

WHISPERING TREES

An intimate public sound installation created by two sound artists
in collaboration with five poets is described by Prue Adams

Sound artistry is the business of *sodacake*, a magical mix of the talents of composer Solange Kershaw and media artist and audio producer Damian Castaldi. The two have worked around the world and last year completed a permanent installation at the Villa Alba Museum in Victoria entitled *etcetera* which utilised dynamic text, sound design and video to create an experience of things remembered by the walls and rooms of this house's rich past. Visitors watch and listen as descriptions of the lavish contents derived from an 1897 auction catalogue pass through the curtains, floating on a dark surface, illuminated by light from a window, unravelling and retelling the history of an opulent past.

Recently settled in Blackheath in the Blue Mountains NSW, Kershaw and Castaldi were inspired by the sense of awe and enchantment they felt when walking through the landscape, through the mist in the trees. They envisaged a work that would become *Whispering Trees* which would be discovered by chance and elicit that intimate sense of allure in an accidental audience.

'We wanted to create an installation that would exist in 'everyday' surroundings, that didn't require the audience to go to a specific space, purpose built for such projects. We wanted to do something that engaged with people who were already there, so to speak, the 'accidental audience' who walks down that street almost every day, until one day they are jolted into taking a moment to stop and listen, and maybe finding something unexpected in the mundane.'

With the support of Jansis O'Hanlon, CEO of Varuna, the Writers House, Kershaw and Castaldi were introduced to a group of local poets and secured funding from the Blue Mountains City Council's City of the Arts Trust for the project. Their collaboration with poets Craig Billingham, Emma Brazil, Vanessa Kirkpatrick, Mark O'Flynn and fiction writer Amanda Kaye, began.

'We gave them a fairly loose brief. We didn't think that the poem needed to be about a tree in order to work with the

concept. In fact we were interested to see what they would come up with.' Some of the writers chose an existing work. Others wrote new works for the project.

Vanessa Kirkpatrick chose her work *The Conversation of Trees*, which was inspired by listening to the music of the leaves of different trees at Everglades Gardens, a National Trust house from the 1930s with its magnificent Paul Sorenson designed garden in Leura. 'It was a moment in my life when I felt a door—just briefly—had opened on another world, as I listened to the trees pass their secrets to each other—the breeze moving through their branches.'

Writer Amanda Kaye chose *Legend has it*, a work she had written as a birthday gift for her friend Lin, who has an affinity with animals and birds. It was 'inspired by watching her interacting with kookaburras and king parrots in her backyard'.

'In it there's a sort of disembodied narrative voice that tells the story of the lady who loved birds, which didn't bother me that much—I thought the piece worked pretty well—but when the *Whispering Trees* project came along I suddenly understood something. This voice wasn't disembodied. It belonged to a tree. Who else would tell the legend so certainly? So as it turned out, my small story dove-tailed into the *Whispering Trees* project very neatly.'

Craig Billingham wrote a new work *Welcome, or 'The man with the earlobe'* for *Whispering Trees*. For Billingham, knowing that it would be experienced as sound influenced the process of writing the poem. 'I was more conscious of melody, which was dictated by the first line. Also, it seemed to me that a listener would have less time than a reader, so I tried to make the poem more 'available' to the ear, if that makes sense.'

Kershaw and Castaldi recorded each of the writers reading their poems as the basis for each sound work. 'Each piece was different of course, and each writer had a different



The Conversation of Trees

It is no illusion:

the trees speak in different voices,
and like music,
attain a perfect marriage of sound and sense.

A fleet of innumerable, dark-green yachts,
the oak leaves tilt
their spinnakers in the wind.

Veins flow with verdant knowledge:
roots delve and keen the past
while branches search far constellations.

Each to each, the boughs of cherry trees
lisp their harmonies,
shedding spindrift petals on the lawn.

I watch the secrets move
from tree to tree,
smooth as light

rippling from a foal's mane
as she bends her head to clover,
takes the green.

Like the lowly swineherd, Caedmon,
stealing from his stalls to press an ear against
the choruses of monks

I stand with door ajar
unknowing, yet spellbound
by these strange, pure tongues

and wonder if I too
might one day find the music of my soul's flute
and take the green,

and love entirely.

Vanessa Kirkpatrick

First published in *The Way to the Well: Australian
Poetry 2014* (Central Coast Poets Inc., 2014).

'the trees speak in different voices'

Vanessa Kirkpatrick, photo Bette Mifsud

untitled

I
Walking, I see my breath before me,
feel the exhalation of trees
cold on my cheeks.
I am walking, and remembering,
the other night,
his hands deep in his pockets,
his suede shoes pointing at me,
his smile shy,
his brown eyes
looking at me,
then the floor.

