Retelling Australia's contested story of water

Lily Hibberd

Fierce political disputation surrounds the use and supply of water in Australia, and yet as a continuous history this is a singular narrative of colonisation. For this country's non-indigenous population, the ongoing failure to understand our continent's water is Australia's least popular historical narrative. From the first moment of European contact with the Australian landscape the struggle has been to secure this resource for commercial and governmental operations. National squabbling conceals the negligence: pipelines for the transportation of water are hotly debated, while oil has been funnelled from the northern most parts of the continent to the south since the early 1960s without raising any great concern. Apart from the more recent tensions over aboriginal land rights and access to mineral deposits, water has been the cause of most major territorial disputes since white occupation or, as it is all too blithely referred to, European "settlement".

While aboriginal people are sidelined in some of the most crucial decisions being made about water, the knowledge of how water functions is ancient wisdom for any aboriginal person whose access and connection to the traditional land has not been entirely extinguished. Cedric Jacobs is a Nyoongar elder and a descendant of the Mooro leader Yellagonga who once lived with his people along the lakes of the northern suburbs of Perth. Cedric describes here why water is now a major problem for the lakes region. "The caves around the area have always been filled with water, which seeps in from the Gnangara Mound and comes down into the subterranean waterways from the north. That water comes through here and seeps under Perth and keeps the subterranean waterways clean. We become upset when developers want to clog them up and put buildings on them and not consult the Aboriginal people … In the Crystal Cave the subterranean water flow has basically dried up."[1]

Anyone who has attempted to map Australian continental water in the past discovered first of all that nothing about it is constant. Its underground lakes and artesian wells constitute a byzantine system of interlocking, porous and fluid networks and channels. On the other hand, the dependence of European settlers on surface apparitions of water that came and

[1] "STORY 2: Following in Yellagonga's Foootsteps, Cedric's Story", word document, accessed 20/02/2011 www.reconciliationwa.org/stories.html

went subsequently formed the increasingly unproductive story of fixed catchments and controls of waterways that denied the greater flow of water beneath the surface. Again, the behaviour of successive Australian governments portrays a political premise that comprises Imperial Britain's *prima facie* narrative of the continent of Australia. Two powerful ideologies emanate from this story today: firstly, the denial of the unknown in ourselves, and, secondly, the maintenance of the ordered idea of nature. In the 16th century, Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza effectively espoused the unknown of bodily consciousness, and in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* Gilles Deleuze explains that in Spinoza's conceptualization, the body "surpasses the knowledge we have of it, and that thought likewise surpasses the consciousness that we have of it".[2] Deleuze elaborates that, "consciousness is by nature the locus of an illusion", pinpointing the binary and preclusive relationship between the human reading of the world and our material existence within it.[3]

In an article from December 2008, called "Dry Thinking, on Praying for Rain", Paul Carter tackles the problem of the Australian desire to order our environment.[4] Yet, as Carter contends, water in this country does not behave according to the Eurocentric conceptualisation of constantly flowing rivers and full reservoirs and that this imaginary alienates us from a metaphysical experience of our continent, with its constantly fluctuating and irregular but rhythmic cycles of wet and dry that arrive in uncontrollable and seemingly useless extremes. Carter proposes that we should cease trying to change the way water works and start acknowledging how we might be changed by the behaviour of water and look at how are might be adapting to this change. "Dry thinking" is Carter's canny way of describing an authoritative and imposing attitude to inhabitation and our avoidance of a necessarily contingent, responsive and reciprocal relationship to place. This shift in mentality would, in Carter's words, "call on us to relocate our thinking in the environments that have inspired it," to arrive at a new metaphysics of belonging that encompasses water's contrary nature.[5]

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[2] Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988, 18.

[3] Deleuze, *Spinoza*, 19.

[4] "Dry Thinking and Human Futures" was published in the *Lettre Internationale* in German, however Carter delivered the paper in English at the Institute of Postcolonial Studies on 29 April 2010.

