to take effective cultural action.

It was the deep-rooted emotion of this genesis that gave rise to the *Seagrass Project* (Cuming et al. 1989; 1991; Cuming 1991/1992). The community were bursting with energy for change as a conservative, male-dominated council pushed an industrial development agenda heedless of environmental consequences. My self-defined role within the community was to animate hope through making art that encouraged people to learn about and value local ecology. Engaging the local community through family, friends, local schools,

businesses, community organisations and local council I developed a proposal for a science/ education/ arts project, applying to local, state and federal arts and environment agencies for project funding. Eventually, the Westernport and Peninsula Protection Council (WPPC) kicked in \$300 and agreed to auspice the project.

The *Seagrass Project* from 1988 - 1990 constituted a quantum leap in my practice that applied my creative experience as a whole to celebrating the eco-systems and life-cycles of Westernport Bay (Cuming, 2010). It borrowed form and content from almost every practical creative precedent I had experienced directly, seen, read or heard about. It proved to be a personally transformative period in my life as I discovered what it meant to invest in a heartfelt vision for healing.

In the *Seagrass Project* the singular blade of *Seagrass* becomes a puppet. The person operating it effectively *becomes* the blade of seagrass. Inspired by the flags I'd seen in Bali in 1986, it consisted of a 3 metre bamboo pole with a cane extension supporting a long narrow bem silk flag. According to an earlier me, it is an "experience of dreaming oneself into the world, rather than looking at it from the outside" (Cuming et al. 1989). According to Abram: "the blade of grass itself-is an experiencing form, an entity with its own predilections and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own" (Abram, 1996, p. 10). The *Seagrass Meadow* is a chorus of such experiencing forms, dreaming themselves into the world. I recorded in an arts magazine article at the time:

The vision for me had nothing to do with confronting an issue and everything to do with revealing a source of nourishment or soul food in the vital living seagrass meadows that survive despite human carelessness and ignorance. Seagrass is a sensual, resilient and ancient life form (Cuming, 1991/92).

If people are the main cause of the global ecology crisis then cultural change is surely a worthy step towards planetary healing. This step did feel significant at the time. It felt like magic, which according to Abram is, “in its perhaps most primordial sense ... the experience of existing in a world made up of multiple intelligences” (Abram, 1996, p. 9). The evolving story was developed in-community over three years from 1988-1990 in collaboration with community theatre practitioner Meme (then Jan) McDonald, pyro technician Neil Cameron, musician Greg Stebbing, sculptor Simon Normand and the community of Hastings.

Year one. That first year’s story in 1988, inspired by Hemingway’s *Old man and the sea*, and *Engineers of the Imagination* (Coult & Kershaw, 1983) enacted a mythic history of Westernport using very large images and music in an outdoor setting. Original songs composed by and with the community told the story of the connectedness and interdependence of all things and of the unique biodiversity of the wetlands, the role of humans as custodians, and the centrality of seagrass to the web of life in the bay. Apart from the songs, no words were used to convey the narrative that year, a presentational choice that some members of the audience found challenging. In the *Seagrass Story* the *Hermit Crab* came from the deepest oceans in response to a call from the *Golden Fish* to rescue the *Fisherman’s Daughter* and return her safely to the *City of the Bay*. The *Hermit Crab*, inspired by the ancient *Pink Sea Snail* from the original *Dr Dolittle* movie with Rex Harrison (1967), aligned the first Seagrass Story with the moon and thereby the feminine, the spiral shell with an idea of evolution. Watching that movie in a cinema while on holiday at the Gold Coast, aged 10, I had experienced an epiphany. I *knew* how the *Doctor* was talking to the animals, but then as I tried to tell Dad and my older brother on the way back to the car the *knowing* vanished like a dream upon waking. The story of the *Hermit Crab* re-membered and restored my faith in that dreamy knowing, galvanising the community and nucleating a project that

ran for three years in my home town of Hastings, kick-starting the engine of my creative activism towards environmental and cultural health and vitality.

Year two. In 1989 a 6m standing pair of bamboo and cane-framed, white bem silk-clad *Royal Spoonbills*, hatched two *Spoonbill Chicks* and one *Mudchild* in a story inspired by the *Ugly Duckling*. The spoonbill was chosen as a species that lived and bred locally, depending on the micro fauna that lives in the seagrass meadow. The three-person operation of this puppet replicated the distinctive head-swaying action of the spoonbill as it sifts through the mud in the shallows. The flexible red-pahang cane neck allowed a universal head movement that rippled through to the body suspended in balance atop the legs. An extra two people were required for flight. The long head pole was removed and the wings lifted from concealment to create the image of flying-off into the sunset. During rehearsals, a 3m articulated leg proved unwieldy as the operators bore the full weight of the puppet whilst attempting to *walk*, so a fixed straight leg was constructed. Surprisingly, this limitation yielded a very life-like walk as the supporting leg maintained the height of the hip as the other leg swung through. The action through the body was fluid and organic. A story synopsis was included in the program to satisfy the call by some for words.

Year three. In 1990 the story focussed on the Eastern Curlew from Siberia and how an Old man teaches his granddaughter about the life cycles of the bay. The four-person cane-framed *tyvec*-clad *Curlew* puppets were slightly smaller than the *Spoonbills*, with wings folded into the body and kept in place with a calico tie, being released as the flock took flight. The image of the flock included four large birds operated by people including my Mum who expressed a wish to perform. A flock of smaller birds was created by children as a representation of the fifty-five species of wading birds that migrate from Siberia each year. Of these three years of birds, the *Spoonbills* in year two were perhaps the most dramatic and

poetic forms. In the third year the theme of migration comprised a significant leap in the narrative development as it established a link between the local and the global.

Significant change occurred as a result of *Seagrass*. Over the three years several environmentally conscious councillors were elected to the Hastings Shire Council and an unprecedented \$111,000 was raised for an arts project. In the years that followed various project personnel generated their own projects modelled on *Seagrass*. One of these, the *Waderbirds* project conducted community events along the flight path of the Eastern Curlew, taking the project to New Zealand, Hong Kong and Japan. Invitations came for me to work all over Australia on *Seagrass*-inspired projects including a Brisbane City Council puppetry residency *Perambulations* and *Hay Yah* in outback New South Wales.

Seagrass gave expression to over a decade of my own practical, imaginative and political development. For the community it established a benchmark for the promotion of environmental and cultural values. The production of the *Seagrass Story* television documentary (Cuming et al., 1989, 1991) in collaboration with the Westernport and Peninsula Protection Council and Open Channel Ltd was integral to the success of the project. It raised the profile of an otherwise invisible grassroots community engagement process, adding value to the project as a whole. Recording the project on broadcast quality video ensured that our local activism reached a wider audience and therefore carried greater political weight. International sales of the documentary and a visit from the Cousteau Foundation—who filmed the 1989 event and broadcast it globally—added to this considerably.

An Australia Council fellowship in 2008 offered me the opportunity to articulate the *Seagrass Model*TM as an evolving multi-modal creative healing methodology tested and defined through a progression of contexts and collaborations (Cuming, 2010). Several large-

scale outdoor, myth-inspired celebrations of ecology born of the *Seagrass Project* extended the model in particular ways (Cuming, 2003; 2004; 2007a; 2007b; 2007c; 2008; 2010).

In summary, the *Seagrass Project* may be described as a creative community engagement methodology that combined intentional self-healing with research-as-healing (Reason & Heron, 1986). In the *Seagrass Project* puppetry as a form of cathexis focussed an object-mediated relational experience (Cuming & Hill, 2017) that called on our earliest experiencing of movement and intention (Hoey, 1997; Moreno, 1945; Trevarthen, 2001; Stern 2002; 2004; 2010). At the time I was just trying to save the planet.

