

ÉCOLE NATIONALE SUPÉRIEURE DES **BEAUX-ARTS**

ANTIPODES CL



# Antipodes



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There exists in our culture the widely held belief that contemporary art has been largely co-opted and re-shaped through its “official” institutions into a kind of rarefied, globalised, economy whose trade is based on the transformation of art into a form of universal cultural currency. The aim of this project was to examine various cross-cultural relationships between art; its institutions and their relationship to specific regional and global histories, geography and politics. The project was structured around notions of displacement that have been integral to the conceptualising of both the physical and cultural spaces associated with the term *Antipodes*.

What does this word mean today? This word, which for over two hundred years has been paramount in the imagination of explorers and travellers and synonymous with the often “unreal” manifestations related by those whose accounts were to become recorded as being the “objective” experiences linking Australia to France.

The working group consisted of five students accompanied by one Professor from each of the two schools. The works produced during this first phase of the project were exhibited in SCA's Galleries 1 and 2, marking the culmination of that month's engagement; a time of crucial introductory experiences and of mutual discovery. From out of this concentrated activity came newer understandings of the personal, cultural, historical and material parameters that each artist would bring to the project. This was clearly evidenced in the variety and in the intensity of the works in the exhibition.

A year later now, and the Australian participants have arrived in Paris to reconnect with their Parisian counterparts and to complete the final stage of *Antipodes*, which will be exhibited at Point Éphémère.

*Il existe aujourd'hui une opinion communément répandue selon laquelle l'art contemporain a été largement détourné et transformé par ses institutions "officielles" en une sorte d'économie mondialisée et raréfiée dont le ressort serait la transformation de l'art en une forme de monnaie universelle. Le but de ce projet était d'examiner les multiples relations existantes à travers les cultures entre l'art et ses institutions, et des contextes historiques et géographiques régionaux ou mondiaux.*

*Le projet a été organisé autour de notions liées au déplacement, notions qui structurent depuis longtemps les espaces physiques et culturels associées au terme Antipodes.*

*Quel est le sens de ce mot aujourd'hui? Ce mot a été tout puissant pendant plus de deux siècles dans l'imaginaire des explorateurs et des voyageurs; il a aussi été porteur d'événements et de manifestations souvent irréels, relatés par ceux dont les récits de voyage sont passés à la postérité comme autant d'expériences "objectives" liant la France et l'Australie.*

*Notre groupe de travail a rassemblé cinq étudiants et un artiste enseignant des deux institutions partenaires. La période d'un mois passé ensemble à Sydney au printemps 2005, et qui a vu la réalisation d'une exposition collective, a été un moment crucial de découverte mutuelle et d'expériences préliminaires. De ce moment d'intense activité productive, sont nés de nouvelles capacités de compréhension des paramètres personnels, historiques, culturels et matériels, mis en œuvre par chacun des artistes de ce projet. Ceci était évident devant l'intensité et la diversité des œuvres montrées à Sydney. Un an s'est écoulé depuis, qui nous a amenés jusqu'à cette exposition au Point Éphémère.*

**Tom Arthur**

La spécificité, tout comme la difficulté, du projet *Antipodes* tient à sa réciprocité, dans la symétrie des engagements, personnels, institutionnels ou financiers. Les antipodes ne sont ni duplication du même, ni renversement, ni altérité pure, ni continuité de l'étendue; elles nous ont ouvert un territoire de travail, parfois glissant. Le projet en a été la découverte et la mise à l'épreuve par l'échange, la confrontation et le travail entre des artistes, étudiants et enseignants, appartenant à deux cultures déployées aux antipodes géographiques l'une de l'autre.

Ici, le travail artistique dans ses moyens propres s'est trouvé intimement mêlé au langage, avec l'opacité occasionnelle des passages entre l'anglais et le français dont cette publication garde l'écho. Ceci n'est pas un catalogue d'exposition mais le document d'un projet. Conçu collectivement, il reste fidèle à l'hétérogénéité des pratiques individuelles et à leurs intersections, dans la complémentarité comme dans le frottement.

Nous nous sommes accompagnés quelque temps d'un texte de Michel Butor, publié au sein de *Boomerang*, sous le titre *Courrier des Antipodes*. La structure singulière de ce texte a inspiré la première double page qui suit; des fragments de textes écrits par chacun des dix participants y ont été mis bout à bout, sans continuité langagière ou sémantique. Au bas de cette double page apparaît une suite de signes tirés du code international sol-air, chacun faisant office de signature pour le reste du livre. Le tableau du code international sol-air donne la clef de lecture de ces symboles graphiques, tant par leur assignation à chacun des auteurs de ce projet que dans leur signification internationale. Les pages de cet ouvrage ont été pour la plupart signées individuellement et parfois à deux, dans le dialogue et le mélange des différences.