[5] Institute of Postcolonial Studies July 2010 newsletter, accessed 22/09/2010 www.ipcs.org.au/publications/ipcs-newsletter

Water is thus a central character in the reconstruction of our behaviour towards the land, being caught up in the triumvirate mythologies of progress, self-subsistence and water as a controllable and stable resource that can be tapped into at anytime. The historical narrative of water represents the paradox of Australia's imagining of itself, in the contradiction of an impossible conception of a nation laid over a very different reality. Water is the one substance that has refused to compromise to ideological impositions from the first moment of attempted European inhabitation up till today. Yet the settler myth prevails, while capitalism has taken over the mega-management of resources, so that the greatest access and most unregulated use of water – our most uncontrollable and critical resource – is in the hands of private corporations, agribusiness and irrigation companies. The futility is unrelenting in the ongoing liberal access to water given to mining companies and large-scale farming operations of non-essential but highly profitable yet water sapping crops such as cotton and rice. The ownership of Australia's water has very recently become a widespread concern because of substantial increases of foreign investment in water rights, totalling millions of litters, according to Deborah Snow and Debra Jopson in their *Sydney Morning Herald* article, published on September 4, 2010, called "Thirsty foreigners soak up scarce water rights". The privatisation of water supply is yet another area where commercial interests have dominated, so that since 2001 an estimated 25 per cent of Australia's drinking water has been owned and controlled by foreign multinationals.[6]

Even though attempts to subject the flow of water to all kinds of practical strategies has seen short-term benefits for civil usages of waterways through extensive management in the form of dams, weirs, locks and barricades, these manipulations are known to have had disastrous and irreversible effects on the complex ecologies of the vast systems that cover millions of hectares of what was once much more arable land. Some of the most concerning instance of Australian water management in recent times has been the problems facing the Murray Darling river system, which covers more than one million square kilometres across the interior lowlands of the continent, from south Queensland to Victoria and South Australia. Past efforts to contrive a predictable and saturated environment on the Murray River were based on the first myth that Europeans brought and valiantly strived to implement against all the odds onto the Australian landscape. The absurdity of this premise still seems to escape our nation even now, evident in everyday language and media

[6] "Future Ownership of Australia's Water", Media Release on Kellie Tranter's webpage, 30 January 2007, accessed 22/09/2010.
www.kellietranterattorney.com.au/tranter-86.htm

discourse where the ebb and flow of water is so often described in rational terms, as a "resource" to be managed or contained. This thinking and its discursive existence in the Australian mindset repudiates any notion of water's true complexity, while we refuse to consider how we might be subject to water's continual adaptation and the fact of our total dependence on change itself.

According to Georges Bataille in *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy,* our ongoing disregard for the material basis of life causes us to err in our understanding of the forces that drive life itself.[7] Bataille claims that in our exploitation of resources we only acknowledge the earth's forces in so far as they are useful to us and yet every "living organism… ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life".[8] Life as an excessive, unknowable and transforming process is treated with the same apprehension and again it is the fixity of the sciences of epistemology and knowledge production that censure the unknown. In the *Accursed Share* Bataille purports that the generative excess of the cosmos is greatly feared by the human race and that this fear gives rise to humanity's destructive impulses. This corresponds with Charles Darwin's unacknowledged gift of the evolutionary paradox, which Elizabeth Grosz has argued shows us how life hinges on the practice of overcoming itself through the process of natural selection to evolve into something completely unforeseen, unknowable and different, and yet this is the least appreciated aspect of Darwin's theory of evolution.[9] As an utterly evolutionary substance, water is equally untameable, so what better means to understand the effacement of what we know to exist yet refuse to see than to long for and seek out the mysterious existence of subterranean water on the Australian continent?

At this point I will turn to a discussion of a 2010 exhibition by Queensland artists Pat Hoffie and Stefan Purcell. Presented from July to October 2010 at the State Library of Queensland Gallery, *WindWells* is relevant well beyond the pertinence and foresight of the artists in making this work, which became all the more prescient since I wrote this text in August 2010, given that two months later the ground floor of the Library was under water as a result of the Queensland floods in January 2011.

