

Chance Encounters

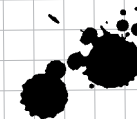
Chance Encounters

Artists Aleksandra Mir, Anne Mestitz, Bianca Barling,
Barbara Campbell, Elizabeth Woods, Jim Everett,
Louise Haselton, Nicholas Folland and Tracey Allen

Curators Mary Knights and Maria Kunda

Long Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre, Hobart
25 March – 30 April 2009

SASA Gallery, UniSA, Adelaide
24 June – 31 July 2009



some call me water

Pigments and mirrors their hues
in me the *life* giver
of all things *with* my connector
to all the things *of* this place
as the carrier *in* my endless
journey that for *all* life is my natural
cycle for everything *of* all-life
for without me life *is* no longer
able to be here *on* this
traveling *planet* of all-life
until the *full-moon* comes again
taking my all-life *in the* tide
with other travelling *water* moving
as cloud and sun on a good *day*
look for the all-cloud of *dark-water*
my brother and *sister connection*
where ria-warrawah *lives quiet*
underneath with *root*-veins caressing
every flow of *my* still that moves
in hearts *and* blood-water canals
pump and *savour* every taste of my
colours *journeying* with talking water
who's song *harmonises* the words
in me babbling over *rocks* and smooth

passages that carry *me in bloodlines*
of all-life of everything relating *to* every
other thing that is life *or not* life
and the timelessness *of my* journey
into all worlds *within the* country
of all-life and everything *else* living
dead or simply there with *everything*
until my journey comes to *needy* places
give life for dry *to grow* anew
all-life and connections *over* voids
that are dark cloud *or* moon cloud
with sun my blender *in* heated air
taking me yet again to *new* worlds
of all-life across our *country* planet
a water *planet* over country
with fire and ashes *to suck* me water
into a oneness ashes *blood* water dry
with my floating *in space* until lagoon
has my spirit for *swans'* nests' eggs
some call me water
keeping *their cycle* touching families
and the dry moon's ever thirst moving
me in *watery travel* of oceans currents
ever cycle and life *be with* me always
some call me water

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NICHOLAS FOLLAND
Navigator 1 & 2, 2008

2.

Introduction

by Rosemary Miller
Director
Salamanca Arts Centre
Hobart, Tasmania

SALAMANCA ARTS CENTRE (SAC) creates opportunities for Tasmania's artists and for Tasmanians to engage with the arts. SAC is Tasmania's flagship multi-arts centre and The Long Gallery is our major exhibition space, a much-loved public gallery visited by many Tasmanians and visitors to Hobart. Since 2001, Salamanca Arts Centre has annually commissioned a major curated exhibition for the Long Gallery featuring the work of Tasmanian contemporary artists alongside their national and international peers.

Outstanding curators have developed intriguing exhibitions presenting challenging ideas and perspectives that have fascinated the many thousands that have viewed them. Most exhibitions have toured elsewhere in Tasmania and Australia, and every second year the major exhibition has been included in the biennial Ten Days On The Island festival's visual arts program. For 2009, SAC commissioned curators Mary Knights and Maria Kunda. Their chosen artists' encounters with chance extended beyond the Long Gallery to headlined community engagement on the Hobart Mercury's front page, a rarity for art.

Chance Encounters was opened in Hobart by Sir Guy Green, Chairman of Ten Days On The Island, on 25 March 2009, a warm autumn Wednesday afternoon. On 24 June 2009 the exhibition opens at the SASA Gallery in Adelaide. What's the chance that the Adelaide Advertiser will hold the front page too?

Chance Encounters involved greatly valued key partners: initial research funds through CAST's Exhibition Development Fund, Arts Tasmania's and Hobart City Council's commitment to SAC's Annual Arts Program, the Gordon Darling Foundation's support for the catalogue launched in the Long Gallery on April 5, the SASA Gallery, University of South Australia and the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania. We thank them all most sincerely.

Chance Encounters

by Mary Knights
March 2009

AN ECCENTRIC SPINSTER lives alone with her pampered flat-faced Chinchilla cat, whose long fur has mauve highlights, in Bianca Barling's video *Last Chance Motel*. Like her pet the woman is carefully groomed: she wears a slinky pastel house gown, a fake pearl necklace and her polished nails are shocking apricot pink.

A trashy aesthetic pervades everything in the bed-sit, exuding a sense of carefully maintained cheap luxury. Every aspect of the cloyingly hyper-sensual interior has been manicured with a control reminiscent of Des Esseintes' house at Fontenay, in Huysmans' book *Against Nature*¹. A pale-pink quilted nylon bedspread with a gathered flounce is neatly spread over the bed; gaudy satin cushions are carefully placed and the carpet is a violet shag-pile. There are no windows, and the nauseatingly sweet pastel colours of the unaired room suggest a rank pungency of lavender, lilac, patchouli and kitty litter.

There is a tragic sense of futility, loss and devastating pathos. She touches up her heavy make-up, and eats ice cream with her cat sharing the one spoon. She seems to be reminiscing, perhaps waiting. *Last Chance Motel* resonates with the often-retold urban myth (or perhaps it is true) of the lonely aging spinster who lives alone in a small claustrophobic urban flat and devotes all of her attention and love to an adored and indulged cat. On her death, which invariably is not discovered for a number of days, the precious moggie with no qualms or sentimental reservations begins to eat its owner.

