

GUEST CURATOR CONVERSATION

***Boundaries* exhibition curator Lucy Bleach, speaks with Kylie Johnson from Contemporary Art Tasmania // February 2022**

Lucy Bleach was invited to work with artists Tess Campbell and Sam Mountford to develop *Boundaries*, an exhibition presented at CAT 9 January – 6 March, 2022. A spatial installation was created in the gallery to present the artists new film *On the Shoreline* that was influenced by the research of scientist, Peter Puskić. The 'shoreline' was used as a strategy to probe the environmental and existential concerns of our time.

Kylie Johnson: Perhaps we should start by talking about your curatorial approach to *Boundaries*. We have previously spoken a little bit about how you consider mentoring to be a major part of your curatorial role within this project.

Lucy Bleach: I was invited to be part of *Boundaries* which is different from me generating the project. Sam and Tess already had a strong idea of how their film, *On the Shoreline* would evolve. Because I was not driving that work it meant that my approach was very much mentoring. I already had a relationship with Sam and Tess before working on this project which came through teaching (University of Tasmania) and conversations as practising artists. We have a rapport which is very natural and friendly but also professional.

KJ: There is a significant overlap between some of the areas of interest within your own practice and Tess and Sam's collaborative practice, particularly ecological concerns and the working relationships you all have with scientists.

LB: Yes, and the artists had a very strong and fully formed relationship with Peter Puskić (scientist) and his research years before I became involved with the project. I offered Sam and Tess questioning about what it might be that they're doing in relation to Peter's research. It was clear that it was not an illustration of his work. It came up in our conversations that it was very much a haptic response. From this a consideration came, how do we tangibly experience the work beyond the moving image?

KJ: That is interesting because in the public talk that accompanied this exhibition Peter spoke about how he came to know Sam and Tess and that his interest in their work was made stronger by it not being a direct representation of his research but rather a translation of it. Sam and Tess spurred his imagination and excitement for the subject. The many relationships within this project seem to be crucial components to its success.

LB: I think they are very important. My existing relationship with Tess and Sam was based on common ground and a common understanding that comes with this. It is partly a knowledge of each other but it is also about trust and this meant that I could go deep into their thinking quite early in the project.

Nikos Papastergiadis covers a lot of this territory in his book *On Art and Friendship*. It is a great book. Within friendship there is respect of a boundary but there is also this magic that happens where the trust that exists can enable an idea between one or two people or a group of people to be exceeded. The idea becomes more than anything 'held' by the people involved. There can be a real sense of a growing imagination amongst and beyond the active participants. When this happens, it's like some sweet harmonic forms, that comes from curiosity, generosity and an openness for the 'thing' to take on its own agency.

KJ: The project started with the film, *On the Shoreline*. Let's return for a moment to how you and the artists considered practical ways to experience *Boundaries* beyond the moving image?

LB: We were fortunate to have time to let the architectural framework for the exhibition evolve. This was quite an iterative process, that started with the footprint of the gallery space directing an experience of the work, towards creating an autonomous architecture within space that the viewer's body would move through, in order to take in fragments of the film. The biomimetic structure that Tess and Sam designed, draws on the spiral structure of a seashell, or the pattern of an ocean eddy, that is at once internal and external, open and enclosed, allowing the sound and light from the film to seep across spaces.

We were also very lucky to have Stuart Houghton (installation build) involved with the project because he is incredibly knowledgeable across so many technical aspects of constructing the installation. He is also an incredible listener and very supportive of people's ideas, which was so important for Sam and Tess in realising this significant aspect of their installation.

KJ: Lucy, your art practice takes many forms: solo and collaborative artworks and projects; festival commissions; community collaborations; writing and lecture presentations and curatorship. How do your curatorial projects inform your art making?

LB: Curatorship is such a lovely opportunity to engage with other people and their ideas. I am quite a singular person and not in a hurry. I don't often seek out collaboration. Sometimes it naturally happens which I love but I also love solo enquiry. I am not interested in directing a vision. My curatorial approach stems from what I have learned as a teacher and mentor. It is very much about listening and digesting someone else's inquiry at whatever stage that it's at and then to promote conversation. Engaging in someone else's ideas in conversation is a form of fitness. It is a great way to keep yourself subtle.

KJ: Lucy Bleach, you are such a teacher. At the time, I was sad that you left teaching at the art school as I really appreciate the way you share knowledge and work with artists. But moving forward, you are still using your teaching skills within the plethora of projects you have been involved in and continue to generate post art school. I do wonder if as many doors would have opened for you and if it would have been possible for you to generate so many projects from within the academic institution.

LB: I think about this a lot. There was trauma in leaving the university. I don't miss the bureaucratic ballast of the institution but I do miss the vital interaction with students that is at the core of teaching. Teaching is such an extraordinarily privileged position. In many ways it has been so great to turn the privilege of teaching inside out. I don't doubt my ability to be resourceful but I think working independently has opened up things for me in a whole other way.

I am about to start a residency at Visual Bulk (ARI) and part of that will be offering free sessions where artists can visit me in the space and talk about their ideas or projects they are working on or about to start. After this I will participate as a mentor/provocateur in the SITUATE program, which focuses on supporting the incubation and development for festival ready-projects by emerging practitioners. I'm interested in the impact that independent mentoring practices can have in the development of practitioners' individual projects, as well as feeding into the vigour of the local creative community.

KJ: This is a question I think about every few years as I have come from a space of 'making' art and now use curatorship within my practice. I'd appreciate your perspective. Do you think an artist curator has a different sensibility or way of developing exhibitions and working with artists than an institutional curator or someone who has come to the role through a formal curator education?

LB: There does seem to be a different approach, a different sensitivity between artist curators and institutional curators. Maybe it is a different kind of curiosity. That curiosity can be something that comes from active experimentation which is bound in practice. If you are not a practitioner then you would just have a different kind of curiosity, which you would

attune and apply in a different way. It is not that one is curious and the other is not, it is just a different kind of curiosity.

Lucy Bleach spoke with CAT Curator Kylie Johnson on 15 February 2022 at a café in North Hobart, Tasmania. *Boundaries*, was presented at CAT 29 January – 6 March, 2022.

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