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FLOATING LAND — RISING SEA: ARTS AND MINDS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is a local and global issue. In past millennia, the people who settled the islands of Moana Nui a Kiva (the Pacific Ocean) undertook the greatest sea migrations of all time. Today there are new migrations, precarious journeys of people displaced by climate change and rising seas. The people of Tuvalu and Kiribati in the north Pacific, Takuu (Mortlock Islands) and the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea, and Australia's Torres Strait Islanders, are now voyaging towards an uncertain future. Rapidly rising sea-levels and massive king tides are encroaching on their villages and salt is affecting arable land. The mass migration of entire island communities is imminent. It is crucial that the rest of the world becomes aware of these Islanders' predicament.ⁱ

Art, in all its forms of expression, is a powerful tool to deliver strong messages in a way that scientific language cannot. *Floating Land - Rising Seas* engaged artists from a spectrum of disciplines and diverse backgrounds to address complex issues about our daunting global future. The capacity of artists to imagine and visualise core issues empowers community participation and acts as a catalyst for social change.

Since 2001, successive iterations of the Noosa Art Gallery biennial event, *Floating Land*, attracted national and international recognition for themes that nurture art within environment. In 2009 the fifth iteration, *Floating Land - Rising Seas*, with Christine Ballinger as Artistic Director,ⁱⁱ grew into a large-scale project focused on climate change and expanded to include genres of creative and critical writing and performance as well as temporal and ephemeral artworks and photography. Lake Cootharaba, located at the southern end of the Cooloola National Park and part of the Noosa Biosphere Reserve, was the setting for this exceptional environmental event. It was chosen because it is a significant feature of the Noosa Biosphere reserve with its many natural attributes, historical significance, capacity to provide a diversity of easily accessible sites for sculptural/performance works, close proximity to centres of population, and the enthusiasm of the Boreen Point community.

The Noosa Biosphere Reserve was declared by UNESCO in 2008ⁱⁱⁱ; it is only one of five in the world to include human culture and habitation as an

integral part of the natural environment of the biosphere. Noosa is situated on Queensland's Sunshine Coast, a region that has experienced major population growth and considerable environmental pressure on its coastal strip and waterways due to Australia's 'sea change' phenomenon and the attraction of its superb natural environment. The UNESCO Madrid Action Plan identified climate change as one of the four most critical issues facing our planet. This inspired the theme of *Floating Land – Rising Sea*: to critically explore climate change and its impact upon fragile coastal and island environments.



Nature-culture juxtapositions and issues arising from climate change were the inspiration and context of the 10-day *Floating Land-Rising Seas* program. Artists from several Pacific countries and Australia were invited to construct ephemeral installations; spectacle and interpretive performances were offered by Gubbi Gubbi traditional owners, talented local musicians and choristers. Dance groups of Tuvalu and Tokelau people who are now residents of the Sunshine Coast highlighted the immediate problems their home communities are facing to the sinking of their islands, and the relocation of entire communities was also an issue the forums on Climate Change and Cultural Knowledge. For all stages of creative practice, *Floating Land- Rising Seas* stimulated significant outcomes including new work, professional documentation, critical writing and promotion, exhibition opportunities and future international exchanges.

