Wood for the trees [1]

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Abstract: Our paper focuses on the materiality, cultural history and cultural relations of selected artworks in the exhibition *Wood for the trees* (Lismore Regional Gallery, New South Wales, Australia, 10 June – 17 July 2011). The title of the exhibition, intentionally misreading the aphorism "Can't see the wood for the trees", by reading the *wood* for the resource rather than the collective *wood[s]*, implies conservation, preservation, and the need for sustaining the originating resource. These ideas have particular resonance on the NSW far north coast, a region once rich in rainforest. While the Indigenous population had sustainable practices of forest and land management, the colonists deployed felling and harvesting in order to convert the value of the local, abundant rainforest trees into high-value timber. By the late twentieth century, however, a new wave of settlers launched a protest movements against the proposed logging of remnant rainforest at Terania Creek and elsewhere in the region. *Wood for the trees*, curated by Gallery Director Brett Adlington, plays on this dynamic relationship between wood, trees and people. We discuss the way selected artworks give expression to the themes or concepts of productive labour, nature and culture, conservation and sustainability, and memory. The artworks include Watjinbuy Marrawilil's (1980) *Carved ancestral figure ceremonial pole*, Elizabeth Stops' (2009/10) *Explorations into colonisation*, Hossein Valamanesh's (2008) *Memory stick*, and AñA Wojak's (2008) *Unread book (in a forgotten language)*. Our art writing on the works, a practice informed by Bal (2002), Muecke (2008) and Papastergiadis (2004), becomes a conversation between the works and the themes or concepts. As a form of material excess of the most productive kind (Grosz, 2008, p. 7), art seeds a response to that which is in the air waiting to be said of the past, present and future.

Keywords: wood, trees, Lismore Regional Gallery, artworks, colonisation
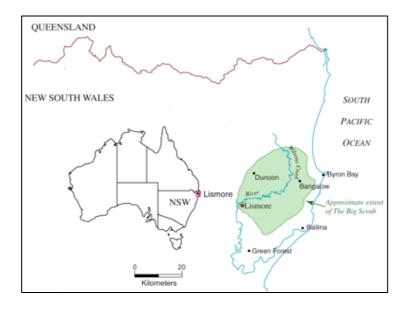
Introduction

Wood for the trees was an exhibition at Lismore Regional Gallery (LRG), on the far-north coast of New South Wales, Australia, in June–July 2011, curated by Brett Adlington, the Gallery's Director. *Can't see the wood for the trees* is a familiar

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aphorism meaning one can miss the big picture (wood[s]) by being caught up in the details (trees). The title of the exhibition intentionally misreads the aphorism by reading the *wood* for the resource, rather than the collective *wood[s]*. It implies conservation, preservation, the need for sustaining the originating resource: the resource and its product are connected rather than in opposition. Furthermore, in Australia we don't say *woods*, we use *forest* or *bush*. This aphorism of British origin has been transplanted onto a country that once had over two hundred and fifty languages other than English, and with practices of forest and land management other than felling and harvesting. On the Australian east coast, for example, it was the colonists who thought of Red Cedar (*Toona ciliata*) as a wood rather than as a tree – many timber getters were people who could only see trees for the wood (Figure 1).

One of the works in the *Wood for the trees* exhibition, Hossein Valamanesh's (2008) *Memory stick* (Figure 2), could function as an exemplary object for this paper, an object that talks to our writing (Muecke, 2008, p. 293) and our concepts associated with trees and wood, which travel in unexpected directions (Bal, 2002). *Memory stick*: the memory of the tree in timber and wood; the memory of practices of landscape and agricultural production transplanted from imperial Britain to Australia; and the memory of wood in the English language – book, beam, tall timber, having a wooden expression, ashen, stumped, a cut above the rest, plank, dead wood, not out of the woods yet. Then, of course, memory stick, as a name for a USB-connected source of portable computer memory, attributes animate properties to a small piece of solid-state technology. *Memory stick* is a spelling-out of the word *memory* formed, in bronze, to mimic a thin stick with dormant buds, pruned from a deciduous tree in winter. The wood of tree trunks carries memory, or history, in its growth rings, and the future in its buds, with the present written out on the gallery wall (Schatzki, 2011, p. 76). This stick, moreover, implies walking – the out-of-proportion long downward stroke of the *y* does this symbolic work. Walking is about memory-gathering. When you have walked regularly in a place, you begin to carry that place, its map, in your body.

