

**Victoria University**

**Jennifer Kamp**

**Threat or Thrill in Suburbia: An Artist's Response to the Changing Nature of Place**

**Abstract**

The focus of my paper is to show how the boundaries between theory and practice, narrative and analysis, word and work can be interwoven to assist creative research into a transient suburban landscape. I examine conceptions of space and how we live, in a visual and textual exploration that loops across time seeking meaning and understanding of my changing urban landscape. As an artist through my photographic and video works I develop ways of working in a changing world with new pictorial possibilities. My work evolves as a layered and reflexive project that illuminates the past and the passage of time, and explores different ways of understanding the world, through unfamiliar technologies.

I discuss social and emotional experiences, and our relationships that give meaning to the space we inhabit. My reflexive enquiry dealing with my personal sense of loss resonates with an unsettled contemporary landscape. My enquiry combines different voices and tensions to express the edginess of shifting threats and thrills that characterise the contemporary landscape. I merge context and methodology, imagery and text with process, to investigate and visualise the subtleties and changing ways of being in today's world. My art practice explores this edginess using digital technology to develop interplay between the past and present, linking the virtual with the actual and the technical, to engender meta-narratives that may open new possibilities.

**Keywords:** Transience, landscape, reflexive, digital technology, ethnography

'Threat or thrill in suburbia: an artist's response to the changing nature of place' describes a plan I am developing to assist my visual research into my changing space in Grovedale, a fringe suburb of the provincial city of Geelong. As I moved around my neighbourhood I was conscious of an unsettled feeling, something not quite right in the

suburban surrounds where I have lived for more than thirty years, and began to examine the contemporary landscape seeking an explanation for my sense of unease. I was unsure whether my response was due to personal issues relating to the sudden death of my husband. Or was I reacting to life style adjustments associated with cultural change and my unfamiliarity with newer technologies? My practice as an artist has been grounded in traditional printmaking and painting methodology; however, I wanted to explore this 'edginess' using digital technology to develop interplay between the past and present, linking the virtual with the actual and the technical, to engender meta-narratives that may open new possibilities.

My surrounding landscape appears to have been overtaken by commercial business developments and frantic house building. Swarms of rooftops cover the once grassy hills. Earthmoving works abound not far from a new shopping complex with huge cranes silhouetted against the sky. Jackhammers and building noise accompany the revving of the many trucks and cars using the Princes and Surfcoast Highways that define Grovedale's geographical boundaries. Billboards and banners advertise franchised business products, and beacons edge the roadsides, announcing a different space. I recollect how it was when my husband and I moved to this suburb. The neighbourhood as I first knew it was a collection of building blocks purchased by a land developer from local farmers. Some houses had been built; others were in the process of erection. The infrastructure consisted of made roads, no footpaths, a small shopping centre, and a primary school. Fenced paddocks and sporadic sugar gum trees surrounded the new estate; distant hills outlined the horizon.

As a practising visual artist and educator I am intrigued as to why I am experiencing a sense of alienation in this place where I have lived for most of my married life. I decided that viewing the landscape from differing perspectives might explain and assist my understanding of the progress around me. My research examines my local space, the nature and products of the change, and the things I no longer comprehend, comparing my observations with recollections of the past. Papastergiadis (2006) argues that such forms of social investigation and cultural practice are becoming more common in the field of contemporary art. Artistic practice cannot be separated from walking through and living in city spaces. 'Critical engagement with the specificity of place involves more than using it as a stage for new ideas' (Papastergiadis 2006, p.199).

### **Artistic practice**

'Road Map' (2007), a cartographic artwork on canvas, is my first visual response to a disturbing event that occurred one Saturday night on the Grovedale oval, becoming the analogue stimulus for my research project. My friend was driving me home after a lovely Saturday evening shared at our favourite Spanish restaurant in Geelong. It was one of those chilly nights, punctuated with short bursts of heavy rain and gusty winds. As we drove towards my home we passed groups of young people aimlessly wandering along the darkened streets. They seemed to be coming from the football and school ovals and I assumed they might have attended a social function organised by the local club. Nearing my home, I realised that broken glass was strewn along the street with cans and bottles littering the kerb. Some young people were still standing in clusters around the cars that were parked along the boundary of the oval opposite my house. After much calling out, a taxi arrived and picked up several passengers. Hoping that the inclement weather would motivate the loiterers to move on to their own homes, I hurried inside.

