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Ghosts in the Landscape

By Phillip Roe

Introduction

This paper emerges from a photographic trip to the Goldfields region of Western Australia in September 2005. The genesis of this work, however, lies in a longstanding interest in relationships between language, landscape, representation, photography and writing, and seeks particular sites in which to elaborate these interests.

This work in effect details the thinking and approach to the development of a new media artwork concerned with working these relationships – of language, landscape, photography etc. – within the context of a particular place. The objective for this artwork is to produce a sense of this particular landscape and this place in ways that take account of the discourses and technologies of construction and production – to develop a sense of this landscape which in some way exceeds these determining discourses, and to explore ways of expressing these within a new media form and the possibilities that such a form may offer.

The particular tract of land that is my primary interest here in terms of a sense of place and in its visual construction as a landscape is the vast, million-year-old salt lake known as Lake Ballard in the heart of the Goldfields region of Western Australia. Its more than 70 square kilometres are about 100 kilometres north of Kalgoorlie, and 50 kilometres from the nearest town, Menzies. There is a certain eeriness about this place, which renders it particularly suited to this project.

In this work I want to bring out a sense of the haunted nature of this landscape. More than this, I want to approach the haunted nature of landscape in general in Australia, and why this notion of haunting is appropriate to landscape as a figure which is central to its construction. At the same moment that (a) landscape is produced by the discourses which determine it – even before it is seen – there also exists this particular place which is beyond these determinations. The landscape is produced in some mediated space between these positions, and haunted by both – it is neither and both of these. The figure of the ghost is already in the landscape.

Jacques Derrida's notion of the ghost and spectrality provides us with a way of thinking about this sense of haunting. For Derrida, the "ghost" inhabits or haunts all concepts and, especially, this ghost maintains itself with its own ghost. Derrida's *Specters of Marx* is all about living *with* ghosts; it begins and ends with this exhortation to live with ghosts. For Derrida, the spectral is the figure of what is there by not being there, and the ghost in general consists in "autonomizing a representation and in forgetting its genesis as well as its real grounding" (*Specters* 171). I find this idea quite powerful in relation to the act of producing landscape, of what one already brings to its possibility in the sense in which Derrida says "everyone reads, acts, writes with his or her ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of the other" (Derrida *Specters* 139).

Lake Ballard

Lake Ballard has many faces, changes through the seasons, and depending on whether there has been rain in this parched environment. Following the rains, the salt lake can be covered with a thin film of water, a reflective glassy surface which radically transforms the images extracted from it. As the lake dries out, the salt whitens, forming a dried salt crust. In its passage from one to the other, large sections of its surface become a soft red mud in various states of hardness from place to place.



The limited selection of images provided here gesture towards a sense of this particular place. This sense is achieved almost through simple aggregation of image upon image of partial representations, each one with something else to say as though they could speak, but speak only of something specific to each and unable to encompass the lake's diversity. In many ways the Lake Ballard area is an alien landscape, its surface appears lifeless, but it is also a place in which life takes place, and death, and which also returns its forms to the earth.





I can write and speak of its simultaneous beauty and harshness, and emphasize the ambiguity of the salt lake – “salt of the earth”, salt as a preserver and salt as corrosive – and all that can be extracted from such oppositions; like the pharmakon, it appears as both poison and cure. But such oppositions already inhabit discourses around land, landscape and identity in the Australian context, and would seem to be little else than an apparatus of capture that I have brought with me and which I throw around the object and assimilate back to myself. There are, of course, some such implements which already inhabit this landscape.

This is landscape in which the figure of the ghost circulates. In this landscape, I want to bring out the sense of the ghost as a means of orienting my relations and the possibility or impossibility of contact with this land.









Landscape

The problem begins with the question of landscape itself.

