

# Getting to Know You

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Beth Dillon  
17/10/2013



Figure 1  
Beth Dillon, *Going Somewhere (Water Work 3)*, 2013  
Still image from video  
HDV loop (11 min 07 sec)



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# Introduction

## *Getting it together*

‘There are more concepts of place than actual geographic ones.’  
(Tacita Dean, *Place*, 2005, p.12)

To say that the world is full of places seems to state the obvious. The idea of human life as a life of location has been the subject of a vast array of philosophical and creative inquiry throughout history. Yet for all its apparent simplicity, to deliberate on the nature of place evokes a range of complex questions and contradictory answers regarding the nature of human experience, subjectivity and identity.

My research presents a personal investigation of how a sense of place is produced and encoded with meaning through the influence of culture. I seek to explore how my experience of places of work, rest and leisure is mediated through the filter of socio-culturally prescribed codes of behaviour. My research considers the following questions – what is my place in the world? As a contemporary artist, participating in the production of culture from within the context of the art institution, what role do I play or can I expect to play in the production of place?

This paper draws on theoretical, philosophical and artistic texts to investigate how artistic intervention in the landscape, studio and gallery affects processes of place making. This paper is not intended to present an exhaustive analysis of the topic of place. Rather, I wish to provide a contextual framework to support the ongoing negotiation of place and personal identity that is inherent to my creative practice and conceptual focus.

I have divided this paper into four chapters, each presenting a distinct thread of inquiry into my central research question. Chapter one, *Between space and place*, seeks to establish a working

definition of place. My analysis will investigate the relationship between cultural production and the production of place, combining discussion of the writings of Susan Best, Edward Casey and J.E Malpas with an examination of Trevor Paglen's theories of experimental geography.

Chapter two, *Be a Body*, explores the role of the body in negotiating place. This analysis is supported by reference to Edward Casey's writings on the workings of the embodied mind. In this section, selected works of Laresa Kosloff are discussed to reveal comparative investigations of the agency of the body in processes of place making in contemporary video and performance art.

Chapter three, *Is this it? This is it*, features discussion of problematic processes of emplacement – the experience of 'being out of place.' This section examines the significance of ambivalent experiences of place in the work of Francis Alÿs, drawing comparisons to my own performance and video works within this discussion. The final chapter, *How am I doing?*, examines place making within the context of the art institution. This section concludes with a discussion of how the cultural infrastructure of the art school education system has shaped my understanding of place and self, and the nature of my practice.

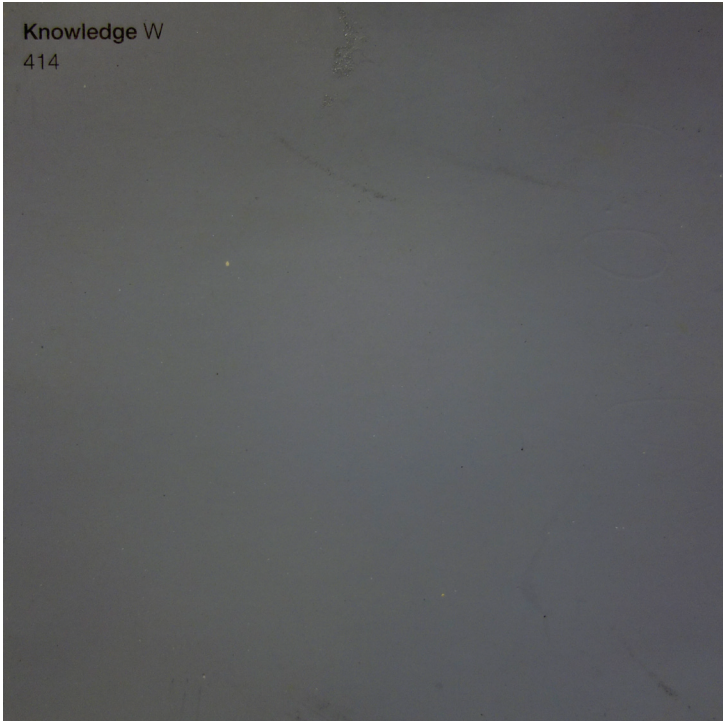


Figure 2  
*Knowledge*  
British Paints Colour Swatch



Figure 3  
*Unlimited Space*  
British Paints Colour Swatch

# CHAPTER ONE

## *Between Space and Place*

### PART I

In order to determine a sense of place, it is necessary to first define what might constitute place as opposed to space. Place is commonly associated with the familiar and locatable, relating to spaces that have been marked and adapted for particular functions of human activity. Space, on the other hand, encompasses the more abstract realm of the cosmos. To analyse space is to consider more abstract questions of time, infinity and the realm of physical material beyond the human scale of dwelling and cultivation. Accordingly, the difference between the two concepts seems to be a straightforward issue of identifying a specific locality within the infinite possibilities of space: place is 'here' rather than just anywhere.<sup>1</sup> The complication lies in our ability to recognise and understand the processes by which unbounded space becomes a locatable place and what affect this has on a sense of self.

