

***Fishman of SE Australia*** John Reid  
School of Art, Australian National University

**RiverSymposiun** Monday 3 September 2007  
Session A3F  
Venue M2

RiverSymposium script presented in conjunction with Powerpoint presentation (FM PP RiverSympFinal.ppt)

Good afternoon everyone and a good afternoon to my session colleagues.

My presentation is a combination of story telling about an extraordinary piscine creature called 'Fishman' found in the remote rivers of SE NSW and an account of the circumstances in which these stories have been told. I will refer in particular to the campaign to save the Forests of Monga in NSW - the mother of the Mongarlowe River and a site of significance for many reasons - but especially because the Fishman is there.

### ***Pause***

In 1988 I went on a field trip into the Bendoura Bushland an area between Braidwood and Cooma in NSW.

### ***Slide 1 Bushland of Bendoura***

I went in with three colleagues from the Photomedia Workshop at the Australian National University School of Art:- Mark Boxhall, Jenny Hilman and Fergus Armstrong.

### ***Slide 2 / 3 Portrait of a farmer / Portrait of a union representative***

I was working on the subject of political disappearances - dumping my body in non-descript landscapes as a metaphor for the disappeared.

### ***Slide 4 Blank.***

Mark Boxshall was developing a camera for wild-life documentation that automatically scanned 360 degree space in response to sounds of various wavelengths. It was battery powered and when activated it went into a scanning sequence like this ...

### ***Demonstrate camera***

Here is Boxhall.

**Slide 5** Self Portrait with Influenza

Self Portrait with Influenza.

**Slide 6** Camp

Here is a test scan of our camp taken with a prototype version of his acoustically sensitive automatic orbital scan camera

**Slide 7** Hilman pic

Jenny Hilman took her photographs from the car window as we travelled to, and from, our destinations

**Slide 8** Armstrong pic

And Fergus Armstrong invariably took his photographs in his back yard when he returned home.

**Slide 4** Blank

Is it any wonder that we were destined to encounter in remote reaches of our wild rivers of SE Australia the shy and elusive Fishman?

***Pause***

**Slide 10** Bushland of Bendoura. Vicinity of Caves

There are caves in the Bendoura Bushland that do not require any special speleological gear to explore – part of the Wyanbene Cave complex. We went in with our cameras and emerged with exposed film that when processed revealed a human-like figure in the stream that flowed through the cave.

**Slide 11** Fishman. Cave image

Note centre frame

**Slide 12** Fishman. Cave image. Close up

Here is a close-up

**Slide 13** Fishman. Cave image. Close up. Outline of figure

Using Photoshop I have removed water stains and outlined the figure

**14** Fishman. Cave image. Close up. (Repeat)

At first we thought that one of our party had pulled a prank but circumstances did not easily admit to this.

We returned to the caves on the off-chance that we had stumbled on to something truly remarkable. The cave was flooded. We stayed in an overhang that we called 'Toad Hall'.

**Slide 15** Toad Hall

We set up Boxhall's orbital contraption on the banks of a seasonal watercourse connected to the cave river system and succeeded in getting a *second* photograph of this human-like piscine creature.

**Slide 16** Fishman. Seasonal watercourse.

That's when my scepticism was finally dissipated. I realised, too, how reassuring scepticism can be.

**Slide 17** Blank

This experience instigated a 10-year obsession to photographically document the Fishman and its fabulous domain.

I have secured some wonderful photographs, many on 10x8 inch transparencies, that have formed the basis of an exhibition that has been exhibited eight times, mainly in regional galleries from 1993 to 2005.

**Slide 18** Invitation Dubbo Regional Gallery 2003

Invitation to an exhibition in the Dubbo Regional Gallery 2003

*Pause*

The photographs fall into three main categories.

**Slide 19** Documentations

## Fishman Documentations

### **Slide 20** Fishman's domain

Fishman's stunning forested domains

### **Slide 21** Self Portraits

And self-portraits taken on location that reveal something of the psychological impact of the encounter, albeit in the main, mediated by the camera.