*The specificity, as well as the challenge, of the Antipodes project lies in its reciprocity, in the symmetry of the personal, institutional and financial commitments. The antipodes are neither the replication of the same, nor an inversion, nor a sheer otherness nor a continuity of expanse, they offered us a territory, which was at times slippery. The project's aim was the discovery and the testing of this territory through encounters, the confrontation and the shared work of artists, both students and professors, belonging to antipodean cultures.*

*In this process, the singularity of art making was perceived as being intimately linked to language, with the occasional opacity in the shifts between English and French, somewhat echoed in this publication. This is not an exhibition catalogue, but the printed trace of a project. Collectively conceived, it is true to the heterogeneity of the individual practices, in their complementarity like in their frictions*

*For a while we enjoyed the perusal of a Michel Butor text, published in Boomerang, under the title Letters from the Antipodes. Its singular structure inspired the following double page of the present publication, in which fragments of texts written by the ten participants are placed side by side without linguistic or semantic continuity. A series of graphic signs, taken from the international ground-air emergency code, appears at the bottom of the double page. Each sign functions in the rest of the book as a name code for each participant. The international ground-air emergency table gives the correspondences between these signs, their corollation to the contributors in this project, and their international meaning. The pages of this book have mostly been conceived and signed individually, a few by collaborative twosomes, in a dialogue and a mixing of differences.*

**Anne Rochette**



Our Friday nights came to this



Water is a dark, still dungeon

## In Suspension

The first stage of the *Antipodes* project, the visit of the French artists to Sydney last year, achieved many of its goals and led to positive and rewarding experiences as well as a high quality exhibition and some very fruitful collaborations. However most of us agree there was an undertow of tensions and frustrations in both groups that were difficult to voice in the cross-cultural milieu and the intense and time-compressed space of the project. In spite of the success of the project some of us were left a sense that a potential had been left unfulfilled. This text is an account that is necessarily selective in its focus and is written from my own Australian cultural perspective. I am writing this at a moment when the project has paused for breath. As such I am not recording an outcome but rather exploring a potential, the gradual unfurling of a process.

### First Contact and the Seven Stages of Immersion

#### 1. Delight and Curiosity

*[They] advanced towards us without arms ... their joy displayed itself in loud bursts of laughter; at the same time they held their hands upon their head, and stamped with their feet, while their countenance showed they were extremely glad to see us.*

Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, voyage of 1791-1793

*The natives wanted to examine the calves of our legs and our chests, and so far as these were concerned we allowed them to do everything they wished, oft repeated cries expressing the surprise which the whiteness of our skin seemed to arouse in them. But soon they wished to carry their researches further ... they showed an extreme desire to examine our genital organs ... Citizen Michel, whom I begged to submit to their entreaties, suddenly exhibited such striking proof of his virility that they all uttered loud cries of surprise mingled with loud roars of laughter which were repeated again and again ... Several of them showed with a sort of scorn their soft and flaccid organs and shook them briskly with an expression of regret and desire which seemed to indicate that they did not experience it as often as we did.*

François Péron, voyage of 1800-1803

We were filled with anticipation when the French arrived in Sydney last year. As a welcoming gesture one of the first things we did was to take them to Pittwater, located in a national park on one of Sydney's large water inlets. The local wildlife showed up in turn, white cockatoos, wallabies, a giant monitor lizard looking like a mini-dinosaur, colourful parrots, a demanding family of possums. We could not have asked for a more exquisite display of exotic Australia as Europeans picture it.



## 2. Generosity

*The old man, taking M. Freycinet by the hand, gestured for us to follow him, and led us to the wretched hut which he had just left ... after repeating to us several times, 'sit down, sit down,' which we did, the natives themselves squatted on their heels and each set about eating the proceeds of his fishing ... the large shells were put on the fire; and there, as in a dish, the animal cooked, after which it was devoured without any further flavouring or preparation. On tasting the shell-fish thus prepared we found them very tender and succulent.*

François Péron, voyage of 1800-1803

There was good will on both sides, generous meals were organised and cooked, we introduced our work to one another and walks, swims and dinners together gave us some time to learn about each other. The main language spoken throughout the project was English, an act of generosity on the part of the French participants that demanded significant amounts of effort and energy on their part.