The writings of art theorist Susan Best, and the works of contemporary philosophers Edward Casey and J.E Malpas, have played a pivotal role in my understanding of what constitutes place. In the various writings of Best, Casey and Malpas, a consideration of place necessarily entails a consideration of how place is defined and constructed through the influence of human activity.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Yi Fu Tuan provides an in-depth analysis of the nature of the place/space divide in *Space and Place: the perspective of experience* (1977).

2 In the context of this paper and my research, human activity encompasses processes of cultivation, habitation, intellectual and creative endeavours and the development of infrastructure.



In *Emplacement and Infinity*, Best describes place as a performative process, acknowledging the acts of enclosure, inhabitation and cultivation that construct a 'sense of place' (Best, 1999, p. 63). Casey adds emphasis to this recognition of a relational connection between human culture and its physical location, arguing that place is not solely a backdrop upon which we conduct our lives but is itself 'concrete and at one with our actions and thoughts' (Casey, 1998, xiii).<sup>3</sup>

In their investigation of the role of human agency in the formation of place, Best, Casey and Malpas conduct a form of topoanalysis that is not limited to a purely geographic study of physical space, but extends to an examination of the way culture shapes the affective relationship between persons and their surroundings. In *Place and Experience*, Malpas states:

'The land around us is a reflection, not only of our practical and technological capacities, but also of our culture and society – of our very needs, our hopes, our preoccupations and dreams' (Malpas, 1999, p.1)

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<sup>3</sup> Casey has written a number of books and essays that seek to address silences, absences, and missed opportunities in the complex history of philosophical approaches to space and place. Consult *Getting Back into Place* (1993), and *the Fate of Place* (1999) for in-depth analysis of the role of place in human experience.



Figure 4  
Beth Dillon, *Getting to Know You (Roll)*, 2013  
Still image from video  
HDV loop (31 sec)



This statement describes place as the product of mediation between the biological necessities of human existence – nourishment for subsistence and protection from the elements, and the more ambivalent drives of culture and society. As a reflection of human needs and desires, place is posited as operating in a constant state of flux, redefined and repurposed to suit the socio-cultural infrastructure of its inhabitants.

Best, Casey and Malpas present a diverse characterisation of place as ambivalent, relational and shaped as much by the whims of human desire as functional considerations. The concept of place as a construct of human culture allows for a consideration of how a sense of place could be re-constructed through alternative cultural activity. The potential for a re-negotiation of place through cultural activity is particularly relevant to the central concerns of my inquiry: To what extent can artistic practice reshape culturally encoded experiences of place?

## PART II

The theories of Trevor Paglen provide an excellent working model for the potential ways a geographic conception of culture can be applied to new ways of thinking about art making as place-bound and place-producing. Paglen's essay, *Experimental Geography*, presents a spatial interpretation of Marx, Walter Benjamin and Henri Lefebvre's theories on the production of material life, proposing that the spaces we inhabit and move through are not merely containers for human activity but are 'actively produced' through human activity (Paglen, 2008, p.29).

While Casey and Malpas stress the influence of human culture on creating a sense of place, Paglen's theories of experimental geography focus on the 'powerful constraints' that place sets upon human activity and behaviour (Paglen, 2008, p.29). Paglen cites the infrastructure of a university as an example of a reciprocal relationship between culture and place. The institution is described as a collection of buildings provided with specific purpose and meaning through cultural activity, but that cultural activity is, in turn, dictated by the physical and bureaucratic structures of the university (Paglen, 2008, p. 30). The nature of the relationship between cultural production and the production of place is thus characterised as a kind of feedback loop between human activity and its material surroundings (Paglen, 2008, p. 29).

To follow Paglen's logic, one can argue that as all forms of art making are situated in a place, artistic production is an inherently spatial practice. This 'geographic' approach to art requires that an analysis of creative practice encompass not only the study and criticism of cultural artefacts produced by the artist but includes analysis of the way the artist participates in the production of place (Paglen, 2008, p. 31). Paglen's self-reflexive conception of the relationship between culture and place endows art and artists with the potential to move beyond critique and into the 'realm of practice' (Paglen, 2008, 32). His essay presents a call for artists to move away from modes of creative inquiry that accept reflection and critique as ends in themselves. Alternatively, Paglen proposes that the purpose of art should be 'to experiment with creating new spaces' and 'new ways of being' that will subvert and redefine the places we inhabit and experience (Paglen, 2008, 32).

While I remain dubious to the feasibility of Paglen's demand for art that produces 'new' places and 'new ways of being', his self-reflexive view of the culture-place dynamic allows for an existential sense of individual empowerment. Reflection on Paglen's text produces an ambiguous sense of agency: If I, through artistic activity, am implicated in the systems of culture that produce place, then my artistic choices have the potential to re-script, however subtly, the cultural encoding of place.

Paglen's manifesto of a geographic approach to art, combined with Best, Casey and Malpas's relational conception of place form the basis of my philosophical understanding of the relationship between the production of place, culture and identity. Theories of reciprocity, cultivated behaviours and ambivalence discussed in these texts will be applied to an analysis of the nature of my own place-bound practice in subsequent chapters of this paper.





