Flatness, Ornamentality and the Sonic Image: Puncturing Flânerie and Postcolonial Memorialisation in the Work of David Chesworth and Sonia Leber

Jonathan W. Marshall
University of Otago, jonathan.marshall@ecu.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts

Part of the Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Other Music Commons

Recommended Citation
Retrieved from https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts/vol2/iss1/13

This Refereed Article is posted at Research Online.
https://ro.ecu.edu.au/soundscripts/vol2/iss1/13
Flatness, Ornamentality and the Sonic Image:
Puncturing flânerie and postcolonial memorialisation in the work of David Chesworth and Sonia Leber

Jonathan W. Marshall
University of Otago
Dunedin, New Zealand

The article below enunciates a novel rhetorical strategy for the description of urban sound installation, drawing on the visual rhetoric of Siegfried Kracauer (“the mass ornament”), Walter Benjamin (the flâneur), and Roland Barthes (“punctum”, “studium” and “grain”). The installation Proximities (Melbourne: 2006), by David Chesworth and Sonia Leber, is used as a case study, while The Edge of the Trees (Museum Of Sydney: 1995), by Fiona Foley and Janet Lawrence, serves as a comparison and precedent for the discussion of colonial politics and heterotopic form. Rather than viewing these works in terms of an immersive, layered, or infinitely expansive depth (LaBelle, Kahn), Proximities is examined from the perspective of Kracauer’s theory of the planar superficial visual ornament. The flat ornamental quality of Proximities allows it to engage with the dialectics of memorialisation, the nature of modernism and travel, and with the sounds of the city, all of which are invoked through the artists’ generation of a technological sonic archive to evoke subaltern, colonial identities within the contemporary metropolitan space of empire and capitalism. This essay thus offers a reappraisal of the issue of sonic memorialisation as it applies to public art works and museums within contemporary Australia and the Commonwealth.

Introduction
Reintroducing planar discourse into sonic criticism and the discussion of urban acoustic place or placelessness

In his famous collection of essays The Arcades Project (1927-40), Walter Benjamin cited early twentieth century sociologist Georg Simmel’s comment that:

Interpersonal relationships in big cities are distinguished by a marked preponderance of the activity of the eye over the activity of the ear. The main reason for this is the public means of transportation\(^1\)

—a form of transport which transforms the whole world into a film which the traveller gazes at distractedly while moving from one point to another. Countering Simmel’s proclamation of the primacy of the eye over the ear in urban life, what I want to do below is to draw on the theories of visual culture developed by Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Roland Barthes to look at what an aural rather than a visual flâneur might be—or to put it another way, what a distracted audience to the ornamentality of modern urbanism and empire might be—and to apply these planar, imagistic theories to the work of sound artists Sonia Leber and David Chesworth. In this, I will be focusing particularly on their 2006 sound installation, Proximities (made in collaboration with visual artist Simeon Nelson).
Like Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, I want to circle my subject without fully resolving its qualities or its valencies. What I am offering then is less a fully-rendered reading of *Proximities* in terms of landscape and site, but more a series of productive visual metaphors and discursive comparisons which draw attention to several of the key issues raised by an artwork like this. Prime amongst these is the challenge of the memorialisation of the colonial subject within modern urban space. This essay is also intended as a continuation of the dialogue on flânerie in the museum, colonialism, and the use of indigenous voice in postcolonial Australian sound installation as has accompanied the creation of *The Edge of the Trees* by Janet Lawrence and Fiona Foley for the Museum Of Sydney (MOS) in 1995.

The problem that I want to pose is how does one construct a politically relevant sense of place through something which is as inherently mobile and placeless as the recorded sound? How do you create a deeply felt, material sense of history, of place, and of depth, through something as inherently superficial, ornamental and externally rich as a newly designed urban space and its associated artworks? How can planar surfaces themselves create a sense of complexity and dialogue?

In this sense, I want to work against the common practice in writing on the poetics of sound in which authors have championed a definition of sound as an inherently or ideally spatial medium which would establish a highly reflective sense of depth, complexity or layered meaning by occupying a location in social space, in the gallery or in the concert hall, and by physically immersing the listener within this realm. Indeed throughout their discussion, authors such as Douglas Kahn and Brandon LaBelle show a marked preference for the use of a watery, immersive poetics which negates any consideration of sound as a planar or commercial phenomenon. Kahn for example notes that while visual information only comes from directly before the listener, sounds reach the individual from behind and all around. From this observation, LaBelle claims that "Space is a potential awaiting activation through [the] durational insertion" of sound, which fills it and which give it shape and texture for the listener. Kahn draws selectively on the writings of Benjamin and on the citation of Simmel given above, skipping over Benjamin's writings on flânerie, to liken the author’s discussion of sound to how one perceives acoustics whilst under the influence of hashish. In such a state, one experiences the direct presence of sound within oneself and about oneself, whilst simultaneously mapping and generating a subjective three-dimensional space about oneself—the projection of space. These models certainly apply to the sound sculptures by WiK (Toshiya Tsunoda et al) and architect/composer Iannis Xenakis, both of whom LaBelle discusses. They can scarcely be assumed to be valid in all, or even most, cases however.

Kahn himself concludes that this “sense of immersion in noise is guaranteed by the ease through which so much” in terms of space and depth “can be perceived within it.” The perception of sound for Kahn may therefore be seen as essentially antithetical to the flattening effects of modernity and capitalism, especially where the overheard public speech cited by Simmel and Benjamin is concerned:

Fields of significant sound constituted by café speech may ... invoke the phenomenal depths articulated by language, as opposed to the surfaces of visual imagery, [commercial] signage [and display] included. Even when discussing post- World War II abstract painting, Kahn follows Michael Fried in foregrounding a haptic, “object-like” quality to planar art pieces, whose size and textual qualities causes them to generate “an extension of the painting out into the room toward the viewer” in a “wrap-around effect.” Defining Jackson Pollock’s work as a form of action-painting, Kahn concludes that for Fluxus artists like George Brecht: “Pollock’s painting produced a state of immersion for the spectator through the combined action of scale and ... delirium” while Alan Kaprow’s own “immersive tactics achieved” a similar “extension” through the use of the “enveloping spatiality of sound” itself. Even late twentieth century painting and its associated performances thus come to seem, through the eyes of Kahn and Fluxus, as performing a form of all-encompassing spatiality and oceanic depth.