ANDRÉ BRETON (1896–1966), the young leader of the Surrealists, took the famous phrase '*as beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissection table of a sewing machine and an umbrella*'² in response to the nineteenth-century cycle of 'songs' titled *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869) by Comte de Lautréamont. For Breton the phrase alluded to the disturbed beauty, violence and visceral juxtapositions in Lautréamont's song cycle which questions the nature of existence and explores the intersection of desire, evil and cruelty.

Little is known of Lautréamont—the *nom de plume* of Isidore Ducasse (1846–70)—who died of a fever at the age of twenty-four in Montmartre during the Commune and siege of Paris. He was born in Montevideo, where his father was a secretary at the French Consulate, and sent to France when still a child to complete his education. At twenty-three he paid four hundred francs in advance to Lacroix to publish *Les Chants de Maldoror* which the publisher subsequently decided not to distribute.³ Lautréamont claimed that Lacroix '*refused to have the book appear because it depicted life in such bitter colours that he was afraid of the public prosecutor*.'⁴ It was eventually distributed by Poulet-Malassis, who had experience handling banned and offensive books with a brochure stating that: '*like Baudelaire, like Flaubert, he believes that the aesthetic expression of evil implies the keenest appetite for the good, the highest possible morality*.'⁵ Although not sold in France until after Lautréamont's death and initially attracting little interest, the unique qualities of *Les Chants de Maldoror* were eventually recognised by the critic Remy de Gourmont (1858–1915) who lauded the work as a '*magnificent, almost inexplicable stroke of genius*', and introduced it to the Symbolist milieu declaring that it belonged to an '*abbreviated library*' to be read by those whose '*ill-made spirits will not lend themselves to the everyday joys of the commonplace; or of conventional morality*.'⁶

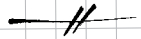
Despite voicing reservations about its literary qualities, the Symbolist writers were fascinated by the book. Léon Bloy recognised a '*prophetic unconsciousness*' while noting that '*[a]s for literary form there is none. It is liquid lava. It is crazy, black, devouring*.'⁷ Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote that '*the Comte de Lautréamont is talented with a fine madness. That singular book with its comic lyricism, a bloody rage reminiscent of the Marquis de Sade, and amidst a load of sentences put together like four pennyworth, a few that burst with magnificent sonority*.'⁸

Lautréamont's harrowing narrative unfurls like a series of linked nightmares. As the protagonist proceeds on his intense and lonely metaphysical journey, bizarre and shocking images are conflated, realities shift, complacency is shattered. Often Lautréamont's ferocious insights evoke disgust, repulsion and nausea. Eliciting empathy, the second song of Maldoror begins with a

lyrical and introspective passage about the protagonist's desire for intimacy and search for a love. As he sat alone on a rocky cliff, looking out to sea he reflected how he had '*...sought a soul resembling my own and could not find one. I ransacked all the corners of the earth, but to no avail. Yet I could not remain alone. I needed someone to commend my nature, someone whose ideas resembled mine.*'⁹

As the sky assumed '*a blackness almost as black as the human heart*'¹⁰ Maldoror plunged into the depths of despair. His thoughts and actions are vicious and reveal a callous disregard for others and the extreme possibilities of human cruelty. On the horizon, a ship was sinking in a violent storm. Maldoror watched with malicious passivity as the sailors and passengers abandon ship and drown in the rough sea. He shot the one survivor, who was swimming towards the shore and he watched with cool fascination as sharks circled in the red foaming sea, mechanically tearing bodies apart, then attacking each other in a frenzy. Among the fighting sharks there was one in whom he recognised a kindred spirit. Galvanised by a deep desire to know her, he plunged into the sea clenching a knife between his teeth to fight by her side. Having decimated all of their opponents they slowly circled each other, each gazing with fear and craving into the others' eyes, then '*...rolling over each other towards the depths of the abyss, they united in a long, chaste and hideous coupling...*'¹¹

The callous nihilism of Lautréamont's chants shock, as does the violent transgression of expected norms, lack of sentimentality and sensitivity and revelation of unspeakable truths. Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* delve into aspects of the human psyche that struggle with reality, obsession and despair, and are capable of orchestrating the bizarre, the barbaric and the cruel.



THE SURREALISTS CONSIDERED Lautréamont, along with Charles Baudelaire (1821–67) and Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91), as 'part of an unholy Trinity of genius'¹² and admired his 'moral ferocity, fantastic metaphors and sudden flashes of dark humour.'¹³ As well as being profoundly influenced by Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* they were captivated by his *Poésies* (1870)¹⁴ held in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Informed of the existence of this rare book by his friend Louis Aragon, André Breton went to the trouble of recopying it by hand. In the spring of 1919, the Surrealists published it in their magazine, *Littérature*, at which point *Poésies* entered literary history.

In his early attempts to formulate the poetics of the marvellous, Breton was influenced by the poets Guillaume Apollinaire and Pierre Reverdy, as well

as Freudian psychoanalysis and, importantly, his experience as a medical intern. The young Breton dealt with shell-shocked ex-servicemen from the First World War, and in their suffering and delusions he saw the manifestations of an alarming poetic structure. Poetry and psychic trauma for Breton were evidence of a domain of reality that is beyond rationality. In 1918 he became immersed in an exploration of the nature of the lyricism of chance and the unexpected, taking up Reverdy's idea that true poetry produces its strongest emotional impact when relationships are forged between distant realities. Breton accepted this account of the poetic moment: the spark of imagination produced by new and unlikely relationships cast between disparate mental images.