## 3. Doubt

*Fierce and terrible when threatening, they are, when suspicious, apprehensive and deceitful; while in laughter, they show an extravagant, almost uncontrollable gaiety ... but generally, in all individuals at whatever moment one observes them, their expression has something wild and sinister about it, which the attentive observer cannot fail to notice, and which corresponds only too well with their innate character*

...

François Péron, voyage of 1800-1803

Australians are regarded as a nation of practical-minded people whose greatest overt expressions are through doing. At its best I believe this gives us a very direct relationship to experience, place and practice. At its worst it becomes an aversion to grappling with theoretical issues or some of the more complex issues in life, for example in political life. Conversely, French people often appear to me to have a love of complexity, of intellectual probing and of vigorous analytical debate about social, political and cultural issues. However I find that the abstracting process of lengthy analysis can reach a point where I feel disconnected from the topic under discussion.

These differences emerged, I believe, when we sat down to discuss our proposed projects, manifesting as very different investigative styles. The French artists initiated lengthy and detailed discussions of the ideas informing the projects and challenged those whose ideas didn't seem to them to be justifiable. They appeared to have a desire to fully discuss the foundational ideas of a project before work began. The group expressed a hunger for dialogue, exchange, engagement and





debate, which they later explained supports the developmental process of their art making.

The Australian artists are more familiar with an investigative process that is less verbal in its early stages. This means the first stages of our work are often characterised by experiments with materials and processes and may not involve much verbalisation of the idea being explored. Often the idea takes shape and form *through* this experimental process. A period of ‘non understanding’ can be a very fertile stage of the creative process and one that can be undermined by too much analysis. Critique typically takes place at a later stage.

It was as if the two groups were working to different rhythms. The Australian group experienced the questioning of our projects at this early stage as intrusive, whilst the French group appeared frustrated and unsatisfied by our reluctance to engage in dialogue that for them is an indispensable part of the creative process.

#### 4. Misunderstanding

*He shall seek to find out whether European seeds that might have been sown there, or the shrubs and plants previously shipped there, have prospered and borne fruit ... He will inform himself as to whether the cattle and different animals Captain Cook and other voyagers left on some of the islands have multiplied, and which seeds and vegetables turned out best ...*

Royal instructions from King Louis XVI to Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, circa 1791

*There is reason to believe that the pair of pigs, left behind by Captain Cook on Adventure Bay, did not prosper, since no trace of them was discovered, whether it be that they perished there naturally, or were destroyed by the inhabitants, who are not yet sufficiently advanced in civilisation to know the value of such a gift.*

Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, voyage of 1791-1793

*... It is regrettable that Europeans cannot make them feel the usefulness of gifts they make to their country, because, in other respects, these natives show signs of foresight that can lead us to expect that they would not neglect to profit by those advantages one would wish to procure for them, if it were possible to instruct them on these advantages.*

Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, voyage of 1791-1793

Differences also emerged in pedagogical styles. In France there is a greater respect for social hierarchy, and for those with higher professional status than oneself. When I lived in France I saw this positively as a means of acknowledging



accomplishment but also potentially as a process that could reinforce entrenched social structures. Conversely in Australia there is a deep scepticism of hierarchy, arising I believe from our convict, colonial and Irish/English histories. This is valorised through an egalitarianism that is liberating through its ease and approachability, though in its worst form becomes an acceptance or celebration of mediocrity.

Teachers clearly occupy different roles in these two systems. In Australia, at postgraduate level, the student-teacher relationship becomes more like that of colleagues. Students have often had long periods of studio and exhibition experience before entering their degrees; study can extend across a lifetime. When I lived in France I observed that French teachers can employ a more directive style than I am familiar with from my Australian educational experience. I believe this difference contributed to a mismatch in expectations between the two groups in this project.

## 5. Discontent

*These last acts of hostility were committed by the natives without any provocation whatsoever from us; on the contrary, we had loaded them with gifts and kindness, and nothing in our conduct could have offended them. I confess that, after so many instances of treachery and cruelty having been reported on all the voyages of discovery, I am surprised to hear sensible people repeating that men in the natural state are not evil, and that they may be trusted – that they are never aggressors except when moved by a desire for vengeance, and so on.*

Monsieur Leschenault, voyage of 1800-1803

*I flattered myself that, at day-break, when they no longer saw our ships, they would consider our speedy departure to our just discontent at their actions, and that this reflection would render them better people.*

Jean-François Galaup de Lapérouse, voyage of 1785-1788

Amongst French people I have often found that ideas of individual responsibility toward the collective good are strong. This is a characteristic that I admire for its emphasis on social responsibility, though it is also one that I have sometimes experienced as subtly impositional. Perhaps this manifested in our project as a layering of group obligations: the obligation to attend lengthy and discursive group meetings that often ran late into the evening, the obligation to submit our ideas to analysis by the group, the obligation to develop project ideas to the satisfaction of the group.



