

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

by Alice Maia Rezende

Locating the centre of the world is a wildly subjective task. The very act of defining its coordinates implies a multitude of “locations”, or frames of reference, which effectively prioritise one set of parameters over another. Since the Industrial Revolution over two and a half centuries ago, rapidly expanding cities have approximated the idea of the ‘centre’ with urban landscapes, pushing once pivotal rural environments to the periphery of the collective imaginary.

In our postmodern moment, this clear-cut countryside-city dichotomy has been replaced with more complex hybrid forms. Suburban environments – facilitated in part by developing mobility technologies – have grown exponentially across the globe to accommodate a more flexible (yet increasingly precarious) lifestyle that includes both access to centralised resources and respite from rising inner city living costs. Meanwhile, a counterurbanisation movement has also taken hold, where wealthy individuals can now afford to move back into a fashionably idyllic pastoral lifestyle – a private silo – after decades of extracting capital value from cities.

Location, location, location seeks to challenge associations of the urban landscape with centrality by superimposing them with critical reflections on positionality – what it means to take a certain position in space and time, and the personal accountability that this entails. By bringing these seemingly disparate standpoints into close proximity, the artists in *Location, location, location* problematise the way urban locations enable or obscure one’s visibility and exposure to varying levels of surveillance. They also investigate whether it is possible to build natural escapes into the very framework of unnatural environments – and why these escapes are so desperately needed. Moving towards a post-Covid era, regions, cities, and countries are digitally globalised but physically segmented. By questioning the meaning and origins of our own locality, the works in *Location, location, location* challenge the relevance of multiple localities towards the regeneration of our brave new world. In this way, the artists critique the often-unseen structures and systems that shape our internal cardinal directions.

Guy Debord defines psychogeography as the “study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.”¹ Similarly, Micallef describes how “psychogeographic experience [... invokes] the emotional human layer about a space”.² By harnessing the immovable concrete structure of the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, artists were invited to map their unique psychogeographical coordinates through video and animation media. The resulting works explore the myriad physical, spiritual, and political landscapes we inhabit, whether chosen or forced upon us, which ultimately help shape our perspectives on the world. Displayed over the very same surface across a five-month timeline, together the works constitute a cacophonous atemporal topography, bringing otherwise distant realities into strange proximity.

¹ Guy Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/urbgeog.htm>

² Shawn Micallef, “Storytelling goes mobile,” in *Mobile Nation: Creating Methodologies for Mobile Platforms*, eds. Martha Lady and Philip Beesley (Waterloo, ON: Riverside Architectural Press, 2008), 111–112

In the English language, the word ‘location’ refers to an exact position in physical space, like a point or a place, where something happens or exists.³ This aura of precision aligns it with the notion of wayfinding – like ‘dropping a pin’ to a friend on Google Maps to be geolocated by a satellite high above. On the other hand, its cousin English word ‘place’ is much broader in definition, for “places are articulated through a thousand uses”.⁴ In the same way, then, that location *way-finds*, place *place-makes*: that is, places intimately connect people with space, imbuing it with social meaning. This makes ‘place’ ontologically potent, for they have the power to frame our lives, sustain us or undo us.⁵

Human geographer Edward Relph covered important groundwork on modern ideas in the fields of urban planning, architecture and sociology by defining ‘place’ as a subject of research.⁶ While Relph defined ‘place’ as identifiable spaces with authentic local identity, its inverse evil twin ‘placelessness’ was reserved for “variously anonymous and exchangeable” urban areas where one finds “formlessness and lack of human scale, impermanence and instability”.⁷ While Relph’s theories are still highly influential, the idea of place and placelessness as polar, mutually exclusive opposites has been since hotly debated, as it does not account for the capacity of ‘meaningless’ space to be valuable. This is because, divested from a stabilised sense of ‘being’, they are more open to an experimental sense of ‘becoming’.⁸ Understood this way, it becomes irrelevant whether “locality – as a point of uniqueness of identity – fails,”⁹ for the banality of a public façade suddenly becomes highly advantageous.