Figure 5  
Beth Dillon, *Getting to Know You (Runway)*, 2013  
Still images from video  
HDV loop (1 min 10 sec)





# CHAPTER TWO

## *Be a Body*

### PART I

‘My body continually takes me into place. It is at once agent and vehicle, articulator and witness of my being-in-place. Our living bodies serve to structure and configure entire scenarios of place.’ (Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, 1993, p. 48).

As the original source and instrument of movement, and primary medium of perception, the body plays an essential role in the negotiation of place. It follows that a consideration of place-making requires discussion of the ways in which bodily processes define and structure our engagement with place, culture and identity.

In *Getting Back into Place*, Edward Casey adapts Kant’s maxim that ‘all our knowledge begins with experience’ to argue that all knowledge of place begins with the ‘bodily experience of being-in-place.’ (Kant, cited in Casey, 1993, p.46).<sup>4</sup> According to Casey, a renewed appreciation of place can only be achieved through consideration of how the body enacts place. This position reflects theories of phenomenology proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, stressing that a sense of place is not derived from the realm of rational thought alone, but is also influenced by the sensory interplay between a person’s own spatial body and the spatial qualities of their surroundings (Merleau-Ponty, 1962)<sup>5</sup>

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4 ‘There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience’ Kant, *the Critique of Pure Reason* (1781).

5 Casey presents a variation of phenomenological theories of place/space proposed in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *the Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). Of particular influence is Merleau-Ponty’s theories contesting Descartes’ cogito -”I think, therefore I am”, arguing that this concept does not account for how

This spatial interplay between body and environment is articulated through systems of movement and potential movement. In moving from 'here' to 'there' the body exercises possibilities of gesture and direction dictated by the structure of our physicality and frontal bias of our sense organs (Yi Fu Tuan, 1977, p.35).<sup>6</sup> From any point in space, a body radiates potential movements of forward/backward, side-to-side, up/down, right/left and so on. Thus place is understood and experienced not only through the resting of a body in a particular location, but also through the potential movement of that body through space to other locations, other places.

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consciousness is influenced by the spatiality of a person's own body. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p.78)

<sup>6</sup> Yi Fu Tuan describes place as articulated through the 'corporeal schema' of the body. To feel at home in a place requires that objective reference points such as landmarks and cardinal points of direction conform with the 'intention and coordinates of the human body.' (Yi Fu Tuan, 1977, p.36)

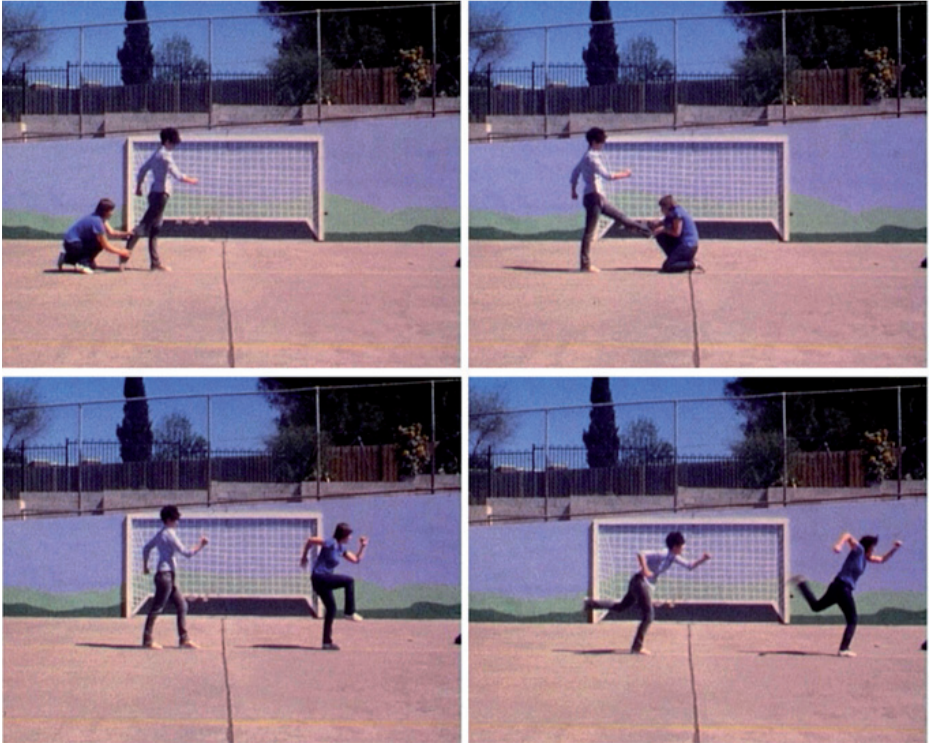


Figure 6  
Laresa Kosloff, *Standard Run*, 2007  
Series of still images from video  
Super 8 film transferred to video (1 min 36 sec)