In curating *Chance Encounters* Maria Kunda and I sought to refer to crossovers between Symbolism and Surrealism and include work that resonates, intentionally or unintentionally, with some of the complex ideas and strategies that the Symbolists and the Surrealists engaged, and point to the ongoing vitality of their legacy on contemporary art.

BANAL OBJECTS AND everyday materials are juxtaposed in strange convulsive combinations in Louise Haselton's sculptures and installations. On a dazzling yellow wall several big spider-shells have been suspended. Their thin dry finger-like protrusions have been pierced with silver rings and linked with metal chains in a bondage that is calculated and disturbing. Nearby on an assortment of odd plinths, uncut lumps of quartz crystals have been placed on top of upended classic Alvar Aalto glass vases and large fleshy helmet shells, embellished with incongruous cast aluminium lobes, appear strangely naked and vulnerable.

The inherent nature and quality of stuffs are emphasised by Haselton's peculiar combinations of the found and handmade; organic and inorganic; and things made with high levels of technical skill alongside the '*makeshift, slipshod, cobbled together*'.¹⁵

The discordant fusions intrigue and repel and the dislocation of objects from their usual contexts confound expected associations. Haselton references *The Gleaners and I* by French film-maker Agnès Varda in these strangely dyslexic and disjointed installations of overwrought, anxious and marvellous objects. Varda attempted to '*find a way to see the beauty in the unkempt, of unworthy matter redeemed by love.*'¹⁶

Absence and silence resonate in *Ballistic Voices*. Anne Mestitz was inspired by Aristotle's 'Ballistic Theory' which outlined the hypothesis that



BIANCA BARLING
Last Chance Motel, 2007

objects propelled into the air desire to return to earth. 'To go ballistic' Mestitz suggests '*implies a burst of irrational anger and conjures the notion of voices shooting out into space and then desiring to fall to earth.*'¹⁷ Wedged into loops of wire, two large megaphone-like forms are placed diagonally opposite each other as if in mute communication across the space. Reflective and pristine on the outside and matt black inside, they invite the viewer to peer through the aperture or strain to hear sound, but depletion and silence are magnified by the cones. Alluding to the abyss, they reveal nothing; Mestitz has splashed loud puddles of paint on the floor which suggest the '*voices have fallen transformed into silent synaesthetic splats of colour.*'¹⁸ The blobs of discordant colour—tangerine orange, mid-night blue, citrus yellow—create a revelatory confusion of the senses evoking the tactile qualities of colour and colour of sounds.



THE SYMBOLISTS EMBRACED experiential strategies such as synesthesia, vagueness, musicality, and hyper-sensuality to evoke, rather than state, a position or describe an object, or name a thing. Their fragmented texts and complex metaphors intimated ideas, rather than clearly explicating them, conjuring up the unknown and unknowable and ensuring a multiplicity of open-ended meanings.

In Jim Everett's poetry correspondences of colours, sounds, fragrances and tactile experiences have been evoked to reveal the beauty, spiritual resonances, loss and tragedy embodied in the Tasmanian landscape. Written as part of a collaboration with painter Jonathan Kimberley some call me water responds to the colours and sounds of the country of his people, the Plangermairreenner, around Ben Lomond in North-East Tasmania. Everett traces the tactile qualities of water as it trickles across the country, cycling endlessly and bringing life, and he alludes to dark and haunting absences.



TWO MAPS, ONE pale blue and the other aqua-green, chart vast uninhabited stretches of the Pacific and Indian Oceans. There is no land in sight, not an island or an atoll. The expanse is mapped and measured, but lacking even a compass, there is nothing to indicate where to go or how to proceed. Called *Indian Blue #2* and *Pacific Blue #2* Nicholas Folland's maps suggest the terror of being lost or aimlessly adrift. Everything is out of control and left to chance.

Close to the maps, two tiny four-masted ships are contained in cut-crystal decanters. Put to sea, sails set and billowing, they are models of the ships of exploration, Nicolas Boudin's *Le Géographe* and Matthew Flinder's *Investigator*. While referencing lounge-chair journeys of discovery and bold seafaring ventures into the unknown, they seem tentative and fragile. Like violent dreams or hallucinations of storms and ship-wreck, the watery absinth greens and glimpses of the ships are refracted and smashed in the glass.

As if displaced or convulsed from another space and time, the ends of two mahogany tables protrude from a wall, perplexing and weird. On the shiny polished wood surfaces there is an odd assortment of upended glass-ware and cut-crystal bowls that are strangely reminiscent of brittle icebergs floating on a still sea, and suggestive of the slight physical presence of apparitions. The ethereal objects, which originally may have belonged in a stilted Victorian parlour, are anxious and agitated as if imbued with murmurs and ghostly memories. There is a sense of intense silence and shattered nerves. Carefully preserved and illuminated from below, they have a severe presence, glowing in shadows like repressed desires and thwarted hopes for drowned men.



