# FEELING CONNECTED

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## *Abstract*
*This paper reflects upon feelings of connectedness to, and/or separateness from, the land, and touches on key environmental discourse specific to Tasmania. The paper is the product of research undertaken for the production of an experimental, site-specific installation titled HOPE.*

*Personal philosophies and commitment to environmental issues are as varied as individual circumstances, but HOPE can positively stem from a position of discontent. For my grandparents, who migrated from Cape Town to the Tamar Valley in 1910 to grow apples, it was the allure and promise of a new and more peaceful life that brought them to Tasmania. My grandfather Walter came from a family of farmers in England and Cape Town. He and my grandmother Frances were to leave behind them in Tasmania their own lineage of offspring to work the land.*

*HOPE will image aspects of Tasmania's history within nature. It is to be built on an ecotourism property in the Derwent Valley. I aim to create an environment within the landscape that is separate from everyday reality and literal interpretation. Being enveloped by the work may help visitors to reflect upon their own connectedness to the land as well as to the possible collaborations, not only with historical links, but also with our universal source.*

*'Tasmania is a beacon in a largely artificial world.'*
(Olegas Truchanas, in Millwood 2003[a])

Tasmania is well known both for its pristine wilderness and its 'old England' farming traditions. Tasmania's landscape is diverse yet conveniently contained, with many remote areas easily accessible by road.

I believe that because Tasmania is an island, many residents and visitors focus their attention on the State as a means of an escape. Tasmania is often seen as a last frontier far away from a fast and 'artificial' world. This is of course paradoxical, given the fact that convicts were exiled to Van Diemen's Land and outlying islands as punishment. A common belief was that a difficult and arduous time alone in isolation, separated from civilisation and 'ordinary' life, would help clear the conscience as well as enforce the realisation of the virtue in changing one's ways.

So there is a paradox inherent in Tasmania in that some people have been forced to stay, controlled and confined, while others have escaped from somewhere else to ensure their own solitude. William Smith O'Brien, an Irish political prisoner, who was exiled to Maria Island,

commented on the irony of the torture of being imprisoned and alone in one of the most beautiful places he had ever seen:

> …to find a gaol in one of the loveliest spots formed by the hand of nature in one of her loneliest solitudes creates a revulsion of feeling which I cannot describe but of which your imagination and sympathy will make you conscious (Ludeke 2001, pp. 54–55).

To be denied freedom stirs up discontent. It seems to be freedom of choice, or the lack of it, that shapes and moulds attitudes, desires, fears and hopes.

Living in Tasmania as an exile from war-torn Europe, Olegas Truchanas found himself working for the Hydro-Electric Commission building dams at the same time as exploring the country of the State's south west. He hoped that his photographs would inspire others to help to protect those areas.

Many adventurers have listened to the 'wildness' in themselves and been drawn to seemingly undiscovered places. Peter Dombrovskis was also a migrant to Tasmania and he too found solace in the vast, untouched and challenging country known as the Tasmanian Wilderness. He once explained that he would go out into the wilderness to get in touch with the land and himself.

> When you go out there you don't get away from it all, you get back to it all. You come home to what's important. You come home to yourself (Millwood 2003b, p. 17).

I have always felt connected in some sense to the land, and indeed the landscape, because of growing up in Tasmania. It is a conscious feeling of wanting to be part of nature rather than feeling separate from or indifferent to it. Inhibiting this connection is an uncertainty as well. After all, people do die in the remote regions of Tasmania; the weather is unpredictable, every snake is venomous, horizontal wood camouflages great holes—not to mention the possibility of becoming lost. However, mixed feelings draw me back and drive me away over and over again. This feels like a driving force that both ignores and accepts the possibility of danger.

As children we were left alone to imaginatively play or to explore along the creek, in the bush and at the beach. Stimulated by Nan Chauncy's bush stories for children and by her own seclusion, my cousin remembers wanting and believing that she would find a little Aboriginal girl to play with in the bush where she lived.

> At the same instant, the something in the cleft showed itself to be a face. A little face peeping at her timidly with a shy smile, a face no bigger than her own but as brown as chocolate with a wide nose, red lips, and white gleaming teeth (Chauncey 1960, p. 24).