Figure 1 Lismore and The Big Scrub where large quantities of Red Cedar were once located (map by Rob Garbutt).

Just as we have done here with *Memory stick*, in this paper we want to discuss the way artworks give expression to themes, or concepts, which resonate with structures of feeling in the present, themes we have alluded to already: productive labour; nature and culture; conservation and sustainability; and memory. Before doing so, however, we will briefly outline some of the ideas informing our writing on art. Next we sketch out the genesis of the *Wood for the trees* exhibition as well as locate it geographically and historically. Then we offer a discussion of a selection of works from the exhibition, based in a conversation between these objects and the themes we have outlined above. This conversation is one expression of the relationship of affordance between artworks and us (Wheeler, 2006, p. 135). As a form of material excess of the most productive kind (Grosz, 2008, p. 7) art seeds a response to that which is in the air waiting to be said of the past, of the present and of the future.

Figure 2: Hossein Valamanesh (2008) *Memory stick* (bronze, 71 × 54 × 1.5 cm) (photograph by Rob Garbutt).

A dialogue with the objects in *Wood for the trees*

We approach this discussion using a set of mutually resonant ideas from a number of theorists about writing, analysis and objects. Mieke Bal, in *Travelling concepts in the humanities,* takes both a concept and an object (a work of art), in order to read both together. For artworks are "always-already engaged, as interlocutors, within the larger culture from which they have emerged", and analysis "looks to issues of cultural relevance, and aims to articulate how the object contributes to cultural debates" (Bal, 2002, p 9).

Bal's (2002) positioning is not too different to Papastergiadis (2004, p.160) who writes that an artwork contributes to "the construction of a field of […] social meanings". When we write about artworks, we participate in their contextualisation, in a dialogue on the same idea/s, and we, as writers, develop "parallel and complementary trajectories of thought" (Papastergiadis, 2004, p.161). Stephen Muecke (2008) refers to this as *momentum*: a meld, an assemblage that moves somewhere else. Muecke (2008, p. 294) calls for a post-representational writing practice which avoids the relegation of "non-

human things to the status of mere backdrop to human dramas". Wendy Wheeler agrees:
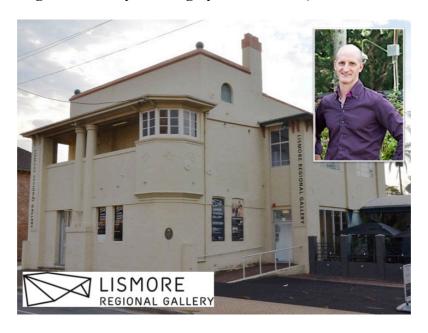
> The "objects" that we meet, and which afford us possible actions, are poorly understood when only understood as separate "objects" along the lines of the old Cartesian divide. What the "object" affords us […is] the responsibility of responsiveness. (Wheeler, 2006, p.135)

Because objects carry "emotions and ideas of startling intensity" (Turkle, 2007, p.6), "we need to think in terms of […] co-constitutive relationships across objects and subjects" (Askins and Pain, 2011, p. 814). Likewise, the cultural geographer, David Crouch (2012), in discussing the work of Deleuze and Guttari, refers to their term *spacing* as occurring "in the gaps of energies amongst and between things; in their co-mingling" (p.239). Bal (2002) notes a series of characteristics of this mutuality: detailed analysis is followed by suspending of certainties, resisting reduction, respecting "irreducible complexity and unyielding muteness", checking the thrust of and allowing for the diversion and complication of interpretation (p.4), and the liberation and release of the object's potential located in its resistance to translation (p.58). Crouch (2012) agrees with this: representations, "borne of the performativity of living", have "liveliness" which remains uncertain, "available, open and flexible, with a permanent possibility of re-inscription" (p.240).