Early on the Sunday morning I arose to take my pets for their usual morning walk. When I opened the side gate I was amazed to find bottles, broken glass and vomit strewn across my front garden and nature strip. Crossing the road, I led the dogs around the broken glass and made our way across the school oval where worse was to come. Hundreds of cans, empty and broken bottles, as shown in the photo, littered the nature strip and school grounds. Their labels indicated that the contents had mainly been vodka or beer. The sight was disgusting.



Photograph: Broken glass on the Grovedale College oval, 2006

My neighbours, like me, were aghast. They said that at about 9.00 pm the previous evening throngs of young people converged on the oval from surrounding streets. Fights had broken out spotlighted by the intermittent flashing of recently installed night-lights. It appeared that someone had broken into the school buildings to gain access to the controls. The police had been called and were dispersing the crowd when I arrived home.

What had happened to initiate this behaviour in these young people? I am told their ages ranged from young teens upwards. After I contacted the College Principal and the President of the Football Club who were 'dealing' with the matter, it was explained to me that a local teenager had sent out an SMS party invitation and estimates indicated that between two hundred and fifty and three hundred teenagers had responded. Later that week the 'Geelong Advertiser' reported:

**'Wild Party spreads to School'**

Smashed glass and debris littered Grovedale College's main oval after a weekend party spun out of control ...it is alleged the party organiser distributed invitations over the Internet, attracting guests from as far as Werribee (*Geelong Advertiser* 10 May 2006, p.10).

I wanted to make an artwork that would help me to comprehend my discoveries on the road outside my home and on the school oval that morning. I wished to develop my project with new media technology, but found the idea of how to begin quite daunting. Since my husband's sudden death I had experienced difficulty in starting new works, so it was quite a challenge. I had just finished reading Umberto Eco's words in his chapter 'Form as Commitment' describing how artists promote a new perception of things and new ways of relating them to each other, enabling us to move more easily in the world (1989, p.136).

I commenced planning using a traditional cartographic technique practised by the artist John Wolseley, who employs it to depict the Australian landscape. Wolseley through his mapping techniques, rubbing sheets of paper over surfaces to make a frottage or an impression, describes his path and shows how space and the changing environment can be understood. Deliberate patterns of mark-making emerge as the plants and bushes

punctuate the surface, registering staccato dots and marks across his paper. The shrubs and grasses were recorded as well as the path of the artist as he moved through the landscape.



John Wolseley *Bush Notations, Curra Moors with Regent Honeyeater* (detail) 2002  
carbonised wood, coloured pencil, watercolour, graphite on paper, 121.0 x 546.5 cm.  
(Grishin 2006, Plate 65, p.191.)

Wolseley proposes that the image of the leaf has relevance to the landscape where it grew; there is a subtle transformation where one system meets another (Grishin 2006). John Wolseley's paths record the shifts and dimension of time from many viewpoints; by combining studies of the here and now with traces of the past, revelation can be experienced.

### ***'Road Map', 2007***

*I prepared five metres of primed canvas, sealing the edges with strips of masking tape to simulate the bike path lines on the road alongside my front kerb. By placing the rolled canvas on the bitumen and working on approximately a metre a day, rubbing it with graphite crayon, I was able to record the uneven, indented road surface. I parked my car in front of my workspace to reduce hazards as I kneeled over it, on the edge of the kerb,*

*wearing my protective rubber kneepads. I initially planned to work in the afternoon because of the reduced traffic but the graphite started to melt in the heat of the day, so I changed to mornings commencing at about 7.45 am. The work took on a life of its own as different patterns began to emerge resulting from the constant shifting of my position and varying pressure of the graphite crayon over the canvas, covering the gritty uneven bitumen. On sunny mornings the crayon became soft and smudgy and blurring occurred when unexpected rain spots drifted down from a sudden shower.*

*I was surprised by the interest of passers-by. Neighbours I hadn't spoken to for years stopped to look and chat, mothers and some fathers walking their children to school asked about the work, and drivers of passing cars even stopped to see what I was doing. Each day after I had packed up, sealing the section of work and leaving it to dry in preparation for the next day's session, I recorded these road conversations.*