Indigenous Tasmanians have lived in harmony with the environment for thousands of years. For many there is no need to question connectedness, as the land is an integral part of who they are. Ancestors live on through the land and therefore through the community. I was reminded of these associations in the Bangarra Dance Theatre's production of *Bush* (inspired by other parts of Australia). Dancers moved close to the ground—hugging the earth. Artistic Director Stephen Page explained that

> I think with *Bush* it's purely about letting the audience into the spiritual glory box of what is sacred … It is also about maintaining an honest respect for land creations and peoples (Vincent 2003, p. 9).

My mother was born in Launceston and lived in Tasmania all her life. She often spoke about a sadness that she believed was inherent on the Island. This lingering melancholy has a specific relationship with Tasmania's history. The rugged and dramatic landscape too has quite often been elicited as a metaphor to explain emotions that are perhaps grounded in the difficulty to connect to a place that was not only a penal colony but also stolen from the Aborigines. Feelings of inadequacy on one hand and loss on the other may have contributed to the description of Tasmania's reputed melancholy. The agony of Tasmania's history was not always part of my conscience when I was growing up, but I was made aware of past colonial activities and of the invisibility of indigenous Tasmanians.

There is another side to the Tasmanian landscape that unfolds towards the east. Here the country is a picture of unsophisticated diversity, characterised by the rise and fall of frequent hills edged by the Island's watery periphery. But whether in the west or the east, I can sometimes feel the creep of isolation that can be experienced when time seems unimportant. Nature can be interpreted as nurturing and supportive as well as indifferent. Just like a small community, welcoming but silent.

However, for many locals, temporary residents and visitors, the experience of parts of Tasmania is truly sublime. The photographs taken in once remote areas by Olegas Truchanas and Peter Dombrovskis have emphasised the uniqueness and spectacular quality of the Tasmanian wilderness. Maybe the Island's allure lies not only in unquestionable beauty and diversity, but also in the opportunity to feel truly alive. Truchanas once said that

> For us as for animals, an ability to find our way in the wilderness is not so much a development of the intellect as it is the sharpening of the senses (Angus 1975, p. 30).

The dramatic combination of dense forests and rugged mountains shaped by rain and rivers as well as the completeness and seclusion of the inland lakes only emphasises for me my puny stature in the grand scheme of things. Can such places really exist and can I exist in such places? Could it be that in these environments many turn inward in order to understand themselves? The awareness and creative observation of Truchanas and Dombrovskis then could be likened to the rugged and spiritual edge of the wilderness itself.

In an essay *Engaging Nature Aesthetically*, Joseph Kupper discusses the experience of being part of nature, rather than just looking at it.

> As we move from acting in nature to acting with nature … our aesthetic experience becomes richer and more inclusive … Our bodies furnish us with responses to the natural environment because we are moving in it, not simply observing it (2003, pp. 77–8).

This is stated another way by Truchanas, who suggested:

> If man is too programmed he is less human. There is a wildness in the land and a wildness in being human (Millwood 2003a).

Yet in recent years greater controls have been enforced, adding yet another layer to the history of Tasmania. The alluring charm of Tasmania is often at risk while the tiny State tries to sustain its population by developing its natural resources. The significance of providing inexpensive hydro-electric power for industry and mining, supplying the demand for timber, and developing tourism cannot be underestimated. Ironically too, Tourism Tasmania advertises the qualities associated with 'getting back to nature' while Forestry Tasmania endeavours to 'hide' the destruction of old growth forests. There is a growing disjunction in the image of Tasmania as being green and clean.

To accommodate increasing numbers of tourists it has become necessary to build lengthy trails of wooden duckboarding that meander through the 'wilderness', protecting the environment by separating trampling feet from the ground. I understand these trails to represent the over-layering of material culture with nature. 'To be on a woodpath' is a popular German expression that implies being lost or on a path that leads to nowhere. Heidegger wrote:

> 'Wood' is an old name for forest. In the wood are paths that mostly wind along until they end quite suddenly in an impenetrable thicket. They are called 'woodpaths'. Each goes its peculiar way, but in the same forest. Often it seems as though one were identical to another. Yet it only seems so.
>
> Woodcutters and foresters are familiar with these paths. They know what it means to be on a 'woodpath' (1993, p. 34).

