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***Design practice in Melbourne. Focusing on the arid environments of Australia, her multidisciplinary research into the water landscapes of remote territories contributes to the scientific, cultural, heritage and Indigenous understanding and management strategies for fragile landscapes. She was appointed as a member to the South Australian Heritage Council in 2024.***

# **Tracing design as practice as research – reflective open-ended expeditions across time**

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## **Abstract**

The following response to Dr Dolly Daou's invitation is a personal review into the agency of critical reflection on the diverse facets of my design praxis embracing expanded fields and communities of practice. Through examining works undertaken over times past and shifting geographical circumstance, this writing tries to expose how the medium of reflective practice PhD research might cultivate methods for recognising that a personal ethos for design can be founded. Ostensibly a historical review this writing proposes to revisit works made again and again after the research has been critically examined, published and deposited on the shelf. I suggest that to sustain received and closely examined knowledge it is a useful process so to continue to advance the cause of collective, creative and situated design through reflection.

***Keywords:*** *Design research, creative practice, postproduction, collection, tour, ordinary landscape*

## **Tracing Research as Creative Practice**

One of the best aspects of contemplating embarking on a design-led PhD, from the perspective of a mature age practitioner academic, is the thinking necessary to fashion how to evaluate the motivation for doing so. Below I extract some pertinent aspects of the PhD – plus a tangential interlude and four hints - that I hope can be pertinent.

After lengthy deliberation, and help from others, the title 'The intention to notice: the collection, the tour and ordinary landscapes' was adopted to position the PhD work within a layered sensibility representative of my layered methods. The intent was to recover a design methodology that crosses the varied threads of disciplines in which I habitually practice; in architecture, interior design, landscape architecture, graphic design, industrial design, museum and exhibition design, interpretation, architectural and landscape criticism, teaching and research. It was therefore necessary to take a range of elements, ground conditions and processes that I habitually operate within and investigate them individually and from various relational perspectives. The collection is the material that I work with, the tour operates within performative and temporal space, and I position my projects in the cultural, ecological and political structures that preside in ordinary landscapes. Here, I offer Hint #1 on the importance of effectively naming what the research is trying to communicate in its reach and complexity. While at first this might seem a trivial idea a good title is your primary introduction to your audience. Additionally, attaining this commitment to the title this really requires personal reflection and synthesis of the objectives and purpose of the work.

During the process I realised that my design interest lies beyond the agency of strategic or (master)planning, so beloved of the milieu in which I customarily practiced. My work tends towards a curatorial turn which eschews completion (of a place) to rather promote open ended interventions based upon reworking towards renewal.

At the time I wrote:

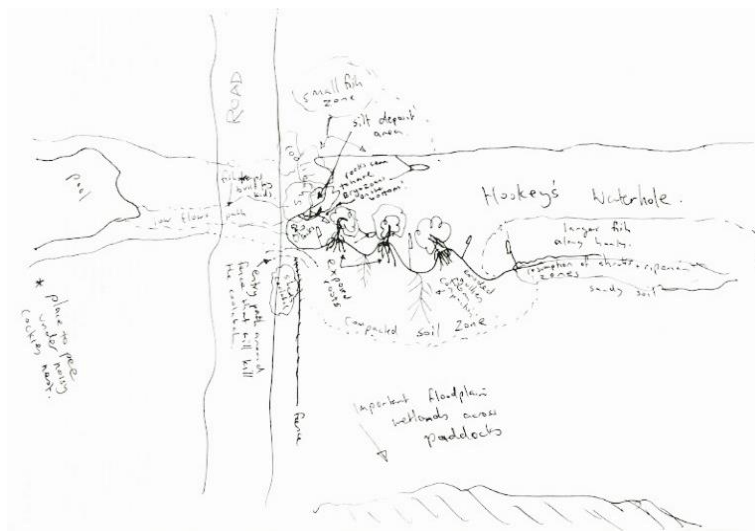
*'I seek to develop text and practice-based narratives that recognise the layered histories, ecologies and politics of*

