

'To be Antipodean is to be *told* who or what you are.' (Beilharz, 1997, p.186)

Introduction

Seven years ago at an ACUADS conference in Perth, *Artists, Designers and Creative Communities*, Dr Kevin Murray delivered a rousing keynote address on *The South Project*, of which he was Director from 2004-2007 (Murray, 2005). The conference was themed around communities and Murray's presentation on a major project exploring not only artists and craft practitioners in communities across the Southern Hemisphere, but also interrogating concepts of what else 'south' might mean apart from an accident of geography, excited the audience with new possibilities for regionality. More recently, in March this year at the *Adelaide Festival of Arts*, Dr Paul Carter's keynote address, scheduled at the end of a remarkably intense and moving *Artists Week*, proposed a future philosophical and geographical 'cosmos' characterised by fluidity. Against a mesmerising video backdrop of swirling water, Carter reminded his audience that we live, work and dream in a 'fundamentally oceanic hemisphere' of 'archipelagos' yet are invested in 'dry' and 'continental...geographically biased thinking' (Carter, 2012). Like Murray's earlier advocacy of the local and regional, Carter's appeal to embrace our surrounding regions came as a stirring and original call to this audience to reorient our vision southwards and seawards.

By March 2012, because *The South Project* had already seen remarkable connections from 2004 to 2009 between – and in – Melbourne, Pacific/New Zealand, Chile, South Africa and Yogyakarta (Indonesia), involving thousands of artists, craft practitioners, writers, performers, activists and diverse audiences, some questions arose: why was Carter's proposal received as exceptional by so many, given a predominantly Australian audience of visual art *aficionados* nationally and internationally connected to regularly intersecting circuits of art discourse? What had happened to *The South Project's* recent (illustrious) history? Had this six year experiment and the potential it held out for further southerly crossings already slipped beneath Australian art world consciousness?

This paper examines, from one participant observer's perspective, *The South Project's* extraordinary activities, why it eventually 'headed south' and, perplexingly, why its legacy now seems all but invisible within Australian contemporary visual art. This initiative continued until at least 2010¹ and is rumoured to be still alive on the Internet and/or in other guises. Nevertheless, seven years after Murray outlined his southerly vision in Perth, it appears that these ambitious and sometimes complex journeys of art/craft exchange that were set in

motion across the Southern Hemisphere from 2004 to 2009, may have deviated too far from Eurocentric conventions embedded in contemporary art to be taken seriously in Australia. Central to *The South Project's* aims and operations were a number of 'c' words not prevalent in Australian and the wider biennale culture of the time; these were craft, collaboration, conviviality, and children (in the project's dedicated youth program SouthKids), not to mention critique. Surprisingly, given *South Project's* sophisticated and flexible organisation systems, a broad range of external published criticism on this phenomenon has not yet eventuated.



Reversed image of 'The Hemispheres', in C. Mason, *Elementary Geography*, The Ambleside Series Geography Books (New Edition, Revised 1925) London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd., p. 17.

Locating South

The South Project was conceived in 'the southern capital of 'the Great Southern Land' (Murray, n.d.; A), with a life expectancy of five years. Not unlike a 'Mexican wave', this short lived expedition sought to fill the vacuum left by the first and final 1999 *Melbourne International Biennial* as a possible solution to that city's perennial 'biennial problem'. *The South Project* was originally intended as an innovative flagship event for the nation's renowned southern 'cultural capital', which, ironically, still lacks a regular international art event comparable to the *Biennale of Sydney* or Brisbane's *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*.

Under the auspices of Craft Victoria, *The South Project* offered a new and comprehensive model of international arts exchange. As a major art event it differed markedly from conventional city-bound, exhibition-focused biennales, and from the *APT's* prestigious exhibition and integrated activity schedule featuring online, school, and children's programs. To some extent, *The South Project* took its bearings from the peripatetic and organisationally

dispersed form of the European *Manifesta* biennale, which emphasised the relational, the situational and the ephemeral². Incorporated within a state crafts body, Craft Victoria, the Australian initiative provided an original and dynamic model that challenged conventional Australian thinking about international art events.

