

## CURATORIAL RATIONALE: *Habitus-Habitat*

By Beth Jackson

In order to provide access to and promote appreciation of Queensland's natural environment, including 3 World Heritage areas, 6 world-class walking tracks are being developed.

Artworks have been commissioned in response to these walks to enhance people's experience of the natural environment through an encounter with contemporary art—a sensitive human intervention. These artworks have the potential to invoke environmental awareness in the viewer through a reflective, transformative experience of both their presence within the landscape and the landscape of their presence.

The responses themselves may be conceived of as symbolic environments, as a nexus between the human (bodily) environment or *habitus*, and the natural environment or *habitat*.

### ***Habitat***

An ecological system (ecosystem) consists of a biological community interacting with its physical environment. Within any given ecosystem, habitats for many different wildlife species occur. A species' habitat consists of the food, water, cover and space necessary for its survival. Climate, topography, elevation range and bedrock geology all function in concert to determine the types of ecosystems and wildlife habitat that can occur in a given area.

Ecosystems are the foundation of our economy and provide 'free' services such as air and water filtration, climate regulation, crop pollination and pest control, which are of incalculable economic value to human society.

Ecosystems are also the foundation of our cultures, providing our deepest psychic links to our sense of place, our diets, our dress and lifestyle, and inspiration for expression in visual, literary and performing arts, and oral histories. Although we can see and know this objectively, as sets of representational practices, human cultures are inherited, acquired and developed on a less-than-conscious level.

## **Habitus**

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) was a sociologist and leading socio-cultural theorist, who developed the concept of *habitus* as a way of understanding the production and reproduction of human cultures.

*Habitus* is a cultural habitat which becomes internalised in the form of dispositions to act, think, and feel in certain ways. It is a set of culturally determined bodily dispositions which have no representative content and at no stage pass through consciousness; for example, the disposition to stand at different distances from people in different circumstances. *Habitus* is acquired through our acculturation into certain social groups, such as social class, gender, family, peer group or nationality. Each individual's *habitus* is a complex mix of these different cultural formations.

We are not normally consciously aware of *habitus*, but we may become aware of it through conscious reflection or finding ourselves in an alien environment. However, it is important to note that, in doing so, we are not transforming *habitus* itself into a set of representational mental states (beliefs, desires, etc.); rather, we are acquiring beliefs about the *habitus* (which remains inherently non-representational).

Bourdieu believed that socio-cultural practices are not consciously organised, are fluid and dynamic, and that any one individual's *habitus* is constantly orientating the self within the environment. *Habitus* is generative and non-linear.

Artworks and art-making, like all human-made objects and practices, objectify our relationship with the environment. However, as they function on a symbolic level, they have the potential to operate strategically, not as a conscious calculation, but as an intuitive interference in the classificatory schema and practical taxonomies of the body.

### **Habitus-Habitat: the concept**

Through commissioning artworks in response to the natural environments of Queensland, a point of union occurs between nature and culture. It is hoped that the viewer may intuitively hold a deep involvement with the surrounding natural habitats, while also engaging unconsciously with the complexity of their own individual *habitus*. It is hoped that the artworks will operate as sites of reflection

and renewal, reorientation and regeneration in much the same manner as a remote experience in undisturbed natural areas does.

### ***Habitus-Habitat* in contemporary art**

To perceive the concept of *habitus-habitat* in contemporary art is to first conceive of artworks as environments—extensions from and for the body which echo and shadow the spaces of lived experience.

The European artist Kurt Schwitters spent much of his artistic life constructing a work he called the *Merzbau* (or Merz Building). He began it 3 times: first in Hanover in 1923, then in Norway in 1937, and finally in exile in England in 1947. The *Merzbau* in Hanover was destroyed in an Allied air raid, and the Norwegian version fell victim to a fire. Only the English version remained, though Schwitters died before he could complete it.

The *Merzbau* was a fantastically constructed interior, as bewildering as it was abstract. The walls and ceiling were covered with a diversity of three-dimensional shapes and the room itself was crowded with materials and objects which were contained in countless nooks and grottoes. The *Merzbau* was 'on principle' an uncompleted work and continued to grow, changing constantly. In this work we can see reflections and refractions of the myriad human *habitus* which surround us in the collective social circles of our lives.

With similar effect though very different in execution, Rachel Whiteread's famous work *House* stood for 2.5 months as a monument or memorial shrine to years of human habitation in the intensely private and complex space of house and home. *House* was a cast of the inside of a 3-storey Victorian terraced house in East London, and it won Rachel Whiteread the Turner Prize in 1993. The structure presented inhabited space in solid form, stripped bare of its cladding. *House* stood alone as a symbol of survival, as all the other houses in Grove Road had already been knocked down to make way for redevelopment.

Through these and many other works of contemporary art, it is possible perceive the human-made *habitus*—the invisible membrane of socio-cultural dispositions which surround and inform us constantly.

Since the late 70s, Andy Goldsworthy has been making site-specific work in the landscape, using nature itself as a 'found object'—as both the subject and raw

material of his sculptures. Goldsworthy collaborates with nature to make his creations. Besides England and Scotland, his work has been created at the North Pole, in Japan, the Australian Outback, and in the US. Goldsworthy regards all his creations as temporary. He photographs each piece once right after he makes it.