Jennifer Kamp *Road Map*, 2007

***Diary of Road Map: conversations and observations, February-March 2007***

*Day 1*

*A man walking a small dog stops to observe me and ask questions.*

*Oncoming passing traffic slows, curious to see what I am doing.*

*Day 2*

*A primary school boy passes bouncing a basketball.*

*Alison, who has been a neighbour for 30 years, stops to ask about my work as she sets out on her regular walk.*

*She tells me about her daughter's planned wedding and what shoes she will wear. A mother taking her primary school children to school with a small foxy dog stops to look and enquire about my work.*

*Day 3*

*Maurice, a neighbour from across the road, comes over to ask what I am doing. I explain that it is about the incident on the oval last year that upset us all. I describe how I will use the canvas rubbing in my art exhibition as part of an installation with the broken glass. He seems very interested.*

*Alison passes again; we talk about the gym at Deakin University that we both attend and how it is being taken over by a commercial provider. We wonder about the future of the staff and our fitness programs.*

*The mother with her two children and dog pass again, say 'hi, how's it going?'*

*Day 4*

*The same boy bouncing the ball passes. Neighbours from the court drive past and wave. Jeff, a neighbour who lives across the road from the school oval, walks past with his grandchildren. He comes back later to look and enquires about my work. Jeff is a member of the Grovedale Football Club and tells me about his hip replacement and knee reconstruction operations. He is off to the pool for a training swim. Alison walks past, says she will go to the gym today, and we must stick with it, I am unsure as to whether she is referring to my work or the gym sessions (perhaps both).*

*I say hi to another mother passing with a small child and Jack Russell terrier.*

*Day 5*

*The weather is overcast with grey skies. There are not so many walkers out today, but there is definitely an increase in the road traffic.*

*A mother taking a small child to school stops for a chat about my work.*

*Alison passes and waves.*

*I notice that varying rubbing patterns have emerged, possibly caused by my shifting position, the uneven road surface, weather changes and variations in pressure due to the shortening of the graphite crayon.*

#### *Day 6*

*A yellow taxi slows down opposite and the driver watches me as I work.*

*The boy bouncing the basketball goes by again. Alison stops to check on my progress.*

*Another lady stops briefly to say hello and look.*

#### *Day 7*

*A purple car stops opposite me and a lady says she has driven past a number of times and is curious about what I am doing. I describe my project and her response is positive, making comments about the educational value.*

*A boy with a schoolbag runs past smiles a hello, says he is running late.*

*Alison stops again to check my canvas and remarks we have had more exchanges in the past few days than over the previous years.*

#### *Day 8 (Saturday)*

*It is a very still morning with the junior football team exercising on the oval across the road. A number of cars are busily dropping off the players.*

*A man who I have not seen before walks around the corner, says hello. He has driven past me every day and wants to know what I am doing. I tell him about my project and how it is based on last year's oval incident. He remembers it well, remarking that his girls were invited to the initial party but chose not to attend. We chat for sometime about children, social expectations, and the use of mobile phones. It seems he has lived in Grovedale for some time and recalls with a smile the 'Brushes & Flushes' business sign my husband and I once had on our front gate. We exchange names and he says he will 'look out' for my exhibition.*

#### *Day 9*

*Traffic slows as it passes me at work. The schoolboy who is usually running late is early this morning and stops and smiles to say hi! Two male walkers pass and also say hello. Not long after, a secondary school student crosses the road to ask what am I doing. Two primary school girls pass and say 'hi'.*

#### *Day 10*

*It has been almost the hottest night on record. The morning is humid with a blustery wind blowing dust everywhere. A lady in a silver car stops, says she has passed me several times this week and am I making an art project?*



*The schoolboy is running late again this morning and waves 'good morning'. Several primary school children stop to look at the artwork and say hello. I ask if they have done rubbing art at school. They reply no.*

*Alison stops again after her walk, says, 'Nearly finished?' We continue a discussion on water restrictions and politics. A young man pushing a baby in a stroller passes looks and smiles. (He was on the other side of the road yesterday.)*

*The graphite crayon is smudging in the humid blustery weather. After reflecting on this section it is obvious that the dust and heat have added a different dimension to the rubbing compared with the work completed on the previous days.*

I continue in my art practice to photograph and video the neighbourhood, observing and recording images wherever I walk. The shopping centres, the playgrounds, roads, paths and houses are the subjects of my suburban landscape enquiry. Their shifting surfaces and changing shapes intrigue me. The transient forms evolving from patterns of light and shade visualise the ambivalence of the landscape I describe in my text and I become conscious of shadows revealed by my computer screen. They infiltrate my narrative, tinged past memories with sadness, and I am trying to pinpoint whether lingering grief at my husband's sudden death from brain cancer has inspired my gaze towards the landscape; has looking inside turned to looking outside?

