

Proposal for an unmade radio program

The program I want to make is an atmospheric, reflective one about two female convict sites in Tasmania. They are the only female convict sites where you can still see evidence of the former institutions, but this evidence is of the most minimal, reduced kind. At South Hobart there is a wall enclosing an empty yard, at Ross an area of extremely uneven ground with a cottage in one corner. They are places with an extremely rich, and troubled, history - but there's almost nothing of it to see. My program is conceived as exploring ways of thinking back into the site, while holding onto the reality of the sites as they are now.

I began visiting the two sites early this year with the intention of making visual work for exhibition in 2001. I've worked with colonial sites and museum collections before and my original idea was to approach this material in basically the same way, i.e. photographically. But I noticed on the last visit how dramatically the sites changed when someone came on the scene; even casual visitors had the effect of animating them. This observation immediately shifted the way I thought about the project. Animation occurring in the present could be a way to bring the past closer, within reach of the imagination.

I started to think about sound as a medium for conveying a sense of animation and presence - combining ambient sound, interview material and scripted text. I want people to think about the presence of the women and children who have irrevocably gone from the sites, but I particularly don't want to clutter them up with re-creations/re-enactments/simulations of the past.

At South Hobart domestic sounds filter down to the factory from houses on the hill above and from the street. There is a running creek, the Hobart Rivulet, which is important because it made the site damp and unhealthy. Once a day a tour group makes a visit; they congregate around the memorial sculpture in the yard, reading out the text and passing comments. Birds overfly the site, locals come to throw a ball to a dog or push a pram.

At Ross the atmosphere is rural. There are occasional trains, sheep, wind, the visitors are more sporadic. They wander through the cottage, reading out the text of the display panels and chatting to one another. A caretaker comes twice daily to unlock the cottage and lock it again at night.

In the program I want first to emphasise the sparseness of the remains -the ground and the wall - and then to introduce the idea that their seeming-blankness is a language that can be read. Most people can't decipher what the wall and the ground say about what was there before, but a stonemason or a builder could. This idea would be explored in the form of an interview or interviews.

I particularly want to make reference to the babies who were born in the factories. In a way I see this as the heart of the program, the most emotive part, and one point where all the threads can be pulled together. The infant mortality at South Hobart was a scandal for years (babies died at Ross too but nowhere near as many) and the loss of all those infant lives hangs heavily over the place. Most burials took place close by, in unmarked graves just outside the factory walls. I've been researching those 600-odd infant deaths in the

Tasmanian Archives, making a list of names, dates, ages and causes of death. I imagine a layering of voices reading a list of the names and ages at death. There could be sounds of a nursery, crying, nursing and soothing sounds.

There's a connection to be made between the burials of all those infants at South Hobart and the uncovering of archaeological material on the Ross site. It included animal bones, along with lots of other material - nearly all of it fragmented to the point of disintegration. Those bones are tiny, but someone has painted even tinier accession numbers onto them. All this in turn resonates with the reduced appearance of the sites, the idea of loss, absence, disintegration.

I hope to explore a set of ideas which have emerged for me gradually through exposure to these sites - about ways of knowing history, about place, about imagination, observation, loss and living memory - and to do it very concretely and immediately, with as strong sense of actual place and presence as possible. I've been working on a text with the idea that it can be used, in whole or in part, to link up material that I record on site and as interviews. However, the intention is to use less scripted text and much more of material that is unscripted and/or recorded on the site. My ideas so far have been partly shaped by existing Listening Room programs (by Kaye Mortley and Shere de Lys in particular) that have dealt in various ways with place and/or history.

Anne Ferran, 2001