Sarah Hill, in "Landscape, Writing and Photography", an article attempting to come to terms with the "complicated interrelationships between writing, photography and landscape", notes that the term landscape itself is ambiguous and slippery – and whose meaning:

"...slides between the actual and the virtual, the real and the represented. It means both the physical fact of inland scenery, and the representations of that scenery. Even this distinction between reality and representation comes into question in relation to landscape." (Hill)

She goes on to argue that representations "of landscape in visual or verbal forms, then, are in fact representations of something that is already a representation." This is because (and she quotes WJT Mitchell to this effect):

"... landscape is itself a physical and multisensory medium. . . in which cultural meanings and values are encoded, whether they are *put* there by the physical transformation of a place in landscape gardening and architecture, or *found* in a place formed, as we say, by nature. . . . Landscape is already artifice in the moment of its beholding, long before it becomes the subject of pictorial representation." (Mitchell *Landscape and Power* 14)

Between the reality and the representation then, something is put into motion, into circulation, something that becomes "landscape". Between reality and representation; landscape is produced within that impossible gap that prescribes a non-contact – landscape as an image which splits off from this (im)possibility of contact – an artefact of the impossible. Between materiality and discursivity then, something flees the scene – without us and despite us – and becomes an autonomous spectral form. This is the sense of the spectral from Derrida in which his general specification of the ghost functions – as consisting in "autonomizing a representation and in forgetting its genesis as well as its real grounding".

Ghosting

Landscape as a cultural medium . . . has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site. Thus, landscape (whether urban or rural, artificial or natural) always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which “we” (figured as “the figures” in the landscape) find - or lose - ourselves. (Mitchell 1994)

Hill further argues, as others have, that precisely because the term landscape requires a viewer to be present in order for the landscape to exist, there is always already a figure in the landscape, and that this fact is generally obscured. This masking of “its status as a construction, inviting us to interpret it as a natural given” poses the central absence of landscape – the figure that is there by not being there – and it is this play of presence and absence that articulates landscape. The condition of this figure is precisely that it is there by not being there – the figure is spectral, we are already the ghost in the landscape.

When I go to photograph a landscape I am immediately confronted with the impossible disjunction in the relations between the land itself and the mediating technologies that I confront it (and myself) with – the photographic apparatus and its history and practice of representation, myself as figured within a range of discourses, and so on. And then to impose on this land the further burden of the idea of landscape, of its history of and as representation and its destiny as representation – the suffix “-scape” already determining that it is about a *particular* way of viewing. Landscape precedes representation whilst at the same time representation is its precondition.

This confrontation appears to me initially as impossible, it confounds my senses and I become lost and disoriented – I don’t know my place in these shifting relations. The moment I look through the viewfinder at my “target” it has become something else. I do a mad dance which consists primarily of raising and lowering the camera to my eye, or holding the camera steady as I alternately look through the viewfinder and around the camera from various angles. My gaze alternates between the “land” and the “-scape” – how are these things so different?

Amidst the proliferation of ghosts I bring to bear through this whole set of mediating discourses and technologies including myself, all made apparent just by looking through the viewfinder – the dis-ease I experience in these initial moments is the apparent impossibility of *making contact* with something in this land which precedes, and exceeds, all of the cultural determinations of what it will be, of what it will become under the imperatives of my whole suite of apparatuses of capture.

Of course, I know it can’t be otherwise, there is no pure and unmediated presence “out there” which is knowable and articulable within the modes of representation available to me – indeed it is precisely this question of representation which provokes the problem. In any case, where is this landscape, where does it take place?

Lyotard, in “Scapeland”, takes this as his starting point:

There would appear to be a landscape whenever the mind is transported from one sensible matter to another, but retains the sensorial organisation appropriate to the first, or at least a memory of it. The earth seen from the moon for a terrestrial. The countryside for the townsman, the city for the farmer. Estrangement would appear to be a pre condition for landscape. (212)

He goes on to correct this formulation, and to show that it is not estrangement which procures landscape but in fact the other way around – landscape procures estrangement. And this estrangement is not on the basis of transferring a sensorial organisation into another sensorium.

Rather, this estrangement, he says, “is absolute; it is the implosion of forms themselves, and forms are mind” (217).

