



# world tree: sounds of a bigger picture

alison clouston  
and boyd

interviewed by **clare lewis**

**CL:** Do you believe that without energy there will be no art?

**A&B:** Art will outlive fossil fuel any day.

**CL:** When did you first make a carbon neutral artwork and do you think that the environment is taken seriously enough in the often ephemeral world of installation art?

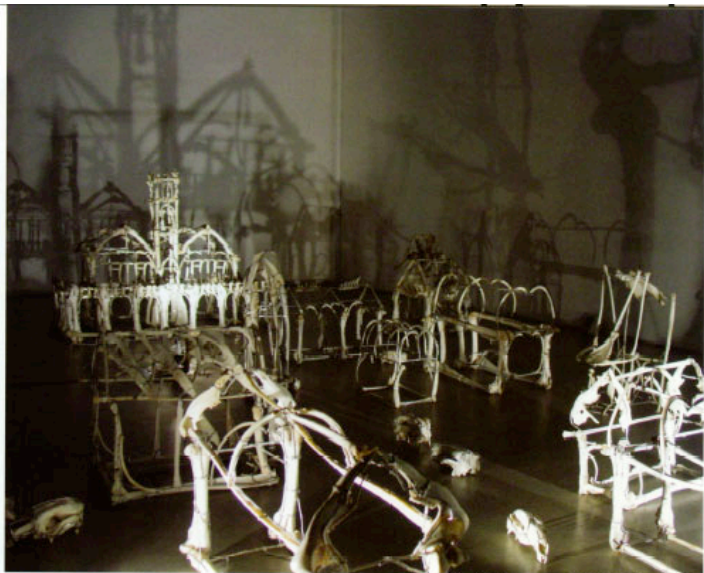
**A&B:** Our *World Tree* (part two) installed in Goulburn Regional Art Gallery this year was our first work to have a formal carbon audit and offset, but much of our earlier work had worked towards carbon neutrality through the use of recycled materials. Using wood in a work like this actually locks up carbon. As for the ephemeral nature of installation work and its concern for the environment, it depends. For some artists it is a means to a way of working that is deeply sensitive to environment, like when artists use material that is recycled or renewable, sustainably harvested. Sometimes artists try to make a point about some wasteful practice and fall into the danger of perpetuating it. And it is true, alas, that for some, installation is akin to set-building, where toxic materials like fibreglass are used or all the materials of its construction are thrown into landfill afterwards.

**CL:** How powerful or powerless are contemporary artists in the face of global crises?

**A&B:** It's easy for artists to feel that we are marginalised by mainstream culture, that we can't make a difference. But we should observe how the advertising industry follows so hot on the heels of contemporary artists these days – those art directors recognise a great persuasive power here. It's up to artists to refuse to work for the devil! We have power, but we need other help to get it out there! And like every other human being, we have the power to change our own behaviour. The art-making process itself has caused change in us – for instance, we became vegetarian after *Adrift* and *World Tree*. That research showed us the carbon impact of the unsustainable contemporary Western diet.

**CL:** And *borborygmi*: the stomach sound, this is a symbol of human appetite and greed, but on the other, it is a site of poverty and Third World conditions – was that your intention, and can you talk about what you see as the possibilities of sound as a metaphor?

**A&B:** We really enjoy those seemingly contradictory readings, how in an artwork they can both work simultaneously, so that you realise that, in fact, they are not contradictory at all. That's the nature of metaphor in our work; it can allow for abundant associations all at once. Metaphor draws relationships between seemingly disparate things, it can allow for ambiguity, even doubt. Sound and sculpture can really exploit that. This allows for a working relationship with the science that is at the root of our work. Whilst the way science is normally explained in words tends to imply a linear direction to the ideas, new science in fact strongly rejects the idea of a directional, purposeful narrative to the universe. Similarly, sound and sculpture are capable of expressing knowledge in a non-sequential way. Our artwork is non-linear; it can raise more questions than it can answer, it is about the inter-connectedness of all things. It is a metaphor for ecology in that sense.