The program engaged with and generated cultural, socio-political and economic dialogues across the Global South in a series of diverse, multi-levelled and cross-cultural encounters. These included a continuous web of exchanges, exhibitions, residencies, symposia, workshops and publications, not to mention major gatherings in Melbourne, Wellington, Santiago, Johannesburg /Soweto, and Yogyakarta. In this way *The South Project* activities continually demonstrated Peter Beilharz's assertion that '[t]he vital point for identity...is that the antipodes is not a place so much as it is a relation, one not of our own choosing but one which also enables us' (1997, p.187).

If we consider statistics alone, it's possible that up to half a million people, on and off-line, have been made aware of their immediate reality, directly or virtually, through *The South Project* (Moreno, n.d.). This includes not only the project's activities and its wider ramifications for geography and art where south is proposed as 'as a space, direction, home and destination' (Murray, n.d.; A), but the deeper historical and philosophical notions which shape our very notions of power, value and our relations with the planetary sphere itself. And yet, within the mainstream orbit of Australian art and art education these concerns remain marginal to wider debates, which are still dominated by agendas pertaining largely to northern hemisphere metropolises.

Given the swirling transformational realities of globalisation, migrancy and mobility over the last two decades, notions of national or regional identity may no longer be considered productive. Indeed, understandings of place and cultural identity have been enfolded into more sophisticated choreographies of cosmopolitanism and local particularities, impelled by a deluge of post-structural and postcolonial theories. Proclaiming the invigorating possibilities of decentralisation, destabilisation, deconstruction and de-colonialisation, *documenta IX* curator Jan Hoet noted in 1992:

We live in an age of social, individual and cultural indeterminacy in which the horizon is no longer a straight line. It manifests itself as a vague tension between heaven and

earth, an indeterminate zone in which we can no longer achieve a sharp visual focus.
(Hoet, 1992, p.20)

During the past decade and a half a recent surge of new biennales, triennials and auction markets throughout the globe – notably across Asia – have responded to widespread debates about inclusive ‘world art history’. Increasingly, geo-cultural issues around centres and peripheries may now appear as provincialism debates left over from the 1970s (see Smith, 1974; Sanders, 2011). But are these issues so irrelevant when we consider where the shaping powers of contemporary art and discourse have overwhelmingly been situated? Australian author Peter Beilharz, for example, critiques ‘the authorised, compulsory French and canonic claims about what counts as social theory’ (1997, p.184) and in 1997 he wryly suggested that:

Doing theory is not a matter of sticking our Antipodean heads through the cutout holes in plywood profiles of Foucault or Habermas; there are more sensible things that Australians choose to do at the beach. (1997, p.185)

While the rise of geographically dispersed biennales would seem to temper the default position of deference to Magnetic North, contemporary art nevertheless remains centred within largely Euramerican paradigms, economies and auction houses. Closer to home, for example, and notwithstanding the *Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art*’s uniquely influential commitment to Australia’s geographic region over the past twenty years, together with Asialink’s consistent efforts to bring ‘Asia’ closer to this country, the most proximate cultures of Southeast Asia, the Oceania-Pacific and New Zealand are only just beginning to glimmer on Australia’s curatorial and art educational horizons. Given our repeatedly professed longing for Deleuzian laterality, the following questions arise: Where is mainstream Australian interest in Latin American or African cultures – if not endorsed through major metropolitan art exhibitions overseas? Why is QAGOMA the only Australian state gallery specialising in regional Asian and Pacific art, notwithstanding expanding contemporary Asian art expertise throughout other state gallery departments? Beyond Australia’s official adherence to monolingualism – ironically at odds with the reality of migrant multilingualism – and given the national propensity for extensive travel, why is there so little cultural curiosity about the neighbouring Global South?



