

META_NARRATIVES

Cecelia Cmielewski, Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

Using technologies that led to petroglyphs (rock art) in the open air and rock paintings protected in caves, storytelling with images is the first record of our spoken tales. The exhibition entitled *meta_narratives* presents works by artists who re-interpret the manner in which stories are told and includes works based on early bark paintings through to the transmedia and interactive narratives being produced today. *meta_narratives* presents contemporary and frequently interrupted reception of texts and histories as explored by artists who find new modes of presenting our stories back to us. The artists place the stories and histories firmly center stage and are exemplary for their finely crafted and appropriate use of electronic and digital technologies in visual and audio portraiture. The works selected for exhibition in *meta_narratives* include an animation based on a bark painting from northern Arnhem Land by John Gwadbu; a complex eight-channel audio sound work and sculptural installation about rare inter-species collaboration by Nigel Helyer; an animated map in henna of the Middle East by Rusaila Bazlamit; an interactive work about Eastern Europe WW2 history by Bronia Iwanczak and the transmedia exploration of all things Luna by Clea T. Waite and Lauren Fenton.

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Every morning brings us the news of the globe and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event comes to us any longer without being shot through with explanation. Actually, it is half the art of story telling to keep the story free from explanation as one reproduces it. [1]

The exhibition entitled *meta_narratives* brings together artists who re-interpret the manner in which stories are told and whose work engages our imagination. While the narratives chosen by each artist are suitably complex for our times, each is presented with a creative clarity that invites us to use our own imaginations to open up to the scale and meaning of the stories and events they are recounting. Each of the artworks included in *meta_narratives* presents gateways into historical and imagined narratives. The works do not offer explanations; they tell a version of the story and offer a space to enlarge our capacity to accommodate others.

Using technologies that led to petroglyphs (rock art) in the open air and rock paintings protected in caves, storytelling with images are the first records of our spoken tales. *Meta_narratives* includes works based on early bark paintings by an Australian indigenous artist through to the transmedia and interactive narratives being produced today. All the artists included in *meta_narratives* are exemplary in the finely crafted and appropriate use of electronic and digital technologies, giving the stories and histories center stage because of the artists' techniques in visualization and audio portraiture. The content of the stories is the most important

element of their explorations, while the technologies are employed carefully so as to not subsume these narratives and histories. The resulting sophisticated pieces really encourage us to be able to reflect on the content – a precious gift in these times of the three-second-sensationalised videograb/sound bite/feed. The topics that the artists are dealing with are very large conceptually, almost too large to contemplate in any ready manner. I am intrigued by the way in which all the works begin with showing us something condensed and manageable and then beautifully lead to unfolding and unwrapping layers of meaning, thereby giving us an entre into worlds which may otherwise be locked off to us.

The artists present large tales and small, intently reflecting on and responding to the specifics of the sites from which the stories are sourced: the moon, a small town off the coast of south eastern Australia, a small island off the coast of Arnhem Land, Eastern European sites and the Arab states. These sites provoke a sense of excavation, an archeological inquisitiveness on the part of the artists. *meta-narratives* presents contemporary versions of frequently interrupted transmissions of myths and histories.

One such work is *Marrwakara Story* (digital animation made in 2013 of a bark painting made in 1964 and sound recordings made in 1962-4) of a mythical journey to an island (South Goulburn Island) in the far north of Australia. The animation is drawn from a sketch on bark painted 50 years ago by John Gwadbu, depicting the *Marrwakara Story*. The animation is accompanied by the sound recording made by Ronald Berndt between 1962-1964 of Gwadbu singing the related cycle of songs. The songs tell of events narrated to him in a dream by his two 'spirit familiars' *marrwakara* (goannas). In the digital animation of Gwadbu's sketch, we see 'a telescoped sequence of events' depicting a celebration and a tragedy. The digital animation was created so that the coming generations would continue to have access to these stories as the bark paintings are too fragile to be constantly accessible to community members. The animation prepared by Toby Tan Smith was created with the permission of the artist's family for the Berndt Museum's exhibition *Little Paintings, Big Stories: Gossip Songs of Western Arnhem Land*, 2013 curated by Eve Chaloupka and Kelly Rowe, Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia. [2]

Marrwakara Story tells of the spirit goannas who live on the mainland of Arnhem Land and are invited to visit the South Goulburn Island by the island's goanna and his wife, the goose spirit. However, an important mainland goanna falls in love with the goose wife, an amorous liaison forms and she has a child by him. The liaison is discovered and the goanna from the mainland must die. After he is killed, he is given a ceremonial burial and we see his funeral barge offshore.



Fig. 1. *Marrwakara Story*, 1964, John Gwadbu, Ochre on Stringybark, Mwang Language, Western Arnhem Land NT. RM and CH Berndt Collection (WU1236).

