

Diary of the Trees

Paper presented by Melinda Rankin for the History Trust of South Australia State History Conference, 2 August 2009



Hahndorf's reputation as a Bavarian themed tourist town complete with oompah bands and liederhosen-clad accordion players has done little to communicate the story of the Silesian settlers who moved to the area in the 1830s. Neither has it acknowledged the significance of the land for the Peramangk people or enhanced the region's role (past and present) as a productive food basket for Adelaide.

The Hahndorf Academy has been presenting the region's history for the last forty years, mostly through the display of objects from its collection. The organisation is currently in the process of reassessing this display, exploring methods of engaging our community and visitors with authentic stories from pre-settlement to the present day.

Diary of the Trees was a temporary public art installation undertaken for the South Australian Living Artists Festival in August 2008. An artist was engaged to present a history of the region through an exploration of an environmental theme: the human impact on our local landscape. This presentation will outline the project and its different stages and will also explore the intentions behind the project and examine how well these were achieved.

Background

The Hahndorf Academy is a regional centre for arts and heritage run by the Hahndorf Academy Foundation Inc. The property, owned by the District Council of Mt Barker and located in the main street, was originally a school, known for its liberal curriculum which included physical education, art, commerce and music.

Its life as an art gallery and community museum started in the 1960s when it was purchased by artist Walter Wotzke. These two aspects of the Academy, the arts and the town's heritage, have run in parallel within the building ever since, continuing when the community purchased the building in the eighties and when the Council purchased it ten years later. As it plans the redevelopment of its historical interpretation, the Hahndorf Academy is exploring ways to bring these two parallel aspects together, to present its community's history in a way that is authentic and consistent with the organisation itself.

The Artist

Evette Sunset is a South Australian environmental sculptor with a background in landscape design and an interest in site specific installation. When describing her art practice Sunset refers to the social and ecological narrative embedded in her work and her exploration of the relationships between nature, the human being and the built environment. It was these aspects, along with her professionalism and experience consulting and collaborating with communities, which drew the Academy to her work.

The Project

The main goal of the *Diary of the Trees* was to present a history of the region by linking it to a contemporary concern: the environment. There were also expectations that the work engage with a broad audience, involve the local community and have high artistic merit. The decision to employ a visual artist to

undertake this was informed by one additional goal: to explore the role of the visual arts in future, more permanent interpretations at the Academy.

The project was installed outside on the grassed space next to the Academy building. This location made the installation highly visible to passing traffic and pedestrians, ensuring notice by anyone visiting Hahndorf, including those that may not have chosen to enter the building to see an historic display or exhibition of visual art. (Although, Hahndorf being the town it is, the Academy attracts over 80,000 visitors a year.) This prominence also enabled the local community to view the progress of the project and it had many intrigued from the first day.

Sunset's conceptual starting point was the proposition that history is embedded in the landscape, so a representation of the changes made to a landscape will also be a representation of a site's history. Which made the story of Hahndorf's trees an obvious place to start: the tree-lined main street; the controversy concerning the town's tree pruning over the years; the other street plantings throughout the town, not to mention Hahndorf artist Sir Hans Heysen's renown for his distinctive paintings of trees. Sunset gathered information from published local history, local historians and residents as well as visiting gardens and sites throughout the town.

The first mark made on the site was a graceful, winding creek bed (made from bark chips) that stretched the length of the installation, making reference to the Peramangk custodianship of the land. We know that this area, near the Hahndorf creek, was known as *Bukatilla*, a term signalling a deep pool or wash place. Sunset's placement of the creek bed throughout the entire site resolved one visual issue – that of how to incorporate the formal rose beds that dominated the space. More significantly, the creek bed reinforced that the Peramangk were the first settlers on the land and remain as a continuing, tangible presence.



The European settlement of Hahndorf had a devastating effect on the Peramangk community – we understand that by the mid 1800s many Peramangk families had been moved to missions. The story behind this exodus remains an absence that is not publicly acknowledged and one which the Academy is keen to explore with the Peramangk custodians and to strongly reference in our museum redevelopment.

Sunset then created conical forms to represent significant eucalypts that were identified during her discussions with residents. These included a large blue gum under which a local couple was married. It was then felled and used in the construction of their cottage (which still stands today). Another was a tree admired by Hans Heysen. The artist had completed a watercolour of the tree, in preparation for a larger oil painting, when a local landowner indicated he wished to fell the tree to sell the timber. Heysen offered to pay the market value of the timber to prevent him from cutting it down, but the offer was refused and the tree felled. Heysen never completed the painting – the sketched out block remains in the Academy as evidence of the artist’s passion for his environment, long before such views were understood by the general public.

Sunset’s forms were fascinating and the object of much interest. They were constructed from soil, covered in newspaper and compost and then upholstered with pieces of turf. Sunset topped the cones with forms woven from locally sourced grapevine. With the ample spring rains in Hahndorf the turf took root and grew, becoming quite fluffy and tactile. The woven forms twisted and bent with exposure to the wind giving the forms a sense of movement. These forms stood as sentinels or memorials to the great trees of the region, felled with such enthusiasm during early settlement, and still under threat through contemporary development.



Sunset also constructed forests of slender eucalypts, topped with large leaf forms made from wire and fabric dyed by textile artist India Flint, who has developed a process called Eco Print which transfers the colours and features of vegetation onto fabric.

