

Abstract

Introduction

Regional identity is a constant construction, in which landscape, human activity and cultural imaginary build a narrative of place. For the Tasmanian Midlands, the interactions between history, ecology and agriculture both define place and present problems in how to recognise, communicate and balance these interactions. In this sense, regionality is defined not so much as a relation of margin to centre, but as a specific accretion of environmental and cultural histories. According weight to more-than-human perspectives, a region can be seen as a constellation of plant, animal and human interactions and demands, where creative art and design can make space and give voice to the dynamics of exchange between the landscape and its inhabitants. Consideration of three recent art and design projects based in the Midlands reveal the potential for cross-disciplinary research, embedded in both environment and community, to create distinctive and specific forms of connectivity that articulate a regional identity.

The Tasmanian Midlands have been identified as a biodiversity hotspot (Australian Government), with a long history of Aboriginal cultural management disrupted by colonial invasion. Recent archaeological work in the Midlands, including the *Kerry Lodge Archaeology and Art Project*, has focused on the use of convict labour during the nineteenth century in opening up the Midlands for settler agriculture and transport. Now, the Midlands are placed under increasing pressure by changing agricultural practices such as large-scale irrigation. At the same time as this intensification of agricultural activity, significant progress has been made in protecting, preserving and restoring endemic ecologies. This progress has come through non-government conservation organisations, especially Greening Australia and their program Tasmanian Island Ark, and private landowners placing land under conservation covenants. These pressures and conservation activities give rise to research opportunities in the biological sciences, but also pose challenges in communicating the value of conservation and research outcomes to a wider public. The *Species Hotel* project, beginning in 2016, engaged with the aims of restoration ecology through speculative design while *The Marathon Project*, a multi-year curatorial art project based on a single property that contains both conservation and commercially farmed zones.

This article questions the role of regionality in these three interconnected projects—*Kerry Lodge*, *Species Hotel*, and *Marathon*—sited in the Tasmanian Midlands: the three projects share a concern with the specificities of the region through engagement with specific sites and their histories and ecologies, while also acknowledging the forces that shape these sites as far more mobile and global in scope. It also considers the interdisciplinary nature of these projects, in the crossover of art and design with ecological, archaeological and agricultural practices of measuring and intervening in the land, where communication and interpretation may be in tension with functionality. These projects suggest ways of working that connect the ecological and the cultural spheres; importantly, they see rural locations as sites of knowledge production; they test the value of small-scale and ephemeral interventions to explore the place of art and design as intervention within colonised landscape.

Regions are also defined by overlapping circles of control, interest, and authority. We test the claim that these projects, which operate through cross-disciplinary collaboration and network with a range of stakeholders and community groups, successfully benefit the region in which they are placed. We are particularly interested in the challenges of working across institutions which both claim and enact connections to the region without being centred there. These projects are initiatives resulting from, or in collaboration with, University of Tasmania, an institution that has taken a recent turn towards explicitly identifying as place-based yet the placement of the Midlands as the gap between campuses risks attenuating the institution's claim to be of *this* place. Paul Carter, in his discussion of a regional, site-specific collaboration in Alice Springs, flags how processes of creative place-making—operating through mythopoetic and story-based strategies—requires a concrete rather than imagined community that actively engages a plurality of voices on the ground. We identify similar concerns in these art and design projects and argue that iterative and long-term creative projects enable a deeper grappling with the complexities of shared regional place-making.

The Midlands is aptly named: as a region, it is defined by its geographical constraints and relationships to urban centres. Heading south from the northern city of Launceston, travellers on the Midland Highway see scores of farming properties networking continuously for around 175 kilometres south to the outskirts of Brighton, the last major township before the Tasmanian capital city of Hobart. The town of Ross straddles latitude 42 degrees south—a line that has historically divided Tasmania into the divisions of North and South. The region is characterised by extensive agricultural usage and small remnant patches of relatively open dry sclerophyll forest and lowland grassland enabled by its lower attitude and relatively flatter terrain. The Midlands sit between the mountainous central highlands of the Great Western Tiers and the Eastern Tiers, a continuous range of dolerite hills lying south of Ben Lomond that slope coastward to the Tasman Sea. This area stretches far beyond the view of the main highway, reaching east in the Deddington and Fingal valleys. Campbell Town is the primary stopping point for travellers, superseding the bypassed towns, which have faced problems with lowering population and resulting loss of facilities.



