About the exhibition

The aim of the exhibition was to document the everyday and imaginary hopes of marginalised young people in Adelaide, Australia. All of the visual material presented in the exhibition was produced by the young people. The exhibition was curated by Simon Robb and Catherine Manning and was the result of a collaboration between the Migration Museum and the University of South Australia research project 'Doing social sustainability: the utopian imagination of youth on the margins' (2006–08). The research project was supported by the Australian Research Council's Linkage Projects funding scheme.

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Acknowledgements

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- Youth Education Centre (Department of Education and Children's Services – DECS)
- Bowden Brompton Community School (DECS)
- Dept of Further Education, Employment, Science & Technology (DFEEST)
- Social Inclusion Unit (Dept of the Premier and Cabinet)

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Foreword

This is an exhibition with a difference that challenges those who put it together and those who view it. It did not begin in the usual way with an idea and the collection of objects. It is a collection of images and text that arose from a research project undertaken by University of South Australia researchers in partnership with the Migration Museum, the Social Inclusion Unit (Dept of the Premier and Cabinet) and the Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Training. It was supported by the Australian Research Council through its Linkage Grants program. Collaborative research projects such as this seek to connect researchers to those developing policies and programs and the wider public by making known their results so that a larger group might benefit.

It is in this spirit that Hope: the utopian imagination of young people on the margins is offered. The essay in this catalogue explores the wider intellectual context and meaning of this project. Here we set out the more immediate challenges faced by researchers and curators alike as we developed this new approach. Complicating the task was the researchers’ decision to work with young people generally considered to be on the margins of social life in South Australia. They are not the young people gracing the pages of the press as academic prize winners or sporting heroes. Some might appear in police reports, others in statistics deploring the fact that not enough young people complete their secondary schooling, still others in concerned accounts of teenage pregnancy or drug use.

While some depict them as on the social and economic margins, they are fully central to their own lives and milieus. They were also full participants in the research, taking photographs, imagining futures and speaking with us about their hopes. In this sense they fit the brief of the Migration Museum. In presenting the stories of migration and settlement, the Migration Museum grapples with the business of presenting the complexities of Australia’s cultural diversity, developed through the arrival of frequent waves of immigrants and refugees. Whilst cultural diversity might describe the
larger narrative, the individual stories focus on the cultural origins and identity of individuals and communities. At the museum there is an acceptance that cultural diversity and identity is both complex and many layered. The Hope exhibition offers a focus on age and class in presenting the views of young people whose opinions are rarely sought and usually do not find their way into museum displays.

When curators put an exhibition together it is often through objects that personal stories are told. They frequently return to the people interviewed. The story may change as people see their words and images represented. Hope, however, came as a completed research project. While the museum had a presence on the reference committee for the project, it relied on the university’s research team to gather the material that would become the exhibition. The team brought this information to the museum in the form of academic reports, quotations from the young people, photographs, drawings, and transcripts of interviews the young people took part in.

The young people who took part in the research project were frequently transient, and often difficult to contact to check text or presentation. This might have led to an exhibition that was filtered through a heavy academic lens as well as a curatorial one. Through the strength of the content produced by the young people themselves, and the commitment of the research team to ensuring the young people’s voices are heard, the exhibition, we believe, has stayed true to its intent – to enable young people from the margins to present their own perspective on an imagining of their future.

A research project involving young people whose behaviours confront the mainstream, indeed at times challenge legal boundaries, necessarily evokes a duty of care on our part and as such we have guaranteed anonymity or masked a participant’s identity wherever possible. We have consulted widely on these matters, with legal advisors, with South Australia Police and with representatives of the Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia. We hope that viewers of this exhibition will leave feeling challenged and with an understanding of the different and often difficult lives of some young people. We also seek to evoke hope in viewers: an understanding that, while some young people seek pleasure in transgressive activities, they also desire futures common to us all: a secure job, loving and friendly relationships, the sense of home and family, a sense of play – and fun.

Alison Mackinnon, Viv Szekeres, Catherine Manning and Simon Robb
Hope: the utopian imagination and social sustainability

By Simon Robb, Alison Mackinnon, Peter Bishop, Patrick O’Leary and Anton Hart

Utopian thinking allows us to explore the idea of hope and of a future without limits. The works in this exhibition are the everyday and invented moments, spaces and relationships born of hopefulness for the future that bloom in research inspired by utopian thinking.

The works in this exhibition come from a research project that aimed originally to expand and enrich ideas about social sustainability. These are typically about the articulation of hopes for a better society in the context of options for practical change. Utopias, on the other hand, typically involve the presentation of ideas associated with hope that are not limited by practicalities or the need for positive change. Utopias are that aspect of hope that is left out of social sustainability.