What I would like to effect below then is a de-architecturalising of sound discourse; to define those volumes and affects which sound sculpture generates in terms of relationships within a single mechanistic or ornamental plane, rather than in terms of a massive recession of depth which, in the words of Kahn, Brecht and Kaprow above, might be seen to oppose capitalism and power through a sense of physical immediacy or through the collapse of distance between the listener and the sonic object. On the contrary, by returning to early twentieth century writings about modernity and urbanism, I would like to suggest that the flattening of depth is both part of the problem and part of the solution or critique which sound sculpture might effect. In the words of Siegfried Kracauer, the problem with capitalism is not that it is too rational and so destroys any resistant sensations of ecstatic fusion or immediacy of perception across distance. Rather capitalism and those art works which engage with it such as *Proximities* or Kracauer’s equally mediated metropolitan “ornament” highlight how capitalism itself is actually not rational or consistent enough. It is not the sonic performance of depth or of fusion which exposes the flaws of modern capitalism and empire, but rather
the performance of depthlessness and flatness which highlights these tensions across the surface of the work and across the plane of the social. It is the affective *sameness* of these art works to capitalism, empire and planar machinic mediation which generates criticism, not their immersive spatial difference.

What I want to suggest then is that when one places such a work as *Proximities* within the denatured, tabula rasa of a new civic development or the modernist museum, what one is presented with is often far less akin to a sense of watery expansiveness, differentially layered spatiality, or depth, but rather something much closer to an affective flatness; or to what is described by Siegfried Kracauer as an “ornamentality”: a superficial yet embodied play across the richly textured planar surface of the technological material as it confronts the observer. Sound sculptures in general—and the urban commissions of Chesworth and Leber in particular—seem to function best on the level of their self-conscious, superficial detailing, rather than at the level of a massive receding depth, or as an infinite expanse of layers which might englobulate the listener. In short, sound sculpture would seem to be more like an explicitly flat image or ornamental spectacle than Kahn and others have typically given it credit for.

*Proximities* and the Australian Commonwealth

Sonia Leber and David Chesworth have been working together as Wax Sound Media since 1993. Their piece, *Proximities*, is located on the bridge which provides pedestrian access to the Melbourne Cricket Ground from the new Birrarung Marr park, crossing over the railway lines, tramlines and the freeway. The riverside park runs out of Federation Square in the centre of Melbourne, and the bridge passes high above the transport routes and stretches of rolling, grassy parkland below. Walkers are presented with an impressive panorama of the city on both sides, and which allows the eye to move from the Governor’s mansion (completed in 1876) located on the edge of the Botanic Gardens to the west, around to the commercial high rise developments situated along Collins Street east of the city centre. From this position on the bridge, city and landscape becomes spectacle.

The bridge was named in memory of William Barak after Chesworth and Leber had completed their design for *Proximities*. Barak was an important figure in cross-cultural relations between the Aborigines and Anglo-European settlers, 1835-1903. More recently he has been seen as a precursor to the later boom in Australian indigenous art, with a National Gallery of Victoria catalogue describing him as “one of a select group of nineteenth-century Aboriginal artists who welcomed the opportunity to use new materials, and to produce work on paper … for Europeans.”

*Proximities* consists of a twenty-four channel mix of vocal samples played back according to a semi-randomised, partly movement-activated score, relayed through fifty-six speakers. These are mounted in low wall-panels on either side of the bridge. The installation was one of many civic works and art exhibitions organised by the state government to coincide with and commemorate the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games. Given its location, title and commissioning, it is therefore impossible to discuss this work without examining some of the issues of politics, contextual cultural meaning and social valency which concern both Kracauer and Benjamin, as well as more recent writers on Australian museology—while Leber and Chesworth themselves relate their work to the terms developed by Roland Barthes in his writings on Romantic lieder (grain) and photography (punctum).

Figure 1 Images courtesy of the artists.
To satisfy the conditions of the Games’ commission, Chesworth and Leber chose to represent the Commonwealth of Nations linked together under the British Crown by crafting *Proximities* from voices, songs and ritual spoken texts (chants) offered in various languages by mostly indigenous or subaltern subjects of the Commonwealth. This included song fragments from Ghana, Trinidad, Malaysia, Australia, the United Kingdom and other locales—with African and Afro-Cuban vocalisations being particularly prominent. Although this dominance of African diasporic exclamations could be said to reflect the make-up of the Commonwealth itself, the relative scarcity of Anglo-Celtic voices within *Proximities* mitigates against this. In the context of the predominantly African flavour of the languages in the mix, isolated voices such as the Scottish pot-mender’s song come to take on an added significance and aural distinctiveness, serving as a statement of the equivalence—at least in aesthetic terms—of the culture of early modern Britain and that of Africa. This rendering of national cultural affiliations via speech and voice takes on yet another meaning when one considers the fact that all of these vocal materials were recorded locally by Leber and Chesworth. Far from representing a series of distant ‘Others’, *Proximities* depicts the ‘Other’ within our midst; Australia not as a homogenous cultural unit, but as a chorus of voices drawn from around the globe in which African peoples and language groups are particularly well-represented. This is not the predominantly white nation of such mainstream Australian cultural imaginings as *Cloudstreet* or *Neighbours*. This is indeed the conventional interpretation of most public artworks to which *Proximities* might be compared, with commentators treating *The Edge of the Trees* and other contemporary Australian sound art memorials as celebrations of cultural diversity. This position is not without its detractors, as we shall see below.

Before I move to look at how the work of Chesworth and Leber is allied with the ideas of Barthes and Kracauer in the artists’ use of the recorded voice, I would like to examine in some detail the issues of place, identity and empire which *Proximities* raises by the very nature of the commission, and the site where it is found, above the central traffic hub for the city of Melbourne, with its newly landscaped, scenic views over the modern, commercial metropolis of Australia.

Cultural Mnemonics and the Politics of Replacement

In his influential text *Sites of Memory* (1984), Pierre Nora makes a distinction between that pre-modern memory which is kept alive by recurrent ritual acts, story telling and other practices carried out directly by those individuals and groups affected by these memories, versus a technologisation of memory in which memory comes to be invested in and shaped by such modern institutions as archives, libraries, history texts and those civic monuments which are commissioned and managed by the state on behalf of the individual. Although Nora’s distinction between an actively-engaged pre-modern community and impersonal contemporary state-run practices has been challenged, his chief point is that the act of memorialisation in those art works and institutions which are exterior to the individual may serve not only to keep events within the consciousness of the populace, but also to neutralise these memories and to—in effect—facilitate the forgetting or erasure of important aspects of these memories.

In the Australian context then, one could argue that the trend since the 1990s to memorialise or otherwise depict indigenous cultures within parks, civic monuments and art galleries serves as a screen to hide the replacement of actual indigenous peoples themselves—and the legal rights they exercise—with the mere “representation” of Aboriginal bodies. The fact that the work offers the sound of speaking subjects whose literal or visual presence is denied to the listener effects a substitution of physical presence by ghost-like sound—a trope which Michel Chion describes as acousmatics, and which here takes on a potentially negative political valency. Julie Marcus for example talks of an aestheticised “smudging of the body” of the Aborigine into the sand which acts as a “denial of dispossession” by transforming “the Indigenous people” into static features of “the land itself”—rather than featuring them as dynamic, living agents and owners of this landscape who remain active within the modern metropolis of today. Marcus contends that many of the apparently progressive art installations located within our cities re-enact this marginalisation by literally or metaphorically placing politics and the Australian indigene at the periphery of the space. For Marcus, works like those by Foley and Lawrence or *Proximities* are aesthetic marginalia to the real work of museums, histories and the courts, constituting little more than aesthetic window-dressing on a new form of terra nullius.

