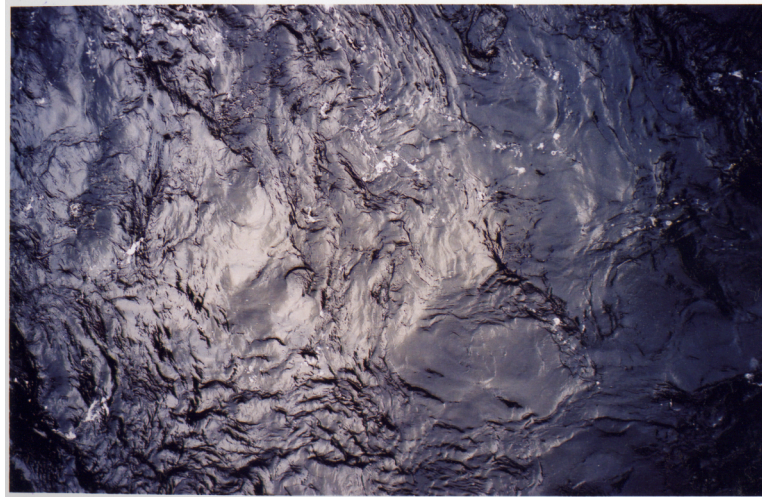


Lecture by invitation: 'Being There: Speaking on Creative Engagements with Place'  
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School of Visual and Performing Arts, University of Tasmania, Launceston

## A theoretician's guide to getting wet

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### Introduction

*Being There: Speaking on Creative Engagements with Place* is a refreshingly commonsense title for an academic forum. I particularly respond to the term 'engagements' because it touches on a couple of ideas central to my doctoral thesis. This plural accommodates the durational and multifaceted reality of lived relationships with place and it allows that we are in the midst of forming such relationships presently. It suggests there are many possible ways we can encounter and know place. And it makes the individual accountable in that relationship for 'engaging' entails consciousness, receptivity and responsiveness.

I also interpret a request in the title to share something of the *subjective* experience of doing what I do, here, at this point in time. While this might be a common invitation for art makers, it is a relatively rare one for a theoretician whose practice is word-based. In my limited experience as a researcher, while there are plenty of forums to speak about the *subject* of your project there are far fewer opportunities to collectively share and reflect on the experience of pursuing theoretical knowledge of art, and the processes involved in crafting original works on art in words. Tasmanian Living Artist's Week is the perfect time to have these kinds of dialogues between practitioners and theoreticians.

I've given my presentation today the rather gimmicky title: 'a theoretician's guide to getting wet'. I like that it sounds a bit like a self-help book promising to tell you how to spice-up your research life – because in a way that *is* what I want to talk about. The idea for this title came from a book by John Paul Lederach I had just finished reading when invited to speak here today.

Lederach writes,

We have often had an odd gap...between practitioners and theoreticians who, from a variety of disciplines, have provided major frameworks for our consideration. They often seek empirical evidence by watching what others do, but they rarely enter the swirling river of social change itself...on the other hand, we have practitioners who live in that river, but only on rare occasions venture out to a place of reflection that translates their experience into proposed theory. We have few who do both (Lederach 2005, p. 123).<sup>1</sup>

Although Lederach is actually speaking here about his vocation in peace-building and reconciliation, it seems to me his place-based analogy is equally applicable to the vocations of art making and art theory; two kinds of thinker share one environment and their lives centre on the same dynamic force, but they negotiate and engage with that phenomenon in completely different ways. One gives themselves over bodily, enters into physical relationship with the river and is stimulated and buffeted by its elements. Meanwhile, the other keeps dry and mobile, taking in the perspectives available from multiple vantage points, gaining orientation within the broader landscape and observing the relationships at play that come to characterise the river itself over time. As a result of their different ways of being the practitioner and the theoretician have disparate experiences, and therefore develop different *kinds* of knowledge.

Lederach's analogy implies however that the independence of their ways of being, engaging and knowing, are to some extent merely self-imposed. For this disjuncture is not a matter of aptitude - it's not that the practitioner can swim but the theoretician can't, or that the theoretician has awareness of a world outside the water of which the practitioner is completely ignorant. Rather, this is an observation of the way that traditional concepts of specialisation and practice can unfortunately tend to look a lot like colonising *one* isolated spot for a long, long time.