The structure of the bark painting of the *Marrwakara Story* lends itself to contemporary digital animation because it is so much like a storyboard showing the events unfolding simultaneously. Given the level of care required for bark paintings, these cultural artifacts are not often circulated in community contexts, hence the use of the accessible format of digital animation and audio and in this case successfully maintains the original graphic style. John Gwadbu's son, Jonah, is now the traditional custodian of this story and song cycle and has kindly given permission for this work to travel from his remote community. I would like to thank the Berndt Museum staff at University of Western Australia and Brenda Westley from the Mardbalk Art Centre who assisted in community discussions to include this work in *meta_narratives*.

The evocative and endlessly engaging *Meta-Book: The Book of Luna* ©, (2014, interactive installation) by artists Clea T. Waite and Lauren Fenton is a transmedia illuminated manuscript that merges sculpture, film and literature. The work is presented as an interactive 'cabinet of curiosities' that has collected different perspectives and responses to our view and perceptions of the moon. Humans share a fascination for the moon through our imagination, awe, scientific investigation and romantic projection. It is our most intimate cousin in the sky that places us visually in the universe and continually affects us all on planet earth. Waite and Fenton have explored all manner of things Luna to encapsulate and return our imagined and researched histories to us.

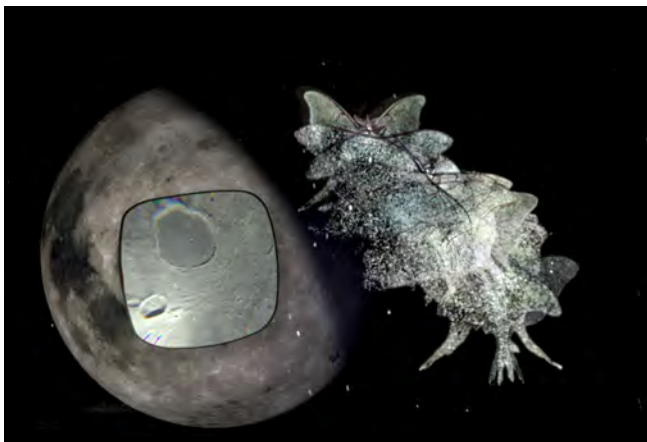


Fig. 2. *MetaBook: The Book of Luna* ©, 2014, Clea T. Waite and Lauren Fenton, interactive installation. Photo: Clea T. Waite.

MetaBook: The Book of Luna is an expanded cinema installation, an electronic cabinet of curiosities that formally examines how structural and dynamic montage can be employed in counterpoint to create experimental narratives and immersive experiences. A participatory artwork combining the experiential qualities of text, sculpture, interactive media and cinema within the enclosed architecture of a tabletop object, *The Book of Luna* narrates a poetic essay about the moon's place in the historical imagination. The nature of love, madness, the unknown and our capacity for the sublime are amongst the intellectual passions that have crystallized around our only satellite. Unfolding across a series of projections and nested spaces, this artwork treats the moon both as a poetic concept and as a concrete, navigable place. The reader is invited to fly in orbit between texts written and inspired by some of the moon's great philosophers and scientists and the lunar craters that have been named after them.

As a hybrid artifact bringing together illusion and science, aesthetics and apparatus, the *MetaBook* re-invents expanded cinema according to a neo-baroque logic of serial miniaturization that unlocks proportionally vast sensorial and imaginary realms. [3]

In the *Law of the Tongue – Symbiosis and Betrayal* (2010, eight channel sound sculpture installation) Dr. Nigel Helyer weaves a narrative around the only historically documented hunting collaboration between humans and another species. This eight channel sound installation builds an audio-portrait of an interspecies relationship initiated by a pod of Orcas (Killer whales) with the Davidson family, who ran a small shore based whaling operation in Eden in South Eastern Australia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to chase and hunt migrating Humpback whales together. *Law of the Tongue* sonifies non-human communication and immerses the listener in the songs of the oceanic realm, a world that we understand so little.



Fig. 3. *Law of the Tongue ~ Symbiosis and Betrayal*, 2010, Dr Nigel Helyer, 8 channel sound sculpture. Photo: Nigel Helyer.

He who fights the monster should be careful lest he thereby becomes a monster. And if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will gaze into thee. [4]

For millennia, Killer whales (*Orcinus Orca*) have hunted Baleen whales along the coasts of Australia, driving them into shallow bays from which they cannot escape. Likewise, for millennia the Yuni people of Twofold bay near Eden in New South Wales have formed a spiritual bond with the Orcas (Beowas to the Yuni) whom they considered to be reincarnations of their tribal ancestors and to whom they sang; believing that the Orcas responded intentionally driving Humpback whales to strand in the Bay as a food offering to their tribal members. Indigenous Yunis were also the mainstay of the settler population and the Davidson families whaling crews, rowing the small whale boats and wielding the harpoons and lances that served the coup de grace to the whale quarry that the Orcas had led them to.

