

Instruments of Democracy

Williams River Valley Artists' Project
@ Cementa15, Kandos Scout Hall
10am to 4pm, 9–12 April 2015

At 10am and 2pm each day WRVAP's project is animated by **Instruments of Democracy**, a short empathetic performance work that acknowledges the role of witnessing in non-violent direct action. The piece has been developed over the past six months through workshopping our responses to the courage, ingenuity, discipline and stamina of environmental activists from all walks of life who oppose the terrible impacts of open-cut and long wall coal mining, and CSG/fracking.

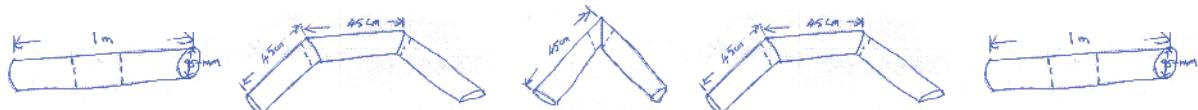
Vast environmental destruction is wreaked by large corporations that do not have the social licence to misuse, contaminate and deplete our



WRVAP Instruments of Democracy workshop, Silver Street Hall, Marrickville, March 2015. Photo: Chris Ward

ground water, destroy forests and natural habitats, and fray the social fabric of our farming communities. When government fails, people act: urgent concern for a sustainable future is spreading like a new form of democracy.

Instruments of Democracy is inspired by the art-like actions we have witnessed in the Leard, Newcastle and Gloucester blockades as well as by Alexandra Pirici & Manuel Pelmuş' *An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale* (a remarkable work of enactment witnessed by WRVAP artists in Venice, 2013). This affinity between artworks and non-violent direct action is discussed by WRVAP artist Margaret Roberts in her manifesto [dis]Regarding Place.



[dis]Regarding Place

In bringing the vocabulary of spatial art practices¹ into more common usage, artists contribute to the revaluation of what all places have in common – the actual space that constitutes the environment and which we need to better care for if the place of the whole planet is to remain inhabitable to humans and other life forms.

Having just been in Maules Creek with people who put their lives on the line to try to stop the progress of coal mining and coal transport, I am impressed by their awareness of the potential small actions have to contribute to a larger social movement in which caring for the planet becomes part of our everyday vocabulary. I am impressed because it suggests a thoughtful reflection about relationships between society and the individual and a commitment to their practice.

I could see how such direct actions are like artworks in that they have limited immediate impact but can be powerful as a form of communication and, together, can have substantial cumulative impact. While activists are unlikely to consider this comparison, it is important for people thinking about how art practice engages with social and political values, as I do frequently.

The Maules Creek experience makes me think again about the relationship between the rise over the last few centuries of the art convention of spatial autonomy² and the devaluation of place over the same period. This is because the formal art convention of spatial autonomy ‘advocates’ the devaluation of place.³ As such it is likely to contribute to, and ‘justify’, the disregard for place that allows exploitation and degradation of place to be so overlooked that it is allowed to happen.

For me, art practices that question that convention of spatial autonomy and begin to build a convention that recognises the actual space in which

an artwork is located, have the potential to undermine such disregard, especially once they became sufficiently commonplace. I am, however, discouraged by the reaction, from artists in particular, that questions how a single artwork can have any impact upon environmental problems through its formal language. That is why it is so good to see how the Maules Creek activists understand how very small actions, which are like artworks but not called artworks, are worth doing because they are understood as not done alone.

Margaret Roberts

This article is adapted from *Blip-brake*, a catalogue essay for the author’s exhibition (ed. Emma Wise) at Factory 49 in Sydney, October 2014. See www.margaretroberts.org.

1 By this I mean art practices in which physical space is part of artwork. In using the term *vocabulary* I am making a comparison with a sentence – suggesting that the physical space that is part of installations and performances etc is like a word in a sentence that also includes other parts of an artwork. Spatial art practices became more common with 1960s movements such as minimalism in the USA and New Realism in Europe, in which the physical space in which works were located became integral to their meaning. I use the term spatial because an important interest of these practices is the nature of the relationships between the (illusory, conceptual, imaginative, reflective and/or critical) space of an artwork and the physical space in which it is located.

2 *Spatial autonomy* is used for artworks whose meaning is more internal, and does not need any reference to the physical space in which they are located for them to be understood. It is referred to as a convention because it is still what people tend to think of art as.

3 The devaluation of place is discussed by Anthony Giddens in *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and (using different terminology) by Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1974 - Eng trans 1991) as a characteristic of the modern culture that arose in 17th-century Europe and has since spread throughout the world, most recently as ‘globalisation’. The art convention of spatial autonomy can’t be given credit for causing this devaluation, but it ‘advocates’ it in the sense that artworks that do not need their physical environment mimic a modern culture that also behaves as if it can survive without regard for its physical environment.

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Art, Activism and Us

The Williams River Valley Artists' Project (WRVAP) supports our interest in ecological issues through communal and individual art practices.

Since 2009 research-residencies across regional NSW have enabled us to engage with grass-roots activism so that our exhibitions, performances and publications can bear witness to specific local struggles to save the environment.

