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Regional identity and digital space: Connecting the arts, place and community engagement

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Abstract

Victoria Cooper and Doug Spowart's 2014 photographic exhibition *Speaking About Place: The Nocturne Project* sought to capture a sense of place in regional towns throughout Queensland. Incorporating both the physical landscape and the virtual space of social media, the project spoke to themes of regional art, identity and digital connectedness, in order to understand how a sense of place is developed and continually renegotiated through individual experience. Within the context of understanding regional identity and place promotion, this article considers whether regional-based art is able to highlight a shifting sense of place, facilitate social cohesion and contribute to the development and enrichment of local cultural spaces.

Speaking about place: *The Nocturne Project*

The value of the arts in encouraging community involvement and developing a sense of belonging is already well established. In engaging the local and creating direct connections between the arts and place, regionally specific arts practice may have the potential to assist in place-promotion and the development of a coherent local identity, and provide a space for discussing local needs. This article explores these ideas in reference to one particular regional Australian arts project: Victoria Cooper and Doug Spowart's exhibition *Speaking About Place: The Nocturne Project*. The exhibition, held in July and August 2014 at the Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery, was a summary of the artists' ongoing collaboration titled *The Nocturne Project*. The exhibition occupied a small space within the gallery, and consisted of a series of photographs of regional Australia, displayed on boards, with social media comments about some images shown in booklets on central pedestals. It represented the culmination of artist residencies conducted in regional towns throughout Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria dating as early as late 2012 (Cooper & Spowart 2014c); in Queensland, the artists spent time in Bundaberg, Miles and, to a lesser degree, Toowoomba. Cooper and Spowart photographed local sites likely recognisable to a majority of community members, such as a laneway (Toowoomba), a Masonic Lodge that was previously home to dance



Figure 1

(Colour online) Kennedy Bridge, Bundaberg.

Source: Cooper and Spowart (2014). Used with permission.

lessons (Childers) and a historic village (Miles). The project's distinctive identifying feature was that images were taken exclusively at twilight. This lighting, whether resulting from the last light of sunset, the appearance of the moon or the eeriness of CBD fluorescents, created a sense of continuity among the images and locations. This effect also made the familiar appear strange and subsequently evoked a desire to know the sites' hidden histories, which may have been lost over time. Spectacular long exposures of traffic gave depth to some images (see [Figure 1](#)), and gave prominence to functional public space by presenting it alongside local narratives and the solidity of the built environment.

In their project, Cooper and Spowart set out to explore public space, and the exhibition drew attention to sites such as thoroughfares, community facilities, disused buildings and working shopfronts. By focusing on such sites, the project aimed to engage contemporary communities with potentially unknown pasts, encourage the recollection of personal histories and connect past community members with forgotten experiences of place. At the exhibition, Cooper and Spowart relayed some of the stories told to them by community members. These were informally collected at their residencies and on social media, remembered by the artists and passed on to visitors at artists' talks running throughout the course of the exhibition. By drawing attention to the constant and inevitable shifts in community membership in this manner, the project also presented itself as a somewhat bittersweet celebration of regional growth and a recognition of loss.

The Nocturne Project spoke to themes of identity and community, and aimed to elicit personal narratives and a sense of regional histories from local residents. To do this, Cooper and Spowart sought to position themselves within each area and become part of the changing regional landscape. As part of their methods, the artists took up residencies and occupied a physical location where community

members were encouraged to visit and share their own experiences of place. At the artists' talk, Cooper and Spowart did not share whether these narratives were recorded, instead suggesting that these took the form of a casual conversation between artists and local residents. Believing this method alone to be self-limiting, sensitive to the risk that some residents would feel uncomfortable if they were to tell personal stories face to face and wanting greater exposure than that offered by personal encounters in small regional towns, Cooper and Spowart embraced social media as part of the project's design. Even now, the artists still maintain region-specific Facebook pages, such as *Nocturne: Bundaberg Region* and *Nocturne: Miles Project*. Together, this combination of offline and online-based methods fills gaps left by each individual method, and ultimately widened the project's potential audience. However, despite the seemingly far-reaching possibilities presented by these methods, their effectiveness in achieving the project's ultimate aims is questionable. Instead, I suggest that the project has engaged regional communities through the photographic representation of physical space rather than a shared sense of place, potentially enabling individuals to develop new ways of seeing and sharing local experiences. Deconstructing this idea is the primary focus of this article.