Image 1: Southern Midland Landscape, Ross, Tasmania, 2018. Image Credit: Patrick Sutczak.

Predominantly under private ownership, the Tasmanian Midlands are a contested and fractured landscape existing in a state of ecological tension that has occurred with the dominance of western agriculture. For over 200 years, farmers have continually shaped the land and carved it up into small fragments for different agricultural agendas, and this has resulted in significant endemic species decline (Mitchell et al.). The open vegetation was the product of cultural management of land by Tasmanian Aboriginal communities (Gammage), attractive to settlers during their distribution of land grants prior to the 1830s and a focus for settler violence. As documented cartographically in the Centre for 21st Century Humanities' *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Central and Eastern Australia 1788–1930*, the period 1820–1835, and particularly during the Black War, saw the Midlands as central to the violent dispossession of Aboriginal landowners. Clements argues that the culture of violence during this period also reflected the brutalisation that the penal system imposed upon its subjects. The cultivation of agricultural land throughout the Midlands was enabled by the provision of unfree convict labour (Dillon). Many of the properties granted and established during the colonial period have been held in multi-generational family ownership through to the present.

Within this patchwork of private ownership, the tension between visibility and privacy of the Midlands pastures and farmlands challenges the capacity for people to understand what role the Midlands plays in the greater Tasmanian ecology. Although half of Tasmania's land areas are protected as national parks and reserves, the Midlands remains largely unprotected due to private ownership. When measured against Tasmania's wilderness values and reputation, the dry pasturelands of the Midland region fail to capture an equivalent level of visual and experiential imagination. Jamie Kirkpatrick describes misconceptions of the Midlands when he writes of "[f]latness, dead and dying eucalypts, gorse, brown pastures, salt—environmental devastation [...]—these are the common impression of those who first travel between Spring Hill and Launceston on the Midland Highway" (45). However, Kirkpatrick also emphasises the unique intimate and intricate qualities of this landscape, and its underlying resilience. In the face of the loss of paddock trees and remnants to irrigation, change in species due to pasture enrichment and introduction of new plant species, conservation initiatives that not only protect but also restore habitat are vital. The Tasmanian Midlands, then, are pastoral landscapes whose seeming monotonous continuity glosses over the radical changes experienced in the processes of colonisation and intensification of agriculture.

Underlying the Present: Archaeology and Landscape in the Kerry Lodge Project

The major marker of the Midlands is the highway that bisects it. Running from Hobart to Launceston, the construction of a "great macadamised highway" (Department of Main Roads 10) between 1820–1850, and its ongoing maintenance, was a significant colonial project. The macadam technique, a nineteenth century innovation in road building which involved the laying of small pieces of stone to create a surface that was relatively water and frost resistant, required considerable but unskilled labour. The construction of the bridge at Kerry Lodge, in 1834–35, was simultaneous with significant bridge buildings at other major water crossings on the highway, (Department of Main Roads 16) and, as the first water crossing south of Launceston, was a pinch-point through which travel of prisoners could be monitored and controlled. Following the completion of the bridge, the site was used to house up to 60 male convicts in a road gang undergoing secondary punishment (1835–44) and then in a labour camp and hiring depot until 1847. At the time of the La Trobe report (1847), the buildings were noted as being in bad condition (Brand 142–43). After the station was disbanded, the use of the buildings reverted to the landowners for use in accommodation and agricultural storage.

Archaeological research at Kerry Lodge, directed by Eleanor Casella, investigated the spatial and disciplinary structures of smaller probation and hiring depots and the living and working conditions of supervisory staff. Across three seasons (2015, 2016, 2018), the emerging themes of discipline and control and as well as labour were borne out by excavations across the site, focusing on remnants of buildings close to the bridge. This first season also piloted the co-presence of a curatorial art project, which grew across the season to include eleven practitioners in visual art, theatre and poetry, and three exhibition outcomes. As a crucial process for the curatorial art project, creative practitioners spent time on site as participants and observers, which enabled the development of responses that interrogated the research processes of archaeological fieldwork as well as making connections to the wider historical and cultural context of the site. Immersed in the mundane tasks of archaeological fieldwork, the practitioners involved became simultaneously focused on repetitive actions while contemplating the deep time contained within earth. This experience then informed the development of creative works interrogating embodied processes as a language of site.

