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Our place: in-between the primordial and the latter?
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Artistic research and subjectivity

This paper presents excerpts of documentation and theoretical reflection which account for my coming-to-terms with a specific place that became the objective of my artistic engagement for a period of approximately six months during 2005. The artwork production is itself somewhat schizophrenically situated as a hybrid of experimental creative-production and scholarship (it was Donald Schön who said that reflection-in-action is susceptible to a kind of rigour that is both like and unlike the rigour of scholarly work and controlled experimentation). From the outset it was intended that such an account as this should be presented in a research forum like the one in which we are currently situated. Indeed the intention to address the theme of the "Making Badlands" conference has influenced the predisposition of the artist and aspects of the content of the resulting artifact. The paper incorporates references to texts arising from archaeological, geological, sociological and cinematographic contexts into what is essentially a phenomenological account.

That such self-directed and self-referential practice may be considered research has in the past been a contentious principle that now has been sufficiently addressed so as to be less so (Schön, Scrivener, Holmes). In particular, Scrivener says that "a creative-production project may comprise some problem solving and may involve cultural theory, cultural history and scientific research inter alia." However, he stresses that it is inappropriate to obfuscate, in other words, to claim that one is the same as the other. Various kinds of knowledge may arise out of the process of making and exhibiting art. Scrivener points out that in creative-production projects these are by-products rather than the primary objective. Certainly, it is my opinion that Pickering's observations of experimental scientific practice as "dialectic of resistance and accommodation" apply to experimental practice outside of the field of science, where the grammars and rigors of reflective practice as described by Schön are evident (Pickering 21). In respect to the conditions of the conception, production and exhibition at the *Making Badlands* conference of the artifact entitled *In-between the Primordial and the Latter* I believe that these conditions apply. This paper further serves to situate this interactive multimedia artwork in that context.

Before proceeding to introduce the site that became the object of my intention in relation to this artwork I proffer an unashamedly appropriated definition of subjectivity that psychoanalyst/philosopher Felix Guattari proposed as commensurate with what he called the "ethico-aesthetic paradigm".

> The ensemble of conditions which render possible the emergence of individual and/or collective instances as self-referential existential Territories, adjacent, or in a delimiting relation, to an alterity that is itself subjective (9).

Guattari's definition extends the subjective from the necessarily individual into shared realms that

may encompass the notion of world picture(s) that Heidegger described or as Elizabeth Eddy has suggested in this forum—"imaginary conflicting places". Guattari's definition also questions the idea of "a singular nature", substituting instead "multiple cultures". It does so without denying a point of view from which individual intentionality and responsibility and care for oneself may arise—and, by extension, collective responsibility and care. It does so without denying points of view from which collective responsibility and care arises—as for example, in traditional Aboriginal cultures where individuality is distinguished from Western understanding particularly in that a collective identity is pre-eminent. Guattari appends his definition and the heterogeneity is made explicit:

> The conditions of production sketched out in this redefinition thus together imply: human inter-subjective instances manifested by language; suggestive and identificatory examples from ethnology; institutional interactions of different natures; machinic apparatuses (for example, those involved in computer technology); incorporeal Universes of reference such as those relative to the plastic arts. This non-human pre-personal part of subjectivity is crucial since it is from this that heterogenesis can develop (9).

The extended definition is useful here because it offers capacity to accommodate alternative of points of view and to advance understanding of the artifact as an instrument of political intent and purpose whilst reflecting also on the implications of its technological basis.

Guattari proposes that his definition decenters "the question of subject into the question of subjectivity" (9). According him this shift calls into question the privilege of linguistic structuralism. Further I believe if one accepts this definition then the way is opened for a new emphasis on the corporeal with regard to the analysis of computer mediation. Embodied actions may render less ambiguity in respect to intentionality than the modes of semiotic analysis which prejudice in favour of visuality and/or textuality.

