

Towards Trialectic Space

...

an experiment in cultural *mis*-understanding and *dis*-orientation

This presentation includes images of Aboriginal people who are now deceased

Interpreting the complexities of modern transnational cultures as one of *multiple modernities*

(Eisenstadt, Multiple Modernities 2003 In *Daedalus, American Academy of Art And Sciences*. 129[1] 1-29)

2

This paper argues that constative speech, and especially when misinterpreted through language translation, no longer serves to describe the complexities of modern hybrid societies. While misinterpretation can be fertile ground for creative practice, a language that is closer to poetics, and particularly visual poetics (with all its nuances of humour, irony and interpretation) might better serve our need to understand and re-present the multi-dimensionality of our new social spaces.

So how do we visualise this cultural complexity while avoiding the pitfalls of appropriation and othering?

“The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space a *third space* where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences...Hybrid hyphenisations emphasize the incommensurable elements as the basis of cultural identities”

(Homi Bhabha. 1994. The Location of Culture p.86)

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The practices I am about to show start from the dialogues around third space, Homi Bhabha’s now classic text on the construction of space between cultures, and from a social perspective one often of incommensurable conflict. It could also be said that Australian art history has been characterised by a constant and continuing dialectic between Indigenous and non-Indigenous art echoing the binary polarities of thirdspace exchange. However, it is clear that Australia is already multi-cultural. In reality therefore, Eisenstadt’s multiple modernities involves multiple languages both spoken and written, presenting inherent problems in terms of understanding meaning, and ‘meaning making’

“*Narration* is a specialized form of constative speech that serves to describe socio-cultural events and object . . . This everyday concept carves out of the objective world the region of narratable events or historical facts. Narrative practice not only serves *trivial needs for mutual understanding* among members trying to co-ordinate their common tasks: it also has a function in the self-understanding of persons”

(Jurgen Habermas. 1989. The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System p.136)

4

As Habermas alludes, narration is limiting in its ability to convey complex thought but serves as our primary language for conveying self-understanding. I would argue that it is often misunderstanding that takes over once the complexities of meaning making and interpretation are engaged with.

“It [the incommensurability of language] does not imply an absolute impossibility of communication, but relates to the occasional and interspersed moments of **miscommunication** that always accompany communicative interchanges between differently positioned subjects”

(Ien Ang. 1997. Comment on Felski's The Doxa of Difference: The Uses of Incommensurability. *Signs* 23[1] p.59)

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Once constative narration loses its descriptive meaning, history and truth codes can become contested and subjective, and often replaced by a hybrid language of non-sense, an in-between language that perhaps better represents thirdspace polarity and the void between. Lacan refers to this as the veil of splitting, and similar to thirdspace conflict, is best described as two elements colliding

the **vel** (or the splitting of alienation), best described as two elements colliding, those of **being** (subject) and **meaning** (other) in which a third element is produced that reflects a **nonsense** (unconscious non-meaning)

(Jacques Lacan. 1977. The Four Fundamental Concepts Of Psycho-Analysis)

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In normal circumstances Lacan's *vel of splitting* is a discarded language because it appears *meaning-less*, devoid of logic and structure. However, this hybrid language displays elements of chaos theory as utilised by the Dadaists and Surrealists and as such its visualisation could be of some relevance in terms of articulating the poetics of shared personal and cultural identity forming as a way of communicating the state of flux that is inevitable in the transformation between mono-cultural and multi-cultural situations. Put simpler, If culture *shifts*, then so should meaning if it is to truly represent its own indefinable and non-geographic space as it moves toward a newly forming symbolic language.

