Salamanca Arts Centre Presents

TESTING GROUND

Curated by Julie Gough
This Education Kit is published to accompany the touring exhibition

Testing Ground
14 March – 28 April 2013
Salamanca Arts Centre, Long Gallery
Hobart, Tasmania

Presented through Salamanca Arts Centre and the CAST Exhibition Development Fund.

Ten Days on the Island, Tasmania’s International Arts Festival.

This Education Kit is designed to support learning outcomes and teaching programs associated with viewing the Testing Ground exhibition by:

• Providing information about the artists
• Providing information about the works included in the exhibition
• Exploring some of the themes in the exhibition.
• Inviting students to engage with the works and the exhibition’s themes.
• Providing strategies for exhibition viewing, as well as pre- and post-visit research

All information about artists’ works and the exhibition has been drawn from the Testing Ground exhibition catalogue, individual artist statements and from discussions with the curator unless cited otherwise. Any definitions have been taken from the Cambridge University Press Dictionary. The catalogue can be obtained from the gallery or by contacting Salamanca Arts Centre on (03) 6234 8414 or info@salarts.org.au.

This resource is primarily designed to be used by upper primary to secondary teachers and students. Framing questions and activates can be adapted for use by lower primary.

It may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition or as a resource before or after visitation.

Prepared by Laura Hindmarsh
for CAST Touring Program 2013
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Testing Ground is a significant contemporary art exhibition developed for Ten Days on the Island 2013, Tasmania’s International Arts Festival in partnership with Salamanca Arts Centre. Curator Julie Gough brings together recent work from Australian and International artists whose work addresses the role of perception, persona and identity, often in relation to place.

Artists
Testing Ground features the work of ten Australian-based and four international-based artists:

Trudi Brinkman (TAS)
Darren Cook (TAS)
Rebecca Dagnall (WA)
Sue Kneebone (SA)
Nancy Mauro-Flude (TAS)
Perdita Phillips (WA)
re a (NSW)
Martin Walch (TAS)
Siying Zhou (China/VIC)
Keren Ruki (Aotearoa/NSW)
Christian Thompson (QLD/SA/UK)
1491s (USA)
Ólöf Björnsdóttir (Iceland)
Jeroen Offerman (Netherlands)

Curator
Julie Gough is a Tasmanian Aboriginal artist, writer and curator. Her research and art practice involve uncovering and re-presenting subsumed and often conflicting histories, frequently referring to her own and her family’s experiences as Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Current work in installation, sound and video provides the means to explore ephemerality, absence and recurrence.

Resources
Salamanca Arts Centre Testing Ground catalogue (including curatorial statement and catalogue essay by Professor Pat Hoffie.)
http://projectartcentre.ie/archive/archive-va-detail/340-olof-bjornsdoittir
http://1491s.com/
http://www.christianthompson.net/
http://www.dasplatforms.com/superpaper/christian-thompson-at-least-we-are-lost-together/
http://rebeccadagnall.com/
http://suekneebone.com/
http://jeroenofferman.com/RetroSpectacle/Letter_Curator.html
http://www.perditaphillips.com/
http://www.martinwalch.com/
http://sister0.org/
Before visiting the exhibition students should be familiar with some key themes and concepts. For the purpose of this education kit the works have been grouped under the following thematic headings:

Cultural representation
Reconstructed narratives
Recording place
Mediated investigations

Consider

Ask what others (students, teachers, family members) understand by the word ‘identity’. Ask them to describe what they consider to be their cultural identity. Analyse the results to see if there is divergence or common ground between different perceptions.

Tasmania has a long tradition of visual artists engaging with place, in particular landscape. How does the term ‘place’ differ to ‘site’ or ‘location’. What genre of art do you expect to address these themes?

What is your initial response to the exhibition’s title Testing Ground? List synonyms for the word ‘test’, replace these in the title, does it change the meaning?

If an artist is, experimenting, or testing an idea can it be considered a finished work of art? How can an audience engage with a work that is ‘experimental’?

Terminology

Consider the exhibition’s title Testing Ground.

‘Testing ground’ can be seen as the literal meaning; a site of investigation. A place or a situation used for testing ideas, products or safety.

or

‘Testing ground’ could imply experimentation itself, the act of observation, practice and repetition. To make ground, discoveries, breakthrough.

Consider the difference between

site vs place

self vs identity
Cultural Representation

Ólöf Björnsdóttir, 1491’s, Keren Ruki, Christian Thompson

The following works look at race and cultural representation. Björnsdóttir and the 1491’s adopt humour as a strategy to playfully address cultural stereotypes of their native homelands whilst Ruki and Thompson explore displacement and hybrid identity.

