

## **Landscape with vestiges: Alex Kershaw's *A Lake Without Water***

I got to know Lake George as a child, from the windows of the family station wagon on our annual trips to the mountains for winter holidays. These are southbound memories, etched by juvenile eagerness, erupting through the drone of the bitumen. To our left, the lake was always a landmark – announcing the journey's second leg, down across the lunar Monaro to the foot of the Snowies – but it could never be a destination. It seemed to have no end or beginning, no way in or out.

For city folk, the road that skirted the lake's edge mustered a certain solemnity. The sky seemed to open away even more endlessly here. It was a long way between petrol stations, a stretch where the patience demanded of us kids seemed to descend upon the entire car, unresisted. For the driver too (this was before the dual carriageway), it demanded some special vigilance. Here and there, the carcass of a shack would sit in a pile under a rusting, corrugated iron hat. Entropy reigned.

The magic of the lake was that of a kind of visual quicksand. A mesmerising flatness, like the x-axis of some cosmic graph, devoid of information, save perhaps for a patchwork of clouds' shadows. On the rare occasions it had water in it, a shimmering strip of electric haze would hover above the flatness like a mirage, into which the leaning but dead-straight fence lines would melt. I remember wondering why, despite the visual vacuum, the driving game 'I Spy' became more interesting here, not less. I was always struck by the contrast between the empty lake and the steep ridge out the driver's side, strewn with rocks, sheep and dead timber bleached like bones.

Little did I know that this lake without water is a terminal basin, the end of the hydrological road: what goes in stays in, or rather, goes up. It's tempting to make of this terminal evaporation a metaphor for the environmental and economic woes of rural Australia, for the unbalanced humours of the land, for its waning population. Recent decades have witnessed an epochal shift in the relation between city and country, with far-flung communities further marginalised by environmental degradation, climate change, the pressures of the global free market, and social dislocation as businesses and services retreat to the prosperous coastal zones. Things look grim for the bush. Thus, the renewed appeal to its symbolic status, its special place in the foundational myths of Australian nationhood. But it is home to a small, and shrinking, minority, whose pact with urban conservatism – a central axis of Australian political power since 1922 – is showing signs of stress.<sup>1</sup>

### **Theatre of Absence**

Alex Kershaw's *A Lake Without Water* is a study in absence – the absence of water, of labour, of roads marked on the map but not on the land itself. But absence is not the same as emptiness, for absence consists precisely in remnants, in hard signs of what was once present. Even the anthropomorphic presences on the landscape – the actors, grass trees, the turret, the geodetic markers recalling the artist's previous photographic work – are indices of disappearance and depopulation. These remainders resist the romantic positivism of landscape through appeals to the spacious sublime; but they are also scale markers of humanity, implying the social. They make the foreground into a *stage*.

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<sup>1</sup> Today's Liberal-National coalition derives from the 1922 federal election in which, soon after the introduction of Australia's unique proportional representation system, the Country Party gained the balance of power.

The social having retreated, work having evaporated, what remains for this place, but theatre? Perhaps farce is all that's left, history having played itself out as tragedy, first ethnocidal, now environmental and economic. In the dry shell of an empty reservoir, a girl from a local marching band, in full regalia, trumpets an out-dated refrain. Like Pierre Huyge's recent project *Streamside Day* – also an elaborate conceit set in a community at the margins – Kershaw's video-vignettes lead the urban viewer into the uneasy zone between sympathy and condescension. Their scripts are borne of the psycho-geography of the lake, a pastiche of histories official and oral, including interviews with long-standing residents of the area.

Kershaw's *dramatis personae* include surveyors, auctioneers and farmers, typically agents of a kind of productive violence, "the reduction of landscape into exchangeable symbolic forms such as maps, law and currency."<sup>2</sup> Along with the legal fiction of *terra nullius*, such reductions stood at the core of the pastoral capitalism that gave Australia its foothold in the modern global economy. These informatic forms of production were not 'post-industrial' but rather were contemporaneous with, and even prefigured, the expansion of the primary sector. Today, however, these actors have become residual, like extras in a film. Kershaw recasts them in short "slapstick-style performances, ludic monologues, and uncanny documents ... [which] act as *circuit breakers* within the daily routines of work in and around the lake."<sup>3</sup> Two surveyors cross back and forth before the camera, Laurel and Hardy-esque, as if lost in the fog. In another sequence they wield yo-yos, which ape the tools of their professional forebears. In an extraordinary feat of imagination, a local auctioneer returns to his older incarnation as a race-caller, conjuring an unseen horse race. Gestural traces of both professions show. The panoptic sweep of the call mimics the vigil kept silently by each lonely trig station.