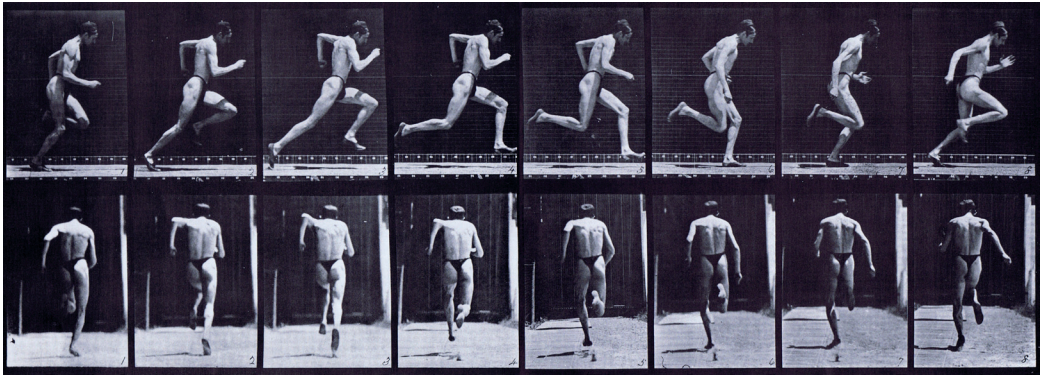


Figure 7  
Eadward Muybridge, *Male (Pelvis Cloth) - Running at full speed*, 1884

## PART II

The notion of the body as an essential tool for the orientation, conveyance and articulation of the self in relation to place and culture is a central concept driving the artistic practice of Laresa Kosloff. In the works of Kosloff, the body in motion is a central thematic concern and expressive device, variously employed as a site of endurance, flexibility and revision (Hughes, 2012, p.55).<sup>7</sup> Of particular interest to Kosloff is the culture of the ‘trained body’ (Bell, 2011, 20). Through live performance and video documentation of bodies negotiating public space, Kosloff investigates the processes by which everyday actions and movements are imbued with significance through the influence of culture.

Kosloff’s 2007 video, *Standard Run*, presents the artist’s attempts to ‘physically draw’ a running method (Figure 6). The work depicts two track-suited figures, trainer and trainee, against the backdrop of an urban sports court, breaking down the conventionally fluid movements of running into a series of isolated poses. Kosloff’s study of bodily training explores how behaviour and movement is cultivated for the purpose of athletic efficiency. The work references the motion experiments of Eadweard Muybridge, presenting an articulation and abstraction of the components that generate bodily expression and movement (Figure 7). In comparison to Muybridge’s

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<sup>7</sup> Hughes places Kosloff’s work within the trend towards experimentation with the body in motion in the work of contemporary Australian female video and performance artists. Hughes’ essay, *Sketching: Bodies in Motion*, links the use of the body in Kosloff’s work to shared themes in the practice of Alicia Frankovich, Gabriella and Silvano Mangano, Agatha Goethe-Snape, Bianca Hester, and Sriwhana Spong.

empirical approach, Kosloff incorporates humour into the video's delineation of movement. Through the transformation of the agile motions of running into a stilted progress of frozen poses, the video references traditions of slapstick, a genre in which gags rely on 'formal presentations of physical awkwardness' (Conland, 2010, p. 126).

*Standard Run*, and other video works by the artist are ambivalent in both their presentation of bodies in motion and in their position in relation to the viewer.<sup>8</sup> The ambiguous setting of Kosloff's videos adds to the uncertainty. Tableaux of bodies engaged in athletic movement are isolated against backdrops of truncated office buildings, non-descript sports courts and public squares. This has the effect of removing these sporting behaviours from their competitive outcomes and associated meanings (Barrett, 2010). In viewing these short movement studies, the audience is prompted to question the artist's intentions; are the works intended as didactic texts? Is there a hidden narrative? Perhaps the works are intended as schematics for a kind of experimental game? As Andy Thomson writes: '(Kosloff) helps us to encounter the actions of filming and watching, and the activity taking place on the screen, as something of uncertain but evident value' (Thomson, 2010, p. 86).

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<sup>8</sup> This ambiguity is particularly apparent in Kosloff's super 8 works that document rollerskaters, gymnasts and laughing club members interacting in public space. For examples and detailed descriptions of these works, consult the artist's website: <http://www.laresakosloff.com/>

## PART III

The ambiguous meaning of Kosloff's work involves the viewer in a 'kinetic dialogue', probing ideas of place, culture and self (Bell, 2011, 20). In my performance and video practice, I seek to engage the audience in a similar process of revision and reflection. One component of my research project comprises of a sequence of videos documenting ephemeral gestures developed in response to the landscape of Fowlers Gap Research Station, far west NSW. Titled, *Getting to Know You (Fowlers Gap)*, this series of performance interventions was conducted as part of an artist residency undertaken at the station.

Similarly to Kosloff's works, this video series documents everyday physical gestures using simple props and athletic costuming in non-descript settings. Works such as *Runway*, *Roll* and *Jump*, document myself pursuing a series of pathetic trajectories: running the length of an airstrip with a handful of balloons, rolling down a rocky slope shrouded in green cloth, falling to the earth, and leaping over makeshift hurdles (Figures 4, 5, 8 & 9). The series of movement studies frame my attempts to establish and test my sense of place and artistic purpose through bodily engagement with the desert scrub.

