

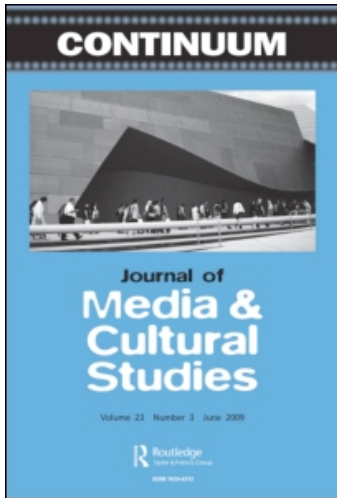
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# Off Road Show: Techno, Protest and Feral Theatre<sup>1</sup>

Graham St John

## Funky Arsenal

It is Sydney 1998 and, ‘like some crazed pirate galleon on wheels’, a strange bus was seen making its way around the city. Equipped with a PA and ‘DJ booth’ facing out from its rear hatch, the Peace Bus was reported to ‘broadside renegade dance floors or earth destroying mining companies, with a barrage of sonic arsenal’. The ‘steel pulse of protest techno’ was heard from speakers positioned in the luggage hatches, as the bus made its way around Sydney ‘rattling people’s cappuccino cups’. The enthusiastic report concluded: ‘If this is a war for the future of Australia then this brightly coloured tank is there firing a funky arsenal designed to activate people into joining the growing movement for a more sustainable future.’<sup>2</sup> Committed to a nuclear-free Australia, the Ohms not Bombs techno-circus was in the driver’s seat. Likened to ‘stormtroopers spearheading a generation’s demands’ that their continent’s ecosystems be safeguarded from the radioactive perils of the nuclear industry (Daly, 1999, p. 9), Ohms were multimedia activists mobilizing for a sonic assault on the comfort zones of the nation’s psyche. But as the interventions of these and other techno-protagonists would illustrate, there was more than a nuclear-free future at stake. Impacted by a DiY activist sensibility that can be traced back to the 1960s, appropriating new and alternative technologies and operating mobile events, these young *technomad* pioneers were implicated in a movement for legitimate presence and belonging in post-settler Australia. Exploring the characteristics of a ‘groovement’ (Strong, 1994) in evidence

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from the early 1990s, the article tracks the ‘intimate’ and ‘tactical’ aesthetics of a counter-colonial momentum.

From the late 1990s, an alternative milieu would make itself visible, was making a noise, and was determined to make a difference. Reclaiming streets and occupying corporate headquarters, exposing greed, corruption and hypocrisy through outrageous means, causing ‘tactical embarrassment’, Australian youth—and indeed youth globally (see Notes from Nowhere, 2003)—were confronting the operations of capital and state. Said to be a legacy of ‘the age of the political gimmick’, which Sean Scalmer (2002, p. 7) identifies as the 1960s, ‘theatrical political activity’ was mounted to draw major media, and thus public, attention to the dangerous repercussions of unchecked corporate behaviour and the irresponsible machinations of government. Inheriting the 1960s conflation of art and politics, from theatrical counter-claims to staged disruption, counter-spectacles and ‘culture jams’ would become ubiquitous features of the contemporary social and political landscape of the 1990s, a circumstance enhanced by the advancements and availability of new cyber and audio-visual technologies. Today, music, mobility and new communications technology augment a playful politics—a tactical media. While the networking, educational and organizational capabilities of the Internet were becoming clearly evident in a period (the late 1990s) that Naomi Klein (2000) called the ‘new resistance’ (see Lovink, 2002), the persistence of what Richard Schechner (1992, p. 104) identifies as ‘direct theatre’—an embodied, theatrical, activism—informs the current discussion. This article charts the course of a ‘miraculous activism’<sup>3</sup> which, in the late 1990s, was pulled into the orbit of a rapidly approaching millennium, and drawn by the continent’s desert interior. While the year 2000 would activate a centripetal movement, the remote outback was having an alluring effect on coastal inhabitants—as it has done since European settlement (see Haynes, 1998; Tacey, 1995). But while making the ‘journey to the centre’ is a legacy for settler Australians, the contemporary trek (demonstrated, as will be shown, by Earthdream2000) seemed to be activated by a desire for post-settler legitimacy—the product of ecological and revisionist sensitivities which have seen young Australians respond to a ‘calling’ to *country*. This outback-bound momentum would be enabled through the harnessing of a range of new media technologies and techniques integral to a performative politics which flowered in the desert in 2000.

