

Encounter in Art
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In this presentation, I want to explore how ‘encounter’ is different from ‘event’ though often used interchangeably. Making that differentiation has, I believe, some important implications for how we imagine the relationship of art to audience.

I am speaking as visual artist researcher. My area of research specialism is the role of art in the public sphere, through two thematics, artistic leadership and improvisation. I share this research interest with Dr James Oliver and Amy Spiers with the community at Centre for Cultural Partnerships, VCA.

First, I will introduce some theoretical underpinning to the notion of ‘encounter’ through developed by Louis Althusser (1918-1990), the French Marxist philosopher, in particular the text -The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter, described as ‘a partial document, excerpted from *The Philosophy of the Encounter*’ (2006)¹. Secondly, I want to offer an imaginary scenario that resonates with Althusser but possibly also within our own experiences of being artists in the contemporary world, of creating or having to create new beginnings. I then explore a particular artwork that is resonant of this imaginary scenario. By working with Althusser’s way of imagining encounter, I am able to explore the artwork in a new way. I hope we can then discuss the implications of the difference between ‘event’ and ‘encounter’ for understanding in a fresh way, how and why artists engage with audiences.

Part 1: Understanding Encounter

Its raining. Rain falls in parallel lines to the ground. Very occasionally a drop will swerve creating an encounter with another drop. It is an infinitesimal swerve, hardly perceptible that induces an encounter with another raindrop. In this way and transposed to atoms, encounter piles up on encounter, atom upon atom and a world is born. Through our everyday experience of rain, Althusser gets us to imagine the beginning of the world.

“The clinamen [an inclination (OED)] is an infinitesimal *swerve*, ‘as small as possible’; ‘no one knows where, or when, or how’ it occurs, or what causes an atom to ‘swerve’ from its vertical fall in the void, and breaking the parallelism in an almost negligible way at one point, induce *an encounter* with the atom next to it, and from encounter to encounter, a pile-up and the birth of a world—that is to say, of the agglomeration of atoms induced, in a chain reaction by the initial swerve and encounter.” p 3
Althusser, L. *The Underground Current of Materialism of the Encounter* (1993/2006)

What is important about this creation myth is the perspective it embodies. There is an absence of cause and effect, an absence of structures that determine what is possible, an

¹ Ted Purves, writer and artist, California College of the Arts, Los Angeles, alerted me to this text in conversation. The occasion was the *Spectres of Evaluation Conference: Rethinking Art, Community, Value*. 6-7 February, Melbourne 2014, Centre for Cultural Partnerships, Faculty of the VCA and MCM, The University of Melbourne *with* Footscray Community Arts Centre.

absence of a pre-existing world that already holds meaning. Althusser's world happens, comes into being by chance. It occurs serendipitously, almost cunningly.

What matters to encounter is the nature of the void that comes before it. Where most Western Philosophy is preoccupied with cause and effect, Althusser proposes that it is philosophy's task to construct the void within which an aleatory², chance encounter might be possible.

How might this inform art in relation to encounter in Althusser's sense? It appears to invite us to imagine existence through the lens of chance, not design. Could it also be the task of art – to construct the void through which chance encounters might be possible? What might be the implications for how we imagine and construct the arts' relations with audience?

Starting out from nothing, from an unassignable place (Althusser, p9)³: a proposition

Imagine you enter a situation as an artist in which many of the assumptions you could make around artistic production and presentation are no longer valid or possible. The situation offers no infrastructure, no theatre, no performance space, no gallery. There is no social form in which to locate an art practice such as an exhibition, festival or celebration. As a consequence there is no audience or group of people to present to, to foregather, to find meaning in your work, no possibility or comprehension of time set aside to experience art, no instituting of the artist's role.

Up to this point in your life, the rain has been falling in parallel lines, but suddenly there is an infinitesimal swerve that brings about a change of direction, unravelling the ordered progress of your material experience⁴.

On the one hand a chasm opens up in which everything you have known prior to this moment appears to be challenged. On catching one's breath, there is the excitement of a new opportunity. You have no choice other than to go on.

However, the challenge that Althusser offers is even more complex.