Framing Questions and Research

• Consider how Ólöf Björnsdóttir work is installed and compare it’s display to other video works in the exhibition. Comment on why you think the curator has used an unusual stand for the monitor.

• Comedy sketches often touch upon issues that are politically incorrect or social taboos. Looking at the 1491’s video work why do you think humour provides an acceptable forum for these issues?

• What connotations does ‘hi-vis’ carry in Australia? For what reason do people wear it and what does it symbolise?

• Christian Thompson considers himself a story maker. Write your own short story to go with one of his photographs.

For Advanced Students

• How would you describe Woollenmaiden’s posture and gesture? What do you think the artist is parodying?

• YouTube is a recent tool for the dissemination of self-produced art works, films and music. Consider how distributing art online challenges the value of art as a one-off object or experience.

• Reflecting on the meaning of ‘cultural dislocation’, what do you think Keren Ruki is communicating about Maori culture in Australia?

• If you were to create a self-portrait to represent your identity how would you set it up? Where would you be? What would you wear? What items could be symbolic of you?
Ólöf Björnsdóttir has studied and lived in her homeland of Iceland and in London. In her art practice she creates and performs alter-ego’s rooted in Icelandic folklore. Levitation II features Björnsdóttir as Woollenmaiden, her back to the viewer gesturing to the romantic landscape before her. Woollenmaiden here is documented set upon a pedestal, a maturation and calmness in contrast to her radical attire.

“Woolenmaiden is a real life heroine in contemporary mythology. Possessing a magical quality, she is a fairytale hag who superheroically gains her strength from wool; her costume is readily identifiable by the ridiculously tall knitted socks (invariably worn with high heels) and the fluffy helmet activating her super-creative powers.”
- Patricia Ellis, Flash Art, Mar-Apr, 1999

1491s is a collective of five artists whose name references the year prior to Christopher Columbus’s so called ‘discovery’ of America. They predominately work in video and live performance, filming short comedic sketches that are distributed via YouTube. Their work guised as documentary, humorously plays off popular representations of Native Americans.
**Keren Ruki** is a Sydney-based Maori artist of Ngati Maniapoto descent, a tribe from the North Island of Aotearoa (New Zealand). In her work she often combines materials and traditional crafting skills from Aotearoa and Australia. Using hybridisation as a technique Ruki signifies identity in modern circumstances of displacement.

In *A Place to Stand* ‘Turangawaewae’ is spelled out in Astro turf across the floor and modified fluorescent safety vests hang bodiless. These vests simultaneously reference a traditional Maori cloak worn for protection from the elements, and hi-vis safety vests as worn by Maori road and mine workers in Australia.

**Christian Thompson** is an Australian artist whose work explores issues of identity, ancestry and cultural expectation. He is a Bidjara man (South Western Queensland) of Aboriginal and British decent. Having completed his undergraduate degree in Melbourne Thompson then went onto study in The Netherlands before becoming the first Aboriginal person to study at Oxford University as a PhD candidate.

*Lost Together* is a photographic series where Thompson stages himself with a hybrid identity, dressed in Tartan and located in a forest in the Netherlands. His staged photographs use conventions of spatial practice, textiles, performance as well as photography.

‘I wanted landscape to be a central figure with this series. The idea came from a conversation my friend Nadia and I had on a rooftop in the south of France. I said to her “sometimes I feel lost” and she replied “at least we are lost together”. That stuck with me.’

Artist in conversation with Bronwyn Bailey-Charteris, Das Platforms.

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*Christian Thompson, Isaac, 2008, C-Type Print*
Reconstructed narratives

*Rebecca Dagnall, Sue Kneebone, Jeroen Offerman, r e a*

The works in this section reconfigure cultural and historic representations. They use techniques of narrative, deconstruction and re-positioning to create art that challenges continuity and expectation.

**Framing Questions and Research**

- Rebecca Dagnall has used a mirroring effect in her works. Think about how a kaleidoscope changes your perception of the world around you. List other times where a mirror has changed your perspective.

- How do you think Sue Kneebone has created these images? What techniques make the image believable?

- What do you consider to be the mood of *PolesApart*? Is it funny? Sombre? Melancholic? Does your opinion change once the ending is revealed?

**For Advanced Students**

- Comment on the tensions inherent in Sue Kneebone's photographic series both in the imagery and conceptually. Compile a list of words that could be used to describe the work.