I sometimes venture into the bush with trepidation, imagining unknown destinations and hazards. For me, walking through parts of Tasmania certainly triggers memories of being told of the almost certain possibility of becoming lost and alone if I failed to remain mindful and alert. But the duckboard trails appear like threads of civilisation, reaching out into unknown territory, symbolising the search for new meaning. Ironically, tourists limited by tight schedules and anxious to see as much of the State as possible seek out these defined and accessible 'woodpaths'.

It is an irony too that the first to arrive in a new place benefit the most, and that they in turn dilute that experience for others by spreading the word. But people do not fight to save threatened environments if they have not seen or experienced them. Both Dombrovskis and Truchanas believed that it was important to document the pristine nature of the wilderness to show the world what the south west of Tasmania was like at that time. Today, helicopters are used to move people, supplies and rubbish in and out of some of those isolated places. Noise pollution that unexpectedly breaks the silence inherent in wilderness shocks many into realising how difficult it may become to find an escape in the future. Sometimes the wilderness no longer seems like a wilderness. Or perhaps wilderness (where no foot has trod) has evolved into a different meaning into the twenty-first century.

Focus is shifting, from a more personal and direct engagement with the environment to the structures and greater controls that must support and manage growing numbers of tourists. Textual guides explain what has passed and define for us what we see. Such interpretations can run the risk of homogenising and inhibiting primary and imaginative experience. Modern development can work to separate us at a time when we have the most need to experience the authentic and to relate to our organic source and universal roots. Kevin Murray, who curated an exhibition of Tasmanian artists entitled *Haven*, claimed that 'Australia needs an island now, more than ever' (Murray 2003).

Can and does interpretation in Tasmania project the unique qualities attributed to the Island State? Can artists, interpreters and Tourism Tasmania successfully work together towards encouraging connections, while also protecting the Island's reputed visual, historical and social allure?

On the Interpretation Australia Association website, some aims of the organisation are explained:

> Interpretation is the key to understanding ourselves and who we are. It challenges us to work out what Australia means, as a continent and as a nation. Interpretation makes sense of life, of systems and structures.
>
> Interpreters rank with the historians, geographers, biologists, physical scientists, writers, artists and curators in comprehending the human condition.
>
> (www.interpretationaustralia.asn.au)

However, the narrative structure of the typical Visitor Centre is such that it too seems to conserve cloister the environment it seeks to interpret. Often tourists spend much of their time reading the information panels at the expense of sufficient time spent intuitively engaging with and interpreting the environment for themselves. Wonderfully graphic historical and scientific displays of flora, fauna, land use and habitat, as well as indigenous culture and its perspectives, assures the visitor that they have used their valuable time wisely. I understand the merit in such interpretation but sometimes I feel a numbing of the senses caused by being 'filled-up' with information, which in turn inhibits the opportunity for a creative and significant personal engagement with the land before, around and underneath me.

The need for silence, for opportunities for personal engagement and reflection, is not uncommon. The philosopher Karl Jaspers wrote that without silence it is impossible to create. He believed that through art, it is possible to discover a true sense of being as an individual, as well as freeing the human spirit towards a heightened awareness (Caraufa 2003, p. 99). The painter Matisse similarly believed that

> To create, is to express what we have deep within ourselves, what we feel in our encounter with the outside world (Caraufa 2003, p. 149).

Like Truchanas and Dombrovskis, many artists continue to seek out the isolated areas to work in seclusion and silence as a way of testing their connectedness to nature and to themselves. Arts Tasmania offers 'Wilderness Residencies' in heritage and remote areas to artists who respond to those areas through their work. The close relationship many Tasmanian artists have with the

wilderness is often beneficial to their work, and to the wilderness itself. For example, during the 10 Days on the Island Festival of 2003 *The One Tree Project* encouraged woodworkers to craft an object out of a section of the same tree cut from the forest. The resulting works not only highlighted the talent and skill of Tasmanian artists, but raised public awareness of the clearing of Tasmania's old growth forests. Tasmanian artists are aware of the need for timber and for tourism, but they oppose the practice of wood chipping. Such projects emphasise their belief of the importance of employing sustainable practices that protect Tasmania's resources and wilderness status.