II
It was here that it happened.
Here the weather turned and
the clouds kissed our shoulders,
here his painted arms reached for me
as I laughed in my polka dot dress
and his palms held my face
as his mouth met mine.

That night we stayed in the big house
of cut glass and candlelight.
The floors creaked and
the halls were full of ghosts.
We climbed out of our window and
sat, side by side on the wooden sill,
looking down upon rooftops,
and up at the stars.

That night was silver, and still.
The two of us held hands
upon the ledge,
as the word love hovered
in the silent air between us.

Emma Brazil

BRANCH FALLING

If a tree falls in a forest
and I am sitting on the verandah
reading, then it makes
one hell of a racket.
A branch, to tell the truth,
rather than a tree, cracking
like a bone in stillness.
Some ontological whim of wind,
some inner atom's weakness,
or maybe the weight of a moth
has permitted it today
to give up the ghost.
Aloft these many years,
like a gesture of pain
I have grown blind to;
I have watched various birds
sharpen their beaks against it
like scissors on a whetstone.
Sometimes grey in a silent mist
that on waking, shrouded the branch,
made wet the washing on the line,
dispersed, a posteriori,
in a moment's splintering.

Mark O'Flynn
First published in
The Good Oil, Five Islands Press, 2000



Left: Mark O'Flynn
Above: Amanda Kaye
Photography Bette Mifsud

She loved the birds very much, but truthfully, the birds loved her more.

style of delivery and reading, and each of these recorded pieces spoke to each of us differently—some more directly than others.’

Billingham’s piece was interesting in that he had the idea of having two children read and sing his piece, which was a lovely and unusual idea.

Welcome, or, ‘The man with the earlobe’

*Welcome to the man with the earlobe
welcome to the child with the nose
welcome to the one who came by pushbike
welcome to the one who came by boat*

*That’s my brother with the earlobe
that’s my sister with the nose
she’s the one who came by pushbike
he’s the one who came by boat*

*So welcome to the man with the earlobe
welcome to the child with the nose
welcome to the ones who came by pushbike
and welcome to the ones who came by boat*

Amanda Kaye reflects on the experience of recording her work. ‘It was fun making the recording with Solange. We made a whispering version and a spoken version, and in the end Solange and Damian mashed them up a little, bookending my piece with the whispers and adding some bird song and the soft sounds you hear in the bush and a tentative melody as well. It’s odd listening to your own voice, or it always seems so to me, but I liked listening to my recording, feeling the deliberate metre of it, catching the rhythms and the slow tempo. I think that’s the benefit of hearing it as opposed to reading it. It controls the experience a little more for the audience, requires them to be still and to focus just for that little while, that brief moment of story.’

LEGEND HAS IT by Amanda Kaye
Posted in Flash Fiction 29 April, 2014
<http://smallstories.net.au/>

Legend has it there was this lady who loved birds. She lived in Blackheath and she watched them in the trees and on the grass and sipping the pollen out of the grevilleas. She loved the birds very much, but truthfully, the birds loved her more. They watched her from the trees and the grass

On some pieces Kershaw and Castaldi worked individually, and on others they collaborated, building the work up in layers—one of them experimenting with a layer of sound or music and the other picking it up from there.

‘Reading a poem is a deeply personal and individual experience, whereas experiencing it as an audio piece is very different, in that the music and sound design affects the listener’s interpretation of the piece. We wanted each piece to be an intimate, individual moment for the listener, and to appreciate them you need to stop, be silent and lean in to listen.’

For Vanessa Kirkpatrick, experiencing the finished works installed at Varuna evoked in me the memories of childhood stories and myths in which trees come to life and speak. It was a wonderful experience to wander through the gardens, watching people standing close to the trees, bending their ears to listen to the poems and stories. Hopefully, it gave listeners a feeling of intimate connection with the trees and heightened their awareness of their relationship with the natural world. It was interesting to record the piece of work, knowing that my voice would be ‘spoken’ by a tree—as if the tree became my body and my own body disappeared.’

Whispering Trees was launched in the gardens of Varuna, the National Writers House, as part of the 2015 Varuna & Sydney Writers’ Festival in May, followed by a two-week installation in the gardens of the Carrington Hotel in Katoomba. Listen to the poems and find out more about the project at <http://whisperingtrees.net/>

Whispering Trees creators in conversation with poet Deb Westbury for the Poetry in Place event at Varuna, 2015 Varuna & Sydney Writers’ Festival. From left: Vanessa Kirkpatrick, Mark O’Flynn, Amanda Kaye, Solange Kershaw, Damian Castaldi, Craig Billingham, Emma Brazil and Deb Westbury