Following Marcus, one could argue that the Australian Aboriginal and indigenous folk voices which feature within *Proximities* stand-in for the body of the absent colonial subject—especially in Melbourne, a city under the British Commonwealth where the presence of our own Indigenous peoples tends to be confined to quite specific geographical areas such as Collingwood, Northcote and Fitzroy. By contrast, such recently bulldozed, cleared and landscaped civic spaces such as Birrarung Marr or the MOS forecourt are only populated by archival or sculptural references to pre-colonial cultures, which have thereby been safely neutralised and rendered as little more than attractive aesthetic ornaments—like the “message stick” sculptures found in Birrarung Marr (pictured below)—all

---

now situated within a space both literally and metaphorically occupied by Anglo-European populations and by their principles of ownership and law. The practice of field recording and ethnomusicology has indeed historically been driven by precisely this kind of translation, in which music anthropologists like Alan Lomax of the Smithsonian Institute sought to document, memorialise and to render as aesthetically pleasing or curious recordings of those sound worlds which—like indigenous folk culture itself—were said to be vanishing in the wake of the inevitable victory of modern, urban Western civilisation. Even influential avant-garde composers such as R. Murray Schafer and Ros Bandt have dedicated much of their practice to preserving those acoustic forms whose integrity is apparently “endangered” by the modern urban metropolis, both artists arguing for the conservation of the pre- or early-modern “sonic ecology” of the world.

Even influential avant-garde composers such as R. Murray Schafer and Ros Bandt have dedicated much of their practice to preserving those acoustic forms whose integrity is apparently “endangered” by the modern urban metropolis, both artists arguing for the conservation of the pre- or early-modern “sonic ecology” of the world.

Figure 2  Vicki Couzens et al, Birrarung Wilam sculptures (2006), at Birrarung Marr. Photo by the author.

Such neo-Primitivist ideas are widespread within much of the discourse about contemporary Australian sound art, as is evidenced by curator Julianna Engberg’s essay on another separate Games’ commission from Leber and Chesworth. The very title of Engberg’s catalogue essay—“My Chicken is Missing”—evokes a sense of tragic “loss” for a prelapsarian sound world, in which “Songs that once described the pulverising of corn” for the inhabitants of the pre-modern African “village” are conceived as radically other to, and threatened by, the contemporary “synthetic bustle of Elizabeth Street” and the sounds of the urban metropolis. Engberg’s comments are ironic given that they are actually more applicable to Proximities than to the specific work which she describes. Reiterations (Elizabeth Street) by Chesworth and Leber was commissioned for the +Plus Factors exhibition held at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne during the Commonwealth Games Festival, and it was in some ways a more radical work than the long-term civic commission of Proximities. The ACCA piece consisted of seven recordings of individual African immigrants moving by foot and by public transport through Melbourne. Presented on headphones, the work put the listener in the position of the immigrant him or herself. Leber and Chesworth observed that audiences to Reiterations: “encounter each individual in turn, inhabiting their listening perspectives as they sing and move about the crowded city,” thereby reinscribing Melbourne and its modern transport routes with the migrants’ own voices, languages, songs and experiences, producing a contemporary patois of spatiality and sound.

Irrespective of Reiterations’ actual formal qualities and display format though, as far as these critics are concerned, the possibility—or indeed the desirability—of sonic hybridity across time and space is, at best, marginal. Sonic history is seen instead as a never-ending sequence of conflicts between the irreconcilable forces of the authentic (the pre-modern voice and the direct bodily presence of the listener and sound-maker) and the synthetic (modernity). This model was also challenged in an even more explicit fashion by Chesworth and Leber in a piece which they designed for the first exhibition at the Museum Of Sydney in 1995. This was an environmental soundscape which accompanied the main videowall installation by the stairs. Chesworth has noted that the processed field recordings from which this soundscape was built contained “remnants” or “aural ghosts” of various “machine sounds” which impinge today upon the acoustic ecology of modern Sydney’s parks and gardens. The resulting audiovisual montage was described by the artist as “a giant organised sea of electrons which appeared to create a vast electronic ecology,” or “a dynamic space delineated by movement, timbre and the tactile”—and not in fact a simple recreation of pre-settlement Sydney’s soundscape.

---


Published by Research Online, 2009
Given Chesworth’s own deployment of the noise and sounds of the metropolis within the MOS environmental soundscape, the absence of any urban patois or more overtly ‘modern’ forms of speech within Proximities is all the more remarkable. Apart from one instance where the words being sung by an African dockworker are impinged upon by the distant sounds of machinery and horns, the material in Proximities is notable for a level of acoustic detailing and recording in which almost all such contextualising sounds and traces have been removed. This does not however naturalise the speech archived within this work. On the contrary, the level of fine crafting and skilful manipulation produces an acoustic surface which is distinctly unreal, unusually proximate to the listener, and which is at times quite uncanny. Nevertheless, the recognisably non or pre-industrial verbal and sonic content of Proximities does tend to place those cultures which it represents in the past—rather explicitly depicting them as a logical extension of the dynamic, Western metropolitan spaces and travel routes which flow beneath the Barak Bridge. Proximities and its verdant surrounds become a site for the distanced spectacularisation of the urban metropolis, rather than immersing or pulling the listener into these dynamic modern spaces through the content of the speech itself, as Kahn would have of Benjamin and Simmel.

To simply read Proximities as a work which marginalises the validity of the contemporary subaltern experience under modernity through its construction of space, language and history would, however, be ungenerous, and would be to interpret this very subtle work exclusively in the context of its literal placement and those factors which facilitated its commission. As Genocchio notes of The Edge of the Trees:

While all acts of symbolic reconciliation [or resistance] run the risk of replaying the structures through which dominant cultures have appropriated and assimilated difference … they cannot simply be reduced to such a negative reading.23

Such an interpretation here principally fails to take fully into account the acoustic richness of Proximities and its qualities such as the sonic detailing noted above. The task then is to develop a rhetorical strategy which recognises the specific formal aspects of recorded sound and playback, whilst nevertheless explicitly engaging with these debates in museology, memorialisation, acousmatic physical presence and colonial history—issues which are raised all too rarely in the wider context of sound art itself.