Including fashion, theatre, books, zines, Websites, e-lists and e-forums, digital audio and video and micro-radio, ‘intimate media’ are practical enablers of what Hakim Bey embraced as ‘radical conviviality’—an *immediate* social ‘context of freedom of self and other in physical proximity and mutual aid’ (1991a). That such micro-media facilitate immediate community can be understood with the assistance of ‘Immediatism’, a project that Bey asserted in an effort to overcome ‘not individuality *per se*, but rather the addiction to bitter loneliness which characterizes consciousness in the 20th century’ (1994, p. 14). Under ‘too-Late Capitalism’, according to Bey, the populace risk immiseration and despair through their separation from others—through *mediation*. By contrast to a major public media demanding little imaginative participation and commodifying the human subject (especially commercial TV networks, major

newspapers), Bey proposed that 'intimate media' assist in the realization of the immanently 'Social'—an autonomy which can be achieved only in the direct presence of others. Thus small press, community radio, cable public access video, CDs and cassette tapes, the Internet, could enable a free association of individuals—non-authoritarian and non-hierarchical.<sup>4</sup> In such associations, which may approximate Bey's 'temporary autonomous zone' (or TAZ, 1991b), the most intimate medium is the human body itself—'the least mediated of all media' (Bey, 1994, p. 10). Facilitating that which Maffesoli (1996) identifies as 'empathetic sociality', enabling the fluid and festal associations thought to characterize Western culture since the Second World War, such might also be referred to as 'tribal' media.

The counter-hegemonic techno-tribes I have in mind use intimate media and the social aesthetic of the dance party TAZ as a means of (re)producing 'empathetic sociality'—to make, or remake, the social. Yet, provocative and tactical, the same media are deployed to *make a spectacle*. For nomads intervening in and exposing the affairs of state and capital, a range of media are employed to rupture existing sites, institutions and corporations, to create an opening to heterogeneity, to generate dialogue with others, to 'make a difference'. This annexing and subversion of the 'proper places' of power resembles the manipulative 'tactical' politics of the everyday outlined by de Certeau (1986), and the mobile, responsive and flexible character of Scalmer's theatrical interventionists (2002, pp. 61–62). Since they have adopted and repurposed media technologies and techniques rather than simply 'withdraw from the area of simulation' (Bey, 1991b, p. 102), they have taken to *being the media*.<sup>5</sup> And the dance party, the 'happening', the TAZ, the festival—or indeed the 'protestival'<sup>6</sup>—is an expressive instrument of protest.

Ferals are a flamboyant protest milieu associated with Australian environmental and indigenous rights activism whose character exemplifies this simultaneity of intimate and tactical media aesthetics. As a DiY milieu adopting new music and media in the commitment towards autonomy, voluntarism, ecological sustainability, social justice and human rights, much is owed to developments in the United Kingdom (see McKay, 1998) and the United States.<sup>7</sup> Style, appearance and performance seem to possess universal import within youth (sub)cultures—both as media of identification and as an expression of difference. Within hippie counterculture an 'anti-disciplinary' protest style (Stephens, 1998) was adopted as an attempt to establish distinction from both the parent culture ('the system') and the 'old left' (organizers, Marxists and 'revolutionaries'). Within punk milieus, a confrontational style would be adopted as a signifier of both belonging (to their milieu) and not-belonging (to the parent culture, or the despised hippy). Within rave, a retrograde, ironic or juvenile affectation performed a similar purpose (albeit embracing the image of the hippy). While all such dispositions have carried over into the feral milieu, as a counter-colonial formation, an aesthetic is harnessed not merely in the interests of *being different* but in the effort to *make a difference*. Resonating with Deleuze & Guattari's (1986, p. 4) nomad who might 'deterritorialize oneself by renouncing, by going elsewhere' or 'deterritorialize the enemy by shattering his territory from within', DiY milieus adopt, share and repurpose