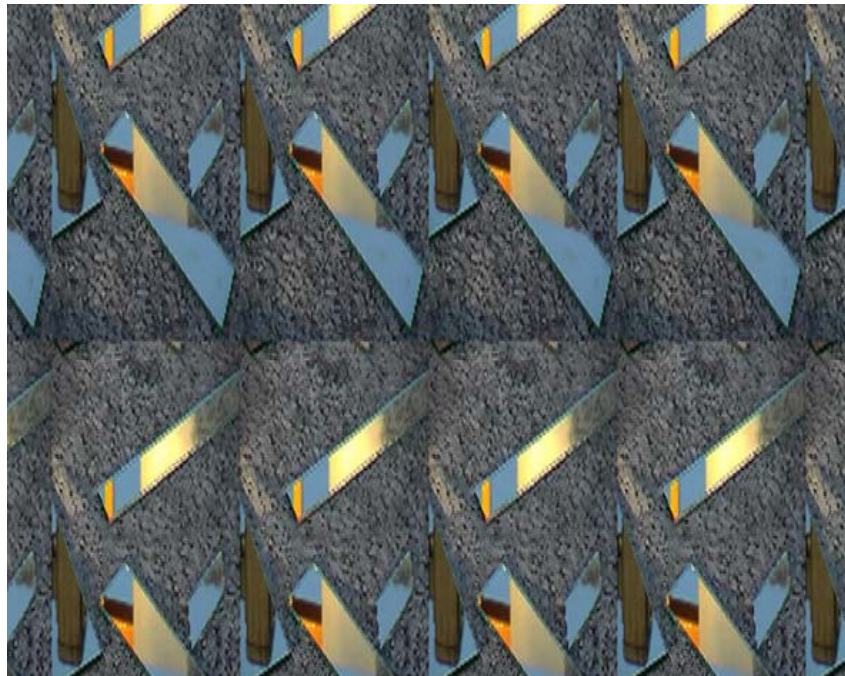
### ***'Road Maps 3', 2009 video***

*I gaze at the photos of my analogue work, the canvas frottage 'Road Map' completed in 2007. The 'Map' is photographed draped over the yellow oval fence, covered with shards of shattered mirror, reflecting an early morning sky. Those who have viewed this photograph say the imagery looks sombre and foreboding; a metaphor for the troubling 'oval event' I described earlier.*

*I import my photos and video film of the work into my computer program, and proceed to 'makeover' the 'Road Map' footage. I offset the formal composition by tilting the canvas on the fence covered with shards and reconfigure segments of imagery to suggest new meanings. I soften the mirrored shards into floating amorphous shapes reflecting prisms of light; in other segments they are multiplied into gridded rows, marching along a gritty bitumen*

*surface that is then diffused with drifting rain spots. The gleaming convoluted forms regroup into new patterns that become enfolding vertical bands sliding in alternating directions.*

*My awareness of sound began to filter through my consciousness when, as I viewed my video recordings, bird songs, the strident crow call and black bird warbles, drifted in and out of my solitary footage. It was then I began to insert splices of sound to resonate with the transient converging shapes of my visual works. In 'Road Maps 3' I incorporated these bird sounds with others that reference my suburban surrounds, the cacophony of the supermarket intermingles with the raucous pub noise that evokes the shattered glass on the road after the oval event.*



Jennifer Kamp *Road Maps 3*, 2009 video still 1



Jennifer Kamp *Road Maps 3*, 2009 video still 2

'Road Map' 2007 as an analogue work marks the beginning of my study and 'Road Maps 3' 2009 visualises the path I have travelled and my empowerment over the landscape.

### **Methodology**

My research project becomes a narrative embedded in the personal because of my participation in this changing landscape. My narrative develops as a painter creates a collage, a collection of visual portraits, ideas assembled, layered, superimposed, sometimes re-arranged, not in a linear mode, but as a bricolage of memory and meaning (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, p.2).