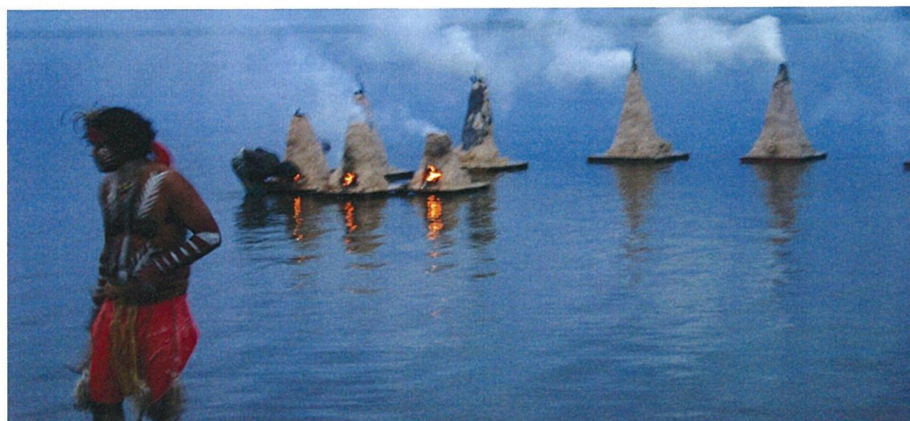
Lake Cootharaba's beautiful foreshores provided a diversity of locations for site-specific installations and events, including the Noah's Ark created at childrens' workshops led by Terry Summers, who employs cardboard as a protest against deforestation. The residents of the lakeside village, Boreen

Point, hosted the visual and performance artists, photographers, writers and musicians during their creative residencies.^{iv} The residents of Boreen Point were keen to interact with the artists' intimate 'conversations' with the natural environment, which generated a continuing dialogue that can still be seen on the website in images, poems and other writings. Thousands of visitors who came over the 10-day event appreciated the power of art to absorb complex information and messages and make them accessible through visual language and performance.

The Pacific and Australian artists-in-residence created ephemeral environmental artworks on the shoreline of Lake Cootharaba, which drew public and media attention to the catastrophic effects of climate change in the Pacific region.

The invited Pacific artists envisioned the complex (and often dire) scientific messages about climate change: their knowledge of its impact on their communities made it vividly real. All the invited artists from Melanesian countries, Eric Natuoivi (Vanuatu), Aka and Yann Conny (New Caledonia) and Gickmai Kundun (Papua New Guinea) felt they could not start working on the land or taking anything from the environment until they were welcomed and received permission from the Aboriginal elder, Dr Eve Feisl, representing the Gubbi Gubbi people who are the traditional owners

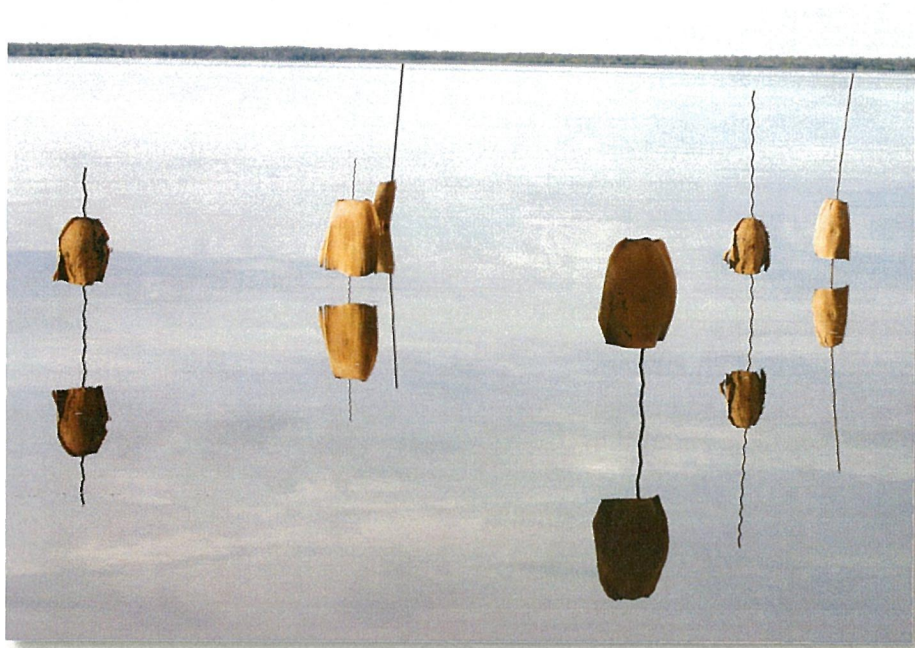
In the Kilivila language of the Trobriand Islands *sopi* literally means water. *Sopi* is like knowledge that flows unhindered from the mind of a wise person with the water-like qualities of clarity and depth. Its aesthetic sense is that it flows freely, unhampered by obstacles, like the creative hand of the skilled sculptor. All the ephemeral environmental installations created by Pacific artists for Floating Land-Rising Sea reflect the clarity, depth and aesthetic sense of *sopi*.^v