Galeria Metropolitana, *The South Project*, Santiago, Chile, October 2006.

Such issues are not currently creating heated debate in Australian art communities even though, after less than three decades of Australian and Asian studies entering Academe³, desire for and opportunities to study these histories (including art history), literatures and languages are seriously diminished⁴. This alarming tendency may seem attributable to rapid globalisation (read Americanisation) through ubiquitous popular media platforms, but recent Government research agendas have also played a significant role in conflating 'international' status with north Atlantic models of knowledge. Collectively, these developments, together with university and Australia Council recruitment strategies which increasingly privilege 'international' executive appointments, suggest that Australia's 'cultural cringe', a term coined by cultural historian, A.A. Phillips in 1958 to describe the country's ubiquitous lack of confidence, is with us still.

In philosophically speculating about the national aspiration northwards, Kevin Murray offers the concept of 'verticalism'. (Murray, n.d.; B) Although many societies have historically oriented their beliefs, practices and cartographies towards the east, the south, or other central points⁵, the Ptolemaic preference for a northerly aligned world map⁶ has seen considerable influence on ascensional thinking by navigational cartographers since the Renaissance. By the nineteenth century, conflation of North with upward movement had been universally adopted in the sphere of global exploration. Consequently, as Murray suggests, this cardinal point became naturalised as right as well as height, an indicator of quality and superiority as expressed in 'North must seem the "good" direction, the way towards heroic adventures, South the way to ignoble ease and decadence' (Davidson, 2005, p.99, cited in Murray, 2006, p.6); 'going south' has become synonymous with failure.

Located at 34° south in Melbourne, *The South Project* would, over six years, challenge these prevailing hierarchies of perceived and received value by providing an alternative platform

for international cross-cultural exchange. The project was underwritten by Murray's extensive professional and personal networks across the Southern Hemisphere and his prolific writings on antipodean and southerly issues⁷, and the project's audacious program coincided with nascent Australian research on antipodality by writers outside or tangential to mainstream visual arts such as Raewyn Connell, Nikos Papastergiadis, Peter Beilharz and Margaret Jolly, not to mention established postcolonial Latin American, Indian and African bodies of literature (de Sousa Santos, 2007). Connell, for example, proposes the 'reshap[ing]' of existing geographical 'circuits' of knowledge in the south:

The intellectuals of rich peripheral countries such as Australia, and of the privileged classes in countries like Mexico, Chile, India, South Africa and Brazil, have significant resources for intellectual work and the circulation of knowledge. Because of their location in the post-colonial world, they have — or can have — perspectives which overlap with those of subaltern majorities. (Connell, 2007)

What then might south-south conversations be like? What may non-Anglophone cultures have in common with Australia besides 'flightless birds' (Murray, 2006) and low cultural self-esteem? Antipodean seasons, perhaps? Or shared colonial/postcolonial histories as corporeal quarries and farms to the cerebral North?

One of the most binding forms of cross-cultural dialogue woven throughout *South Project* endeavours was the inclusion of craft practitioners, workshops and residencies with visual art, literature, film and performance. Certainly, while investigations of what it means to be in the Global South may have been conducted over hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years in Indigenous trade and craft exchange, the inclusion of craft in major international exhibitions of contemporary art is exceptional. Even the few supported Australian arts exchange programmes in the Asia-Pacific region between the 1970s and 1990s, such as *Mildura Sculpture Triennials* (1973-1978), *ANZART* (1981-1985) and *ARX (Artists Regional Exchange)* (1987-1998), were focused on so-called leading edge art.