Ramsar. The *Seagrass Project* culminated in a story about the Eastern Curlew—a migratory wading bird that depends on Westernport—explicitly aligning the project with the



Fig (xvii) *Celebrating the Eastern Curlew*. Video screenshots 'Seagrass Story' 1991.

Ramsar Convention (Papayannis & Pritchard, 2008) and incorporating the aims of these with our art-making in order to raise awareness not only about local seagrass ecology but about the body of international law that protects it. Drafted in 1971 in Iran, the Ramsar Convention (1971) established a global process by which wetlands of international significance could be identified and protected. Each of the 168 signatory countries are responsible for the maintenance of the wetlands they designate for inclusion in this conservation process.

Initially there was only a passing reference to culture as one of the factors governing the convention, however a series of amendments recognised the importance of culture. “The incorporation of cultural aspects in the management strategies for wetlands is not an isolated initiative. Besides Ramsar, several other bodies worldwide have officially recognised the links between biological and cultural diversity” (Papayannis & Pritchard 2008, p. 4). To this end the Ramsar Culture Working Group (CWG) was established in 2005 under then Secretary General Peter Bridgewater, who had been Director of the Australian National Parks Service in 1990 during the Seagrass Project. Bridgewater was interviewed by Open Channel as a part of the *Seagrass Story* television documentary (Cuming et al., 1991). The CWG produced a document titled the Guidance Document which expands and clarifies the cultural purposes of the Ramsar Convention. Addressing the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) Rio (2012) Bridgewater (then Chair, Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC), Statutory advisor to UK government) summarises:

The key achievement in the CBD is recognising that we can share biodiversity, we can sustainably use it and we can conserve it and we can do all of those things together ... My feeling of hope is that countries will do that nationally, they now have the tools from the CBD and we should spend less time in the CBD meetings and more time doing stuff on the ground (Bridgewater, 2012).

Birds

Creative action applies a healing balm to spaces of culture within and beyond.

Participant creators both confer and receive benefit. For me these healing spaces can be traced through a series of birds. Here are some of their particulars:

Royal Spoonbill. Initially the *Spoonbills* had articulated legs informed by those of *Socrates* the stork. On the much larger puppet these proved unwieldy and were abandoned after testing. The straight load-bearing leg instantly brought the puppet to life. The 3 metre body balanced on a horizontal bamboo hip to which the straight legs attached. The head attached to the body by two 2 metre pieces of cane and was operated by a 5 metre pole from underneath (Cuming et al., 1989, 1991).

Eastern Curlew. In 2004 I developed a multi-campus, all-age, all-ability project with Vanessa Roche and Chisholm College of Tertiary And Further Education (TAFE) celebrating the Eastern Curlew. Incorporating puppetry, song and percussion, the multi-modal engagement methodology enabled broad spectrum participation of students, staff and community. The theme carried forward the purposes of the *Seagrass Project* in a totally new context (Cuming, 2004).

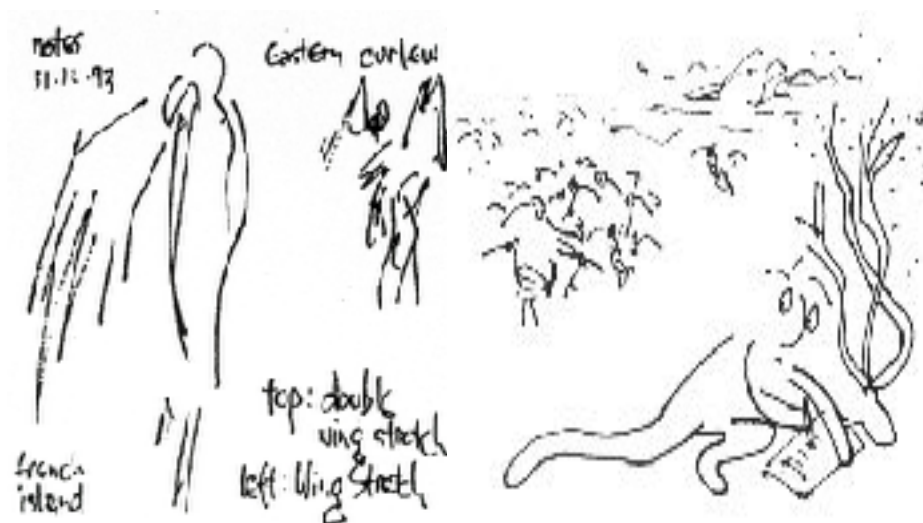


Fig (xviii) *Feel action in the bird as emotion in yourself.* Author's notebook.

Orange-bellied Parrot. One evening in South Melbourne, as a group of adults living with mental health diagnoses shaped up to the idea of making some very big puppets there was a feeling of trepidation in the room. In this project with Melbourne's Danceworks, real care had to be taken to engage people sensitively. The novice creators were a bit daunted by the scale of the images we were about to make. Eventually one piece of cane was lightly and easily turned into a feather by taking advantage of the 'natural' bend in the bail. The harmonious and relaxed inclusion of all members of the group occurred by degrees as nine 3 metre feather frames were created forming the basis for the wings and tail of one bird.

Australasian Bittern. An *Australian Bittern* for the WPPC provided an important opportunity for Dad and I to work creatively together (Cuming, 2003). This puppet was a walking only image created for the endangered species parade. It also led to commissioning of the *Straw-necked Ibis* for Watermark Inc in Sale that kickstarted the science-based arts program in schools that gave rise to the statewide project with the aforementioned HDTW and then to a collaboration with the San Diego-based E.O. Wilson Biodiversity Foundation. Cathexis of program form transfers as intention from one context to the next.

Peregrine Falcon. The *Peregrine Falcons'* feathered wing design was informed by the *Orange-bellied Parrots*. They were capable of flight-only (Cuming, 2003). The wings were fixed open and the legs were decorative rather than functional. The fixed cane-framed wings provided a muscular action. Peninsula Home Education created them in two separate venues over several months. They featured in the endangered species parade on Australia Day 2003 in Mornington and were subsequently exhibited at the Frankston Arts Centre briefly before being installed in the foyer of the Wyndham Cultural Centre in Werribee, Victoria where they remained for over a decade. One member of the team gave birth during this project so the resonances of the image were amplified and made immediately more

meaningful. Laughter and tears shed through the art-making process all bless and intensify the experience, rendering the collaborative process sacred.



Fig (xix) *Peregrine Falcon*. Peninsula Home Education with author.
Photo by Lynn Wynne 2003.

Little Raven. Landcare students at Chisholm TAFE in Cranbourne, after creating their own wetland on campus, created a large *Little Raven* (Cuming, 2007a) and a breeding pair of *Damsel Flies* for the opening ceremony. Percussion and the circle as a gathering space were features of this event that ensured efficacy via an atmosphere inclusiveness, a precursor to projects in Swan Hill and Lake Bolac.

Brolga. The *Brolgas* for the *Twilight Ceremony* of the Lake Bolac Eel Festival echoed the forms of many birds that had gone before with long load-bearing legs as per the *Spoonbills* of Seagrass 1989. The wings of the *Brolgas* were also similar to those of the *Peregrine Falcons* but lighter, enabling them to be folded back onto the body after flying. Each 5 metre tall *Brolga* had four operators. The adult team comprised eight people including artists, farmers, scientists, teachers and students. The *Brolgas* also had offspring created and operated by children. Big puppets for big people and small puppets for small people. The young ones follow the lead of their elders. Cathexis expressed as a playful relational bond.



Fig (xx) *Brolga* mating dance. Puppets author and Lake Bolac community. Video screen shot Alan Pullen.

