

Landformed: An Image of Tim Newth.

By

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Notions of relationships and "dreaming" inform and encapsulate the **Ngapa Jukurrpa (Water Dreaming)** project from the Northern Territory which has recently been awarded an Australia Council Hybrid Arts grant. On paper, the two phase research and performance project, which plans to follow the path of the Water Dreaming of Warlpiri landowners from Lajamanu, appears to be a unique and manageable venture. In actuality, the project is challenged both by the complexities of meaning hidden in the terms, relationships and "dreaming," and by the potency of its hidden participant, the land itself. The visionary director behind **Ngapa Dreaming** is a genuine hybrid artist himself. Tim Newth has quietly hopped boundaries between the visual arts and dance, theatre direction and animateur of large-scale performance events for years though, with this project, he is meeting the unbounded activity of the spirit head-on. When I talked to Newth about the project, he made it clear, right from the beginning, that following the path, "will not be a romantic or mystic thing." He is committed to the "arduous test, physically, mentally and spiritually" of a journey that will cross 2,000 kilometre of country running between the Stuart Highway and the Tanami Desert from just above Alice to Darwin. Advised by the Central Lands Council to set up contingency plans with helicopter rescue organisations, the small group of four artists and five landowners will rely, not on roads; but on old man Freddy's signalling between one tree or mound and the next. Their map, in other words, is in the mind of Freddy Jangala Patrick.

This map is one node of the interconnected relationships which the project aims to explore: its markings link the multiple stories of the land between its elements and between its creatures and spirits. Each member of the group will forge symbiotic relationships with place which is also time and the source of life and its symbols. Other relationships involve people, the guardians of the expansive elongated country, whether personal, disciplinary or familial, intra-cultural or cross-cultural. The fundamental pattern interconnecting the four core artists, however, is Aboriginal kin relations which were established when Newth and, later, dancer-choreographer David McMicken, worked with the people of Lajamanu. A visual artist and an elder of the community, Freddy Jangala Patrick adopted Newth as his son which made him the brother to Steve Jampijinpa Patrick. David McMicken was given the skin name Japaljarri which makes him a cousin to both Newth and Steve Jampijinpa Patrick. The five traditional owners, Myra Nungarrayi Patrick, Molly Napurrula Tasman, Rosie Napurrula, Maisie Napangardi and Gladys Napangardi Kelly are integral to the journey because of their relationship to the sacred sites. It is the responsibility of the landowners to advise the spirits, of their respective "dreaming" sites, about the visitors and their intentions.

Another significant set of relationships will emerge from the puzzle of the term "dreaming" itself for, through this term, the artists will negotiate the meeting points between traditional Warlpiri belief and contemporary understanding of art, as is expressed in performance. "Our culture," Newth observes, "doesn't

educate us to listen to our spirit" but that search is at the heart of the **Ngapa Jukurrpa-Water Dreaming** Project and explicitly so for Steve Jampijinpa Patrick, screen printer, illustrator and bass player. Steve's participation is directed to the deeper knowledge of the spirit, which he will gain from his father Freddy, the five landowners and the land. He considers that, as a traditional landowner himself, "it is my duty to continue to learn and pass on my father's Ngapa Dreamtime that we rightfully belong to, to our sons."¹ Steve journeys into the spirit of which art, understood in western terms, is but a part. What is this thing called "Dreaming"? The performance-come-ceremony, planned to emerge from the quest, will evolve from the core artists ideas and feelings about the concept and experience of Dreaming. Tim wryly points out, "each artist uses the term Dreaming, yet we probably have four different perspectives about what this means. The performance is the "telling" of what that thing is". Moreover, for Newth, the work must communicate to the relationships which surround him, conveying its stories just as much to his Mum and Dad as to his peers in the performing arts' community and the Warlpiri people of Lajamanu. In order to find "the relationships to traditional expressions of ceremony which connect painting, song, music, sculpture, dance and language,"² the performance is envisioned to be bi-lingual and multi-skilled. The Dreaming creation, like the waters followed, promises to be an experience of many currents and many auditoriums, from the theatre to the desert.

Drawing Initial Parameters

What prompts an artist to forfeit the comforts of home and opt for red dust and horizontal landscapes of Warlpiri country? When do visions of a Parisienne garret lapse into the concrete walls of a studio infested with heat, mice and cockroaches on the supine back of a vast open country? The story, Newth observes, is a long unfolding as much the result of accident and coincidence as of a developing sense of relationship to the people of Lajamanu and to the land. The shearer's son from Wangaratta has turned his youthful pledge to art's importance in the scheme of life into a map of images and movement whose imprints deepen with time. Newth sees his life moving through stages, learning, probing and, now, finding ways into the stories and the spirit. He crosses boundaries to expand the potential of the individual whether this be the self or for others: the balance is crucial.