Drawing on elements of personal and collective narrative and physical and digital imagery, Cooper and Spowart's project offers an interesting case study through which to further explore how public and private local histories can contribute to a shared sense of place. *The Nocturne Project* also highlights the significance of interactions occurring within regional areas, and considers how community participation may not be limited by the proximal boundedness of physical space. By reviewing Cooper and Spowart's project design, artistic output, styles of communication and subsequent community responses, this discussion links itself to the idea that interactive representations of place in regional-based art could contribute to the development of the local cultural space. The project also offers a platform from which to consider the following questions: first, how artists are able to highlight and frame the local area and capture shifting senses of place; second, whether (in the case of *The Nocturne Project*) the disconnect between photographed sites, gallery space and online space diminishes the project's applied local outcomes by destabilising existing regional narratives; and third, whether this disconnect creates a space within which new narratives can develop. A brief exploration of these ideas will help us understand community identity and provide a space for its discussion in a regional context.

Art in place and regional identity

Place and regional identity are constantly being developed and renegotiated in response to change. Place can be further linked to cultural planning, place-promotion and tourism, as well as the revitalisation and healing of a region following traumatic events. Within the social sciences, the fields of space and place are fast moving and constantly being re-evaluated; therefore, a full engagement with that debate is outside the scope of this discussion. At its simplest, however, place is the geographical space associated with particular behaviours, practices (Casey 1996: 46) and local knowledges (Cresswell 2004: 11), gathering individuals and their bodies into various contingent and stable conjunctions. As place is intrinsically tied to movement and mobility, it is also temporary. A sense of place is therefore subject

to constant renegotiation as the individual moves through space during the course of the everyday. Place attachment is highly individualised, brought about by and then renegotiated through movement and active engagement between the body and the landscape (Crouch 2001: 62). Bijoux and Myers (2006: 45), for example, consider that movement temporarily solidifies a sense of place based on both physical and emotional sensory experience. Place is therefore brought into being through movement between the individual, the material and the social (Low 2003: 12). Individually constructed senses of place and regional place-promotion are often at odds (Markusen and Gadwa 2010: 380); however, regardless, a region is a relational network (Zimmerbauer 2011: 244) that is enriched by the heterogeneity of its constituents.

Gibson and Klocker (2005: 95), Johnson (2006: 308) and Stern and Seifert (2010: 262), among many, emphasise the arts and cultural fields as invaluable in encouraging community participation and generating social, economic and cultural capital. This can be linked to place through the specificity and local relevance required for any arts project to become enmeshed within the community (Johnson 2006: 307). In recognising the importance of space and place to the individual and to the region, Cooper and Spowart sought to understand the constant changes taking place within the local community, while making light of a shifting sense of place through their images. At an artists' talk in early August 2014, they described how the photographed sites were chosen without consideration for the local community; each was selected according to the artists' attribution of aesthetic value to the elements that made up the site. Some sites were dilapidated buildings that community members actively avoided. By reframing the structure within an image, residents were forced to acknowledge its status as a local eyesore or to reassign a value to it in keeping with the artists' vision. Other sites included within the project were heritage-listed buildings, infrastructure and recognisable local landmarks. Without knowledge of the ways in which each region saw and promoted itself, the project became a projection of the artists' own movement through space and developed senses of place. Their vision rendered the familiar strange, and may have opened up the possibility for new ways of seeing local space.

By imposing their own ideas on region-specific sites, the artists' actions appeared to be in opposition to the project's aims of drawing out personal histories of place. As the images depicted the artists' own spatial experiences, community members may have felt distanced from the photographed sites as they typically experienced them in their everyday life. While each site and its image became part of a collection reflective of the artists' senses of place, it drew attention to the multiplicity of experience occurring within a single region. One example of this is the Masonic Lodge shown in [Figure 2](#). In the image, the lighting is artificial compared with that normally found in the twilight hour; the surrounding buildings have been purposefully darkened to give the lodge greater prominence; and the colouring of the sky is more saturated so as to complement the focal building.