As we met with the Karween Dance Troupe a day or so before the event, we learned that the troupe also planned to do the *Brolga* dance. Negotiations just prior to the ceremony enabled us to align our new puppet *Brolga* mating dance with this traditional representation of the *Brolga*. That ceremony also brought the traditional dance forms of *Eagle*, *Kangaroo*

and *Willy Wagtail* together with *Whale*, *Brolga* and *Eel*. These collectively combined with *Brolga*, *Eel*, *Sugar Ant* and *Weedy Seadragon* as puppets gathered in a circle for a very special 90 minutes to play and dance together around a sacred fire.

Wedge-tailed Eagle

In 2003 Aboriginal elder Aunty F. joined me in redefining Australia Day in Mornington by creating an eagle representing *Bunjil*, the creator spirit of the Kulin Nations. This very large cane and bamboo-framed, hessian-clad image was about 6 metres tall with a 12 metre wingspan. Designed for parade and ambient presence on a day that celebrates the invasion of the original republic of Australia by the British, our intention was to redefine the day as a celebration of 50,000 plus years. A local Aboriginal art group, Kaal Koori, co-constructed *Bunjil* but couldn't bring themselves to appear on the day. Aunty F., however and her son Jason led the team of operators holding the space as the town gathered, winning the Best Parade Entry on the day and most importantly subverting the naive nationalistic sentiment that characterises the day. The local council *rag* that week blurted out that Mornington Council had won the inaugural Best Australia Day Celebrations Award for the state of Victoria. The paper featured photos of the puppets in the parade and of the Mayor receiving the award making no mention of Kaala Koori and *Bunjil* the Eagle. It also failed to mention the 10 community groups inspired by Aunty F. who had been central to the success of the day, but many of us knew that we had succeeded in opening a space that day, a space of possibility, a space with potential, a *lively* space.

Weedy Seadragon

One of the other puppet images that was created for that incredible event in 2003, amongst a street full of birds, was the *Weedy Seadragon* (*Weedy*). This 11 metre-long image

was a scale model of a weedy seadragon skeleton picked up on a beach around the time I became a father, so my personal connection to the image was super-charged from the outset, a significance that surely enhanced its status as the marine emblem for the state of Victoria.



Fig (xxi) *Weedy Seadragon* with *Blue Wedges Coalition*. Photo courtesy Leader Newspaper Group n.d.

Graeme and Roza Euston together with local poet Cheryl Rolland of the Balnarring Sustainability Group joined me to work on the cane and bamboo frame for the *Weedy Seadragon*. Artist Suze Kepert applied the final surface of the skin in that first version (Cuming, 2003). The puppet had only two points of articulation with three or four adult operators. Like the *Sugar Ant*, it was a scaled representation of a local species of fauna. Unlike the *Sugar Ant* which as a worker is a non-reproducing female, this Weedy Seadragon was male. It is the male who gestates the young.

Puppets often get re-purposed. *Weedy*, after assisting in the re-framing of Australia Day galvanised the Blue Wedges Coalition, an alliance of environment groups defending Port Philip Bay against dredging and subsequently supported the *Pelican* catamaran with their *Two Bays* science and cultural program (Cuming, 2007b). He was also to confer a blessing at the funeral of friend and local artist Kay Stanley focussing grief in a silent tribute.

In 2010, a group of *Weedy's* friends created a female *Weedy Seadragon*, so we could enact the weedy seadragon *Mirror Dance* mating ritual as presented on TV by David Attenborough. Being a mating ritual, the *Mirror Dance* required the production of baby *Weedy Seadragons*. These were constructed by children in community workshops using wire and colourful fabric tat, pipe cleaners and baubles: big puppets for big people, small puppets for small people. Ultimately graceful in performance and quite delicate despite their size, they were usually accompanied by a drum, occasionally accented by high-pitched chortles. The *Mirror Dance* gave people the opportunity to look up and contemplate the life cycle of this beautiful creature close up (Cuming, 2007b).

Butterfly

Emerging from the cocoon with wings furled and damp, the butterfly stands and unfurls his beautiful wings. He stands in the air as he takes in his surroundings. Antennae that have been tucked in and senseless awaken to the world. Eyes that have known only the dimness of an interior space adjust to the light. A proboscis curled up front is ready to sup on flowery nectar. Air beckons flight yet wings need time. Beautifully butterfly flips without thinking into the wind. He is alone for a time just moving through spaces of trees and sunshine. He is alone until he sights another. He is alone until he is called to dance the dance of eternity. He is alone until he is joined by her, joined to her and pulsing. And flapping. And straining in an ecstasy of release. An intentional butterfly soon to die but for now on purpose.

Soon to die but for now never more alive.

* * *

Culture

An essential long-term cultural perspective on humans as creative myth-makers is supplied by Campbell (1969) who says “in the history of our still youthful species, a profound respect for inherited forms has generally suppressed innovation” (Campbell, 1969 p. 3). This perspective helps us find our way. On the one hand we have inherited cultural forms such as *Punch and Judy*, such as t'ai chi, such as the string puppet and the shadow puppet, however, as Reeve reminds us, these forms are always renewing themselves.

In the video Campbell is heard to say:

an individual who puts himself to the task of activating his imaginative life, the life that springs from inside not from response to outside information and commands ...

that person can find stimulation. There's no rules. An individual has to find what electrifies and enlivens his own heart and wakes him.

(Video extract taken from *The Hero's Journey, a Biographical Portrait*)

My own Anglo Celtic heritage traces back through several generations within Australia to Scotland and England and provides me with a sense of who I am and where I come from. It doesn't answer questions like: *Why did my forbears come to Australia? What does it really mean to live here? Who am I in this context?* A few of my great great grandfathers were captains of industry, mayors and magistrates and founding presidents of sporting clubs in this country yet no mention is made in their records of Australia's First Nations people. *How can that be?*

The Australian colonial mindset generally denies the sovereignty of the First Nations people, however Gammage (2011), Pascoe (2014) and Watson (2015) confidently assert Australia's sovereign status prior to British invasion on the basis of the sustained cultivation and cultural practices of the original occupants. Watson explains the genocidal doctrine of "terra nullius" or no-mans land, the idea used to justify dispossession (Watson, 2014). Sovereignty is such dense and unresolved territory that I despair at thinking on it although I have dipped my toe in (Fitzpatrick 2012). The popular view appears to stand on the misconception that sovereignty is about acts of policy or governance but my feeling is its personal. We are each a sovereign being with rights and responsibilities and we are all affected by the lie of colonisation (Reynolds, 2014).

The uncomfortable detail of the aboriginal stolen generations can be found in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Their Families* (R.