Our dialogue with the objects in *Wood for the trees* is in the context of the exhibition as a gathering of artworks and people, and the geographical locale in which the exhibition "took" place. The genesis of *Wood for the trees* has a circuitous narrative. In 2009, Adlington curated an exhibition called *Family guy* at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, New South Wales, which brought together "the work of 14 contemporary male artists who question[ed] the male position within the family across the generations" (Adlington, 2009). This led Adlington to consider exhibition themes that would explore masculinity and that had the potential to build an audience of males for the LRG. One inspiration was *Family Guy* artist Roderick Sprigg's project *Occasional tables*, in which the artist invited five father and son pairs to each construct a coffee table for a group exhibition (Sprigg, 2008). In a similar manner, Adlington's initial impulse was to work with one or a number of men's sheds – community owned sheds for men in which arts, crafts and technical activities can be completed while also breaking down social isolation – to develop an exhibition by men's shed participants. The concept did not attract any partnerships, so Adlington parked that exhibition idea for a time.

In late 2009, Adlington took the role of Director at Lismore Regional Gallery (Figure 3) and noted the success of an exhibition featuring the *Hannah cabinet* (Hannah, 2009) at attracting a male audience to the Gallery, eliciting strongly positive responses from men in the Gallery visitors' book. The *Hannah cabinet* is an intricately crafted, large-scale furniture piece with highly detailed marquetry created over seven years by well-known and locally renowned Lismore craftsman Geoff Hannah. Perhaps, Adlington thought, there is an implicit association between timber, wood-working, "masculine" activity and the large number of men who felt drawn to this exhibition; thus, with the men's shed idea in abeyance, an exhibition broadly based on wood started to take shape (personal communication, July 4, 2011).

Figure 3: Lismore Regional Gallery and Brett Adlington (inset) (photograph of Brett and the Gallery logo courtesy of Lismore Regional Gallery; photograph of the Lismore Regional Gallery building by Rob Garbutt).

The role of a Regional Gallery Director is diverse and very much hands-on, leaving little time for focused curatorial activity. Adlington recalls that while the genesis of *Wood for the trees* occurred over a period of three or more years, and was in the Gallery program for eighteen months prior to the exhibition, the actual task of sourcing work for the exhibition occurred over a two-month period. Initially, the exhibition was just called the *Wood show* with the title *Wood for the trees* emerging as works for the exhibition were identified and themes cohered. Because timber and trees were so closely connected with the settler history of the Northern Rivers region, from the initial colonisation to the present, through phases of large-scale extraction of timber to vigorous and successful rainforest conservation actions, Adlington wanted the exhibition "to be about the tree as well as well as the timber […with] elements of traditional wood work in the exhibition, […] the type of show that [would be] accessible to [non-gallery-going] male audiences and [which] would draw people in" (personal communication, July 4, 2011).

This theme of Australian cultural connections to wood *and* trees was a productive element in the exhibition, with specific local meanings. In the spring of October 1842, rainforest trees, and Red Cedar (*Toona ciliata*) especially, *called* timber getters on the Clarence River north to the Lismore region (Jarrett, 1894). These mostly English, Scottish and Irish settlers named the 700 square kilometre area of dense rainforest in which the trees grew, *The Big Scrub* (Stubbs, 2001, p.296), and sometimes, simply, *The Scrub*. The relationship with wood and trees wasn't only a local one, but was part of colonial trade to Sydney and then to London and the rest of the Empire. Red cedars just happened to be trees containing wood for which there was a lusty Imperial appetite.

