

SITUATIONS

Thinking Through Avoca

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First published in: Juliana Engberg, Lyndal Jones: Darwin with Tears
(Melbourne: ACCA, 2008)

I have never been to Avoca.

Instead I have come to know the project's house and inhabitants through a constellation of digitised archive documents, site plans, anecdotes and responses that have begun to gather around and to be produced through this cumulative project. And so, this text must be a consideration of what the Avoca Project might be beyond first-hand experience; what imaginative charge it releases from 10,000 miles away, as a durational artwork in place over time.

Initiated by Lyndal Jones in 2004, Avoca's site and host is the Watford House located in a small Central Goldfields town in Victoria, two hours north-west of Melbourne. This is how we first come to locate the project - 35.40S, 143.43E – by its relativity to other places, as a mapped and static location. But almost immediately the Avoca Project destabilises us from this anchoring point, sending us ricocheting off the map to other points of origination, both real and imagined.

The Victorian weatherboard house – known locally as the 'Swiss House' – was originally shipped plank by plank, joist by joist, from Europe in the mid 19th century to take up residence as the town's hotel on the High Street, but was then moved on Red Gum tree rollers downhill to its present location on the Avoca River flood plain (*already my own lexicon of cinematic images serve as the visual substitutes for these journeys from the self-build fiasco of Buster Keaton's One Week (1920) to the iconic haulage of the Quoye house across the Newfoundland ice in Lasse Hallström's version of the Annie Proulx novel The Shipping News*).

Clearly identifiable as an immigrant by its architectural incongruity, the house is both itself a nomad and a temporary resting place for migrants. It has existed through a process of remaking as a dwelling materially and socially for over 150 years. In this sense, the acts of refurbishment on the house and its site by Lyndal Jones, her local collaborators, 'project experts' and resident artists and writers can be seen, not only as restorative, but crucially as a facet of the house's ongoing process of being made, unmade and remade.

If we understand sculpture as a process of embodiment, of emergent forms, then the Watford House and by extension the Avoca Project, through its various guises and in its various locations, might first be understood as a processual sculptural form, an immigrant body and accumulation of materials and histories on which and through which a new set narratives are being played out. In its derelict state the house may well have evoked the paradigmatic uncanny qualities of the gothic haunted or 'dead' house (*I am visualising Victor Hugo's sketches of an empty Guernsey house for his novel Les Travailleurs de la mer*), but in its current metamorphosis, its historical and recent pasts are being exposed, made present (rather than remaining latent or merely absent) through an ongoing process of transformation and recuperation. The Watford House has become both the subject and medium, the object, model and platform, for a process of imagining by this resident and transient community. And so I am imagining that an initial encounter with the Avoca Project at first-hand might well send you back and forth between the intriguing, multi-layered materiality of the house (its rotting numbered timbers,

its restored veranda, its flooring and windows), and its mythic status. Gaston Bachelard describes this correlation between form and imaginative charge in his phenomenological account of intimate places. "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box," he suggests. "Inhabited space transcends geometric space". (*The Poetics of Space*, orig. 1958, English translation, 1994, Beacon Press, Boston, p. 47)

But though the house itself might well act as a metaphor for the fate of the town, subject to the forces of industrialisation and more recently globalisation and climate change, the project does not seek to become a nostalgic representation of the town of Avoca, or to recuperate an authentic moment in history. Jones is clear to conceive of this work as a dynamic collaborative model of sustainability in the present, active in a global network of interdisciplinary projects engaged with the future of our environment, as well as a physically-bound, site-specific 10-year project. The Avoca Project should not only be considered then as a temporal sculptural form, nor simply as fascinating metaphor for a series of social and environmental histories, but also as the descendant of the activist, environmental projects of the 1960s and early 1970s which have found new resonance in more recent processual, collaborative and interdisciplinary contemporary projects world-wide.

Often characterised by the remote nature of their locations, far from the centres of contemporary urban culture, such projects have risen to recent prominence through their dispersal and documentation in survey exhibitions such as *Groundworks: Environmental Collaboration in Contemporary Art* (curated by Grant Kester at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, 2005) and publications such as *LAND, ART: A Cultural Ecology Handbook* (edited by Max Andrews, RSA, London, 2006) and *Design and Landscape for People: New Approaches to Renewal* (edited by Clare Cumberland & Lucy Musgrave, Thames and Hudson Ltd, London, 2007). Ongoing projects such as *the land* just outside Chiang Mai, Thailand, initiated by artists Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert (thelandfoundation.org) and Andrea Zittel's *High Desert Test Sites* (highdeserttestsites.com) in the Southern Mojave Desert, California began, like the Avoca Project, with the purchase of a piece of land by an artist(s). This was the catalyst for a series of collaborations and experiments, acted out upon and through the land, often involving interdisciplinary discussions and interventions.

The participatory, often cross-disciplinary processes involved in these projects is akin to that of groups such as Argentinean Ala Plástica, UK-based Common Ground and Danish group Superflex, whereby the artist's primary authorship is used as a visionary means to engage participants and visitors and to secure funding support. Ownership of the project invariably becomes exchanged and shared, though authorship of specific facets of the project might be clearly identified such as particular architectural interventions, residencies or texts.