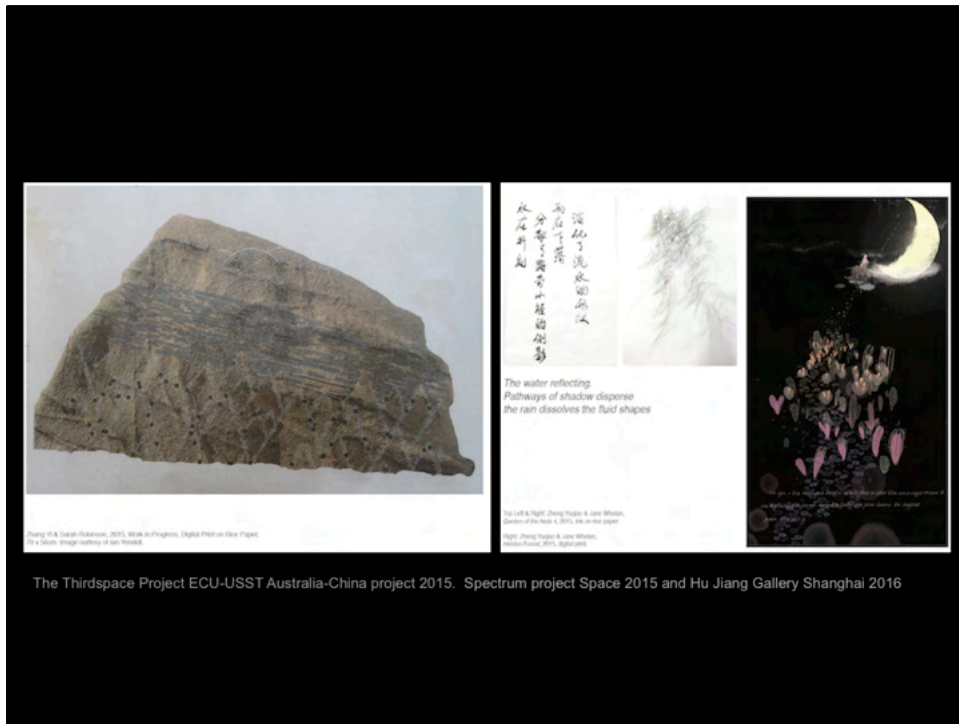
In his essay on chaos theory in practice, Dean Wilcox makes a comparison between the works of Henrik Ibsen and Robert Wilson, illustrating the oppositional forces at play between logic and chaos by stating "it becomes apparent that Ibsen's work is compact with no extraneous characters or images, whereas Wilson's performances thrive on the expansion of a central theme or visual motif" (1996, 2). The reference to a poetic description of identity relates to Wilson's expansion of a central theme.

“[the space between is as one of a] quasi-logical presupposition of an identity between *mental space* (the space of the philosophers and epistemologists) and *real space*... [which is an] abyss between the mental sphere on one side and the physical and social spheres on the other”

(Henry Lefebvre. 1991. The Production of Space p.6)

7

Henry Lefebvre takes thirdspace into a third dimension by relating it to time and space in relation to the body; he states, ‘Both imaginary and real, speech is forever insinuating itself in between’ In this respect, Lefebvre offers a more embodied view of the space between and one that offers the artist and the collaborator a position that goes beyond its singular spatial meaning, bringing into play a cerebral space that makes reference to its social context while opening avenues for dialogue that can extend to the unconscious and the imagined. For example, Freud’s past, present, and future model of trialectics uses a chronological model for psychoanalysis that facilitates the retention of lost memories. Lefebvre’s trialectic space however extends daydreaming and fantasy to one that accommodates Lacan’s non-sense within a new narrative in which time and chronology can be re-imagined.



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So it was in this space between that I established a project in 2015 entitled *Third-Space* in which artists from China and Australia engaged in artistic collaboration. As the participating artists did not share a common language, the collaborators had to find alternative ways of communicating. The project resulted in a number of visual solutions that were more often than not, representative of the miscommunication that occurred between the subjects, fostering as a result new mediated languages that became *meaning-full* as intimate and shorthand forms of personalised communication and coding.