*places. I uncover, recognise and make explicit material and ephemeral conditions, informed by other situations which may include; speculative travelling, peripatetic drifting, dispassionate observation and chance association; that lead to the production of outcomes that may include storytelling, archiving, the making of experimental itineraries and collaborative interventions in and around ordinary landscapes. And this is not necessarily, but can be, about site-specific works.'* (Gini Lee, 2006, p4)

It was extremely helpful to inadvertently come across Nicolas Bourriaud's postproduction during the early days (Bourriaud, 2002). From this small book I learned to accept the notion that everything already designed in the world is enough, given the increasing limits to carrying capacities everywhere. Essentially, design tactics for renewal of that which already exists operate as methods to appropriate designed places, objects and systems for reflective practice. Using postproduction theory as a methodological tool might influence contemporary design by adopting perspectives that embrace ecological and multi-dimensional practices conversant with the global landscape of the production and consumption of everyday goods, services and places.

Hint #2 is to be open to ethically borrow to expand the knowledge of others, even if at first this appears tangential. If design practice is to retain relevance to the complexities of a changing environment, then my sense is that transdisciplinary thinking across knowledge realms is critical. Together with developing interactive communities of practice to dissolve communication barriers between dissimilar knowledge through shared modes of expression. (Lee, 2006)

Anecdote post PhD research yet built upon a curatorial eye to promote a transitory collaborative performance. One of my most memorable experiences involved sitting around a waterhole in the dry Australian outback discussing with Dale - an ecologist concerned with fish - the structures and dynamics of how the place worked between culture, landscape and aquatic science. Our mode of communication beyond being in the place together was the mud map drawn on site to express everything that went on the place that we could see or knew from our pre-trip research. Later we used this simple graphic to develop projects for the waterhole, both cultural and scientific, and it still resonates with its authenticity when exposed to later audiences. (Lee, 2011)



*Hookeys Waterhole as record 2009*

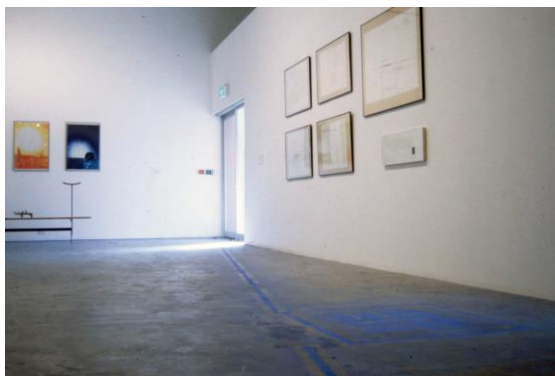
I return to briefly review three selected curatorial works arising from immersion in the kinds of peripatetical excursions afforded by speculative PhD programming, of works that embrace the thematic intent inherent in Intention to Notice.

Collection and the (design) landscape: The intent of the Field notes: S(c)ite works exhibition<sup>1</sup> was to provoke my design school

<sup>1</sup> An exhibition of the research work of academic/practitioners from RMIT

colleagues to speculate on how their investigations in the field were translated from (the) field and returned to the (the) studio site to provoke further development of a conceptual attitude to works in situ. This first open-ended, non-linear curation also allowed this group of designer/academics to operate within a community of practice. In the gallery individuals could offer up thinking and making practices for demonstration and scrutiny in a public forum. In part the curatorial idea suggested that

'the studio never replaces the field as a place for investigation; rather the studio is a place for experimentation and gestation. The practical capacity of the field to provide unconstructed data for further reference understates the diversity of field conditions which designers employ in amassing subject [and object] matter. The imprecise nature of the field creates the domain for a variety of associations and interpretations, encouraging chance observations and collaborations to provoke responses both poetic and pragmatic.' (Lee, (1999), 2006, pp22-25)



*Field notes:S(c)ite works  
the collaborative space*



*Terra-cognita garden  
(an explored region)*

My offering allowed for an appropriation of Mughal spatial representation of the Garden of Eden, where the gridded works of

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*University Interior Design and the Louis Laybourne Smith School of Architecture and Design at the University of South Australia, 1999*