WRVAP came together initially in support of an artist-friend distressed that the NSW Government's proposal to flood the Williams River north of Dungog to build the Tillegra Dam would inundate her family's farm. From weekend residencies at the farm we learned of the trauma experienced by people about to lose their homes and livelihoods. We developed great respect for the work of the No Tillegra Dam Group and other local activists.

When the NSW Government dropped its Tillegra Dam plans in 2010 we reconsidered our reason for existing. Visits to the Bylong Valley, The Drip and nearby coal-affected areas introduced us to our next subject – coal and CSG.

Linking up with campaigns by Lock the Gate, 350.org, Front Line Action on Coal and Protect Gloucester, in 2014 we undertook non-violent direct action training in Maules Creek and supported blockade actions against Whitehaven Coal's destruction of the Leard State Forest

south of Narrabri. We also joined protests against AGL's CSG fracking near Gloucester, and the Pacific Climate Warriors' coal-ship blockade of Newcastle Harbour, protesting coal's role in rising sea levels.

Such recent grass-root/activist experiences have galvanised our belief that an art perspective can usefully inflect and enhance conversations about how we see and value the world we inhabit. A powerful image, things placed in a considered relationship in space, an object invested with time and energy, carries meaning; sometimes art can symbolically and physically touch us in ways that slogans, facts and figures cannot.

WRVAP's seven exhibitions – shown in NSW Regional and other galleries in Muswellbrook, Sydney, Maitland and Kandos – are documented at williamsrivervalley.blogspot.com.au and in the two editions of our activist-style broadsheet *The Stuttering Frog* (named after the frog threatened by the planned Tillegra Dam). WRVAP's work is undertaken as a mirror to the many individual efforts that contribute to a broad social movement to protect the environment.

We devised **Instruments of Democracy** to foreground the instruments that people use to lock their bodies onto gates, equipment, the earth, etc, to stop individual acts of environmental destruction. We admire their bravery in putting the environment above their own lives, and their foresight in testing the democratic tradition of respect for individual human life. That tradition underlies the processes of non-violent direct action, enabling people in individual environmental arguments to confront each other – outside a mine, or on a harbour – while showing respect towards all involved.

Portraits of some of the brave people from all walks of life who are locking-on for the environment, frame our project in the Scout Hall.



Images from top: Coonabarabran mother-of-three Nicole Hunter locks-on to an excavator, protesting Santos' Pilliga CSG, November 2014; activist Colin Ryan locks-on at Whitehaven Coal's Werris Creek mine, September 2014; Front Line Action on Coal's dawn tripod action shuts down Whitehaven Coal's Tarrawonga mine nr Boggabri, September 2014.

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Instruments of Democracy

Works in Kandos Scout Hall

WRVAP **Instruments of Democracy** (2015) performance objects – metal, cardboard, mixed media

NVDA activist portraits – digital photographic prints, cardboard

Suzanne Bartos **Another Meeting Pool (after Merlyn Skipper)** (2015) puppets

Neil Berecry-Brown **Social Licence** (2013) text

Sue Callanan **Breath by Degrees** (2015) coal, felt
suecallanan.blogspot.com.au

Juliet Fowler Smith **Barking Owls and Weeping Woodlands** (2015) drawing on paper, mixed media

Noelene Lucas **Death by Coal** (2015) video

Margaret Roberts **Life 4 Coal** (2015) floor cut-outs
www.margaretroberts.org

Toni Warburton **AgitPots H₂O** (2015) clay and ceramic
www.toniwarburton.com.au

David Watson **Australian Navigators** (2015) photographs,
Koala Diplomacy (2015) prayer flags, **Checkout + Ransom Note** (with Denise Corrigan) (2013) powerpoint
www.davidwatson.net.au



This pamphlet backgrounds WRVAP's contributions to the Cementa15 biennial contemporary arts festival (9–12 April 2015) in Kandos, NSW. It is a sibling publication to the 2nd edition of *The Stuttering Frog*, a 20 pp newspaper/catalogue which accompanied WRVAP's anti-coal exhibition LEAVE IT IN THE GROUND (Articulate project space, Sydney, November 2013). Collect a live 'Frog' at the Scout Hall, or: issuu.com/brownscows/docs/the_stuttering_frog_2
williamsrivervalley.blogspot.com.au

WRVAP takes inspiration from the remarkable activist organism Front Line Action on Coal (FLAC) and thanks Meret MacDonald @ FLAC + Chelsea Miller/Chantelle Brown for use of images of their actions. We are indebted also to Aidan Ricketts, Dean Sewell, Denise Corrigan, Chris Ward, Tony Furey, and Kandos Scout Group.

Pre-press: Tony Furey tony@parslowart.net

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Further Reading

Catherine Flood & Gavin Grindon (eds), *Disobedient Objects* (London: V&A Publishing, 2014)

Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism Vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014)

Aidan Ricketts, *The Activists' Handbook: A Step-by-step Guide to Activism* (London: ZED Books, 2012)

Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy* (orig. pub. 1993, now available as free download)

Flipside: David Watson, **Australian Navigators: Brown** [23-year-old Chantelle Brown locked-on to 'the echidna' opposing the construction of Whitehaven Coal's new mine in the Leard State Forest, Maules Creek nr Narrabri, NSW, October 2014]. Source image: Chelsea Miller, Front Line Action on Coal.



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