- ¹ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, New York: Dover Publication: 1969
- ² André Breton, cited by Hugh Honour & John Fleming, *A World History of Art* (London: Laurence King: 1991), p. 680
- ³ Isidore Ducasse, cited by Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods* (London: Vintage: 2001), p. 79
- ⁴ Isidore Ducasse, cited by Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*, 2001, p. 79
- ⁵ Poulet-Malassis, cited by Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*, 2001, p. 79
- ⁶ Remy de Gourmont, Remy de Gourmont, ed. *The Book of Masks*, Atlas Archive Two, ed. & trans. Andrew Mangravite, 1994, p. 190
- ⁷ Léon Bloy, cited by Gaston Bachelard in *Lautréamont*, Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation: 1986, p. 45
- ⁸ J.-K. Huysmans, 'Letter to Jules Destrée, 27 September 1885' Barbara Beaumont, ed. & trans. *The Road from Decadence, from Brothel to Cloister: Selected Letters of J.K. Huysmans*, 1989, p. 71
- ⁹ Lautréamont, 'The Second Song of Maldoror', Remy de Gourmont, ed. *The Book of Masks*, Atlas Archive Two, ed. & trans. Andrew Mangravite, 1994, p. 191
- ¹⁰ Lautréamont, 'The Second Song of Maldoror', Remy de Gourmont, ed. *The Book of Masks*, Atlas Archive Two, ed. & trans. Andrew Mangravite, 1994, p. 191
- ¹¹ Lautréamont, 'The Second Song of Maldoror', Remy de Gourmont, ed. *The Book of Masks*, Atlas Archive Two, ed. & trans. Andrew Mangravite, 1994, p. 194
- ¹² Alexis Lykiard, *Maldoror and the Complete Works of the Comte de Lautréamont* (Boston: Exact Change: 2004), p. v
- ¹³ Andrew Mangravite, 'Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont', Remy de Gourmont, ed. *The Book of Masks*, Atlas Archive Two, Atlas Archive Two, ed. & trans. A. Mangravite, 1994, p. 190
- ¹⁴ Alexis Lykiard, *Maldoror and the Complete Works of the Comte de Lautréamont* (Boston: Exact Change: 2004)
- ¹⁵ Louise Haselton's & Brigid Currie's artists statement, 2006
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*
- ¹⁷ Anne Mestitz, artist notes, unpublished, 2009
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*





LOUISE HASELTON
Double Terminator, 2007

4.

Black Swans

by Maria Kunda
March 2009

A FRIEND OF mine from Tasmania's northwest coast didn't get his driver's licence until late, so as a country youth he regularly thumbed lifts on quiet roads.

Picture the patient hitchhiker staring fixedly into the vanishing point of a long straight road. At last, after a long wait, a car comes into view, but it stays in the distance for an uncanny length of time. There is no driver visible, and the driver's side door is ajar. The hitchhiker watches and discerns that the car is not stationary. It inches closer painfully slowly. As the car eventually draws nearer, a figure can be seen slumped low in the driver's seat. The car stops, the driver sits upright and reaches over to open the on the passenger side door, and his weathered face peers out doubtfully. 'Uh, hello?' says the hitchhiker. 'Mate!' says the driver with relief in his voice, 'Get in! On *that* side, you'll have to drive, I'm blind.' The hitchhiker admits that he cannot drive and the car crawls away, its driver navigating by leaning down and gazing fixedly at the white stripe on the side of the road, from the part-open door. After an interminably long time, the car driven by a blind man melts into the horizon.

A recent book, *The Black Swan* by the mathematician Nassim Nicholas Taleb (born 1960) is a lively critique of the over-riding human tendency to overestimate our capacity for prediction and control of circumstances.¹ Taleb sees our blinkered attitude to improbability as playing out in significant and detrimental ways in the political, economic and social domains. His black swan theory points to hard-to-predict events that fall well beyond the realm of normal expectations. A 'black swan' is statistical outlier that is very high-impact. From a mathematician's perspective, Taleb is concerned with the limitations of conventional mathematical models to describe—let alone predict, extreme phenomena, but his concerns extend to

the behavioural. From psychological research, we know that human cognition operates through pattern-recognition. We privilege perceptions of order, we ignore or repress rogue elements and we conceive of the future based on narratives that take their structure from the past. These tendencies are unsuited to situations of volatility and rate of change, like our present day.

Taleb's purpose with black swan theory is to shatter our illusions of order and alert us to contradiction. Though his motives stop short of poetry, his concerns interleave with those of the Surrealists. The term 'black swan' derives from the ancient Western presumption that all swans were white. A black swan used to signify something that was known not to exist. However, the 17th century discovery of black swans in Australia changed the connotation of the term, which came to refer to a perceived impossibility that does actually come to pass. Thus the black swan also demarks the so-called 'New World' or antipodes as a territory that exposes the limits or falsity of European concepts. Taleb's black swan theory points to a necessity to break the realm of normal expectations and to deliberately explore and become sensitive to the unpredictable.

When I was growing up in Tasmania hitchhiking was a commonplace activity. For my friends and me it was just a form of opportunistic entertainment, mainly a way of getting from town to the beach. For those who grew up in country Tasmania, hitching was more of a necessity. Belanglo backpacker murders notwithstanding, for the most part hitchhiking is fairly reliable and uneventful means of transport, in so far as you are fairly assured of making your way from point A to point B, generally within a reasonable time frame, give or take an hour or so. At best though, hitchhiking is poetry in motion, a practice of everyday life that can pierce the fabric of normality.

A polished pale blue sedan with white bauble trim all around the windscreen and windows pulled up to pick up a friend, near Ulverstone, circa 1979. Inside the car there was *a family of Elvises*, two raven-haired Presleyfied parents and in the back, the offspring of the species: a well-scrubbed male and female. Under the steady gazes of the wife and baby Elvises, the young father Elvis softly asked the hitchhiker where he was headed, and the hitchhiker hesitantly told him. A limitation of hitching is the near impossibility of refusing a lift once it is offered, even if it promises to be freakish. The journey of perhaps an hour with the family of Elvises proceeded in unbroken silence.

When I was young I gave my own name to this order of off-the-grid experience, referring such engagements *meaningless encounters*, but my terminology wasn't quite right: they were not entirely meaningless for they could produce lasting impressions and a sharpening of the senses.



