

The Walk Project

Martina Copley

WALK presents the work of eight Australian artists each specialising in a different media – Peter Corbett, Vicki Couzens, Nicky Hepburn, Brian Laurence, Jan Learmonth, Carmel Wallace, Ilka White and John Wolseley. At the heart of this exhibition is a 250 kilometre trek along the Great South West Walk, an increasingly endangered natural environment cradled in the far south-west corner of Victoria.



The WALK project was developed by Ilka White and Carmel Wallace, out of a very modest idea—to encourage an appreciation of this unique walking track and the spectacular environment it winds through. They were also curious as to how an extended time spent with fellow artists in a wilderness environment would foster artistic experimentation and inter-disciplinary collaboration.

It was hoped to create a diverse body of work that would act as an 'archive of interpretation' to engage other sectors and contribute to a cross-fertilisation of ideas about the valuing of this land. Carmel approached Colin Dunkley, former CEO of Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority, to discuss the project and GHCMA became the first local sponsor. Their support indicates an inspired appreciation of the contribution art might make to environmental awareness and solutions. Soon after ALCOA (Portland Aluminium) also came on board and this was invaluable as backing to further applications for funding.

A close association with the community of Portland was formed as Carmel and Ilka worked with Karl Hatton, Cultural Services Officer of the Glenelg Shire Council and a local Project Reference Group to manage the initial stage of the project. The Project Reference Group incorporated local community and business, including the Friends of the Great South West Walk. For three weeks, the artists walked through forest and river, estuary and bay to create work in response to their experience of the ever-shifting environment. Along the walk, local specialists including field naturalists, scientists and indigenous

spokespeople joined the artists to share their expertise and passionate engagement with this ancient land. Local knowledge triggered new lines of artistic enquiry, dialogue, observation and making. The great range and breadth of local involvement also gave the community a feeling of ownership of the project and an increased understanding of the way artists work and contribute. Public gatherings and opportunity for discussion during the walking phase of the project included a ritual dance and 'smoke-ceremony' send-off by the local indigenous community and 'meet the artists' afternoons and evenings.

Strong early interest in the project was shown by local and national tourism, historical, business, art and cultural groups. This interest continued to manifest and the project received a substantial amount of funding support from government, business and philanthropic organisations. WALK translated into a rich and intriguing exhibition, launched at Portland Arts Centre in November 2007. The further collaboration between myself; NETS Victoria; designer Erik North; writer Kit Wise; photographer Terence Bogue; education resource writer Louise Hall and many others, brought together a range of expertise and experience to help realise the project.

The exhibition tour, managed by NETS Victoria, has extended the notion of 'community' from one defined by place to one formed by groups of people with a common link. The exhibition and associated educational resources and public programs encourage informed and inquisitive responses to the landscape and illuminate the diverse creative



Above John Wolseley talking to visitors at Horsham Regional Art Gallery about the NETS Victoria touring exhibition, *Walk*, for the *Meet the Artist* public program held on the 13 January 2008. Photographer, Merle Hathaway, courtesy Horsham Regional Art Gallery and NETS Victoria.

Below Carmel Wallace, *Murrell's Beach*, 2006, courtesy of the artist, photographer Grant Wallace.



practices represented in the exhibition. Artist workshops and floor talks offer audiences the opportunity to engage directly with the artists and art works at each venue. Key local groups were invited to contribute to associated publications and website www.netsvictoria.org/walk/ (including Windamara Aboriginal Corporation, Glenelg Hopkins Catchment Management Authority, Portland Field Naturalists' Club, Parks Victoria, Birds Australia, Department of Sustainability and Environment in Portland, the Friends of the Great South West Walk and the Wilderness Society.) They addressed issues of sustainability and cooperation with brief texts on the history of the walk, the preservation of indigenous species, the current use of landscape and the original inhabitants of this region. These organisational networks were also instrumental in promoting the WALK project and the surrounding region to a broad cross-section of the community.

The project has been a model for other ventures. WALK was recently shown at Lake Macquarie Gallery (NSW) where curators developed a complementary exhibition involving local artists responding to contested landscape. The initiating artists of the WALK project have presented papers to new audiences via conferences with Education Victoria

and WALK 21 and written for associated publications. WALK added impetus to lobbying by the Wilderness Society for a substantial reduction in logging of the Cobboonnee Forest and it has recently been announced that 18,400 hectares (70%) of the forest will now be zoned as National Park.

WALK reinstates a sense of empathy towards the natural world. It is an invitation to reflect on the fragile state of habitat and its increasing vulnerability. Art expressing its relation to land and landscape conceived as a creative social, cultural, ethical and aesthetic relation to place.

Martina Copley is the Curator of the Walk exhibition. You can contact her at: martinacopley@bigpond.com or NETS at Melissa.Hart@netsvictoria.org

The Walk exhibition is on at the Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale, 31 May-29 June 2008. For information including a paper by Martina on the Walk project visit: www.netsvictoria.org/walk/

Above left Nicky Hepburn's artwork, *Cuttlefish, Seed Pods, Galls II, Bark, 2007, made from cuttlefish, found seed pods, steel and tree bark.* Courtesy of the artist. Photographer Terence Bogue.

Below left Ilka White, *Journal extract, courtesy the artist.* Photographer Terence Bogue.



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