media to communicate their difference amongst themselves (to reaffirm marginal identity) *and* to others (to alter social and political circumstance). The history of youth (sub)cultures demonstrates a desire for the spectacular result. Yet while punk was (and arguably remains) a theatre of refusal, and rave a theatre of disappearance (from parents, the state, and the major media), complicating its desire to 'go elsewhere', feral evinces a direct-action theatre. And while this milieu retains the ludic imagination exalted by countercultural forebears, recognizing the 'authority' of indigenes and ecological imperatives suggests that duty/obligation may also be at work. Employing a range of visual and sonic media, Australian environmental and indigenous rights activists have harnessed a tactical aesthetic in their fight for country.

### **Technomad Counterculture: Mutate and Survive**

The Australian techno-circus derives from a UK techno sound system development, itself evolved from an émigré Caribbean tradition rooted in Jamaican dancehall. From the 1940s, Kingston 'sound men' were experimenting with record players, amplifiers, rare black American records (especially R & B) and the extemporaneous MC (initially also the 'selector' or DJ) to mount a music-dance experience with origins in the slave era. As a vehicle for dancehall, the sound system would become a medium for amplifying local identity. Norman Stolzoff (2000, p. 7) observes that dancehall, more than just a means to survive racism, poverty and exploitation, is a cultural 'communication centre'. Not simply a 'refuge', it is 'the centre of the ghetto youth's lifeworld—a place for enjoyment, cultural expression and creativity, and spiritual renewal'. As Enda Murray (2001, p. 60) points out, these Jamaicans were 'cannibalising radios to make monster sound systems and shaping a type of electric folk music for a new generation'. As Jamaicans migrated to London in the 1960s and 1970s, the innovative repurposing of new audio technologies continued, with the practice later adopted by techno sound system collectives. Influenced by the dub reggae systems of an increasingly politicized second-generation black British youth, these systems would be infused with punk, traveller and, from the late 1980s, electronic dance music cultures. The cooperative tradition of the black systems was suited to networks of sonic squatters holding discretely organized (free) parties in disused warehouse spaces and at outdoor sites (Chan, 1999; Murray, 2001; Rietveld, 1998; St John, 2001b).

From Jamaica to London, dancehall to techno, the sound system would be an intimate, and progressively mobile, media assemblage. Many community sounds systems like DiY and Luton's Exodus mobilized in the early 1990s, giving life to 'true desires—erotic, gustatory, olfactory, musical, aesthetic, psychic, and spiritual' (Bey, 1991a). They questioned authority and activated radical conviviality. An 'exodus' trope conveyed a strong desire to escape the confines of the city and British nationalism, a longing for difference satisfied on the road to other places and other times, and in 'tribes' succeeding from the parent culture. With the 1994 Criminal Justice Act, the United Kingdom was no longer regarded as a suitable landscape within which to remain mobile, and 'the traveling circus of the late 20th century'

(Garner, in Rietveld, 1998, p. 251) would make the physical exodus from Britain to transport a cooperative techno-culture around the globe. Forming in 1991 with the slogan 'make some fucking noise', London's Spiral Tribe would become the trailblazers of an international travelling techno-circus, whose sites (such as the European 'teknivals') contextualized techno-culture's performance to itself—reaffirming a techno-punk identity. Describing their relentless performance, one observer saw the Spirals 'promising something and then screaming ultrasonic violent chaos. ... Rhythms careering forward piling into the future, bellowing into the sky, and then a voice sampled YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DEALING WITH' (Stroud, 1994). Spiral Tribe would have a large influence on Glasgow's Desert Storm who, with their 'beats not bullets' sensibility, formed during the 1991 Gulf War. Like the Spirals, Desert Storm displayed a preference for camouflage netting, transporting themselves in 'rapid development vehicles' and dressing in khaki and black. According to Alan Lodge, 'Desert Storm gigs feel like they are taking place in a bunker with a civil war going on outside. The visual impact of a Desert Storm gig drives home the concept of a revolutionary culture boiling under the surface of modern Britain.' In 1994 this affected 'war machine' joined a worker's aid convoy to Tusla in Bosnia. According to member James:

We started playing on the move and we had thousands of people following us through the streets in two foot snow and minus ten degrees. We played one techno record with a chorus that went 'Get going to the beat of a Drum BANG!' and all the soldiers fired their AK-47s in the air 'kakakakaka' and it was such a fucking buzz it was incredible. We played the same record about ten times. At one point a policeman came up to tell us to turn the volume up, but to turn off some of our lights as we were attracting shellfire. The frontline was only ten kilometres away.<sup>8</sup>

Part of a subterranean cultural vanguard humping techno to the front lines, and orchestrating tactical dance floors, sound systems were beginning to conduct international cultural work. As Danny from Desert Storm stated, 'what we do is a cultural gift from the youth of Britain to the youth of Bosnia'. A new role for these cultural 'communication centres' was being forged. Like traditional circus spectacles, the techno-circus would become a critical means of entertaining and communicating with populations across and outside of Europe. Yet, unlike the traditional circus, their spectacular conviviality and compassionate interventions would potentiate significant intercultural outcomes.<sup>9</sup>

Undoubtedly the most influential and inspirational force in this transnational techno-circus nomadology was the Mutoid Waste Co. Emerging in London in 1983/1984, and thrust headlong into the 'mutation and creative recycling of waste materials into sculptural and artistic form', the Mutoids would become a legendary 'recycledelic' industrial sculpture collective. Prior to and during the emergence of the acid house scene, Mutoid warehouse parties at the old Coach Station at King's Cross were cast as 'more post-apocalyptic than the post-apocalypse' (Cooke, 2001, p. 136), reminiscent, for Alan Lodge, of something between 'Mad Max, Judge Dread and Strontium Dog'.<sup>10</sup> Imaginative installation and pyrotechnic artists whose remixing of

found objects was analogous to the practice of the punk and electronic artists with whom they worked, co-founder Robin Cooke and his associates became well known for lateral thinking on grand scales.<sup>11</sup> In the 1980s, the prospect of nuclear Armageddon gave shape to the artistic lifestyle of the Mutoids, who had a near obsession with a post-apocalyptic Mad Max aesthetic. 'Mutate and Survive'—a rephrasing of the UK Nuclear Disarmament Party slogan 'Protest and Survive'—became a Mutoid mantra conveying dissatisfaction with conventional forms of protest which Cooke thought ineffectual. Rather than mounting direct assaults on power, mechanical sculptors and creative recyclers would offer an aesthetic of tactical resistance. This was a progressive and indirect style of activism mutating 'the refuse of modern culture into radical creations that transcend the traditional boundaries of art and protest' (Taylor, 1999, p. 9). Via salvage-Situationism and the revivifying of obsolescence, the Mutoids recruited machines of death and destruction for radical assaults on the senses, for the penetration of the marvellous into the everyday. Furnishing dance TAZ with anthropomorphic engines and mutated bike parts, raising subterranean spaces of difference where all became a spectacle to each other, they incited fellowship and inspired the imagination.

Influenced by Britain's New Age Traveller legacy, in the early 1980s Cooke envisioned a 'road show consisting of mutated personnel and vehicles'. While the dream was realized in Mutoid adventures in Europe, for Cooke, the Australian outback, and Uluru in particular, would become the focal point for a millennial corroboree called Earthdream2000. That Cooke was drawn to the outback had much to do with the compelling survivalist aesthetic and modified vehicles of Mad Max. Eventually an annual trek to the Australian interior incorporating a series of dance parties or 'corroborees', Earthdream would attract a cavalcade of expatriate and local dissidents. It would find appeal among young people populating the edge of the continent and raised in a climate of expectation and failed policy; those exposed to revisionist histories and the alternative 'truths' of settlement who felt obliged to connect with indigenous country and culture in an intentional and persistent pattern unrivalled by coastal events. As Cooke would state: 'we're going to be able to reach parts within the individual make up of people that the normal one-off dance party would never even start to touch' (in Kenobi, 2000, p. 7). In the process, the Earthdream circus would be a major catalyst for innovative intimate and tactical media developments.