The Thirdspace Project ECU-USST Australia-China project 2015. Jenny He and Claire Bushby

“There may be, between languages, highly specific dialogue relations... [constative] language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents”

(Mikhail Bakhtin. 1981, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.293)

“Poetry, striving for maximal purity, ... chooses not to look beyond the boundaries of its own language”

(Mikhail Bakhtin. 1981, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.399)

10

As a participant in the collaboration, I responded to the possibilities of representing a broader hybrid space of contestation and misinterpretation through a visual language that was neither geographically or time specific. Julia Lossau’s reference to the jigsaw presented a visual metaphor for the ill-fitting nature of culture clashing. My ultimate attempts to visualise and *piece together* these narratives responds to Johannes Fabian’s critique of ethnography, whereby he says “taxonomic imagination in the west is strongly visualist in nature, constituting cultures as if they were theatres of memory, or spatialised arrays”

“thirdspace tends to be transformed into a bounded space which is located next to (or, more precisely) in between other bounded spaces, like a *piece of a jigsaw*”

(Julia Lossau 2009. In Ika, Karin Gerhard Wagner, *Communicating In The Third Space*, p.70)

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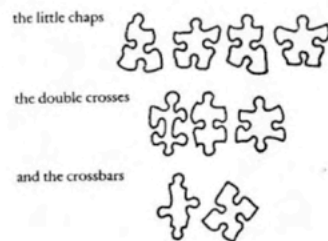
(Johannes Fabian. 1986. as cited in James Clifford, *The Predicament Of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, p.12)

10

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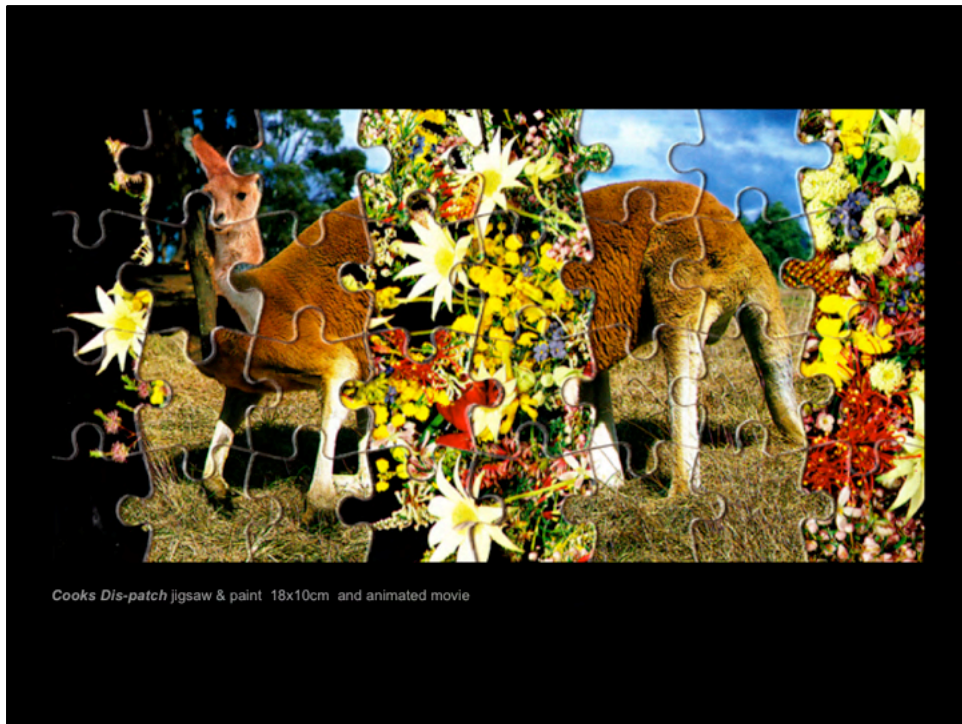
“...there is something **futile** about jigsaws. One carves an image up only so that someone else may slowly reassemble it. ...The message seems to be that **things don't necessarily fit**

(Georges Perec. *Life: A Users Manual*. as cited in Turner 2015, p.2)



11

In Georges Perec's postmodern novel *Life a Users Manual* (1978) the main character Bartlebooth spends his later life obsessively making jigsaws of images from his travels around the world. While completing his 439th and final jigsaw, Bartlebooth dies holding the one remaining piece in his hand. Ironically the last hole in the jigsaw is the letter X while the piece he is holding is the letter W. Perec's use of poetic humour highlights futility and irony, an element I strive to visualise in my current works.