What I am arguing here then is that the work of Leber and Chesworth does in fact suggest an engagement with, and critique of, these trends in contemporary memorialisation and urban sound, yet this critique is one which functions indirectly, through an overtly superficial or ornamental treatment of the sonic material and the body, rather than through a deep and explicit dialogue in terms of verbal rhetoric or architectonic space. It is indeed hard to imagine how the artists could have secured the commission for Proximities had they tackled such issues head-on, through an angry, vociferous statement of culturally hybrid, dynamic subaltern modernity. There may be a space for such an attack on ideas of racial, immigrant and subaltern identity through forms such as French-African rap, yaourt and Franco-Algerian rai, but not, I suspect, via the design of those official state-sponsored monuments which are situated at the very heart of the civic metropolis and its spaces of leisure.24

The Theatre of Disappearance

Writing about his own use of recorded Indigenous speech in his piece for the MOS (The Calling to Come, 1995), Paul Carter observed that:

The Museum of Sydney occupies a site of disappearances: its monumental appearance may be said to contradict the site’s history, or once again to obscure it. What then? We can colonise it with little theatres that exhibit what has disappeared. Or, refusing to come to the party … we can persist in enunciating the space of disappearance… Such an enunciation … renames the site as … [a] place where symbolically the end has not come and a different kind of—distracted “exchange” might be said to be enacted. In offering a critique of history as an already-finished, closed and pre-scripted theatre, Carter, Chesworth and Leber present an alternative construction of history as a melancholy theatre of ghostly memorialisation, in which the audience attends to the choreographed movement and disappearance of voice even as these historic voices continue to pulsate and morph throughout these harmonically-charged,
Romantic aural planes—a sonic disappearance which can only end in noise (see below). The finality of history is suspended or resisted in order to allow “a tonally and timbrally mediated” circulation and flow across the mnemonic, acoustic space. Such an approach cannot, of course, overcome the disappearance of other signs of spatial specificity, of indigeneity, or of the literal bodies of Aborigines and of their principles of jurisprudence and ownership. It can, however—perhaps—hope to hold in abeyance, or to engage in a dialogue with some of these forces; to resist them in some small way, and to publicly articulate the aesthetics of disappearance within this public space by re-enacting such a dispersal of presence each time an acoustic fragment moves through the speakers, only to dissipate into the wind again.26

**Flânerie and Mobile Spectatorship**

Part of the issue here is to what extent does that quality of dynamism, renewal and endless movement which we take as normative to modernity finally annihilate any sense of cultural specificity and place, and to what extent does it allow for a counter narrative in which sounds, objects and cultures can in fact be tied to a specific location, without merely becoming static monuments to a moment in history which we, active subjects of the modern urban metropolis, have now supposedly superseded.

Writing in Germany during the 1930s, Siegfried Kracauer claimed that increasingly people did not travel to go to a particular location, but rather that “travel has been reduced to [the] pure experience of space,” to an experience of moving along a horizontal plane from one coordinate to another. As a result, there had been a “flattening out of” affect, experience and the body “in order to make” the individual seem as “smooth and shiny as” a 1930s “automobile ... desiring nothing other than the greatest possible technologising of all activities.”27 For Kracauer—like Benjamin—the chief characteristic of modern life was its increasingly self-reflexive, abstract or fetishistic quality. Kracauer nevertheless argued that:

This emphasis on the external has the advantage of being sincere. It is not externality that poses a threat to truth. Truth is threatened only by the naïve affirmation of [those] cultural values that have become unreal [in the modern world] and by the careless misuse of concepts such as personality, inwardness, tragedy, [pre-modern authenticity,] and so on.28

In short, the very superficiality and abstractness of modern culture was not only a sign of the alienation of the individual and of modern travel, of social, economic and racial problems and conflicts, but it was also a dramatisation of these very same problems in a way which made them easier to perceive—and thus rendered this aspect of modern life open to attack and criticism. The transformation of the world into a series of vacuous images with nothing behind them was also what made the city a place of dreams, a place where one could re-imagine such arbitrary images for one’s own purposes and desires—just as Benjamin claimed the flâneur had done when travelling through the streets of Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Kracauer and Benjamin were in many ways trying to recover for progressive politics the aesthetics of Romanticism, which they felt had been claimed by fascism and other oppressive ideologies under bourgeois, imperial capitalism. One of the ways Benjamin proposed that such a resistant culture could be reformulated was through a Surrealist critique of the city whereby—in the eyes of the late nineteenth-century figure of the flâneur and his Surrealist successors—the modern metropolis was transformed from an alienating manifestation of contemporary capitalism and the colonial state, into a space of dreaming, desire and of self-realisation. Benjamin claimed that “the father of Surrealism is [the] arcade” or the passage, which contained that “bazaar” of barely organised objects which made up “the last hang-out of the flâneur.”29 A novel feature of Parisian architecture in Paris during the 1840s, the passages were the precursor to the shopping malls of today, consisting of roofed arcades lined with shops, newsagents, cafés and windows which displayed all of the dusty bric-a-brac and shiny new commodities to be found in Paris during this period of capitalist transition. The passage was, for Benjamin, a fabulous public interior, glistening with objects of visual attraction and distraction; a realm where new models of consumption and display had yet to fully take effect, and where the very redundancy and inefficient nature of such an approach to marketing created a space for the individual to rework such tawdry, reflective baubles for his or her own desires.
The flâneur was, in this a sense, a Romantic figure—but not one who stood aloof from the object of his gaze, as did the man shown in Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. The flâneur projected his deepest longings onto the city such that he became—like the passages themselves—a site where the distinction between a roofed, private, *interior* space, and an open, public, *exterior* space, dissolved. The flâneur projected his desires onto the commodities in the shop-windows of the arcades which he travelled past, becoming, in Charles Baudelaire's words "a roving soul in search of a body"—an acousmatic presence if you will—for whom "the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned."\(^{30}\) Like the Surrealist artist who composed material by allowing whatever uncensored thoughts which unconsciously arose in his or her mind to be "automatically" transcribed onto the page or the canvas, the flâneur was "an automatic walker, yielding to the metropolis, avid for its dreams."\(^{31}\) The flâneur did not, like Friedrich's *Wanderer*, see his stormy depths echoed in a sublime vision of nature and its awesome majesty, but rather the flâneur acted as a mirror of the city, his disinterest in any *specific* object paradoxically allowing his eye to graze indifferently over the subjects of the city, and so to reconstruct them according to his own fantasies and his own idiosyncratic, fungible associations or fantasies of embodiment. Flânerie and ornamentation are in this sense antithetical to the Romantic sublime. In this world of pure planar surfaces, the flâneur was, for Benjamin, the ultimate critic because he defied altogether any claims to bourgeois interiority or the mystic depths of the fascist Götterdämmerung, finding instead his jouissance and personality through his own creative interpretation and voyeurism of the otherwise superficial city.