### Desert Rats and 'Doofumentaries'

While this legacy of endurance, generosity and spectacular transgression influenced a local cohort, the lines were shifting and tactics were modified. Allying with aggrieved indigenes in a postcolonizing 'fight for country', from a Mad Max 'road warrior' whose transgression knew 'no boundaries' (see Dearling & Handley, 1998) to an 'eco-warrior' familiar with cultural and physical boundaries as a matter of principle, Earthdream was a catalyst for *aesthetic terra-ism*. But let us look at how this

intervention came about. From the early 1990s Sydney was a centre of cooperative techno, or 'technorganic', experiments in Australia. The first communal sound system, a small PA, was purchased by the Jellyheads, an anarcho-punk collective, members of which began operating free parties under the name 'Vibe Tribe' (or 'Circus Vibe Tribe') in 1993. Fusing anarcho-punk and fluro-techno, Vibe Tribe was a party juggernaut opposed to the commercial exploitation of electronic music and the privatization of inner-city space. These self-identified 'new rave travellers' were enablers of the techno-communitas or 'doof' (St John, 2001b; Luckman, 2003), and their techno-circus was critical to an emergent arts-activist scene that saw acid techno (and later rap) music adopted by a post-rave counterculture. Since the techno (electro-music) and feral (eco-activist) 'cross-over' had transpired at least as early as Melbourne's Imagineer parties in 1991 (Liguz, 1998, p. 6; St John, 2001c), techno was already gaining credence within environmental direct action circles. Described as 'events in which people of all races, sexualities and cultural backgrounds can come together', the free (illegal) open air 'multimedia events' in Sydney Park were instrumental doofs combining music, art, video, performance, circus skills and interactive installation (Strong, 2001, p. 74). Adopting increasingly accessible audio hardware (from DAT to 303 to samplers and synthesizers), and feeding provocative vocal samples into a live mix producing what Pete Strong referred to as 'agit-house', Vibe Tribe's principle techno protagonists, Non Bossy Posse, instigated a tradition of promoting local political issues in the context of cutting-edge music performances. And with the assistance of experimental video performance group Subvertigo (formed in 1992 by John Jacobs), image and filmic montage would accompany the sonic manifesto. The audio-visual experimentation mutated into what Strong dubbed the mobile 'doofumentary'—an innovative media assemblage, as tactical as it was convivial. Invoking the legacy of European 'circus tribes' where new anarchist formations had 'embraced the rise of electronic music fusing liberationist politics with technology' (Strong, 1994), Vibe Tribe's ambition was to mobilize a non-profit, non-waged travelling circus incorporating performance art, installations and music. By the mid-1990s, the Byron Bay 'rainbow region' would be both a source and destination for talent:

We are now in a position of overflowing our warehouses, beaches etc with a totally awesome array of raver/freak—hybrid geek humanoids who have come to expect nothing less than a wild frolic—Razzamatizzical glitter infested cabaret—from sequins to sequencers, Queer friendly and a hard live commitment to our dance politics.<sup>12</sup>

In the latter half of the 1990s, 'dance politics' became concomitant with a struggle for environmental and indigenous justice issues, and the 'overflow' was destined for the outback. But the intra-continental techno-circus idea awaited Ohms not Bombs to come alive.

The brainchild of Strong, Ohms is a mobile doof collective that formed in 1995 to catalyse a movement for a nuclear-free future and sovereignty for indigenous