The Fowlers Gap works apply the relational theories of place discussed in chapter 1 of this paper to a consideration of how my



negotiation and re-presentation of the landscape can potentially subvert the existing cultural encoding of the site. The works deliberately engage with traces of human cultivation, situating my body in relation to an assortment of ridges, furrows, ploughed lines and excavations left by agricultural practices. Physical interaction with these residual elements places my actions in dialogue with the diverse history of human activity at the research station. This approach acknowledges existing functions and meanings of the research station as a site of scientific research, agricultural production and indigenous culture, whilst allowing exploration of my own invented use of the landscape as an artistic training ground.

In the works I have cast myself as an artist-in-training, employing the athletic capacity of my body to establish and measure my place in the landscape through self-imposed tasks of physical labour. As in Kosloff's videos, these tasks are staged for the camera, acknowledging the presence of the viewer but deliberately confounding a direct reading of the meaning and intent of my actions. The works operate as a collection of anti-climactic spectacles that are intended to both entertain and puzzle the viewer. Like Kosloff, this approach incorporates elements of slapstick, presenting my body as a fallible entity in alternating states of collision and accord with the landscape.



Figure 8  
Beth Dillon, *Getting to Know You (Flock)*, 2013  
Still image from video  
HDV loop (2 min 24 sec)



Figure 9  
Beth Dillon, *Getting to Know You (Jump)*, 2013  
Still image from video  
HDV loop (43 sec)

In *Extimacy: A new generation of feminism*, Alexie Glass-Kantor analyses the role of the 'doing-body' in the work of female Australian video media artists over the past decade (Glass-Kantor, 2009, 13). Glass-Kantor suggests that the canny manipulation of the gaze in works by Kosloff and artists such as Anastasia Klose and Alex Martinas Roe is a tactical approach that enables female artists to 'articulate and disseminate their own representation' (Glass-Kantor, 2009, 13). I see my practice as located within this resurgence of body-focused performance and video works in which the artist plays the role of director, author, performer and distributor of their own image.

In the *Fowlers Gap* series, my self-representation as a doing-body engages with the mythic associations of Australian Outback's frontier culture: a culture of stoicism, hard yakka and survival against the odds. Yet the purposefully anti-climactic resolution of my athletic interventions points to an awareness of my sense of being out of place in the Outback milieu. My actions are simultaneously those of an artist documenting their exploration of an unfamiliar landscape, and those of a city-slicker seeking to legitimise their presence in this remote patch of Australia through imitative gestures of physical labour.

Dave Hickey describes this oscillation between utility and imitation in art made in and about the landscape in a 1971 article for *Art in America*, 'Earthscapes, Landworks and Oz':

'Making art in the landscape allows the elevation of many splendid activities from the bondage of utility into the realms of imitation – activities like sipping iced tea from a big glass while sitting on a tractor seat, loading a rock crusher, mapping out the land beneath your feet or clearing your sinuses with the fragrance of asphalt.....These are all things worth doing both in and of themselves.'

(Hickey, 1971, p. 42)

I consider my practice to be a continuation of this legacy of land-based practice in which artists appropriated strategies of landscape cultivation in order to produce work. However, in contrast to the heroic monuments produced by early land-art practitioners such as Robert Smithson, who manipulated the raw materials of the earth to realise a grand artistic vision, my work employs elements of absurd humour and irony to consider the complex relationship between the figure and landscape.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The work of Richard Long also provides a fitting example for how my work deviates from historical land-art practices. The collection of ephemeral gestures performed at Fowlers Gap build on the history of Long's poetic interventions in far-flung sites of natural splendor. The difference lies in my incorporation of a sense of humour and ironic reflection into the practice of fleeting intervention in the landscape. This ironic approach is particularly concerned with how the expectations of a site-specific residency (those expectations being that you visit a

The work produced at Fowlers Gap is deeply critical of the role of the artist in the landscape, exploring states of alienation from the land and communicating an ambivalent sense of my place within it.

My research into place-making seeks to address the impact of this state of ambivalence on my artistic practice and conception of self. Having established a working definition of place, and the role of the doing-body in negotiating a sense of place, I will now examine ways in which states of unbelonging and non-identity can be translated into artistic practice. In the following chapter, *Is this it? This is it*, discussion of Francis Alÿs' 'art of dislocation' will consider the poetics of displacement in relation to my own site-specific practice.

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place and respond to that place in a creative manner) influence the nature of your experience of that landscape. In this context, I am no mere tourist, I am an artist-in-residence, and must act accordingly. My work therefore asks: what can an artist do in this place? What should they do?

# CHAPTER THREE

## *Is this it? This is it.*

### PART I

“Art is never entirely about or from a place, but rather a product of an experience, friction and/or contamination.”