The Place

The site of focus is the northern end of a rocky and sandy 500 meter long discrete bay known locally as Turners Beach. It is situated at Slade Point about fifteen kilometers to the north east of Mackay. Slade Point is one of Mackay's oldest seaside settlements. Prior to its very recent transformation into a "respectable" suburb it was an area annexed from the main town and has long been associated in the minds of some longer settled European Mackay residents with squalor, high crime rate (Mallet) and low land value. It was where the "blacks" lived—the Aboriginals, the Torres Strait Islanders and the South Sea Islanders. More recently, the "Interstaters" the "Seachangers" and the bargain-hunters have moved to take advantage of the idyllic scenic aspects and the sea breezes. Land prices have soared to levels comparable with larger cities all around Australia's coastline. Mackay is a region of prosperity where it is easy for the trade qualified and the unqualified alike to find high-paying work especially in the mining hinterlands, and so these days there is little evidence of a disadvantaged underclass to be found anywhere around the area. Yet, in my experience, for many of the longer settled Mackay city residents the stigma associated with Slade point remains.

My family and I have rented a renovated beach shack at Slade Point for some eighteen months now. Soon after moving in, being an explorer by nature, I discovered for myself some tiny secluded coves in parts of the headland that are difficult to access. Reaching them involved treacherous climbs or low-tide-only clambering over slippery boulders. These places immediately endeared themselves to my sensibility and provided solitary, contemplative experiences. My exertion to reach the coves and the immense audiovisual impact and rhythm of the sea interacting with the rocks in close proximity combined to heighten my awareness. There has previously been analysis of artists' representation of nature in terms of the sublime in this forum (McLean 2-4). I acknowledge the "terrifying pleasure" that McLean refers to in that paper as an aspect of my

response to the location. But this leads only partway to where I want to go with the current focus of this reflective analysis. The importance of the corporeal response to a place, rather than explaining subjectivity in predominantly visual terms should not be overlooked. A phenomenological explanation may be more appropriate.

In an archeological study of Neolithic rock-art in Northern Sweden and Scandinavia Joakim Goldhahn claims "that one's bodily experiences of a place are vital for the interpretation of the prehistoric 'mindscape' of that landscape" (41). He argues that the sites of coastal rock-art in those regions are significant because of the loud and furious sound atmosphere in the proximity and that the phenomenological experience of this contributes to the meaning conveyed in the images at those locations.

The most inaccessible coves of Slade Point are discrete and remote from the suburban outreach. No beach house overlooks them directly and no skipper would ever venture to moor in those tiny treacherous bays. Unless one takes the trouble to climb and scramble one would not know of their existence because they are not to be seen from the craggy vantage points above them. There are three of them along the point beneath the cliffs before the coast opens to the north into the broad estuary of McCreadys Creek. They are like secret hideaways. In this sense they are wilderness-like, with little technological encroachment except for the flotsam and jetsam. Beyond the high-tide-mark jumble of foam, plastic and driftwood there is barely enough foreshore for a stand or two of pandanus before the escarpment steeply rises. There is no sand on these narrow beaches, not one of which is more than 50 meters wide. They are piled with rumbled pebbles and smooth egg-shaped rocks that *en masse* look salty gray in harsh sunlight. On closer inspection the rounded rubble on each shore is quite distinctive. When wet the stones look colourful and have a flecked texture. They are difficult to walk on because the beach slopes steeply and the stones slide and roll from under one making crunching grinding and tinkling sounds as one transfers weight from foot to foot. Ambulation is reduced to slipping, staggering, lurching movements and one tires quickly in the heat of the day.

To the south of those isolated coves beyond a particularly rugged and impassable headland lies a broader, longer stretch of beach with coarse golden coloured sand which terminates abruptly in a rocky bed running parallel to the shore in line with the low tide mark. At its southern end is another headland with an organ pipe rock feature beyond which sweeps Lamberts Beach and a stretch of sand that continues to the Mackay Harbour some ten kilometers away. This is Turners Beach.

Turners Beach at Slade Point in the mid-ground with the hidden coves beyond

It had occurred to me that each of the coves has a characteristic predominance of particular coloured stones, though this observation should not be relied upon. Indeed on Turners Beach, which is much easier to access and so has come to be visited frequently, it seemed that the predominance of certain colours would vary from day to day. Certainly the stones distributed in the coves and at the northern end of Turners Beach are unique in character and consistency compared to those found along the shores of McCreadys creek estuary only just around the point. There are hardly any stones at all to be found on the sandy shores that reach to the south of Turners Beach to Mackay Harbour.