I see my search for a new repertoire of skills using unfamiliar computer software tools as a metaphor for my unfolding research into discovering ways of negotiating and re-engaging with my landscape. As my confidence and understanding of the computer software develops, my imagery becomes more flexible, expanding my range of visual possibilities. Eisner (2002) describes how this growth in technical expertise not only is an acquisition of skills but also reflects a progression in the development of thinking. My empowerment over my environment is regained as my expertise with the new technologies improves. The jumps and starts of my early images are replaced by a controlled rhythm and flow.

## **Theoretical frameworks**

I use current theories and practices in autoethnography to frame my work, and to engage the audience in my process of inquiry and discovery. Ellis and Bochner, in *Composing ethnography: alternative forms of qualitative writing* hold that '[i]nstead of masking our presence, leaving it at the margins, we should make ourselves more personally accountable for our perspectives' (1996, p.15).

The path of my enquiry is an ethnographic study, a set of cycles that is not neat and tidy, because of the strong focus of ethnographic inconsistencies of living in today's world. The process becomes one of jumps and starts, spurts and hesitation, apt metaphors to describe my changing environment and developing visual research. Through my art works, I investigate what phenomena may have contributed to the change in my suburban landscape. The path of my study like the landscape I inhabit becomes ambiguous and perceived threats morph into thrills as I gain confidence in using unfamiliar digital technology to develop interplay between the past and present.

My enquiry combines different voices and tensions to express the edginess that characterises the contemporary landscape. Through the mix of memoir, narrative and theoretical research with practical knowledge, the creative piece becomes part of several knowledge regimes (Milech 2006, p.13). I merge context and methodology, imagery and text with process, to investigate and visualise the subtleties and changing ways of 'being' in today's world.

Through my arts-based research I try to re-contextualise my concerns and reorganise my perception of life around me. Art has the power to initiate creative processes and the imagination, to frame the world in a variety of ways. A subjective awareness of the world and its ambiguities can be explored to notice a particular environment and our place in it: 'the arts are means of exploring our own interior landscape' (Eisner 2002, p.11). We learn to see what we had not noticed, we feel what we had not felt, and we formulate the images for our understanding.

I have just finished reading Tim Winton's latest book *Breath* (2008) about adolescence and the addiction to danger. He speaks about the risk-taking of his youth, the dangers of the surf...the exhilaration of holding one's breath endlessly, an experience that does

something to your body and mind. Winton describes adolescence as a period of unexplained anger, an empire of boredom and domesticity, occupied territory where pointless actions of risk-taking involve drugs, fast cars and sexual misadventure.

More than once since then I've wondered whether the life-threatening high jinks that Loonie and I and Sando and Eva got up to in the years of my adolescence were anything more than a rebellion against the monotony of drawing breath....as a youth you do sense that life renders you powerless by dragging you back to it, breath upon breath in an endless capitulation to biological routine, and that the human will to control is as much about asserting power over your own body as exercising it on others. (Winton 2008, p.41)

This risk-taking, a challenge to suburban safety and domesticity, the political correctness of our socio-environment could be another possible explanation for that Grovedale 'oval event'.

I chart my research path using my art practice as a reflexive reference for framing and developing my ideas, allowing sight and form to shape my way. The process of reflection in action allows the artist to deal with problems and make sense of troubling phenomena. By my nurturing particular kinds of reflexivity, new experiential patterns of thought may form, opening up new vistas. A personal aesthetic framework can show the connectedness between life and art to make perceptible concepts and feelings not previously expressed (Greene 2001). Ideas and images become embarkation points setting the direction for emerging possibilities and new options. Eisner (2002) describes these cognitive processes of representation as ends of discovery, which generate surprise. From surprise, the threat and thrill of unexpected encounters, we are more likely to learn something that makes changing context meaningful.

### **'The shock of the new'**

Bolt (2004) argues the 'shock of the new' is a special type of understanding that is realised through our dealings with the materials and tools of our practice. Working with Heidegger's (1977) notion of 'handlability', she proposes that the artist is open to what emerges in the process of practice. I have previously worked with traditional methods and materials to portray my imagery and my intention is to continue to explore unfamiliar digital processes to develop understanding of the ambiguities and transience of my

contemporary space. Eisner (2002) writes that artists' works must be more than purposeful, that aspiration needs a vehicle. Knowledge and technical skills are necessary to convert imaginative solutions into material existence. To think within a medium requires an understanding of specific techniques to realise the potentialities. Solutions to problems depend on the artist's imagination to visualise the possibilities of the process.