ERIC NATUOIVI, VANUATU

AILAN I DRAUN LONG SOLWARRA

(Islands Drowning In The Sea)



Eric works with earth, water, fire and natural materials to create the spectacular ceramic forms for which he has an international reputation. In Vanuatu cultures each of the base materials he uses – clay, pig tusks, mangrove wood and sennit (coconut fibre binding) – carries symbolic meaning, aesthetic and heritage value. His message to us is, “We should cherish and safeguard the natural world to enrich the way we live”.

Following the Welcome to Country and presenting his gift to the Gubbi Gubbi elder, Eric felt at ease in the natural and spiritual environment. Working on the shores of Lake Cootharaba in the wind and rain, he carved posts from fallen wood and created his environmental work from natural objects found in the local environment. He said he would not remove anything essential from it, only trees that the earth had given up and rocks from the lakeside.

There were numerous elements in the completed installation, ‘Ailan I Draun Long Solwarra’. The rock arrangement, grouped in a rough circle, represented



a meeting place of the people of the land or the foundations stones of a village. A little further away, near the encroaching tide, four carved posts stood for the ancestral spirits, concerned about the rising seas and the fate of their people. Just beyond the waterline were fragile sails made from palm bast migrating to distant shores.

Ni-Vanuatu (Vanuatu born) people, like other Pacific Islanders, are very aware of the effects of climate change as some low-lying atolls in their archipelago are already suffering the effects of the encroaching seas.



GICKMAI KUNDUN, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

‘REACHING OUT’

Every material is precious to Melanesian people who live in fragile eco-systems where many resources are seasonal or scarce. This is even more so as successive king tides are causing massive erosion and the salt table is mounting, destroying arable land and crops.

Gickmai is a renown sculptor who specialises in making both monumental and small works from scavenged scrap metal and found objects; his objective is to point out the waste created by consumerism. He searched for flotsam and jetsam, fallen wood and rejected objects to show how we can adapt to scarcity. He brought nothing with him – no pre-conceived project, no materials. When he felt assured by the spirits that reside in land and nature, made friends among the local community and other artists, and



listened to the stories of sinking islands from the community leaders of Tuvalu and Takuu, he commenced making his installation 'Reaching Out'.

Gickmai found a large submerged log, weathered and shaped by years in the water. "I'll give you a hand", "Let me help" – fellow sculptors Steve and Éric offered to help Gickmai manhandle the massive trunk out of the stream. This spontaneous act inspired Gickmai's work and its title. As the work took shape on the shores of Lake Cootharaba, Gickmai explained that the recovered log had become the trunk of an aged, weathered person very weary and nearly drowned. The concentric circles and ovals carved on the body represent the heart barely beating, the lungs just breathing. From the live tree above, several branches reached down like arms to lift the worn body to safety.