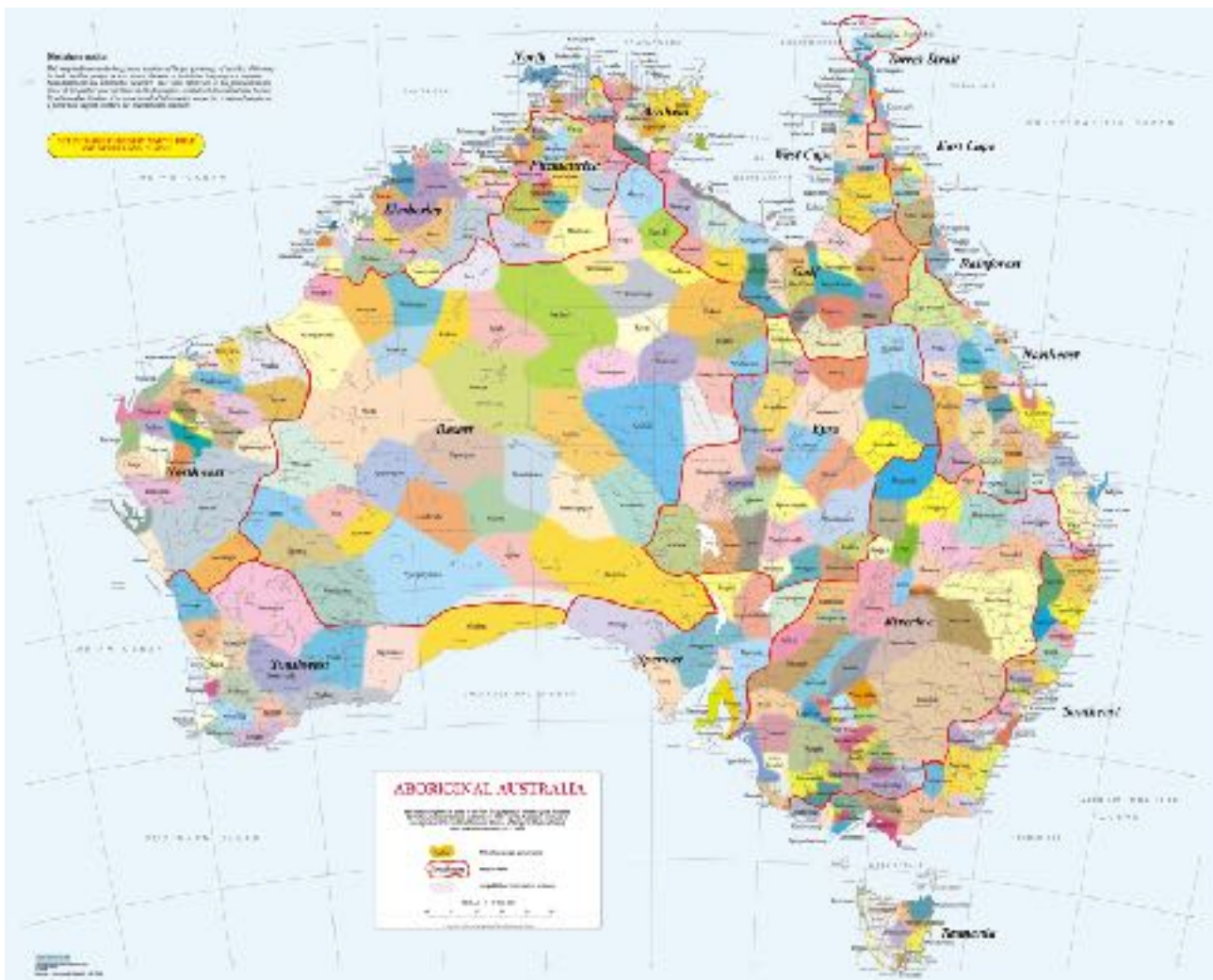


Fig (xxii) *Aboriginal Australia Map*. Reconciliation South Australia - (n.d.)

Wilson, 1997). In its stolen generations commissioner Ronald Wilson writes of a shameful genocide and delivers the testimony of the intergenerational trauma experienced by Australia's First Nations people on this soil since 1788. Inspired by a workshop conducted by Steve Payne, founder of the Torch Project (Thorburn, 2009), I resolved to read the report slowly and steadily from cover to cover, absorbing the detail and feeling the pain. I was fortunate that a friend had picked up a former library copy in an op shop. The report was otherwise hard to find. It seemed to me that this eloquently written account of Australia's shameful past was being swept under the carpet. Thankfully a digital copy is now available online. It deserves to be read widely.

Extensive bloodshed has been visited on Australia's First Nations people prior to the advent of civil society (Georgatus, 2013). Needless and shameful violence has shaped Australia as we know and will continue to shape Australia until we acknowledge it.

The blood-soaked ground upon which our legal, intellectual and democratic institutions stand remembers the genocidal secrets my forebears have striven to forget and erase. Since the well documented killing times (Culture Victoria, n.d.), the establishment of the state-based Supreme Courts, the state and federal Houses of Representatives and the respective state Universities beginning in the 1850s, the strategic removal of children from their families has continued to inflict widespread intergenerational trauma on the First Nations peoples as a whole (R. Wilson, 1997). Wilson states unequivocally that “[t]he effects of separation on past generations can be handed on and contribute to further separation of children from their parents today. Many submissions to the inquiry raised this issue” (R. Wilson 1997, p. 5).

These traumas sadly reflect the values of an aberrant predominantly white Australian culture founded as a penal colony. Lest we forget:

Separation and institutionalisation can amount to traumas. Almost invariably they were traumatically carried out with force, lies, regimentation and an absence of comfort and affection. All too often they also involved brutality and abuse. Trauma compounded trauma. No counselling was ever provided. These traumas ‘have impacted particularly in creating high levels of depression and complex PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder)’. PTSD ‘has a lot of somatic symptoms, impact on personality, on impulse control, and often leads to ongoing patterns of abuse’ (Professor Beverley Raphael evidence 658) (R. Wilson, 1997, p. 196).

Watson introduces us here in relatively few words to the very complex ongoing circumstance that bears directly on this situation, without which bearing any notion of healing in Australia is plainly ungrounded:

The underlying theory supporting the colonisation and dispossession of First Nations peoples in Australia entailed the doctrine of terra nullius—essentially “there’s no people here, it’s ours”. Of course, it’s now commonly known that in 1992 the High Court of Australia rejected terra nullius as a legitimate source of legal foundation. In the case *Mabo v Queensland (1992) 66 ALJR 408*, in a ruling of six to one, the court held that the lands were not terra nullius or “practically unoccupied” in 1788 (Watson 2014, p. 509).

Without labouring the point, healing is required in this country, not only for the First Nations people but for all of us. We all live day-to-day with the traumatic sequelae of the violence of invasion, each in our own way. Simple gestures including acknowledgements of traditional owners, welcomes to country and smoking ceremonies appear to indicate a community will to embrace a new awareness of Australia’s First Nations and by doing so to contribute to healing. These rituals enhance our capacity to connect emotionally through country to each other, inclusive of all.

Trevarthen (2001) says regarding the personal origins of culture:

Human beings are not merely social, they are inherently cultural. Infants are born with motives in their complex brains that lead them to learn through communicating about intentions, interests, and feelings with trusted companions, and to interpret with them a common reality (Trevarthen, 2001, p. 95).

Progressively over several decades my praxis has attended to the personal, the cultural and the ecological with a view to healing. Awareness of Australia's genocidal history has motivated me to seek out creative collaborations with First Nations elders and community who in turn have responded by assisting me in better understanding who I am, where I belong and how together we might proceed.

The Circle

Moreno recognised that within a group any person who is isolated for any reason holds the key to the group becoming whole. Playback Theater founder Jonathan Fox referred to Moreno's isolated person as the *isolate* with the 'a' sounded as in the 'e' of 'facet'. Moreno's principle of including the isolate is substantially achieved by the form of the circle but may need further encouragement, coaxing or facilitation. Performing within a circle, in the open, is quintessentially affirming and transformative. As a metaphor for culture, the circle holds a space of intentional possibility. A person standing in a circle of people is able to witness others as they stand in presence with themselves. The circle is a space in which one may be present as both witness and the witnessed. This performative experience is at once an active gesture and an optimally receptive attentional position. Transformation occurs within the circle. By bringing people together to make and play, puppets help to create circles.

Stolen Snakes. In the Trading Places project in Swan Hill in 2007, we gathered in a circle to make ceremony and celebrate the river (Cuming, 2007). Moreno was invoked and that circle was consciously and intentionally called. The *Stolen Snakes* was a contemporary dreaming story by Wadi Wadi elder Aunty E. devised for her children and her children's children so they could learn about their history without re-engaging the trauma. This river celebration carried meaning for everyone including recent refugees from Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan whose lanterns depicted their homelands and their journeys to freedom. One

Hazara uncle and nephew created a *Lantern Yurt* with many figures silhouetted sitting inside, explaining that when the Taliban took over no more than two people could occupy a yurt. Others depicted their flight from war zones. The river story also proved meaningful for the Japanese exchange students who learned for the first time about the Japanese tradition of Bunraku puppetry and that rice farming in Australia started in Swan Hill. It was no less meaningful for the predominantly Anglo-Celtic community who needed to feel proud of their heritage and of their survival in this country with stories of transport and sheep. Through the collective sharing of meaning under the canopy of Aunty's *Stolen Snakes* story I felt an authentic recognition of and connection to this, my own country and culture.