BARBARA CAMPBELL
News Haikus, 2009

To become alert to the improbable is to become more alive and to develop a capacity for *wonder*, as opposed to a deluded sense of certainty. At a later date I began to read the works of surrealist poet and founder of the Surrealist movement, André Breton (1896–1966). Surrealism carries the conviction that *the improbable can happen*, and the will to bring it to pass.

For Breton, Isadore Ducasse's phrase, *as beautiful as the chance encounter between a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table*, captures the way that everyday life is occasionally ruptured by random moments of wonder, rare crystalline clarity, shock, or perturbation.² Moments of rupture or convulsion are the *only* moments of beauty as Surrealism defines it, hence another memorable phrase from Breton's book *Nadja: beauty will be convulsive or it shall not be*. The idea here is that beauty has the power to call into question what passes for reality or knowledge. An artwork that merely describes or resembles what is known fails to be beautiful in Surrealist terms. This position defies any classical sense of order and symmetry and calls into question classifications, boundaries and ideological norms.

In *Poésies* of 1870s, Ducasse (who took the pen name Comte de Lautréamont) openly plagiarized texts by famous authors (among them were Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, La Rochefoucauld's *Maximes*, as well as Jean de La Bruyère, Marquis de Vauvenargues, Dante, Kant and La Fontaine). He thought of it as theft: today we call it appropriation. He also plagiarised and reworked his own *Les Chants de Maldoror*. He wrote of his technique: 'Plagiarism is necessary. It is implied in the idea of progress. It clasps the author's sentence tight, uses his expressions, eliminates a false idea, replaces it with the right idea'.³ Thus for Ducasse the idea behind intellectual theft was not to simply copy, but to *rework*—we might say 'upgrade' the works that had gone before.

It seemed to Breton that Lautréamont's—or rather Ducasse's—poetic process was similar to the utterances made by the shell-shocked patients he had worked with as a medical intern: a process reliant on bringing together dissonant images, which in conjunction produce something new, a sense of illumination. With this sort of illumination rests the ultimate source of revolutionary transformation of everyday life. Max Ernst (1891–1976) thought of collage in the same way. The semi-conscious play of signification that the artist sets in motion is never quite put to rest. The artwork or poem is not a closed circuit, but a generator of unforeseeable ideas.

To try to bring forth the marvellous, the young Surrealists engaged in playful, sometimes ludicrous games and experimental practices like

hypnosis and dream analysis, collaborative actions and games. A favourite was a game in which players write in turn on a sheet of paper, fold it to conceal part of the writing, and then pass it on to the next player for a further contribution. The Surrealists referred to it as *Cadavre exquis*, 'exquisite corpse', because from their first game came the portentous sentence, *Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau* (The exquisite corpse will drink the young wine).⁴ I interpret the phrase as a warning that history or tradition threatens to devour the present, much like Taleb's observation that our expectations formed on basis of the patterns of the past can blind us to the newness of the present. Highlighting an aspect of the *Cadavre exquis* exploits, Breton declared that the game was an extraordinary type of meeting place, because the type of poetry it yielded cannot be wilfully produced, nor brought forth by a single mind. Moreover, the reading effect has an open, highly interpretable quality, due to the peculiar abstract nature of randomised language (either verbal or visual). It had a quality of promoting drift. For Breton—and for the Situationists who came later, the quality of drifting meaning took on a high significance.

UNWITTINGLY IT SEEMS, Nassim Nicholas Taleb's title *The Black Swan* recalls a line in a poem by the fictitious Australian poet Ern Malley, and swan motifs also run through a number of Symbolist poems, all of which seems to be pure coincidence.

The Ern Malley hoax was hatched by two young Australian modernist poets, James McAuley (1917–1976) and Harold Stewart (1916–1995), who, in 1943, created a mythological Australian working class Surrealist poet. Largely motivated by an antipathy to the methods and effects of Surrealism, according to legend, the two young men created most of Malley's oeuvre one sultry afternoon, by filching lines from dictionaries of quotations, and then they used the poems to dupe a young editor Max Harris (1921–1995) who took the bait. When the poems were published their mischief escalated into a scandal with far broader and more damaging consequences than intended, and the ensuing events were become one of Australia's most notorious literary frauds. But even after Malley was exposed as a fake, the poetry that had been a deliberate attempt at obvious pretension and poor quality pastiche, despite its intentions and derivations, had its own curious surreal force for many readers, pointing to the eruption of the marvellous. From the poem Dürer: Innsbruck, 1495, jump these salient lines:



ANNE MESTITZ
Ballistic Voices, 2009

*Now I find that once more I have shrunk
To an interloper, robber of dead men's dream,
I had read in books that art is not easy
But no one warned that the mind repeats
In its ignorance the vision of others. I am still
The black swan of trespass on alien waters.*⁵

IN FRANCE IN the 1950s and '60s the Situationists and radical Lettrists continued a line of Surrealist exploration. Rather than conceiving of culture as the sum of its objects—private possession, marketable goods or subjective emotional states—the Situationists understood the drifting quality of culture as something that takes place between participants, and which derives its existence from being relayed between them—as in the game *Chinese Whispers*. The famous founder-member of the group, Guy Debord along with hundreds of notable international artists who worked in various contexts throughout the late '50s and early '60s, thought of the *context* as being very important for the location of an artist's activities in the world. Conceptual artists and contextual artists of the '70s and '80s also worked in the public sphere, and tried to engage audiences in events and experiences in preference to constructing 'works'. More recently, similar tendencies appear in a movement dubbed 'Littoral art' which is focused on concrete material problems, community issues, and strategic interventions aimed at effecting social change. According to the model of practice, an artist is seen as ideally a critical agent in society, working both on culture and social relations.⁶