Without forgetting that the image was part of a photographic exhibition, which understandably inspires the use of digital image manipulation, the Masonic Lodge does not look as it would to local residents in daylight. While this effect heightens the shared sense of mystery that surrounds Masonic Lodges, it has also unconsciously produced differing levels of disconnect between the image and everyday experience, potentially disrupting the possibility of connection to a pre-existing



Figure 2
 (Colour online) Isis Masonic Lodge, Childers
 Source: Cooper and Spowart (2014). Used with permission.

regional identity. This disruption to reality has also been produced through the presentation of the photographed site as a spectacle. As Sontag (1979: 156) states, ‘reality as such is redefined — as an item for exhibition, as a record for scrutiny, as a target for surveillance. The photographic exploration and duplication of the world fragments continuities and feeds the pieces into an interminable dossier.’

Despite the dissociation of the image from lived space, the project itself was continued by local photographers, who participated in a workshop with the artists (Cooper and Spowart 2015), and the resulting images, shared on the *Nocturne: Bundaberg* Facebook page (Cooper and Spowart 2013), continue to imitate Cooper and Spowart’s original artistic output. The images that make up *Nocturne: Bundaberg* were also taken up by Bundaberg Regional Council as part of the *Picture Bundaberg* archive (Bundaberg Regional Council 2015). This is in contradiction to the artists’ claims that the region was unreceptive to place-based arts projects, following an apparent over-saturation of similar projects that focused on regional healing and a bringing together of residents following flooding in January 2013. Bundaberg is a prime example of the ways in which regionally specific art has been used effectively as a tool for healing and revitalisation. For example, *Sunken Houses*, the emotive collaborative exhibition between photographer Brad Marsellos and musician Heinz Reigler, shared stories of post-flood rebuilding processes (Hennessy 2014). A similar project took place in Toowoomba: mosaics remembering flooding in January 2011 were erected at flood-affected sites throughout the CBD (ArtsLink 2013). Boon (2014: 685) suggests that shared ideas surrounding a sense of place can help connect individuals in disaster-impacted areas, providing support networks while allowing physically altered aspects of place to be rebuilt and redeveloped.

For the revitalisation of areas once possibly viewed as dull, and as contributing to regional stagnation, Toowoomba again offers an example: the annual street art festival First Coat continues to make use of unused walls as artistic spaces (Toowoomba Regional Council 2015). Most recently, visiting Melbourne artist Adnate completed an evocative portrait of an Indigenous child in a prominent inner-city location in collaboration with multicultural and youth-focused community groups (Murray 2015). Waitt and Gibson (2009: 1230) suggest that where the cultural consumer actively interacts with the arts in a specifically place-based context (in projects like the above, for example), this creates and enables the maintenance of connections with both regional public spaces and between others within the community. This movement towards revitalisation engages cultural planners, regional government, local residents and tourists, and requires extensive knowledge of the issues pertaining to a region (Stern and Seifert 2010: 263). Beyond healing and revitalisation, however, region-specific arts projects can also lead to increased public participation (Markusen and Gadwa 2010: 379), stemming from a newly developed sense of ownership and feelings of collective interest (Anwar McHenry 2011: 246).

Even with these possibilities, some elements of *The Nocturne Project* demonstrated limited knowledge of each region and a lack of prior engagement with the regions' various histories and development trajectories. Undermining each residency was the assumption that the histories and lived realities of each photographed site were lost over time, and only able to be uncovered by the artists. This was made obvious through the disjuncture between the artists' and residents' ideas of function and what could be considered visually appreciable. Figure 1, for example, is a site of entry and exit; linked to ideas of movement within or through the region, instead of evocative memory and deeply felt emotional experience. Sites like the bridge may be viewed as predominantly more functional, linked to Augé's (1995: 102) understanding of the non-place, a site through which to move to somewhere else. In alternate ways of seeing, the bridge image may have made light of the very real out-migration of regional youth (Farrugia, Smyth and Harrison 2014: 1039), and presented itself as an image of loss.

While long-exposure of traffic lights presents a striking (albeit common) photograph, the lack of explicit connection between residents and captured sites offers limited possibilities for the development of the local cultural space. Lippard (1997: 270) considers that 'art in a more neutrally "public space" . . . is already displaced', as it is detached from a sense of locality. Essentially, some images were not of sites that individuals particularly identified with their idea of regional identity, or with which they wished to engage, potentially lessening the project's regional impact. Despite this, the project appears to have opened up spaces for alternate ways of seeing and valuing the local, similar to healing or revitalisation-centric arts projects.

