

## ***BECOMING INDIGENOUS: THE IMPOSSIBLE NECESSITY***

Liz Bryce

Sometime in 2005 an image on the front of a catalogue caught my attention. It had a chair in the middle of what looked like the Karoo Desert, a part of Southern Africa.<sup>1</sup> The image had an immediate visual impact on me. I liked the inference of remoteness where something happening is usually unlikely to be noticed by the 'art' world. I was privately intrigued with the thought 'what if there had been no photo?' or 'what if it had been viewed only by a passing tribesman or farmer or indeed only roosted on by wildlife?' Surely that small audience was as important as a gallery full of viewers. I liked the idea of communicating with those who inhabit or are familiar with a particular place. On these occasions the act of putting the work there could be likened to an unsolicited performance, an interference or intervention in a public place. It suggests through various iterations a possible inhabitation of a place by people who might represent different types of viewer. In Aotearoa New Zealand some of these viewers might be indigenous and some might be people who think that they could become indigenous. Yet another group of viewers might realise that becoming indigenous is an oxymoron, an impossible aim. Iterations using figures mimicking colonising actions were central to the project discussed below. The figures (dolls) sometimes occupied places singly like scouts or surveyors; often as small invasive columns of figures, like an invading army. They did not ask permission; they did not respect the values of those already there.



(Images left to right) Figure 1: Liz Bryce, *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, Otago Peninsula, 2006.

Figure 2: Liz Bryce, *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, Taiaaroa Heads, Dunedin, 2006 (photograph courtesy of Jim Searle, Peripatus).

Figure 3: Liz Bryce, *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, Haulashore Island, Nelson, 2005.

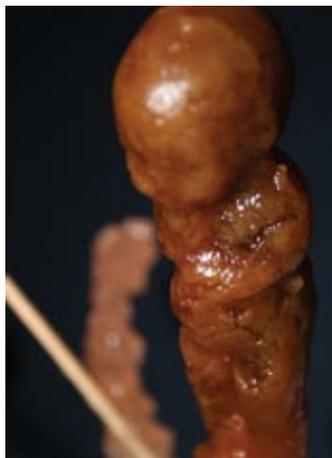
The notion of carefully considered art for an audience not readily perceived or identified became a priority that I explored during the project *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, a multidisciplinary and multi-outcome project that occurred during 2004-06.<sup>2</sup>

An apparent oxymoron driving the project was the desire of the coloniser to become indigenous. Canadian theorist Terry Goldie suggests that a feeling of "not belonging", of the alien within, is responsible for this very specifically post-colonial desire.<sup>3</sup> The project also engaged with Rosi Braidotti's notion of "becoming" as an evolving state of nomadic thought and action. Braidotti refers to Judith Butler's notion of an alternative performance where identity is constructed through repeated behaviours, describing these actions as "iterations".<sup>4</sup>

Within the overall project, I produced work for public situations as well as gallery exhibition venues, using performative, sculptural, photographic image and digital formats. Each of the many iterations within the project was documented photographically and collated with narrative notes along with some of the theoretical frameworks that were important to each concept. Meta-documentation for the project was digitally formatted as a hypertext document, which encouraged a rhizomic reading experience through the related but changing narrations of the different works produced.

An important visual code that was repeated in various ways in the project was a small cupie doll originally of British origin.<sup>5</sup> Over the years that the doll was produced (approximately between 1950 and 1970) there must have been several different production castings resulting in different shades and hues of pink. These cheap, plastic dolls became historically synonymous with the New Zealand A & P (agriculture and produce) shows as one could win the pink fairy doll on a stick at the fairground side-show. Later they were used commercially to represent many ethnicities. In the 1960s and 1970s some were painted brown and marketed as 'Māori' souvenirs and sold in Rotorua gift shops: Pākehā souvenirs of Māori.

I made multiple casts of the cupie doll form in wax and sugar. One edition had a wick inserted, turning the dolls into candles, referring to another souvenir trend in the 1970s. Further editions used a traditional recipe for toffee in both white and raw sugar. They were displayed on sticks like the fairground dolls. As the toffee disintegrated and crystallised, the work became lustrously beautiful and the substance changed state and form, from solid to liquid to crystal. In a neat kind of justification of the indigenous, the *white* sugar casts dripped and melted within a few weeks. However, the *raw* sugar dolls (containing a small amount of brown sugar) still exist in form, albeit in a fossilised-looking state.



(Images left to right) Figure 4: Liz Bryce, *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, Waitangi Day, Octagon, Dunedin, 2006.

Figure 5: Liz Bryce, sugar casts following *Island (S)hopping* from *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, Blue Oyster Art Project Space, Dunedin, 2005.

Figure 6: Liz Bryce, *Raw Sugar*; *White Sugar* from *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, 2005-07.

I experimented with colouring the wax so that the casts achieved different hues and mixes of pink, beige and brown. Some dolls had brown centres and white outsides; others had white centres and brown outsides, while some had patches of different colour. As well as contrived colouring, the wax naturally changes colour over time, gradually darkening.