At the end of the chase the carcass was lanced with a marker and the boats returned home to the shore, leaving the Orcas to their reward, the massive tongue and sometimes the lips of the Humpback – that was the unwritten and unspoken agreement; the *Law of the Tongue*. The following day the men would retrieve the carcass and tow it to the flensing deck to render it as oil. Helyer's *Law of the Tongue* compelling and evocative installation operates with eight parallel audio tracks, six driving solid state audio actuators that activate the skeletal vessel and three ships' oars. The remaining two tracks drive two large sub-woofers buried in the three meter long (life size) neoprene "whale's tongue." The sonic data is drawn principally from sonified water quality data, whale recordings and hydrophone recordings. [5]

In *Timebinder* (2010: interactive, 2004: artists book), Bronia Iwanczak tackles the seemingly impossible task of presenting the events of the Holocaust. Iwanczak has carefully excavated objects from several Eastern European sites to investigate whether the objects contain any resonance of trauma that could be detected by self-described psychics. *Timebinder* documents the psychometric responses of six clairvoyants to fragments collected from a variety wartime sites of WW2, including Hitler's Lair, Lamsdorf (the labour camp the artist's father was interned in) and Auschwitz-Birkenau. This work sits at the intersection between subjectivity and history: how we come to embody, if at all understand the nature of historical events that exceed rational understanding.

The primary element of *Timebinder* comprised of several objects that the artist retrieved from the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau, including a piece of barbed wire, a rail peg and a shard of glass. To Iwanczak, these material remnants carry with them the memories of the horrors that transpired here. Yet rather than exhibit only the fragments themselves, she sought to elicit from them their 'testimony.' Iwanczak took the objects to a number of psychometrists – the reverend of a Sydney Spiritualist church, a forensic clairvoyant and a Maori who works with indigenous

communities – who 'read' them, measuring their emanations and thereby forged a palpable if tenuous link or 'binding' over time and space, between Sydney in 2004 and Birkenau in 1944. The artist recorded these interpretations in book form, displaying them alongside the objects in a cabinet. [6]



Fig. 4. *Timebinder*, 2006, Bronia Iwanczak, mixed media. Photo: Hamish Tame.

In *meta_narratives* we see the interactive (made by Gary Warner) version of this work whereby (as with *Marrwakara Story*) the work immediately becomes more accessible to a wider range of audiences and age groups. The interface which is reminiscent of the book still resonates as we enter the 'stories' of the various objects and see the responses of the various psychometrists. By bringing such minute residues into our focus - through the intimate objects presented in a cabinet, an artist's book and the subsequent interactive, we are offered a space to reflect on the Holocaust. This is a radical invitation but one extended with care. The self-control exerted by the artist reduces the sense of being overwhelmed which is an emotion so frequently experienced when looking at images and hearing stories from those camps.

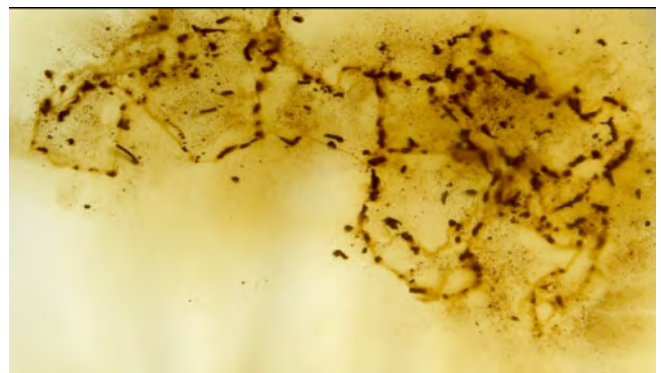


Fig. 5. *My Homelands*, 2013, Rusaila Bazlamit, HD video. Photo: Rusaila Bazlamit.

My Homelands (2013, HD single channel video 3.34mins) by Rusaila Bazlamit uses the tension between an image of the Arab countries map deconstructing while a famous Arab nationalistic song is being hummed. Using henna as a basis to produce her "map" Bazlamit upsets the order and boundaries of

place during the filming of the work. The result suggests a tumultuous yet poetic erasure, leaving us to ask how, who and what next? Bazlamit provokes the viewer to look critically at and think about Arabism, Pan-Arabism, Arab Spring, Nationalism and Identity. Presenting the flux of borders and nations we are given an insight into the contested zones and recall social, political, colonial and global disruptions of older and recent times. The use of henna brings women into the frame in a way that traditional broadcast media tends to ignore. The works presented in *meta_narratives* and curated as part of the ISEA2014 exhibition programme are contemporary digital, electronic and interactive presentations which are simultaneously some of our oldest tales.

REFERENCES

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