It might also be seen as a comment on the entrenched legacy of 'disciplinarity' that can lead, in Australian academic Bob Hodge's words, to 'the unquestioned sense that the boundaries around the existing disciplines are inherent features of knowledge' (Hodge n.d., p. 114). Tightly defined disciplines can have a tendency to inadvertently reinforce artificial separations that can become 'odd', and even illogical and unhelpful intellectual barriers between what are in fact interconnected aspects of our lived experience in the world.

As a theoretician wanting to intersect meaningfully and with some directness with practical and experiential subjects – like human relationships with environment and the phenomenon of making art (two core concerns of my current research) - I've become increasingly conscious of this apparent paradox during my studies. A summary of the unusual path I've taken through my education will map my haphazard and largely unconscious negotiations of these issues to date, and help explain how and why I came to be here.

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Hodge is an Academic at the University of Western Sydney and an advocate for the changes taking place in research as a result of the 'postmodern turn' within the arts and humanities in particular.

## Academic path

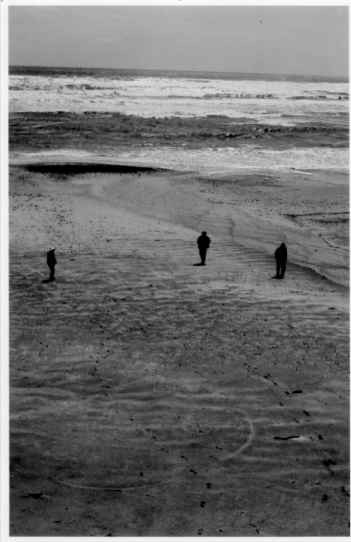
I began a Bachelor of Arts at the University of New South Wales in the year 2000 and came to major in philosophy. Over the course of the degree I learnt that I was more interested in the moral problems that arise in practical life than the kind of transcendental concerns explored through such branches of philosophy as metaphysics. I decided environmental ethics was my area.

In 2003 I moved to Hobart to complete the last semester of my degree at the University of Tasmania. One of the two units I enrolled in was *Art, Natural Environment & Technology* offered at the Tasmanian School of Art. This involved three fieldtrips of a number of days each: one to Queenstown, one to the Tasman Peninsula and one to Maria Island. I think the School of Visual and Performing Arts has similar undergraduate subjects that get art students out into the field, but as far as I know nothing remotely like this was ever available to me at my old university.



Tasman Peninsula field trip  
August 2003  
*Art, Natural Environment & Technology*  
Photograph: Bec Tudor

The fieldtrip subject brought together historical knowledge, theoretical readings and access to contemporary Tasmanian artists with experiences of new place, physical exertion, inter-personal bonding, immersion in the natural environment and encounters with local history. It required me to leave the lecture theatre and my personal comfort zone. The learning process itself was one of actively engaging in experience of place. And importantly, it gave me the opportunity to find out through art making what it might mean for this engagement to be a *creative* one.



The following year a *Masters of Art, Design and Environment* was introduced at the Tasmanian School of Art. In a sense this was a postgraduate extension of the undergraduate wilderness units, and included an intensive summer school of field trips followed by two semesters of coursework and a personal project. Instead of returning to Sydney to do honours in philosophy, I applied for this coursework Masters. I was accepted with the agreement that my project would comprise of a research paper as well as a body of visual work.

West coast fieldtrip, summer school 2004  
*Masters of Art, Design & Environment*  
 Photograph: Bec Tudor

Jumping into art school at the Masters level was extremely challenging. The greatest task for me was to manage the crises in confidence and the uncertainty that came with the steep learning curve of shifting out of a familiar academic discipline into a new and quite different one. But, probably precisely because it was so challenging it was also very rewarding. My Masters project concerned National Park lookouts – how they visually frame landscape and physically mediate experience of natural environment, and what they reflect about our environmental values as visitors in conservation areas.

I produced a multimedia installation that employed the aesthetic components of a typical lookout amenity and facilitated various viewing experiences in which the audience inevitably became implicated in the scene. I wrote a 10,000 word research paper on visual perception, landscape conventions in art and in managed natural environments, ideas of the picturesque and the photogenic, tourism and environmental values.



