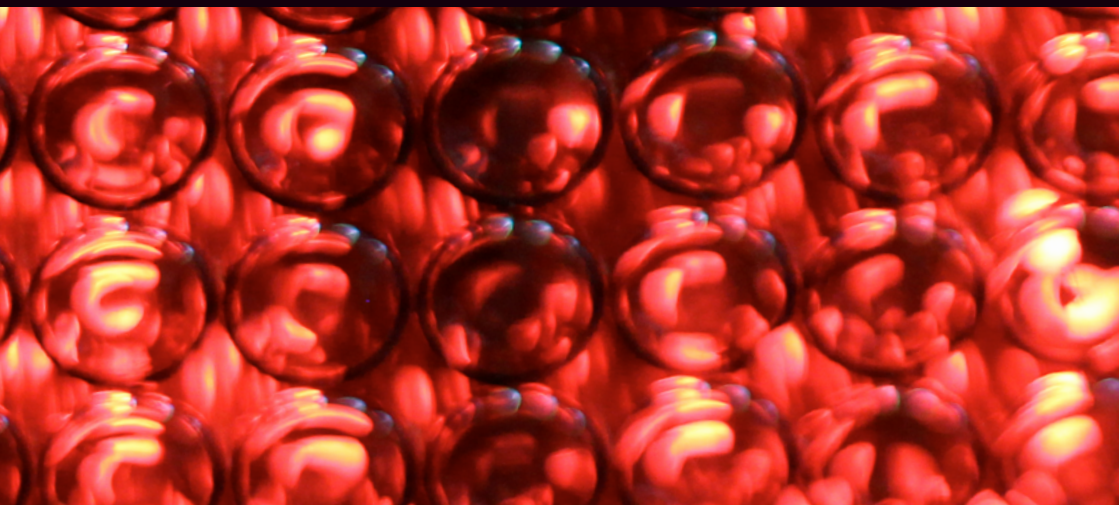
OVER MANY HORIZONS

KEITH ARMSTRONG 2 AUG – 23 SEP



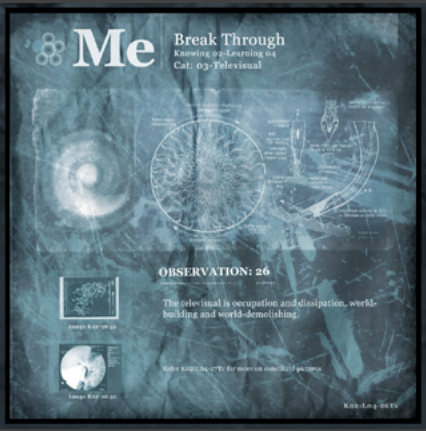
NAVIGATING THE HORIZON

In his survey exhibition *Over Many Horizons*, Keith Armstrong creates spaces for the imaginative dimension of our collective horizons to be nourished: in the darkness, embracing the unknown. Taken as a whole these interactive, experiential artworks suggest the existence of a complex interplay of worlds, a network of environmental, social and cultural ecologies. There are five invented 'horizons' in the exhibition and each one casts a distinctive light on questions of futurity, responsibility and perception.

Horizons are themselves everything from biophysical phenomena to a rich metaphorical device signifying new spiritual, emotional and mental potential, a means for channeling creative invention and as a forecast of the future. Part of the seduction of a horizon is its faint visibility and the tantalizing sense of something that will always remain too far away to touch, the paradox of an already present possibility.

The artist's multimedia practice is informed by questions that have influenced and motivated him for many years. These questions underpin an ongoing inquiry into the way that human beings conceptualise their place within larger earth systems, and reflect a fundamental concern with how we are positioned in relation to non-human things (whether animals, artefacts, technologies or elemental forces). The works also reveal the sensitivity Armstrong has toward the intense pressures that exist in a resource-limited world, where terrestrial and marine ecologies are under profound stress: ... '*Over Many Horizons* seeks to shine a light upon the silent, shadowy barriers of cultural misunderstanding that prevent us from re-inventing ourselves as a future-sustaining species' ...

Drawing on the ideas of philosophers and theorists who challenge binaries of culture and nature, subject and object, Armstrong believes that acute environmental problems are reinforced by false binaries and reflect a crisis of our human subjectivity. The artist encourages



us to consider our 'ecological misunderstandings' and to confront the collective confusion that exists in the face of environmental pressures. He contends that contemporary environmental conditions are the result of a failure to comprehend how ecologies function and our key roles within them. This seemingly willful failure to confront our own interdependence is a problem of perception and a problem of understanding. As such, it can be seen as a cultural phenomenon.

While human beings may be recast within ecological systems so that we understand ourselves as embedded in relations of nature and culture, we still remain a distinct kind of actor within socio-ecological networks. We have 'consciousness' and therefore carry some responsibility for the fate of 'non-conscious' others. How we differentiate ourselves, while simultaneously recognising the entanglements of the social, material, physical and biophysical world is critical to our survival as a species.

