

the  
crumbling  
ecologies  
project

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Jasmine  
Targett

Craft Victoria:  
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*The Crumbling Ecologies Project* interrogates the impact of the economic climate on both environmental conservation and arts education in Melbourne. In times of economic crisis both art and conservation funding is cut, raising questions on their value to culture and society. A response to the ongoing threatened closure of many media specific courses across Victoria, the works examine the relevancy of these materials within contemporary arts practice and the impact the loss of educators will have on Melbourne's artistic culture.

The installation features thousands of hand made geranium leaves that upon closer inspection appear on the brink of crumbling, embodying the story of their makers- the artists directly impacted. Viewers are invited to take a leaf for free or pay what they think it is worth.

#### Why Geraniums

In many parts of the world there are species of geranium that are critically endangered or extinct. In Australia the garden geranium is on the Australian National Heritage Trust's Alert List for Environmental Weeds that threaten biodiversity and cause environmental damage. Soon to become a huge pest to Victoria's native flora and fauna, they are one of the most popular commercially sold garden plants. In Melbourne, geraniums sit ambiguously between a plant and a weed deriving connotations of being out-dated and old fashioned. One of the key arguments used to justify the closure of the craft studios is that these materials and practices have become out-dated and no longer relevant to contemporary arts practice and research. Geraniums symbolise the economic impact on the ecological equilibrium and the importance of preserving craft as a diverse form of contemporary arts practice.

#### Works

*Crumbling Ecology*- is a large ephemeral floor based work made from thousands of handmade porcelain geranium leaves, the last large scale art work to emerge from the devolved Monash Ceramic Studio. Making a work on this scale required activating a community of volunteer makers including teachers, students and artists, united by a single purpose; to comment on the beauty and integrity of craft that is soon to be lost. Porcelain is a material known for its strength; using the material in this



way comments on the loss of educators and the knowledge their hands pass on. The audience will decide the work's value and fate by choosing to walk around or over the leaves. They may respond by collecting and saving some of the leaves, being invited to pay what they think its worth. If they walk over them they will feel them crumble, hear them crack and see the work disintegrate during the course of the exhibition. Through this sound and sensation the loss of craft is given a voice.

*The Beauty of Weeds*- reflects on the themes discussed in the exhibition, posing two questions- At what point does an artwork become a relic that historically reflects the critical concerns of an epoch's culture and society? And how can the use of craft practices evolve into the realm of conceptual arts practice?

Cultivated from the unusable plant waste generated during *the Crumbling Ecologies project*, *The Beauty of Weeds* explores the indefinite boundaries between artwork and artefact. Through inverting the traditional museum glass dome, the installation interrogates how we determine what to preserve that is deemed of cultural and artistic merit. The deconstructed tools and objects from a 'devolved' classroom

become relics to a craft no longer practiced. Within the installation the plants and organic material have become the medium, evolving the 'art object' beyond the hand of the artist, elevating craft to a conceptual form of contemporary arts practice. This return to nature and environmental aesthetics within the materiality of the work echoes the current ongoing need to make visible environmental concerns.

*Weather Barometer* is a wall installation incorporating fixed and flickering neon lettering and stencilled text that examines the imminent threat of species decline. The IUCN Red List of endangered species categorises the rate of a species' decline. From Least Concern to Extinct. It can be suggested that by these classifications Craft is a Critically Endangered form of arts practice. This is the highest risk category and indicates a species' numbers will decrease by 80% within three generations. The closure of the craft studios will mean that the next generation of artists working in Melbourne will no longer have the resources to learn the technical skills necessary to practice craft professionally. The flickering light used in the installation explores the sense of urgency around the future of craft. Traditionally weather barometers have been used to alert the public to extreme weather conditions or in fundraising, to chart the level of funds raised. This conceptually links the instability of the current financial climate to the closure of Melbourne's art schools



### *Porcelain Persuasions* Miriam McGarry

On arriving at the casting studio I was bundled into the threatened studio space, and welcomed into a team of volunteers. We stood in a row; jeweler, musician, sculptor and I - slowly dipping and spinning the green leaves into the porcelain slip. Little by little, we filled our sheets of newspaper with embalmed plants, gently massaging the porcelain coating where it had not clung to the waxy leaves. Jasmine Targett's white geraniums are compellingly tactile, and serenely beautiful. However, in addition to their elegance, the crisp porcelain leaves are persuasive and political.