Alison Clouston and Boyd Opposite page: *For Flick and Feather* (detail) from *Adrift* 2006, call skin, watercolours. Photo: Ian Hobbs. *Acove: Sunetown* (detail) 2004, kangaroo and wombat bones, lighting, moving shadows, soundtrack. Photo: Alison Clouston. *Below: Nestling Nestling* (detail) 2004, 40 Australian native birds' nests, interactive soundtrack, movement sensors, aluminium, speakers, wiring 'tree' or stave. Photo: Alison Clouston. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008.

Sound in these works can set up a metaphorical language – the language of the trees as they rub and moan in the wind, or the language of the koala, learnt from the trees and reminiscent of them, a woody guttural utterance. We use sound as reminder, of what is there but unheard and disregarded. We've even given a voice to minerals, like scientists we're using technology to reveal the normally unheard and overlooked, for instance the insect-like chirruping of moraine rocks and ice in a melting glacier, or the underwater life of a pool.

Metaphor implies some analysis, but importantly, the sound is also working on a subconscious, pre-metaphorical, emotional level. It's working like music – even field recordings are arranged as music, with attention given to melody, rhythm, dynamics.

CL: Do you consciously address more of the senses; the visual and the audible? You seem to create layered or immersive situations, would you agree that sound can be a social archive so to speak?

A&B: Immersive and layered, yes! Tactile and olfactory senses can be invoked too. By social archive, do you mean sound as repository of social meaning at a particular moment? We're not using sound as social documentary. We are trying to create a sense of timelessness, of deep, even geological time, of cyclical time. Sound exists in time in a special sense. Boyd likes to 'discover' musical patterns in natural sound, say,



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recognising the pitch of water drops in a creek as melody, or transcribing the sounds of a beehive as music – which makes us wonder about human culture in all this. Was the music there, to be discovered by us? Some physicists argue that mathematics is not a human construct, but a universal law, already out there in the universe to be discovered by the sufficiently evolved human mind...

**CL:** Some of your works involve elements of a micro and macroscopic scale, from the sound of your local stream to the roar of an ocean. It seems to refer to an idea of the individual and the collective – in some ways, it is always easier to distinguish the sound of one voice than millions, perhaps you could outline your imagined outcome.

**A&B:** The ocean is billions of drops but just one ocean. The *Adrift* soundtrack is the journey of a drip – creek, river, ocean, human body (borborygmi) – snatches of the hydrological cycle.

The interest in the micro and the macro scale is like an ecological way of thinking – where all of the parts are considered together, the study of the relationships between species being important to an understanding of the whole. Installation is like this. No wonder we talk of making a little 'world'.

It is intriguing to think that 1.8 million species on earth have been identified and described, yet any teaspoon of soil or water or ice contains billions of unknown organisms. Each and every one of us is like that too, our bodies made up of billions of life-forms. Sounds are arranged in an almost orchestral way, each sound itself divisible – we can distinguish a B flat human voice from a B flat koala voice because of the numerous different harmonics within each. Installation is like this, almost infinitely divisible.

**CL:** Many of your works incorporate structures from early civilisations, do you view those mechanisms as utopian?

**A&B:** No, we have no romantic illusions about the past, or utopian dreams for the future. Other cultures in the past have overstretched their resources, (and collapsed – plenty of examples in Jared Diamond's book *Collapse*). We happen to have the technology to wreak more havoc than past cultures,

the art-making process itself has caused change in us – for instance, we became vegetarian after *Adrift* and *World Tree*

**Alison Clouston and Boyd Larr:** *Coracles* (detail) from *Adrift* 2006. 3 boats, calskins, soldered copper water pipe and fittings, auto buzzy (inner tube rubber), field recordings from Burnt Flat Creek, Wollondilly River, Tasman Sea. Duet for soprano saxophones, composed by Boyd and performed by Paul Cuffan and Sandy Evans. Photo: Ian Hobbs. **Right:** *World Tree* (part two) (detail) 2007, sound and sculpture installation, native cypress tree, copper, steel, soundtracks, sound equipment, solar power system, greenhouse gas audit and offset. Photo: Iain Hobbs. (Screened by Viscopy, Sydney, 2008).

and there are a lot more of us on this earth. But we have the science now to understand what we are doing and so the chance to change it.