For Lyotard, a landscape is an erasure of a support – “an absence which stands as the sign of a horrifying presence in which the mind fails and misses its aim” (217). It is clear he says, that landscapes “do not come together to make up a history and a geography. They do not make up anything; they scarcely come together at all” (218). He says: “When and where they happen is not signalled. They are half seen, half touched, and they blind and anaesthetise” (217).

This is the scene into which I project myself. Nonetheless, I proceed with this photographic project, trying to work with this strangeness the landscape procures for me and my first questions become how can I photograph this strangeness, this excess, without already determining and framing it? To photograph “this strangeness” in its own terms is impossible. But also, that is what I must attempt to do – not simply to return a pre-given image to its cultural form – for this would already prescribe a non-contact.

I proceed, then, to photograph according to a range of strategies, somewhere to begin. I think of time, space, textures, sequences of images, and so on – all framed within a vague notion I have which I think of as trying to recover the event in the thing. That is, in the representational reduction to the snapshot, the duration of the land as an event is lost – only to be surmised later as some kind of ghost effect that we reinsert or “re-place” in the image text. My attempt then is to pursue the eventness of the land rather than to represent the “thing” which is the land – an ultimately impossible but necessary task.

Language and Landscape

Complicating these issues are the relations of visual and verbal forms of representation. Photography, says Hill, is usually seen as “an art of surface and space, writing one of depth and time”, but notes that this “does not negate the spatial elements of writing nor the narrative elements of photography”. This difference between image and narrative, between showing and telling, is what Lyotard calls a genre difference. In particular this concerns the relations of time. For Lyotard, narrative activity takes a hold on time, it “makes time pass, even fly, but it also holds it back, turns it back, makes it curl into spirals, makes it escape itself and catch up with itself” (216). Whereas landscape, he says, simply seizes time. It extracts an estranged instant, but both these forms of representation struggle with their status as representation and the problem of contact with the materiality of the land.

In that moment, lost within the complex web of relations that form around me as I go to photograph – the relations to landscape, the land, the mediating presence of the camera – I cannot say precisely what it is that I am photographing – not even my language is adequate to the task. Landscape has figured large in the history and sense of identity in Australia, and it is figured as a struggle to develop or transform a relationship with the land. This struggle remains, and a residual anxiety still seems to inhabit the question of the relationships to land, landscape and identity.

Even from the first days of the colonies, the disjunction between an alien language and its capacity to know and describe, speak with, this land was problematic. There are many examples which point precisely to this from colonial beginnings onwards. In Ross Gibson’s *Camera Natura*, for example, the painter-convict Thomas Watling struggles with his words and the landscape as he writes in his journal. He says: “But my language was fashioned elsewhere, and I have never seen such things before” (Gibson *Camera Natura*).

Language and discourse have a history within a land. European languages evolved within a reciprocal and relatively stable relationship with a particular land with which they have been intimately connected for many centuries. In this relationship the forms of language come to trace

the contours of the land, words form themselves around specific features of the land, and the land forms insinuate themselves into the language. The visual becomes assimilated within a reciprocal relationship to a language and to ways of speaking, where the question is not simply one of the use of a translucent and neutral language to describe a landscape but rather one that raises questions of the ways in which language structures the ways of seeing, the subject position of the seeing, and hence of what it is possible to see.

It is not only the forms of the land that enter language in this way. An excellent example is that of colour and how it enters this complex world of relations between landscape and language, and the intermediary function of the visual. Colours insinuate themselves around the tongue, European green is crisp and clear with a long legitimated grammar that defines and articulates borders in the construction and consequent perception of different shades of green. More than one writer in English has been troubled by the disjunction between the available and defined colours in the English language and the perception of the non-matching colours of the Australian landscape. The use of “olive green” or that other often-used descriptor of Australian green, a “dark dirty green”, for example are attempts to find suitable linguistic descriptors for Australian colours. “Olive” arises as an approximation – it is a European colour, there were no olives in Australia prior to the invasion. The landscape is assimilated towards available subject positions of the language, mediated by a spectral visual and linguistic relation to another, European, landscape, and “olive green” comes to be smeared across the Australian landscape. For example, the Rev Wollaston, in the 1840s, wrote:

... no tree to my taste, can be beautiful that is not deciduous. What can a painter do with one cold olive green? There is a dry harshness about the perennial leaf, that does not savour of humanity in my eyes. There is no flesh and blood in it: it is not of us, and is nothing to us.

