

David Watson

Power Walk With Me?

UNTIL 1931 coal was mined only a couple of kilometres from the centre of Sydney – in Balmain – via shafts sunk several thousand feet beneath the harbour, and for much of the 20th century imposing coal-fired power stations operated nearby, on Iron Cove and at White Bay. Coal-gas for street lighting, and later (with the advent of electricity) for cooking and heating, was produced up-river, at AGL in Mortlake.

But gone are the days when one's power source was local, tangible, malodorous and demonstrably dangerous. Today the filthy, increasingly gargantuan, planet-destroying processes of coal mining and coal-fired power generation are for city dwellers all-but invisible. And as our coal exports spiral (Newcastle is now the world's largest coal port) few Australians appear to have noticed or be fazed by the fact that we have become, over the past decade, one of the world's leading exporters of global warming.

When I was a youngster my family enjoyed car-camping holidays to remote parts of New South Wales. Even the matches we used to light the fire, which sported local municipal insignia of sheep, wheat and grapes, bore close relationship to the regions and communities we came to know and enjoy. But nowadays we mobile, frequent-flying Australians appear more familiar with Phuket, Vienna, Osaka and Los Angeles than with Putty, Mudgee, Gunnedah and Kandos. Meanwhile, whilst many a city-slicker may have been too busy to notice, many an increasingly coal-mining-dependent rural community has faced irrevocable (if not always entirely unwelcome) change. In the process, the very fabric of daily life, its interwoven social, spiritual and environmental complexion, has been altered.

In a 'coal rush' – dig it, ship it, burn it, before it's outlawed and worthless – money talks, and arms are swiftly twisted. It is also convenient and immensely profitable, particularly when you're a corporation based in Switzerland, Hyderabad, or Beijing, to remain blind to disturbed local terrain, and somehow remote from and blameless for the bigger, insanely damaged picture (ice caps melting, the Great Barrier Reef dying, extreme weather events costing us billions).¹

As a concerned artist/citizen attempting to wrestle with the scale, complexity and collateral damage of fossil-fuel extraction/power generation in the NSW Hunter region from the physical and psychological remove of Sydney, I am cognisant daily, too, as one of AusGrid's happy consumers, of my own complicity. What bothers me most is that I don't really know *where* our power comes from – how and where it is generated – and I suspect that this lack of understanding mirrors a broader public disconnect.² So, curious and having just leafed my way with increasing alarm through two recently published local coal-related exposés (*Rich Land, Wasteland: How coal is killing Australia*, and *Big Coal: Australia's Dirtiest Habit*), I decide to embark upon a modest (determinedly-non-fossil-fuelled) pilgrimage to find out.³

On a preternaturally warm winter's morning earlier this year I pedalled over the Anzac Bridge into the city hoping to locate a map of the New South Wales power grid. I'd remembered that the Electricity Commission had once had a shopfront on George Street showcasing wondrous new electrical appliances, including electric stoves, opposite Sydney Town Hall. And although I knew that times, tastes and government utilities had changed, I was still expecting that somewhere on the accessible ground floor of that brutally crisp 1960s office block (today branded Ausgrid) would be someone welcoming on a counter whom I could