*Lookout*  
 mixed media installation, dimensions variable  
 Entrepot Gallery, December 2004  
 Photograph: Bec Tudor

These ideas developed later into a site-specific sculptural work called *Site* for the 2006 Mountain Festival sculpture trail along the South Hobart rivulet. This work translated the cartographic symbol for a lookout, which in its form represents degrees



of sight, onto the irregular surface of the ground.<sup>2</sup> The position of the work, unlike many other spots along the rivulet did not offer a view of Mount Wellington. My work invited passers-by to reorientate themselves by turning against the linear walking track, putting their back to the rivulet and lowering their line of sight to engage with their immediate surroundings. It enticed them to step out onto the work itself and spend a little time engaging with that particular space. In this way the work was an anti-lookout.



Site 10 x 20m  
Hessian, eyelets, tent pegs  
Mountain Festival Sculpture  
Trail, South Hobart Rivulet  
April-March 2006  
Photograph: Peter Robinson

I also expanded the context for the theoretical investigation beyond the National Park with a paper I presented at the conference, *Senses of Place*, held in Hobart last April. This paper discussed urban lookouts, their use by local people and the sense of belonging or desire for escape associated with looking out over your own home. This paper is included as a chapter in the edited book *Making Sense of Place* published jointly by the University of Tasmania and the National Gallery of Australia, due out March 2008.

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<sup>2</sup> Its position had an almost monumental feel due to a permanent memorial sculpture by Hobart City Council landscape architect Julie Stoneman, of two steel tangents that acted as a frame or gateway out into an open and rarely used expanse of grass.

## Doctorate

I was unprepared when, on the basis of my Masters results, I was approached to apply for a scholarship to undertake PhD with the Tasmanian School of Art. This was the point where I let go of my last pretence at following a self-directed future plan. I applied without being sure what I could or should do next. Although I'd just begun to explore art making, I did feel strongly this next challenge would require me to return to what I knew – theoretical research and writing, so I proposed to do a doctorate in art theory.

I was granted the scholarship and resumed studying three months later.

I am now in the third year of that PhD, and it happens that I'm the sole research higher degree candidate pursuing fulltime study in art theory at the Tasmanian School of Art at this moment. Everyone else currently undertaking a Masters of Fine Art or a Doctorate fulltime are doing theirs in studio practice. So, the question of what 'being *there*' means to me at present is a pertinent one. On an average day, 'there' is not the Tasmanian landscape or an art studio, it's my quiet office adjacent to school administration. My 'being there', when all goes well, mostly involves reading books or articles and writing chapters of my thesis. Meanwhile around me throughout the Centre for the Arts building, creative research takes place in studios and workshops with all the mess, noise, smell, colour, sweat and dialogue art making often entails – and conventional research is generally thought not to.

However, since the beginning of this most recent phase of my studies, I've sought a sense of active connection with the 'real world' while researching. This simply began with seeking opportunities to bring my research out into the light by delivering student lectures on art and environment, presenting at relevant local conferences or forums such as this one, and getting some papers through to publication. Initially my motivation was professional experience – wanting to confirm the years of developing academic knowledge and skill had some application to the real world and may be of some relevance to post-study employment. Later the motivation became the interpersonal interaction that came with such projects - confirmation that others did exist out there and were interested in the ideas I was looking at.

But lately the importance of having multiple 'ways of being' in relation to my subject matter has infiltrated my research methodology more significantly. I have started interviewing selected contemporary Tasmanian artists about the relationship between their practice and environmental awareness, and I am using this original material to produce case studies that balance the more theoretical and abstract chapters of my thesis. This reflects my increasing interest in understanding art as *practice* – through processes, journeys, relationships of making, rather than as a phenomenon of discrete physical objects.

## Case study: Geoff Parr

The latest case study I have completed for my thesis looks at the practice of Emeritus Professor Geoff Parr (born 1933) - a contemporary photomedia artist and environmentalist currently living and working in Hobart. He has a distinguished background as teacher and arts administrator, he was Director of the Tasmanian School of Art for some thirteen years between 1978 and 1991, during which time he oversaw the incorporation of that school into the university and the introduction of Australia's first research higher degrees in fine arts. He joined the conservation campaign to save Lake Pedder as a concerned citizen in the early 1970s and was a founding member of the United Tasmania Group, formed to contest the 1972 state election on the issue of the lake's flooding. That group is now recognised as the world's first green party.

Parr engaged in activism during the Franklin campaign, contributing strategic political advice as well as photographs for reproduction in books and on posters to raise public awareness about the environmental cost of the proposed dam. In 1983 he was arrested and charged along with some 80 other artists and art students who staged a blockade in Queenstown of a supply road to the proposed dam site. Parr has now retired from both teaching and politics and primarily dedicates himself to his art practice, though he is still active in the arts community through such activities as supervising research higher degree candidates at the art school and as Chair of the board of Contemporary Art Services Tasmania.