Anguila Australis

In 2008 the Lake Bolac Eel Festival *Twilight Ceremony* brought people together to learn about and celebrate the life-cycle, habitat and cultural significance of *Anguila Australis*, the Australian short-finned eel (Cuming, 2008; 2010).

Commencing with a moment of conception somewhere far beneath the Coral Sea as both the male and the female eels spawn and die. Fertile eggs float to the surface and drift south in the Eastern Australian current, developing transparent chordate bodies that seek sustenance in micro life-forms before they *smell* fresh water flowing off the land. Turning pink then yellowy-pink they swim upstream, climbing waterfalls and crossing grasslands, turning black as they grow to maturity over a period of several years. Eventually, after maybe twenty years, as the Autumn rains flood the water holes, the creeks, and the Hopkins River, they roll down and back out to sea if they can make it through the rock fish-traps and woven basket nets. The female is a metre long and the male about half that as they swim along the coast back to the Coral Sea but this time without nourishment. They digest their own

stomachs on the way. They return mystically to where they began in a cloud of fertility to repeat the cycle.

The success of this project turned on an intentional ceremonial space in which sacredness was an agreed shared value. The making of puppet images to represent each stage of this life cycle from *Egg*, through the juvenile clear *Glassies*, *Pink Elvas* and *Yellowy Pink Adolescents* to the *Grey Black Male and Female Adult* forms focussed people on the ecological detail over a period of months.

The construction of a massive *Mother Eel* undertaken by the Kikkabush Women's Group incorporated painted designs by Debbie Austin. My work for the *Twilight Ceremony* of the 2008 Lake Bolac Eel Festival (Cuming, 2010) owes its origins methodologically to the



Fig (xxiii) *Mother Eel - Kikkabush Women's Group - Lake Bolac 2008*. Video screenshot Alan Pullen.

Seagrass Project (Cuming et al., 1991). What distinguishes the more recent event from the

former is the wholehearted participation of the First Nations community and a consciously engaged sacred healing purpose. The form and the narrative of this ninety minute celebration contain all of the elements that evidence puppetry as a meaningful process of cathexis. Some of the detail of this event will help to clarify what I mean.

Uncle Ted Lovett said in his welcome-to-country at that ceremony in 2008:

We nurture our children to take the roles of custodians and carers and eventually elders, there's one race in this world, one people, and we are it, so ... lets stand together as one and show the world that we can live in harmony together with our lands (Cuming, 2008).

As I worked in Lake Bolac in 2008 my presence to the purpose of healing was steady. My preparedness to go the extra mile in order to acknowledge past wrongs was foremost in my mind as I engaged with the local community. This included late night drives to meet with an important Uncle or to find a capable writer and a few tricky observances of protocol. On the surface and in the light of day I was busy sharing skills and making stuff for a community performance, but not without noticing the insidious background of an injurious denial about Australia's history of violence. The local secondary school had no intention to allow their students to view the national broadcast of Prime Minister Rudd's historic apology to the Stolen Generations, which happened to coincide with the first scheduled music and puppetry workshops. Standing firm, we applied gentle pressure to the principal who reluctantly acceded to a group of year 10 students watching it in preparation for their participation in the project. This small victory provided the project with a meaningful political edge and several weeks of workshops followed without incident or undue stress. On the night of the ceremony, in the welcome to country, Uncle Ted Lovett proclaimed with heartfelt certainty that "there is only one race" and that "we are it" so we must "pull together as one, not as individuals" and

as he did the ceremonial smoking fires billowed through fire-flame light and coloured theatre-lighting as the life cycle of the Australian eel *Anguilula Australis* was enacted.

Within the Lake Bolac Eel Festival *Twilight Ceremony* several existing elements of my practice came together to give rise to a quantum leap. My transformed *Punch and Judy* introduced puppetry to the community as a living tradition, modelling how an ethically healthy and locally meaningful narrative can be shared using puppets. The *Sugar Ant* marionette inspired the community to tell stories about their own local ecology. The *Weedy Seadragon* appeared as a cameo, representing the creatures of the sea. The *Brolgas* occupied many teenagers over some weeks during the construction phase of the project and two teams of dedicated adults for the performance itself. The *Eels* themselves called in younger children to make the lantern *Eggs* and older children to make and operate the various stages of the *Eel Life-cycle*. As already mentioned the determination to conduct the ceremonial in a circle as we had done in Swan Hill was critical to the success of the event. Yet these ingredients alone did not bring about one of the most special 90 minute community celebrations I have known.

Anguila Australis is echoed in the northern hemisphere by *Anguila Americanus*, *Anguila Japonicas* and *Anguila Europa*. And salmon as witnessed at Brookes Falls, in Katmai National Park, Alaska echo and mirror the eel by swimming up into the freshwater streams to spawn and die before returning to the salt to grow to maturity. Curious counterpoints of provenance and migration, inspirational frameworks of ecology that beckon me to inquire about ecological interconnection and the cycles of human culture.

As preparations drew to a close in the last few days before the *Twilight Ceremony* however, cultural tensions had to be addressed through creative negotiations on a micro-scale. It was the arrival of the indigenous dancers that enabled this to happen. Questions about our purpose arose naturally and were focused clearly in the context of the approaching

collaboration. The fire was set and the space was swept. People gathered around that circle in numbers. Uncle Ted Lovett's welcome to country affirmed the space. In Lake Bolac in 2008, the passion of the sacred fire and the purpose of healing was embraced as it was enacted, in country with the presence of the ancestors.

Shadows

I first saw shadows performed by an old Greek man at Clovelly Puppet Theatre in Sydney in 1979. Gross (2011) says shadow puppetry dates back thousands of years to ancient Greece: "shadows on the cave wall are Plato's metaphor for the most unreal, second order of things, the appearances (natural, and artificial at once) that entrances and seduces us, that we mistake for truth" (p. 126).

Clovelly was founded by the grandmother of Australian puppetry Edith Murray who mentored many, including my own mentor Lorraine (Lorrie) Gardner, Norman Hetherington of *Mr Squiggle* fame and master shadow artist Richard Bradshaw. I first saw Bradshaw's shadows in the 1980s. He presented a series of shadow puppet vignettes accompanied by spoken word, verse and song.

According to Bradshaw who still performs and has written extensively:

Shadow puppetry has its origins in either China or India. Shadow Theatre began in Asia. Written records go back a thousand years, but the art may be twice as old as that. It was the earliest way of putting a moving image on a screen and was a forerunner of cinema and television (Bradshaw, 1972).

In 1986 I saw shadows in Bali on the outskirts of Denpasar and experienced feelings of dread and awe at the spiritual power of the Dalang who read my heart and shook me to my

core. Gross describes shadow puppetry as: “the stuff of the shared memory and present understanding of the world, embedding those watching in a larger substance that is already inside them” (Gross, 2011, p. 129). So *what is inside us as we dance with our own shadows?* Miller (1943) says “the shadow puppet has within its means a psychological distancing which transcends reality no matter how realistic the intent” (p. 60).