Sunset then constructed orchards with materials sourced from a serendipitous find at the local green waste depot – beautiful, long, straight, fruit tree prunings. The early German settlers sold fresh produce at the markets in Adelaide and the two main entrances into Hahndorf today are marked by thriving primary production.

Finally the artist made reference to the street trees of Hahndorf with the construction of brightly coloured flags placed along yellow lines marked onto the grass, representing the grid-like structure of the town's streets. The main street is framed by gracious cork elms that provide cool green shade in summer and brilliant colours once the cool of autumn sets in. Pine Ave contains pine plantings and Windsor Ave contains Royal Oaks. These street plantings, particularly the cork elms, have been the subject of controversy throughout the years (and continue to be so when the disappearance of one is suddenly discovered beside a building site). The presence, absence or pruned state of the trees is also used for the dating of photographs.

This was the point where the project was to end. We expected that the installation would stay in place for several weeks and would be dismantled, probably at the end of the SALA festival (for which the project was an official event).

However, the community response to the project was so positive that we decided to keep the installation in place indefinitely, monitoring its condition to ensure removal before dishevelment. The eucalypt forest and fruit orchard were the first to be removed being the most fragile, but not before the brave fruit prunings budded and flowered! The conical forms gradually faded as the rainfall ceased and once the grass had died completely the surface was rendered with locally sourced clay, which weathered and cracked over summer.

The forms were finally removed in January, six months after their initial construction.

Community involvement

The community was the first point of call for the artist and they remained involved throughout the project, giving information, materials and suggestions. One idea was to extend the current rose beds into the creek bed formation. Another community member linked the artist with a local who has been locating and propagating heritage roses around the district. As a result we are now about to plant around a dozen varieties of roses grown from cuttings taken from plants brought to the district by the German settlers. This opens up a whole new area to investigate: who brought the roses, where did they originate from, allowing us to further explore the history of our landscape and those who called it home.

During her visits to local gardens the artist was shown fruit trees planted by early settlers, although many trees are now clearly nearing the end of their life. This raised the issue of biodiversity and the loss of old strains of fruit. In response, the artist negotiated with Balhannah Nursery to donate four stock fruit trees, which the local council agreed to plant and maintain as street trees. These will receive grafts of the old species, thus ensuring their genetic continuation. As these trees grow they will maintain their links with the history of the early German settlers.

Something about the installation invited passers by to enter the space, to eat their lunch, have their photograph taken and in the case of the local kindergarten, have special excursions. Now the space is back to 'normal' again, people tend to walk around the edges of the lawn, keeping strictly to the footpath. This has led us to reassess the potential of this open space and possibilities for ongoing interpretation that is welcoming and inviting.





Partnerships

The project was funded primarily by Arts SA through their Public Art Seed Funding program. The District Council of Mount Barker also provided funding through their community development program to enable two young men to assist the artist, as well as in-kind assistance with materials from the recycling facility and grounds staff. Greencorp participants and Council assisted in the rendering as well as the final dismantling of the project.

Challenges

Probably the greatest challenge was communicating to visitors the information inherent in the work. Visual artists often encompass concepts and information into their work, but the communication of these elements is often subtle and open to multiple readings. Historical interpretation on the other hand seeks to provide information in a clear, instructive way, with as little ambiguity as possible.

Added to this were the physical realities of the work: an outdoor installation is not well suited to interpretation based in a catalogue essay and conventional outdoor interpretive signage is not feasible for an installation of a temporary nature. Laminated signage was placed near the footpath for passers-by to read, and was updated when it became weather worn but by far the best interpretation came from face-to-face interaction with the artist.

The project also highlighted a lack of professional research available as a resource for interpretation, particularly in relation to the twentieth century. This is an area the Academy hopes to address within the next twelve months as it is an essential foundation for any further interpretive work.

It has become clear that there is a need to develop a long term historical interpretive exhibition, based on sound professional research. This will provide a context and reference point for the less permanent or more poetic responses by artists.

Benefits and opportunities

By engaging a visual artist we expected a public artwork that extended our audience, generated interest in the Academy and had a clear reference to our local history, and that is certainly what we received. In addition however we accessed additional information about our region, increased our involvement with our community, made new friends at Council and achieved the totally unexpected outcome of the extension of our collection into the Hahndorf Academy grounds.

Working with a visual artist allowed for a flexibility in approach and outcomes, while still achieving our initial goals. Crucial to this outcome were clearly articulated goals and outcomes and an artist who was a good fit for the project: passionate about the themes presented, producing work of high standard and experienced in community involvement.

Approaching local history through an environmental theme also allowed for a fresh approach to what is seen as a well-known theme. It also allowed for the project to extend beyond the usual boundaries of Hahndorf's history – the end of the nineteenth century – into the twentieth century and beyond to the present, dealing as it did with a contemporary issue.

There remains over a hundred years' worth of untold stories to be discovered and told and we suspect there are a number of themes that, like this one, can be traced through the years to land in the twenty first century with freshness and relevance. Our strategy is to build on the experience gained through this project to develop and build a coherent research program and exhibition plan for the future.



Government of South Australia
Arts SA

The District Council of
Mount Barker 