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The first series of highly political and provocative jigsaw works focused on the construction of Australian landscape from the mythological position of European Arcadia, as a simulation of the natural world in the form of a gentrified mutation of colonial ideals within contemporary parklands. These nostalgic narratives involve early Disney characters as a reference to Freud's fantasy and reality, and as a reminder of propaganda and prejudice through the racialization and animalisation of black people. Here the fantasies of colonialism and the resulting erasure of indigenous histories are played out.



Lonesome Ghosts Jigsaw & Paint 62cm x 56cm

Flora, Fauna and the Ranger Jigsaw 75cm x 58cm

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Wartime propaganda relied heavily on animation in which animals represented humans within a fantasy world that acts as a stepping-stone between reality and simulation (Glassmeyer, 2013, 99–114). The aspect of animals representing humans, and particularly the portrayal of black people as monkeys and apes in many Disney animations of the 1950's is analogous to the attitudes toward and the treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia through their classification as flora and fauna up until the Holt referendum as late as 1967.

The very idea of an 'Australian' landscape is based on **erasure**. This erasure is not simply that of nature subsumed and recast by culture, but that of the distinctly Aboriginal, autochthonous spiritual landscapes obliterated by the recreant settler visions which literally followed the frontier in the canvas bags of artists who came to paint the new land

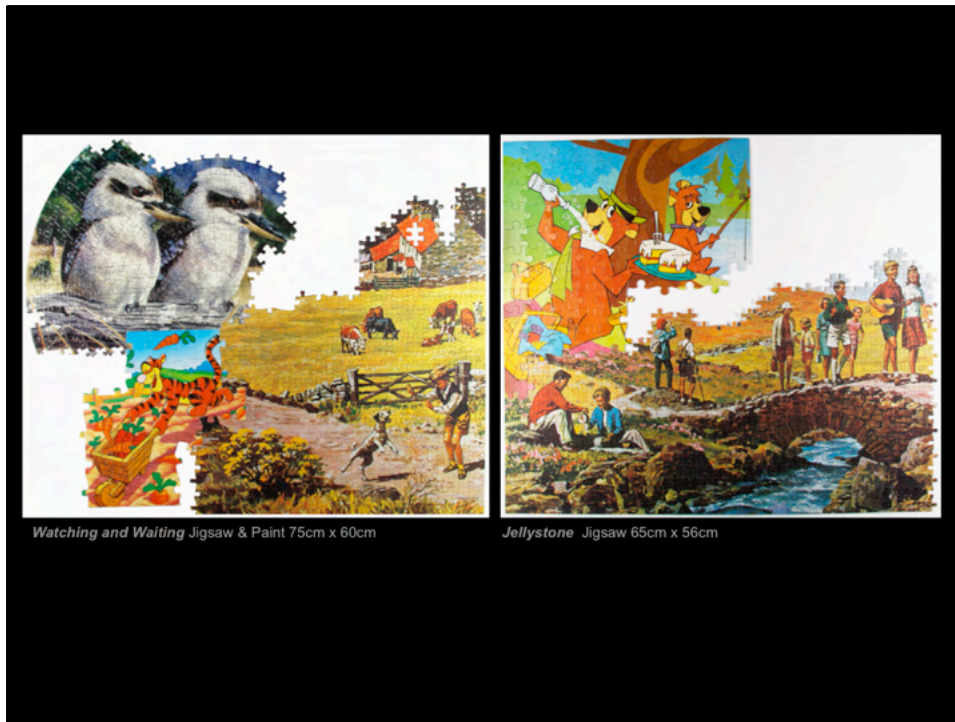
(Marcia Langton. 2003. Dreaming Art in Nikos Papastergiadis *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference* p.52)