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[7] Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Zone Books, 1988, 21.

[8] Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 21.

[9] Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power,* Crows Nest, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 2005.

In pursuing such revisions, Hoffie and Purcell's installation fortunately avoids truisms or superficial answers in relation to water. Over and above issues of climate change and sustainability *WindWells* makes a far more significant point by questioning the primacy of knowledge itself. The issue of water and its lack of reliability are central to the Australian psyche today and *WindWells* is based on an allegory of the repressed or forgotten power of the unseen yet generative force of our want and desire for water: everything in the gallery is dry, the writhing blue pipes are hollow, the book tanks empty, while the turning windmill and the images of water seekers and water makers keep on yearning for the elusive liquid. The interpretation of the history of water in Queensland in this project also highlights the dilemmas that Australia has faced thus far in its relation to the land, and which will continue to underpin the relationship that non-indigenous Australia will have to this country in the future. When unitary histories are offered up one of the most important questions to ask is why were other versions left out of the picture? In the case of a mythical imagining of water in Queensland it could be argued that contemporary rationalism doesn't want all these inexplicable artesian stories mingling with its mega-management water plan. But the excision and forgetting of irreconcilable content reveals that these acts are not only about forging a one-dimensional national identity; it constitutes an erasure of a political kind. Such an assertion might seem like a stretch but the constraint of individual autonomy in Australian society is more widespread than ever and the practice of a self-sustaining search for subterranean water is symbolic of anarchic activity, just as it was for pioneers. While an attitude persists that 19th century practices like water divining are incompatible with contemporary Australian environmental wisdom, the entire pioneering ethic is hardly insupportable today. A little scrutiny reveals that the current politics of water governance is scarcely more progressive, with the prevailing notion that the Australian continent should act as a giant aquifer or a non-porous container for water. This "catchment" ideology was established in the early 1900s with massive damming projects like the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme and The Ross River Dam, and it's a concept that is still driving policy today, evident in the recent commissioning of projects such as the enlarged Cotter Dam in the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales's latest dam at Tillegra.

Suspended between myth and history, Pat Hoffie and Stefan Purcell's *WindWells*: *channelling & divining* comprises a re-telling of the story of water. It proposes a new yet contingent relation to the interpretation of the past, and an attempt to differentiate the story of water from persistent rationalist notions of its constancy as a reliable resource that is nonetheless unmanageable. The peculiarity of *WindWells* in this context is that it highlights the role of art in the revision of culturally represented collective memory. *WindWells* questions the politics of history making while showing a delight for the self-made as the driving force of progress in early Australian settler culture.

Situated firmly in 19th century Southern Queensland, this artwork examines the moment of the state's rural adaptation from localized subsistence cultivation to large-scale mechanised agribusiness. Up until that time the legend of the pioneer had prevailed; a legend based on an individualised conception of space in which people struggled to make livelihoods from the land. At the end of the 1900s, however, this autonomy was wrested away by the commercialisation of agricultural labour.

WindWells calls up the story of water in Queensland, retrieving three fantastic tales about the contrivance of water in the region from the John Oxley Library archives at the State Library of Queensland, including the invention and fabrication of the legendary Australian Southern Cross windmill, the coming of the celebrated British sideshow magician and chemist Professor John Henry Pepper to Brisbane in the 1870s, and the renowned work of the successful Toowoomba water diviner Joseph Gordon Palethorpe in the late 1800s. Presented in the exhibition space on level two of the State Library of Queensland, Pat Hoffie and Stefan Purcell employ devices of illumination to create an installation that melds myth with history in a series of expositions that allow us to differentiate what is tangible from what is fable in the narrative of water as part of the history of European settlement of Australia.