All this artifice is incongruous in the stark setting. The appearance of the theatrical here is a strategy of disjuncture, an attempt to interrupt the inexorable narrative of decline.

### **'Cranks of ev'ry Radius': Precision and the Absurd**

Surveyors are especially vexed figures, seeking the truth of empirical measurement, but one they know to be only temporary, subject to changes wrought by slow geology and fast humanity. They were amongst the first Europeans to reckon with the ancient but still living geography of indigenous society, embedded in its languages, codes and secrets. More than just a geo-informatic trailblazer then, the surveyor is also a socio-historical pathfinder. Thomas Pynchon isolates the uneasiness of this confrontation between lore and science in *Mason and Dixon*, his imaginary chronicle of the survey of a key fault-line of North American settlement.<sup>4</sup> His heroes' doubt-ridden progress rehearses a pre-history of postmodern and post-colonial relativity. Their modernity bears more than an inkling of its great deficits in the face of the traditional knowledges it destroys and overcodes, especially when it comes to the restless uncertainties of the terrain it pores over and maps.

The surveyors' line brings crashing together incommensurable strains of knowledge. It paves the way for rational progress in general, and Capitalism in particular,

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<sup>2</sup> Artist's statement. Rendering country as information by the arbitrary superimposition of abstract codes – perhaps this is where the surveyor intersects with landscape artists, especially photographers.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1997). The Mason-Dixon line marks the border between Pennsylvania and Maryland, and is commonly regarded as the frontier separating northern from southern states of the US, of course a highly loaded politico-historical threshold. It was surveyed in the 1760s to settle a border dispute between the two provinces, both then British colonies.

“a geometry of violence ‘more permissive than Euclid’.”<sup>5</sup> But it crosses other, older meridians; the universal systems of the Enlightenment are constantly destabilised by imagination, by the radical heterogeneity of folk wisdom, superstition and local knowledge.

Who claims Truth, Truth abandons. History is hir'd, or coerc'd, only in Interests that must ever prove base. She is too innocent, to be left within the reach of anyone in Power,—who need but touch her, and all her Credit is in the instant vanish'd, as if it had never been. She needs rather to be tended lovingly and honorably by fabulists and counterfeiters, Ballad-Mongers and Cranks of ev'ry Radius, Masters of Disguise to provide her the Costume, Toilette, and Bearing, and Speech nimble enough to keep her beyond the Desires, or even the Curiosity, of Government.<sup>6</sup>

Pynchon, too, offers farce and theatre as antidotes to the romance of pioneering, and of primitive cultural intelligence and its disappearance.<sup>7</sup> His ‘gay relativity’ (Bakhtin) assumes that truth is contingent rather than universal, but also that narrative and other non-scientific knowledge infects and inflects the empirical project. Folklore, for its part, is partly fabrication, but is interwoven with harder forms of knowledge about people, land, climate and country. (This is the fertility we call culture, of which *agriculture* is a subset.) Kershaw’s installation at Artspace also assumes a certain *détente* between truth and invention: information is metered, each document given its own space, not unlike exhibits of natural or social history; but upon inspection, each reveals a measure of caprice or conceit.

Even though, on the heroic stage of exploration, surveyors were mostly behind the scenes, we still imagine theirs an arduous, lonely and physically demanding task. But conflation with the romantic, and better told, history of colonial exploration may be misleading. For the survey was more like a sophisticated military experiment, or a feature film production, a complex assemblage for information production comprising cutting-edge technology, imported beasts of burden and highly specialised labour.

The flat bed of Lake George was, in fact, a key locus in the first attempt at a purely trigonometrical survey of New South Wales, begun in the 1860s. The Lake George baseline survey brought together the Government’s best surveyors and astronomers. Specially seasoned pine bars were brought from the Lands Office in Melbourne. When these were found to be erratic measures in the widely varying diurnal temperatures, the colony’s iron standard bar – originally shipped from England and held in the Sydney Observatory – was transported to the site, where an underground vault was constructed to store it. Ten-foot long, cast iron measuring bars were compared to this standard before and after a day’s work. Each carried “microscopically fine points near its extremities, thermometers to record [its] thermal state ..., mechanical contrivances to prevent sag or distortion ..., [and] micrometer microscopes.”<sup>8</sup> Though moved around on camels, these bars demanded the utmost care: each was housed in a felt saddle, itself swathed in canvas and protected by a timber box. At night, they slept in a heated tent. Even the dry, historical account of A.H. Chesterman reveals an elaborate conjuncture of diverse

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<sup>5</sup> John Leonard, ‘Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind’ (Review of Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day*), *The Nation*, December 11, 2006. Leonard is quoting here from *Against the Day*.