Unlike the artist, visitor or explorer, the farmer and bushman live and survive on and with the land. They may be involved in tilling the soil, building dams, working mines and logging. They would perhaps not describe their connections to the land in romantic terms, but by working with and therefore shaping their environment on a daily basis, they do become deeply connected to their home and place. My uncle's ashes are buried on his own property. I loved his place, where there were rolling and rocky hills only barely dotted with trees. My childish delight must have sensed my uncle's deep connection to his farm.

But attitudes are as diverse as the people who live close to nature. The parents of self-proclaimed bushman Deny King believed that

> … children should grow up in a setting where they could develop all their senses to the utmost; where their powers of observation and deduction would be honed by the demands of survival; where characters would be built by the need for self-reliance and living in harmony with all things—weather, plants, animals, people; where they would learn to appreciate solitude and beauty (Mattingly 2001, p. 21).

Instilled with these values, King's mother maintained that 'intuition was of the spirit' which could allow one to 'transcend normal limitations'. In adult life King established himself on a tin mining lease at Melaleuca in south west Tasmania, country consisting of almost impenetrable bush divided by numerous rivers. Like so many newcomers to Tasmania, his wife Margaret expressed that she had come to the end of the world. Melaleuca was accessible only by foot or boat before King built a small airstrip.

> On his own territory, at ease in his environment, at one with its creatures, in harmony with its grand silences and its great storms, Deny was quite unlike any other man (Mattingley 2001, p. 105).

Deny King's position, somewhere between an explorer, scientist, miner and farmer, is evident in where and how he lived. Accordingly to Mattingley, his home was '… incongruous on the bank like a discarded tin can on the edge of the empty expanse of fired plain' (p. 105). This apparent incongruity, of an individual's precarious habitation set against a lonely and pristine environment, is a fascinating contribution to the historical, social and artistic fabric of place.

Land was also important to my grandfather Walter, who left England in 1902 to follow his elder brother to South Africa. Another brother, Jack, had set up greenhouses in Essex and grew flowers for the London market. Yet another was in Jamaica growing bananas. Walter first landed on the isolated British island of St Helena, working as a Morse code operator with the Eastern

Cable Company. ‘A very lonely place for a young man’, my sister said. Eventually he re-established himself in Cape Town with a hope of finding suitable land and following in the family traditions of farming and trading. However, he must have missed out on good land because in 1908 he decided to migrate to Tasmania. He had seen in a Cape Town newspaper an advertisement about a land sale at Clarence Point, on the West Tamar River near Launceston, and probably felt elated at this possibility of a new life in Australia. The land advertised was suitable for an apple orchard. Tasmania at that time was exporting fruit overseas, including to South Africa. He had met my grandmother, Frances, in Cape Town, and they corresponded for two years before she eventually sailed out to meet him in 1910. They were quickly married soon after her arrival.

My mother’s love of nature influenced me as her father’s love of the land had influenced her. She was very close to her brothers too, and often spent time with them on their properties. I remember her concern for the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines as she tried to fathom what had been done to them. She also felt strongly about Tasmania’s wilderness areas and rallied against the exploitation and destruction of the environment. She worked with the Wilderness Society to help save Lake Pedder, and later became involved in the campaign to protect the Franklin River. She skilfully wrote poetry about the things that mattered to her.

On the other hand my father was positive and energetic, and enthusiastically worked towards industrial ‘progress’ in Tasmania. A practical man, he was aware of the State’s need to support itself. In 1970 he took me in a light aeroplane to Lake Pedder, where we landed on the famous beach. He understood my longing at that time to live off the land, and the passion surrounding Green politics. I was overcome by what I saw, not only by the lie of the land as we descended to land on the beach, but by the shallow, still and silent water enclosed by strangely dark and rugged mountains. I was sorry that we only just had enough time to take a few photographs, stroll along the beach and eat lunch. Such as it was, it is an experience I will never forget.

What does it mean to be connected to land, and what does it feel like to be separated from it?