In outback New South Wales in 1993 a group of teenagers in the town of Hay floated on the edge of a community theatre project curious but reticent. I pointed them in the direction of a pile of fridge and washing machine boxes and suggested that we could do a shadow puppet show together about their town. Monitoring their use of sharp knives closely as we worked on the platform of the old railway station, they created a *Bushranger* with a *Gun*, a *Cow*, a *Steam Train*, a *Railway Track* and a *Hay Sign* (Cuming, 2018a). Pine poles were cut and lashed together to make a nice big seven metre screen. Lit by a fire-torch-lager-phone that shook, jangled and thumped rhythmically to conduct the movement and a thong-o-phone slapping harmonically, the images improvised the story of a hold up involving a cow and a gun-wielding bushranger, a wordless improvisation that captivated and transported us despite its bizarre incongruencies. That shadow play in Hay was followed by the appearance of the *Cod From Hell*, a five metre long bamboo and cane framed Murray Cod with flaming eyes, in an enacted telling of a Wiradjiri dreaming story about the creation of the Murray and Darling Rivers, one of my first experiences of working with indigenous dreaming stories.

Another incarnation of the shadow screen occurred for *Winter Dreaming* in Hastings in 1994 where students from two secondary schools produced a show in a former housing commission suburb with a freeform array of images. Regardless of the content, the movement of the shadows with music and a fire torch creates atmosphere.

At the Eel Festival the *Shadow Screen* called in some of the farming men to knock together a frame by welding large steel poles together and again. As had occurred in previous projects several teenagers magically appeared to make articulated cardboard creatures to represent the local eco-web. The shadow screen at Lake Bolac represented the interconnectedness of life on Earth. Depictions of food chain and life cycle played on the screen. Frog ate insect and broлга ate frog as the new moon hovered in the fire-lit sky.



Fig (xxiv) *Shadow Brolgas at Lake Bolac*. Video screenshot 2008.

Egg

Standing on the concrete path after the rain, the sky is still grey to the east. A vibrant rainbow arcs over the tree of trees. His six spindly legs firmly braced against gravity, he no longer knows a purpose. He will not fly again. Shuddering uncontrollably he steps aimlessly, hanging on to the last shreds of life's fabric. He turns his quivering form and casts his eye toward a blur of movement. The ache of loss wrecks him and he staggers, losing sight of her against a cloud of colour. He knows he has done all he can possibly do to ensure his progeny will survive and thrive. A puff of wind knocks him over and he flips awkwardly into a familiar stillness. Above him his mate flies yet. Her power is undeniable, her will inexorable. Within her body the fertilised eggs. Within her being the wish to find the shape of shapes, the green of greens, the tree of trees.

* * *

Writing Praxis

The writing as praxis inquires into and reveals those aspects of my puppetry practice that enrich the Video as praxis. Within the frame of artistic research the narrative form of my thesis draws from Ellis et. al who offer auto-ethnography “as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273) and Denshire citing Denzin who suggest that auto-ethnography “move[s] others to ethical action” (Denshire, 2014, p. 844). As an auto-ethnographic method the “layered account” allows me to “express the multiplicity of identities I embody when making a report” in order to “invoke in the reader the emergent experience of being” (Ronai, 1992, p. 102-124). The layered narrative also incorporates case study as a method. Simons in clarifying the need for transparency in self-related research, identifies case study as the study of “the singular, the particular, the unique” (Simons, 2009,

p. 3). Following Ronai, the literature review, the methodology and the case studies appear as layers within the narrative rather than as hermetically sealed sections. The reason for this is to privilege the video praxis as the epistemological nexus of the research. Writing as theory follows video as practice. The common ground they share is the lived experience of the author. Extending the notion of Ronai's layers, 1. the writing as a whole may be read as a layer within the artistic research methodology as a whole; 2. The video is within itself a product of layering.

Two other writers on puppetry, Hoban (1980) and Gross (2011), indirectly inform the presentational form of the research. Their writing approaches affirm that writing about puppets can be and perhaps ought to be quirky. The writing of Hoban (1983) must be seen to be believed. Page 205 of Hoban's post-apocalyptic novel *Riddley Walker* (Fig xxiii below) refers to several core ingredients of the *Punch and Judy*, including the stages of construction, the nature of the performance, the definitive traditional *swazzle* voice of *Punch* and the set of stock characters including *Judy*, the *Baby* and the *Crocodile*. This image of the text establishes a continuity of form from writing-as-word art to writing-as-visual art. Hoban bends our heads by contorting the familiar shapes of words, using unconventional phonemes, morphemes and sentence constructions, skewing the familiar so that we must search for it. His unwavering attention to the life of the world he creates, word by word, sustains us, holds us to the page. His cathexis mesmerises.

Gross (2011), in discussing Hoban, offers us a glimpse of this puppetry-inspired territory when referring to the ancient and dismembered, blackened hand of a Punch man, saying: "It shows the strength of fragile things, the humanity of human things, a knowledge that precedes knowledge—knowing that, for Riddley, 'thinks us but dont think like us and is afeart of being beartht'" (p. 112-113). Gross here is citing Hoban referring to the knowledge

itself being afraid of being birthed, a view that accords independent life to the knowing in a way that echoes the life of the puppet.

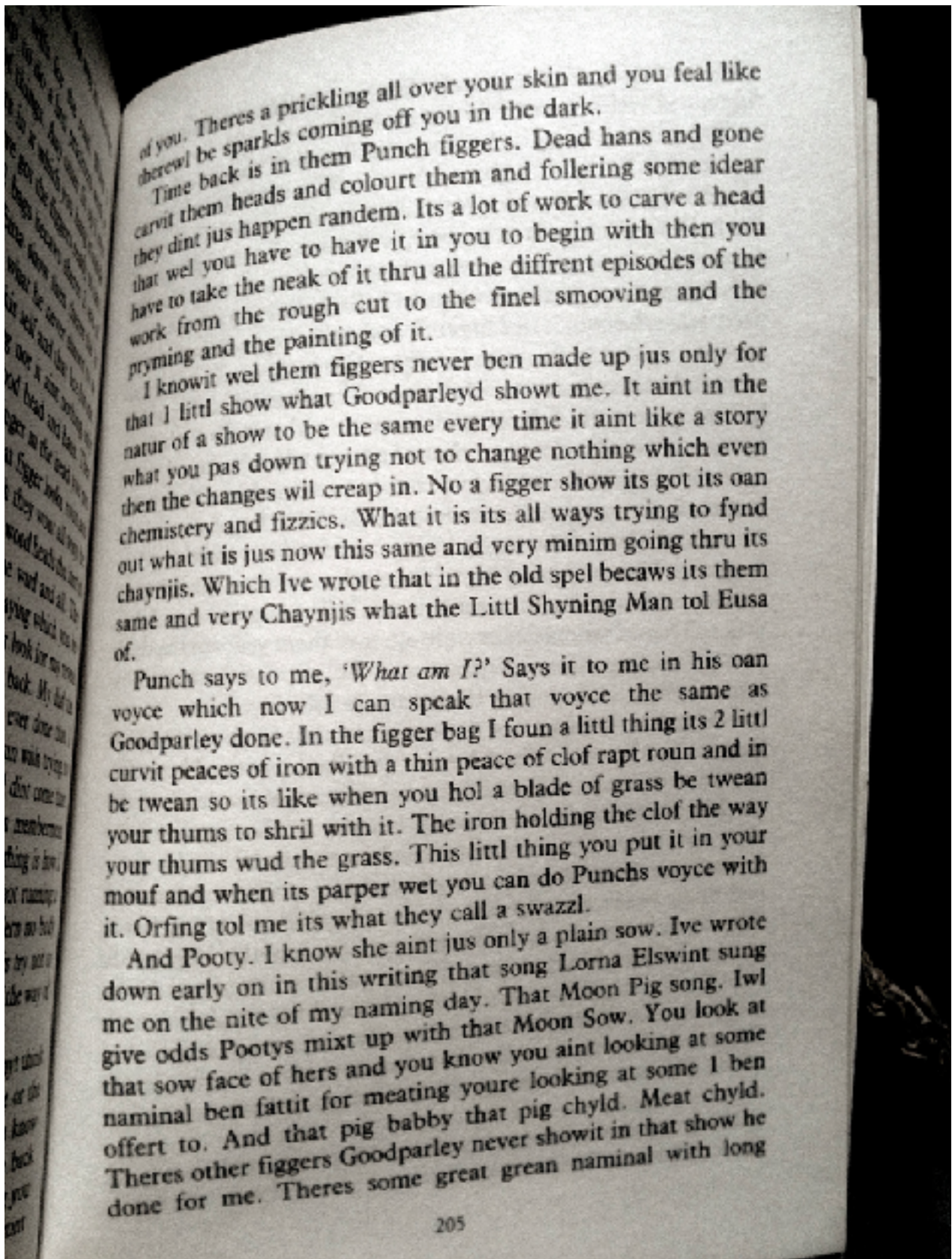


Fig (xxv) *Its oan chemistery and fizzics*. Page 205 'Riddley Walker' by Russell Hobans.