Geoff Parr  
*Place II*, 1983/88,  
 photo transparencies,  
 6 light units, each  
 71 x 90 cm (detail)

Parr's *Place II* (1983-1988) is one of the works I discuss in depth in this case study and has explicit relevance to the idea of engaging in multiple ways with art and place that I'm discussing here. It is a series of six cybachrome positives on light boxes that depict Parr as protagonist in the Tasmanian landscape. Each of the staged scenes is rich in symbolic references to Tasmania's post-colonial history and specifically, its impact on the land; hunting of the thylacine to extinction, injustice to indigenous people over land ownership, forestry practices, hydro-electric damming etc.

Parr appears in these works as a generic businessman dressed in suit, shirt and tie, but his placement in the landscape casts him also as traveller, *plein air* artist and outdoorsman. As both subject and maker of this work he is clearly presenting himself as a mediator and interpreter of place. He is an agent not just an observer, for he stands in the firing line amidst the thylacine targets, places the noose around his own neck, and literally enters the river. In this way, Parr seeks to directly implicate himself in the histories and issues defining this place, Tasmania.



Geoff Parr  
*Place* 1984  
 cibachrome transparency  
 90 x 72cm

The suit is a symbol of power and capitalism, yet it is also simply the garb of working professionals. At the time these works were made Parr was Director of the Tasmanian School of Art and a leading arts educator and administrator. He spoke in our interview about how his professional role at this time placed competing demands on his art practice and if one can read these works as self-portraits, they might be seen to humorously address the difficult divide Parr has straddled throughout his practice between bureaucratic politicking and creative environmental passions. This series depicts a quest to orientate the self within landscape and personal experience, questioning: What is my place? How do my actions as artist, as teacher and as activist relate to the environment ‘out there’?

An important dimension of Parr’s practice since the 1980s has been what he calls ‘issues-based’ art, work that responds directly to specific political events and is both an outlet for, and statement of, his concerns. *Place II* is an example from this body of work. He states, ‘just as art has always reflected the human condition, I think contemporary art has a job to *influence* human condition’. In light of this statement, I argue in my thesis that Parr’s body of ‘issues based’ work can be seen as a sustained, ongoing attempt to enter his art into the swirling political waters of contemporary environmental activism.

## Reviews

Another way of being in relation to research that I've recently begun exploring is writing exhibition reviews for publication in national art journals.

In April this year during Ten Days on the Island (which incidentally, is a festival all about creative engagements with island places) the Sydney-based editorial team of RealTime magazine came to Hobart to run an intensive review-writing workshop with six select writers. They were looking to kill two birds with one stone: they wanted to cover as many events from the festival on their website as possible, and they were looking to form ongoing connections with more art writers in Tasmania.

I had been interested to know how one gets into writing articles on the arts, and was looking to diversify my writing style and gain more experience writing about art. But when this opportunity arose I was also intimidated by the prospect of trading up my quiet office, far-off deadlines and rather abstract thought processes to participate in this fast-paced review-writing hothouse, where I would be required to review not just art exhibitions but theatre, music, dance and other art forms as well.

RealTime magazine is a free bi-monthly broadsheet covering international contemporary arts that has been distributed across Australia for the last 14 years. It espouses a phenomenological approach to writing that is a far cry from the 'objective' academic style I was already comfortable with. Within the first sentence of a review they want readers to be immersed in the experience of the artwork, they encourage writers to embrace the first person perspective, to work with informed subjective responses, and to not be silenced by limitations in prior experience. Working in this way was a revolution in my attitude to writing. It was a way of speaking about art that flowed from instigating direct encounters with works, and sometimes artists, curators and galleries as well. I found that with this kind of writing my voice had to come through learning to read myself 'being there' in relationship with works of art, whether that relationship was pleasurable or fraught.

In the months following that workshop I was approached to write a review for Artlink on painter Neil Haddon's show *Stranded* at Criterion Gallery. Then one on the group show *Room* at CAST<sup>3</sup> gallery curated by Derek Hart for Art and Australia, and another for that same magazine on Adam Geczy's exhibition *Ex Cathedra* at Criterion Gallery.