**Flânerie and Modernist Ornamentalism**

Kracauer argued that such an attention to the superficial aspects of the modern spectacle could act as a critique of this modern sense of abstract placelessness and the impersonal state by reflecting back at modernity its own image. If the sale of the products of one's own body (labour) caused the modern individual to become alienated from him or herself, then what modernity achieved was the transformation of "individuals" and their bodies into interchangeable physical elements within a larger machine—be this the factory, the office, or global capitalism as a whole. Kracauer saw this machinic logic as being exemplified in those spectacles which he described as "ornamental."
Modern culture was ornamental for Kracauer because it referred only to itself and to its own depersonalised machines and structures. The female chorus lines of the 1920s, for example, were not ‘about’ anything as such. Rather each woman was transformed into a series of physical elements (legs, arms, breasts) which moved in waves, in a ripple of kicks or shifts to the left, rather than as a collection of self-aware, psychologically-complex individuals whose depths of character might have been hinted at in such visual displays. Whereas for the soldier on the parade ground “regularity was considered a means to an end” which “arose out of patriotic feelings and in turn aroused them in soldiers and subjects. The star formations” of the girls, however, “have no meaning beyond themselves.” The “masses above whom they rise are not a moral unit”—like Hitler’s military performer at Nuremberg, but:

Rather the girl-units drill ... to train the broadest mass of people ... to create a pattern of undreamed-of dimensions. The end result is the ornament, whose closure is brought about by emptying all the substantial constructs of their contents

—and of their meaning. This produced a gigantic, depthless “star formation” of body parts and machinic elements. The distracted gaze of the audience over the performance of such ornamental objects is one which does not have a central focus, but which roves indifferently between different ornamental objects, body parts, or sites of (in)attention. The viewer’s eye casts about this display of planar surfaces in a way which acknowledges and foregrounds the lack of depth on offer in such cultural phenomena. Here, as with Benjamin’s flâneur, the absence of interiority in the viewer is echoed in the dispersed superficial pleasures found within those objects which the viewer gazes upon. More importantly, this depthlessness takes on a specifically embodied character, in which acousmatic sound and voice generates a specifically machinic sense of fantastic bodily presence. The depthless-subject of the flâneur is realised through a machinic, fragmentary body, where the distracted gaze or aural perception (an eye or ear that views many acousmatic objects with an equal, roving indifference) accords with the construction of a fragmentary and non-unified body (a moving corpus which also lacks any overarching hierarchy of parts).

If then, as Barthes has argued, the voice can evoke a sense of embodiment in its sonority and in its timbral qualities, I would suggest that the acousmatic subaltern or Indigenous body which is conjured up by Proximities is precisely such a mobile, planar ornamental body as that found in musical film director Busby Berkeley’s choreographed “star formations.” Proximities evokes a hybrid, disjointed mass of physical units which do not cohere into a collection of psychologically or culturally profound human subjects, but which rather creates a great, billowing plane of abstracted materials which implicitly extend infinitely in time and space beyond the literal boundaries of the work itself. The aural mix of Leber and Chesworth creates a passage-like or ornamental display of glistening, artificial-sounding sonic elements, suggestive acoustic objects and dispersed bodily presences, which listeners stroll between, flâneur-like, while the cars, trains and trams below the walkers echo their own distracted sensations of placelessness, flow and transport. Where Kahn’s ideal work would immerse and englobulate the listener within a liquid spherical space as one walks within it, the experience of travelling between the two rows of speakers from which Proximities is constructed is more
like moving between a pair of kaleidoscopic walls or flat planes, covered with materials which acoustically dance and shift across their vertical surfaces. Benjamin famously argued in “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936) that modern recording technologies have rendered all art as flat, and superficially available for universal consumption as the filmic image. While some critics have seen in this the death of art as we know it, Benjamin himself felt that it had the potential to free art from the oppressive hierarchies of capitalism, culture and class via new technologised forms such as movies and photography.

Writing about the filmic actualités of the Lumière brothers from the 1890s, Tom Gunning describes exactly the kind of visual distraction which Chesworth and Leber solicit in their own highly crafted, acoustic surfaces:

The lack of dramatic narrative in these early street scenes invites a different sort of gaze to the one we have learned from classical narrative cinema … One must scan the surface of the image for various centres of interest … Once focussed, however, the pleasure one finds in a face, a gesture, an odd mode of transport, a bit of architecture, gives no guarantee of being sustained. Further, these points of pleasure are simultaneous with other possible points of interest; one is peripherally aware of all one is missing. New centres of interest bob into the frame unexpectedly, while others depart beyond reclamation. The receptive spectator approaches these images with a global curiosity about its “many interesting places,” a curiosity that is endlessly being incited and never completely satiated. The street is filled with endless attractions.

In the case of Proximities, these “endless attractions” take the form of constantly appearing and disappearing voices and exclamations, as series of digitally choreographed “many interesting places” and sounds and bodily presences whose totality eludes the individual listener through its mobility and machinic complexity.

Clearly the figure of the Euro-American flâneur and his or her free consumption of imported, recorded cultural objects in the form of images or sounds needs to be viewed somewhat more critically when, as Tony Mitchell observes, contemporary systems of exchange have produced a “binary dynamic” which “places the Western listener in the privileged position of being a musical flâneur able to tune into new sonic adventures” which have been strip-mined from the colonial peripheries of the Western metropolitan centre. Nevertheless, Australian museologist Andrea Whitcomb has pointed out that a degree of flânerie has been normative within state-sponsored mnemonic institutions such as the museum since at least the time of the nineteenth-century’s world fairs, and that the increasing use of sound sculpture and multi-media installation in museums today constitutes an attempt to harness such a model of distracted viewing and listening as a counter to earlier attempts by imperial museum administrators and archivists to present a unified narrative of colonial progress. This position is echoed in Susan Best’s celebration of The Edge of the Trees and the MOS as a site for the “immersion and distraction” of the flâneuresque observer.

As the subtitle of Proximities suggests—Local histories / global entanglements—what is evoked in this sound sculpture then is a flattening and collapsing of space which resists any attempt to clearly order the shifting, kaleidoscopic materials according to any transparent hierarchies of race, geography or class. The sculpture is a kind of tangled, sonic superhighway, promoting in this case a potentially radical and destabilising form of aural flânerie in the audience through the complexity of Chesworth’s and Leber’s digital choreography of voice across the space.

