

Sophie Bannan

# ‘The Periphery State’: Liv Worsnop at The Physics Room, Christchurch

7 June–12 July 2014

Some weeks after ‘The Periphery State’ closes, I meet with Liv to discuss the show. We sit on bare wooden floorboards against a fan heater and with beer too cold from just being in a cupboard. Christchurch is deep in winter. The small courtyard we look out upon is in a state of seasonal dormancy.

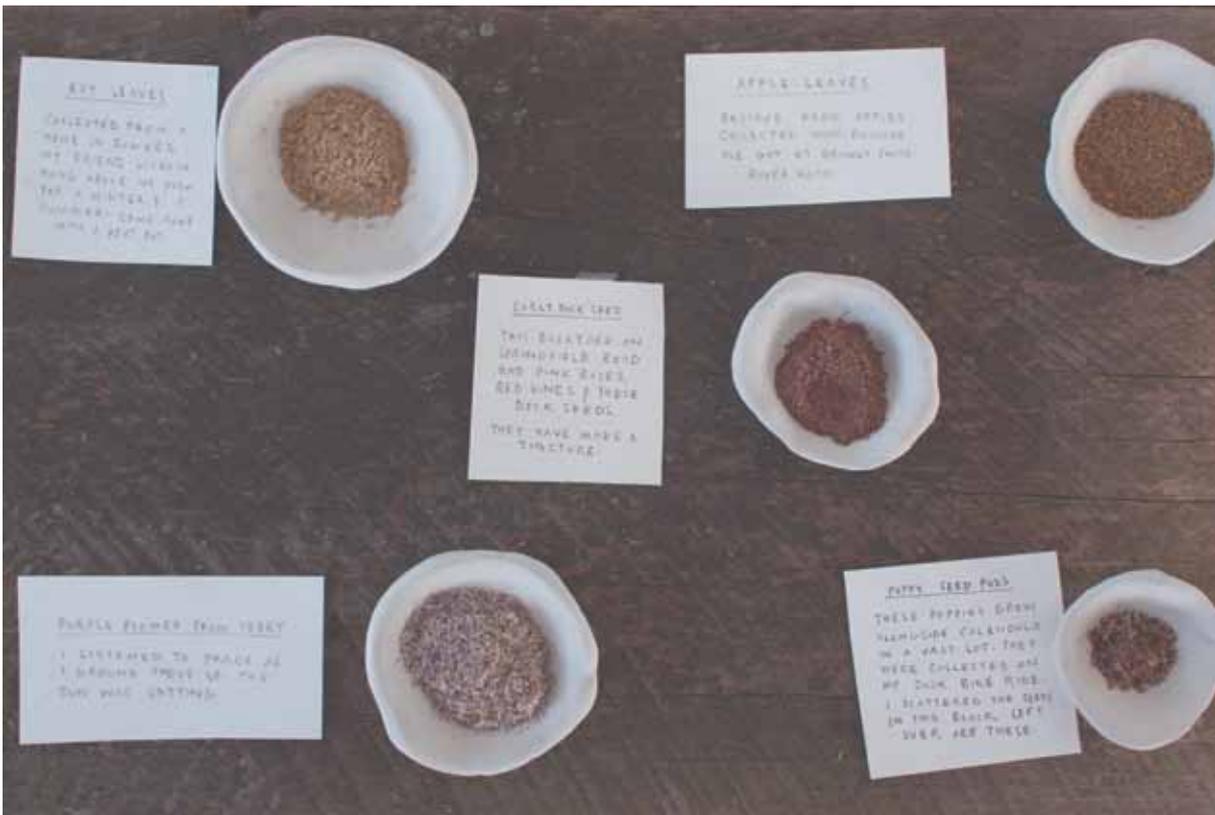
Prior to the February 2011 earthquake Liv had been in her second year of a Fine Arts degree at the University of Canterbury’s Ilam School of Fine Arts. She recalls that she was *doing things with plants*—trying to explore the idea of connection, using plants as a way of finding language about the togetherness of things, of the connectivity of everything. She describes the work as contrived. *I was scrambling for this thing that I wanted and believed in and needed but I didn’t even know what it was.* Though Liv disagrees with her mother that she went through a *really bad space* following the quake, she can’t remember what happened between then and the end of that same year.

*But then my final thing at uni was a catalogue of earthquake rubble, I had all this stuff that was photographed into a grid and catalogued with the date collected, the site and the materials ... I put them in display cases and had them as something dormant and then active. The active state was when objects were interacting with one another. The dormant state was just a load of things in a cabinet. I was interested in the notion of collection and museological display. Really, I was just a hoarder.*

'The Periphery State'



Liv Worsnop, 'The Periphery State', 2014, paper, linen, tape, clay, card table, tinctures, infused oil, found: rocks, water, plywood, leaves, twigs, cord, flowers, wood, installation view, The Physics Room. Photo by Daegan Wells, Courtesy of The Physics Room.