Initially there was little large-scale destruction of The Scrub. The loggers worked by picking out high-value trees one by one. In fact, it was usually Bundjalung assistants who did the work of spotting trees and guiding the cedar getters to them. This situation changed with the passing of the Robertson Land Acts of 1861 when crown land was

made available to selectors as freehold property. In 1862 selectors started to take up *selections*, or small farms, in The Big Scrub for intensive agriculture, mistakenly believing that the luxuriant growth of the rainforest was evidence of rich soil beneath. Selectors depended on creating pasture and crop land in order to make a return and pay off their three-year government loans, and government surveyors made regular journeys to determine the extent of holdings and the "improvements" made before tallying up the bill (Harrison, 2004, pp.35-38).

Today, the clearing of the underbrush, vines, dead wood and timber of The Big Scrub has become the stuff of local history and legend. The clearing of the Bundjalung people from that same land is the stuff of silence. In an ecological lament, Harry Frith states that "[u]ntil 1842 no white man had penetrated [The Big Scrub] and, until 1862 no farmer had dug in its soil. But by 1900 the forest was gone and its ashes, washed into the deep red soil had left not even a black stain on the surface" (Frith, 1977, p.7). We could reinterpret Frith's last sentence as a statement of Aboriginal and settler contact history, though such an interpretation overstates colonial effectiveness and ignores Aboriginal resilience and resistance. While settlers may behave as though the colonial project of clearing had been taken through to completion, this was never achieved. Aborigines have always been present, yet in the colonial imagination settlers steadfastly resist seeing the cleared area of The Big Scrub as a "shared landscape" (Harrison, 2004).

In the Lismore region, clearing connects with past and present physical and psychical practices of identity formation through labour, place-making and dwelling. Local identity emerges from colonial practices of clearing land that made it available for agriculture and remade it into a more familiar landscape comparable to received images of English rurality. This is a landscape that is not dominated by the flat plains of outback Australia coloured in yellows, browns and reds beneath depthless blue, but instead is comprised of rolling green hills beneath cumulus skies (Figure 4) reminiscent of Constable. In this sense, the clearing of The Scrub was a labour that was simultaneously a clearing of the mind in which a British colonial imagination and aesthetic could be installed and developed (Garbutt, 2010).

These local historical narratives of clearing and cultivation connect to others to weave national stories. Since the 1800s the colonists, and, later, the citizens of Australia, have imagined the "progress of civilisation" in forested areas to commence with clearing, and from south of Sydney to north of Brisbane the historical progression from cedar getting via clearing to intensive agriculture is a common storyline. Contemporary environmental and economic debates over the practice of clearing continue throughout Australia. To stop clearing is, many believe, to retard progress. Decade-long protests over the New South Wales state government's restrictions on land clearing as a result of the Native Vegetation Act illustrate this, as farmers demand "the freedom to work our land" and "the right of farmers to farm" (Archibald, 2003; Feain, 2010).

Since the 1970s, "new settlers" in the Lismore region have challenged this dominant narrative of progress. This influx of internal migrants was part of the nation-wide phenomenon of counter-urbanisation that began in the 1970s, and which, in the Northern Rivers region, was culturally dominated by the alternative counter-culture movement, by "hippies" (Kijas, 2003, p.33). Because of the decline in the dairy industry, many counter-cultural new settlers were able to buy cheap, cleared land, often

in idyllic surrounds bordering remnant Big Scrub rainforest. One piece of rainforest, known locally as Terania Creek, came to define the cultural gap between how the old and new settlers valued wood and trees. In 1979 a protest movement developed around the proposed logging of this forest. On one side were the police who were protecting the loggers and bulldozer crews of what is now the Hurford Group who were after the wood, and on the other a counter-culture-infused camp of activists who used a combination of media-savvy direct action, political lobbying and legal nous to stall and eventually win the battle for the trees (Kelly, 2003). The tactics used by the activists became the template in other environmental campaigns. While still a contentious issue locally, the Terania Creek protest is also a source of local pride as "the first [successful] battleground to save old growth rainforests" in Australia and possibly in the world (Lismore Regional Gallery, 2011a). A popular site in the Terania Creek forest, now part of the World-Heritage-listed Nightcap National Park, is Protestors Falls named in honour of those people who took part in the campaign.