In contemporary art, a distaste and ultimate rejection of Anthropocentric knowledge as a mode of critique often leaves the task of imagining place in the sole hands of architects and city planners. While past exhibitions have perhaps been able to afford this topical distance, as a public-facing exhibition, *Location, location, location* is implicated in the very task of urban regeneration. Arguably then, this becomes its strength: as stakeholders look for answers to urban problems, it has the freedom to answer critically, and more imaginatively than any urban mogul could.

Yet it is important to consider that the display of visual information in public spaces comes tangled with suppositions. Whether or not we are consciously aware, our field of vision is routinely exposed to messages that saturate our cognition, from adverts, to graffiti, political messages, to commercial signage, and so on. In São Paulo city, where I grew up, a municipal law titled *Lei Cidade Limpa (Clean City Law)* was proposed by mayor Gilberto Kassab in 2006 to address oppressive levels of urban visual pollution. Approved in 2007, the regulations prohibited the placement of advertising materials in public and private buildings and outdoor urban spaces, including a ban on all outdoor billboards and strict size limitations on commercial signage.¹⁰ Residents were quick to note the unintended social effect produced by the measures, which revealed previously hidden shantytowns and illegal labour

³ “Location,” Collins Dictionary, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/location>; “Location,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/location>; “Location”, Wiktionary, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/location>

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 131

⁵ Kim Dovey, “Place as Multiplicity,” in *Place and placelessness revisited*, eds. Robert Freestone and Edgar Liu (New York: Routledge, 2016), 261, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uq.edu.au/10.4324/9781315676456>

⁶ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1983),

https://search.library.uq.edu.au/permalink/f/12kerkf/61UQ_ALMA2198302860003131

⁷ Edgar Liu and Robert Freestone, “Revisiting Place and Placelessness”, in *Place and placelessness revisited*, 3

⁸ Dovey, “Place as Multiplicity”, 261

⁹ Imants Tillers, “Locality Fails”, *Art + Text*, no. 6 (June 1982)

¹⁰ “Lei Municipal de São Paulo 14223 de 2006,” Wikisource, last modified July 30, 2008, https://pt.wikisource.org/wiki/Lei_Municipal_de_S%C3%A3o_Paulo_14223_de_2006,

shops in the city skyline.¹¹ Locations should thus be considered strategically in relation to their associative ability to expose or hide, enabling ample visibility, maximum privacy, or the many gradating levels in between.

Shrouded under the mantle of commercialism, public space should be conceptualised as a radical arena for the re-imagining and representation of identities. The artists in *Location, location, location* carefully consider the site's exposure potential, plying the hard concrete façade into malleable narratives. **Lucy Nguyễn-Hunt** identifies the Brunswick Street intersection as a significant experiential site in *things I can't say / những điều tôi không thể nói*. After years of walking the tightrope of "out and proud" in their work and remaining closeted to family, Nguyễn-Hunt delves into the personal complexities of coming out as a diasporic, mixed-race person. Outing herself to family through their work at QCA Pop Gallery, Nguyễn-Hunt grapples with the seemingly irreconcilable simultaneity of a locus that evinces memories of queer trauma and affirmation. The amplifying nature of kitsch neon signage is appropriated to make visible what Nguyễn-Hunt, as an intersectional being, finds thoroughly lacking in the wider net of languages and representations associated with diasporic and BIPOC identities.

Borrowing the scrolling aesthetic of a LED stock market ticker, **Erin Dunne** reconfigures their work *Drawn Together* to engage in dialogue with the medium of projection. The eighteen-metre-long woven linear narrative offers an autobiographical account of contemporary life in rural and regional Darumbal Country, Central Queensland, deploying the artist's queer gaze to disrupt normative assumptions that queerness cannot be found or flourish beyond the urban. By 'rural-bombing' Queensland's capital city, *Drawn Together* also functions as an ironic 'sell' of alluring greener pastures.