A relationship between habit and habitat

When exploring an environment afresh the form of the geology mediates its particular features, relative scales, spaces and distances. The remnant surface litter of eons—the soil, the dust, the rocks—is conveyed as patterns and textures. I observe, collect, watch and often wonder as I wander. During these moments a fundamental sense of place is established. This may be vague or fleeting. It may be protean. If the impression is significant it may lead to desire to linger, to return and so, an ongoing relationship with a place may ensue.

Walking up to the top of the two prominent headlands and along Taylors beach between them became part of my daily exercise routine. The first slope is the heart-starter, rewarded by an ocean vista replete with tropical islands. This vantage is sustained along the ridge where at first I used to feel like a trespasser crossing in front of the unfenced yards of houses. The uneven track that descends past the concrete water tower is not well worn and I very rarely have to share this section of my habitual route. The beach stretch is recuperation before the second climb and the return home along the road where I have the company of individual joggers and pairs of walkers mostly accompanied by dogs.

It puzzled me why I hardly ever saw a person around those houses so close to the rugged part of the route, where the breeze was always blowing and the outlook uplifting. Maybe there was nobody home? Maybe when you own a slice of place you begin to take the place for granted?

In a paper presenting quantitative research purporting to measure the defining characteristics of attachment to a place, Steadman hypothesises that "the best model of sense of place will be that which suggests that attributes of the environment are associated with characteristic experiences. Symbolic meanings are produced from these experiences, and these meanings in turn underpin place attachment and satisfaction" (675). Steadman's summary of the literature is comprehensive and coherent. My difficulty with his research is that ownership is one of the factors that define the sample from which he produces data relating to both attachment and satisfaction. Thus his research is preconditioned by the ownership factor and whilst it may have relevance to property developers it does little to inform the theoretical issue as he defines it.

At Turners Beach my sense of place is derived from habitual engagement and observation, from a ritualistic physical interaction with the geographical features and the daily and seasonally variant atmospheric qualities, and from fleeting interaction with encountered life-forms (human, fauna, flora). Land ownership is a virtual instrument that fundamentally alters an actual balance between all of these components, involving rights that are defined in contractual terms and which bear no relationship to the real interdependencies. I should point out that I have no ideological problem with land ownership. I have owned land in the past—beachfront property too—but presently do not. Perhaps having no current such obligation in relation to a place frees one to experience territorial alternatives?

Can it be out of habit then that place becomes habitat? Whilst walking the pebble-strewn sands of Turners Beach each morning it became my ritual to pick up a stone that caught my eye and handle it, squeezing and rolling it between my fingers and the palm of my hand, tossing it in the air and catching it occasionally, toying with it in this way and that all the way home. I apprehended smoothness, roundness, granularity and mass in an absent-minded sense that is the specialty of hands. Before long I had begun a small collection of stones in the front garden, each specimen dropped in an angular vertex formed where a pathway of pinkish concrete pavers turned toward wooden steps leading to the front door. It had been a dry and bare patch of dirt where no plants grew and had always seemed to me to need some visual softening. The gradually increasing rock collection achieved this quite satisfactorily to my mind.

At some time I became cognisant of my discernment and particularity in choosing pebbles that better matched the colour of the pathway at home. It had become a kind of game to test my colour memory and check its accuracy by direct visual comparison on my return. Variation was acceptable within a vaguely imagined tolerance. I was secretive about this habit and would check that there was no witness to the depositing of a stone. The pursuit made sense to me but I didn't expect anyone else to appreciate its rhyme or reason. After the passing of weeks that particular corner of the path had been filled to satisfaction. My engagement with the game had waxed and waned. However my fascination with the stones themselves was still on the rise.

In the abstract to an interesting article in *Transformations*, George Karpathakis writes a passage that enables me to justify my preoccupation with collecting the rocks and to take comfort that my personal ritual was not such an unusual or strange thing:

> [H]umans collect and use rocks for many purposes: utilitarian, economic, scientific, sacred, decorative and mnemonic. The collected rock acquires meaning different from the rock in situ. This meaning can be communal or personal, connected to events, real or mythic, or to place. The rock can act as a sign or tell a story. It can be seen as a metonym of the landscape. Or it can be viewed as a synecdoche, the part standing in for the whole, for a landscape or an experience. The meaning of the collected rock or the rock collection varies from person to person and can change over time (1).

Rocks provide records of the earth's formation, each being a kind of encapsulated clue to the origin of all Earthly things. There are deep-seated primal and anthropological aspects to the relationships between humans and rocks. Karpathakis and the authors he cites remind us not only

of the primordial nature of these relationships but also of the links to our technological origins.