To provide a sense of the aesthetics at play: the lighting was kept low in the large SLQ Gallery, so that long shadows were cast over the floor, from the backlit structure of a full-scale Aussie windmill. On the far side of the space the windmill's blades turned over a massive projection of stock footage showing factory workers in an industrious mode, churning out metal parts one after the other. According to the exhibition catalogue, the film documents the production of machinery parts in the town of Toowoomba, Southern Queensland, where in fact the Griffith Brothers first invented and developed their windmills in 1876.[10] In front of this striking set two large cylinders bore an apparent resemblance in form and scale to corrugated iron water tanks, even though they had been made of hundreds of books removed from their covers, with their pages splayed outward. A network of ultramarine blue pipes ran from the windmill across the floor, up the walls and into the

[10] Which State Library of Queensland curator Trudy Bennett describes in her essay, "Watery Treasures from the John Oxley Library", reproduced in the *WindWells* exhibition catalogue, Brisbane: State Library of Queensland, 2010.

tanks. While, on the right hand wall of the entry, two electromagnetic devices continually charged and released concentrated electrical zaps in small glass chambers. Right next to these, a large circular projection loomed with thundering storm clouds.

After passing around the tanks, a large plate window was visible, jammed into an alcove in the far right hand corner of the space. An apparition projected on the angled glass, was part of a scene that resembled a magician's set, with a chair and a table covered with a Persian rug. In this apparition a top-hatted and suited man repeatedly walked on and off the stage, like a ghost in a real life setting. He motioned exaggeratedly with the conjuring gestures of a magician without actually making anything real or illusory happen. Created as a recreation of Pepper's Ghost, this world-renowned cinematographic contrivance was invented by Pepper in the 1860s and quickly embraced by countless European and American magicians, illusionists and filmmakers. With its stagy aesthetics announcing a theatrical ploy, *WindWells* was at this point redolent of sideshows and 19th century vaudeville styling, which is recognizable for its rough but decorative appliqués of bright colour and glitter, and crude proscenium arch constructions and figures that are often strangely out of proportion. In an interview with the artists in the exhibition catalogue, by Gavin Sawford, Hoffie and Purcell describe the aesthetic of their project as "steampunk", making an oblique reference to the material and visual impact of the industrial age on vaudeville in Britain, an aesthetic that was crucial to the travelling shows that Pepper brought to Queensland in the 1870s. Highly popular across America, England and in Australia, populations across the western world embraced the presentation of science as an extravaganza, as a spectacle suitably conveyed through the vernacular of stage magic, and recently exemplified in Terry Gilliam's 2009 fantasy film, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus*.

After adjusting to its carnival distractions, other components of the installation became apparent. The first was a sound emanating from two of the tanks and out of a glammed-up gramophone horn attached to the end of one of the pipes, from which it was possible to discern a collection of echoing sounds, and twanging guitar chords like groans from the belly of the earth, possibly piped from beneath by the windmill or channelled in from Professor Pepper's magic show. Turning towards the water tanks and closing in to better ascertain the acoustics, the text of the books looked almost legible. Moving along the rows and up and down the tanks, to inspect one book after another, the volumes amounted to an incalculable assortment of printed languages. As diverse as Spanish, Turkish, English, Arabic and Persian or Farsi, they created a misappropriated Tower of Babel; converted to both an empty tank and a tower of books, yet also inverted like the aridity of Australian linguistic diversity, a sentiment exacerbated when one discovers from staff in attendance that the books in the installation had recently been deaccessioned from the SLQ collection. Yet these books are as rich as the ethnically heterogeneous stories that make up contemporary Australian society, with countless indigenous and migrant cultures sharing alternate notions and experiences of survival in this land. This includes the Afghanis who trekked across the central desert with their camels in the 1850s; in addition to accounts that my own Mallee farming family have made of Indian traders travelling from town to town in caravans selling bolts of cloth and buttons to isolated farming women in the early 21st century; as well as the numerous aboriginal guides who aided European explorers with their remarkable knowledge of how to read the land for signs of water.