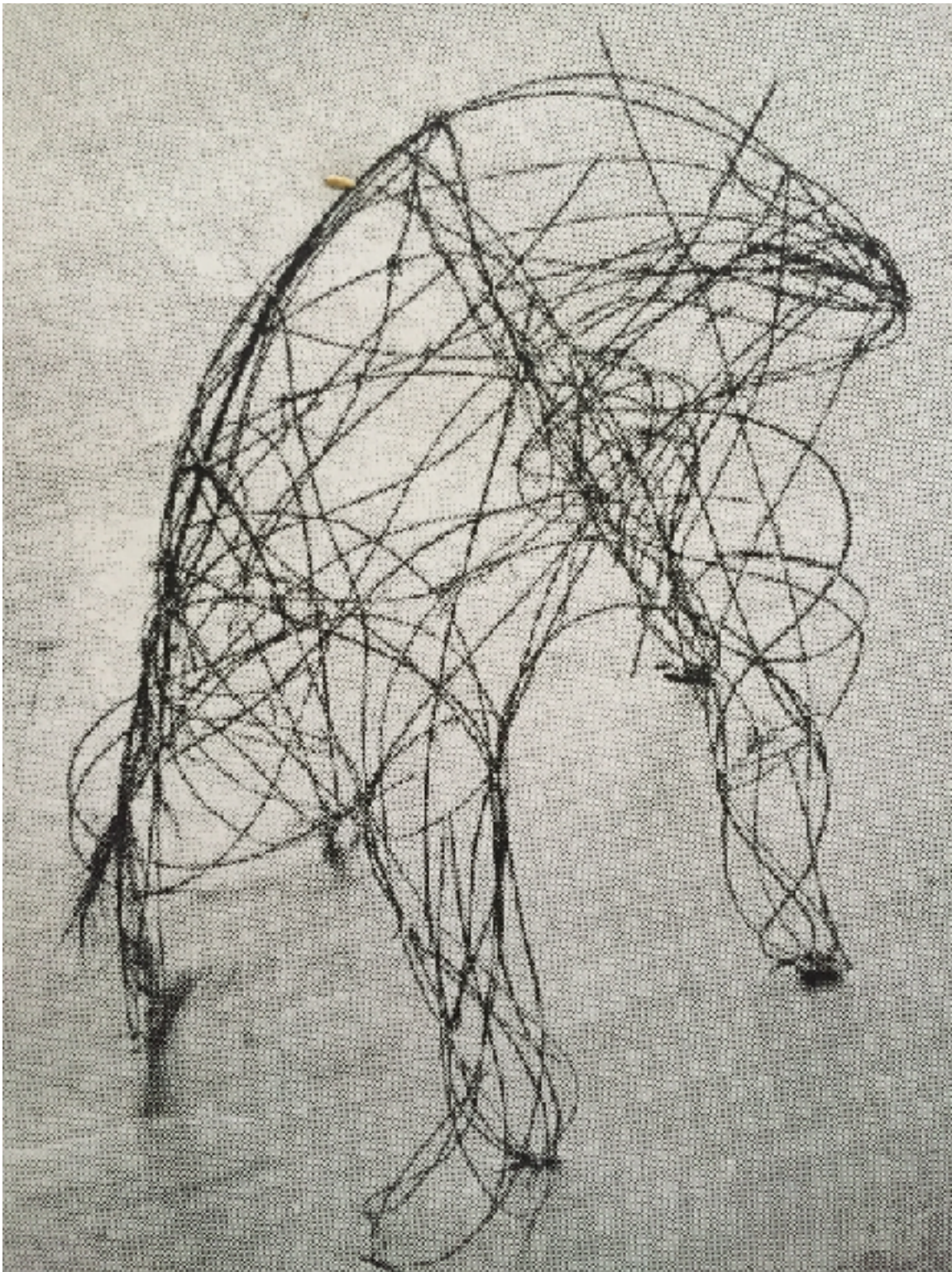


Fig (xxvi) *Strawberry the Dog*
Brisbane City Council 1991.

In the spirit of the knowing being birthed, the figure above shows an open cane structure about two metres tall and three metres long representing a dog. The process of arriving at this image was unaccountably mysterious. As artist-in-residence with Brisbane City Council in 1991, I encouraged the community puppet makers to play with the materials

and modelled what I meant by picking up some cane, bending it and tying it to form a strawberry shape that I called a dogs head. During eight weeks of constructive play the head was abandoned for the headless body. Operating the open frame from within, I could shuffle-walk and gallop, roll, sit up and clap front paws and vocalise. In contrast to the spectacle of a singular performance event such as Seagrass, a 'Perambulation' of ambient animated figures occurred throughout the Brisbane City Gardens through the course of a day, a devolved outcome that reduced stress and enabled the makers to explore open-endedly.



Fig (xxvii) *Lake Bolac Fire Eel*. Fire sculpture by Tim Monley. Life drawing by Author.

Lineage

As sure as birds have eggs, *Socrates* led me knowingly back to Plato's cave with shadows on the wall and a crazy dream of justice as a state or *republic* and I'm left wondering *what story can I hear in the echoes of my practice?* In the background there are the deeply personal threads that tether me to my immediate family and forebears, through DNA to a cultural heritage traceable for about a thousand years initially and thence, as with

all of us to the neolithic and paleolithic roots of human existence. Prior to that we find our ancestry relates us to all other life on Earth, a story that unites us now as never before. Then there is a foreground of threads that tether me to life and body, experience and form, puppetry in particular and creative practitioners in general. These threads, so richly interwoven within my own lifetime, comprise the fabric of my expressive life. That fabric is textured and patterned and alive for me with endless colour and meaning.

And here I am in Australia attempting to understand the story of a modern society grappling with a shameful and violent past. *So what are the echoes that sustain my cathexis? What is it that rivets my attention? Is it the under-exposed narrative of colonial Australia massacring its way to civilised society in one of the world's most tragic contemporary genocides? Could it be a new story about the Original Republic of Australia; of First Nations people that lived in this country peacefully and productively until 1788?*

Tracks and gathering places.

*An old Aboriginal man appears face to my face
With long hair & beard
In a dream
...
I am then above my home in Hastings
Being introduced wordlessly
To the gathering places
& to the tracks
of 1788
...
in
the
dream
it is the
atmospheres
that call me as I find
that they are the same today
as they were back then so I know we have
inherited the culture of the people we have overthrown*

Threads of the Story. We started by looking at healing. Stern and Trevarthen resourced us with some of the science of pre and post natal relational experiencing as the foundations of personhood and culture. We encountered Moreno who founded the theatre of spontaneity and psychodrama giving rise to Gestalt Therapy through Perls and Playback Theatre through Fox. We heard from McNiff about the art as healing and from Korner about the importance of liveliness in addressing trauma. We stopped in our tracks to acknowledge the trauma of separation suffered by the First Nations stolen generations as reported by R. Wilson and wonder still whether our response is adequate.