Among the images that decorate Jasmine's studio space is a picture of a 'yarn-bombed' tree. Yarn bombing sits within an emergent trend for craft-ivism or arts activism, where small interventions using artisan skills and techniques are executed to highlight political and cultural issues. While yarn bombing has conventionally been a site specific enterprise performed in the urban landscape, *Crumbling Ecologies* translates the concept of craft-ivism into the art gallery. By placing her own political porcelain within a traditional white gallery space, Targett demonstrates the legitimacy of art-activism as an art form. Targett's practice has previously married the realms of art and politics in Life Support Systems glass works (2011), and Antarctica, Dissolving Perception (2009). These projects exploited the transparent material quality of glass, to succinctly create an exposé of contemporary environmental issues.

*Crumbling Ecologies* comments on mass production and consumption, through the construction of individually crafted elements. The geraniums represent an investment of time, material, craftsmanship, handwork of different creators, as well as the snowflake-like individualism of the leaves themselves. *Crumbling Ecologies* is explicitly and intentionally a local production. The enthusiasm of volunteers, from both within and outside the arts community, validates Targett's central thesis: that the practices of porcelain, glass and textiles artists are valued, and deserving of support and opportunities for ongoing development.

In horticulture, Geraniums have a dual meaning of both friendship and folly. *Crumbling Ecologies* exploits this contradictory but co-existing message to articulate the current relationship between art and 'craft' within

Victoria. Geraniums (like artisans and crafts people) exist in a liminal space. Between a weed and a precious flower, the porcelain geraniums are simultaneously craft and art. Targett exposes how artisan practices of porcelain casting, glass blowing and tapestry slip between the cracks for funding, recognition or endorsement.

There is a perception of both geraniums and crafts as old fashioned, irrelevant or out of touch. And yet, there is simultaneously a growing trend towards preference for the handmade unique object. Oliver Supon's book, "The New Artisans" published last year explores this resurgence and awareness of quality handmade objects. Within Victoria; institutions, collectives and blogs such as Craft Victoria, NorthCity4 and thedesignfiles.net, demonstrate a cultural and social awareness of the importance of sustaining these traditions. Why then does education policy not follow this public support? *Crumbling Ecologies* exposes the reality of a thriving craft community in Melbourne, which is being uprooted and displaced through failures of funding and recognition.

Jasmine Targett's porcelain landscape is constantly under threat. In addition to potential destruction from visitor's boots, the fragile environment has no means of regeneration. The fragility of the materials demonstrates the dangerous position artistic practices such as porcelain casting hold in the future. Without funding, projects like *Crumbling Ecologies* will not only die out, but will be unable to regenerate unless tertiary level courses remain available to educate new practitioners. Targett's delicate installation shows how the very skills that created the porcelain leaves are under threat of extinction.

*Crumbling Ecologies* explores a space between fragility and preservation. The individually hand crafted porcelain geranium leaves are rescued from decay, but in the process of conservation, are embalmed in a cast.

37 000 gentle persuasions...



Debbie Pryor  
Gallery Curator, Craft Victoria

Across the nation art schools are re-evaluating the need and demand for crafts such as ceramics, glass, woodworking and jewellery. Such courses are experiencing restructuring, merging and fatal closures; the dilution of teaching pure craft techniques at a tertiary level will have a profound effect on the visual art, craft and design communities. Melbourne based artist Jasmine Targett began her project by tackling the Monash Caulfield campus' craft restructure and in doing so discovered a national community supporting her concerns.