"In order for swerve to give rise to an encounter from which a world is born, that encounter must last; it must be, not a 'brief encounter', but a **lasting encounter**, which then becomes the basis for all reality, all necessity, all Meaning and all reason." (ibid, p 5) (my emphasis)

How might you or I undertake this situation, imagining it to be catalytic, a new birth?

Initially, we might be thrown back on ourselves and begin to question – What drives me

² literally meaning dependent on the throw of a dice (OED).

³ 'A man of nothing who has started out from nothing starting out from an unassignable place...' (Althusser 2006, p9)

⁴ In the career of an artist it is likely that this kind of challenge will occur 2 -3 times in a single career through a move and/or through cultural, social or political change. In my own life this imaginary scenario describes my personal experience of moving from the urban metropolitan contexts of London and Rome to post industrial north east England (Newcastle/Gateshead) in the late 1970s. In the first, arts infrastructure and related practices could be assumed. In the second, the role of the artist within post-industrial regeneration needed to emerge. Later in 1992 I moved from this postindustrial context to remote rural Scotland, experiencing again the challenge of not being able to assume the role of a contemporary artist, but being open to its emergence through the particular context at hand.

to make art in the first place? Should I escape from this place to a context that is more receptive? But there is no escape from the happenstance, from the contingent in life. The fact is that we have to do with *this* world and not another. Our birth is a gift that we are given. It is not chosen. Through creativity, we may re-enter that world as if for a second time, through an impulse to live, not just exist. To take 'hold' is to take place, to build form. We need to go on. We need other encounters to build the circumstances of a certain kind of power to persuade.

We might be tempted to follow Paul Valery in his belief that the poet writes for himself, not for an audience⁵. We might try to empty the space of preconception, to create the opportunity for other minds, other thoughts or other possibilities to occur that we could not have imagined. We might note how these new elements shift and reframe the focus of our initial interest, creating a new circumstance/encounter. We might reach a point in which we need to bridge other interests with our own. Imposing our interests on the situation proves not to work without the protection of an institutional/organisational framework. We ask- How can we begin the conversation? How do I know that you see what I see, hear what I hear? (Arendt 1958/1998).

**Deconstruction as a reconstruction on new foundations..
in actual, political functions Althusser, p ??**

In 1970/1 the artists Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison started to work together in partnership. Helen Mayer was a Chaucer Scholar ⁶. Newton Harrison was an established sculptor recognised alongside Robert Smithson, Anthony Caro among others.

The Harrisons' meeting constituted an opportunity to rethink their individual trajectories in relation to a changing world.

Together, they made a profound conceptual shift. **They declared the environment their client** i.e. Their work from that point on would not set out to address a visual art audience (Newton Harrison) or an academic readership (Helen Mayer Harrison). This conceptual shift from audience to environment, determined from that point on that all their work would be collaborative and would in some way address the challenge of climate change.

Many artists, including poets, have become involved with climate change, but it is the particular approach that the Harrisons have developed that remains radical, a significant point of learning. Their work still continues over 40 years later. They are invited by governments, organizations and individuals globally to examine the eco culture of specific places under threat. They create work that traces the interconnectedness of living systems, of which the human is but a part, reimagining a place within a much larger 'field' of relations and interdependencies - a '*field of play*'.

It is their first project together, *The Lagoon Cycle* (1976-86), that set up the approach that has subsequently informed all the projects in a very particular way. *The Lagoon Cycle* is an account of their exploration of the indigenous habitat of a crab and the

⁵ I found this comment at the exhibition, 'Mirror of the World: Books and Ideas' at the Victoria State Library, March 2014. The context was Valery's book *Fragments du Narcisse*, Paris Societe des Amis du Livre modern 1974, illustrated by ??

⁶ Chaucer was the English 12th century poet and writer of *Canterbury Tales*.

implications of attempting to breed the crab in a different environment. Through their research, the natural lagoon in which the crab is found in Sri Lanka becomes a series of artificial tanks in California. These tanks present significant economic potential but with problematic ecological implications. The Harrisons displace and reconstruct step-by-step points of interdependence between the crab and its habitat, responding to each new question as it arises. They document their journey. Each development represents a discrete experience and a different lagoon. Poetry, drawing, large scale maps and photographs configure crucial links to form a complex narrative.