WindWells resists this erasure as it retrieves memories of a deeply anxious search for the mysterious wellsprings of this continent's water. On a series of small turntables, alongside one of the water tanks, images of men undertaking water divining are printed on small upright pieces of cracked mirror, spinning eccentrically. These are reproductions from Palethorpe's 1903 booklet, *Water finding by means of magnetism and the diving rod*. In its "channelling and divining" *WindWells* thus examines the extraordinary Australian quest for subterranean water by finding and retelling stories held in the SLQ Heritage Collection, including Palethorpe's booklet, the Library archives on early local windmill development, and the material on Professor Pepper, whose time in Queensland is documented in the *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland* in 1974-75, concisely presented in a small secondary room, with a wall of framed documents, including Palethorpe's handbook and details of Professor Pepper's work in Queensland.

WindWells recounts the heroic tale of the intrepid settlement of the land by European settlers and their search for water, yet it presents this as a phantasmagoric history of water. The presence of alternate histories is forceful in *WindWells*, even if spectral and restless like Pepper's Ghost. None of this is static. The constant activity of the fantastic blue windmill, the old footage of factory lines in action and the conjuring of Pepper's Ghost are an allegory of the endeavour for water, and at this juncture the installation points to a contingency of fact and fiction in which histories are channelled from deep beneath the surface consciousness. Being dispersed, displaced or subverted, the strange juxtaposition of mythology and memory in *WindWells* prompts a curious interrogation and revision of seemingly immutable conceptions of the past, so that the exhibition poses a challenge to water's historical conceptualization as part of the arrival and imposition of a European system of thought. Where water is usually emblematic of the logic of human management of uncontrollable aspects of Australian nature – which for the British is remembered as being one of the most confronting of all colonial frontiers – in *WindWells* the contemporary concealment and reinscription of this history starts to reveal some of its contradictions because of the peculiar conflation of images of water divining, windmill, industry and magic. Wherever settler narratives are recounted, early attempts to survive on the Australian continent are usually told in terms of the failure of the Australian environment to provide for human life rather than the settlers' lack of ability to interpret the land and its secrets, even though this was not for want of imagination or the desire to uncover its mysteries. At the same time as *WindWells* was on show, the adjacent Queensland Museum presented *The Last Days of Burke and Wills* and a narrative of the hopeless and tragic search for north-south crossing. Australian historian Michael Cathcart has constructed a critical questioning of the mythology surrounding accounts of water in Australian history, in the 2009 book, *The Water Dreamers: The Remarkable History of our Dry Continent*. Cathcart's book examines the impact of settlers' visions of a water-rich land and the aspiration to make their dream a reality, which has so far been realised in massive irrigation and hydro-engineering schemes that continue to wreak devastation on so many Australian river systems. The heroic tragedy of Burke and Wills maintains an old claim over the Australian imagination, even though their supposed mission to locate the great inland sea is yet another untenable myth.

Resisting conformity to dominant representations of the past, *WindWells* transforms the construction of history into a productive and playful questioning of the institution itself. The State of Library Queensland is an extremely well facilitated modern sandstone building bursting with exhaustive and rich archives. Sandwiched between the Gallery of Modern Art and the Queensland Art Gallery, not far from The Museum of Queensland, *WindWells* is located at the physical and conceptual crossing point of contemporary art, state archive and historical and curatorial analysis. Once the sole domain of the scholar, in Australia artists are more frequently interacting with historical collections. Institutions are increasingly recognizing the lateral interpretation of archival material by artists and the potential for artistic presentation in engaging visual or tactile forms as a valuable means of making the esoteric repositories of large collections more accessible to the public. Artists are thus being called upon by state institutions to take up fellowships as in Tom Nicholson and Tony Birch's work with the State Library of Victoria on the *Camp Pell Lectures,* presented in 2010 at Artspace, Sydney, or to create exhibitions within state library exhibition spaces like

WindWells. Hoffie and Purcell's work confidently participates in a dialogue with its host institution in a dynamic interpretation of history, as a mode of research is being employed to make an interpretation that has the capacity to free up some of the secrets that scholarly or archival practice tends to store away within its own inherently categorising process.