... with dingy looking forest in the background. All the trees, although evergreens, want freshness: their foliage is of the most sombre uniform hue imaginable ...an impervious mass everywhere presents itself of one uniform colour, a dark dirty green, over which on a hot day, the hazy, African-looking atmosphere hangs like a pestilence. (Wollaston, also quoted in Roe 25-26)

The issue of colour remains problematic, despite photography and its apparent precise and neutral rendering of colour within its technological apparatus. Film stock, however, varies widely in terms of how it renders colours, between brands for example. But film stock is also graded so that one might choose, for example, between what is termed “natural colour” (whatever that might be and however it might be determined as such) and “high colour” (as it implies, with more richly saturated colours). One could also mention digital cameras and the possibilities of adjusting colour, brightness, contrast and so on within digital manipulation software. There is no direct correspondence, no legitimated language or grammar of colour, between a landscape whose colours change variously and significantly under different conditions of light and the means within our technological apparatuses of rendering colour.

Ghosts (Figures) in/of the Landscape

What complicates this place, Lake Ballard – of its existence as landscape and of its particularity as a place – is that this place is also the site of a significant art installation. In 2003, British sculptor Antony Gormley developed his *Inside Australia* installation at Lake Ballard, as part of the 2003 Perth International Arts Festival. He made sculptures of real peoples’ bodies at one-third of their original volume, but at the same height. Gormley interested about 130 local people (from around the town of Menzies) in volunteering to have their naked bodies scanned. Polystyrene patterns were made from the scans, and then 51 cast metal sculptures were made using an alloy of elements found in the area (*Age*).



The concept of his "insider" sculptures, Gormley says, is to release "the attitude" of a body, the shape that life has inscribed upon it and make it stand "more naked than a naked body" (*Age*). And in this same sense, the figures draw attention to the landscape, in a sense making it more naked, stripping it bare, barer than I would have thought possible. The landscape has to answer to something else, something that undermines the apparent completeness of the scene.

But this stripping bare, I suggest, is on the basis that these figures haunt this landscape – refusing the possibility of its representation functioning autonomously, refusing its capacity to forget its genesis and grounding – in short, questioning the landscape's representational status precisely by drawing attention to it – they are *of* the landscape, and as such have the authority to question it. It is this sense of the contact these figures have with the landscape that I want to approach here.

For Gormley, the installation is "an experiment about who can make art, how it can be made, who can be represented by it and where it can be seen. ... And maybe as an extension of that, how it can be experienced, because in many ways, the art here is not the subject. The subject is the place and the viewer's own experience of this place, through the agency of the work" (ABC).