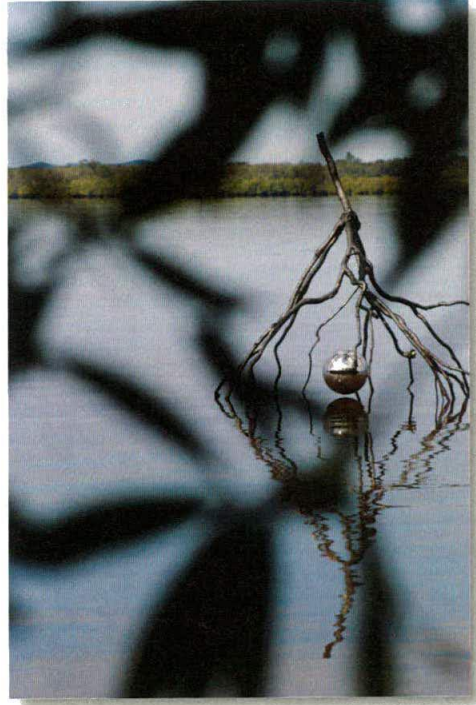
AKA (PASCALE BEDAGUE), NEW CALEDONIA

MANGROVES

Aka's artistic practice encompasses monumental metal sculptures and ephemeral environmental works. It is unusual for a woman artist to work on large-scale projects constructed in metal, but she has mastered many engineering techniques. Aka finds no contradiction between working with industry and working with the environment, as she says, they have to learn to live together. She recently held one of the most prestigious awards in New Caledonia, artist-in-residence at Société Societe Le Nickel, New Caledonia's massive nickel plants, where she transformed the base metal, refined ore and off-cast scoria

into aesthetic objects. The aim was to demonstrate the possibilities of different approaches to technology and ways of transforming industrial base metal into forms that inspire the human spirit.

For *Floating Land-Rising Sea* Aka created an ephemeral work which evokes fragile eco-systems. The mangrove tree – in all of its thousand species – is the guardian of tropical coastlines and estuaries. Banks of mangroves may be a nuisance for developers, but they are an essential transition zone on mudflats between land and sea. Mangroves protect coastlines against erosion, nurture countless species of fish and invertebrates and provide a durable wood for the struts of canoes, house posts and other multiple human uses.



Aka fabricated her mangrove tree from an inverted assemblage of branches and placed it in Lake Cootharaba. Within its exposed root system, which is exposed above the tide line, she placed a reflective ball of thin, translucent panes of mica engraved with a circle of clasped hands, symbolising solidarity and unity. The silvery surface reflected the lake and the varying thicknesses of the mica panes produced different sounds with the passing breezes. Her message was that, like the mangrove tree, we all need to set down anchor points to safeguard the precious ecology of our coastline.



YANN-GAEL CONNY, NEW CALEDONIA

BARRIERS

A fence looks pretty innocuous to most Australians; our rural landscapes are strung with endless kilometres of posts and barbed wire demarcating property and containing sheep and cattle from roaming. Yann's fence, rather a conceptual barrier, started on land and disappeared into the Lake. This



work addressed issues of property; the Western concept of private ownership versus the Melanesian beliefs in collective accessibility and seasonal use resulting in a more sustainable culture. He asks, will private ownership prevail when land is inundated and we need to share increasingly scarce resources?

The concept for Yann's installation at Lake Cootharaba germinated near his home at La Foa in New Caledonia. New Caledonia became a French Penal Colony in 1864 and the largest convict prison – the massive stone fortress called Fort Terumba – was built on the coast near La Foa. The French colonial regime may have 'paid' the local Kanak tribes for the land, but the Kanaks did not foresee permanent dispossession and exclusion from land rights over the area. As well as the fortress

prison, extensive lands, riverfront and seashore were fenced off to allow for cattle farming, horticulture and fishing to supply the military, the convicts and the growing settlements at Noumea and in the hinterland.

In 1878, the Kanak Resistance Leader, Chief Attai, led a year-long rebellion against the French. Although the rebellion was quelled, the spirit of resistance remains among the Kanak people to this day. Since the Matignon Accords were signed in 1988, the process of Kanak revindication of land rights has moved ahead. But the fences at Fort Terumba still remain.

Yann's message is clear – as the irreversible effects of climate change affect all humanity, rethinking exclusive rights to property ownership must be on the agenda.



VIRGINIA KING, AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

‘WORD STRINGS’



Virginia King’s sculptural practice is a lyrical and poetic practice that rewards us intellectually and emotionally. Her sculpted words and forms look effortlessly set into landscape or float in waterspace, but each artwork silently bears complex aesthetic and cultural layers, which are embedded and implicated in the environment.