Another consistent feature of *South Project* exchanges was KidSouth, a succession of children's programmes in Melbourne and abroad where visual artists and craftspersons worked directly with youth in schools and other venues. The KidSouth workshop at Belle Primary School in Soweto,⁸ for example, saw excited children also politely 'gate-crashing' an adult *South Project* craft workshop, indicating the importance of art and craft in impoverished

under-funded South African schools facilitated by volunteer local artists. Like many of its programs, these workshops demonstrated *The South Project's* capacity for affective as well as aesthetic and intellectual connection with a wide range of participants. Until very recently – in Australia at least – contemporary art biennales have also remained a largely kid-free zone.

The inaugural *South Project* gathering in Melbourne in 2004 experienced no shortage of conversations. Here, delegates from forty Southern Hemisphere countries – artists, activists, writers, architects, craftspeople, story-tellers, administrators, dancers, poets, exchanged extraordinary stories from Argentina's 'disappeared' generation to Antarctic residencies and lost' Rapa Nui language. New connections were discovered and at the gathering's plenary many wept and embraced like long lost kin. From the following year *South Project* gatherings physically journeyed to Wellington (2005), Santiago/Valparaiso (2006), Johannesburg/Soweto (2007) and Yogyakarta (2009), co-staging onsite programmes of activities with local art and craft communities. Workshops, exhibitions, residencies and publications also occurred between major gatherings in the form of local and international satellite programmes with universities, community and ethnic groups, art galleries and craft organisations. The organisation's multiple parameters and ever-expanding connections thus became a complex weave of intersecting and pulsating nodes between people, ideas and objects across the bottom of the world.

Wide international interest in *The South Project* saw many conference and publication invitations taken up by its indefatigable director Kevin Murray, who created a diverse and sophisticated body of topics considering 'southness'. These writings would launch his websites – *The idea of south* and *Southern perspectives* – devoted to even more comprehensive investigations of southern issues. However, this 'inside' form of discourse on and promotion of the project itself meant that few alternative writers published opinion on *The South Project* at national or regional levels.

While leading edge visual art formed a cornerstone of *The South Project* ethos craft, in the form of exhibitions, practitioner addresses and workshops, established a firm and effective foundational base for cross-cultural exchange, immersed as it is in histories of dialogue, story-telling and community. However, as Murray noted in 2006, 'because of its traditional association with lower class culture, the doors of biennales and state art institutions remain largely closed to the crafted object'. 'Craft', he added, 'still flourishes in countries of the

south'. (Murray, 2006) These platforms proved especially successful in connecting Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals and communities in Wellington, Santiago, Valparaiso, and Johannesburg/Soweto, even if *South Project's* broad programme was not fully endorsed by the Board of its host institution Craft Victoria.

Post-Johannesburg/Soweto, however, the craft component of the project would be seriously reassessed when Murray resigned as director of both *The South Project* and Craft Victoria. A re-constituted *South Project* board separated from Craft Victoria in 2007. Subsequently, the project's schedule was ambitiously extended to stage a grand triennial *South Festival* in 2010, 'focus[ing] on Melbourne as a cultural hub', followed by a Pacific gathering in francophone New Caledonia in 2011 and Rio de Janeiro in 2012. This plan was, however, not to be, despite being set out in a glossy prospectus polished with corporate language describing KPI deliverables, 'cultural capital brand[ing]' and an impressive 'investment logic map'. (Moreno, p.12) Significantly, the word craft seldom appeared in the document.

A Yogyakarta (Indonesia) gathering was proposed for 2009 which would be 'collaborative, reciprocal and of activation [sic]⁹, preceded by a focus group style gathering in Melbourne in 2008¹⁰. The major artistic focus would be on emerging contemporary artists, particularly young graduates based in Melbourne.

Despite *South Project's* new strategic plan that built on its remarkable successes, the organisation was, surprisingly, soon de-funded by institutional sponsors and KidSouth ceased to operate. The Yogyakarta gathering¹¹ proceeded with almost no financial support and a call for donations went out across the networks.