### **Slide 22** Blank

I also wrote in my journal:-

"I return to Canberra from the wilderness of the SE vitalised with clear missions; yet, disorientated in terms of my hitherto enduring personal philosophy. I know all things are a construct of the mind; yet, my mind had constructed in Fishman something that knew me before I knew myself. Through my obsession with this creature, I discovered the power of silence. I discovered the power of advocacy. I discovered a discovery. I endured scepticism armed with nothing more than human testament. I attracted as believers people who value imagination as much as knowledge. I aggravated as detractors people who have been suffocated by reason. I repelled in twitches those who have lost their sense of wonder.

"Amid this, I rationally formulated art strategies. I secured Fishman from the scrutiny of destructive scientific method. Fishman, I discovered, was a fine art discovery not a scientific one.

"With the aid of my journal and in conjunction with these exhibitions, I have over the course of almost twenty years, told and retold the details of my encounter with this gift from our wild rivers as 50 minute narrative titled *Fishman of SE Australia*."

### **Slide 23** Narrative in Public Lecture Format

There have been 18 of these. This is the handbill for the first presentation at ANU Open Day in 1992. I had more than my prescribed 15 minutes of fame.

## **Slide 24** Narrative in Conferences and Seminars

There have been at least a dozen presentations to conferences and seminars.

The last conference presentation was to 700 high school students gathered in the Johnny Farnham Tent on the banks of the Murray River at Mildura as part of the MDBC International Youth River Health Conference in 2005.

## **Slide 25** Press

I have also collaborated with journalists in the press, radio and television.

Since 1992 there have been 23 radio interviews, 17 newspaper articles and 4 television appearances as story-telling for the mass media. These have included the ABC's 'Andrew Ollie Show', Phillip Adams's 'Late Night Live' and a Justin Murphy segment for 'The 7.30 Report'.

## **Slide 26** Blank

Journal entry:

"I published my findings within the visual arts to effect the public perception of my experiences of Fishman as parable and as allegory. I elevated Fishman from fact/specimen to fiction/symbol. I collaborated with journalists to build Fishman as super media myth so that the idea/image of it could be put to work in our mass mediated society:- in campaigns to save old growth forests and the rivers that they bear.

"If we lose these wild places from our heritage we lose priceless places here on Earth where we can teach our children how to wonder."

Most importantly I have worked with environmental groups who, in the context of extended campaigns, have turned - when media interest wains over time - to the Fishman story for a unusual story-line and as a fund-raiser

## **Slide 27** Forest Embassy

Handbill for the Forest Coalition. *Fishman of SE Australia* at the Parliamentary Theatre, Parliament House, Canberra.

**Slide 28** Student Coalition

The Environmentally Concerned Coalition of Students, an ANU campus group. This coalition consisted mainly of students who were also members of The Wilderness Society and The South East Forest Alliance.

Members of these groups were involved in two successive and sustained campaigns ...

**Slide 29** Deua Wilderness

One in the Deua River wilderness ...

**Slide 30** Monga

... and the other in Monga State Forest which gives rise to the pure waters of the Mongarlowe River.

In both these places I had photographically documented Fishman.

**Slide 31** Deua Fishman

Deua River Fishman

**Slide 32** Monga Fishman

Monga Fishman in the Mongarlowe River

The Fishman was then put to work.

**Slide 33** Blank

Here is an extract from the oral / visual work *Fishman of SE Australia* pertaining to Monga.

'I returned to the place on the Mongarlowe River where previously I had lost my senses.

**Slide 34** Entering Mongarlowe

'This time, I prepared to enter the Fishman's aqueous medium on my terms. I removed my pack, my boots, my clothing, my spectacles. I was taken within moments by the eternal current. Its chill shocked my body as I swam beneath the surface. I went down, not along. I confronted my fears.