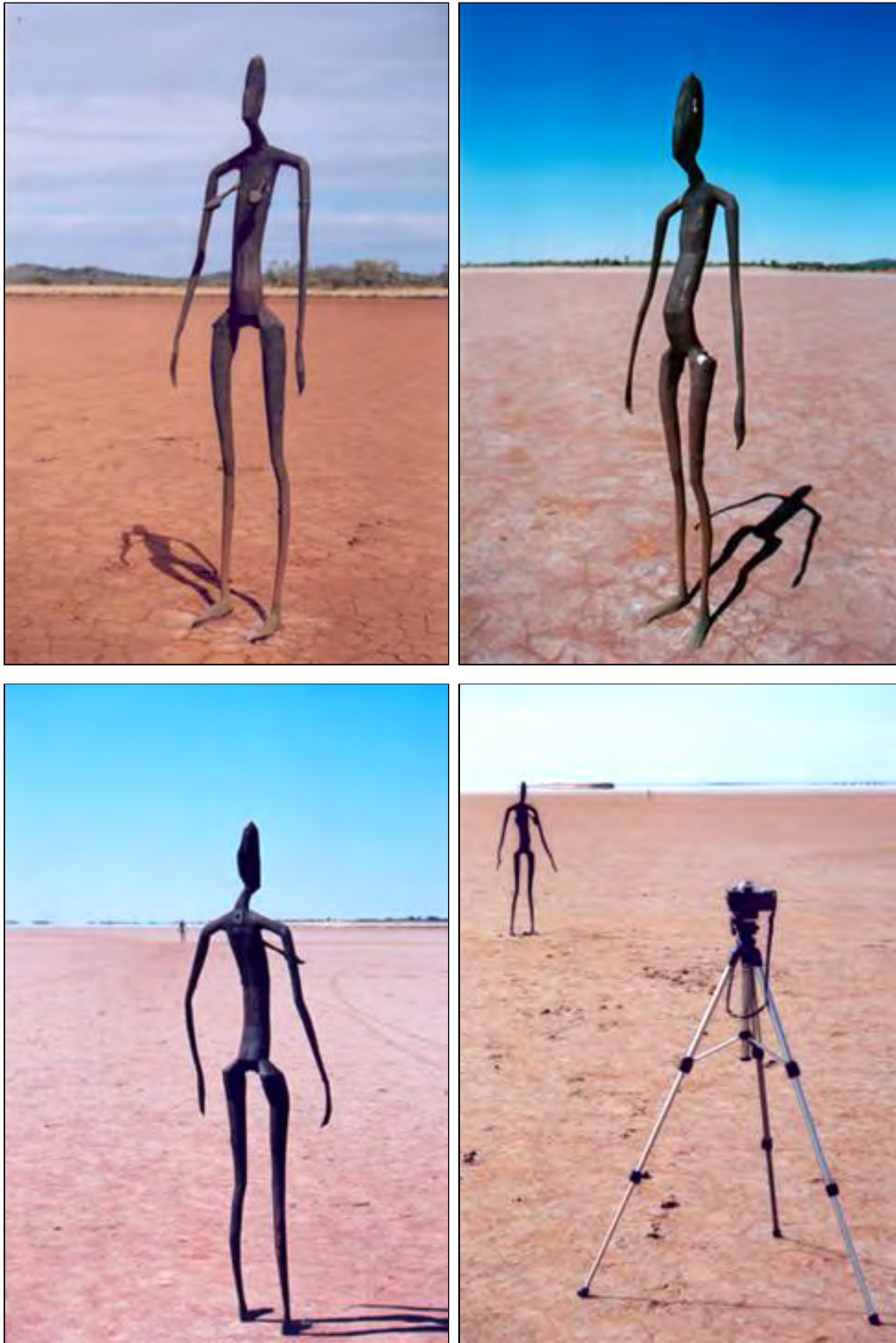
The figures were then arranged over 10 square kilometres of Lake Ballard (*Age*). This spacing has the sense of a cartographic project, providing the landscape with a grammar that spatialises. It brings visitors to the site *into* the land as their tracks mark out an extended grid from figure to figure. This movement through the land is an engagement that narrativises (spatialises and temporalises) it through making *contact* with the land.



This, then, is the question – how to make contact with the land when the conventions of landscape militate against such contact. What it seems to take, as we have found with these figures which haunt this landscape, is that something must disrupt the comfortable formation of the “-scape” which alienates us from this contact. These figures do not haunt the land, they are of the land – but they do disrupt our formation of landscape as we extract the scape from the land. The figures haunt the landscape – the always already absence/presence of the “figure in the landscape” as intrinsic to the idea of landscape is here brought into question, as a caution perhaps, by the figure that rises from the land and will always haunt its image.

Between the land and the landscape then, the way is narrow – an impossible gap which haunts the production of every landscape. If we want to make contact with the land, I suggest, we would

want to pay attention to this gap and the ways in which it haunts our productions.



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