Pushed to its limit, the hyper-visibility of bodies can often conflate with a sense of hyper-vigilance. In *Street View*, the collective **Lacey-Law-Lobwein** (LLL) consider the ways in which computers and algorithms attempt to map human bodies, while simultaneously stripping them of unique identifiable characteristics. Employing motion-capture technology to render moving 3D skeletons, LLL question the constant processes of data capture and collection that occur in public spaces. The dual perspective of the skeletons projected on either side of the façade provides an imagined X-ray view of the activity taking place inside, emphasising the constant and pervasive nature of spatial surveillance.

Similarly, **Justene Williams'** projection also features bodies in motion amid a strange and mythical urban jungle where monitoring presences alternate between humanoid shapes and reflective surfaces. Originally developed as component pieces of the installation *No Mind* (2015), the video loops depict Williams' trademark elaborate sets made from human waste materials, where paper webs, bamboo cages, reflective parking lot mirrors, curled photographs and the artists' body conflate into dizzying excess.

Foregrounded by a post-apocalyptic Australian landscape, **Dylan Mooney's** superhuman, towering figures tip relations of power with their surveilling gaze. Mooney's characters proudly display their Aboriginal, Torres Strait, South Sea Islander and queer identities, following the passing traffic with their eyes as an appropriative gesture of the othering gaze. A Yuwi man from Mackay, Central

¹¹ Bob Garfield, "Clearing the Air," in *On the Media* (Podcast, 20 April 2007), <https://www.wnyc.org/story/129390-clearing-the-air>

Queensland, Torres Strait Islander man from Erub and Badu Island and an Australian born South Sea Islander, Mooney's characters are inspired by his friends, family, and Yuwi ancestors.

At a macro environmental level, cities today occupy only 3% of the Earth's land, but account for two thirds of the world's energy demand and 70% of CO2 emissions.¹² Moreover, as global temperatures and sea levels rise in unison, over 570 coastal cities are projected to be affected by 2050, putting over 800 million people at risk from the impacts of rising seas and storm surges.¹³ Meanwhile, at the psychic level, researchers have begun to demonstrate how, in comparison to natural settings, the urban environment has an 'all-over' negative impact on cognitive ability and mental health such as reduced attention; reduced memory; reduced emotional and impulsive controls; and increased aggression.¹⁴ That said, science has also pointed out how *earthing* practices¹⁵ – physically connecting oneself to the ground, such as digging into soil or walking barefoot – as well as other *rewilding* activities like forest bathing¹⁶ and being in or around the ocean¹⁷ are naturally medicinal, serving up a host of profound health benefits such as regulation of the immune and nervous system; improved cardiovascular function; reduced depressive symptoms and possible cancer suppression.¹⁸

In light of these assessments, locations perhaps not only constitute landscapes, but lands of escape: places one can long for and run toward. Here, the notion of transversing toward another location as a recurrent aspect of living becomes prescient. **Christopher Bassi** addresses this theme poignantly in *Passages*. The paintings reflect on the transcoastal journeys of his Meriam and Yupungathi ancestors from the Torres Strait and Cape York and eventual settling on Thursday Island. Through pictorial representation, Bassi looks to capture the abstract notions of mobility and flow between people, seascape and landscape which is essential to Torres Strait Islander identity.

Bella Deary's clay sculptures react to abstracted environmental forces in *Rise*. As the projection slowly fills up the building's surface with ebbing ocean currents, dissolving the clay's global South, we are posed a direct question: as fellow inhabitants of the physical South, how will proximity to catastrophes looming over our neighbours implicate us in the not-so-distant future?

At Covid's insistence, geographical siloes are now a norm of existence. In such pivotal times, it would be natural to assume that re-discovering the 'uniquenesses' of our local stomping grounds would be absolutely paramount for our artistic and psychic survival. Yet, in our globalised era, if a "progressive

¹² Kim Fausing, "Climate emergency: how our cities can inspire change"

¹³ "Staying afloat: the urban response to sea level rise," C40, <https://www.c40.org/other/the-future-we-don-t-want-staying-afloat-the-urban-response-to-sea-level-rise>

¹⁴ Jonah Lehrer, "How the city hurts your brain... and what you can do about it," The Boston Globe, last modified January 2, 2009, http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/01/04/how_the_city_hurts_your_brain/?page=full