Australians.<sup>13</sup> Initially consisting of around 20 musicians, artists and activists, the Ohms project was infused with the techno millennial sensibility of the early rave scene (St John, 2004). When they acquired an old State Transit bus (the 'Omnibus') renovated to tour the continent, commentators recalled the American transcontinental ramblings of the proto-hippy electro-tribal Merry Pranksters three decades earlier (Daly, 1999, p. 9). But while there may have been similar aspirations to produce an alternative and parallel 'movie' to that of the nation, and while banks of electronic audio-visual equipment and outrageous street performance have been par for the course, this was no 'Acid Test'. Ohms would create informative 'doofumentaries' consisting of a syncopated audio-visual apparatus and information stalls at doofs communicating anti-nuclear and other ecological and social justice issues. While Ken Kesey's day-glo school bus 'Further' signified the distance its passengers were willing to go in their psychedelic odyssey, with 'Earth Defender' painted along its side panels, the Omnibus accommodated a self-identified 'travelling circus of resistance'. Ohms was driven by Strong's vision of tapping the party 'vibe' for extra-party purposes: 'unity is strength, together we can dismantle oppression, let's have the NRG we have developed on the dancefloor and use it to mutate the state, derail the earth destroying system. By tuning our funky technology to the cycles of our Earth's ecology we can crossfade towards a brighter future for all' (Strong & Strong, 2000). And with a head full of steam for the outback, the Ohms mission became 'a noughties version of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters meets a Russian Revolution propaganda train meets Priscilla, Queen of the Desert!' (Murray, 2001, p. 67). The maiden voyage was Dig the Sounds Not Uranium, a tour which in 1998 saw the Omnibus and a crew of 13 take a PA, digital cameras and live techno equipment around Australia to throw 30 events (parties, actions, music workshops) over four months before achieving its destination: Jabiluka uranium mine in Kakadu National Park.<sup>14</sup> Dig the Sounds was a travelling multimedia sound system destined to transmit a 'liberationist message and showcase local and touring musicians and artists'. The 'Mobile Autonomous Zone' would 'drum up opposition' to Jabiluka, 'catalyse further actions and ideas about breaking the nuclear cycle locally and globally', and 'actively promote grassroots reconciliation respecting the original people of the land' (*Sporadical*, 5, 1998, p. 8). Resembling a folk-singing tradition, Ohms' protest techno would serve the purpose of uniting individuals and groups around a cause, around the will to make a difference.

The 'doofumentary' provided an inspiration for the Labrats alternative energy sound system. With a solar-powered PA and a wind-powered cinema hauled by a van with an engine converted to run on vegetable ('veggie') oil, Labrats are a unique and dynamic presence in the emergence of the Australian sound system.<sup>15</sup> Street performer, cartoonist and 'human techno beat-box' Izzy Brown, and trained geologist, funk, reggae and dub DJ-producer Marc Peckham met in 1998 at Jabiluka where they were exposed to the Ohms road show and combined to entertain and enthuse fellow campaigners. With Brown and Peckham subsequently responding to Arabunna elder Kevin Buzzacott's call for assistance, the Labrats would mobilize to support his opposition to Western Mining Corporation (WMC) in outback

South Australia—joining the Keepers of Lake Eyre, 180 km north of Roxby Downs.<sup>16</sup> Adopting a direct dance-activism and jacking into sustainable power sources, they would constitute the soundest system yet seen. As they assert, the solar-powered sound system pulled ‘the party scene back to its roots as a revolutionary force of beats and breaks, bleeps and squeaks in the face of an authority that is destroying our environment and the people that depend on it for their survival’ (Brown & Peckham, 2001, p. 92). Developing a multimedia assemblage inflected with funk, hip hop and techno traditions, and using cut up and sampling techniques, the Labrats have communicated their antagonism with Energy Resources of Australia Ltd (ERA), WMC and other bio-developers, and promoted their living alternative to audiences in metropolitan centres Australia-wide.<sup>17</sup> The message is principally amplified via their hip hop/techno formation Combat Wombat, whose debut album *Labrats Solar Powered Sound System* was released in 2002.<sup>18</sup> While the rebellious sensibility found in hip hop is often superficial in practice, as a tactical outfit Combat Wombat is decidedly counter-hegemonic. Marc looks to ‘message rap’ like Public Enemy’s ‘Fight the Power’ to explain: ‘I remember when I first heard that song it felt like our generation was invincible and capable of anything. All I could think of was, why do they keep calling our generation, generation x, when actually we’re generation y. . . . Why? Because we’re the one’s asking the questions’. But they don’t just ask the questions, they claim to ‘offer a solution’.<sup>19</sup> While political avant-garde projects are uncommon to a scene ‘espousing decidedly conservative discourses of nationalism and community’ (Maxwell, 2003, p. 16) and while they are largely removed from hip hop’s—or, for that matter, dancehall’s—machismo, Combat Wombat gives voice to that which is a virtual given in that culture: an identification with place. In most urban hip hop the ghettos, neighbourhoods or the suburbs are defended turf—the place and its occupants ‘represented’ as a ‘true’ (appropriate, committed) expression of the arts of hip hop (Maxwell, 2003, p. 10). But the ‘place’ that Combat Wombat ‘represents’ and defends is the beleaguered country itself. Aboriginal custodians (the only real authority they respect) call upon them to assist—to, as Kevin Buzzacott asks, ‘say sorry to country’ through action. Via rapping and other tactical media (such as audio digital samples, graffiti, film, alternative energy workshops, etc.) they have responded.