Rejecting the lone existence of the visual artist, a young art school graduate found the inter-personal aspects of community arts appealing. The collaborative project that wakened his senses, **Going Dancing**, took place in home-town Wangaratta and brought Newth together with dancer-choreographer Beth Shelton. Moreover, the cloth, which he had viewed in terms of base and material for his art, suddenly took flight—air partnered fabric in a dance that would entwine the two for many years to come. Newth did not need encouraging to join a further collaborative process, this time with **Danceworks**, a Melbourne contemporary dance company under the direction of Nanette Hassel because, by

¹Notes.

Project Description

² Ibid

now, he was propelled by a need to find out how to "make" a dance. The process totally mystified him. He grins, remembering how naive he had been with that group of skilled and highly motivated professional dancers; telling them that angles and relationships were defective in one way or another, challenging their decisions. Retrospectively, he realises that **Around Squares** of 1987 introduced him to the art of directing: from arranging shapes in photographic images, he changed media and steered dancers around and through a floating cut-out chessboard that swept the performance space. Equally, inevitable in the pas-de-deux of air and fabric was the emergence of inflatable's and wind-socks, hovering geckoes and shivering lengths of colour which, in many ways, proved Newth's signature over the years that followed as he moved between Brown's Mart Community Arts Project in Darwin and Tasdance and pageant events in Launceston. Of all the myriad influences which shaped and guided him along the way, none was more profound than the Lajamanu women's ceremony which, he adds in a quizzical tone, we call "dancing." "What I saw that afternoon was dancing, narrative chant, body painting, spiritual immersion and the land," the red dust dancing. Watching the fusion of the arts with the country and the spirit, Newth sensed that there was something of him there, in the ceremony, waiting to be discovered. Fate had taken Newth to Lajamanu's point on the map, 'to the centre heartland of the Northern Territory. That year, Corrugated Iron Youth Theatre (Darwin) mounted and toured the winning plays of the Young Playwright's competition, one of which was a story from Lajamanu in Warlpiri language and English. The young people's Living in Isolation proved a hit in the desert town with its prone terrain and upright temperament. Next year the school council rang Brown's Mart and asked "Why can't our kids do that too?" In some instances, relationships developed naturally, at other times, patience and time etched out slow binding tracks. The return trip entailed settling the matter of kin which is of prime importance to residents of Lajamanu. A letter of explanation from Freddy Jangala Patrick's point of view is included in the project's submission to the Australia Council: "Some years ago I was confronted by a young kartiya fellow (European bloke) while doing a Kuruwarri painting. He asked me to explain to him about the patterns and the dots in the Kuruwarri that I did on the canvas. I happily explained to him. That is when I first met Tim." Once in the family, however, Newth was subjected to the slow acquisition of deep knowledge shadowed by the symbolic patterns and dots: one has to prove oneself responsible at each stage of instruction to handle such dangerous and sacred knowledge.

Finding Other Routes into the Map

In and away from Lajamanu, the interconnectedness of land, people, spirit and art spawned in Newth's consciousness until he reached a turning point in his life. Two years ago, he felt the need to pull himself free from the race for grants and disengage himself from pressures to produce output after output: he needed different spaces, different foci. Tasmania provided him with an opportunity to gain a clearer vision of himself through the slower rhythms of Tai Chi and meditation. A major inspiration, at that time, came from **Tasdance's** visiting American choreographer, Stephen Petronio who developed dynamic movement from the seemingly antithetical natural body-consciousness of the Alexander technique. The steadiness and clarity of the ambience taught Newth to relinquish

his ambitions, a lesson which makes him feel "no lesser of a person." Looking back, the daily ritual of mediation, begun at that time, has caused, Newth believes, a gradual change in his attitude to art and self, a flange which seeks to find ways to the spirit. This reminds Newth of another ritual rigorously maintained at the significant time of 6 PM Sundays. Carolyn Jones' **A Search for Meaning** on ABC National acted as another source of inspiration for he admits to an abiding respect for Jones' ability to draw out the stories of people's lives, for her way of going backwards in order to see what is here. The time's significance derives, if rather incongruously, from the country teenager's 6 PM Sundays sacrosanct hour with **Countdown**. There was no way, at that point in his life, that anyone could prize his eyes from a screen filled to excess with brash images, colours and movement. He cannot quite explain the coincidence of absorption in two such unlike programs but he is certain that one day the interconnections will be revealed.