**'gardened' nature are an idealised utopian vision of the uncertain occupation of wilderness. The blue chalk floor work inscribed an abstracted garden plan around the gallery, to invite the others' works into my garden of ideas, objects and other offerings – indeed appropriation but nonetheless expressive of a shared response to the exposition of design research beyond academic norms.**

**Tour and the collection: The Theodosian Walls of Istanbul provide enclosure and occupation as they march across the landscape, expressing space for the materiality and the ephemerality of lives contingent on their consistency. Suzie Attiwill and I took a morning walk to trace the journey of the walls to see how closely we could follow the old tracks; to explore the spatial layers and the material layers that we could record as visitors. Back in Melbourne, we made an installation: I wrote on spacing itineraries: wall walking, and Suzie wrote on between itineraries: wall walk. We laid out the work on gallery wall in a return community of practice exhibition. Suzie's expressed the narrative horizon line; mine, a photographic excursion above and below, of lives performed within and without the walls. (Lee, 2006, pp64-65)**



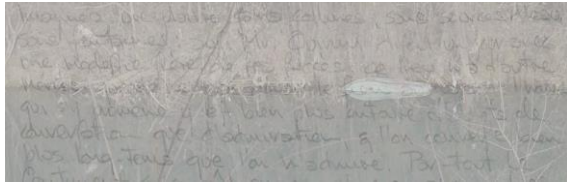
**Spacing itineraries: wall walking**

**Between itineraries: wall walk**

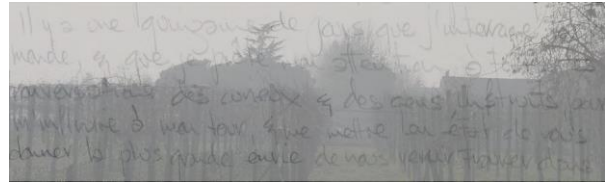


**Hint #3** revolves around the need to welcome in discursive practices in praise of experimental design works for and in experimental places as theoretical expression made visible. Essentially, devise a flexible curation program as necessity to be managed due to the diversity of offerings and collaborations as the key to making a community of practice according to a collaboration of minds willing to commit to exposure in the public area.

**Ordinary landscapes and the tour: Alticchiero in Padova**, is an apparently disappeared place, as a site where imprecise memories and false leads provoke a method of recording and reconstructing a lost philosophical garden, through examining absence while in search of presence. A theoretical prompt in this case appropriated the experience of the feminine sublime, to propose that the process of garden-making could be reimagined as fluid narratives of text and image, fashioned around the act of travelling through place. Jenny and I travelled to the Brenta River to find the house and garden that as once written could be experienced in two hours or two days depending upon the itineraries found in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century guide book *Alticchiero* by Justine Wynne, Countess Orsini Rosenberg. During the time spent in the contemporary Alticchiero landscape, as we became more certain that we would not find the garden's remnants, I chose to record snapshots of the immediate landscape. Later I made a new imagination for the garden through overlaying Justine's French words copied in pencil from her book. Hoping that delving into the topographical layers of a place, where the material details are absent, might uncover hints of extant qualities to inform a performative curation methodology in the imagination. (Lee, 2006, pp54-57, 70)



The Brenta



The Vineyard

**Back home, as I couldn't translate the French, I gave the copied pages to Dolly to make a reading of the original text; in order to curate the next tour through a collaboration of Dolly's sensibilities and response to Justine's diary and my experience of the now absent place. This work has been revitalised just recently where we can both experiment between knowing and not knowing a place to imagine what might have been and to trace where fragments from the past might lead us.**

**The final Hint #4 is both a summary and a provocation that resonates in the elaboration of the Alticchiero project. My design research practice has evolved through an attitude to practice and promotion of expanded curation as a mode of creative work. Over time the research collaborations that occur through journeys around landscapes made with others are always drawn from the field – whether a physical place, an abstract situation or usually a combination of both. The hint is to seek to practice knowing one's personally held field, a place that naturally makes sense - to a remembered past, to the experienced present and to an imagined future.**

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