(Francis Alÿs, 2007, p. 90)

In *Navigating in a Discovered World*, Doryun Chong contemplates the revival of mobility in artistic practice, describing the recent rise of a nomadic type of artist whose production is ‘immaterial and contingent’ (Chong, 2010, p.41). Art Historian Miwon Kwon summarises this itinerant model of artistic production:

‘If the artist is successful, he or she travels constantly as a freelancer, often working on more than one site-specific project at a time, globetrotting as guest, tourist, adventurer, temporary in-house critic, or pseudo-ethnographer.’ (Kwon, 2004, p.4)

For contemporary artists such as Francis Alÿs, art is no longer solely produced in the fixed contemplative space of the studio, but is rather researched, developed and presented through periods of international travel. Although I operate on a far more modest scale, my creative process shares nomadic elements that are key to the practice of Alÿs and his contemporaries.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, my research into place making considers how artistic practice functions in the various states of dislocation and ambivalence provoked by travel.

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<sup>10</sup> In the period 2010-2013 I have created site-specific works in New York, Beijing, Cambodia and various locations across Australia. In 2014 I will be undertaking creative projects and residencies in Iceland, Germany and the UK.



The artistic practice of Alÿs exemplifies the model of the mobile artist. Since emigrating from Belgium in the late 1980's, Alÿs has conducted urban interventions and gestures in response to sites including the streets of Mexico City, the Venice Biennale and the Peruvian sand dunes (Zwirner, 2013). T.J Demos describes Alÿs as a 'vanishing mediator' who translates the geographic displacement of the outsider into a Deleuzian model of deterritorialisation, allowing for intervention in social conflicts and the facilitation of collective movements (Demos, 2010, p.178).<sup>11</sup>

*Turista*, provides one such example of an interventionist act (Figure 10). The work documents a period in which Alÿs stood in the queue at the Zócalo, a central square in Mexico City where casual laborers advertise their services, and offered himself as a tourist for hire. Through this gesture, Alÿs marked himself as an outsider looking in on Mexican society, simultaneously confronting the tourist gaze, and implicating himself as an agent of this touristic gaze. This act was at once a political and poetic gesture, oscillating between action and impotence (Wellesley News Online, 2011). According to Alÿs, the work was motivated by his concerns about the division between observance and participation when one resides in a foreign country:

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<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed explanation of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of deterritorialisation, consult, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (1972)





Figure 10  
Francis Alÿs, *Turista*, 1994  
Performance Documentation

“How far can I belong to this place? How much can I judge it? By offering my services as a tourist in the middle of a line of carpenters and plumbers, I was oscillating between leisure and work, between contemplation and interference.” (Ferguson and Fisher, 2007, p.11)

Alÿs embraces the ambivalent status of the outsider, incorporating elements of humour, chance and failure into a site-specific practice that emphasises process over production, and states of becoming over being. A core methodology of Alÿs’s practice of ‘doing without doing’ is the poetic gesture (Demos, 2010, p.179). The poetic gesture is defined by the artist as an action that:

“Provokes a moment of suspension of meaning, a brief sensation of meaninglessness and senselessness that reveals the absurdity of the situation, an act of transgression that makes you step back and revise your prior assumptions about this reality.” (Ferguson and Fisher, 2007, p. 93)

Alÿs’s use of the poetic gesture allows for a revision of existing dynamics between place, culture and self. The intention of this methodology is not to produce a new place, as Paglen would demand of art, but rather to reveal, interrogate and shift existing socio-cultural conditions through gratuitous and absurd acts of intervention.

## PART II

Like Alÿs, I seek to acknowledge and explore an ambivalent sense of place through the creation of work that evokes a non-categorical affect; that is, an affective dimension that is both compelling and opaque. This approach is evident in a series of work produced during a period of field research in Mildura, Victoria. Titled, *Going Somewhere*, this collection of video-documented performances, drawings and sculpture explores the physical and socio-cultural landscape of the Murray River community from an outsider's perspective. Commissioned for site-specific arts biennale, *Mildura Palimpsest #9*, the works investigate themes of productivity, progress and dislocation. A series of videos document myself engaged in acts of self-irrigation on the bleached surface of a salt lake on the outskirts of town. These acts include filling my uniform with the contents of a watering can, transforming myself into a human sprinkler, and constructing an elaborate contraption for a thorough self-dousing (Figures 1, 13 & 14).

The videos are accompanied by a collection of video stills and sculptural works inspired by the town's public fountains and rampant sprinkler usage (Figures 11 & 12). The works engage with the town's employment of water as a force of landscape transformation in both domestic and agricultural contexts.<sup>12</sup> *Going Somewhere* inserts my personal interpretation of irrigation practices into existing systems of

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12 At all times of the day, I witnessed sprinklers in action in suburban lawns, commercial vineyards, and sporting fields. The town also possesses a strangely aggressive public fountain that spurts ferocious jets of water skyward during daylight hours. The setting of the videos, Lake Ranfurly, was chosen due to its function as a Murray River saline management site.



Figure 11  
Beth Dillon, *Going Somewhere (Suit Up)*  
Bottled water, costume  
Installation view, dimensions variable



Figure 12  
Beth Dillon, *Going Somewhere (Around Again)*, 2013  
Watering can, pump, bucket, rope, water, hose  
Installation view, dimensions variable

water management and distribution that have shaped the region's industry and culture since the establishment of the town in 1887.