**Slide 35** Blank

'In the course of this brief adventure, I had to choose between culture and the wild, between staying and returning. It came at the moment that my lungs lost volume. I could not cry out as one would, instinctively, when falling over a cliff. I was as silent as a fish. My neck strained, its taut skin preparing to tear into ribbons and admit water beyond its cutaneous layer in defiance of the set of my jaw.

'It was then, as I surged with all my strength through the half-light toward the surface, that I recognized wilderness - a full sensory experience of the world unmediated by artefact.

*Pause*

'I walked the thin umbilical track from wilderness - represented at its periphery by gasping and wet footprints - toward culture - represented at its heart by the artist's studio, the poet's desk, the scientist's laboratory.

'I took the long way back to my car. I crossed the paddocks on the other side of the Mongarlowe and picked up the River Road into the forests of Monga.'

**Slide 36** Monga Fog

The fog descended.

**Slide 37** Blank

*Pause*

**Slide 38** Bulldozers in Monga

The destruction of the forests of Monga began in earnest in July 2001 courtesy of bulldozers contracted by NSW Forests

**Slide 39** Eucryphia threatened

Of most concern were the patches of Eucryphia moorei and treeferns Dixonia antarctica. This is remanent vegetation that dates back to the Gondwana era.

**Slide 40** Fishman at risk

And, of course, Fishman, a signifier of high conservation value and biodiverse natural forests; and the rivers that rise in them

**Slide 41** Fishman Campaign

As a consequence there was a concerted campaign involving the Fishman narrative as allegory in the press, on radio, and the public lecture circuit.

**Slide 42** Direct action

There was direct action - and media interest in court proceedings gave me the opportunity to talk about Fishman. (As tragic as it was) I was grateful for a chance to stand my ground in Monga in front of a bulldoze.

**Slide 43** Court action

To quote from my statement to the court magistrate:

"As an artist I too have found inspiration in Monga and have experienced the power of this ancient place to bring to mind the eternal themes of human kind - themes that enunciate in various ways the symbolic relationship between the human species and the natural environment.

"The Fishman of SE Australia," I went on, "is one such story of an encounter with a creature of alarming human likeness, and how it engages us as human beings in the well-being of our wild rivers and forests."

I told the magistrate about presenting the story to 350 delegates at the Australian Photographic Society. annual Conference in Canberra in 2001 and an international conference on the arts in Germany. This was picked-up by ABC Regional Radio.



#### **Slide 44** Victory Publication

Eventually under this pressure and continued on-the-ground protest, NSW Forests withdrew and the Carr Government declared Monga in its entirety a National Park. This book was published by the local community to celebrate

#### **Slide 45** Blank

I will conclude with an extract from the narrative which reflects upon an expedition into the Budawang Ranges in search of Fishman.

#### **Slides 46/ 47 / 48** Expedition to Budawangs

'Many of the landscape photographs we had produced, wittingly or not, by hand or by mechanical procedure, revelled in the picturesque wilderness - more images critically composed as a splendid view in which dramas of a human scale have, or might, transpire - dramas of occupation, of rape, of birth, of death.

'The story of the making of a picturesque, wilderness landscape photograph is, invariably, a story of the making of a path. The public distribution of such photographs, unaccompanied by the story of the path that was laid in its taking, fails to check the bio/cultural instinct to physically occupy the view, and then to colonise the next horizon.

'Photographers are not renowned as desirable curators of the unknown; and, wilderness landscape photographers, who prey on endangered places and who release their pictures to an expectant public without the story of their production, without declaring their path, are among its most wilful violators.

'The best curators of the unknown are believers. Believers are people who value imagination as much as knowledge. Believers love to travel well worn paths. Who would go to Loch Ness if it were not for the belief of the monster. Believing is seeing.

#### **Slide 49** Blank

'The most revered form of travel is the walk. For as the eye sees the other senses are gradually heightened.

'The forms perceived by the eye may also vibrate the ear, enlarge the nostrils, heighten the pallet and engage with the grip. This is the stuff that informs the traveller.

'And, as the shaman realised, walking in wilderness is a prerequisite for a heightened appreciation of culture.'

Pause.

Thank you.