- Consider the title of the series ‘Paradise in Suburbia’, how can the suburbs be considered as a landscape?

- Singing a song backwards to then play it forwards may seem like a pointless exercise. Consider the role of paradox and the absurd in Jeroen Offerman’s. List other examples of artworks, literature, movies where you have encountered it.

- Consider the title *PolesApart*. Can you draw any culture or symbolic references?
Rebecca Dagnall is a photographer from Western Australia. In her series Paradise in Suburbia Dagnall explores the relationship that people develop with places in their suburbs. The works use a mirroring effect to create a utopian atmosphere that references Australian landscape painting stemming from the Heidelberg School. In contrast positioned within this landscape are contemporary subjects: riding bikes, canoeing, picnicking. These people are dwarfed by the landscape, seemingly oblivious to the scene they are situated within.

‘…. But perhaps she is invoking a double meaning of the notion of “Paradise”: land that is left untouched and untainted by human intervention, where things exist in harmony – like the biblical inference of her titles to the Garden of Eden -- and its opposite, a suburban “heaven” with its accoutrements of order: bitumen streets, concrete footpaths, houses with gardens and garages and instant access to electricity and broadband.’ Curatorial essay by Kirsten Rann, [MARS] Melbourne Art Rooms

Sue Kneebone uses mixed media assemblage and photomontage to allow for new associations to be made from archival images. Her practice is concerned with the historical legacy of the Australian colonial settler and the British Empire.

In the series Continental Drift majestic marble sculptures sit within the barren salt lakes in a South Australian landscape. These sculptures are symbolic of the rise of the British Empire being both neoclassical and exotic. Planning for Paradise situates a monument to Sir Thomas Elder, pastoralist and philanthropist of Colonial South Australia in a barren desert landscape.
Jeroen Offerman is an artist from Eindhoven in the Netherlands who works with a wide variety of media including film, video, performance, sculpture and installation.

For The Stairway at St. Paul’s Offerman practiced for three months to sing the Led Zeppelin classic Stairway to Heaven backwards before recording the song in front of St Paul’s Cathedral. The video is then played backwards ironically reversing the painstaking task. For this work the artist plays with the content and context of the original song, which was rumored to contain subliminal messages when played backwards. Although the band always denied these allegations Stairway to Heaven is often cited with theories concerning the power of the mind and mass hysteria.

rea is a Gamilaroi/Wailwan woman born in Coonabarabran, New South Wales and currently lives and works in Sydney. She is a new media artist working in photography, digital media and video. Through her work rea examines racial discourse in Australia by reworking personal and historical narratives.

In rea’s PolesApart the artist herself is shown in a Victorian black mourning dress running through a bushfire-devastated forest. The pursuer is never seen though reference can be drawn to the stolen generation during which the artist’s grandmother Ruby and her great aunt Sophie were removed from their family in 1916. Drawing to a climax the fugitive is splattered with red, white and blue paint.

‘Ultimately the work is about the continuing lack of visibility of Indigenous identity and of the diversity of Indigenous identities in the Australian landscape…At the end of the video work I become invisible through the spraying of these colours all over me. It seems that the harder I work to be visible the more I’m blotted out - like I’m continuously running hoping to find the freedom to create my own identity - rea!

Artist statement in PolesApart catalogue essay by Dr Christine Nicholls, 2009
Recording place

Perdita Phillips, Siying Zhou, Martin Walch

The works by these three artists record the Australian landscape through digital media and analytical approaches. Phillips plays with the objective lens of science and technology, Walch with data and statistics while Zhou’s work uses politics and mass media.

Definitions

media
noun
- the internet, newspapers, magazines, television, etc., considered as a group

multimedia
adjective
- Using a combination of moving and still pictures, sound, music, and words, especially in computers or entertainment:

Framing Questions and Research

- What do Perdita Phillips photographs remind you of? Where have you seen similar technology being used before? What does that bring to your reading of the work?

- Consider the difference between picturing what you hear and listening to a picture. Close your eyes, listen to one of Siying Zhou’s works and then draw your own image to go along with what you hear.

- Notice the use of colour in the work in Martin Walch’s work. What could they be symbolic of?

For Advanced Students

- Consider the role of the artist vs the role of the scientist in understanding our natural environment. Comment of how these perspectives differ and compile a list in the different ways the scientific method and the artistic method can be used in representing a place.

- Consider the multiple meanings of the word alien. Comment on how Siying Zhou plays with these meanings.