Nicolas Bourriaud (born 1965) came to prominence in the late 1990s using the buzzwords 'Relational Aesthetics' to theorise what he saw as a vital tendency in the art of the last couple of decades. He pointed to artistic strategies that emphasised, in his words, 'contact and tactility', and which sought to transform the viewer into 'a neighbour or direct interlocutor'.⁷ He celebrated artwork that aimed to provide opportunities for social intercommunication and hailed as highly significant art that transforms would-be viewers into participants and collaborators, who enter into dialogue with an artist and effectively complete the work. In such art forms, Bourriaud sees alternative forms of public expression, which can cut across the forces that dictate daily life and commandeer its representations, namely the forces of global capital and the mass media. He did not try to claim that such art

operates from a position that is divorced from capitalist relations. Rather, he argues, art can occupy what Marx referred to as the 'social interstices' or gaps of capitalism. Art springs eternal and irrepressible, like weeds sprouting from the cracks in the pavement, or in a kind of parasitic relationship, drawing life-blood from a not-necessarily hospitable host. Bourriaud writes,

Exhibitions of contemporary art [...] create free spaces and periods of time whose rhythms are not the same as those that organize everyday life, and they encourage an inter-human intercourse which is different to the "zones of communication" that are forced upon us...⁸

Bourriaud argues that contemporary 'relational' art pursues a political project when it attempts to move into the relational sphere, interrupting more formalized and congealed modes of communication. In this regard, the disruptive and excessive potential of relational aesthetics extends the Surrealist legacy of resistance to received ideas and forms. Bourriaud acknowledged that much of the art he was addressing at the time was largely performative, interventionist and quasi-sociological in the way it operated, and that visual concerns were—at best—of secondary importance. To exemplify the idea of relational aesthetics, Bourriaud cited artists like Daniel Spoerri (born 1930), who hosted dinner parties and then exhibited the detritus in a gallery. Artists like Spoerri were motivated by a strong desire to avoid rekindling the visual styles of the past, and one way they saw of doing so was by sidestepping visual effects as far as possible.

Above all, relational art seeks to produce sociability in the present. Bourriaud writes, 'Inventing new relations with our neighbors seems to be a matter of much greater urgency than "making tomorrows sing." That is all, but it is still a lot'.⁹ In *Chance Encounters* the contributions of three artists in particular—Aleksander Mir, Elizabeth Woods and Barbara Campbell connect with the situational and relational tendencies that I have just outlined, though in each case, their works go beyond sociability and process. As I write this essay, Elizabeth Woods' and Barbara Campbell's projects are still unfolding. Of the three, Woods and Mir have each been working for decades now in ways that could be understood through the framework of relational aesthetics, though their effects are very different, with Woods' work being very often breathtakingly beautiful, with strong formal, even decorative qualities, and Mir's generally taking on a rugged—if at times heroic—amateurism.

Barbara Campbell is well known as a performance artist, and she usually works in a tightly conceived and directed way. Yet to my eye, conceptually, her



ALEKSANDRA MIR
First Woman on the Moon, 1999

IT'S THE TIME OF YEAR
FOR A PACKAGE OF CHANGES
THE CLEARING OF TREES

DEEP IN THE TWILIGHT
GETTING RID OF EVERYTHING
UNCOMPLICATED

SEEN JUST NORTH OF EAST
PEOPLE WHO VENTURED OUTDOORS
THEIR FISTS IN THE AIR

BYZANTINE CHANTING
FLUTTERING TRIPLET FIGURES
BARBERING CLASSES

AS THE SKY DARKENS
BEST TIME TO SEE THE TRIO
TELL HALF THE STORY

MERCURY
16/03/2009

work over the years has been inflected with a Surrealist sensibility. For this exhibition she has taken up our invitation to engage with a game of chance, but applied the structure of the traditional haiku form. For ten consecutive days she is engaging in a series of encounters in the pages of *The Mercury* and *The Sunday Tasmanian* newspapers, extracting lines from the newspaper, and searching for word sequences that conform to the five and seven syllable formation of haiku. I open my email, and here it is, the first of the haikus, and immediately it heralds a whiff of autumn.

Elizabeth Woods is currently engaging with people who live in and around Lansdowne Crescent in West Hobart. In response to her invitation, they are making

small changes in their lives. The stated aim of Liz's work is to 'instigate small domestic changes that will alter relationships within the household and with the wider community.' In a bid to make Hobart 'kinder, more enjoyable, more convivial, generous, attentive and affectionate,' she invited people in the locality to be part of the project by instigating alterations to their habits or behaviours. Participants are displaying a statement on the street outside their houses closely resembling a Hobart City Council 'Application For Planning Approval' notice. For example, one Lansdowne Crescent household have made public their pact to find more time to 'gaze out of the window.'¹⁰

With non-profit organization, Caso Projects, Aleksandra Mir's work of 1999, *First Woman on the Moon* is a wry celebration of the thirtieth anniversary the Apollo II mission to land the first humans on the moon in 1969. The action took place on a Dutch beach, a 'man-made' contested territory, and effectively raises JFK's words, to put a woman on the moon '...before the end of the millennium'. The video recalls the triumphalism of the Apollo era, but its evident artificiality and amateurism undercuts the heroics reminding us that the twentieth century did not see out its promise of gender equality. Mir's entire budget was spent on a half-page advertisement announcing the project in the prestigious magazine, *Artforum*. The work itself unfolded with in-kind assistance and corporate sponsorship.¹¹