The alphabet migrated into the Pacific, a fundamental cultural change borne by colonial officials and missionaries. In recompense, King sets free words, messages and the sayings of poets to be borne by wind and water. As she explained

“I hoped to overlay ‘word strings’ across the lake and the land and decided to cut letters from plywood and string them together to form phrases, that might float in the lake and possibly, if I found a suitable site, use others suspended among nearby trees, like ladders of thought. . . phrases that alluded to past and present loss, combined with references about environmental neglect and concern for the planet. . .and allude to past histories of the site.”

The phrases placed between land and lake were Hidden Currents, Lament, Tides of History, Floating Syllables, Endangered Ocean, Cradle of Life, Ocean Roar, Bleached Coral, Salt Tears, King Tide, Migration, Drifting Wreckage and Celestial Navigation.

Hidden Currents, the first 'word string' on the land, referred not only to the bronze plaque with the statement about Eliza Fraser^{vi} but to past unspoken histories, the hidden currents within communities and to the deep hidden currents that mingle beneath oceans.

During the installation when the string word 'Lament' was suspended, a rare sea eagle landed in the paper bark tree above. It seemed an auspicious sign as the eagle appeared to rest and observe our installation.



Over the next few days, pelicans, canoes and launches came and went and whip birds could be heard in the early mornings. A storm brought winds and heavy rain that drenched and straightened the dangling word strings, correcting their placement as they dripped ground-wards.

The days of intense creative production at Boreen Point on the shores of Lake Cootharaba resulted in spectacular site-specific artworks created in and around Lake Cootharaba; the creative outcomes of *Floating Land–Rising Seas* included photo essays, critical and creative writing, performance and acoustic ecology. The educational outcomes encompassed a school's program, artist-in-residence programs, forums on systems thinking and climate change addressed by leading scientists and cultural leaders. The website www.floatingland.com.au promoted the program, gave profiles all artists, provided an image bank of venues, sculptures and events. The site also published commissioned critical

writing, links to local and international biosphere organisations. As work was created, text and images were uploaded each day for global accessibility.

The role of the regional art gallery in Australia is changing. The 'gallery' is now a catalyst for innovation and must operate across shifting art/cultural practices. Its brief requires attentive responses to the specifics of its local community as well as to global concerns. The Noosa Regional Gallery has gained a national reputation for *Floating Land* since it was first launched in 2001. 2009's program will place the Gallery in the international arena for art and environment events.

ENDNOTES:

- i Film clips of 'There Once was an Island' are accessible at www.thereoncewasanisland.com 2010 YouTube
- ii *Floating Land: Rising Seas* is an initiative of Noosa Regional Gallery (www.noosaregionalgallery.org) and is co-programmed alongside the Noosa Longweekend (www.noosalongweekend.com). The Noosa Regional Gallery is the principle manager of *Floating Land*, backed by the organisational resources of the Sunshine Coast Regional Council. NRG contracted specialist curatorial, educational, project and technical support for the event. Dr Susan Cochrane, who is an expert in Pacific art, was engaged as the Guest Curator for the Pacific component.
- iii details on www.noosabiosphere.info/
- iv Profiles of all artists and other invited participants are at <http://www.floatingland.com.au/artists>
- v The Trobriand Islands are an archipelago at the south-east tip of Papua New Guinea renowned in anthropological literature. See Shirley Campbell 2001, *Art of Kula* for further description of Trobriands art and aesthetics, online at www.questia.com/library/.../the-art-of-kula-by-shirley-f-campbell.jsp
- vi Eliza Fraser was a Scottish woman whose ship was shipwrecked on the coast of Queensland, Australia, on 22 May 1836, and who was captured by Aborigines. Fraser Island (off the coast of Lake Cootharaba) is named after her. See Biographical Entry in The Australian Dictionary of Biography Online, adonline.anu.edu.au/biogs/ASIO171b.htm