Physical space, gallery space and the digital

The Nocturne Project was a multi-platform experience that took place across each region, and was then inserted into digital space while also being presented at a variety of local galleries. In Toowoomba specifically, the scope of the project was misrepresented by the limited gallery space and the ways in which images and some elements of the project were displayed. Within the immediacy of the gallery space,

for example, the only reference indicating the project's digital element was a series of printed booklets on a central pedestal, which contained carefully selected comments that did not always reflect the styles of engagement found online. While the exhibition did not present itself as such, Cooper and Spowart's project exists as an interactive experience encompassing the felt experience of physical space that makes use of the ease of connectivity enabled by the digital sphere (Cooper and Spowart 2014a). These Facebook pages were created to enable enriched levels of community participation through a perceived sense of anonymity and freedom, while simultaneously allowing those not physically present within the region to virtually 'attend' and contribute to the project. While initially optimistic about the possibilities offered by social media commentary, Cooper and Spowart more realistically found that online ease of connectivity only produced rapid-fire responses, which were often short, impersonal and more related to the image aesthetic than to shared individual memories. Regardless, this ease of interaction — either face-to-face or online — resulted in an interactive and temporary artists' projection of each region's changing sense of place.

Digital space continues to account for a third of *The Nocturne Project's* design and content, from digital social media marketing to the insertion of images into online discussion groups. While effective at widening the project's reach, this transformed the project into a tripartite experience, to the extent that it could be classified as three separate projects, each with distinct goals and output. This detachment between the regional area and the lived sites, gallery space, and offline and online interactions makes each element of the project inaccessible from the others. Depending on where the project and its images are viewed, it takes on distinct meanings and interpretations, all of which are led by the artists' understandings of place. The possible interpretations of the project can be separated into three distinct experiences and positioned alongside theories of offline and online space and place.

First, when found online and shared with individuals who may not be familiar with each region, the sites are removed from their original contexts. Gonzales (1992: 126) believes that it is difficult for the photographer to separate the photograph from the multiplicity of influences informing its content. It is thus expected that Cooper and Spowart have projected their own expectations of each site through the final image, and perhaps misguidedly assumed that their audience would fill in the blanks. This is problematic when the sites have been actively objectified and altered, finally becoming distanced from the desire to seek out histories and emotional or physical attachment that initially inspired the project. When meaning is emptied out in this way, each photographed site is reduced to a single aesthetically pleasing image in a series. The twilight melds together and creates a heterogeneous collection of scenes that *could belong anywhere*. For example, without familiarity of the local area, the image depicted in [Figure 3](#) simply becomes a lit phone box and a just-visible ivy-covered wall rather than a place embedded in memory. It is still appreciable, but in a more visual sense that draws attention to empty space and silences in regional communities. Each image from the collection is evidently of a site that exists somewhere, but the title provides the only evidence of geographic location. Nevertheless, online ways of operating and interacting are drawn from offline knowledges of contextually appropriate behaviours and experiences (Fernback 2007: 53; Kobayashi 2010: 562), so the fact remains that the online



Figure 3
(Colour online) Toowoomba, uncategorised
Source: Cooper and Spowart (2014). Used with permission.

image can be understood on some level, irrespective of the level of regional and site familiarity.

Still, a lack of deep engagement with the photographs shared online is evidenced by online responses, where comments related more to the visual aspect of the image rather than the over-arching themes behind the project. A viewing of the *Nocturne: Miles Project* Facebook page shows that when images have been acknowledged by the page audience at all, a majority of comments read ‘great colour contrast!’, ‘nice photo, I look forward to seeing more!’, or simply ‘wow’ (Cooper and Spowart 2014b). The artists’ anticipated detailed sharing of stories is largely and unexpectedly absent, and may represent a changing digital space. By assigning significance to the artist’s own movements throughout each region, each site has been transformed into an image by the act of collection. This reflects Lee’s (2010: 268) understanding of the photographer as actively ‘turning a specific site into an appreciable and visible site’. In this regard, the online viewership was evidently beneficial — more so to the artists and the expansion of the project audience than in terms of retaining individual senses of place. Online, the project and its amalgamation of images have been made more accessible, perhaps inspiring individuals to seek out the hidden individual histories and changing senses of place within their own more familiar locales.