The series of absurdist irrigation experiments explore unproductive methods of channelling and dispersing water in the landscape. The decision to engage in what could be considered acts of water 'wastage' reflects the ambivalent nature of my Mildura experience. Time spent in the town was characterised by meandering drives through the sprawl of housing developments and dirt bike raceways, the consumption of warm beverages, and visits to the Murray River bank undertaken in a vague attempt to connect with the natural splendour celebrated in the tourist brochures. This sense of detachment and ennui was translated into slapstick acts of irrigation that subvert the positive ethos of local community development initiatives through gestures of disengagement.

Ultimately, the works of *Going Somewhere* present my attempts to come to terms with a frustrated experience of place and artistic purpose. Dressed in a gray jumpsuit and 'efficient' haircut, I have presented myself as a foreign intrusion on the lakebed, realising acts of water distribution with purposeful intent but without a clear outcome. In comparison to the Fowlers Gap series, in which I pursued self-imposed rituals of athletic engagement to achieve a sense of purpose in an unfamiliar landscape, the Mildura body



of work examines the impact of purposeful unproductivity on an understanding of self and place. In both series of work, I have sought to subvert the expectations of how an artist should experience and represent the place in which their practice is situated. This ironic critique of myself as ‘artist-in-residence’ seeks to explore how itinerant art-making affects not only my experience of unfamiliar places but also the viewer’s understanding of that place.<sup>13</sup>

In the final chapter of this paper I wish to extend my examination of productivity and the value of artistic labour to consider place-making within the context of the art institution. I have previously discussed theories of place that hold that human activity is simultaneously a producer of and produced by the place in which it is situated. As an artist who labours within the systems of the art institution, it is necessary to include discussion of how this cultural infrastructure has shaped my understanding of place and self, and the nature of my practice.

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<sup>13</sup> The work will be presented in Mildura for the Palimpsest festival in October 2013, and then re-presented for assessment at the College of Fine Arts, Sydney. I am interested in how audience responses to the work will differ at each exhibition, considering that Mildura viewers will be familiar with the site and history of the town, while the Sydney audience will be far removed from both.



Figure 13  
Beth Dillon, *Going Somewhere (Water Work 1)*, 2013  
Still image from video  
HDV Loop (1 min 58 sec)





Figure 14  
Beth Dillon, *Going Somewhere (Water Work 2)*, 2013  
Still image from video  
HDV Loop (1 min 36 sec)

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *How am I Doing?*

What does it mean to be a professional artist in the 21st Century? How does the culture of critique and intellectual focus embedded in university education systems affect the nature of artistic practice, and the place of artists in society? The third component of my research examines my place within the world of the art institution, interrogating systems of display, critique and commerce that an artist negotiates in the development of their professional career.<sup>14</sup>

In *Work Ethic*, Helen Molesworth attributes shifts in the role of the artist and value of artistic production to the rise of a service-based economy in the Western world after WWI:

‘The use of a non-object based art made by an academically trained artist and described in an increasingly professionalised language echoes similar transformations in other forms of production from the university to the boardroom, as postwar culture at large came to be dominated by the logic of management and service sectors of the economy.’ (Molesworth, 2003, p.34)<sup>15</sup>

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14 According to figures held by the Student Centre at the College of Fine Arts, Sydney, approximately 200 students graduated from Fine Arts and Media Arts programs offered by the faculty in 2012. I am interested in what career path these students take after graduation. Does the Australian cultural infrastructure have the resources to provide for the professional development of these emerging artists? Does the nature of university education change expectations of what it is to be a professional artist?

15 Molesworth groups post war artists and their labour into four categories: the artist as manual worker; the artist as manager; the artist as experience maker; and the artist quits work. Her text is particularly useful for locating changing approaches to artistic production within the context of global shifts in labour

Molesworth's essay echoes Paglen's geographic notion of cultural production, arguing that 'art and artists are both in and of the world, helping produce it and being produced by it (Molesworth, 2003, p.34).' In order to investigate my place in the world, I found it necessary to test my relationship with the institutional culture that supports my practice, and the audience that receives the products of my labour.

Through process-based research I produced a series of live performance works and small sculptural objects engaging with the institutional culture of art school and behavioural codes of artistic professionalism (Figure 15). Firstly, I created an artist-in-training jumpsuit (the 'Insti-suit') that appropriated the design aesthetic of the College of Fine Arts Paddington campus and the colour palette of a trio of found paint swatches titled *Knowledge*, *High Alert* and *Unlimited Space* (Figures 2 & 3). This gray and yellow uniform was worn during studio experimentation and performance interventions to project an aura of professionalism and communicate my dedication to the development of my practice within the confines of the art institution.

One such intervention involved wearing the suit to the opening night event of the Honours program work-in-progress exhibition and vigorously shaking the hand of every gallery attendee whilst

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practices. Although Molesworth's text is focused on American and European artists, her analysis is helpful as an indication of global trends in institutional art making from the 1950's onwards.

declaring: “Thanks for coming. Good to see you.” Titled, *Working the Room*, the performance presented gestures of networking as a type of social ritual practiced by the professional artist.