Montage and Distraction

Kracauer echoed Soviet film maker Sergei Eisenstein in strongly endorsing that quintessentially urban practice of cinematic “montage.” By this, Kracauer meant a process in which technological fragments which “by their” very “nature demand to be isolated from one another”—namely the separate images in each frame of the film-strip, each individual sound within the Foley score, or each note and tonal element within a composition such as in Proximities—were not simply turned into a “motley sequence of externalities” by being coerced “into an organic whole” or used to forge a spurious “artistic” unity. Instead, these “isolated” montaged elements should leap one from the other in a series of jagged discontinuities, such that their status as superficial signs or dancing recorded ornaments with no real connection to deep psychology or the human subject was maintained. When art is constructed through a dancing montage in this way, the viewer does not focus his or her attention on an implicit narrative goal, fully rendered human presence, or upon the construction of character, but—as Gunning observes above—rather he or she muses distractedly about the relationship between these machinic elements themselves.

Translating this model of montage into Australian acoustic and mnemonic space, both Proximities and the MOS’s The Edge of the Trees installation might be considered, in the words of Catherine Rogers and Susan Best, to evoke an ornamental, utopic “non-place.” As Rogers observes of Foley and Lawrence, such montaged sound works do not generate any sense of a “real place” as such, but rather seek to present themselves as a perfected egalitarian, multicultural acoustic “society”
constituted from discrete historic fragments of other places and cultures. This generates a "heterotopia." Each acoustic or museological "artefact" or "high art installation" is comprised of "a number of sites and spaces that are in themselves incompatible and contradictory." In these heterotopic, montaged planes, Aboriginal and subaltern "presence...exists as a kind of virtual reality, an embodiment in the form of "a partial, fragmentary" digital re-incarnation" or montage. I would add that the possibility of heterotopia is here enabled by the fact that the sound never coalesces into a stable spatial form, but rather that voices move across the plane as vocalists appear and disappear.

For Kracauer, such montaged cinematic presentations therefore lacked:

any authentic and materially motivated coherence ... convey[ing] precisely and openly to thousands of eyes and ears the [heterotopic] disorder of society—this is precisely what would enable them to evoke and maintain the tension that must precede the inevitable and radical change. [Walking] in the streets of Berlin, one is often struck by the momentary insight that someday all this will suddenly burst apart. The entertainment to which the general public throngs ... [produces] the same effect. What Kracauer is arguing here—and which I would like to endorse in the context of Proximities—is that the distracted spectatorship or process of listening which is created by such a technologised flatness forges a heterotopic choreographic space in which the observer is free to reconfigure and grapple with the meaning of these ornamental acoustic objects, bodies and presences, and what their relationship to each other might be. Planar ornamental opacity and arbitrariness thus comes to act as a spur to the conscious reflection on political meanings and structural relations in society and art. If we combine this with the insights of Benjamin and the Surrealists, desire—and its structuration of attention or distraction—becomes a way to activate a political consciousness through the listener's relationship to the aural art work and to the metropolis.

The rich and gorgeously recorded vocal samples of Proximities would seem to me to accord quite precisely with this sense of "Elegant," heterotopic "surface splendour" which Kracauer celebrated within modern culture. The array of different voices, of laughs, of linguistic fragments, oral inflections and of thickly applied acoustic detail which Chesworth and Leber offer recalls that "Gesamtkunstwerk of effects" whose dancing body Kracauer claimed "has crawled out" of the Art Deco movie palace in the form of an unnatural "glittering, revue-like creature" or "visual and acoustic kaleidoscope" which "assaults...the senses." The massive array of shimmering, mobile technological ornaments marshalled within Proximities elicits a similarly distracted response in the listener, who struggles to find order within something which fundamentally defies any clear sense of orderliness beyond its own machinic embodiment and the experience of travel through colonial space.

Similarly—drawing on postmodern theory, rather than Benjamin and the Frankfurt School—Simon Reynolds has described a comparable sense of mobile technological flatness in 1980s house music. "Above all," Reynolds argues:

this music is shallow, an array of surfaces and forces that engage the listener through fascination (what was that sound?!): [but] there's no depth, no human truth or social concern to be divined, no atmosphere ... just an illegible, arbitrary alteration of torques, vectors, [and] gradients, whose opacity is endlessly resistant to the attempts of white rock critics to read anything into it.

One must acknowledge in this respect that the nature of the sampled material within Proximities as culturally specific linguistic traits and vocalisations does mean that, unlike the subject of Reynolds' analysis, the artists' productions clearly do have social concerns already woven into their acoustic fabric. Nevertheless, both house music and the compositions of Chesworth and Leber are characterised by an apparently "arbitrary alteration of torques, vectors," intensities and "gradients" across the plane and by the soliciting of a barely-legible sonic "fascination" which tends to work against any attempts to firmly fix the meanings of the work in terms of deep political signification—rather than in terms of these very flows, transports and ornamentally-arranged planar gradients themselves. This lack of any transparently visible hierarchy within the mobile acoustic surface of Proximities acts as a call for the political and social awakening of the flâneur-esque listener.

The Edge of the Trees, by contrast, was designed with less attention to speaker placement and acoustic detailing of the recorded voice than Proximities. Its aural surfaces alone cannot generate a comparable sense of complex heterotopic pulsion and ornamentality. Nevertheless, if one follows Rogers in moving from the museum's forecourt to read the institution as a whole, the combined impact made by Ross Gibsons' audiovisual series The Bond Store (1995), together with Carter's recitation piece referred to above, Narelle Jubelin's arrangement of the display drawers, and so on, then the MOS does evoke a rich sense of heterotopic ornamentality—though perhaps more through the deployment of actual physical objects, materials and surfaces (wood, stone, iron, feathers, ochre and bones, in combination with quiet Indigenous vocalisations), which are further supported by sonic ornaments, rather than principally through a densely active surface of aurality, sound and embodiment, as is the case for Proximities.
Figure 5 The speaker slots of *The Edge of Trees* (left) and materials (right). Images by the author.

**Figure 5**

Punctum and Harmonic Ornamentalisation

*Proximities* is not, however, entirely without a hierarchical arrangement of materials, and I would like to turn to two elements of the work itself which act to order the samples according to two different and opposing principles. The first of these ordering structures is what I think we can legitimately here describe as a “layer”—that is to say a single track which one finds relatively evenly dispersed throughout the piece as a series of harmonic undertones—yet it is a “layer” which, by the very nature of its even distribution across the space, contributes to this sense of planar flatness and ornamentality which I have been describing. Chesworth has taken a series of tonal strata from within each of the individual grabs of sound played back within the work and has pitch-shifted and harmonised them together to produce a wavering series of tones and hums. When walking across the bridge, this sinuous drone remains a constant element amongst the rest of the aural detailing and it serves to link together all of the samples, coalescing them into the hybrid, harmonic and overtly machinic or technologically-produced, ornamental body which I mentioned earlier. This is echoed by artist Simeon Nelson’s visual design for the wall panels of the bridge, which feature a constantly undulating motif recalling both Maori moko facial tattooing (the absent subaltern body) and the filigree patterning of ancient Celtic metalwork and design (ornament).46 These continuous acoustic and decorative strata also act as a metaphor for the humanist ideal of “multiculturalism,” in which different voices, bodies and cultural influences come together in a complementary fashion to make up a greater and essentially unified social whole. This might indeed be considered a visualisation of what one of Benjamin’s contemporaries described as a mellow, gently pulsing “tone painting, in which conflicting colours take their place without quarrelling with one another, and none shrieking” which have been acoustically “shaped out of discords, beaten but not molten into a harmony” which blends together within the metropolitan space such sources as the vaudevillian sonic exclamations and cultural identities of a “Cockney Comedian, a Spanish Tandem … a Swedish Acrobat … American Clog Dancers, an Argentine ‘Stunt’ Artist” and other sounds.47

Figure 6 Visual moko and aural planar continuity across the speakers. Images courtesy of the artists.