Over the course of the project, wax doll candles performed ideas in public, by my repeatedly placing and leaving them in significant places. All these manipulations alluded to "becoming" and to perceptions of ethnicity. The



Figure 7: Liz Bryce, *Desire to Belong*, from *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, Pavement Window, Peter Rae Gallery, Dunedin, 2006.



Figure 8: Liz Bryce, *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, Inside Pavement Window, Peter Rae Gallery, Dunedin, 2006.

allusion was used to enact unpublished colonisation stories. For example, in one publicly sited installation in Nelson, hundreds of the dolls occupied sites historically linked to immigration waves from Britain in the 1860s. Local people of Māori descent or connection understood the significance of large numbers of pale dolls waiting in that place to be carried ashore by a few darker dolls.<sup>6</sup>

The *Becoming Indigenous* project changed the focus in my practice. Things that now became important were the performative nature of the work, the non-authorial mark of the artist and the accessibility and participatory nature of the work for the audience.

'Performative' refers to work which "performs an action" rather than representing it.<sup>7</sup> In their way, the materials of the cast dolls – wax and sugar – performed the concept of the project by changing colour and form. The changing colour and form suggested that becoming indigenous could be possible. However, the method used for the digital work mimicked or performed an impossible conclusion: becoming indigenous is an unrealisable aim. Another aspect of the project involved the tangible occupation of actual space by the dolls and the fact that the audience could perform various actions with them without the artist needing to be involved. The accessibility of work for the audience and its participatory nature has relevance today and is allied to a kind of democratic ethic as a key issue in relational artwork.<sup>8</sup>

Place and historical palimpsest is relevant here and has subsequently led me to work in collaboration with a group of other artists who are also interested in working with these notions. Our members have formed *activelayers*<sup>9</sup> to continue to collaborate on experimental cross-disciplinary works that have layers of meaning and extend the boundaries of the different media involved. We combine our disciplines of theatre, dance, video and visual arts not only through digital media but also in the method of working with an idea. The artists involved are from different parts of the world and many of us have not met face to face, becoming acquainted only through digital media. We challenge ideas of location and 'site' using the places where we happen to be (local site) combined with a variety of media and performance software that allows us to work together in real time from our different physical locations and across different time zones.

I was introduced to the *Upstage* software that *activelayers* uses most during the *Becoming Indigenous* project.<sup>10</sup> In this medium, the invisibility of the artist suits the nature of subversive, though not necessarily radical, work. The unpredictable nature of the audience and internet is part of the challenge. In a way – similar to an artwork in the Karoo Desert – do we know if there will be anyone there?

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- 1 The work was by Bharti Kher, Echo for "Violence/Silence", Pulse, South Africa, 2002, in "Shifting Map: Artists' Platforms and Strategies for Cultural Diversity", Edith Rijnja, Gertrude Flentge (eds), Reinaldo Laddaga, Charles Esche et al, RAIN Artists Initiated Network (Amsterdam: Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten & Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2004).
- 2 Elizabeth Bryce, *Becoming Indigenous: The Impossible Necessity*, unpublished dissertation, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2007.
- 3 "And the first felt need for indigenisation came when a person moved to a new place and recognised an 'other' as having greater roots in that place... a process which I have termed 'indigenisation'. A peculiar word, it suggests the impossible necessity of becoming indigenous." Terry Goldie in *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures* (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1989) 12-14.
- 4 Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (London: Polity Press, 2002) 42, referring to Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York, Routledge, 1993).
- 5 *Kleeware made in England* is just noticeable on the back of the neck of some of the original dolls.
- 6 The place was Haulashore Island during *Terminus05*, a symposium of international sculptors working on two sites, curated by Ali Bramwell, 2005.
- 7 This concept was reinforced for me by Rosa Casado, a Spanish performative artist and dancer whose workshop "To Create in a Time and a Place: Strange Paradises", I attended during this research project. See <http://magdalena.actrix.co.nz/guests/rosa.html> as last accessed on 25 October 2008.
- 8 I refer to discussion and response around Nicolas Bourriaud's text: entitled *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du reel, 1998, 2002 for the English translation) and Liam Gillick, "Contingent Factors: A Response to Claire Bishop's *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*" in *October* 115, Winter 2006, 95-107.
- 9 *Activelayers* was formed in March 2008 by Liz Bryce, James Cunningham, Suzon Fuks and Cherry Truluck. See [www.activelayers.net](http://www.activelayers.net) as last accessed on 25 October 2008.
- 10 *Upstage* is software developed by Douglas Bagnall for Avatar Body Collision enabling a group of people to create a real time cyberformance on the internet. The cyberstage uses 'stages', 'backdrops', 'avatars' and 'props' and now includes audio and drawing functions. Audience members may contribute to the real time performance online through a chat window. See [www.upstage.org.nz](http://www.upstage.org.nz) as last accessed on 25 October 2008.