The outcome from the first fieldwork season was *earthspoke*, an exhibition shown at Sawtooth, an artist-run initiative in Launceston in 2015, and later re-installed in Franklin House, a National Trust property in the southern suburbs of Launceston.



Images 2 and 3: *earthspoke*, 2015, Installation View at Sawtooth ARI (top) and Franklin House (bottom). Image Credits: Melanie de Ruyter.

This recontextualisation of the work, from contemporary ARI (artist run initiative) gallery to National Trust property enabled the project to reach different audiences but also raised questions about the emphases that these exhibition contexts placed on the work. Within the white cube space of the contemporary gallery, connections to site became more abstracted while the educational and heritage functions of the National Trust property added further context and unintended connotations to the art works.



Image 4: *Strata*, 2017, Installation View. Image Credit: Karen Hall.

The two subsequent exhibitions, *Lines of Site* (2016) and *Strata* (2017), continued to test the relationship between site and gallery, through works that rematerialised the absences on site and connected embodied experiences of convict and archaeological labour. The most recent iteration of the project, *Strata*, part of the Ten Days on the Island art festival in 2017, involved installing works at the site, marking with their presence the traces, fragments and voids that had been reburied when the landscape returned to agricultural use following the excavations. Here, the interpretive function of the works directly addressed the layered histories of the landscape and underscored the scope of the human interventions and changes over time within the pastoral landscape.

The interpretative role of the artworks formed part of a wider, multidisciplinary approach to research and communication within the project. University of Manchester archaeology staff and postgraduate students directed the excavations, using volunteers from the Launceston Historical Society. Staff from Launceston's Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery brought their archival and collection-based expertise to the site rather than simply receiving stored finds as a repository, supporting immediate interpretation and contextualisation of objects. In 2018, participation from the University of Tasmania School of Education enabled a larger number of on-site educational activities than afforded by previous open days. These multi-disciplinary and multi-organisational networks, drawn together provisionally in a shared time and place, provided rich opportunities for dialogue. However, the challenges of sustaining these exchanges have meant ongoing collaborations have become more sporadic, reflecting different institutional priorities and competing demands on participants. Even within long-term projects, continued engagement with stakeholders can be a challenge: while enabling an emerging and concrete sense of community, the time span gives greater vulnerability to external pressures.

Making Home: Ecological Restoration and Community Engagement in the Species *Hotel* Project



Images 5 and 6: Selected Species Hotels, Ross, Tasmania, 2018. Image Credits: Patrick Sutczak.

The *Species Hotels* stand sentinel over a river of saplings, providing shelter for animal communities within close range of a small town. At the township of Ross in the Southern Midlands, work was initiated by restoration ecologists to address the lack of substantial animal shelter belts on a number of major properties in the area. The Tasmania Island Ark is a major Greening Australia restoration ecology initiative, connecting 6000 hectares of habitat across the Midlands. Linking larger forest areas in the Eastern Tiers and Central Highlands as well as isolated patches of remnant native vegetation, the Ark project is vital to the ongoing survival of local plant and animal species under pressure from human interventions and climate change. With fragmentation of bush and native grasslands in the Midland landscape resulting in vast open plains, the ability for animals to adapt to pasturelands without shelter has resulted in significant decline as animals such as the critically endangered Eastern Barred Bandicoot struggle to feed, move, and avoid predators (Cranney).

In 2014 mass plantings of native vegetation were undertaken along 16km of the serpentine Macquarie River as part of two habitat corridors designed to bring connectivity back to the region. While the plantings were being established a public art project was conceived that would merge design with practical application to assist animals in the area, and draw community and public attention to the work that was being done in re-establishing native forests. The *Species Hotel* project, which began in 2016, emerged from a collaboration between Greening Australia and the University of Tasmania's School of Architecture and Design, the School of Land and Food, the Tasmanian College of the Arts and the ARC Centre for Forest Value, with funding from the Ian Potter Foundation. The initial focus of the project was the development of interventions in the landscape that could address the specific habitat needs of the insect, small mammal, and bird species that are under threat. First-year Architecture students were invited to design a series of structures with the brief that they would act as 'Species Hotels', and once created would be installed among the plantings as structures that could be inhabited or act as protection. After installation, the privately-owned land would be reconfigured so to allow public access and observation of the hotels, by residents and visitors alike.