Young people and the margins

Utopias are absent from social sustainability debates and so too are the voices of those we call young people on the margins. Their views offer a different and generational challenge to the more anodyne depictions of hope and the future found in conventional views of sustainable societies, and indicate that we may need to consider the centrality of marginal ideas about hope and the future.

The young people involved in this project would probably not describe themselves as being on the margins. It is a label given to them by other people. The young people, instead of describing themselves as marginal, may see themselves as central to their friends, families and the spaces they inhabit. The phrase ‘young people on the margins of society’ can be used productively by some groups to assist in education, care and learning. It may be used negatively by those with power to entrench their power. It can be used to describe a group of young people who have problems with crime, school attendance, drug use or social behaviour. The world in which these young people participate has often been shaped by a past characterised by abuse, violence and other trauma. Their response to their past has been interpreted in a variety of ways by institutions, professionals, peers and family. Sometimes the past has been used to understand why these young people are marginalised; at other times essentialist ideas such as character flaws are used to attribute cause and this can serve to further categorise young people and exacerbate marginalisation. In a similar way the construction of the future cannot be separated from both the past and current context of young people’s lives.
Process and product

The works in Hope come from research done with young people aged 13 to 18 who attended alternative education schools in South Australia in 2006 and 2007. The researchers interviewed students, talked with them in class, encouraged them to draw and gave them a camera to take photographs of places, people and things that they associate with hopefulness and the future. In addition they were asked to imagine, without limits, ‘something’ in an empty room of the museum. The exhibition aims to be true to both the ideas of the young participants and the intellectual context from which their ideas were produced.

The photographs produced are expressive of the idea of art into life, of young people taken in their world – at home, the skate park or the city, alone or with friends. They are often glimpses of a dark world, of desolate empty ruins and spaces covered in scrawled chaotic graffiti tags, but also celebratory moments with their friends and family, and with favourite possessions. These images are highly reminiscent of the work of important contemporary artists such as Bill Henson, Wolfgang Tillmans and Larry Clark. Tillmans became known in the early 1990s for his photographs of young people taken in their social environment – in clubs, at parties and at home, and his images are important documents of Generation X. Larry Clark’s photographs and films from the early 1960s to the present day are confronting and document young people longing to escape their confines through risk taking and danger. Henson creates intense photographs that are painterly and darkly cinematic, bringing together the formal and classical with the gritty, casual dramas of the everyday, of darkened streets, of ruined spaces. There is of course a haunted quality to this space, and it is in this haunted half-light that adolescent hope soars. This ruined and haunted space is, we might argue, utopian.

There is also present in the work produced, particularly with the textual descriptions of an imagined exhibit, a surreal or absurdist tendency. Such images seem to be significant in envisaging hope or just helping to provide or ignite a spark that can reanimate the world. Although in these works the use of the camera may in some sense mitigate against the expression of this surreal or absurdist sensibility, due to a general use in our society of the camera as a documentary instrument, the camera has still been used to make strange the ordinary world. Hope comes from the search for ways to reanimate everyday things, to gain another more vibrant perspective on an otherwise mundane, entrapping, going-nowhere everydayness. The imaginative exercises, on the other hand, seem to allow a fuller range of expression for this absurdist surrealism and for a re-mythologising, fantasy-making quality of
hope. Whether in photographic estrangement, or in textual narratives, the surrealist impulse is an entry point into utopian thinking, much in the way that Ernst Bloch described utopia as being a waking dream.

**Hopefulness and relationships**

A strong theme in the works in this exhibition is the idea that hopefulness appears in relationships between family members and between friends. Sometimes the photographs in the exhibition document a problematic idea of hopefulness. For example, there is a photo showing a young man who is laughing and making an offensive gesture. The young man is a friend of the photographer. This then is a photo that documents a friendship. It documents a deliberately provocative and offensive, yet pleasurable, idea of hopefulness that is also a contribution to ideas about what hopefulness might mean. Likewise, there is a photo showing a young woman posing provocatively with her tongue stuck out. Hopefulness here is documented as being present in play, both accepting and sending up sexuality. Hopefulness in this case is found in a provocative and playful relationship with an imagined or implied other.

The works in the exhibition also document family and friends who participate, as Kristeva put it, in an ‘economy of care’. An economy is a system of exchange, so an economy of care is an exchange of kindness, ‘an attentiveness and courtesy’ or a reciting of a narrative and a listening to that narrative. An economy of care also involves openness to possibilities, and it is when we are immersed in such an economy that the pleasures of relationships emerge.