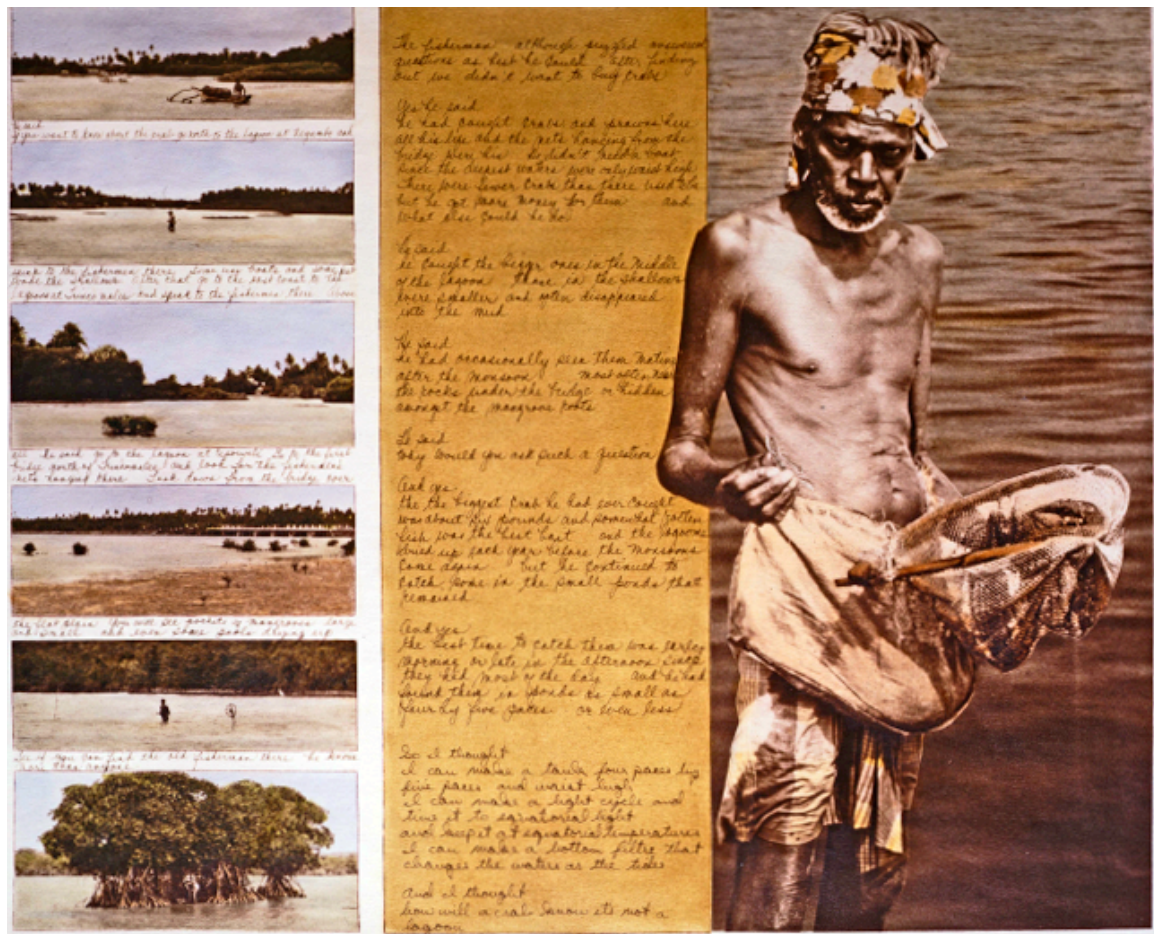


Figure 1 Excerpt from *The Lagoon Cycle* (1976-86): The First Lagoon, The Lagoon at Upouvelli, p10

