

Sensing the Unseen

If you do not speak, do I speak for you? The title of Robyn Backen's installation at Incinerator Art Space intelligently connects history, place and time to the individual. Both a whisper from the past and a direct and immediate question. The beckoning and subtly provocative question that responds to the Willoughby Visual Arts Biennial theme, *Imagining Place*, could also be posed as, if you do not speak, then *who* is speaking for you?

Standing alone within the tower Backen has constructed, the single question is softly repeated. *If you do not speak, do I speak for you?* Participation is encouraged. Any shuffle of the feet, a breath, a sigh, a stutter or an articulated response is recorded. History is at once captured.

With Backen's art practice interlacing science and technology, these soundwaves are passed through a series of meticulously refined digital processes that decompose the recorded sounds. Analogous to the Incinerator's purpose to disintegrate things to ash through heat waves, Backen's recorded sounds are distorted. Like a whispering wall, there is a time delay; however more significant as the sounds and voices resonate into the entrance of the art space creating an immediate sensation that reverberations from the past are present. A composition in decomposition. We are taken away from the visual to focus on our senses, the unseen and the subconscious.

The sound draws attention to the space we occupy. If an archaeological dig were to occur at the rear of the Incinerator it is likely to take you through layers of carbon and charred remains of objects once significant to people of the local area. As Backen has stated, these are "murmuring histories that resonate within the walls". They have changed form but their presence has shifted space into place.

As more people partake in the engagement with the whisper, early layers of sound fade to the distance and more recent recordings speak the loudest. As it accumulates and cycles through, each person will undergo a unique experience. A palimpsest of history is created and at the same time, an evolution of place.

Dispersed amongst the recorded sound is the sharp crackle of burning charcoal and quotes from theoretical physicist and Nobel Prize recipient, Richard Feynman. Feynman speaks enthusiastically and poetically about fire and its essence being "stored sun"ⁱ. Backen again makes us aware of the purpose of the Incinerator by incorporating science and imagination.

In a window overlooking the art space, are flickering scenes from the 1927 film, *Beautiful Middle Harbour*, originally used to promote Walter Burley Griffin's ideal community creation, Castlecrag. As local residents, Walter Burley Griffin and his wife and fellow architect, Marion Mahoney practised anthroposophy. They brought this philosophy of "intellectual thought with the imagination"ⁱⁱ to their way of life and their profession; positing architecture within nature and instigating theatre and creativity in everyday life as a way of stimulating and uniting a community. If you like, they were pioneers of 'place making' at a physical, spiritual, intellectual and creative level. As Griffin, along with Eric Nicholls were the architects of the Willoughby Reverberatory Incinerator, by screening edits of the couple and their friends in a dance and theatre performance over Middle Cove, Backen

gives a nod to their role in the creation of the Incinerator and the neighbouring suburb. Also, as progress (and perhaps fate) would have it, the very Incinerator they designed is now a creative hub.

Returning to Backen's interest in communication we are brought into the digital realm in a room of projected text. The large words, quotes from Feynman, animate onto the wall and move towards the chimney. They then collide, like atoms strike to create heat, and stretch to the point of becoming disintegration. What was once bright, sharp and decipherable is now illegible. Traces of language appear coded and indiscernible. They distort to the point of abstraction and turn to fragments. Relics. Like most of the elements in Backen's work, they are ephemeral. Then, the words reform again and take their place, only to end up in an endless cycle of decay and restructure.

Backen's installation has captured the essence of history that emanates within place, while perceptively magnifying the significance of the on-going role of the individual within it in order to define it. She does not dictate what we sense or how we react. In words of Feynman, she "leaves [us] something to imagine..."ⁱⁱⁱ

An Australian interdisciplinary artist, Backen's installations sensitively engage with the environment they inhabit. They cross boundaries of science, technology and art. Although often technologically complex, they appear minimal and rely on participation and audience experience for the work to be fully realised. In an initiative from Willoughby Council and as part of the Willoughby Visual Arts Biennial, Robyn Backen was appointed in a mentor role with Northbridge artist, Sarah Fitzgerald throughout the development and creation of this artwork.

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Incinerator Art Space

ⁱ Richard Feynman, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1pYI5JQLE> accessed 23/7/15

ⁱⁱ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthroposophy>

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