The *Crumbling Ecologies* Project opens a discussion surrounding the condition of environmental conservation and craft education within Australia. This predominantly ceramics-based exhibition symbolises the crumbling of a community and the struggle to sustain an industry in the absence of a training infrastructure. It also stimulates discussion around the meaning and worth of craft and design as viewed by both the arts education system and Australian society.

In the gallery space neon wall installations and museum style vitrines feature multimedia works, showing both the breadth of Targett's practice and the interdisciplinary impact across craft and visual arts of the topics' material. Navigating the exhibition, the viewer experiences the installation as a art school, gallery space and contemporary Museum. The most literal piece in the exhibition, an installation of ceramic geraniums, sweeps a large portion of the room. Some of these geraniums will be taken home by the audience and some will be destroyed throughout the exhibition's duration as a result of audiences navigating the site, which physically reinforces the loss of craft and environmental research funding with a startling crunch.

Upon entering the gallery the Weather Barometer, a flickering wall installation of neon and vinyl, raises awareness to the decline and increased risk of extinction to both the geranium and craft. Mimicking the motions of a weather barometer the piece conceptually links financial climate to the closure of Melbourne's art schools.

The Beauty of Weeds, fashioned from the Project's plant waste, sits beneath hand blown glass domes replicating a Botanical exhibit while demonstrating the utilisation of craft within a conceptual art practice. The vitrines are positioned upon tables salvaged and repurposed from an art school, further demonstrating the resilient and transformative nature of craft, able to be adapted to the needs of the user.

Geraniums are heavily featured in the exhibition, with thousands dipped in ceramic slip and positioned tenuously throughout the gallery. In Melbourne geraniums are a popular commercial plant used to 'green' corporate breakout spaces and public gardens around the city. Yet curiously also feature on the Australian National Heritage Trust's Alert List for Environmental Weeds. This mirrors the dichotomy that is Australian Craft; across the country craft courses are being shut down within art schools, despite enjoying a resurgence in Australian creative and consumer cultures.

"One key argument used to justify the closure of the craft studios is that these materials and practices have become outdated and no longer relevant to the contemporary arts practice and research" says Targett.

To claim a material can no longer be researched or utilised is defeatist. Any material incites experimentation, exploration and excitement, how is it that a creative institution can arrive at the decision that a material has reached its potential? In a direct commentary on the strength of the community, the thousands of ceramic geraniums shown in the exhibition are created by volunteer makers in Melbourne, Bendigo and New South Wales. The artists' involvement is a direct display of their concern on how the closure of art school craft studios will impact their future careers and the position of Australian crafts on a national and international scale.

Both contemporary visual art and craft feature a stream of talented young, emerging contemporary visual artists and craftspeople who use ceramics regularly, if not primarily in their practice. In particular, artists such as Brendan Huntley and Honor Freeman have studied the craft within the last 10 years and have shown in major Australian institutions such as Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney and National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and both are represented by commercial galleries. This indicates that both commercial and creative audiences continue to see the worth in the varying incarnations of the material.

Undoubtedly the upsurge in digital technologies has had a hand in the diminished support for craft in higher education in this country. There is no disputing that universities have realised they can increase their profit margin from online teaching rather than providing classes with hands on making but are Universities taking into consideration the impact on cultural industries, the environment and a way of life in Australia? As Gabriella Bisetto, glass artist and head of Glass Department at the University of South Australia states: "Universities are increasingly moving towards an online education - UniSA is part of Open Universities Australia (OUA) offering innovative practices, expertise and resources in online learning and distance education. Online learning is a fantastic resource for a component of our society but it does also increasingly put pressure on actual hands-on programmes that cost more in resources, staff and facilities. It makes courses that can be taught online financially very attractive for universities to offer in opposition to studio based practices".