Liv Worsnop, 'The Periphery State', 2014 (detail).

In this respect Liv's practice as a whole was activated by the event of the earthquake and subsequent period of response and recovery, a floating spatiotemporal re-rendering thrown backward into a context and landing firmly in the now empty spaces of a once functioning cityscape.

Having arrived in Christchurch three years after February 2011 I was surprised to find what seemed to be minimal critical engagement, especially from within the emerging arts community, in the complexities of this post-disaster landscape. It is with this still in my thoughts that I enquired as to the presence of any shift in student work immediately—or even less immediately—after the earthquake.

*I don't think so. I was one of the only ones. I think for a long time everyone was like -ugh earthquake art! and had jokes about broken ceramics and there was this spring from the community but it didn't really articulate as much in the arts community I don't think. This spring from the community is, as I understand, talking to a broadly public community, and even an arts community, at ground level, literally. I am thinking about the likes of Gap Filler and the insurgence of street art, creative endeavours that erupted like a spring and engaged a wide public by providing a way to re-enter the now cordon-free central city and begin to engage with this drastically disrupted environment.*

I most certainly can't lay claim to there being a complete absence of critical contextual engagement however, for the context itself is too gargantuan in nature to warrant such sweeping conclusions. Indeed it is so expansive that it is my feeling any work produced is impossible to completely disentangle from said context; that the very fact of being a 'Christchurch artist' is to be inextricably intoxicated by our environment, no matter how little or how much one might regard their practice to exist on its periphery.

The 'Periphery State' is refined in its methodologies and concurrently broad in scope, approaching an intricacy and generosity of engaging (without restraint or pretense) in the complex systems of this post-disaster landscape, engaging a 'general public' and equally existing as the materialisation of a specialised body of critical enquiry.

The show seeps into the Physics Room gallery through a series of outdoor projects in the surrounding block, on the corner of High and Tuam Streets. Drawings of the local flora (weeds, edibles)—reminiscent of those by early botanical explorers and labeled with detailed explanations of uses—are secured as posters along the wire fence enclosing an empty lot. Downstairs in the same building as the gallery, these are enlarged and frosted into the windows of C1 café. Outward, further afield, are scatterings of succulents and small natives, tenderly gathered and rearranged within public, outdoor spaces. They are given time to grow.

A different form of activation is taking place upstairs. Delicate ceramic vessels, propped up on found slabs of rock and wood on the gallery floor, hold plants in states other than growing. Botanicals are dried, crushed, chipped or pressed into oils. Their aroma is faint; I'm encouraged to crouch down to get closer. A re-activation is occurring, a new extraction from a post-growing state. A white card offering associated anecdotes reporting a remembered action pertaining to its discovery or uses accompanies each vessel. The texts, between the posters outside and the gallery space, have taken on a less instructive role, a tone lifted from a personal notebook rather than flora field guide.

*Mint: plucked from a field thick with Yarrow, Dock, Grass and Mint. Parsley grows inside the house & I found a dead bee in the bathroom. Springfield Road.*

Scattered references to specific and general locations grow a sprawling and chaotic city map; an experiential map of the empty spaces are filled with the humble activations that materialise through Liv's fieldwork. Likewise, the gallery space is scattered with found rocks, timber sheeting, branches and various other found materials. Their arrangements—some isolated, others in considered clusters—activate the spaces between, the empty spaces that one moves through and around. The install approaches a map, a chaotic one, but nonetheless a map. Furthermore, despite it being a 'full' show in terms of volume of work it maintains a methodology in its presentation synonymous with its research methodologies. Its mapping of interstitial space directs the viewer on a path through the gallery and, likewise, the city beyond.

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Liv Worsnop, 'The Periphery State', 2014, installation view.

Along one wall are a series of drawings, small twigs sewn onto white paper with black cotton. The element of attention to each twig's angles and bumps is true to the show as a whole. As with Liv's small activations in outdoor spaces that are carried out with a palpable tenderness, each of the many elements of this intricate show become exactly that, tenderly activated by the quiet courtesy offered to each element. For the volume of elements, there is an unexpected space and calm to the show as a whole. In talking to Liv, the words *space* and *activation* recur; she allows each element a generous physical space through which they have the potential to reach a more active state.

I spoke with Liv about the cards with hand written text. I felt that these were being too generous, that in a gallery setting you could perhaps ask more of an audience than outdoors. *I heard this story of Helen Keller—that when she was learning to sign, her teacher was holding one of her hands under flowing water and in the other signing the word 'water.' It was just a feeling and another feeling, they were completely separate. And then when she made the connection, that this action was related to this idea, then her whole world blossomed. So the text honours this skill we have, of communication, that without a notion of language it is like a blockage. To talk about something, to acknowledge the language it has, is to acknowledge the greater space it occupies.*