Early in the project's development, a concern was raised during a Ross community communication and consultation event that the surrounding landscape and its vistas would be dramatically altered with the re-introduced forest. While momentary and resolved, a subtle yet obvious tension surfaced that questioned the re-writing of an established community's visual landscape literacy by non-residents. Compact and picturesque, the architectural, historical and cultural qualities of Ross and its location were not only admired by residents, but established a regional identity. During the six-week intensive project, the community reach was expanded beyond the institution and involved over 100 people including landowners, artists, scientists and school children from the region (Wright), attempting to address and channel the concerns of residents about the changing landscape. The multiple timescales of this iterative project—from intensive moments of collaboration between stakeholders to the more-than-human time of tree growth—open spaces for regional identity to shift as both as place and community.

Part of the design brief was the use of fully biodegradable materials: the *Species Hotels* are not expected to last forever. The actual installation of the *Species Hotel* on site took longer than planned due to weather conditions, but once on site they were weathering in, showing signs of insect and bird habitation. This animal activity created an opportunity for ongoing engagement. Further activities generated from the initial iteration of *Species Hotel* were the *Species Hotel Day* in 2017, held at the Ross Community Hall where presentations by scientists and designers provided feedback to the local community and presented opportunities for further design engagement in the production of ephemeral 'species seed pies' placed out in and around Ross. Architecture and Design students have gone on to develop more examples of 'ecological furniture' with a current focus on insect housing as well as extrapolating from the installation of the *Species Hotels* to generate a VR visualisation of the surrounding landscape, game design and participatory movement work that was presented as part of the Junction Arts Festival program in Launceston, 2017. The intersections of technologies and activities amplified the lived in and living qualities of the *Species Hotels*, not only adding to the connectivity of social and environmental actions on site and beyond, but also making a statement about the shared ownership this project enabled.

Working Property: Collaboration and Dialogues in *The Marathon Project*

The potential of iterative projects that engage with environmental concerns amid questions of access, stewardship and dialogue is also demonstrated in *The Marathon Project*, a collaborative art project that took place between 2015 and 2017. Situated in the Northern Midland region of Deddington alongside the banks of the Nile River the property of Marathon became the focal point for a small group of artists, ecologists and theorists to converge and engage with a pastoral landscape over time that was unfamiliar to many of them. Through a series of weekend camps and day trips, the participants were able to explore and follow their own creative and investigative agendas. The project was conceived by the landowners who share a passion for the history of the area, their land, and ideas of custodianship and ecological responsibility. The intentions of the project initially were to inspire creative work alongside access, engagement and dialogue about land, agriculture and Deddington itself. As a very small town on the Northern Midland fringe, Deddington is located toward the Eastern Tiers at the foothills of the Ben Lomond mountain ranges. Historically, Deddington is best known as the location of renowned 19th century landscape painter John Glover's residence, Patterdale. After Glover's death in 1849, the property steadily fell into disrepair and a recent private restoration effort of the home, studio and grounds has seen renewed interest in the cultural significance of the region. With that in mind, and with Marathon a neighbouring property, participants in the project were able to experience the area and research its past and present as a part of a network of working properties, but also encouraging conversation around the region as a contested and documented place of settlement and subsequent violence toward the Aboriginal people.

Marathon is a working property, yet also a vital and fragile ecosystem. Marathon consists of 1430 hectares, of which around 300 lowland hectares are currently used for sheep grazing. The paddocks retain their productivity, function and potential to return to native grassland, while thickets of gorse are plentiful, an example of an invasive species difficult to control. The rest of the property comprises eucalypt woodlands and native grasslands that have been protected under a conservation covenant by the landowners since 2003. The Marathon creek and the Nile River mark the boundary between the functional paddocks and the uncultivated hills and are actively managed in the interface between native and introduced species of flora and fauna. This covenant aimed to preserve these landscapes, linking in with a wider pattern of organisations and landowners attempting to address significant ecological degradation and isolation of remnant bushland patches through restoration ecology. Measured against the visibility of Tasmania's wilderness identity on the national and global stage, many of the ecological concerns affecting the Midlands go largely unnoticed. *The Marathon Project* was as much a project about visibility and communication as it was about art and landscape.