While *South Project* honoured its commitment to fund all Indonesian participants, loyalty engendered by this organisation saw most Yogyakarta-bound Australian artists self-funding their participation, unlike other waged participants long associated with the *South Project* who chose not to attend. As Zara Stanhope noted: 'I think people are hungry to get out and experience those other cultures...And artists do it so well. They go off and live on the smell of an oily rag to have those experiences'. (cited in Stephens, 2008, p.2)¹² Despite – or because of – this paucity of resources, a down-to-earth and ultimately positive exchange took place in Yogyakarta. Here, local Indonesian artists politely but firmly challenged the privileged cultural naïveté of a number of perhaps inappropriately selected emerging artists. As in the 2006 *Transversa* exhibition at the Santiago gathering, Australian artists were

predominantly from Melbourne and received valuable *in situ* lessons about 'real' collaboration and relational aesthetics away from the safe, theoretically insulated art spaces at home. The event nevertheless became a productive grass roots encounter on concrete floors, dirt and cyberspace in a city where, ironically, craft plays a significant role in contemporary art and life. Following the gathering, Yogyakarta exchanges continued via a small post-event exhibition and residencies in Melbourne¹³, while independent collaborative projects initiated in Yogya have maintained momentum without funding, an unusual development in assisted cross-cultural projects from Australia.

Conclusion

In 2004 *The South Project* embarked on a complex program of re-mapping cultural horizons to investigate productive opportunities of a horizontal kind, exploring what else south might offer. On the eve of this enterprise's first off-shore departure to Wellington, Kevin Murray could already address Perth's ACUADS audience in 2005 with a glowing report of the project's remarkable progress, and its potential to make a difference in mainstream Australian art, the craft sector and anything in between. By challenging the tenacious hold of Euramerican paradigms and offering alternative perspectives, knowledges and networks across a vast range of cultures and practitioners in the Global South, it was assumed that Australian individuals and art institutions might just leap (or at least occasionally shuffle) sideways when not clambering ever upwards to seek endorsement from the north. It seemed inevitable, an idea whose moment had arrived, especially when all that art, activity and conviviality was accompanied by convincing theoretical interrogations of 'southness' to transcend our naturalised acceptance of western geographical mapping. Positive participant responses have continued throughout the life of *The South Project* - and beyond - notwithstanding inevitable internal management turbulence and external incommensurabilities along the way. Those involved tend to remain devotees.

In 2012, however, it seems that the extraordinary achievements of this project remain a blip on the horizon in mainstream art circles resolutely looking to Venice, Kassel, Berlin and New York for direction and guidance on the next best thing. It was to be expected that *The South Project's* extraordinarily demanding administrative structure that was constantly on the move between Melbourne and 'field' locations across the south, could not be sustained – even though its lifespan outlasted the initial projection of four years.

Possible explanations for this disconnect between *South Project's* bold vision and national tunnel vision include its (exhausting) complexity of ongoing activities but more likely reside in the centrality of craft and children's creativity during at least five of the project's six year life span. Perhaps these aspects presented too much in the way of relational aesthetics, a little too early for Australian art trends. Additionally, the predominance of Melbourne in the selection of Australian artists, despite national calls for expression of interest, was another determining factor in limiting information. Furthermore, while the project generated catalogues and promoted writing from the Southern Hemisphere, the paucity of existing critical literature on the project itself by writers external to the project has invited much less coverage than it deserved. In speculating about the (perplexing) demise of *The South Project* it may be premature to yet draw firm conclusions. After all, it's entirely possible that there are thousands of children, as well as adults, whose geographical and imaginative understandings of their locality were transformed, or at least re-oriented, through *The South Project* phenomenon. The paradigm change to follow might warrant waiting a little longer...

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¹ After 2009, *The South Project* existed as an online community, with occasional and modest Melbourne-based exhibitions of visual art.