Photographer
unknown, *Balmain
Colliery*, c. 1900

Leichhardt Library
Service



David Watson, *Welcome Mat*, Kandos Projects 2012

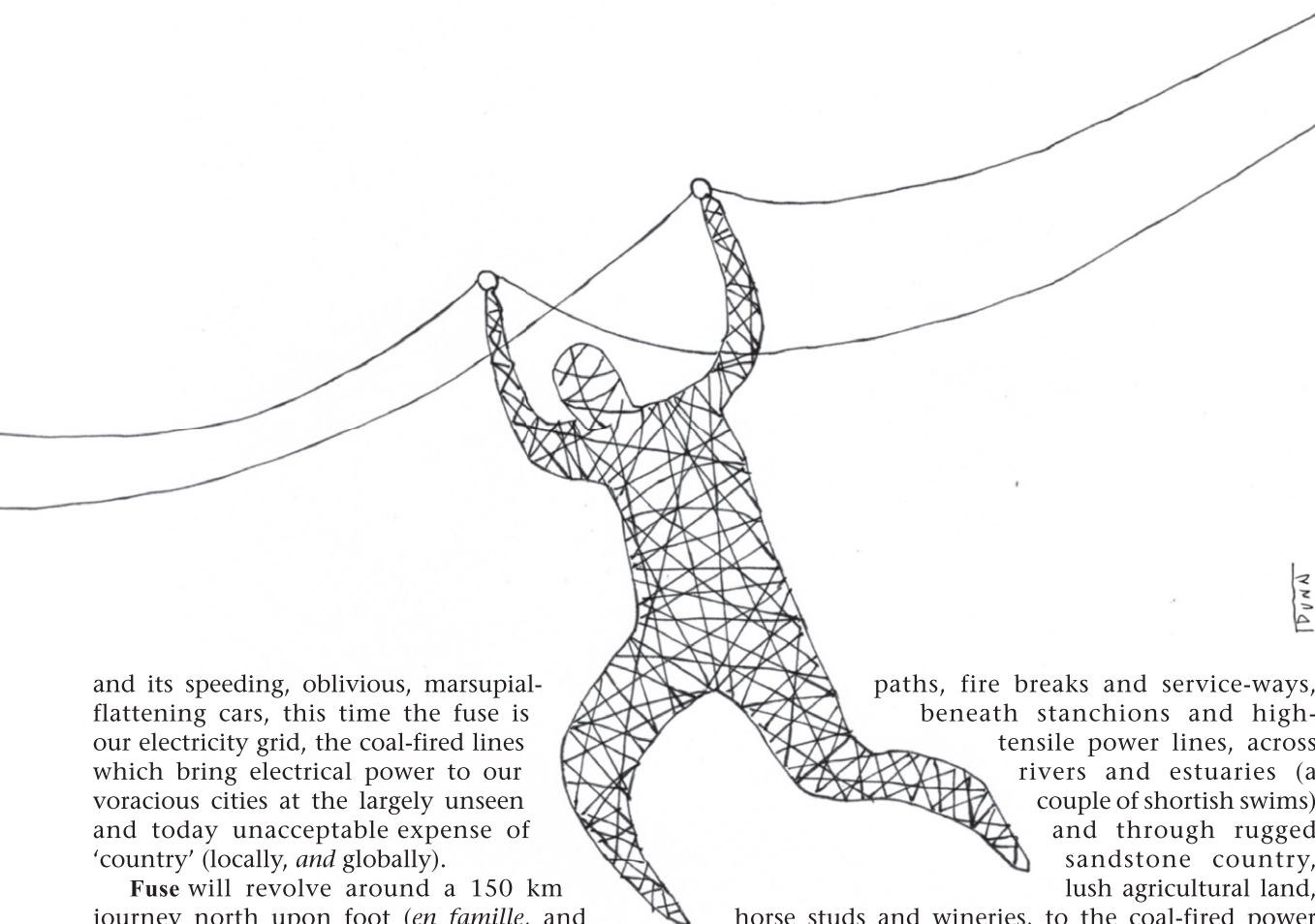
quiz re matters electric.

I'd been prompted finally to 'get on my bike' by reading earlier that morning that '\$4 billion in private funding would be sucked away from Australia's solar power and renewable energy industries' [when] the Coalition won government.⁴

A modest A4 notice blu-tacked inside the skyscraper's glinting glass George Street frontage informs me that Ausgrid's reception is now located around the corner, in Bathurst Street. There a shortish affable man behind a counter sits beside a busy office thoroughfare, looking more like a kindly concierge than the switched on face of the state's electricity grid. I chat briefly to the man and an employee friend who's stopped for a chinwag on his way out. I tell them both that, as an Ausgrid consumer, I'm attempting to find out precisely *where* my power comes from. Neither, it transpires, has ever really thought about it. As women in high heels and men in suits make a bee-line to lunch through electronically-activated but rather-last-century sliding glass, we agree – in a friendly, shoulder-shrugging, mutually powerless kind of way – that answers to contemporary questions such as these lie certainly beyond this hard-surfaced air-conditioned lobby and possibly beyond our ken.