I tell Newth about Kath Walker's **Oodgeroo (Paperbark-tree)** story which I have always regarded as a fundamental metaphor of what art should be for the practitioner. The simple story of the old woman who had lost contact with her tribe and who, with a little help from Biami, the Good Spirit, regains the stories of her identity—her relationships with her people—through drawing on the paperbark: "she recalled the stories of the old Dreamtime, and through them entered into the old life of the tribes."³ Newth knows another story, one that happened during the preparations for the 1992 **Illuminations** project in Launceston. The Pallowah people of Tasmania, who had never spoken or heard their language, nonetheless, insisted that this language—the words for "sun" and "moon"—be part of their story around which the event was to be shaped. One day they pulled Newth down into their circle around seven or eight linguistic texts from which they hoped to extricate "their" words. Newth felt that it was a contrived exercise at best but, with his inimitable patience, he watched as they spoke the sun and moon words from the incomplete documentation of a plethora of Tasmanian Aboriginal languages. Rejection after rejection occurred, then, as if reaching deep down into a Jungian-like unconscious, the intoned word was greeted with "yes, yes, yes." One by one, the Pallowah found the language of their suns and moons and, thus empowered, they performed. Newth remarked that the Pallowah have extended that remembering now to the land, to the Cataract Gorge and site of the following year's celebration, by marking an Aboriginal presence along side the other histories that lay claim to that spiritual centre of Launceston. Many of the projects with which he has been connected over the last eight years, especially those that are dance-based, make roads into Newth's own sense of Identity and connectedness with the land.

As we move over the issues of Newth's transition from "pure form" to story and the spirit, he talks of an artist's time map which begins with learning the techniques of how to do things whether this be a drawing of a human form or the execution of multiple pirouettes. Once the fundamental techniques of construction and performance have been ingested and the "knowing" tested, the

³ Kath Walker's "Oodgeroo (Paperbark-tree)." *Stradbroke Dreamtime*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson (1982 edition) 56-7.

theoretical artist is initiated. That is when the telling and the communicating begins. Newth acknowledges the influence of Neil Cameron in his passage from form to story. Cameron guides giant-sized puppets and images through the themes and histories of the host communities in his large-scale pageantry and pyrotechnic events, such as **Fire on the Water** and the Opening Ceremonies for the Arafura and South Pacific Schools Games. Images are typically sacrificed to fire at the culmination of the spectacle. Watching the effect of Cameron's gutsy raw images, constructed so as to hang together for the required hour or two of the ritualised event, Newth became aware of the powers of a communication that did not require the conscious attention to perfection, characteristic of technicians of form. "I realised that if a few strokes conveyed the idea of a "cat" there was no need for any further details." Communicate, that is what stories do.

Retracing the Ancient Map's Presence

Newth hesitates, when I ask about the significance of the creative act. "It can be a dangerous thing," he replies. As he continues to describe the need for balance between working for the self, for other people and for the world, for giving discrete attention to disparate activities such as washing-up and the hybrid project, I realised that I had asked the wrong question. Newness, innovation and avoiding the use of bamboo structures because that was used in the previous production, these notions, Newth feels, are ultimately stultifying and false. Re-creation was quite another matter: "there is a lot of power in recreating the created and a major hurdle for artists to transcend." He nods in recognition when I explain how the Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe describes arts practice in his Igbo culture. "When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore the Igbo choose to **eliminate the product and retain the process** so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulse and experience of creation"⁴ (my emphasis). Instead of innovation and originality, the motivation behind re-creation suggests that the meaningfulness of the past, whether of an individual or of a community, is re-configured and re-enacted in the present. The source stories are retold: ancient maps re-live their formation. The idea of the artist participating with the origin stories, symbols and images reminds Newth of a saying about indigenous concepts about time that he has not quite decoded as yet. With appropriate gestures carefully delineating—dancing—the front and back of his mind, Newth explains that while his culture views the past as behind and the future as in front of oneself, indigenous people see their past in front of them and their futures behind.

"Time, and more time" is Newth's quick response to my question about approaches to cultural exchange that avoid the imposition of European frames. After consideration, he used a blackboard analogy to explain his first encounter with the people at Lajamanu. "When I arrived my life's blackboard was full with stories from other places. I had to wipe the blackboard clean. I couldn't assume anything. New stories had to be written." The analogy is a familiar one for those

⁴ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press (1988) 207

of us who have experienced the shock and pleasure of Aboriginal community life and grappled with the complexities of cultural erosion and exploitation of traditions. Latent assumptions of superiority must be teased away but do we have to erase all our life stories when meeting another culture. Later, Newth counters his position, with a lesson learnt during the **Wader Bird Project**, an international environment art tour. The artists planned to work with the indigenous peoples of various places along the wader birds migration path—Auckland, Melbourne, Broome and Koshiro (Japan)—enabling the different cultural groups to shape the performance events in their way. With their commendable intention of empowering the host culture to take the initiative, the white artists failed to enter into the spirit of exchange. Now, Newth feels the need to embark on a collaborative, cross-cultural exchange with a clear sense of "self," knowing one's strengths and giving of one's presence. And, while he believes that white Australians still suffer from not being able to articulate "who the hell we are culturally," he advocates a sense of pride in that which we know and have achieved as a culture. We must, in other words, have something to exchange.

What lies ahead promises to fuse the basic elements of Newth's passions: the spirit that moves earth and air, fire and water, the spirit that guides people through stories and relationships and time that dances ahead and behind in the forms and contours of the land.

The "telling" of the **Ngapa Dreaming** may maintain its mysteries but the seekers will have entered into an exchange which is at the quick of the human condition. They will have listened for the sounds, shapes and movements of the spirit. There can be no more dangerous nor more enduring search.

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