Over time, as Karpathakis suggests is possible, the significance of my rock collecting practice changed and so too my intent in regard to the ritual and the artifacts themselves. There were no more corners in the garden that needed softening. In addition my conscience was provoked after considering a sign adjacent to Turners Beach which reads: *Mackay City Council REMOVAL OF SAND – STONES FROM THIS AREA PROHIBITED*. Figuring that I had progressed from a casual souvenir gatherer to a habitual removalist I decided on *socio-ethico* grounds that my practice should cease.

Sign adjacent to Turners Beach

A non-linguistic taxonomy

The next phase in my growing obsession with the granites of Slade Point was an attempt to categorise them. I determined that the range of colouration is limited. There appear to be, broadly speaking, five main categories of hue: the blacks and grays; the reds; the pinks; the browns and purple-browns; and, the greens. In addition there is a range of distinctive yellowy subclasses of each of those main hues. This taxonomy is according to overall visual impression. The flecking and grain of the granites introduce further significant quality variations which exhaust my linguistic ability to account for them. Handling a stone gives enhanced appreciation of its granularity for which one acquires a corporeal familiarity and memory. The colour and texture appears to be related to the form property of a type of stone. For example, the pinkish samples with largish white grains and coarse texture are more likely to be more "egg-shaped" or more evenly rounded without any noticeable angulations.

Being barely drilled and unskilled in the natural sciences my classification is most abstract. Indeed, beyond the "base" prototype of *rock* and the "subordinate" *granite*, I cannot be more concrete (Rosch 27-48). My learned options for textual description run out.

Unsorted stones on Turners Beach

According to Stevan Harnard discerning subtlety of hue, brightness and saturation involves "categorical perception." This "innate" faculty results from what he calls an "invariance extracting mechanism" in the case of our colour perception. It accounts for the separation of colours interspersed by neutral zones as we see them in a rainbow. Rather than create piles of stones in my yard at home, I decided that I would undertake a photographic documentation *in situ* on the beach in my attempt to qualitatively categorise the granites. I wonder if, in deciding what stone was similar

enough to which and so to be placed within my framing device and recorded, I was using this faculty that Harnard describes? Certainly, at times I experienced what I thought of as a paradox of identifying difference amongst similar things. Yet I was forcing a decision based on grammars that I was dynamically establishing in real time. Perhaps Harnard explains experience such as this when he writes:

> …living in the world requires the capacity to detect recurrences, and…that in turn requires the capacity to forget or at least ignore what makes every instant unique, and hence incapable of exactly recurring.

In other words, in my attempt to photograph stones according to dominant colour grouping, and faced with what appeared to be overwhelming subtle variance, my best strategy was to selectively look for invariance.

Photos of the palette of five primary hue categories established according to a visual grammar highlight variance as much as consistency

Bear in mind that in the case of my preoccupation I was aware of no specific cultural precedent and that I had at that time no clearly defined intent other than the visual investigation in its own right. I was not looking for gold or other mineral commodity, though it had crossed my mind that one could produce attractive kitchen bench top laminate in the form of terrazzo either from the stones themselves or from images of them.

Subsequently I began to research the topic and found limited sources on granites in general and a little data specific to the granites of the region. Granger & Jones say, "Late Devonian to Early Carboniferous volcanic rocks of the Campwyn Beds (age about 350 million years before present) crop out in coastal headlands in northern parts of the study area such as Slade Point and Shoal Point" (13). According to Murray:

> The northern New England Orogen (NNEO) extends from the sedimentary cover of the Clarence-Moreton Basin in the south to the Bowen area, and west to the Bowen Basin. It contains granites of 4 main age groups: Middle to Late Devonian; mid-Carboniferous to Early Permian; Late Permian to Late Triassic; and Early Cretaceous. Common features shared by all of the granites include:
>
> - They are overwhelmingly high temperature I-type granites with no relict zircon;
> - They have low ISr ratios indicating that old continental crust was not involved in their formation; and
> - They are associated with Cu-Mo-Au mineralisation (101).

Given the essentially phenomenological nature of my study this sort of information has little relevance. My objective had by this time become to collect many photographs of the stones classified according to colour so that the images could be used as a kind of palette derived essentially from the place that had become the focus of my attention. I still had no clear idea what the palette would be used for. Was I looking for a story?