Organized Movement, a video diary (2004) documents her participation in 'Localismos', an artist-in-residency programme for twenty

artists, held for one month in Mexico City in the summer of 2004. The stated intention of 'Localismos' was to enable artists to engage directly with the materials and craftsmanship of the local area, to create works specific to the context as a way of examining globalization 'not as an isolated phenomena, but as a union of localities.'¹² As a non-Spanish speaker, Mir decided to take part in Latin dance classes to engage with local people and customs through body language, and to document the process. We see her at dance classes, follow her forays into nightclubs and watch her fraternizing with fellow resident-artists against a soundtrack of Mexican pop music. At times her voice, off-camera, directs groups of people participating in 'organised movements'—karaoke and synchronized group-dancing. These stand in stark contrast to the formal constraints of the painful dance classes, where we see Mir's humiliated struggle, which is both funny and sad. A voiceover commentary provides a dissonant interpretation of the action. At one point the narrator opines, 'Taking community as a starting point for spontaneous movement ... where everyone is a welcome interpreter and contributor, the best thing happens, new dances are born', which sounds upbeat but the imagery of disorderly movement belies any promise of a blossoming new art form. Rather, it's a cheerful celebration of chaos. Mir's video undercuts the lofty ideals that have emerged under the guise of relational art and, without cynicism, provides a subtle and not disrespectful comment on the very type of curatorial rationale to which it owes its existence. It is lighthearted, but the poetics of encounter are awkward and troubling. The artist does not emerge as catalyst, trickster or shaman, but as shambling participant and droll commentator, heroically uninhibited and uncompromisingly candid. As Art and Life are difficult, sometimes the role of the artist extends to nothing other than riding the contradictions.



¹ Taleb, Nicholas Nassim, *The Black Swan*, New York, Random House, 2007

² Isidore Ducasse (1846–1870)

³ Isidore Ducasse, *Poésies*, 1870, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/16989>

⁴ See http://exquisitecorpse.com/definition/Bretons_Remembrances.html

⁵ http://www.ermalley.com/malley_poetry.html

⁶ The term littoral art is associated with the Canadian artist and writer Bruce Barber. The official Littoral website is <http://www.littoral.org.uk/HTML01/>

⁷ Bourriaud, Nicolas, *Relational Aesthetics*, Paris, Presses du réel, 1998

⁸ <http://www.mariabuszek.com/kcai/PoMoSeminar/Readings/BourriaudRA.pdf>

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Elizabeth Woods, artist statement, 2009

¹¹ <http://www.aleksandramir.info>

¹² See Kirsty Bell 'Aleksandra Mir' in *Camera Austria*, Graz, November 2004

ALEXANDRA MIR born in Poland, is a citizen of Sweden and the USA, and currently lives in Palermo, Sicily. Her work connects ideas about leisure and labour, often involving social processes that are open for anyone who wishes to participate or give the work meaning. Aleksandra's works are often the outcome of an event that she has initiated in a specific location, and may develop through film, performance or installation. She has presented her work at a number of international shows, including the 2002 Sydney Biennale, and has held solo exhibitions at galleries and museums including the Institute of Contemporary Art in London and the PS1 Contemporary Art Center in New York.

ANNE MESTITZ engages with drawing, sculpture and installation. She is currently undertaking a PhD at the University of Tasmania researching the expressive qualities of reductive forms. Anne focuses on colour, volume and line as means of expression. Her experimentation with formal devices is underpinned by an enquiry into the complicity of the viewer, the nature of visual perception, making sensation concrete, and the operation of aesthetic experience and memory in objects. Her work ranges from linear abstraction to poetic figuration, and often promotes curious relations between surface and content. Anne currently teaches in the Drawing Studio at the Tasmanian School of Art, Hobart. She is represented by the Bett Gallery, Hobart.

BARBARA CAMPBELL is highly regarded as one of Australia's foremost practitioners in performance art, and has worked in that field since 1982. She has undertaken several residency projects, at Griffith University, the University of Melbourne, the University of Sydney and the Australia Council studios in Santa Monica and New York, developing key projects, working with the specific physical and contextual properties of given sites—gallery, museum, atrium, tower, radio airwaves and now the world wide web.

BIANCA BARLING works primarily in video, photography and performance. Her work examines the aesthetics of gender, sexuality and pleasure whilst negotiating human failures and vulnerability. She recently completed a Masters of Visual Arts entitled 'The Eroticisation of Death and Dying in Contemporary Cinematic Practices' and was the recipient of an Australian Postgraduate Award. Bianca has exhibited extensively over the last few years nationally and internationally and has received numerous awards and prizes, including several project and development grants through Arts SA, Hill Smith Malaysia Airlines Travel Award, Australia Council Runway grant, and an Australian Film Commission Raw Nerve grant.

ELIZABETH WOODS has focused on making ephemeral site-specific public art for the past ten years, and has made major works in Australia and Europe. Her works are characterised by the involvement of local communities in their development. She has received numerous grants and has undertaken various residencies and commissions throughout Europe and Australia, her most recent being the UNESCO Aschberg residency with CAMAC in France in 2007. Currently Elizabeth Woods teaches drawing and is a PhD candidate at the Tasmanian School of Art, Hobart. In 2009 Elizabeth received an Australia Council grant to undertake new work in the Champagne region of France.