¹⁵ Gaétan Chevalier, Stephen T. Sinatra, James L. Oschman, Karol Sokal, Pawel Sokal, "Earthing: Health Implications of Reconnecting the Human Body to the Earth's Surface Electrons", *Journal of Environmental and Public Health*, vol. 2012, Article ID 291541 (January 2012): 8 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2012/291541>

¹⁶ Qing Li, "Effect of forest bathing trips on human immune function," *Environmental health and preventive medicine* 15, no. 1 (January 2010): 9–17, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12199-008-0068-3>

¹⁷ Benedict Wheeler, Mathew P. White, Lora E. Fleming, Timothy Taylor, Andrea Harvey, and Michael H. Depledge, "Influences of the Oceans on Human Health and Well-Being," in *Oceans and human health: implications for society and well-being*, eds. Robert Bowen, Michael Depledge, Cinnamon Carlarne and Lora Fleming (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 4-22, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uq.edu.au/lib/uql/detail.action?docID=1666490>

¹⁸ Graham Rook, "Regulation of the immune system by biodiversity from the natural environment: an ecosystem service essential to health," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110, no. 46 (November 2013): 18360–18367, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1313731110>

sense of place is defined by its relations with other places, by ‘routes’ rather than ‘roots’¹⁹ – where binary associations of attachment, identity and authenticity toward place have been replaced with more hybrid relations – what should the role of ‘local’ culture be? Perhaps it is that locality should be harnessed against the encroaching powers of gentrification and free-zone development by maintaining a critical distance – and potential independence – from place-making initiatives. As local artistic communities are invited to redesign public space in an attempt to increase a location’s fashioning for commerce and consumption, it becomes our duty to question how these new spatial infrastructures interact with or depend on governmental, nongovernmental, and international powers. We must examine centres’ histories and current operations to unlock and expose unseen power machinations, and then we must push back with our own strategies of occupation and perpetuation.^{20 21}

Starting at the most hyper-local place of all, **Max Athens’** *UMBILICAL* addresses the primordial separation of self from site at the origins of life. Here, umbilical cord forms are represented as ouroboric, snakelike shimmering 3D sculptures, their interdependence revealed as they continually dance around the boundaries of others. The work’s abstract nature enables generous space for interpretation: could it illustrate the dependency of individual identity on the sustenance of more collective identities and synergies? And where do these synergetic encounters take – or should take – place?

Catriona Drummond reflects on one such synergetic location in *Sweaty Saturday*, translating the contemporary hybridity of West End’s Boundary Street into an animated comic vista replete with idiosyncratic characters. As Drummond notes, that area of Boundary Street outside Archive demonstrates a *laissez-faire* approach to urban development in the face of expanding commerce. In *Sweaty Saturday*, we see the strip’s mounting parallel universes: mobile app delivery drivers convening on the carpark edge, the ancient cop shop in the old Queenslander, and a constant stream of bar-hoppers. On a hot Brisbane night, sweat may be the only equalising agent of these disparate human realities.

The works in *Location, location, location* demonstrate plural viewpoints and associations within themes of visibility, exposure, surveillance, landscapes as escape routes, and locality. In engaging such topics, as a group the artists hope to replace pre-emptive binary discourses regarding location and place with more hybridised definitions. Where different locations tend to generate distinct accounts of nature and social relations, it thus becomes evident that spatial positioning should involve engagement and accountability. To this end, it recalls the feminist scholar Donna Haraway’s description of location as a subjective standpoint in a “vast web of differential positionings”.²² It cannot be pinpointed in (objective) space, as it does not wish to be fixed, but to remain constantly curious. In this way, she concludes, “location is about vulnerability; location resists the politics of closure.”²³ The centre as a fixed point, then, is never meant to hold.

¹⁹ Dovey, “Place as Multiplicity”, 262

²⁰ For an extended discussion on this topic, see Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: the power of infrastructure space* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2014)

²¹ Claire Doherty, *Out of Time. Out of Place: Public Art (Now)* (New York: Art/Books, 2015), 15

²² Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3, (1988), 575–599

²³ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”