When photographing the granites I made use of a picture frame to cluster them into a composition with relatively straight edges that could then be cropped without slicing through whole stone shapes

Getting our stories straight

Celebrated film maker Wim Wenders, talking about *sense of place* and how it is portrayed in contemporary (American) movies, makes a distinction between "telling a place" and "telling a story". He laments that "cities and landscapes are *background, locations* found by the *location manager*. They are no longer heroes..." He continues, "In my book, the loss of place is a lost quality in movies. It comes with a loss of reality, a loss of identity." Wenders says his thesis is "[t]hat places find stories and make them happen. Not that stories happen anyway, and just need *locations* to *take place in*."

What name would the pre-colonial inhabitants have given this place where these wonderful stones are to be found? I call it Turners Beach only because I saw that name inscribed on a location map in a promotional leaflet for local bed and breakfast accommodation. I have not seen or heard the name attributed in any other context. The more official local place maps and directories leave the beach location un-named referring to the area as Slade Point and the larger beach to the south as Lamberts Beach. Slade Point received its title upon the inscription of passer-by Captain James Cook (Kennedy).

According to Chalmers' historical account of John Mackay's settlement enterprise in 1860 an early encounter in the area between the local Aboriginals and the colonials ended in bloodshed:
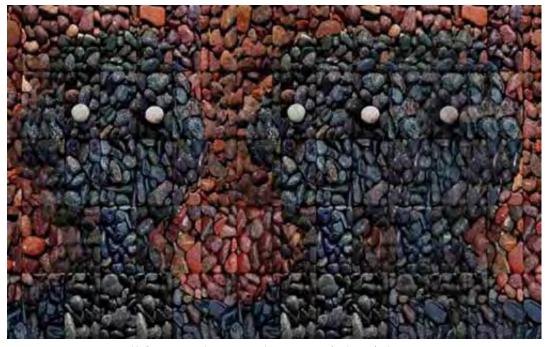
> By April supplies had considerably diminished, and the end of May found them without tobacco, salt or sugar. Their supplies should have arrived by steamer from Rockhampton in March but it was June 29th before the cutter "Presto" moored in the river. It appears that the vessel had come north at the appointed time, but passed the mouth of the river and anchored near Slade Point where, in a skirmish with the blacks, one of the crew and a passenger named Roberts were killed on the beach. The vessel thereupon returned to Rockhampton.

There is today a proud and active ATSI community in the Slade Point area. One focus for this

pride is the connection with Olympic athlete, Cathy Freeman, who grew up in the community. The local sports oval has been renamed after her. Whilst the Yuibera People are celebrated and respected in official proceedings as the traditional custodians the Wiri and the Birri Indigenous clan groups also have association with the Mackay region. These people and their descendents have suffered and endured the displacement of colonialism and waves of social, political and economic upheaval associated with State and Federal administrative regimes since that time, and as Veracini points out, "[t]he centrality of Aboriginal participation in the pastoral frontier, and thus in the context of the whole of Australian history, may need to be thoroughly reassessed". The focus for these people now, as it is for the South Sea Island communities in the area, is on proudly upholding their traditions and creating opportunities to share those aspects of these that are suitable for sharing, together with their sense of responsibility for the land, with the wider community. The stories of how these people have endured and survived the trials of times such as those documented in Gibson's Badland tales are theirs to tell should they wish.

These matters are raised in this context because there *is* an abstraction of a story woven into the artwork that I intend to relate to these themes. It is not an appropriation of anyone else's story that may exist in relation to the Turners Beach site—indeed I have not come across any besides the one cited above (Chalmers). Rather it is a story of personal significance that I have carried with me to this place and resurrect here in the artwork inspired by the place and produced using its ancient material.

During the 1990s I was a managing director of an Adelaide-based design and production house that in 1995 was appointed preferred supplier of services to the Office of Reconciliation which was at that time run out of Prime Minister Keating's office. This status was not conferred without some considerable justification and in our case it was on account of a record of mentoring and fostering the development of Indigenous talent. Those were exciting and heady times during which I had the pleasure of working alongside such celebrated personalities as: documentary photographer, Ricky Maynard; journalist and former chair of Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute, Katrina Power; and contemporary artist, Max Mansell, during their formative and emergent periods.