Figure 4: "rolling green hills beneath cumulus skies" (photograph by Rob Garbutt).

It is against this local and historical background that the selection of works began for *Wood for the trees*. The exhibition's purpose was to showcase "[w]orks reflecting on the tree and the adaptability of wood" (Lismore Regional Gallery, 2011b). But a fundamental consideration is the regional location of the Gallery; not only are there clear budget constraints limiting the types of works which can be transported to the Gallery, but the politics of wood required deft handling. A member of the Hurford Group, Hurford Building Supplies, was a major sponsor of the Gallery during the exhibition. This caused some concern for Adlington when a contributing artist raised the issue. The curator was adamant, however, that the exhibition would be nuanced by articulating the need for conservation *and* timber production, given the many ways Australian society, including artists, depends on wood and wood products. As Adlington wrote:

> [I]t is indisputable that timber has played a central role in the history of art. It has been used as a sculptural material across all cultures, not to mention its use in the production of paper; […] and as a vital ingredient in the firing of ceramics. Then of course there is timber used in the

construction of furniture, houses and later ships that sailed to claim new lands. […] Acknowledging our place in a region that was the first battleground to save old growth rainforests, the exhibition includes some documentation of people active in this fight. This successful action led to world first legislation to stop logging rainforests, and in turn led to a more sustainable logging industry. (Lismore Regional Gallery, 2011a)
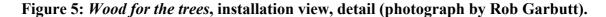
The exhibits themselves were primarily created from wood. The exhibition was housed in the Gallery building that dates from the 1920s and which incorporates local rainforest timber in its construction. And art exhibitions, in this instance in regional Australia, exist "at an environmental cost", says Adlington, because artworks have to be transported across the country (personal communication, July 4, 2011).

The process of identifying works for the exhibition combined Adlington's knowledge of established Australian artists working with wood and with wood-related themes, and the LRG's aim of incorporating local artists and items from the Gallery's permanent collection. Setting works from local artists, interstate artists and from the permanent collection together enabled all the works, in these new and varied contexts, to gain increased depth of meaning and complexity of resonance.

What, then, was the experience of engaging with the exhibition as a viewer? How did the works call to us, communicate to us, and how did we respond to them? In the next section, we walk through the exhibition, selecting pieces and pieces selecting us. The relationships that form are not only dyadic – at times a piece resonates for both authors, and at other times pieces connect through resonances and resistances with each other and us as well. The prose is not solely generated from within us as authors but from a space between us all, just as feelings of various kinds seemingly emerge within us during a walk along a bush track. So, here, is one walk along a track in the scrub, through *Wood for the trees*.

Walking into the Gallery, was, for us, to enter a familiar space. The current logo for the Gallery is an abstract geometrical representation of the region's geographical boundaries within the NSW Northern Rivers (Figure 3), from North Woodburn in the south to Nimbin in the north and from Clunes in the east to just west of Goolmangar. Further, seeing this particular woodwork-based exhibition was to immediately sense light and warmth. (The Northern Rivers is a subtropical region.) Blonde was the colour that sprang to mind. Blonde or pale wood is the visible entrapment of sunshine, the capturing of light, a solar flare. So our affective response – the impression of light and warmth experienced as *jouissance* – came from our sense of "belonging to" the Gallery, as local residents, as well as taking pride in, because of "ownership", the Gallery presenting such an affecting, aesthetically pleasing, historically resonant exhibition. In fact, after Adlington curated the exhibition, he realised colour was absent. The exhibition was predominantly muted in tone (Figure 5). However, it is difficult to conceive of timber as failing to be gorgeous or vital. It has texture; if it lacks colour, it has light; and if in tone it is muted, it is not muted in emotion – in this exhibition, the articulation of loss through melancholy or sadness as well as playfulness through connecting forms and titles was also fulsome.