The reference to ancient technologies in our work has to do with the sense of time that we talked about before. (Seeing the cycle might help us to avert the repetition of the same mistakes too). Some things are enduring symbols – for instance, even today when we want to talk about bees, and their meaning in our culture as industry, cooperation, pollination and fertility, we still use the emblem of the rounded hive, the 'skep' of early apiaries, rather than the square white box that apiarists actually use nowadays. There is a recognised potency in the age-old image.

We use a very ancient form of boat, the coracle, in *Adrift*. There are many reasons for this. Like the bee skep, the coracle comes from our own cultural heritage. The work began with a strong concern about the feral cattle along the damaged creeks and river in our water catchment, and coracles were, (and still are in some places), made from animal hides stretched over a frame. In our coracles the frame is made from copper water pipe. Importantly, the coracle really is *adrift*, it is a circular vessel without stern or bows or keel, totally vulnerable to the currents, with just one paddle to guide it off the rocks. There is story that the early Christian monks, in their zeal to spread the new religion in the world, set out in the Atlantic ocean in these fragile craft, in the faith that their God would deliver them up on some heathen island. Today we humans need to relinquish this deeply embedded sense that we will be saved by some force beyond us – we alone have to sort out the mess we have made of this planet Earth, our only home.

**CL:** Has progress rendered the environmental climate change and consumption reduction inevitable?

**A&B:** Climate change is now inevitable. We have to limit its degree. Consumption reduction is also inevitable. We need to plan for this, to plan to share the world's finite resources of oil, air, water, soil with all of humanity and all of the world's species. Humans currently claim almost all of the world's biomass for ourselves.



**CL:** Using the image of the Norse world tree as a dead, fallen tree accompanied by sounds of nature at breaking point suggests that we have moved past that breaking point. What is next in this metaphor? Does hope enter this installation?

**A&B:** The *World Tree* is not really dead, though it is laid out upon the trestles. Hope is in its beauty, that we humans can see that beauty. It is in the detail of the human arts – see how the points where the copper meets the wood are made with the labour of love, the connections are intimate. Copper is not an inert material, it goes green with verdigris, like the lichen that grows on the World Tree when it is out in the rain. Some ecologists measure the value of a forest to life by the amount of fallen timber on the forest floor. 'Dead' wood is alive with hosts of microbes, fungi, insects.

The copper pipes could be extracting or administering some medicinal essence. In fact, this copper apparatus is what delivers the soundtracks to the headphones, giving life and voice to moraine rocks and glacial ice, to trees and arboreal mammals, to intestinal biota. These are the sounds of complaint, it is true, but with the art and technology of the soundtrack, we can listen.

What does 'dead' even mean, biologically speaking. In this work? Every end is beginning, a continuum of endlessly cycled carbon in carbon-based life.

**CL:** What do you see as the priorities of the fuel shortage, can you elaborate on how your practice works towards an alternate future?

**A&B:** It's not a fuel shortage that concerns us, we need to use a lot less fuel. But we humans are not planning for the inevitability of peak oil, any more than we are preparing to avert dangerous climate change. We make work that recognises our personal part in all this. We can demonstrate that new technologies like solar are here and applicable now. In our work, there is a sense of longing, of mourning for what we have lost and are about to lose, but the making is itself a form of hope.

**CL:** Do you see your commentary on the energy crisis as a catalyst for change?

**A&B:** This comes back to the question, can art make a difference? It certainly changed us! ☺

Clare Lewis is a Sydney based writer and curator. She co-founded Terminus Projects in 2004, a site-specific contemporary art organisation [www.terminusprojects.org](http://www.terminusprojects.org) and works as a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Contemporary Art.