A still from "In-between the Primordial and the Latter"

Around this time I also had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a quiet, unassuming and intelligent artist who from his earliest exposure to specialist "desert" art dealers had developed an

international following. This man had grown up adopted into a 'European' family in Adelaide and when I met him had recently rediscovered family connections in Yalata. Yalata is a coastal mission town at the head of the Spencer Gulf to where inhabitants of the Maralinga region of South Australia were removed when the atomic tests were conducted there by the British government in the 1952. In fact, from conversation with him, I gathered that he had learned that his people were among those desert nomads who had not been warned of one imminent blast, and who experienced a thick and sickly black radioactive cloud descending on them.

This knowledge seemed to transform his life. The huge paintings that resulted were exhibited at Tandaya during the 1996 Adelaide Festival of Arts in an exhibition called *Native Titled Now*. He had devised a method of affixing a thick coating of sand to the canvas and in a collection of such works entitled *Maralinga Nullius* had made use of white ocre, brown and black coloured sands from his home country to depict traditional trail and circular community motifs. However the traditional motifs were dramatically fractured. I will always remember the official opening of this exhibition because in an adjacent annex on a giant screen was displayed a video documenting how the Maralinga badlands had been restored by digging huge trenches and burying the contaminated soil. Premier Olsen who opened the exhibition took the opportunity to grandstand the success of this operation. Watching the video you would have gotten the idea that the clean-up operation had been so successful and the restoration of the landscape so complete that it would soon be offered as a tourist destination. The Premier barely mentioned the art. I recall that the contrast between the paintings and the propaganda was so stark that I felt appalled and incensed. I remember I couldn't understand how 'Kunmanara' Brown could have remained so calm. He had a serene composure and looked as if he had expected nothing else but what had taken place. Kunmanara is not his real name. It is a term of respect that his people use for one who is deceased. On September 11 1997, little more than a year later, at the age of 36 he passed away after losing a painful battle with liver cancer.

An invocation of the foregoing story has been infused into the artwork "In-between the Primordial and the Latter" in the form of time-based and interactive image and sound sequences. These are looped and may be encountered by the audience in a non-sequential manner. Grid patterns established in one sector as a palette of granite colours and textures have in another sector been assembled to form humanoid shapes. These are used as metaphorical icons for Colonial and Indigenous cultures and embedded in certain paths of the interactive for the discovery and apprehension of an exhibition audience. Parallel paths lead to interactive sequences intended to evoke a sense of deep geological time.

Conclusion

At the "Making Badlands" conference exhibition, Bundaberg, December 2005, the interactive multimedia artwork "In between the primordial and the latter" was premiered. The work is one of a series of three, collectively entitled "Inverse Blink", and produced with the assistance of funding from Central Queensland University's Regional Centre of the Arts (RCotA).

Via a CameraMouse™ interface, exhibition-goers navigate layered movie content on an LCD screen using body movements. This motion is monitored using a mini-cam connected to the audiovisual processor. The operative instructions are: to dig deeper into the content one should stand still; to skip to another narrative sequence one should shift around. Thus the viewer experience may be of a kind of dance.

Hands-free interaction at the "Making Badlands" conference exhibition

The dance is a metaphor used by Andrew Pickering to describe how, in his observation; certain scientists have temporally tuned their goals in response to resistance and accommodation from non-human agency. Surely this account is also apt for creative endeavour where ever professional grammar, rigour and goal-oriented engagement leads to innovative expression?

The "Inverse Blink" experimental project is intimately bound with technological and sociological concerns. The aesthetic arises from interdisciplinary practice. Felix Guattari's extended definition of subjectivity is inclusive of diverse human and non-human contexts and takes account of the actuality of engagement with technology and media. The orthodox objective/subjective duality is challenged.

The aim of this reflective article has been to focus on some of the connections that have informed the understanding of *place* represented in the work. Corporeal notions: habit; the cognitive processes by which one begins to make sense of environmental data; how the present embodies the past; are some of the themes that have been explored.

In the context of the presentation of the paper in association with the inauguration of the artwork this is appropriate. However there is much yet to be done with regard to observing how audiences engage with the unusual interface and narrative design of the work. Analysis of the navigational and structural design of the interface and the content and how this marries with the "hands-free" technology to provide corporeal and audiovisual experience is a topic for future reflective review.

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