JIM EVERETT *purulia meenamatta* was born at Whitemark, Flinders Island, Tasmania. He is a member of the plangermaireenner clan, meenamatta country north-east Tasmania. He has a long history in Aboriginal Affairs, and has travelled Australia visiting many remote Aboriginal communities. His output includes articles, short stories, poetry and theatre scripts, television documentaries, educational videos and plays, political papers and short stories, and inclusion in eight major anthologies. Recently Jim has been working in an ongoing collaboration with Jonathan Kimberly. Jim is cultural mentor for the performing arts project *Origins*, and script adviser for the film project *Cape Grim*.

LOUISE HASELTON produces sculptures and installations in which the formal placement of objects are contrasted with an element of randomness. Traditional precision craft techniques such as casting might be positioned within an assemblage of found objects. Following a Helpmann Academy residency at Sanskriti Kendra, Delhi, in 2005, Louise has been making sculptural works using materials gleaned from the world around her. In 2008, Louise's work was exhibited at the Substation, Singapore, Greenaway Gallery, Adelaide and the Contemporary Art Centre of SA. Louise is a lecturer at the South Australian School of Art and is represented by Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide.

NICHOLAS FOLLAND is a South Australian artist whose practice embraces sculpture and installation. His work extends ideas and materials beyond received expectations, and thematically they press the limits of human and natural possibility, for example his extraordinary chandeliers constructed out of ice. Recently he has been working with cut crystal in connection with ideas of yearning and loss. In 2003 Nicholas was awarded the prestigious Ann & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship. His works are held in the National Gallery of Victoria, the Art Gallery of South Australia, and Artbank, Sydney. Nicholas is a lecturer at the South Australian School of Art, and is represented by the Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide.

TRACEY ALLEN is a multi-award winning graphic designer, with special interests in typography and publication design. Her books and catalogues have been awarded and exhibited internationally, at the Tokyo Book Fair, the London Book Fair, the Australian Graphic Design Association Awards, the Frankfurt Book Fair, and the State of Design Festival, Melbourne.

MARY KNIGHTS & MARIA KUNDA, the curators, have collaborated on the development and implementation of the exhibition *Chance Encounters*. Mary Knights is the Director of SASA Gallery, and Lecturer, Art, Architecture and Design, University of South Australia. Maria Kunda is Associate Lecturer in Art and Design History and Theory at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania.

6.

List of works

ALEKSANDRA MIR

Organized Movement, 2004

A 45min documentary, produced during the residential workshop and for the resulting exhibition, 'Localismos', Perros Negros, Mexico City, May 2004.

First Woman on the Moon, 1999

Video (DVD)

12min

ANNE MESTITZ

Ballistic Voices, 2009

Steel, MDF and Paint

Variable dimensions

BARBARA CAMPBELL

News Haikus, 2009

(10 days of *The Mercury* and *The Sunday Tasmanian*, 16.03.09–25.03.09)

Part A: acrylic labels on Masonite and steel.

Part B: printed newsprint, MDF and steel

20 parts consisting of 10 pairs (part A & B).

Part A: 37.5 x 23.5cm

Part B: 40.5 x 30cm

BIANCA BARLING

Last Chance Motel, 2007

DVD video,

4min 30sec, continuous loop

JIM EVERETT

Some call me water, poem, 2006

In collaboration with Jonathan Kimberley for a painting and writing project titled meenamatta lena narla peullakanny - Meenamatta Water Country Discussion.

Design on paper by Tracey Allen

350 x 15cm

Courtesy Bett Gallery

LOUISE HASELTON

Whatever this is that we are in, we are in it together, 2007

Spider shells, chain, acrylic paint

Approx 300 x 600cm

Double Terminator, 2007

Helmet shells, cast aluminium, paint, Alvar Aalto Savoy vases, quartz and plinths

Variable dimensions

NICHOLAS FOLLAND

Navigator 1, 2008

Mixed media

25 x 110 x 87cm

Navigator 2, 2008

Mixed media

25 x 110 x 87cm

Pacific Blue #2, 2008,

Digital print, edition of 5

80 x 170cm

Indian Blue #2, 2008

Digital print, edition of 5

80 x 130cm

Untitled (boat 5), 2008

Crystal decanters, timber, resin and fluorescent light

32 x 28 x 28cm

ELIZABETH WOODS

The Public Notice Project, 2009

Hobart City Council Public Notice proforma, board and red tape.

Photographs by Kevin Leong

60 x 42cm

7. Acknowledgements

CHANCE ENCOUNTERS was commissioned by Salamanca Arts Centre (SAC) to be shown in the Long Gallery, Hobart, as a part of the Ten Days on the Island Festival, and at the SASA Gallery, Adelaide. The exhibition is a curatorial collaboration between Mary Knights, Director of the SASA Gallery, University of South Australia, and Maria Kunda, Associate Lecturer in Art and Design History and Theory at the Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania. *Chance Encounters* is a Salamanca Arts Centre project supported by Hobart City Council, Arts Tasmania, the SASA Gallery, University of South Australia, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania, Ten Days on the Island festival, CAST Touring and Moorilla. The exhibition catalogue was generously supported by the Gordon Darling Foundation and Focal Printers.

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Cover poetry: Stéphane Mallarmé, extract from *Un Coup De Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (Paris: La Nouvelle Revue Française: 1914)
Inside back cover: Barbara Campbell, *News Haiku*, 2009