We chose to respond to what generated an affective response in us – so, in that sense we mentioned previously, these pieces of work chose us. As Kathleen Stewart (2010, p.339), a theorist of affect, describes it, we "burrow[ed] into the generativity of what [took] form, [hit] the senses, shimmer[ed]". We aren't trained in art theory or art criticism specifically. And in Australia, responses to regional gallery exhibitions don't usually get into a wider media conversation. So we approach this writing practice as experimentation, the rider being that the world can be depicted as amorphous, as in the artwork of Lionel Bawden (2009), and in the Australian writer, Murray Bail's (1998) *Eucalyptus* (Ackland 2012, p.180), a novel about a forest of that Australian native forming a landscape that expresses the "poetics of potentiality", of "becoming" (Crouch 2012, p. 239). There were many strands in the conversation already generated by the eclectic artworks in the exhibition, about nature, culture, history, geography and gender. In relation to gender, although we have emphasised a masculine structure of feeling above, women as woodworkers were also well represented.

Figure 5: *Wood for the trees*, installation view, detail (photograph by Rob Garbutt).

Elizabeth Stops (2010, p.93) wanted to work with media "imbued with references to local occupation and land use". Grouped standing pieces of wood, charcoal and porcelain in Stops' (2009/2010) *Explorations into colonisation* (Figure 6) are in conversation with each other and with the viewer. The holes in the wood and the limited apertures in the porcelain are places for flow (of conversation, for example) or fastening (barbed wire, in particular). The colonial practice of chaining Aborigines is implicated in the tracing of barbed wire around the porcelain which is primarily about fencing off and stamping on/e's ownership, with "no regard for sustainability or prior habitation" (Stops, 2010, p.37). *Explorations* was also a quest for Stops "to maintain an art practice that […] remained environmentally sustainable" (2010, p.1). She used discarded then salvaged materials in a recycling practice, including fence posts and charcoal from the burning of wood in the kiln. The porcelain pieces (three) in their white, flawless,

elongated, cool smoothness could be feminine, ethereal, even nun- or angel-like in identity, except for that image of barbed wire which circles them. The utter darkness and seeming impenetrability of the charcoal in its blackness, its thick, squat shape and compressed texture make for solidity, but also, uncannily, infinity. The charcoal – and even the wood – appears both gravity-bound and flight-full; it has an earth-bound heaviness, yet a central thrust: momentum and mobility. Qualities are in a constant dialogue in *Explorations*: the vulnerable and violent, the immanent and transcendent, the solid and ethereal, guilt and innocence, orderliness and mess. Here there is history, an Australian text about black and white relations.

Figure 6: Elizabeth Stops (2009/2010) *Explorations into colonisation* (wood, charcoal, porcelain, ash, sap, binder; 55 cm high) (photograph by Rob Garbutt).

Rosalie Gascoigne's *Banner* (1986) (Figure 7) is made of the sides of old drink crates in blue, red and yellow – primary colours of sky, soil and sun in central New South Wales where the artist worked. As so often in Gascoigne's artworks, the materials used are "things that have been somewhere, done something" (Gascoigne, 1997, p. 7). The slats, though placed vertically as well as horizontally, suggest the usual flatness of the ancient yet reworked Australian landscape that lies beyond the coastal ranges of the east coast. Overlaying these fields of colour, the words *crystal*, *swing* and *Sharpe's* suggest the warmth and piercing light of the sun on paddocks extending into the distance, repeating, repeating. Perhaps, too, through this scene, a river or creek flows, with shards of light reflected from its surface: a rope for a swing hanging, waiting for the leisure-inclined to disrupt the hot silence. We could be drinking that heat and light.