---

The other organisational structure which I would like to examine is the spatial placement of the indigenous Australian material on the bridge. Sonia Leber has referred to this as a “punctum” within the work, alluding to Barthes’ description of the photograph and the way in which the structure of its surface is punctured or rendered problematic by isolated, almost incidental details within the visual field. The punctum is, for Barthes, to be distinguished from what he calls “the studium” of the photograph. The studium consists of those sets of significations, meanings and formal arrangements which exist within the image. This can also be related to Barthes’ separation between the “phenosong” of the Romantic lied, versus its “genosong.” In the studium of the photograph or the phenosong of vocal delivery, the use of light or shade and the representation of specific, known events, actions or individuals via recognised codes of gesture, pose, setting, décor, emotional inflection and so on—in other words, the technical excellence of the work in its formal, expressive and tonal character—these make up the studium or phenosong. The punctum, however, constitutes a disturbance in the visual field; a gap, omission, error, or fragment which somehow exceeds the designs of the photographer. The genosong is slightly different in that it is less a hole or a gap within the surface of the vocal image, than it is a positive aural presence which subverts the expressive topography and hierarchy of the voice. The genosong contains what Barthes, Leber and Chesworth refer to as the “grain” of the voice, something which speaks of the soft, wet material body of the singer—“the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the sinuses,” in Barthes’ words—just as the more breathy immaterial phenosong speaks of the immaterial “soul” or psychology of the singer or of the character whom he or she voices. In either case, however, these elements of grain and punctum do not simply overturn the structure of the image or the recorded voice. Rather both highlight that which mechanical transcription lacks; namely full presence, a live subject, a fully-rendered interiority or a deep connection with the real world as depicted in the photograph or in the recording, and thus that to which Barthes’ most personal memories might be connected.

The punctum can only really affect the viewer or the listener if one allows oneself to pass beyond “the unreality” and flatness “of the thing represented, 1 [Barthes] entered crazily into the spectacle, into the image, taking into my arms what is dead”—namely the recorded image or sound—causing Barthes to become “mad for Pity’s sake.” Even for Barthes, the effect of the punctum is, in the end, to turn the viewer into a kind of mad flâneur; a viewer or listener who has paradoxically entered into the flatness of the image and who has flattened his or her own subjectivity by linking it to such a disembodied form of modern, technological reproduction. The disturbance of the punctum is not one which saves us from the flatness of the image, but rather one which transforms this flatness into the ornamental or flâneur-esque strategies of resistance identified by Benjamin and Kracauer, producing a self-conscious dialogue with and critique of this depthlessness of modern perception. Indeed, Leber has suggested that, by representing such a Barthesian discontinuity within the urban environment, Proximities may act as a punctum for the city as whole; a superficial machinic structure which highlights the ornamental heterotopia of the surrounding metropolitan sights, sounds and locales.

Staging Place

When viewed in these terms, Leber’s strategic use of the term “punctum” to describe the placement of the Indigenous material within Proximities becomes highly revealing. After consultations with prominent Wurundjeri elder and descendant of William Barak, Joy Murphy-Wandin, Chesworth and Leber decided that the material which represents the Indigenous peoples of the Melbourne region needed to be given special treatment within Proximities. These voices are therefore confined to approximately three speakers on either side of the highest point of the bridge, which walkers encounter as they reach the peak of the gentle slope which leads up from both ends of the bridge. While most of the rest of the samples consist of songs and the odd exclamation, the Aboriginal recordings are made up of the sounds of clap-sticks and the sequential repetition of key Wurundjeri words, terms and names for population groups. Close listening reveals this material to be taken from a lesson in Wurundjeri being given by Murphy-Wandin and others. “Waah!” says Murphy, who is answered back, somewhat inexactly, so she corrects her partner by saying “Waah! Like ‘waah,’ as in ... the crow!” “Waah!” comes back the response and Murphy goes on. Although these Indigenous materials are literally and metaphorically displaced from their point of origin through their existence as recordings and by their disembodied acousmatic playback amidst the hard, empty surfaces of urban machinic modernity and its monuments, Proximities at least strives towards a sense of Indigenous continuity by documenting the transmission of that most central of cultural formations—language—from one person to another. Leber’s hope is that walkers get the impression that they are “arriving at a place” when they move into this section, while the “peripheries” of the bridge impart a sense of “flow.” The central Indigenous section is therefore more physically and spatially “grounded.” This more concretised and fixed spatial and sonic ambiance within the composition acts as a kind of “punctum” within the harmonic studium of the surrounding material.
Just as for Barthes, though, the psychophysical wounding of the punctum cannot in fact transcend the flat materiality of the image, but only allow for a transitory moment of madness in which exterior surfaces become overtly and consciously ornamental. The strategic placement of Indigenous voice by Leber and Chesworth cannot fully arrest the passage of modernist depersonalisation, abstraction and travel, nor can it halt the transformation of bodies into a technological archive. Such disappearing acts are set up in advance by the very conditions of the commission, and by the modern urban world within which it acts. In closing then, I would like to hint at one last way in which these patterns of modernity, consumption and colonialism are contested—but not through an act of wounding, grounding, puncturing or stopping, as the punctum would imply—but rather through the deployment and infringement of noise within Proximities.