For, contrary to popular conception, history is not a static entity. It is in a continual state of flux, a flux that gives rise to the consternation and regulation of affected social and governmental forces, because collective cultural consensus notably forms around the positive, useful or truthful aspects of the past, which are geared to suit the prevailing interests of the privileged or ascendant members of that society. Which plays out as a radical forgetting because inconvenient truths are never far away. This is the basis of German philosopher Walter Benjamin's contention in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History,* of 1940, that amnesia operates at the service of historicism, maintaining a set of coherent views to preclude challenges to its official narrative.[11] Nowhere is this "historicism" more apparent than in Australia, a nation that is as much a constitutional construct today as it was for the heroic British imperialists sent to claim the continent as an unmapped, unpopulated and timeless territory. Written on the eve of the Nazi devastation of Europe, in the *Theses* Benjamin foretells of a warning that he claimed would come as a flash in a moment of danger and that this would take the form of spectre of a suppressed past, namely Fascism, which was about to be raised from the dead. We should pay heed to such warnings for the spectre today is all the more dangerous for being concealed within pantomime campaigns with no-names like "War on Terror", the ubiquitous "Peace Keeping Mission", and in Australia the ongoing Northern Territory "Intervention".

Just four years earlier, however, Benjamin pinned his hopes for the future welfare of historical consciousness on the on the eponymous figure of the storyteller.[12] In the 1936 essay, *The Storyteller,* Benjamin's ideal narrator operates contrarily to historicism, the storyteller's allegorical mode having the capacity to flood the retrieval of the past with meaning, enabling the recognition of pastness in each moment so that it returns in a present reification.

Hoffie and Purcell show no fear of storytelling as *WindWells* activates collective memory through allegory, associative narrative, myth and metanarrative. The characters of Pepper

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[11] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. Fontana: London, 1973, 245-255.

[12] Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the work of Nikolai Leskov", *Illuminations,* 83-107.

and Palethorpe in the exhibition carry meaning backwards too, like the *Angelus Novus* that Benjamin called upon as the personification of the Angel of History, with the "storm of progress" propelling him into the "future to which his back is turned".[13] Hoffie and Purcell's installation is also like Benjamin's other atlas of 19th century mnemonics, the great but unfinished *Passagen Werk*, because in repurposing a whole range of narratives *WindWells* brings a specific section history to account for itself through a rethinking of water and place. And it is about time such an account was made, for Australian suffers badly from the deliberately selective telling of its past, a practice that explicable but not excusable for being part and parcel of the need to maintain the conceptual premise of white sovereignty.

The scale of the problem is hard to fathom, except when it is related to us through narrative, as it is in *WindWells* where we encounter the impracticability of the European mindset in one of Professor Pepper's failed feats of artifice that Hoffie and Purcell uncovered in the SLQ archives. The story is of an ostentatious affair, staged by coincidence in the windmill manufacturing town of Toowoomba, in which Pepper hosted a spectacular rainmaking demonstration. This took place in 1882, during a period of extreme drought in the region. Despite the fanfare and a series of electrically charged fireworks, and while making the link between water conjuring and magic arts explicit, Pepper failed to produce a single drop of rain, hopelessly raising the crowd's anticipation a bit like the little glass voltage chambers in the SLQ gallery that continuously fire yet have no effect on the endlessly rolling storm clouds in the big circular projection.

The 1919 picture of *Mr Tilney and son water divining,* reproduced in the *WindWells* catalogue, illustrates the mix resourcefulness and mythology invested in the sourcing of water by European pioneers.[14] The whole scene is oddly staged like a magic show. Fashioned in the style of its time, the backdrop and shallow setting contribute to its theatricality. The weirdest feature of all is the most obvious: the two men have cast their gaze to the studio floor and are staring intently at a pile of dirt that has been placed there, staring intently at nothing but dust. By doing this they show that divining water is not simply about locating underground wells but that water can be called up from the deep. Tilney and his son demonstrate how the search for water might be a reciprocal process in which the land is listened to and this is a spiritual practice for which the diviner applies faith. European empiricism is evidently immaterial to the practice, not because the diviners were

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[13] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations,* 249.

