

Vital Signs/Art and Wellness: The Hospital as a Mediated Site

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Declaration

The thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to the final version of my thesis being made available worldwide when deposited in the University's Digital Repository **, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. **Unless an Embargo has been approved for a determined period.

Miranda Lawry
September 2013

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Abstract

As photographers give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure.
(Susan Sontag 1990:34)

This thesis is the outcome of original inquiry that focuses on substantiating ‘Practice as Research or ‘Practice-led Research’ as a means of generating and identifying ‘authentic experience.’

The ‘space,’ as Sontag names it, is ‘the hospital;’ in particular, the hospital as a vulnerable, threatened and, ultimately, destroyed space. The theme of interacting with such an insecure space in order to record and articulate an ‘authentic experience,’ namely the experience of the staff who have worked in one hospital in particular, the Royal Newcastle Hospital (NSW), forms the foundation of this exegesis.

The research is situated within the area of Arts Health and is a theoretical and, at times, personal reflection on my time as artist-in-residence at the Royal and my relationship with the staff as they prepared to leave a much loved place of work.

As a photographic artist, the research was realised by using the photographic image as a primary visualising agent and, principally, the window as the prevailing encoded form. The resulting images and the process of creating them are recorded herein and have left the people of the Royal with a series of ‘imaginary possession[s] of a past’ that is now intangible in a material sense, and thus ‘unreal.’ Nevertheless, the images, some of which are now permanently housed in the new precinct, The Royal Newcastle Centre at Rankin Park, and memorialised in the first of the three portfolio books, *Pathologies of Time I - Royal Newcastle Hospital*, were created with the intention of working with the staff in order to contribute to their journey towards taking ‘possession’ ‘of space in which they felt ‘insecure.’

Preface

‘Moving the Royal, Framing the Memories’ was an art project funded by a collaborative grant between Hunter New England Health and The University of Newcastle. The project was designed to provide an approach to navigating change through an embedded artist practice and assessing the viability of such an approach to relieving the stress and loss felt by staff at the demolition of their hospital and their subsequent relocation. It focused on the dual aspects of change: the institutional desire to move forward after the closure of the hospital and the staff’s loss of identity. The overarching project ‘Royal on the Move’ (which included a diverse program of events and publications celebrating the hospital and its achievements) was conceived firstly by the ‘Arts for Health’ staff at the John Hunter Hospital who were deeply aware of the grief and subsequent anger that had overtaken many hospital staff at the Royal Newcastle Hospital as the date for the hospital’s closure drew closer. Beyond the official programs to celebrate the history of this iconic institution the regular staff felt marginalised and forgotten. My colleague Professor Anne Graham and I had already worked on several small research projects at the John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle from 2000 to 2003 where our installation works, which also dealt with institutional issues of engagement, had been well received.

This project’s aims centred on assisting an organisation to navigate change. The artists participating in the multi-layered structure were also interested in assessing the viability and form of the approach and the intrinsic value of a permanent commissioned artwork in supporting the workforce in times of institutional restructure. The intention, therefore, was to publicly validate the minor but very important aspects of the daily working life in the hospital and the intrinsic role of the staff. The project therefore engaged with questions such as:

- How could an Arts /Health project navigate this deep sense of ownership and disappointment that was evident in conversations with the staff of the hospital?
- How could a project serve to provide an ‘authentic experience’ while also being commissioned (and funded) to officially acknowledge but navigate the future direction for the institution from a determined policy perspective?

As the project evolved from early discussions and planning, the two initial projects, incorporating an archive and photographic installation, grew to include a procession from the Royal Newcastle Hospital to the new hospital facility on the John Hunter Hospital campus at Rankin Park. Therefore the project incorporated three University of Newcastle researchers, Anne Graham (Fine Arts), Dr David Watts (Drama) and myself (as chief investigator). For the purposes of this research I will describe the structure of the research project to include reference to my two collaborators, without whom the project and its lasting value would not have been possible. I do however wish to specifically define my practice within the research, which is highlighted in the studio component and detailed in this exegesis. It is perfectly plausible for me that a collaborative process (in the Arts) can combine the expertise and vision of a team of practitioners generating creative interplays that transcend disciplines. The duality of practice, manifested in collaborative engagement, is what gives my practice an embedded voice.



Portfolio: Pathologies of Time I, II and III

The accompanying books in the portfolio case represent the creative work produced for this practice as research thesis. Each book documents the physical structure of an iconic hospital in the throes of closure and demolition or repurposing. It is recommended to view the books as a prelude to the exegesis.

Pathologies of Time I - Royal Newcastle Hospital is the primary case study. The photographic images map the body of the hospital through each stage of its demise using the windows and staff voices as the poignant framing devices. This extensive project, created over five years, also documents the commissioned art installation and related exhibitions.

Pathologies of Time II – Hospital Laennec describes the closure of an iconic Parisian hospital that had operated on the same site for over 350 years.

Pathologies of Time III – Hospital de la Santa Crue I Sant Pau images the Modernist hospital in Barcelona, Spain famed for its pavilion architecture, underground services and elaborate tiled interiors. This World Heritage listed facility will be transformed into a unique cultural centre.

The second two books represent an extension of the initial and principal project, 'Moving the Royal, Framing the Memories' (as depicted in Pathologies of Time I - Royal Newcastle Hospital). They provide the element of universality that reinforce one's understandings of, and contemplations on, the values implicit in what is ultimately and irrevocably lost in the progress of modernity - especially, in the instance of this research, the progress of medicalization, governmental imperatives and, ironically yet intertwined, property value.