Avoiding the promotion of fear or guilt, the artist sidesteps the condescending tone of some environmental art imbued with shame and blame - a wise decision given that most people are already inured to warnings about our growing ecological crisis. The artist instead prompts questions, obliquely but powerfully, of how individuals and societies may share responsibility and re-think their place and simultaneously, their actions in the world. While some of the works may suggest profound disconnections (based upon misconceptions of ecologies) they also offer images that suggest transformation.

The subtle suggestions of transformation in Armstrong's work align with design theorist Cameron Tonkinwise, who has argued that past environmental narratives and the accompanying visual language of sustainability have, by and large, not successfully inspired the need for cultural change. While future nightmare scenarios have often served to promote the necessity of sustainability, Tonkinwise argues that what is needed instead is an empowered, affirmative

understanding of sustainability as a value in and of itself. He asks: 'What if sustainability were indeed affirmed now as a value in its own right, something not necessary, but just desirable? And not inherently desirable to all; rather something that only some desire, though more may be persuaded to find it desirable – and the latter is the political task at hand'. This is a position in contrast to the narrative of necessity and it establishes a motivation dictated by desire rather than guilt, inviting the design of future scenarios - a positive pathway that may be mapped and navigated.

Re-imagined earlier works are shown together with three new projects in the exhibition, brought together because they reflect what Armstrong has learnt from sustained collaborations over the past twenty years with life scientists, ecologists, development NGOs and architects. During this time he has embraced multiple ways of thinking and acknowledges the importance of diverse contributions in his practice. The many shades of darkness in the exhibition reflect Armstrong's interest in the 'nocturnal' and his concern for threats to night biodiversity and the myriad myths and stories that have shaped our cultural understandings of life in the darkness. Armstrong has collaborated with scientists and conservation NGOs in night surveys and worked on several projects after dark on mountains and in forests. The light and sounds in such places and the sensory exposure to the night increases the artist's connection to the barely recognisable, in ways that help to temporarily resist today's all-consuming media mesh.

Over Many Horizons is an attempt at a productive exchange across disciplines, with modest aims to explore and potentially ameliorate real-world problems by experimenting across disciplinary boundaries. Collaborative, interdisciplinary modes of working point us toward a way of seeing human existence as an overlapping and interacting reality. They involve modes of participation that are designed to invite practitioners to 'plunge' into the river together rather than build bridges over

the (metaphorical) divide between disciplines. Interdisciplinary programs and methods have become an essential way of engaging in cooperative learning and exchange and are now central to the development of new ways of thinking.

During his collaborative process, Armstrong has used guiding questions to prompt the engagement of a range of people, asking: how might we confront hyper complex problems together, by developing practical expressions of care for the sustenance of future ecological systems? This question of how we develop practical expressions of care is a central concern in Armstrong's process. 'Taking care' is broadly about developing reciprocity with the animate and the inanimate world of which we are a part. It is also an interesting point of emphasis within the Australian context, where the concept of 'caring for country' has been key to the Indigenous Australian way of being on the land for thousands of years. In the contemporary context, it demands a different emphasis. We are learning to care for present and future ecological systems in a world defined as equally by movement as by our attachments to one geographical location, and by an understanding of the global as well as what is local to each of us.

Over Many Horizons was conceived by Armstrong as a living experiment, inviting participants and audiences to help evolve the vision; and the project will continue to develop beyond this survey. Art that aims to develop strategies for re-imagining our individual and collective futures are needed now. This exhibition seeks to wrest your attention and invites you to register the many horizons that stretch out before us...

Dr. Tania Leimbach

Tonkinwise, C. 2011, '"Only a God can save us" Or at least a good story: I (heart) sustainability (because necessity no longer has agency)', Design Philosophy Papers, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 69-80.

Head, L. 2011, 'More than human, more than nature: Plunging into the river', Griffith Review, no. 31, p. 31-43.

PUBLIC PROGRAM

When Options Run Out,
What Can Art Do?
lunchtime talk by Keith Armstrong
Wednesday 17 August, 1pm