Away from *Banner*, at one end of the exhibition, stand two *tutini* – two-metre high grave posts from the Tiwi Islands – that feature in the pukumani ceremony and honour the dead. One of the poles is by Watjinbuy Marrawilil (*Carved ancestral figure ceremorial pole*, 1980), the other by Artist Unknown (*Ceremonial Pukamani burial pole*, 1988), Indigenous and anonymous in the bicentennial year of Australia's invasion (Figure 8). We could also see this latter piece as a memorial to the relationship between colonisation and unacknowledged Indigenous labour. The grave posts haunt the room with their presence, seemingly out of place, and certainly out of context, yet they feel like a necessary inclusion for an exhibition that will draw a predominantly white

audience into the white space of the Gallery. The works – tall, thin, painted in ochre, echoing the combination of wood, land and light in Gascoigne's *Banner* – are easy to pass by, albeit anxiously, but remain impossible to ignore through an autochthonous relationship that, in our non-Indigenous postcolonial state, we crave (see Garbutt 2006).

Figure 7: Rosalie Gascoigne (1986) *Banner* **(timber) (photograph by Rob Garbutt).**

Figure 8: Watjinbuy Marrawilil (1980) *Carved ancestral figure ceremorial pole* **(natural ochres on iron wood, 246 x 20 x 21 cm [left]; Artist Unknown (1988)** *Ceremonial Pukamani burial pole* **(natural ochres on ironwood, 202 x 28 x 28 cm) [right] (photograph courtesy of Brett Adlington).**

The door of Paul Roguska's (n.d.) *Waterfall* cabinet (Figure 9) is comprised of finely-sawn, evenly-spaced cascades of Brown Salwood. The organic form together with the geometric repetition of the cascades initially draws one's eye. It is a paradoxical work. The woodwork restates the beauty of nature – yet does so in a finely worked and carefully measured piece of furniture made from a tree often found on the banks of rocky creeks in tropical Australia (Hyland et al., 2010). Nature and culture are represented simultaneously, with the half-seen space behind the cabinet door hinting at the void that often occurs at the base of a waterfall, dark and private behind the watery veil. The cabinet connects us to the sublime cascades of Protestors Falls, and the ribbons of falling timber/water flow out to those protestors at Terania Creek who are represented in images in another room in the exhibition.

Figure 9: Paul Roguska (n.d.) *Waterfall* (Brown Salwood, 150 x 44 x 18 cm) (photograph by Rob Garbutt).

Gina Fairley (2008) has characterised Lionel Bawden's (2008) *The amorphous ones (the insatiable, unquantifiable longing)* (Figure 10) as "laborious 'shaping'" yet also as "erosive narrative". In his own art writing, Bawden (2009) has settled on tropes such as "displaced species", "shadow-land", "a fractured utopia" and "lost histories". Within *Wood for trees,* then*,* Bawden's work may appropriately join the conversation about de/colonisation and de/forestation. *The amorphous ones* is made up of white Staedtler
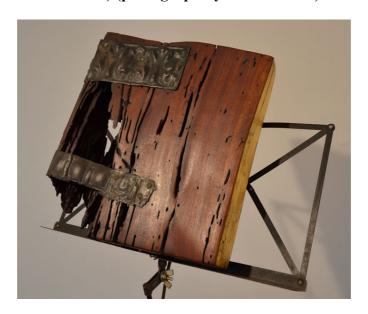
pencils carved, cut, sliced, fused and sanded, with their leads exposed on the surface.
The organic shapes could be rocks, anemones or jelly fish, a "carved sea-shelf or
perforated coral" (Fairley, 2008), or forest mushrooms or fungi. The inside of the
pencils laid bare could be the cellular core of a tree: evolutionary and technological and
cultural histories are, then, laid bare too. The work reminds us that wood – through
pencil, paper, the wooden desk and the original rubber eraser – is enmeshed with the
technology of writing. But if we think of marks on a surface, in different colours, as
communication, white on white reminds us of the invisibility of some forms of
communication and power in intercultural and interspecies contexts (Garbutt, 2011,
pp.159-173). The whiteness also functions as a reminder of coral bleaching driven by
global warming. So longing and amorphousness align conceptually with the loss of
forests, races, species, histories and languages.