Second, for individuals familiar with the photographed sites who were only able to connect with the project online, the images may have created a heightened awareness of separation from place. The digital element of the project appears to be inspired by early online predictions, such as those discussed by Adams (1997), Mitra (1997) and Graham (1998). Digital space was seen as a new

placeless frontier, which was able to be explored and transformed then mapped out, while simultaneously allowing its users to move beyond physical space and interact with others in disparate locations (Kinsley 2013: 7). The idea that digital space provides users with bodily transcendence from physicality is still observable in everyday life; however, it is unreflective of the ways that digitally connected material devices (computers, mobile phones, etc.) are used (Horst and Miller 2012: 105). Wellman (2005: 54), for example, believes that the actual materiality of digitally connected devices in fact creates an awareness of rootedness in place *away* from others, with whom the individual can readily connect. This occurrence is easily identified within the online reactions to *The Nocturne Project* — one notable image comment on the *Nocturne: Bundaberg Region* (Cooper and Spowart 2013) page reads to the effect of ‘stunning, as always . . . makes me miss home so bad’.

Finding their own online presence unsatisfying, and unable to provide their anticipated responses, Cooper and Spowart turned to sharing their photographs in ‘remember when’ and ‘you know you lived in [regional town] when’ themed Facebook groups. Within these groups, members were already receptive to sharing local knowledges, discussing histories and reminiscing about their own experiences. Like Horst and Miller’s (2012: 106) conceptualisation of the website as attracting individuals who found its content relevant to their needs, and pushing away those who did not, these groups provided Cooper and Spowart with direct access to their preferred online audience. While the offline place is already associated with locale, behaviours and practices, with its participants bound by proximity (Mosco 1998: 59), here the online group was transformed into a seemingly inorganic replica of something sorely missed and now actively sought after. The notion of the online community as an artificial attempt at recreating a real, physical entity is a false comparison, however (Brent 2004: 217) — the constant movements within and between offline and online experience are not detached from one another. Instead, this movement represents a very real example of the interlayering of the physical and digital which is now a normalised and unexceptional part of everyday life (Horst and Miller 2012: 108). In the case of the ‘remember when’ groups appropriated by Cooper and Spowart, the online group is a romanticised conceptualisation of each region, which is distanced from lived realities.

Third, for local residents attending the regionally specific exhibitions associated with each residency, the final image may have been detached from their deeply felt interactions with each site. It is clear that the project was not intended to be representational. However, if the intense stylisation of the photographed site transforms it into one that the regional gallery attendee is unable to connect to their experiences, the image may take on alternative meanings. As with all images, Cooper and Spowart have staged image content and organised it in ways that may have differed from the subject’s ideas of identity and place (Urry 2002: 128). Schusterman’s (2012) analysis of the photograph as giving false permanence to its subject can be applied here. He states (2012: 71–2) that, ‘though experience itself is elusively evanescent and significantly subjective, the photograph has the powers of durability, fixity, and objectivity that belong to real physical things . . . the experiential process of photography is obscured by the photograph as object’. In this instance, giving permanence to the local space and reimagining it as an object makes sense of the online responses to shared images. As the images meld

together, they take on new meanings and are able to be understood in more broadly appreciable ways.

Conclusion

Victoria Cooper and Doug Spowart's *The Nocturne Project* aimed to understand and capture a sense of place while highlighting the ways by which individual experience and histories contribute to regional identity. In effect, it predominantly served to display the artists' own spatial experiences, and inadvertently presented the shared histories of local residents as secondary. Still, it remains highly positive in that it aimed to connect contemporary and past local residents through its splintered use of digital space. *The Nocturne Project* was detached from lived realities, with most of these resulting from the distance between photographed site and online participant, and the site as object being removed from its local context.

A single regionally focused arts project is unlikely to lead to the development of the local cultural space (and would not be so unrealistically expected to do so). However, by actively inserting itself into some parts of the local community and landscape, *The Nocturne Project* connected residents together and reminded regional areas of the artistic value of everyday spaces and sites. Continued community engagement with the arts appears to have a fundamental role in facilitating the development of the local cultural space, and offers possibilities for stimulating local economies, and healing and revitalising regions. This idea of the local cultural space also needs to be enmeshed within the region, being deeply felt, accessible and easily identified as relevant to that area and its communities.

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