<sup>6</sup> *Mason & Dixon*, p350.

<sup>7</sup> Nick Cave’s recent screenplay for *The Proposition* also suggests a return to a kind of gratuitous myth-spinning, and an older theatricality missing from the camp, travel-brochure adventures of the 90s. The film revels in the imaginary nature of bush history; the slovenly bush troopers are not far from Hogarth, or Goya’s Caprichos, their brutality punctuated by irruptions of caricature and song.

<sup>8</sup> A. H. Chesterman, Surveyor General, *The Trigonometrical Survey of New South Wales* (Sydney: NSW Department of Lands, 1924) 9-10.

technologies, mustered in the name of an elusive precision, an apparatus of capture that is nothing short of pataphysical.<sup>9</sup> The lake, then, has been a stage before.

### Palimpsest and the Remedial Image

In an essay called 'Photography's Expanded Field', George Baker portrays a medium that, having appeared to triumph as (modern) science, returns as (postmodern) art, only to be consigned to a laborious deconstruction of itself, belatedly mapping its relations to other media, old and new.<sup>10</sup> In this 'expanded field' it becomes clearer that a medium is constituted by, and inspires, remediations of other media.<sup>11</sup> The remedial image draws on a multiplicity of sources, and implies multiple ways – and times – of reading. This might be applied not just to the media of imaging, but also to the media of *imagining*, which include the tools and codes of numerous non-visual and *non-artistic* disciplines. This idea is not new to Australian art history, with its acknowledged debts to cartographic, botanical and other informatic drawing traditions.<sup>12</sup> As every land has its archaeology, so too does every image.

The landscape is not the land, nor is it simply an image of the land. For it is also how we see the land, the output of a complex array of information systems – geographic, geodetic; pastoral, touristic; photographic, filmic and art historical – a composite thing. The advent of software like Google Earth further blurs the distinctions between map, land and territory, even as it cements the optical regime of surveillance in the popular imagination. Every map now implies a zoom from the cosmic to the microcosmic, a prodigious informatic depth. In response, landscape may be expected to assemble itself in new ways, more vertically perhaps, and newly layered, so as to cater to – or resist – this type of reading.

Kershaw prefers to short-circuit this new legibility. His birds-eye views derive from state-of-the-art aerial survey photographs, produced by the NSW Department of Lands, tracing the survey line at Lake George. But rendered here as moving images, they are in fact animations, a simulation that proves to be highly synthetic: transitions from image to image do not conceal their suture lines; the clouds we peer through are actually tufts of wool, remnants from the lake bed revived as a stage prop, a lo-fi special effect spliced into the digital remediation process. While the artist begins with super-high resolution images, the layering actually amounts to a *loss* of information. This continues in the gallery space: by mounting his map-images at chest height, Kershaw traps them at a short, fixed distance from the viewer's eye, as if to render the informatic image inoperable.

For Kershaw, it is not a question of 'capturing' the landscape image, but of provoking it – undressing and redressing it, recomposing it in a kind of exploratory montage, using data that's still there in the land, or has already been wrung from it by others. Sometimes it will be necessary to subtract, sometimes to add, by way of a conceit or decoy. An image like this – a remedial image – will never be complete. It is corrective, therapeutic, and always unfinished. As with surveying, it implies constant updating. The

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> George Baker, 'Photography's Expanded Field', in Stephen Melville (ed.), *The Lure of the Object* (Williamstown, MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Institute, 2005), 101-116.

<sup>11</sup> See also Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> If anything, the discourses around postmodern art have amplified art's dialogue with its own history as if this were a discrete set of gestures somehow quarantined within the works and their documented afterlives, rather than a continuum of *work*, involving and contingent upon a wide range of actors, disciplines and ways of seeing.

same logic pervades the world of digital documents, be they textual or visual. In art, as in geography or computing, this remedial approach bespeaks a more cautious modernity, one less strident about laying down its disciplinary grids.

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