



ISBN 978-0-9806742-8-6

Published by Performance Space, Sydney 2010

Copyright © Alex Kershaw, Zara Stanhope and Bec Dean

All images: Alex Kershaw, Production Stills (2007-2008) Courtesy of the artist and GRANTPIRRIE

PERFORMANCE SPACE
CARRIAGEWORKS, 245 WILSON ST EVELEIGH
PO BOX 461 NEWTOWN NSW 2042 AUSTRALIA

t =61 2 8571 9111

f =61 2 8571 9118

www.performancespace.com.au

ALEX KERSHAW
ONE OF SEVERAL CENTRES

INTRODUCTION

Performance Space is delighted present this new visual arts commission by one of Sydney’s most compelling photomedia artists, Alex Kershaw. *One of Several Centres* is a multi-channel video and sound installation that, in the artists words “unravels the spaces that exist between our understanding of Australia’s geographic centre, Alice Springs.”

This project has been several years in the making, and an early iteration of the work was shown by Fremantle Arts Centre in Western Australia (2009). This new version, made for the bunker-like gallery of CarriageWorks is an expansion and reconfiguration of the interplay of the work’s multiple layers; from the performative videos and their coalescence and dissonance, through the aural array and soundscape, to the sculptural forms of the screens and seating arrangements. In this installation, structures grow out from the moving-image work and effectively ground them in the space.

As a part of his working methodology, Kershaw spends extended periods of time researching sites and getting to know the people who work in and inhabit chosen locations. There are many participants to thank for this work and their contribution to its evocative intricacy. Many people and local organizations in Alice Springs that have given not only their time, but have engaged seriously and playfully in Kershaw’s process, to show us something of themselves and their particular connection to place.

One of Several Centres subtly shifts routines and the representation of located behaviours, presenting a document that could be perceived as out-of-kilter with reality, but alternatively, connects on a deeper level with the non-rational, internal dialogues that form part of our complexity as human beings.

One of Several Centres is an exploration of the ‘interior’ on many levels.

Bec Dean, Associate Director, Performance Space

ALEX KERSHAW

Since the late 1990s Alex Kershaw has worked as a photographic, and more recently video artist who examines the symbolism and ritual associated with people and their territories. His work is often site-specific in nature and relates explicitly to the Australian consciousness while addressing universal ideas of identity, memory and relation. Often spending extended periods researching locations and characters, Kershaw creates ‘psycho-geographic’ landscapes, which fuse an empathetic engagement with place with quixotic and uncanny staged interventions.

In Conversations With Absent Others (2004), Kershaw attends to a series of geodetic points across regional New South Wales. Subverting their original purpose as economic mapping points, Kershaw constructs shrine-like assemblages around the concrete obelisks often affectionately named after surveyors. By treating the landscape as a site for potential correspondence between the living and the dead via multiple polytheistic offerings, Kershaw draws our attention to the importance of memorial, but also the humour, sadness and futility of attempts at correspondence with our collective past.

Petalody (2006) began from the desire to record and remember family lineage and the impulse to archive what is ultimately fleeting-our corporeal experience of time. Kershaw spent a year documenting his grandmother in her home, drawing on her passion for Ikebana the ancient art of Japanese flower arranging. Together they arranged flowers with personal relics-her late husband’s golf balls, catch-phrases in petals, a dinner table as a fortress-resulting in a series of portraits loaded with a sense of intimacy and estrangement.

A quiet activism pervades much of Kershaw’s practice, which often focuses on socio-political debate in a light-hearted way. His recent multi-channel video installation, *A Lake Without Water* (2006) examines the contentious issue of land ownership and exploitation through an improbable cast of surveyors and farmers. Like a Beckett play, the local protagonists perform abstracted monologues and follies against the backdrop of the southern tablelands of Lake George. The installation generates the feeling of a ‘devil’s workshop’. Through its cartographic panning of salt-leached landscape, teamed with slapstick performances of landowners and distributors, the work is configured as both desolation and re-invigoration.

PARTICIPANTS

Australian Army – Norforce, Pete Bowden, Christopher Bocker, Brother Chico, Vinceneo Di Benedetto and Andria Scacchetti, Teddy Egan Jangala and Franky Japanangka, Dan and Tom Falzon, Colin Graham, Kathleen France, Noreen Hudson and Clara Inkamala, Jabba Jovanovic, Shari Larkins, Jimmy Mohi, Tina Namow & John Rainer, Elliot Rich and James Young, Roberta at Australian Pacific Touring, Josh Santospirito, Alice Springs Steiner School, Margaret Wallace & EndlesSpirit Snowy Starr.

PRODUCTION ASSISTANCE

Alana Armstrong, Vanessa Bellemore, Alex Davies, Cain Gilmour, Carlos Gray, Trent Jansen, Gail Priest, Peter Yates, Elliot Rich and James Young.