Sensing 'though that I'm unsated, the concierge offers to ring 'upstairs' to see if there is someone (perhaps in corporate relations?) who might address my query. But after a few minutes' wait I'm informed that nobody up there knows, either. He suggests that I call the switch, and jots down the number. But because (unlike almost every other person out and about in the city today) I don't own a mobile phone, I am temporarily unable to 'let my fingers do the walking'. Instead (adopting plan B) I pootle off to the Lands and Titles Office in Macquarie Street in search of large-scale maps and aerial records detailing (as the Gregory's street directory once did, in pale red ink) the routes of high-voltage transmission lines feeding into the city. I am in luck. There are even aerial photographs on the verso of the 1:25 000 maps, with easements sometimes visible. I purchase several maps and pedal home, dreaming already of my route north across the Hawkesbury.

I decide that all this initial research, its dead ends and 'light globe moments', will form part of a yet-to-be realised art-action, potentially titled *Fuse* (2014). The work will re-inflect poet Judith Wright's metaphor of the sanctuary-destroying road which 'leads into the world's cities like a long fuse laid' ('Sanctuary', 1955).⁵ Rather than the road



and its speeding, oblivious, marsupial-flattening cars, this time the fuse is our electricity grid, the coal-fired lines which bring electrical power to our voracious cities at the largely unseen and today unacceptable expense of 'country' (locally, and globally).

Fuse will revolve around a 150 km journey north upon foot (*en famille*, and with a cast of invited walkers) to the seemingly invisible source of the current, the flow, the very lines which feed our power-hungry urban maw. Over the course of several months the multi-part walk will lead from the power board in our Rozelle home studio, via the sub-station at the bottom of the street, across bitumen and bush, via public

paths, fire breaks and service-ways, beneath stanchions and high-tensile power lines, across rivers and estuaries (a couple of shortish swims) and through rugged sandstone country, lush agricultural land,

horse studs and wineries, to the coal-fired power plants of the central coast/Hunter region; and thence to the coal mines, nearby.

A blog, uploaded via back-pack-solar-powered smart-phone, will record each leg of our unfolding journey to the increasingly desecrated source (we will pass, for example close to the hamlet of Bulga, currently at loggerheads with mining giant Rio Tinto over mine expansion plans).⁶ The walk's physicality, its serendipitous (if ultimately directed, ordained) route, its inquisitive eye, ever-changing complexion and semi-self-sufficiency will register initially, I hope, in contradistinction to the speed of electricity and to the slicing geometry of the power grid. Most importantly (via the blog, attendant media exposure and a potential future exhibition and publication) **Fuse** will draw public attention to some of the dirty, destructive, today unacceptable downsides of coal-fired power generation. Its take home message will be 'leave it in the ground'.

SMH reader David Nash summed it up neatly recently:

Australians need to come to terms with the idea that coal needs to be left in the ground. This was one of the key findings of the Climate Commission's report, published in June. Australia's dirty secret on global warming, the export of coal, is an issue unlikely to be raised [during the 2013 election campaign]. But there are compelling moral reasons to think more critically about the global consequences of this industry, and if politicians are unwilling to do so, it is inevitable that people will take action themselves, both through divestment, and through civil disobedience. It is already happening.⁷

As we know, sometimes contemporary art can flick



Back-pack-solar power



Guy Ben-Ner, *Treehouse Kit*, 2005

our switch or light up our grid.⁸ It can take us beyond our comfort zone, wrench us from our consumer treadmill by suggesting that we contemplate destroying all our possessions⁹ or living in an abstracted flat-pack-DIY-style tree-house.

Over recent decades art actions and relational works have sought not only to engage the public imagination, but to involve and evolve by facilitating serendipitous collisions and collaborations. Such quasi-directed 'art situations' can proffer a powerful social and/or political shorthand.¹⁰ Productive frissons of empathy often radiate from such situations (as from any true action) both directly and indirectly. Sometimes viewing documentation, reading about, or catching a radio program inspired by a work/action is all that is required.