A little while later I was asked to write a feature article for Art Monthly Australia on *The Space of Presence*, an exhibition at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery featuring the work of Hobart-based artist Leigh Hobba. Though the Tasmanian landscape constitutes one of this artist's primary concerns, this exhibition posed a significant challenge for me personally in several respects: it was a huge survey exhibition of an artist with a highly conceptual practice in video, performance and sound - media in which I have no particular expertise - and many of the key works were made during the first years of my life employing technology that I have no

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<sup>3</sup> Contemporary Art Services Tasmania



experience of. There was certainly a moment there where I thought I had now extended myself too far into those swirling waters and I thought that I might not be able to see this particular task through.

However, it was through Hobba's video projection and sound piece *River with Converging & Diverging Audio* (1982) that I eventually found a way into writing about this exhibition. To begin with I was confounded by this work, but then a little research revealed that this shaking, swaying, bobbing footage of water, foliage and bank was shot from a raft floating on a Tasmanian river. At the beginning of the sequence the raft must be tethered. Later it journeys downstream over rapids and through calmer water.

But we never glimpse the raft, nor any sign of the artist himself or the recording equipment used in the work's making. This groundless travelling perspective evokes Ralph Waldo Emerson's<sup>4</sup> notion of the 'transparent eye-ball' and extends that metaphor to offer the experience of a disembodied, all-hearing ear also. The intensity of the running water soundtrack never really 'describes' the river seen, instead it creates an awareness of audio and visual as two independent but intrinsically interrelated streams of perceptual information.

The significance of *River with Converging & Diverging Audio* deepened when I learned that the Betamax Portapak, interestingly listed as the work's sole material, was one of the earliest portable video cameras capable of recording colour. Despite being cutting-edge equipment at the time, this two-piece unit connected by a cable was extremely cumbersome by today's standards. It occurred to me that the logistical exercise behind this work had lineage with the early wilderness photographers who carried their large cameras and glass plates into remote place aspiring to produce the most realistic and affective representations of the natural landscape possible, using the latest recording technologies of their time.

Yet despite the use of cutting edge audio-visual equipment, the possibility of *River with Converging & Diverging Audio* emerges most directly from the artist's physical and experiential immersion in that river place. The work is virtually comprised of the artist's own aural and visual experiences of being *there*, and unlike conventional landscape imagery, the subjectivity of this representation is revealed through the sense of the artist's and viewer's bodies journeying through space and time via the moving image. And though the way that this perspective was achieved was not initially evident to me, the impact of the piece as experimental rendering of human experience of place, nevertheless became a key to this exhibition *The Space of Presence*, the subtitle of which was *Tasmanian Landscapes in Video and Sound*.

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<sup>4</sup> Romantic philosopher, essayist, poet and environmental thinker (b.1803, d. 1882).

## Conclusion

I've returned to the visual and metaphorical image of the swirling waters throughout this presentation. Hopefully I've done this without labouring the analogy overly. As much as anything, the river analogy exemplifies the experience of what it's like to conduct research – the way unlikely streams of relevance can spontaneously form between disparate bodies of knowledge, pathways to follow are carved into and across fields, and ideas tend to revisit in cyclic ways. If the waters represent the essence of the subject or field you wish to be emersed in, the idea of getting wet is about somehow positioning yourself to personally participate in the relationships that characterise that phenomenon.

For an art theoretician this is, I think, potentially more than just a question of how you can conduct a studio practice and a theory practice simultaneously. More importantly, it's about traversing your territories in multiple ways. I've given two examples of ways my recent research activity has taken small but nevertheless intentional moves towards the swirling waters: by interviewing and case studying contemporary Tasmanian artists, and reviewing exhibitions for publications. I have been tempted in the past to view such forays as peripheral to the central business of producing my doctoral thesis. However, I have come to recognise them as central to my understandings about the potential contributions of research, and where the meaning lies in what I currently do.

For this reason the title of my talk was slightly misleading. Guides usually tell you definitively what to do or how to get somewhere. This talk has been a reflection from a momentary pause in an inquiry that is very much midstream. I take comfort in Lederach's reminder that, 'Theory is not writing perfectly defined' (like the theoretician sticking to the bank) 'but intangible explanations of social realities. It is about the common sense of how things are connected, how they influence each other...Theory is our best speculation about how complex things work' (Lederach 2005, p. 125). It seems to me this is a necessary outlook for any theoretician seeking meaningful ways to enter intellectually and creatively into the phenomena of art, and of place.

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