- Considering the title of the work Sticks and Stones, what may the artist be addressing about the politics of naming?
Perdita Phillips is a Western Australian artist who works in mixed media installation, environmental projects, sound, sculpture, photography and drawing. Previously trained in Environmental Science her work explores themes of ecological processes and human’s scientific engagement with nature.

The video Sleepwalking shows a figure in a lab coat sleepwalking back and forth across a nightscape. The video was filmed using an enhanced night vision scope. The work humorously positions the scientist as ambivalent and unpredictable.

Using the same enhanced night vision technology the photographic series Night Vision documents the site of the artist’s camp. The scientist here is the observed rather than the observer perhaps representing a greater-than-human vision.

Siying Zhou is a Chinese-born artist and curator who has lived and worked in Australia since 2003. Her work is concept driven and crosses many disciplines including video, installation and drawing. Zhou is interested in the individual in the time of globalisation with a focus on multicultural communities. Her work often concentrates on the correlation of physical and imaginary spaces. Having lived and worked in Darwin for a number of years her works in Testing Ground address her personal experience living in the Northern Territory.

Being serious uses six pieces of journalism about ‘Alien-ology’ published in local newspaper the NT News. Six speakers broadcasting these stories are suspended above six digital prints of the sky.
**Definition**

*alien*

**adjective**
- coming from a different country, race, or group
- strange and not familiar
- relating to creatures from another planet

Who’s There? places speakers within photographic images of palm trees and dark clouds, a typical tropical pre-storm scene. The sound track comprises the artist reading in a monotone voice the newspaper headline stories of the NT news from 2009-2010.

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**Martin Walch** lives and works in Hobart, Tasmania. He works with photography, digital media and computer-generated drawing. Walch has a long history of engaging with the Tasmanian Wilderness through his practice.

Sticks and Stones uses the official place names as listed by the Nomenclature Board of Tasmania in 2007. Each name scrolls in an alphabetized list to the left-hand size of the screen whilst simultaneously constructing a the map to the right. These western names have been used to mark and colonise the Australian Landscape.

“This work exists as both visual cacophony and silent poetic memorial to the absent, disallowed original Aboriginal place names of this island, and by apposite association affects an awareness of the purposeful erasure of Aboriginal people and culture by colonizing forces.”

— curator Julie Gough from *Testing Ground* catalogue essay.
Mediated Investigations

*Nancy Mauro-Flude, Darren Cook, Trudi Brinkman*

The way we approach a subject, object or experience is loaded with pre-conceptions and subconscious assumptions. The work in this section expands our understanding of the materials the artist have chosen to use. Mauro-Flude and Brinkman break the conventions of textiles and sculpture by using unconventional and ephemeral mediums, while Cook challenges the traditionally fixed nature of sculpture.

**Framing Questions and Research**

- Why do you think Nancy Mauro-Flude has combined textiles with new media? Think about the handmade vs the digital.
- Think about how Darren Cook’s work could be considered a sculpture. If you don’t agree explain why.
- A taut string between two cups can transfer sound. Why do you think the string has been left loose in Trudi Brinkman’s work? What else could have been used to symbolically connect the two vitrines of water?

**For Advanced Students**

- How do you feel about the unlikely pairing of Augmented Reality technology with Indigenous histories?
- Given the work’s title, *never ending sculpture* (the beginning) *Ten sculptural actions over Ten nights*, how could this work be considered never ending? Does this challenge your understanding of an artwork as a finished outcome?
- Consider the video’s placement upside down in *Water edge*. How does this reconstruct your understanding of science, gravity and our position in the world? Note the label indicating the source of the image – how is this important?
Nancy Mauro-Flude is a Tasmanian artist who works in performance, new media and web-based projects. Her work references computer hacker culture, surveillance techniques and the automaton often with theatrical and ritualised outcomes.

Valetudo is a hand sequined-embroidered colourful flag. A fan positioned in front of the work creates movement and allows the sequins to reflect light around the room. An initially unseen part of the work is the embedded Augmented Reality layer. When the flag is scanned using a smartphone and the Layar application the work links to a website about late Tasmanian Aboriginal Elder, Aunty Ida West. During her lifetime ‘Aunty Ida’ pursued justice for Indigenous people and pushed for a healing garden to be situated at Wybalenna, the site on Flinders Island where exiled Tasmanian Aboriginal people were incarcerated from the 1830s.