Australia has an established commercial infrastructure for makers, our mainstream audiences are becoming more design savvy and artisan products are at an all time high for demand. Ceramics in particular is treated as a diverse component of contemporary craft, as opposed to the actuality of it being an essential component, relating directly to mould making, form building and sculpture which are integral to many other visual arts processes.

Brian Parkes, CEO JamFactory Contemporary Craft and Design suggests the rise in frustration and concern is widespread "JamFactory runs what we describe as a post-tertiary training program in ceramics, glass, furniture and metal design and the worrying thing we've witnessed in recent years is the reduction in both the number of graduates from craft-related related programs across the country and the diminishing skills level they seem to be attaining as graduates."

The Crumbling Ecologies Project highlights the desperate, fragile point that we have found ourselves at. A point where the government needs to invest in the future of our creative industries as opposed to looking at the immediate financial benefits for the educational sector today and commit to the building of an industry that can contribute to the international landscape.

Our contemporary culture has not desisted in using hand made Australian vessels and objects, we retain the need to hand down information from generation to generation on the materials used to create them – the system in which we do this within our mainstream culture is not through family tradition, but a formal education system. Perhaps this move by educational institutions will see a push in new practitioners seeking privatised teaching?

Targett is completing her PhD Sensing Ether: a studio based investigation into Perceiving Atmosphere, Light and Life Support Systems at Monash University. It's a brave move on the part of the artist, critically publicising the movements of an institution before the completion of study. Perhaps the best position from which to observe is on the inside.



*Collaboration, Continuity and Community*  
Alicia Renew

*The Crumbling Ecologies Project* addresses the key issues surrounding the closure of media-specific studios across Victoria and asks us to consider why these studios are disappearing from the education system. The project openly questions which forms of artistic practice can be considered as contemporary, and which are now considered irrelevant, while identifying the obsolete notion of the artist existing within a singular medium. Since the rise of Conceptualism in the 1960s, the art world has recognized the dominance of the multidisciplinary artist, designer and architect whose creative practice relies on accessibility to various media-specific studios. Yet art schools have continued to perceive traditional studio practice outside of the freer forms as rigid classicism with dictatorial notions at play. This has resulted in the disempowering of artists and designers in aspects of technical specificity. This dated mode of linking technical practitioners to the divisive thought of being either a maker or a thinker is a discontinuous logic that has led to the current closed studio archetype. Only through the notions of collaboration, continuity and community can changes be made within art schools to stabilize, an otherwise *crumbling ecology*.

### *Collaboration*

The current split model, which has studios and departments separated, both physically and metaphorically has segmented and narrowed skilled visual and conceptual approaches to simply exist within a singular canon. The artist working solitarily within a single discipline is a dated 20th century notion, it is instead proposed that a no walls approach to

studio practice should be adopted and should act as a reflection of the contemporary artist who works outside of one medium and expands past limited learning systems. Architecture should act as collaborative tool that draws practices together through open spaces that enhance creative production.

### *Continuity*

To foster progression, a collegial assessment of the three compasses of the visual arts; aesthetics, technique and economics should be used to promote creativity between disciplines. Basic training in different technical arenas for all artists, architects and designers with access to media-specific artisans and specialists, along with exposure to conceptual theory will foster new dialogues and open advanced discourses about our cultural and visual anthropology. The separation and isolation of mediums only amplifies the current approach of closed dialogues between disciplines which hinders innovation in each field becoming a catalyst for the current unsustainable approach to arts education and production.

### *Community*

The new art school should demand an approach to arts education that combines intelligent physical making along with providing an experiential sensorium which joins studios, labs and lecture theatres in one collaborative space. Rather than the closed circle, of work and display hidden within a labyrinth of walls, it should aim to choreograph the self-referential space of the studio with engineered exposure of mixed spaces and galleries that coexist within mutually accessible arenas. The new art school should be a thieving hybrid learning environment with co-teaching, studios, galleries and technical labs for collegial learning, a network of intimacies, that is shared and explored by artists, architects and designers.