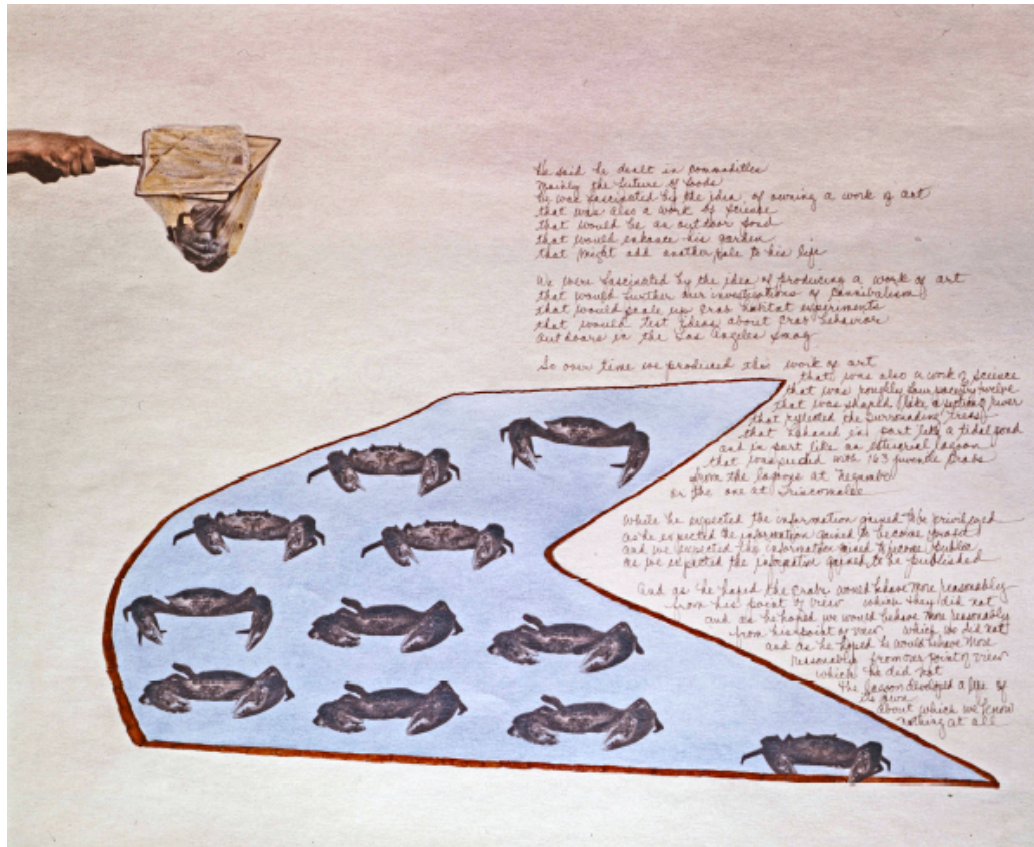


Fig 2 and 3 Excerpt from *The Lagoon Cycle* (1976-86): The Third Lagoon The House of Crabs p1&2

In the past I have described the quality of the journey as formed by the wide-eyed gaze of the exploratory, creative artist. However Althusser's articulation of encounter reveals new aspects of this work.

The Lagoon Cycle could not have been anticipated in the sense of being planned as an artwork. It is as if their meeting created the small swerve of atoms, inducing an encounter that has led to the foundation of an entirely new convergence between art and ecology. The development of the work after its beginning, depends upon other encounters, an accretion, or 'agglomeration', for the project to have purchase in the imaginations of those who encounter it and through encounter, to influence change. The Harrisons describe this process as 'conversational drift' (REF) clearly quoting the *dérive* of the Situationists and taking this into a process of dialogue that is crucial to the nature of development (Kester, 2004?).

The first encounter, the *First Lagoon* (pp-?), focuses the Sri Lankan habitat of the crab. The subsequent *Lagoons* appear to me to be take the form of constantly re-opening the space of the void to enable new encounters to occur. Let's explore what this means. In part it is brought about by their partial view and understanding of the crab and its habitat, the need to keep learning in order to create a whole picture and secure and sustain the life of the crab across the different natural and fabricated conditions of the lagoons. The Harrisons on their website describe this as

"Beginning in Sri Lanka with an edible crab and ending in the Pacific with the greenhouse effect, (*The Lagoon Cycle*) seeks ever-larger frames for a consideration of survival. It looks at experimental science, the marketplace and megatechnology, finally posing the question, "What are the conditions necessary for Survival" and concluding that it is necessary to reorient consciousness around a different database."
http://theharrisonstudio.net/?page_id=263