On a recent field trip to the Derwent Valley, I drove beside the River Derwent and passed through New Norfolk before heading further upstream, where the River narrows and meanders through farming country. Eventually I came across a sign imprinted upon a small hill, depicting a merino ram and the words ‘Hamilton Show’ outlined in white stones. Not far from this enduring icon I visited my relative Tim Parsons and his wife Jane at the Hamilton Sheep Centre. We talked about farming practices and future plans for their property. Tim and Jane expressed their defining moments, spiritual places and ideals, and their attitudes towards conservation, regeneration, wildlife sanctuaries and land management.

I am in the process of designing and building with the Parsons an experiential artwork entitled H O P E. Positioned next to the Hamilton Sheep Centre, the artwork will compliment the Parsons’ ecotourism business. I aim to create an environment within the landscape that is safely contained within, as well as separate from, everyday reality, normal perception and literal interpretation.

The 20 x 20 metre experiential artwork (Figure 1) will consist of:

- a duckboard path that defines a way through;
- jagged rows of poa tussocks, representing the crimp of the sheep's wool;
- poles reminiscent of hop-growing in the Derwent Valley;
- metal screens perforated with the letters H O P E, which mean: H - Helping to understand land care issues, O - Organising the land in sustainable ways, P - People and Place, E - Environment;
- casuarina trees, indigenous to the area, planted around three sides and allowing for a panoramic view of the property on the fourth side; and
- gravel paths connecting the artwork to the Sheep Centre and the Wildlife Sanctuary lagoon.

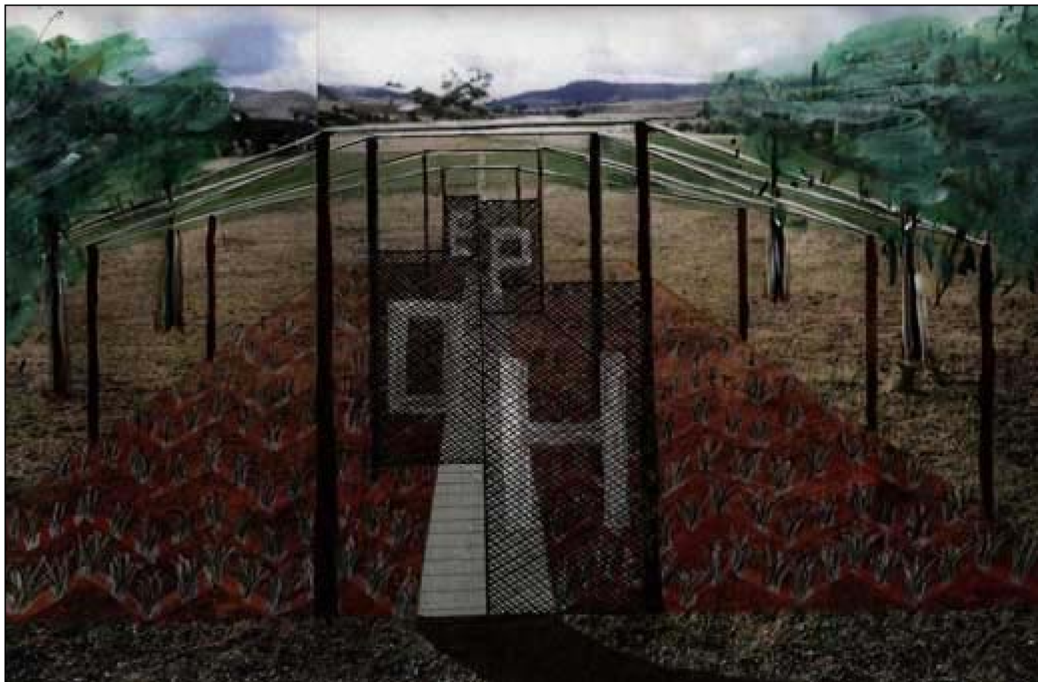

**Figure 1.** The HOPE installation, designed by the author.

H O P E will provide a reflective rather than a didactic experience for visitors. They will be invited to enter artwork and walk through. The eye will read patterns of lines and channels created by the act of moving through the work. This device will create a mood and assist the visitors in observing where they are and what they see, encouraging them to pause and reflect upon their own connectedness to or separateness from the land.

The making of this artwork may also help me to particularise my own sense of self and place, enduringly linked to a Tasmanian inheritance.

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