The idea of an economy of care has been canvassed at great length by several feminist writers, and indeed there is a gendered dimension to this economy. It is the case, and is visible here, that caring has been most associated with women and girls and so it is here that many of the photos and imaginative exercises that depict care were those of the young women in the project. They were most likely to offer images of children, of food and of their friends and their pets. Yet this economy of care is not exclusively a feminine project, as we shall see, and can lead young men into both caring activities and, paradoxically, into violence enacted through a context of care.

For Alphonso Lingis, the hopefulness that relationships of care engender mean that hope is a kind of birth, something new coming into the world. It is associated with laughter, the joy of laughing with others when things have gone awry, and with space for ‘something else to begin’. Hope is found in
those spaces and moments where something new, and hence something partially unknown, appears.
Hope comes from nowhere, or at least its presence can’t be predicted from what has preceded it.\textsuperscript{4} It is a break with the past that also does not necessarily have an end point or a place where it stops. It is in this sense a somewhat timeless experience, freed as it is from the past and the future. It is immersion in an intense sense of the present.

An economy of care can likewise be thought of in terms of a gift economy, where people are bound to each other through giving, receiving and reciprocating.\textsuperscript{5} A gift economy is not a commodity economy; it’s another way of describing the interactions that bind people together socially, despite commodity exchange and globalised capitalism. We are speaking here of an exchange of gestures of care, intimacy, understanding, thoughtfulness, respect, and happiness.

Sustaining hopefulness through gift relationships, or an economy of care, does not necessarily have positive consequences. It might mean sustaining relationships and their consequences rather than moving forward in school, to work, in ways that mark one out from the peer group. For some young women caring relationships might mean early pregnancy, early immersion in a milieu that mitigates against acknowledged markers of success. Likewise, sustaining hope through relationships can sometimes mean doing crime, as one young person said:

\begin{quote}
Sometimes the future with crime and death in it seems appealing. It’s hard to resist that future when so many of your relatives and family members are doing that too. You can’t back down when you’re out with them because they will look at you like you’re a bitch and smack you around.
\end{quote}

In this situation renouncing crime and violence is to give up hope: it is to give up the sense of belonging that emerges in these relationships. In one sense crime can sustain hope, the hope that emerges from relationships with friends and family when those family and friends are involved in crime and violence.

**Hopeful places**

A utopian space is not necessarily one that is perfect or ‘well wrought’. It can be any kind of space that is productive of imaginative activity. Any place that shelters the daydream, protects and encourages the imagination, is utopian. This place is typically the family home, at least the family
home in its ideal form, where economies of care are protected and nourished. Being is something that needs to be protected and made safe or, at least, being needs to feel that it is safe, and certain images can help us to imagine that we are safe and secure. The image that perhaps best exemplifies a self protected is the house. Bachelard suggested that the house image has become 'the topography of our intimate being'. It is the space in which we write our inner self; it is the space where the inner self can be mapped, where the inner self can be read. There is a double movement at play with houses where we inhabit them and they inhabit us; by remembering houses and rooms we learn to abide within ourselves. The house image then, is a site where we do work on our own inner being and on those feelings that we value, all within the protection of the walls and roof and things that are gathered around us to help give us proofs or illusions of stability. Young people have documented places of hope where they are less likely to be scrutinised or evaluated, places where they can maintain connections and author their identity independently.

Alongside the conventional family home, the backyard and the bedroom, alongside these spaces that protect the daydream, and foster an exchange of kindness, hopefulness can also be found in places that are run-down, unwanted and unloved. It can be found in what appears to be a ruin. The important point is the degree to which a space ‘shelters the daydream’. There are ruins featured in these works that are described as being ‘like a home’ or a ‘secret garden’. The ruin is a transitional place, between what it was once and what it is becoming. It invites those who go there to consider the idea of change, of transition. Change and transition are part of the lexicon of hopefulness. They are also part of the operation of the imagination, where the ordinary is transformed into something new, where something new is created. Ruins invite speculation about the possibility of hope and they invite the imagination to do its work.

**The time of utopias**

Ernst Bloch described a utopia as a ‘waking dream’, as the timeless pulse within time itself or, in other words, ‘the aporia of the non-time of time’. This is the time that belongs to meditation, contemplation, daydreaming, imagining, creating. It is a time of thinking without thought. Utopias are almost always elsewhere; they don’t belong, or they can’t belong to the here and now. They participate in another world to this one at the same time as constituting that other world. Often the time of that other world is the future.
The time in this exhibition is often explicitly of the future. Some strong themes emerged when the future was considered. Firstly, the future was a term that this group of young people felt alienated from (it doesn't belong to them). The future is something that 'other people make predictions about'. A manifestation of this alienation can perhaps be seen in the representation of alien or inhuman forms in the drawings and imaginary museum exhibits. The future also means crime, violence, mass destruction and World War III. Violent death was a strong recurring theme with the young people and here it is important to note that there were two versions of violent death: the one in which we feel doomed to be a victim against our will, and the one that is desired as a kind of righteous act. The first is feared and the second is desired. If we combine the initial idea about the future then we have three strong feelings: alienation, fear and desire. There are also more ordinary versions of the future here too where the future becomes a site of hopefulness when it contains wealth, a home, family and friendship. The time of utopias is the time of ordinary aspirations yet to come, but also the time of violent desire, fear and alienation.