Trudi Brinckman is a Tasmanian sculptor who works with a diverse range of objects and materials. In her work she attempts to de-contextualise the objects she works with so they are stripped of their cultural or historical significance. This then allows her to create new connections between our environment, materiality how we experience the world.
Water edge links an upside-down video of a fountain to a vitrine of actual water by paper cups and string. The ‘live’ water remains still in the sealed box whilst the recorded water flows continuously. The two representations of water are connected, but the sagging string indicates a futility, unable to communicate or transfer from one to the other. However rather than being simply redundant, the work intrigues our imagined possibilities - perhaps there is something occurring that is beyond our understanding?

Darren Cook is a sound and video artist working in Tasmania. He often uses analogue forms of technology to explore mediation and duration.

In never ending sculpture; (the beginning) Cook makes a number of interventions and amendments to his work throughout the duration of the exhibition. Working in the gallery after hours these changes are experienced as the residue of the actions. The exhibition catalogue lists this work as Space: variable, Time: endless. By the work unfolding in the exhibition space Cook here is testing and challenging conventions of making and viewing art.
During your visit

**Activities | Exercises during visit**

The following tasks are designed to initiate structured viewing and engagement for students in the exhibition. They can be undertaken in any order and are suitable for individual and small group work. Implicit in some tasks is the idea that students or groups will report findings and discuss works with others.

- Take a slow walk around the gallery space and write down some initial responses to the artworks that stand out to you most, taking note of the different ways things have been hung or installed, and the order in which the works have been displayed.

- Make a list of three examples around the room where you can notice similarities between works (this can be in their visual style and technique, the subject matter, or the themes and concepts the artists are exploring).

- Take a closer look at where particular different artworks have been placed in relation to other artworks. The curatorial positioning of the artwork is important to our interpretation and understanding of the exhibition’s themes.

- When you find yourself wanting to look at some works in particular do you think it is because the image or subject is interesting or is it because of the artist’s technique or way of interpreting the subject?

- Thinking again about the exhibition title Testing Ground, which works do you think are about experimentation and which ones are working with the themes of place or identity? There may be some that do both.

- Consider the term ‘black humour’. A number of works in the exhibition use humor to reclaim cultural stereotyping. List the works that use humour and comment on how effective you think this technique is.
Activities | Exercises post visit

- Have a look at 1491's YouTube channel http://www.youtube.com/user/the1491s?feature=watch. Compare and write about your experience watching them online vs in the gallery.

- Pick a line from a song, write it down and hold this text up to a mirror. See if you can sing it backwards in the same tune. Could you recognise any words that perhaps were not in the song originally?

- Read the catalogue essays by Julie Gough and Professor Pat Hoffie.

- Consider the essay subtitle (not Terra Nullius nor Manifest Destiny). How much do you know about either of these terms. It may help your reading of the exhibition to conduct some brief background research.

- Curator Julie Gough said ‘A key intention of the exhibition is to destabilise mainstream expectations about culture’. What were your expectations prior to the show about identity and culture? Do you think seeing this show has altered them?

- Both Gough and Hoffie refer to the exhibition as an experimental laboratory, a space where the works test the artists as much as the audience. This goes back to the double entendre of the title Testing Ground. Which works do you think tested your expectations of what an artwork can be or do?

- What do you think the benefit is of addressing oppressed history through art. Do you think art is a good avenue to express political or social concerns?

- Which work in the exhibition had the biggest impact on you? Was this because of its content (its subject) or because of its materiality and form? Consider what to you makes a successful artwork, a work that moves you (Is ‘moves’ leading them towards valuing emotional engagement in art?).

- Write a review of the exhibition that explores the links or relationships between the works. Choose one of the themes suggested in this Education Kit and write from this perspective. Are there other themes which you could apply to some of the works? Compare two or more works which appear to be exploring similar ideas in different ways.
Further research

Find other Australian and international artists who work in similar ways to the artists in Testing Ground by researching national and international exhibitions. Compare your results – do the artists you found come from certain places, particular cultures, or time periods. What curators, galleries and writers support artists working with these themes.

How have other artists addressed issues of place and identity? Select two and explain how they have each done this.

Try and determine if there are similarities in techniques, mediums, outcomes and themes being used by artists to those exhibiting in Testing Ground.
Testing Ground is a CAST Touring exhibition initiated by the Salamanca Arts Centre.

This exhibition is supported by the Contemporary Touring Initiative, an Australian Government program, and the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian Government and the State and Territory Governments.

Contemporary Art Spaces Tasmania (CAST) is supported by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its principle arts funding body, and by the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy, an initiative of the Australian, State and Territory Governments, and is assisted through Arts Tasmania by the

Cover image: Christian Thompson, Dead as a Door Nail, 2008, C-Type Print