[14] *WindWells, ex. cat.,* 11.

spiritualised by finding water in this way but because they tapped directly into a watery consciousness of that particular place.

In its alternate, somewhat anarchic historicisation, *WindWells* aligns icons of the industrial age with mythic histories of water. Rolling rainclouds gather force, machinery parts are forged, the windmill turns without wind and Professor Pepper's ghost endlessly returns in his top hat, cane and waistcoat to call up a forgotten period of popular European culture in which the inexplicability of the sciences were gleefully elucidated by illusionist arts and where magic was thought of as easily interchangeable with logic. Coming at end of the first hundred years of Australian colonisation, the magic show was popularized around the mid-late 19th century alongside the birth of photography, which was widely imagined as yet another manifestation of the supernatural in a material form.[15] Other conceptions of photography existed at the time but, with an emphasis on the staged imagery of Tilney the water diviner and the carnivalesque Pepper, Hoffie and Purcell chose the psycho-spiritual incarnation of photography over its rational or empiricist lineage. Situating the search for and production of water at the juncture of three powerful forms of conjuring – the windmill, the magician and early photography – Hoffie and Purcell have not shied from presenting their ideas as illusionism, and as such sympathy for magic is constructive in the appreciation of the project. What *WindWells* can assist us in doing, nonetheless, is to recognise how the icons of illusionism are bound up with the mnemonics of storytelling in the continuum of history. Already embedded in our consciousness, the windmill for example is an icon of pioneering endeavour and, while the idea of invention is pivotal to Australian mythology, Hoffie and Purcell reconceptualise the legend by reinscribing the machine as a "windwell". From this renaming the artists point out that, technically speaking, the common moniker is incorrect, for a windmill's primary purpose is to sluice water to power a mill to grind down grains into various kinds of flour, while the Australian version is a glorified pump. Still, in collective Australian imagination, the windmill is both ubiquitous and enigmatic; its rusty cries an unforgettable reverberation for anyone who has ever visited the country.

While Hoffie and Purcell's windwell turns without any wind, its fantastic appearance is inseparable from its practical purpose of plumbing the groundwater. Except the well is dry. We know this because the blue pipes have been perforated with thousands of tiny holes, each one emitting a beam of light, creating an array of twinkling stars instead of spouting

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[15] See *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, Clement Cheroux et al., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.

water. The painted pipes wend their way through the gallery, in and out of the walls, feeding something like subterranean wisdom into the empty tanks via its magic plumbing system. In phantasmic mode, the book wells fill up with the kind of wisdom that is held in books, as the usually discreet conventions of knowledge are turned inside out just like *WindWells'* corpulent library, with its denuded volumes flapping about, giving their content away. This flagrant outing of knowledge contravenes the customary containment of the public library, which is paradoxically often only accessible if you know how to get to the source.

Our relationship to the Australian environment is not so different: in dry country you never know the next source of water, and survival depends on being constantly alert to the prospect of its being found. Yet, during the last two centuries of colonial habitation in Australia such contingency has been difficult to conceive. We now face a time in which a new sensitivity to and awareness of the land constitutes the best chance of sustainable habitation. The imaginary European vision of constantly manageable supplies of water, of flowing rivers, consistent rainfalls, temperate seasons and full reservoirs was a fiction from the start. If the waters could be heard as song, as they are in the pipes and tanks in *WindWells*, they would intone to us that instinct should be our guide. But, like the coming of new languages to a country, the diversity, underworldliness, inaccessibility and irrationality of intuition is like a thousand babbling tongues: we understand nothing. That's where in telling the story of Palethorpe and Pepper's practical magic *WindWells* reminds us how to be resourceful with knowledge, to know how to know and to know how to intuit a future that is more in tune with the metaphysics of the land.

WindWells: channelling & divining
Pat Hoffie and Stefan Purcell
State Library of Queensland Gallery
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Lily Hibberd is an artist, writer. She is founding editor of *un Magazine* and lectures in the Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University.