



Salt of the earth

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director



It was dreamed up on a bus between Horsham in rural Victoria and Melbourne. I'd been at the 2004 Regional Arts Australia conference in Horsham and I had gone along to a talk by the sculptor, François Davin, and there was something about his approach to art that I had felt myself but had not been able to articulate. So when I hopped on this bus and there was a seat next to him, I sat down and we dreamed up this thing *Salt of the Earth*.

Noosa Regional Gallery was organising projects in Queensland with François that involved ten international artists from the Artists in Nature International Network and I said, 'Can we hijack half your artists and bring them to Western Australia on the way?'

It was actually a very short lead-up time. We thought it up in late October and the artists arrived in May and there was a lot to do. I was trying to introduce the concept of site-specific art to the community here. I needed to find five host farming families and I wanted them from different areas. They needed to be people who were ready for something like this: ready to invite an artist into their home and cook for them and share their bathroom with them and have them as part of the family, knowing that the artist would then create something on their land.

The way François envisages site-specific art is that the artwork looks at the physicality of the site and also at the memory, or the history of the place. In Australia of course, that's particularly important. All but one of the sites were working farms. In Goomalling we chose not to do it on the farm but to do it on a salt lake, which was a bit of a tourist attraction. The last element in projects like this is the community who 'own' the site. In Goomalling, the people who really own that salt lake are those who go and look after it. The community are involved in the upkeep of it in one way or another.

Each artist worked differently. One artist's work (Davin) was directly related to the story of the farmer who had been on that property for five generations and it addressed this whole dilemma we have in Australia about what does it take for us to feel that we can belong on the land? The result was a collection of beautiful, massive stones, almost ancient burial mounds on a hill all facing the homestead. They were the four previous generations laid to rest somehow. It was offering some sense of belonging to the current farmer while also acknowledging that prior to her family a whole different people used it as well. Another artist from France, Anne Mangeot, used sticks to build a shelter with two distinct halves: the past and the present. It was humorous with Anne because she did nothing but panic for two days because the sticks in Australia are so different to anything she encountered in Europe. Not flexible, so brittle. She didn't know how she would do it. But in the end she managed and it was beautiful.

The small town near the salt lake has about 500 people. And every day at the garage they'd put up a big board saying what was on the schedule that day at the lake. People would drop by with food or they'd come and sit and chat with Ludy Feyen, the Dutch artist, who was building this amazing crystal serpent you could walk through.

There's a really gorgeous story: Ludy was talking with this very Aussie farmer and she said, 'Oh, I need lots of wire.' And so this farmer and his son, they straightaway took down 600 metres of this old fence and spent the night chopping it up and twisting it. And when he went down to the pub on the Friday night everyone asked 'So, what have you been up to, Digs?' he said, 'I've been wrapping wheat stubble and wool around my old fence to make this crystal serpent.' And all the farmers are saying, 'Oh yeah, get out of here!' But he got them involved. He got them down and then they were doing it as well.

In the end with *Salt of the Earth*, we were looking at living acts of art: not looking at art as product but art as sharing and a different way of involving communities. Normally with community artists, the artist goes out and does a workshop and all the community participates – they might paint a panel for example. But in this project we were saying, 'Let's say that the artist is the artist and they're here and they're serving the community by doing their artwork. And the way that the community will be involved is as witnesses.'

So yes, the community may lift some stones or twist some wire but through witnessing the artist at work the hope is that something, a seed within their own artistic hearts which is private to them and which will take its own unique shape and form, will be kindled. It's not measurable but it's been absolutely fabulous and for two of our farmers in particular that I know about, it's really made an enormous change.

Somehow having visiting artists from overseas who are totally innocent to our area actually drew out the stories that needed to be spoken. And this story between the first Australians and the later Australians was very much there in the artwork. It was a real encounter.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Crystal Serpent – Ludy Feyen, Goomalling
PHOTO: MAL CHESTER

Essence of Life – Carlotta Brunetti, Meckering
PHOTO: SHARON WILLIAMS

Dreamstone Lines – Cornelia Konrads, Talbot Brook
PHOTO: CORNELIA KONRADS