² According to its website, Manifesta [1996-], the roving European Biennial of Contemporary art, changes its location every two years. Manifesta purposely strives to keep its distance from what are often seen as the dominant centres of artistic production, instead seeking fresh and fertile terrain for the mapping of a new cultural topography'. <http://manifesta.org/>.

³ As late as 1983 Terry Smith surveyed – and decried Euramerican dominated models of art history syllabi throughout the country, noting: "...European, not Australian, art has been the main interest of historians working here, and...only quite recently have undergraduates had the opportunity to take courses in Australian art, with very few looking at Asian art and none at Aboriginal art... Most strikingly absent from Australian art history writing is a consciousness of the continuing contribution of aboriginal [sic] and minority group artists....The whole question of the relationships between black and white Australian artists needs to be explored".

⁴ During *The World Today* program, broadcast by ABC Radio National, Linda Mottram stated that '...only a tiny proportion of Australian students currently learn anything at all about Asia.'

⁵ See, for example, 12th century Medieval 'T and O' map, Saint Isidore, Bishop of Seville, *Etymologies*. 'The world is portrayed as a circle divided by a "T" shape into three continents: Asia, Europe and Africa. Other maps have taken a specific place as a reference point (Mecca, Jerusalem, Edo Japan's Imperial Palace, etc.)'. 'The arrow points north: Directional orientation in antiquarian cartography', *Geographicus*, n.d., <http://www.geographicus.com/blog/rare-and-antique-maps/the-arrow-points-north-directional-orientation-in-antiquarian-cartography/>

⁶ Claudius Ptolemy's 200 CE treatise, *Geographia* oriented maps towards the north. (Gordon, 1971, p.211-227)

⁷ Murray's investigations of the south have traversed broad terrain, encompassing, for example, critical theory, South American politics and African craft through online editorials, lectures, essays, conference keynotes, websites and blogs.

⁸ By 2011 Belle Primary School in Orland West, Soweto had expanded under the new name of Mbuyisa Makhubu Primary School. This was in honour of the young man who was photographed holding Hector Pieterse, the twelve year old school child martyred during the 1976 Soweto Uprising. For further details, see 'Hector Pieterse,' http://www.soweto.co.za/html/p_hector.htm.

⁹ '... Delivered through a series of exhibitions, actions, performances, workshops and collaborations, most of which will take in the public domain, the Yogyakarta Gathering in 2009 will be the first time that the South Project has travelled to Asia. Although a select group of Indonesian artists has already participated in South Project activities (such as Heri Dono, Titurubi, Jumaadi, Wulan Dirgantoro, and Dian Fatwa) the South Project has a growing network of potential support, such as the Indonesian Contemporary Art Network amongst others. The South Project also welcomes collaborations from other regions in the South to participate in Yogyakarta 2009. The intention of the Yogyakarta Gathering is above all COLLABORATIVE, RECIPROCAL AND OF ACTIVATION...' from the 2009 South Project Yogyakarta Expression of Interest, *The South Project*, 2008, www.southproject.net/south/Yogyakarta2009.../Yogyakarta_October_Brief_2008.pdf.

¹⁰ *Why Gather?*, Elisabeth Murdoch Theatre, The University of Melbourne, 19–20 July 2008.

¹¹ *Perjumpaan Selatan-Selatan*, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 21 - 25 October 2009.

¹² 'Partly being where we are in the world - our oceanic borders - I think people are hungry to get out and experience those other cultures,' says Stanhope, 'and artists do it so well...'

¹³ 'Tuesday, December 15, 2009 until Sunday, December 20, 2009...Melbourne Reflection Post Yogyakarta South Gathering 2009 The South Project presents in Melbourne a reflection on the 5th International South Gathering in Yogyakarta Indonesia in October 2009 – a collaborative model of engagement bringing together arts projects from Melbourne, Perth, Santiago and Yogyakarta. Opening includes artist talks' from South Project, *Bus Projects*, 2009. <http://www.busprojects.com.au/2009/12/09/south-project/>.