It doesn't take much to create a dynamic community and sustainable ecology for the arts, it does however take vision and a portion risk to invite dialogues surrounding shifting paradigms of the environment. Perhaps it is only when these conversations happen that we can start to see some stability and longevity in the ecology, art, education and production.

## **Crumbling Ecologies Project Participants Included:**

### VIC

Jasmine Targett	Julia Storey	Carmen Couche
Sally Cleary	Wen Shobbrook	Yanrong Wu
Rebecca Mayo	Annie Quail	Simone Steel
Tony Conway	Debbie Symons	Suse Scholom
Seven Thousand Oaks-	Jasmine Coulson	Sinead Kennedy
Miyuki Jokiranta	Charlotte Coulson	Nicola McClelland
Sarah Parker	Elise Sheehan	Tammy Warner
Jess McCausland	Naomi Troski	Annie Dowd
Sharon Clues	Ri Van Veen	Miriam McGarry
Caroline Brandt	Lucy Hall	Sharyn Masson
Jacinta Richardson	Sophie Harle	Nola Smith
Margaret Boyle	Ella Leoncio	Sari Harris
Atika Fraval	Susan Frisch	Kristen Halkett
Janice Kent-Mackenzie	Rosanna Caldwell	Sharyn Masson
Sharon Twining	Jess Kelly	Kristen Miller
Rebecca Norris	Kobie Nel	Dee Strandly
Phoebe Norris	Ulla Britta Westergren	Rachel Berry
Jen Rae	Kathryn de Jesus	Tim Denshire-Key
Shelley Grayden	Di Richardson	Jacqueline Vermer
Susannah Larritt	Jenna Wilson	Cindy Leech
Cat Finnerty	Cassandra Smith	Declan Donald
Ian Wadley	Gabbie Hoff	Friederike Heinsdorff-Neill
Rebecca Delange	Beka Hannah	Kim Davis
Adele Macer	Georgia Lancaster	Sue Lawson
Annette Martin	Pauline Meade	Laura Elphinstone

### NSW

Liane Rossler	Jude Belnick	Lucie Macany
Scarlet Marshall	Maddy Ghosh	Vicki Grima
Lana Marshall	Helen Earl	Zoe Brand
James McCallum	Ximena Tapia	Melanie Ihnen
Szilvia Gyorgy	Zeynep Bayraktar	Nina Still
Bridget Kennedy	Canbora Bayraktar	Tilly Torrevillas
Corrine Fisher	Rose Daridis	Ayla Ihnen
Hannah Fisher	Brooke Thompson	Luke Torrevillas
Emilie Fisher	Beau Thompson	



Jasmine Targett is an interdisciplinary artist whose work examines our perception of nature while quantifying ecological concerns. Often deceptively beautiful, her practice illuminates parts of nature that are frequently overlooked, from Earth's atmosphere to common garden weeds. Within her work there is an uneasy tension between the engaging aesthetic and the information portrayed, exploring sinister scientific data that has irrevocably altered our perception of nature in recent years.

*"Observation challenges the way we understand the world, sometimes thinking about observation changes what we see."* – Jasmine Targett on Observation, 2011.

In 2010 Jasmine was the recipient of a Young Artist Grant from the City of Melbourne for her research project Life Support Systems. Due to the works cultural and artistic merit it has been curated into Wonderland at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Taipei, 2012. Jasmine is completing a PhD on Sensing Ether: a studio based investigation into Perceiving Atmosphere, Light and Life Support Systems at Monash University with the assistance of an Australian Postgraduate Award.

*"It's hard to imagine a more opportune moment for 'making sense' of environmental issues, which clearly present us all – scientists and non-scientists alike – with a huge challenge... Jasmine Targett's works bridge a crucial gap, presenting complex, disturbing data in lucid, evocative, even surprisingly beautiful form."*  
– Professor John Gregory, Making Sense: from the Sublime to the Meticulous, 2011.

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