Daniel Crooks *Intersection No.4 (vertical volume)* 2008, digital still

Daniel Crooks' everyday landscape observations are relevant to my study. The daily commute and passage of time are the focus of his 'Timeslice' research project (Simmons 2009). Crooks uses reconfigured cameras to describe a polyocular viewpoint that shows small differences of images from many angles. His rippling images become a metaphor for the everyday linear perception of the cityscape, creating a correspondence between the moving image and the motion of living.

The story as an evocative autoethnography affirms the subjectivity of the researcher and helps me to frame the experience of being and address those experiences related to my work as an artist. My use of different voices represents the complexity and contradictions of my experiences to give the reader the opportunity to identify with similar understandings and discoveries. My art-based research is a renegotiation of past and present space that is not informed by the traditional methodology for scientific research and scholarship, but is played out with my exegesis and artwork drawing on ethnographic data. This methodology is not a method-free zone; it is more implicit than explicit, and

evolves rather than being defined and constrained at the beginning (Martin & Booth 2006). The work focuses on a form of knowing through the self, and the subjective experience of how we live with others in the social and cultural domain. Bachelard writes about 'two kinds of space, intimate space and exterior space, keep encouraging each other, as it were, in their growth' (1994, p.201).

My transdisciplinary explorations of data led me to explore my initial questions about the changing landscape in Grovedale and in the process illuminate issues that I could not anticipate. My research project became an intermingling of slices of time and sound, a 'revealing' as I grappled with the painful memories and emotions associated with my personal loss, as well as knowledge and an insight from an artist's perspective into the changing nature of place. Bachelard speaks of the artist's experience of a 'reverberation', the being of a new poetic image lying dormant in the unconscious (1994, p.xvi). Nelson describes '[t]he sound of shadows and shapes,' how 'the audibility of the shadows' can impinge on artistic forms (2009, p.16). Bochner and Ellis (2003) discuss the importance of art as a mode of enquiry, a new research paradigm. They explore how it creates meanings for the spectator, how it can heal, and what it could inspire or teach. My looking at the past was not to reinvent it, but to understand and value that which is lost. The product of the research becomes not a conclusion but a transgressive activity, a means of inviting others to consider what they could become. Art can reveal an artist's feelings and perceptions, but it can also evoke the recognition of one's own.

## **Bibliography**

Bachelard, G 1994, *The poetics of space*, trans. M Jolas, Beacon Press, Boston.

Bochner, A & Ellis, C 2003, 'An introduction to the arts and narrative research: art as inquiry', *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 4. pp.506-514, viewed 15 March 2009, from <<http://www.sagepub.com>>.

Bolt, B 2004, 'The exegesis and the shock of the new', *Text*, special issue, No.3, April, viewed 27 November 2007, from <<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/>>.

Denzin, K & Lincoln, Y (eds) 1994, 'Introduction: entering the field of qualitative research', *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks, California, Sage, pp.1-17.

Eco, U 1989, *The open work*, trans. A. Cancogni, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Eisner, E 2002, *The arts and the creation of the mind*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London.

- Ellis, C & Bochner, A (eds) 1996, *Composing ethnography: alternative forms of qualitative writing*, Walnut Creek, California, AltaMira Press.
- Greene, M 2001, *Variations on a blue guitar: the Lincoln Center Institute lectures on aesthetic education*, Teachers College Press, New York.
- Grishin, S 2006, *John Wolseley Land Marks 11*, rev. edn. Craftsman House, Thames & Hudson, Melbourne.
- Heidegger, M 1977, *The question concerning technology and other essays*, trans. W Lovitt, Harper & Row, New York.
- Martin, E & Booth, J (eds) 2006, *Art-based research: a proper thesis?* Common Ground Publishing in association with Victoria University, Melbourne.
- Milech, B H 2006, 'The critical artist' in Martin E & Booth J (eds), *Art-based research: a proper thesis?*, Common Ground Publishing in association with Victoria University, Melbourne, pp.1-19.
- Nelson, R 2009, 'The sound of shadows and shapes', *The Age*, 29 April, p.16.
- Papastergiadis, N 2006, *Spatial aesthetics: art, place and the everyday*, Rivers Oram Press, London.
- Simmons, L 2009, 'Daniel Crooks: the future of the past', *Artlink*, vol.29, no.1, pp.20-27.
- Winton, T 2008, *Breath*, Hamish Hamilton, Penguin Books, Camberwell, Victoria.