## 6. Breakdown

*When we opposed this, a cry, apparently a war-cry, rose from these savages, for they hurled spears and stones at us, a large stone hitting M. Marion on the shoulder and slightly wounding M. Duclesmeur in the leg. The officers in command of the launches were concerned for M. Marion and M. Duclesmeur and ordered a volley to be fired at the natives and put them to flight. The two gentlemen ... re-embarked with the intention of landing in the centre of the cove where they could not be dominated on any side ... The natives saw that they were making for this spot, followed the boats, and again arrived in order to resist our landing. As we were prepared this time, a volley was fired, wounding several and killing one. The natives immediately fled, carrying with them any unable to follow.*

Sailor on Marion du Fresne's expedition, 1772

When an object or a relationship breaks down we are forced, sometimes for the first time, to consider how it is made, how it works. The gift of breakdowns is their potential of 'bringing something to presence', allowing us to see something clearly for the first time, offering windows for insight.

France and Australia both have complex colonial histories that remain unresolved, France as a coloniser and Australia as both coloniser and colonised. We like to talk about living in a post-colonial era however we continue to live with the history, memory and legacies of colonialism in both Australia and France.

In a strange way the *Antipodes* project seemed to echo these legacies. At the outset the Australians had no fixed idea of how we would all work together, but expected to mutually work this out during the first steps of the collaboration. For us the emphasis was on process. When the French arrived they quickly initiated a working method based on one they were familiar with. This assertiveness, and our difficulty in voicing our differences, led some of the Australians to 'resist' in indirect ways.

It was as if the French were offering gifts (European seeds, plants and pigs) that were valuable to them but which the Australians found difficult to assimilate. For the French, this may have seemed like an ungrateful acceptance of their input, a reluctance to play the game. I believe this caused offence on both sides and I imagine left all of us feeling, in some measure, undervalued.



## **7. Exchange**

The word exchange came to English from French. Perhaps in its roots it contained the idea of change, change through contact with another. Exchange is about the space that lies between people, not the people themselves.

Perhaps cross-cultural collaboration is about expecting and accepting frustrations and misunderstandings, and from this the insights gained through the exposure of deep cultural differences. The question is what we will now do with these.

Understanding what each culture has to teach requires time, conversation and listening. It demands a willingness to suspend our cultural assumptions (perhaps impossible to achieve but essential to aim for) and the willingness to be confronted (and delighted) by our differences. The first step is to speak and hear our differences. The second step is to value them.

Lapérouse's expedition ended up on the floor of the Pacific Ocean, wrecked during a cyclone off Vanikoro in the Solomon Islands. Leaving one's shores is fraught with the danger of shipwreck, failure or death. When we leave our shores we expose ourselves to another, but what we really do is expose ourselves to ourselves. We see the contrast. It is this confrontation, losing some parts and seeing new parts of this self that is the most painful but growing part of the whole thing.

I like the metaphor of water. Water was the highway that brought Europeans to Australia, water was what shipwrecked them and it is water that, if followed for long enough, joins us all together.

## **Postscript**

Since this text was written there has been some very honest and open dialogue between the project participants about how we each experienced the project and the differences (and similarities) in our styles and creative processes. This is leading to a greater depth of understanding and ease of communication between us.

In relation to this text there is at least one important point on which we have had to agree to differ, that is the use of quotes from French explorers and their early contact with Aboriginal people in Australia (or in one case, the people of Easter Island). I included this material to draw attention to the broader problem of cultural difference and miscomprehension, what happens when two groups of



people from very different cultures come together for the first time. I chose the French explorers partly because of the historical link between our two countries but more importantly because the French explorers in Australia were visitors, not colonisers, of Australia, who by all accounts had good intentions towards the Aboriginal people they encountered. Ostensibly their goals were scientific and anthropological and they operated within the ethical and intellectual understandings of their era. Australian readers from within and without the project generally interpreted this parallel (and constructed) 'narrative' as operating on a purely metaphorical level, with the significant differences between the contemporary and historical scenarios undermining any tendency to make direct comparisons. Conversely, French readers from within the project felt that the quotes made direct links between, on the one hand, the French explorers and the French participating artists, and on the other hand the Aboriginal people and the Australian participating artists. After lengthy dialogue about this question I can only conclude that there have been two very different cultural readings of the text.

2 May 2006