Another work, *Signature Style*, consisted of a number of durational performances in which I wore the suit and wrote my signature continuously on a pad of paper for 3 hours at a time (Figure 16). During the performance, the act of repetition caused my signature to deviate from its original mark. Performed live in the gallery, I responded to questions from members of the audience with the declaration that I was busy ‘working on my style.’ This work was intended as a meditation on the identity of the artist and as a critique of how artistic value is attributed according to the perceived uniqueness of an artist’s creative output.



Figure 15  
Beth Dillon, *Institutional Rainbows*, 2013  
Plywood, acrylic paint  
Dimensions variable



Figure 16  
Beth Dillon, *Signature Style*, 2013  
Performance Documentation

# CONCLUSION

## *Loose Ends*

From the outset, the intention of my research was not to provide a concrete analysis of the relationship between place, culture and identity. Place is a vast area to decipher - of which I could only expect to present a superficial evaluation within the limitations of this paper. Rather, I sought to present a personal investigation of place as the product of negotiation between site, self and culture.

The development of my research and body of work was guided by a desire to understand and potentially revise the culturally encoded behaviours that determine an experience of place. Through discussion of the theories of Best, Casey, Malpas and Paglen, I formed a definition of place that could be applied to an analysis of the potential role that artistic practice could play in a re-negotiation of place. My inquiry considered this potential for re-negotiation by citing examples from my own site-specific practice and selected works of Francis Alÿs and Laresa Kosloff. Through analysis of the slapstick physicality of Kosloff and the poetic gestures of Alÿs, I explored various ways that the 'performing body' could reveal and subvert the cultural encoding of place and self.

Through research and experimentation my body of work developed into a series of behavioural studies exploring the role of the artist in



places of the studio, the gallery, the landscape and the residency. Costume, simple props and acts of ephemeral intervention were used to aestheticise behavioural codes of artistic production. In video documentation and live performance, I employed deadpan humour and acts of gestural isolation and repetition as artistic devices to present an ironic critique of my place as an aspiring artist in contemporary society.

The interpretation of place presented in this paper and in my creative output reflects themes of ambivalence, self-reflexivity and fallibility that are ongoing concerns in my practice. It was the experience of being 'out of place' - of an uncertain sense of purpose in place - that originally inspired my research and accompanying practice. It is therefore fitting that my research focused on awkward experiences of place, probing the impact of sensations of unbelonging, dislocation and ennui on my artistic practice and personal identity.

To conclude, my research and accompanying body of work do not seek to offer up new places, or new ways of being in place. My inquiry has sought to examine the ambiguous sense of individual and collective agency embedded in the notion that human activity is both producer of and produced by the places in which it is situated. Ultimately, this paper illustrates how artistic practice that embraces



the poetics of ambivalence acknowledges the multiplicities of place and culture that shape our experience of the world. As Mitchel Cumming writes in *Outa Place*: 'There are simply places, and other places, and the movement and relationships between them.' (Cumming, 2011, p.33).

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# PLATES

Alÿs, Francis, *Turista*, Mexico City, 1994, photographic documentation of an action, courtesy of Francis Alÿs and David Zwirner, New York, Image: Enrique Huerta © Francis Alÿs

British Paints, *Knowledge*, colour swatch 414, sourced from Bunnings Warehouse

British Paints, *Unlimited Space*, colour swatch 400, sourced from Bunnings Warehouse

Dillon, Beth, *Getting to Know You (Flock)*, 2013, still image from video, HDV loop (2 min 24 sec)

Dillon, Beth, *Getting to Know You (Jump)*, 2013, still image from video, HDV loop (43 sec)

Dillon, Beth, *Getting to Know You (Roll)*, 2013, still image from video, HDV loop (31 sec)

Dillon, Beth, *Getting to Know You (Runway)*, 2013, still image from video, HDV loop (1 min 10 sec)

Dillon, Beth, *Going Somewhere (Around Again)*, 2013, watering can, pump, bucket, rope, water, hose, dimensions variable

Dillon, Beth, *Going Somewhere (Suit Up)*, 2013, bottled water, costume, installation view, dimensions variable.

Dillon, Beth, *Going Somewhere (Water Work 1)*, 2013, still image from video, HDV Loop (1 min 58 sec)

Beth Dillon, *Going Somewhere (Water Work 2)*, 2013, still image from video  
HDV Loop (1 min 36 sec)

Dillon, Beth, *Going Somewhere (Water Work 3)*, 2013, still image from video, HDV loop (11 min 07 sec) Dillon, Beth, *Institutional Rainbows*, 2013, plywood, acrylic paint, dimensions variable

Dillon, Beth, *Institutional Rainbows*, 2013, plywood, acrylic paint, dimensions variable

Dillon, Beth, *Signature Style*, 2013, photographic documentation of an action, Image: Michael Clark

Kosloff, Laresa, *Standard run*, 2007, series of still images from video, Super 8 film transferred to video (1 min 36 sec)

Muybridge, Eadweard James, *Plate 61 - Males (Pelvis Cloth), running at full speed*, 1884, cited from *Animal locomotion: an electro-photographic investigation of consecutive phases of animal movements*, 1872-1885, University of Pennsylvania. The plates printed by the Photo-Gravure Company. Philadelphia, 1887.