The appeal of the future, as Derrida put it, is the appeal of the other, and it is this appeal that we need to respond to now. This is the responsibility that we have towards the future: both the appeal of otherness, and the doing that allows us to hear that appeal. The future is always something that never arrives and belongs alongside the other undeconstructables: 'justice, openness to difference, the wholly other, the marginalized'.

What is worth saying about the future, or worth representing, are those words and representations that continue to deconstruct what is meant by the future. Yet at the same time, the future is also calling on us to act now on behalf of justice, the need of justice, the need of the marginalised, not so that justice can arrive, finally, nor that the marginalised can be central, finally, but so that we can sensitise ourselves to their presence even where they appear to be absent.

To what extent have the young people given presence to their utopian imagination? To the extent that they have thought without limits about hope and the future. To the extent that they have re-worked their world as a manifestation of hope. (This, as Bloch suggested, is the work of the imagination, to conduct a revolution against the ordinary world, that the utopian imagination is part of the revolutionary transformation of the world.)
What can utopias offer? A new way of looking at the everyday world based on hope. A process that produces objects (images and words) that document transformation and revaluation. Working without limits produces artefacts that illuminate everyday life with hopefulness.

Notes

1. The research project 'Doing social sustainability: the utopian imagination of youth on the margins' is a University of South Australia research project funded through the Australian Research Council Linkage grants program (2006–08). Partner Organisations: Migration Museum; Youth Education Centre; Department of Further Education, Employment, Science and Technology (DFEEST); Bowden Brompton Community School; Social Inclusion Unit (Department of the Premier and Cabinet).
The exhibition
There’s a lounge room in the museum, she says. In the lounge room is my mother, my aunty, my little sisters and brothers, and a baby. Mum and aunty are having coffee. The kids are playing X Box ‘Resident evil’. The adults are talking about me, about how to help me. They’re kind. In the room there are poems: ‘I want you to love me’ and ‘Love me’. There’s splashing coming from the pool outside. The exhibit is called ‘Feelings that flow along’.

There’s an enormous glass cube suspended from the ceiling of the museum, he says. There are breathing holes in the top of the cube. Inside the cube are more cubes. Inside these cubes are drug addicts separated by glass from drugs. This is happening in the future where there is no food.

In the museum, he says, there are stars and money. There are stars on the ceiling. I take out my mobile phone, he says, and show pictures of myself holding a fist full of money.

In the museum, he says, there’s a beautiful beach. The beach has beautiful sand, and it’s got all the rocks on the side, and it’s got beautiful clear water, and just behind it there’s beautiful scrub with lots of wildlife. On the bay is a boat.

In the museum, he says, all the prime ministers in the world bring their flags and burn them. Then they all hold up a flag with a peace sign inside an orange triangle.

There’s a giant hillside or cliff in the museum, he says. On the edge of the cliff is a large tree, an elm or oak. The exhibit is titled ‘A tribute to humans’.

A girl is in her car, in the museum, she says. The girl’s driving with her friends to a nice party, where there are lots of nice people, friendly people that all have lives and have jobs and that will go to work every weekday, and then come home on the weekend and think, ‘we can let ourselves go now’.

In the museum, he says, there’s a fish tank with a fish inside it. Next to the fish is a garden gnome who is smoking a pipe. Next to the gnome is the sign ‘gone fishing’ and the fish is saying ‘I’m not stupid’. The gnome gets up into the fish tank and catches the fish and eats it.

In the museum is a room that’s ‘hot’, she says: there’s models draped over cars, there are cigarettes all over the floor, there’s money on the floor and money hanging from the ceiling. There’s fluffy dice inside the car and the models are primo models in fishnet stockings.

Yoda, he says, is in the museum. Yoda’s wearing a jet pack. He’s got a chopstick in one hand and tries to steal food from museum visitors. He has a lightsaber in the other hand. In this exhibit Yoda exists in a time when there is no food. There is a sign next to Yoda that says ‘I’m hungry’.

In the museum, he says, there’s a garden with large trees, grass, dappled light and flowers. The garden smells clean. The garden is reached by travelling a long hard walk where the walker moves away from civilization. It’s a secret garden, it’s a silent place, without people, a garden located in the future.