Over the three years and with its 17 participants, *The Marathon Project* yielded three major exhibitions along with numerous public presentations and research outputs. The length of the project and the autonomy and perspectives of its participants allowed for connections to be formed, conversations initiated, and greater exposure to the productivity and sustainability complexities playing out on rural Midland properties. Like *Kerry Lodge*, the 2015 first year exhibition took place at Sawtooth ARI. The exhibition was a testing ground for artists, and a platform for audiences, to witness the cross-disciplinary outputs of work inspired by a single sheep grazing farm. The interest generated led to the rethinking of the 2016 exhibition and the need to broaden the scope of what the landowners and participants were trying to achieve.



Image 7: Panel Discussion at Open Weekend, 2016. Image Credit: Ron Malor.

In November 2016, *The Marathon Project* hosted an *Open Weekend* on the property encouraging audiences to visit, meet the artists, the landowners, and other invited guests from a number of restoration, conservation, and rehabilitation organisations. Titled *Encounter*, the event and accompanying exhibition displayed in the shearing shed, provided an opportunity for a rhizomatic effect with the public which was designed to inform and disseminate historical and contemporary perspectives of land and agriculture, access, ownership, visitation and interpretation. Concluding with a final exhibition in 2017 at the University of Tasmania's Academy Gallery, *The Marathon Project* had built enough momentum to shape and inform the practice of its participants, the knowledge and imagination of the public who engaged with it, and make visible the precarity of the cultural and rural Midland identity.



Image 8: Installation View of The Marathon Project Exhibition, 2017. Image Credit: Patrick Sutczak.

Conclusion

The Marathon Project, *Species Hotel* and the *Kerry Lodge Archaeology and Art Project* all demonstrate the potential of site-based projects to articulate and address concerns that arise from the environmental and cultural conditions and histories of a region. Beyond the Midland fence line is a complex environment that needed to be experienced to be understood. Returning creative work to site, and opening up these intensified experiences of place to a public forms a key stage in all these projects. Beyond a commitment to site-specific practice and valuing the affective and didactic potential of on-site installation, these returns grapple with issues of access, visibility and absence that characterise the Midlands. Paul Carter describes his role in the convening of a "concretely self-realising creative community" in an initiative to construct a meeting-place in Alice Springs, a community defined and united in "its capacity to imagine change as a negotiation between past, present and future" (17). Within that regional context, storytelling, as an encounter between histories and cultures, became crucial in assembling a community that could in turn materialise story into place. In these Midlands projects, a looser assembly of participants with shared interests seek to engage with the intersections of plant, human and animal activities that constitute and negotiate the changing environment. The projects enabled moments of connection, of access, and of intervention: always informed by the complexities of belonging within regional locations.

These projects also suggest the need to recognise the granularity of regionalism: the need to be attentive to the relations of site to bioregion, of private land to small town to regional centre. The numerous partnerships that allow such interconnect projects to flourish can be seen as a strength of regional areas, where proximity and scale can draw together sets of related institutions, organisations and individuals. However, the tensions and gaps within these projects reveal differing priorities, senses of ownership and even regional belonging. Questions of who will live with these project outcomes, who will access them, and on what terms, reveal inequalities of power. Negotiations of this uneven and uneasy terrain require a more nuanced account of projects that do not rely on the geographical labelling of regions to paper over the complexities and fractures within the social environment.

These projects also share a commitment to the intersection of the social and natural environment. They recognise the inextricable entanglement of human and more than human agencies in shaping the landscape, and material consequences of colonialism and agricultural intensification. Through iteration and duration, the projects mobilise processes that are responsive and reflective while being anchored to the materiality of site. Warwick Mules suggests that "regions are a mixture of data and earth, historically made through the accumulation and condensation of material and informational configurations". Cross-disciplinary exchanges enable all three projects to actively participate in data production, not interpretation or illustration afterwards. Mules' call for 'accumulation' and 'configuration' as productive regional modes speaks directly to the practice-led methodologies employed by these projects. The Kerry Lodge and Marathon projects collect, arrange and transform material taken from each site to provisionally construct a regional material language, extended further in the dual presentation of the projects as off-site exhibitions and as interventions returning to site. The *Species Hotel* project shares that dual identity, where materials are chosen for their ability over time, habitation and decay to become incorporated into the site yet, through other iterations of the project, become digital presences that nonetheless invite an embodied engagement.

These projects centre the Midlands as fertile ground for the production of knowledge and experiences that are distinctive and place-based, arising from the unique qualities of this place, its history and its ongoing challenges. Art and design practice enables connectivity to plant, animal and human communities, utilising cross-disciplinary collaborations to bring together further accumulations of the region's intertwined cultural and ecological landscape.

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