Performance Space is supported by The Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body and the New South Wales Government through Arts NSW. Performance Space is supported by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments. Alex Kershaw has been supported by a New Work grant from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council.



ONE OF SEVERAL CENTRES

'... locality as a dimension of social life, and as an articulated value of particular neighborhoods, is not a transcendent standard from which particular societies fall or deviate. Rather, locality is always emergent from the practices of local subjects in specific neighborhoods. The possibilities for its realization as a structure of feeling are thus as variable and incomplete as the relations among the neighborhoods that constitute its practical instances.' Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 2005

Only rarely in Alex Kershaw's *One of Several Centres* does the town that is the work's subject appear. Uluru, the iconic landform that commonly represents Alice Springs in the popular imagination (despite being some 450 kilometres distant), is similarly absent. The civic space at heart of Central Australia and rough geographical centre point of the continent appears, under Kershaw's direction, as a series of filmic vignettes of people, mostly in isolation. At one point Kershaw permits a brief panorama, a panning shot from ANZAC Hill, before returning to what preoccupies him about this urban yet outback environment. A sensation of separateness, of contained lives that do not interconnect, is emphasised by the positioning of screens in a form that prevents the work from being viewed as a totality.

Although science refuses to agree where the midpoint of Australia is located, Alice Springs has borne the mantle of geographic centrality in European thinking since its establishment. The inability of settlers to relate to the traditional ownership of the region by its Arrernte custodians led to the consequent development of Mparntwe, (the Arrernte name for Alice Springs). The frameworks of both state and church, each with their own symbolic centres, were administered from towns like Alice, forever changing the universes Indigenous Australians thought they knew, and ways of living within them. The 'Alice' (which was known as Stuart until the 1930s, but renamed in honour of the wife of a Post-Master General of South Australia, Sir Charles Todd) was located along the route of John McDouall Stuart's traverse of the continent from south to north. It's development was secured by the siting of the Overland Telegraph Line station, which, by the early 1870s, created the base for the subsequent influx of populations attracted for reasons of agriculture, mining, tourism, defense and others.

Kershaw's Alice is not a centre in the sense of a median or a point of equilibrium. It is the background context, the attractor that brings together Indigenous and local residents, long term workers and short stay visitors; those who 'come in' or 'travel through'. It is not the significance of Alice as a territorial hub we experience in this work but the distinctiveness of the individuals who are found within her domain.

One of Several Centres presents varied perspectives on a place through the actions of her population. Their behaviour is in part confounding, at other times playful. We suspect some sections of the work, such as the circulating dog walker or the worker laying turf on a roundabout, are orchestrated by the artist to emphasise certain conditions or to act as metaphors. Choreographed episodes (the memorable folly of attempting to stack chairs in defiance of gravity) heighten an impression of tension. Surreality builds as the camera journeys through Todd River gums, night activities and jazz singing in an abandoned cinema.

Other footage showing everyday activities and local personalities or street scenes suggest these sequences were recorded from life. But can we be sure? For example, how are we to have confidence in the accuracy of the local tales relayed through mulga ant mounds? A number of Kershaw's episodic scenarios are confounding in their accumulation of unfamiliar languages, signs and gestures. Hence, doubt builds regarding the usefulness of the speaker's, and additionally, the artist's translations. Furthermore, in revealing the viewer's own uncertainties and assumptions, *One of Several Centres* raises questions about our ability to understand or interpret what the camera reveals; life in this country.

More uncertainties arise, as children parade their paintings of the red landscape or Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the armed forces surveil an unknown target. Kershaw's streams of fragments present a raft of distinctive behaviours, experiences and feelings he perceives as arising from place. This distinctive tenor sets *One of Several Centres* apart from films and mini series in which locations around Alice supply backdrops to narratives of human drama, tragedy or entertainment, such as: *Walkabout* (Roeg, 1971), *A Cry in the Dark* (Schepisi, 1988), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (Elliott, 1994), and more recently *Samson and Delilah* (Thornton, 2009).

Alice Springs is undoubtedly unique: surrounded by sites of cultural importance, it is a nucleus of post-settlement history and gateway for itinerant tourists and workers at the core of a prehistoric landscape. Over numerous visits to this centre of 'the Centre', Kershaw has observed particular complexities of residency, community and citizenship. Each scene is a potent contemplation of individual humanity and the myriad social and cultural webs within which it exists. As Kershaw leads us, frame by frame, through his Alice, the multiplicity of the lived realities on each screen compounds, gathering at the fulcrum of the installation. This is not a point of utopia but the vortex of greatest dilemma for the viewer who finds herself a spectator, a foreigner to her fellow citizens.

Zara Stanhope