I see **Fuse** as a curious, somewhat surreal intervention located somewhere between Monty Python's *Climbing the North Face of the Uxbridge Road*¹¹ and Francis Alÿs' *The Green Line (Sometimes doing something poetic can become political and sometimes doing something political can become poetic)*¹² with a reverential nod to the protest walk, the freedom ride and the hunger strike.¹³ Potentially fraught, unscripted and at times perhaps physically impossible, the concept of the walk remains nevertheless deeply felt and I hope – with input from others and a little ingenuity – pregnant with possibility.

As the regularly dissident (and remarkable) Chinese artist/citizen Ai Wei Wei noted recently:

If you don't act, the danger becomes stronger.¹⁴

Perhaps you'd like to join me? Autumn 2014?

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David Watson's most recent project **Wild Ryde**swimming home (2006-12) involved a meandering pilgrimage upon foot across the suburban postcodes of his youth + a return swim down Sydney's 'original highway', the Parramatta River. See, for example: <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/offtrack/the-pace-of-place3a-david-watson28099s-wild-ryde/4502380>

1 'Indeed, one major natural disaster exacerbated as a result of global warming can easily wipe out in one hit several years' worth of [coal] royalties. Cyclone Yasi in 2011 is estimated to have cost the public purse \$7 billion, with a similar amount borne by companies or individuals.' Guy Pearse, David McKnight, Bob Burton, *Big Coal: Australia's Dirtiest Habit* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2013), p 211.

2 I swiftly discover that 90% of NSW's electricity is generated by coal-fired power stations.

3 Sharyn Munro, *Rich Land, Wasteland: How coal is killing Australia* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2012); Guy Pearse, David McKnight, Bob Burton, *Big Coal: Australia's Dirtiest Habit* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2013).

4 Ben Cubby, Tom Arup, 'Climate of uncertainty', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 August 2013.

5 Judith Wright: *Collected Poems 1942-1985* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 2002), p 139.

6 Matt Siegel, 'Coal Mine Fight Embodies an Economic

Struggle in Rural Australia', *New York Times*, 13 August 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/14/business/global/in-australia-signs-of-a-tilt-in-economic-equilibrium.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

7 David Nash, 'Public will act on coal's perils if politicians won't', Letters, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10-11 August 2013.

8 Artists have on occasion also explored the invisible, ineffable power (and legacy) of electricity itself: Ceal Floyer's *Light Switch* (1992-99) projected a light switch onto the gallery wall; Martin Creed's infamous *Work No. 227, the lights going on and off*, won him the 2001 Turner Prize; Margaret Roberts' *No Big Coal* (2012) explored the notion that we are all complicit by offering up giant pieces of felt cut into the up-scaled shapes of elements of the gallery's own power board, for visitors to reconfigure; volunteers were also invited to hold the shapes 'with their backs against the wall'.

9 For *Break Down* (2001) Michael Landy inventoried, boxed up and destroyed all of his possessions.

10 Lucas Ihlein's *Bilateral Petersham* (2006), for example, was a

blog-based work which engaged with a cast of locals, confrères and itinerants to chart a quotidian array of adventures and discoveries whilst the author/artist confined himself for two months within the municipal boundaries of the Sydney suburb of Petersham.

11 www.youtube.com/watch?v=9U0tDU37q2M, accessed 9 September 2013. The sketch formed part of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (Episode 33), broadcast November 1972.

12 Alÿs' 2004 walk along 'the green line' (Moshe Dayan's pencilled 1948 armistice border between Israel and Jordan) with a small pierced can of light-green paint, variously bewildered, upset and pleased locals at a time when a decidedly less transient concrete barrier was being erected across Jerusalem.

13 For example, 'Over Our Dead Bodies', an August 2013 hunger strike in Brisbane protesting a deal to unlock Queensland's Galilee Basin coal reserves, joined by former Australian Democrats senator Andrew Bartlett: <http://overourdeadbodies.net/>

14 *Ai Wei Wei: Never Sorry* (Alison Klayman, 2012) screened 8 September 2013 on ABC TV.