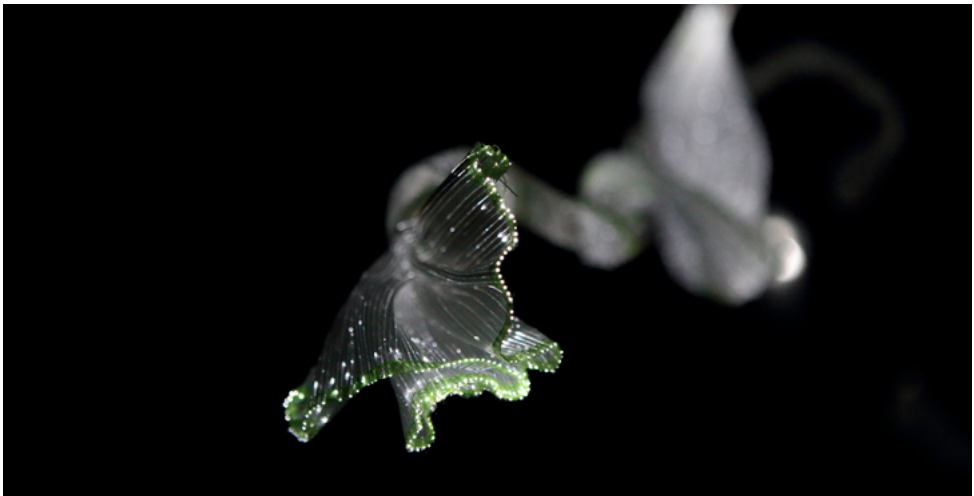
New Horizons:
Art For Complex Times
panel discussion Keith Armstrong, William Gladstone (School of Life Sciences, UTS), Jeremy Walker (Social Inquiry Program, UTS), Tania Leimbach (Institute For Sustainable Futures, UTS).
Thursday 18 August, 6pm

Despite much positive work done, our species remains as unsustainable as ever. This panel brings together theorists, artists and design thinkers to ask the big question – if science can only do so much – what kind of help can the arts bring now, and what new kinds of practitioners do we need to evolve?

Future Horizons Workshops
Saturday 20 August, 2–4pm
Saturday 27 August, 10am–4pm
as part of UTS Open Day

Designing Sustainable Futures
lunchtime talk by Tania Leimbach and Dena Fam
Thursday 8 September, 1pm
as part of Sydney Design

All events will be held
at UTS GALLERY
Level 4, UTS CB.06
702 Harris St, Ultimo



LIST OF WORKS

(Deep Ecology) Horizon 1
2016
glass, fibre optics, electronics, computers, water, lighting, mechanics, five-channel sound
4 × 2.5 × 1.5 m
Sound: Lawrence English
Coding: Luke Lickfold

(Seasonal) Horizon 2
2016
metal, mechanics, motors, lights, 3D printed forms, organic materials, video, four-channel sound, interactivity
4 × 4 × 3 m
Co-direction: Lawrence English
Sound: Lawrence English
Coding: Luke Lickfold

(O Tswellang) Horizon 3
2016
glass, fibre optics, wood, LED display
1 × 0.5 × 0.5 m
Thanks to Dr. Ricardo Peach, Programme for Innovation in Artform Development (PIAD) - Vrystaat Kunstefees/Arts Festival/Tsa-Botjhaba; Anita Venter and Qala Phelang Tala (Start Living Green); Centre for Development Support, University of the Free State, South Africa; Angela De Jesus, Johannes Stegmann Art Gallery, University of the Free State, South Africa; The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Flanders Foundation, QUT Creative Industries. Thabang Mofokeng, HOT Rural Workers Collective, Botshabelo Township, South Africa.

(Shifting Dusts) Horizon 4
2016
video, wood, beach sand, stereo sound
2.5 × 2.5 × 3 m
Co-Artistic Director: Charlotte Vincent
Sound Director: Guy Webster
Performer: TC Howard
Thanks to Vincent Dance Theatre.

(Inter State) Horizon 5
2016
microfiche, microfiche reader, LED signboard, transparent print, headphone sound
2 x 3 x 2 m
Credits: Prof. Roger Dean (sound). Original Imagery developed by Stuart Lawson. Quotes drawn from Tony Fry's refuturing philosophies.
Thanks to John Grosso, eBeam Film LLC, CT, USA.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Keith Armstrong is a Senior Research Fellow at Queensland University of Technology, Creative Industries, Brisbane, Australia. He directs the transdisciplinary arts organisation, Embodiedmedia. www.embodiedmedia.com

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Keith Armstrong's special thanks: Julie Dean, Kai Armstrong, Tania Creighton and Eleanor Zeichner at UTS Gallery, Dr. Tania Leimbach, Prof. William Gladstone, Dr. Lisa Roberts, the Living Data Program, An Marosszeky, Prof. Mandy Thomas, Prof. Terry Flew, Prof. Greg Hearn, Michel Haggman, my numerous collaborators and sources of inspiration.

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2 August - 23 September 2016

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Cover: Keith Armstrong, *(O Tswellang) Horizon 3*, 2016 (detail).
Inside: Keith Armstrong, *(Inter State) Horizon 5*, 2016 (detail).
Back, left: Keith Armstrong, *Light of Extinction*, 2014 (detail). Photo: Bryan Spencer.

UTS GALLERY
Level 4, UTS CB.06
702 Harris St, Ultimo
Monday–Friday 12–6pm

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