Through his site-specific dialogue with the environment, Goldsworthy brings us close to perceiving the habitats of other species, the ways in which the environment is used purposefully, shared and lived-in, formed and reformed by layers of living organisms.

Looking, touching, material, place and form are all inseparable from the resulting work. It is difficult to say where one stops and another begins. The energy and space around a material are as important as the energy and space within. The weather - rain, sun, snow, hail, mist, calm - is that external space made visible. When I touch a rock, I am touching and working the space around it. It is not independent of its surroundings, and the way it sits tells how it came to be there.<sup>1</sup>

In June 2000 Goldsworthy conducted a project entitled *Snowballs in summer* where 13 giant snowballs were placed on the streets of London and left to melt in the heat of the longest day. As they disappeared they left behind materials that Goldsworthy packed into the snowballs: sheep's wool, crow feathers, chestnut seeds, ash seeds, Scots pine cones, elderberries, barley, metal, barbed wire, branches, chalk, pebbles and highland cattle hair. Some snowballs were placed in very public locations, while others were semi-hidden so that people could discover them. Inherent in Goldsworthy's work is the dialogue between *habitus* and habitat.

Another artist of key historical significance is the late Joseph Beuys, whose practice entailed an intensive understanding of the artwork as lived environment and experience. Beuys was a deeply spiritual philosopher as well as radical practitioner. His project *7000 oaks* was begun in 1982 at Documenta 7, the large international art exhibition in Kassel, Germany. His plan called for the planting of 7000 trees, each paired with a column of basalt stone approximately 4 feet high above ground, throughout the greater city of Kassel. The project took 5 years to complete, the last tree having been planted at the opening of Documenta 8 in 1987. Beuys intended the Kassel project to be the first stage in an ongoing scheme of tree planting to be extended throughout the world as part of a global

mission to effect environmental and social change; locally, the action was a gesture towards urban renewal.

Other works by Beuys, such as his performances *Coyote: I like America and America likes me* (1974) where he spent three days in a room with a coyote, or *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (1965), are dialogues between human and animal, life and death, art and life.

Christo's large-scale temporary installations, particularly *The umbrellas, Japan—USA* (1984-91) and *Wrapped trees* (1998), created a synthetic artistic field fusing nature and culture.

### ***Habitus-Habitat: Environmental art in Australia***

Environmental art has been a strong strand of Australian art practice, finding support through a series of outdoor sculpture prizes and festivals. The Mildura Sculpture Triennial (which began in 1961 as the Mildura Prize for Sculpture) was one of the most significant and experimental contemporary art events of its time. Minimalism, non-objective art, performance art, earthworks, environmental art and feminist investigations all found their moment at Mildura which continued until 1988.

The Mildura Triennial was followed by the Sculpture Triennial which was held in various locations around Melbourne, commencing with the First Australian Sculpture Triennial in 1981. However, by the time of the fifth and last Triennial in 1993, the focus had changed from outdoor venues to interior museum spaces. Recently established outdoor sculpture awards, such as the McClelland Survey and Award and the Helen Lempriere National Sculpture Award, stem from the Triennial's legacy.

Festivals which have more specific environmental focus include Mildura Palimpsest. Although it now uses some indoor exhibition spaces, it includes works which explore art and science and which 'debate and address the impact of human habitation and technologies on the land and the social implications of consequent change'.

The 3 Mountains to Mangroves Festivals, produced by Brisbane City Council (1998, 1999 and 2001) included environmental works integrated into the Boondall Wetlands.

The Floating Land, hosted by Noosa Regional Gallery, is an annual site-specific art in nature event which aims to explore the intersections between contemporary art, the environment and communities.

Another popular outdoor sculpture festival, Sculpture by the Sea, held at Bondi and other sites, often includes works with environmental references and concerns.

The art of Indigenous communities, of all Australian art, most embodies and exemplifies the *habitus-habitat* nexus. In sand and body paintings, weaving, carving and corroboree, Indigenous cultures explore the relationship between people and the environment in detailed and intricate ways. These artworks map familial relations, landscapes, food sources, laws, rites and spiritual cosmologies.

### ***Habitus-Habitat: a methodology***

The concept of *habitus-habitat* is as much a methodology for the process of art-making as it is an aesthetic strategy for the use of artwork as an interpretation of the natural environment.

The commissioning of works for the Great Walks of Queensland will involve the artists demonstrating a connection with the chosen region and then undertaking a residency based in the area, possibly using facilities at local regional galleries, universities or similar institutions. The residency will involve connection with local communities, contact with other artists, and research into the environment. The resulting artworks will spring from and reflect these involvements.

Artworks exploring both the *habitus* of the individual's journey and the unique habitats of regional Queensland will capture a complexity and create a transformative experience for all the participants.

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1. Pomona Environmental Analysis Program, Andy Goldsworthy, accessed 12 January 2004  
<http://ea.pomona.edu/Goldsworthy/art.html>