Et In Anarcadia Ego Jigsaw & Paint 75cm x 56cm



Buffalo Drought Jigsaw 65cm x 60cm



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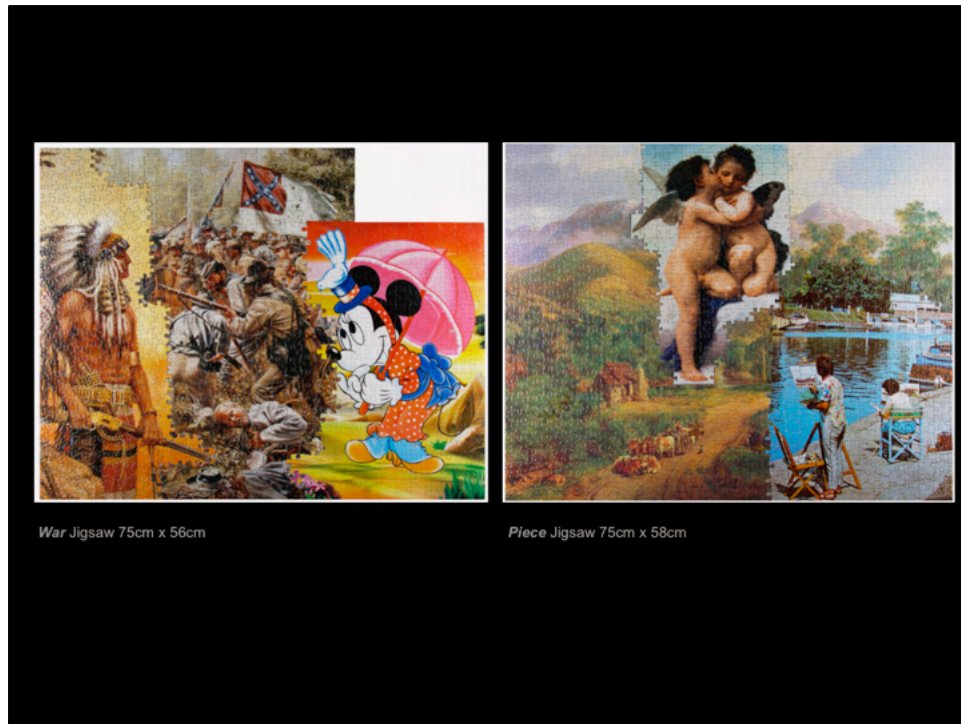
In these works the theme of a shared public space emerges, as evidence of 'restorative' nostalgia as defined by Deleuze and Guattari as a nostalgia that focuses on *nostos* with aims to reconstruct the lost home
Nostos derives from the Greek word for homecoming



Cabbage Crates Jigsaw & Paint 75cm x 60cm



Paradise Lost Jigsaw 65cm x 56cm



19

Where nostalgia serves to retain lost homelands, spoken language has become less geographically bound through migration and Diasporic flows. For those languages that have survived colonisation, the aspect of miscommunication across languages suggests a relationship between body, time and place that is less defined, or what Lefebvre refers to as 'the unassignable interstice between bodily space and bodies-in-space'

Chinese and Aboriginal culture share the **non-fixivity** of culture as common threads, along with the proposition that both cultures in some way have been formed **in and by the West**

(Eduard Kus, 2008)

Hanna Fink and Hetti Perkin's description of Aboriginal art probably comes closest to defining the indefinable: 'Aboriginal Art is a protean phenomenon, a way of introducing **change to maintain continuity**'

(Hanna Frink & Hetti Perkins 2005. Writing For the Land. Art & Australia 35, p.63)

I work regularly in China, Interestingly Chinese and Aboriginal societies share the non-fixivity of culture as common threads, along with the proposition that both cultures in some way have been formed in and by the West. (Richard Bell's "Art is a White Thing / Eduard Kuss "Chinese Identity")

This decentralising and re-imagining of space is perhaps best examined within the Orientalism – Occidentalism discourse. When we eliminate a western point of reference, perceptions of the East are literally *disoriented*, creating a situation where nostalgia is out of place and where identity is no longer about place, but about *space and temporality*

The word *orient* derives from the French word "east" from the Latin *orientem*, and as such establishes a single point of reference in the West.