Finale and Götterdämmerung:

The Ursound of chaos and the critique of modernity

The Barak Bridge is a elevated structure. This exposed position means that the bridge is often windy. The travel routes beneath it are moreover extremely active. Depending on the weather or time of day, one is likely to hear the art work within a bed of peripheral sound ranging from diesel goods trains, to transport and venue announcements being given out on the loudspeakers located not far from the bridge, cars, and—somewhat more soothingly—the gentle, ringing tones of the Federation Bells installation (located about four-hundred metres away) which commemorates the one-hundredth anniversary of Australian Federation and which is set off in Birrarung Marr twice at day.54 The space also comes alive with noisy crowds when a sporting event is staged at the MCG. To listen to Proximities is to engage in a distracted dialogue with other sounds—particularly the burbling, chaotic zephyrs of the wind, passing crowds, and the zooming ringing drones of mechanised transport, which in turn ornament and adorn the complicated mixture of moving samples and elements which make up the installation proper. Indeed, Chesworth and Leber actively encourage the integration of such material within the installation by including within the mix itself the sound of footsteps such as those made by the flâneur him or herself. This creates what, to paraphrase Kracauer, might be considered a kind of mise en abyme within the soundscape, with the score containing within it the sounds of the very city within which it is located.55 Both as a series of recordings and as a socially-situated, urban art work in public space, Proximities cannot be separated from the sounds of travel itself and the kind of noise, chaos and disruption which this implies. If, as Michel Serres suggests, all communication involves a dialogue between two parties whose aim is to successfully marginalise a third speaker—noise—then Proximities explodes this tripartite structure, threatening to expand the exchange of speaker, listener and their third “parasite” into an ultimately chaotic festive discussion which has no limits.56 The presence of such noisy parasites within Proximities speaks to the dispersal of the work and so invites ornamental fragmentation and deconstruction.

Figure 7 Sources of noise at Proximities: the rail lines and crowds. Images by the author and courtesy of the artists, respectively.
Brandon LaBelle has claimed that: “Sound art as a practice harnesses, describes, analyses, performs, and interrogates the condition of sound and the processes by which it operates,” and that in so doing “it teaches us that … knowledge is festive, alive as a chorus of voices.” While a conventional museological or highly aestheticised approach tends to produce “a bounded geography, of this space with that sound, this room with that voice,” a more expanded approach such as that which Leber and Chesworth employ contains within it the potential to take:

on all sounds and all places. Yet in doing so it shrinks back from its own discoveries, for the Ursound as primary soundscape must in the end be pure noise, as the sound of the universe [or of culture] exploding into being, its signals still travelling, as white noise from dying stars.

Sound art has the potential to create and foreground an ambiguity within the architectural which threatens not just to blast apart modernity, but also the ornamental machinic structures of modern art and culture itself, leaving nothing but an ever expanding circuit of noise and the disappearance of bodies and of centres of light. As a work of art, Proximities enacts these tensions and contradictions within modern space, travel and colonialism, even as it struggles to aestheticise, spatialise and contain these forces so as to reclaim a site for the indigene, the subaltern and the self-aware flâneur. Proximities flattens space, sound and culture into a series of planar ornamental motifs which become engulfed in the Ursound of chaos, to produce a complicated field of distractions for the flâneur to become embroiled within, which she or he must decode—not as a series of deep structures, but rather as absences, disappearing relations, and pulsing, vibrating textures of flow, travel and repetition. Proximities cannot enforce social justice, nor can it arrest the flow of capital, empire and modernity. It can however, in Kracauer’s words “evoke and maintain the tension that must precede the inevitable and radical change” of society “that someday”—we hope—will burst this all apart.

Notes

Unless otherwise specified, all online materials accessed April 2007. I am grateful for the assistance of Sonia Leber, David Chesworth, Dr Christopher Marshall, Dr Rod Giblett, Cat Hope, Assoc. Prof. Joanna Mendelssohn, Keith Gallasch, Rob Muir and the anonymous readers of this paper.


2. Kahn, esp. pp. 23-44.


4. Kahn, p. 44.


9. *Proximities* was the only permanent, wholly commissioned work. It was however to be unveiled within the 2006 Commonwealth Arts Festival, which included various events and major exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria Australia and the Australian Centre for the Moving Image, both located nearby in Federation Square. See Charles Green, ed., 2006 *Contemporary Commonwealth* (Melbourne: NGV, 2006); Karen Burns, "2006 Contemporary Commonwealth," *Art Monthly*, 188 (April 2006), pp. 9-11; Anthony Gardner, "Assassins in the Attic" and "Rapt in Rhetoric: Musings on ‘politics,’” in *Broadsheet*, 35.2 (2006), pp. 80-83 and 35.3 (2006), pp. 144-7 respectively.

10. Describing the exhibitions associated with the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, curator Green observes that "culture was associated with the Games as a medium for celebration, and the projection of a progressive image of the Australian nation," acknowledging that the 2006 Contemporary Commonwealth exhibitions were propelled by a "similar descent and humanitarian motives." Charles Green, "The Empire Strikes Back," *Gallery* (Feb-April 2006), p. 31.


30. My reading of Benjamin and Kracauer is here guided by Schwartz and Elsaesser in their linking of the Weimar critics to Surrealism and to a kind of prescient postmodernism, a world of surface and false-yet-real appearance. By contrast, Gunning—while conceding that “Benjamin’s characterisation of the flâneur” is highly “unstable”—is nevertheless keen to distinguish between a three-part continuum of spectatorial positions: the distanced ironic flâneur; the “badaud” or gawker absorbed by the sights which he sees; and the X-ray vision of the detective. Benjamin, “The Flâneur”; Crickenberger; Tom Gunning, “From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and *Traffic in Souls* (1913),” in Arnwine and Lerner, eds, pp. 25-61; Schwartz, passim; Elsaesser, passim.


41. Rogers takes the term from Foucault, although the space which accords most fully with the latter’s rhetorical construction of a heterotopia would be that of a ship. The travelling vessel is unfixed from the normal temporal continuities of terrestrial life and place, whilst also constituting a fluid, unresolved amalgam of different cultural, social and political realms and regimes amongst the passengers. Even so, such an apparently utopic spatial structure may facilitate colonial structures and wars. Though Foucault does not himself ally the heterotopic with political resistance, the specific locales which he identifies—museums, libraries, cemeteries—echo those which I describe above. Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” [1967], *Diacritics*, 16 (Spring 1986), pp. 22-27.


43. Ibid., pp. 323-4.


51. Phone conversation between the author and Sonia Leber (May 2007).

52. Hansen notes that Kracauer argues: “It is not only the preserved presence of the grandmother” or other photographic subject which “moves the beholder but, on the contrary,” it is “her reduction to a spatialised configuration of time. This is what makes the beholder of old photographs shudder—and makes grandchildren giggle … Kracauer’s photograph is disturbing because it alienates both object and beholder, because it ruptures the web of intimacy, memory, and interpretation.” Quoting Kracauer, Hansen observes: “‘We are contained in nothing and photography assembles the fragments around a nothing.’ The photograph thus in fact enables, rather than prevents, a momentary encounter with mortality, an awareness” that history does not necessarily “include us,” assisting in our recognition of the “provisional status of all given configurations” and “confronting the viewer with the actual state of disorder and crisis” found within the abstractions of machinic, capitalist, imperial culture. Hansen, pp. 455-7; Kracauer, pp. 47-64.

53. Personal discussion with Leber and Chesworth, Barak Bridge (June 2006).


57. LaBelle, p. ix.

58. Ibid., p. 241.