We then looked at puppetry through Gross who reminded us about the sacred purpose of the shamans, and Simmens about the global origins of the multiple forms and from Miller half a century ago about the therapeutic applications of puppetry. We followed Reeve to learn that the Punch and Judy tradition is alive and well in the hands of contemporary practitioners consciously transforming it. We also heard of the incredible Schumanns in Vermont, USA whose large scale outdoor political puppetry has rippled around the globe since the 1950s.

We mapped ecology with help from Quammen's retelling of the theory of evolution through to the human implications of Carson's bioaccumulation, and paused for a moment to take in MacArthur and Wilson's theory of island biogeography as a way of understanding species extinctions. Flannery warned about the extinction rates of Australian fauna. We entered the legal labyrinth to catch up with the Ramsar Convention on migratory birds, the body of international law for the protection of wetlands and may have noticed in passing it's location under the treaty of treaties along with the Convention on Biodiversity and other similar instruments. We learned that Lovelock's Gaia theory proposed life on Earth as a self-regulating bubble of life we know as the biosphere. Fitzpatrick introduced us briefly to eco-

criticism and eco-dramaturgy as grass roots responses to the ecological crisis and Kumar told us about reverential ecology, a way of regarding humanity within nature as sacred.

Finally we considered the cultural context with a commanding overview by Campbell of the broad sweep of human myth making—from the very beginning—and the important role of the creative agent in culture. Flannery, Pascoe, Gammage and Watson independently informed us about the Australian cultural context, assuring us that the First Nations people were practising intentional cultivation in 1788 when the British invaded. Wilson and Reynolds each confirm that genocide is a reasonable way to refer to the process of colonisation. Trevarthen also provided useful cultural context for healing trauma. He assures us that cultural learning begins in the womb as the pre-natal infant engages the world around them via the senses and within them via the arousal pathways. *Is this the playful knowing of this world that dwells at the very core of my praxis?*

Spirit. A series of rainbows speak to me in unusual ways. In 1990 the healthy *Green Seagrass* turned white—as the seagrass meadow died—to represent the *Ghost Seagrass*. It was transformed during the show by a team of people with buckets of school-grade acrylic paints. The rainbow-colours of *Seagrass* in the final scene of the third and final show in 1990 represented regeneration and hope for the future after devastation. By the late nineties my new *Punch and Judy* curtains reflected the new story, with the colours of the rainbow and the story about the *Baby* and the the *Crocodile* cleaning up the River. Those curtain came from my house. The house curtains came from *Seagrass*.

In a dream in 1992 a huge hairy, scary black spider transformed into a most beautiful creature imaginable with rainbow light emitting from the hair filaments all over its body and legs. *Rainbow Spider* then became a collaborative puppet construction and focused the first

year of *Winter Dreaming* in Hastings. *Was this the rainbow from my childhood dream that used to frighten me now relieving me of a lifelong fear of spiders?*

A parade of *Endangered Species* in Mornington (Cuming, 2003) saw the rainbow appear as a street full of *Coloured Flags*. The *Stolen Snakes* in Swan Hill, told by Wadi Wadi elder Aunty E. to honour her nephew who took his own life while working on his masters thesis about the stolen generations. The *Big Mother Eel* at Lake Bolac emerged out of the lake to dance around the sacred fire painted from head to tail in the colours of the rainbow with cultural designs that echoed the dreaming patterns of the artist's ancestors.

These dreams come to me unbidden as I sleep and help me connect to this country. *Could the colourful cloud of my childhood dream be Rainbow Serpent? Could the Old Man who took me up over the land be Bunjil the Eagle? Is this spirit of the land talking to me?*

Puppetry Praxis

Training ourselves to liveliness. By revealing the micro and macro constructive and performative processes of my puppetry praxis through this dissertation and through the Video, I hope this research will open doors of possibility for applying the playful and lively principle of cathexis to gaining a better understanding of ourselves, our community and our beautiful world with a view to bringing healing where it is most needed.

This research project introduces culture, cultural learning and how we become cultural beings. It proposes healing, ecology, culture and puppetry as specific fields of research that might help inform a creative pedagogy. A hierarchy of cathectic forms beginning with the body as in t'ai chi, middling with the various art forms and those of puppetry—from hand to rod to string to shadow— culminates with the screen in the form of writing, photography and video. Given the increasing dependence of humans on screens—

might a refined understanding of cathexis help us understand our new screen-obsessed culture? What are we doing to ourselves, to our children, to our future?

Puppetry brings together and segues easily into other creative forms. It prepares us for them. It leads us easily into art and sculpture, dance, music, language, science, history, education, spirituality and more. By appealing to multiple senses it activates multiple arousal pathways in the brainstem. By sharing my process holistically I am asking in a multi-modal way: *what would it take to nucleate meaningful change in the world? How might young people be optimally stimulated to learn and grow? How might our future leaders develop the imaginative tools to govern more effectively? How might we inform meaningful cultural change within and beyond our educational and bureaucratic institutions?*

Puppetry is an excellent starting point for asking questions about almost anything. Puppetry is a safe and accessible form of cathexis that may be applied to all learning levels, from pre-school to post-grad and may therefore be of interest to educators and educational policy writers as they strive to engage children in learning. It enables us to focus intention and to generate and experience possibility, making the thinking process itself viewable and tangible. It is ancient, it is global, it is popular and it is endlessly rich in cultural learning potentials because it brings the inner world of thought, emotion and spirit into the open before words get in the way.

Puppetry may also be used to focus a group of people on a collaborative purpose and then to explore and refine that purpose. Cultural tolerance and personal resilience are strengthened as we engage in meaningful play. As a model for engaging metaphors for change it is very transferable. It may be useful for example in envisioning, scoping and evaluating new approaches to community health, education delivery, business investment,

international law, environmental planning and cultural development. Team building and creative modelling is the territory: dream, make, play, reflect, discuss and review.

Newspaper, masking tape and felt tip pens are all that is required for making and playing with embryonic ideas. With this simple kit, children of all ages can readily engage the puppetry process in a meaningful way within and beyond the educational context. Where time and skill permit the use of tools, wire, string, glues and paint etc., recycled materials offer greater scope for the construction of more durable forms. Novice creators can easily make puppets that work and convey meaning. Making bigger puppets using bamboo and cane is a natural extension of these simpler, smaller puppet technologies.



Fig (xxviii) *Training Ourselves to Liveliness*. Photo by Author 2017.

One day in a familiar room, a small group of post-graduate researchers stood with me in a circle to make newspaper puppets and play. We laughed and shared and left the room that day as if meeting for the first time. The activity was enlivening and conducive to making connections within and between us. Making and playing with puppets in this way is a healthy way for individuals, groups and whole communities to spend time together. In the simplest and most playful of ways, puppetry excites and stimulates engagement in learning and in the development of meaningful relationships through informed play and by doing so, provides a way for us to generate fresh awareness and model new consciousness.

The figure above is my own handprint. It is at once the *puppetless* hand of *Punch* and the open, receptive hand of t'ai chi. Through a trick of shadows what is concave appears to be convex. The incidental flecks of brown (top left) are leaves of the seagrass species *zostera muellerii*. In a transient echo of ochre-sprayed *shadow* hands in ancient rock shelters I have left my mark on the Earth. Within hours the gesture will be washed by the Ramsar-protected waters in which my father's memory lives eternal. It is both a wave hello and a wave goodbye. It is also an offer to help facilitate meaningful change through creative action. Puppetry works not only because it transports us beyond the body into a magical realm but because, as often as it does so, it returns us to ourselves.

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