Figure 10: Lionel Bawden (2008) *the amorphous ones (the insatiable, unquantifiable
longing)* **(white Staedtler pencils, epoxy and incralac on paper stack; 40 x 90 x 50
cm) (photograph by Rob Garbutt).**

AñA Wojak's (2008) *Unread book (in a forgotten language)* (Figure 11) is a
devastating piece if one links it to disappearing forests. The artwork's wooden
component came from a 300-year old remnant forest red gum (Blake Society, 2010)
which lived at the time of colonisation at Sydney Cove. Here is a book that doesn't
open, but nevertheless is falling apart. Yet its chamfer is embellished with precious and
incorruptible gold leaf and its binding is made of long-lasting metal. The unread book's
gold-leaf papering and metallic binding sit in mournful contrast to the decay of the
wooden covers. The unopened book (moreover, one "in a forgotten language") mimics
silence in a forest free of human language and, in its gravitas, it potentially mimics
imperial logos. The sadness is doubled, tripled and more, by the hundreds of lost
Australian Aboriginal languages, and further, perhaps, by the lost but unspeaking, or
variously speaking, animal, plant and bird life now gone because of destruction of
habitat in a cut-down forest.

Figure 11: AñA Wojak (2000) *Unread book (in a forgotten language)* **(redgum, gold leaf, tin, steel 115 x 55 x 50 cm) (photograph by Rob Garbutt).**

A conclusion

In the word tree we might be drawn towards nature, and the word wood to the product of our labour. Karl Marx said that material production is something every culture of human beings has in common (1990, p.286, n.6). We labour and our labour alters nature to create an environment around us, and that environment in turn influences our culture and us as individuals as part of that culture. Work – including cultural production or artwork – is what we do to survive. Ecocritic, Lawrence Buell (2005, p.5), describes the imagination as "at least as fundamental as scientific research, technological know-how and legislative regulation" as a key to today's environmental crises which include climate change; loss of species, homes and habitats; food security; poverty; and peak oil. Moreover through theoretical imaginings, neo-materialists, amongst others, have pointed to the inherent anthropocentrism of Marx's economic view, a view that discounts and erases the labour of the non-human world for human-centred and for more-than-human ends (DeLanda in Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, p.41). Artistic practice, and engaging with art, enables experimenting with imagination in relationship with others of all kinds, and in relation with a range of senses that is not afforded through abstract and disembodied experimentation and theorising.

If our writing has a tone of circumspection, of hesitancy, if it is not fulsome, that's because we are sensitive to Crouch's (2012, p.240) understanding that representations are not "fixed or closed to change", to Bal's dictum to be alive to irreducibility and resistance, and to welcome suspension and potential, and to Stewart's (2005, p.1027) request that we stay with the resonance of things rather than heading for "finished representations". Attending to, writes Stewart (2007, p.129), "gestures not toward the clarity of answers but toward the texture of knowing". We note, as well, Anna Gibbs' (2005) discussions about affect and ficotcritical practice: "that writing may be driven as much by the body as by thought: it partakes not simply of ideas, but of sensory and affective knowledges". We chose to write about this exhibition because it so affected us.

We were disposed "to communicate something of … [our] affective experience" (Gibbs 2005) with these artworks. We were affected by their aliveness, by the way we entered into conversations already in progress, initiated by the liveliness of the artworks, and continued by Adlington as curator. We were affected by the exhibition's locale, but also its global relevance, given this particular locale's geography, history and culture. We are expecting the conversations to carry on, to be sustainable and sustained – because – such conversations are sustaining. The artworks afford us this "responsibility of responsiveness".

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