21, 21

Similarly, the resurgence of Confucianism in modern day China could also be attributed to nostalgia, a yearning for elements of society that survived the Cultural Revolution. The binding of past, present and future forms a Chinese *dis-orientalism* in which, according to Rasheed Araeen, the Chinese avant-garde now operates.

In this sense, whereas Orientalism inquires from the outside looking in on China and forces on China conceptions of individual, group and society which gel with western expectations, Occidentalism **looks out on the West** and examines a range of responses to colonialism and modernity.

(Jonathan Spenser. 1995. Occidentalism In The East: The Uses Of The West In The Politics And Anthropology Of South Asia" in James G Carrier, ed. P.234)



A Happy Occident Jigsaw 65cm x 60cm

Picnic At Huang Ing Rock Jigsaw 75cm x 60cm

22, 23, 24

The following works extend the notion of place into space developing the ideas around Daoism in which a multi dimensional perspective is presented.



Every Road Has two Paths Jigsaw 65cm x 60cm



The Deception Jigsaw 75cm x 60cm



Border Patrol Jigsaw 65cm x 60cm



Uncool Britannia Jigsaw 65cm x 60cm

A link to Daoism materialises in the three main elements of Shan-Shui-Hua art, those of the *path*, the *threshold* and the *heart* (Fung, 1960). Essentially painters who work in the style of Shan-Shui-Hua do not present a fixed image from what they see, rather they attempt to paint what they *think* about nature, reflecting *not the viewers eye but the mind*.

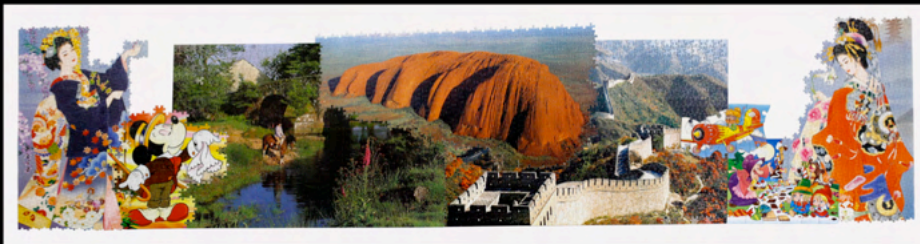
Parts of Daoist philosophy align with Lebevre's analysis of multi-dimensional space in which time and place are not fixed, rather the artist records what they think rather than what they see. This is a form of transference, of body and mind and of time and place.

‘His [the analysts] task is to make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind or, more correctly, to **construct** it”

Sigmund Freud. 1937. The Standard Edition Of The Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud

26, 27, 28, 29, 30

Entering Anarcadia is my best attempt to re-construct this as a landscape that has multiple references and from various time spans. Like trialectic space, Shan-Shui-Hua is a vehicle of philosophy, and one that accommodates various aspects of reality and non-reality across multiple positions, perspectives and points in reference.



Entering Anarcadia Jigsaw 285cm x 65cm



Thirdspace Spectrum Project Space Perth 2015



Home and Housed (collaboration with Joan Ross) Spectrum Project Space Perth 2015



Giving Yesterday a Tomorrow Hu Jiang Gallery Shanghai China 2015





In this paper and through exhibitions in Australia and China, I suggest that cumulative trialectics can contribute a form of transference beyond praxis. Through a collaboration with Xu Shanxun, with whom I do not share a spoken or written language, the element of transference occurs through an intuitive and shared visual poetry.

For those languages that have survived colonisation, the aspect of miscommunication across languages suggests a relationship between body, time and place that is less geographically defined, or what Lefebvre refers to as 'the unassignable interstice between ***bodily space*** and ***bodies-in-space***'

(Henry Lefebvre. 1991. The Production of Space p.251)

New meaning-making is therefore reliant on a dialogue that cannot be assumed to be either coherent or definitive; rather, it is a dialogue that includes misinterpretation and misunderstanding. This point of conflict as highlighted by Bhabha becomes a point of departure when Lefebvre's cumulative trialectics are engaged - a position in which multi directional and multi-faceted information becomes disorienting, and as a consequence is more accurately represented visually as a poetic proposition or as an incomplete reflection of our reality.