In their survey of these collaborative projects dedicated to social and environmental change, Cumberlidge and Musgrave draw out the key shared principles, proposing that they:

- Propose renewal as a continuous, open-ended process;
- Take a holistic, multidimensional approach to their designated situations;
- Maximise resources – material, human and economic;
- Use local distinctiveness as a starting point for a vision of the future;
- Engage professionals to work outside their normal sphere of practice and share an awareness of symbolic value.

Within this context, the Avoca Project's sustainable credentials (such as the irrigation mechanisms and hydrophones embedded in the underground water tank by Jones and Nigel Helyer) can be viewed not merely as the outcomes of a collaborative environmental strategy, but as an integral part of the artwork as a process of imagining, as a site of possible future scenarios. The local distinctiveness of Avoca and the specific problems of the Watford House and plot of land offer a structure (both physically and conceptually) through collaboration can occur.

The Avoca Project, through these sculptural and social processes and through its responses to the specific environmental challenges of that location, might at first be considered as dedicated to the production of *genius loci*, a sense of place, as exemplified by Lucy Lippard's response to the rootlessness of modern society in *The Lure of the Local Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society*. Lippard's engagement with place as a site of authentic and rooted identity draws upon the humanistic metaphysics of geographers such as Edward Relph and Yi-Fu Tuan. Relph, for example, posited a bounded notion of place as a moral converse to the rootlessness of mobility, suggesting,

"Roads, railways, airports, cutting across or imposed on the landscape rather than developing within it, are not only features of placelessness in their own right, but, by making possible the mass movement of people with all their fashions and habits, have encouraged the spread of placelessness well beyond their immediate impacts." (Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion, 1976, p. 90)

At its heart, this phenomenological consideration of place evokes the belief that to be human is to be "in place". But this essentialist view of place hardly fits the dynamic aspirations of the Avoca Project. In Jones' vision for the Watford House there is no authentic home to which the artists, 'project experts' and visitors are seeking to retreat; furthermore, the house's particular history is persistently being 'out of place'. But rather, Jones' future vision for Avoca correlates to a more progressive of place, as advanced by geographers such as Doreen Massey, David Harvey and Tim Cresswell in the UK.

In 'A Global Sense of Place', Massey suggests that, "what gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus. Instead of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a larger proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself [...] And this in turn allows a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local." (A Global Sense of Place in Reading Human Geography, Eds. Trevor Barnes and Derek Gregory, London: Arnold, 1997, pp. 315-23)

In this sense, the Avoca Project can be understood as a constellation of particular economic, social and material relations at different points in time, but also (as Massey further develops in her 2005 publication *For Space*), as a relational space. To understand what Massey means by these relational qualities, we might consider her visit to the town of Keswick in the Lake District, England. Massey writes:

"This is the event of place. It is not just that old industries will die, that new ones may take their place. Not just that Hill farmers around here may one day abandon their long struggle, nor that that lovely old greengrocers is now all turned into a boutique selling tourist bric-a-brac. Nor evidently, that my sister and I and a hundred other tourists soon must leave. It is also that the hills are rising, the landscape is being eroded and deposited; the climate is shifting; the very rocks themselves continue to move on. The elements of this 'place' will be, at different times and speeds, again, dispersed." (For Space, London: Sage, 2005, p. 140-1)

So the Avoca Project occurs through engagements between things in progress, people passing through, land undergoing shifts and changes, erosions, deposits, fabrications and interventions. The question that Massey leaves us with is what aspects of place endure and it is here that we might finally begin to consider the Avoca Project as practised place, as a model of Edward Soja's 'thirdspace'.

Firstspace, Soja argues is empirically measurable and mapped – produced by social processes; whilst secondspace is conceived space – subjective and imagined – a positivist concept of space. "Thirdspace", Soja proposes, "as Lived Space is portrayed as multi-sited and contradictory, oppressive and liberating, passionate and routine, knowable and unknowable. It is a space of radical openness, a site of resistance and struggle, a space of multiplicitous representations [...] It is a meeting ground, a site of hybridity [...] and moving beyond entrenched boundaries, a margin or edge where ties can be served and also where new ties can be forged. It can be mapped but never captured in conventional cartographies; it can be creatively imagined but obtains meaning only when practiced and fully lived." (Edward Soja, "Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the

Geographical Imagination", Human Geography Today, Eds. Doreen Massey, John Allen and Phillip Sarre, Cambridge: Polity, 1999. p. 276)

The Avoca Project as thirdspace produces place when practiced and lived; a space of interrelations, as consistently under construction, always in the process of being made and remade, not just materially but socially. It is an event in progress rather than rooted to its physical limitations or in search of completion. Lyndal Jones describes the project as both poetic image and a model of resilience and it is in between these two artistic tropes – the representation and the model and between these two periods of time – the past and the future – that we can locate that enduring legacy of the Avoca Project: a space of workings out, a landscape and architecture onto which propositions are drawn; a node in a network of conversations and discussions about lived experience and the possibility of change.

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