As a consequence, the ever larger frames are an accumulation of knowledge that pose new more crucial questions, moving from the life of the crab into its interconnectedness of living forms of any kind with whole eco-systems. This openness to new horizons is given form and potency through an on going dialogue between two characters. The two characters – the Witness and the Lagoon Maker - raise questions, seek practical solutions and explore the implications of the success and failure of experimentation. The subject - the crab - becomes a metaphor of interdependence between living forms. Culture is part of a larger whole. Human beings intervene in that whole through partial knowledge and perspectives and, through intervention, they learn, expanding their horizon of knowledge. The dialogue is an experience, an incidence of how, as individuals, we improvise not simply in response to the outer world, to what is given, but also from their inner world and particular perception and understanding of need and survival at a particular moment in time. The narrative gives form to their explorations, keeping it alive, allowing it to accumulate, to 'pile up' to agglomerate, giving birth to new understanding. It is itself an improvisation on improvisational forms of life, constructing new layers of experience (Douglas, 2012).

The conditions of openness is expressed in these two mirroring texts the first positions improvisation in human culture and the second in natural systems in which the one systems interpenetrates and shapes the other as a necessary condition of survival.

<p>From The First Lagoon</p> <p><i>The Lagoon at Upouveli</i></p> <p><i>A culture is</i></p> <p><i>And I thought</i> <i>A culture is a cooperative adventure a complex system of shared interrelated beliefs about the nature of reality and causation of values codes of conduct and ethics by which people define themselves collectively and niche themselves individually</i></p> <p><i>It is a fragile form not having the duration of oceans or lands with which it is in discourse and upon which it depends for its survival Its constancy is reproduction and change Its stability is always at risk</i></p> <p><i>Its boundaries increase or decrease by virtue of the energies available the pressure of growth from within the pressures of change from without</i></p> <p><i>Scarcity of food can reduce its population while increasing its vulnerability from without as can climate change as can disease as can an idea</i></p> <p><i>Abundance can increase its population while increasing its vulnerability to stress as the resources available are consumed</i></p> <p><i>Conquerors can debase a culture denigrating its belief structures and language while destroying its relationship to the ecology</i></p> <p><i>But people are tough and resilient and improvise their existence as best they can very creatively with the materials at hand but the materials keep changing Only the improvisation remains constant.</i></p> <p>The Witness p 37</p>	<p>From The Third Lagoon:</p> <p>The House of Crabs</p> <p>An estuarial lagoon is the place where fresh and salt waters meet and mix It is a fragile meeting and mixing not having the constancy of the oceans or the rivers It is a collaborative adventure Its existence is always at risk</p> <p>Heavy rains increase its size and its boundaries increasing nutrients while decreasing salts</p> <p>Forest fire then rain can set up the conditions for heavy silting and a lagoon can turn first into a mud flat then into a swamp</p> <p>If the day is warm the waters being shallow warm quickly If the night is cold the waters being shallow cool quickly</p> <p>Life in the rivers the lakes and the oceans where the properties of water are more constant is less stressful</p> <p>But life in the lagoons is very special it has evolved high tolerance to the stresses that come about from sudden changes in salt and fresh water and temperature and available food for the life web</p> <p>Life in the lagoons is tough and very rich it breeds quickly Life all of us it must improvise its existence very creatively with the materials at hand but materials keep changing Only the improvisation remains constant</p> <p>The Lagoon Maker p 60</p>
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Figure 4: Two mirroring texts on Improvisation from the Lagoon Cycle (Harrison 1985).

It is important to look at the Harrison's' work as a whole. Their approach is material, rather than ideational, predominantly in the sense that nothing is known until an encounter is developed with the specific place, site or location of an ecological issue, such as the small crab that is good to eat but likely to be over exploited. It is that specificity that affords the process of agglomeration, of one experience piling upon another experience in a lasting encounter that is explored through the dialogue that unfolds. There is also recognition that not just anything can produce just anything. There needs to be an affinity by which new possibilities can take hold and build one

upon the other.

So returning to our scenario, and armed with a proposal to imagine encounter as the collision between two drops of rain, two atoms that collide, and challenged to think how such a collision could be sustained creatively - How might we respond creatively to our imaginary scenario of no infrastructure and no social form?

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