### **Moving Spectacle: Earthdream**

By 2000, the technomad counterculture was gaining familiarity with the country’s interior, travelling through it, participating in it, dancing on it. It was establishing contact and alliances with indigenous custodians in remote areas—in regions where ecology and culture are under threat. And as the millennium approached, these techno-tribes were setting their sights on a major outback convergence: Earthdream2000. Ohms not Bombs, Labrats and the UK’s Bedlam<sup>20</sup> would be in the vanguard of this outback odyssey which saw actions mounted and performances staged in solidarity with Aboriginal people throughout Central Australia and the Northern Territory for over five months (May–October 2000). It was widely

rumoured that Mad Max IV would be shot at Coober Pedy, coinciding with Earthdream's presence there, providing temporary work for more than a few travellers (as extras). Billed as bigger than Mad Max—or 'Madder than Max', the cult hero had infiltrated the consciousness of travellers.<sup>21</sup> In the decade he had been living in Australia, Earthdream imagineer Robin Cooke sought permission from those he regarded as the 'proper authorities' to travel through, and celebrate, in the outback. In September 1997, he met Arabunna brothers Kevin Buzzacott and Ronnie and Reggie Dodd at Roxstop, an anti-nuclear industry desert action and music festival at Roxby Downs. Extending his hand to non-Arabunna to join his 'Coming Home' camp at Lake Eyre South, Buzzacott welcomed Earthdream.<sup>22</sup> Responding to the calls of both Robin Cooke and Kevin Buzzacott, sound system crews, eco-radical collectives, new spiritualists and other artists and performers would spiral up the spine of the continent—holding meetings, corroborees and actions with locals along the way. Multimedia potlatch machines, sound systems and other performers were carriers of the party gift. Bearing audio-visual equipment and fire-art technology, Bedlam, Ohms not Bombs, Labrats and Mutoid Waste held an intercultural dance party at Alberrie Creek on the Oodnadatta Track just east from Lake Eyre South. But while Cooke and helpers prepared convivial dance floors at Alberrie Creek, Coober Pedy, Alice Springs, Darwin and other locations (on Aboriginal land with permission throughout), my attention is drawn specifically to a tactical performance aesthetic catalysed by Earthdream, a *feral theatre* manifesting in the desert.

As stated, the sound systems were integral to this. Having been committed to country in outback South Australia where Aboriginal communities were battling two uranium mining operations,<sup>23</sup> the Labrats would be a source of inspiration for Earthdream participants. As Izzy reported:

at the gates of Roxby Downs uranium mine we showed footage of the Chernobyl disaster to mine workers. We had a debut screening of the Beverley uranium mine documentary *Emu Spew* projected onto the side of the Bedlam sound system truck in the clay pans near the infamous Pine Gap. Yet perhaps our biggest Earthdream home movie screening happened when *Showdown in Seattle* and a Sydney Reclaim the Streets doco were projected onto the giant silver screen of an abandoned drive in movie cinema on the outskirts of Alice Springs. (Brown & Peckham, 2001, p. 93)

Joining the Labrats at Buzzacott's Keepers of Lake Eyre camp, where they had travelled in 1999, Ohms not Bombs returned to the outback aboard the Peace Bus. Strong understood Earthdream to be a focal point for what he outlines as 'a united response to the government's continued assault on the environment, on youth, the unions and the traditional Aboriginal people of this country' (*Sporadical*, Apr. 1999, p. 3). Soon afterwards, Buzzacott, Labrats and Ohms would combine to orchestrate a four-day Reclaim the Streets style protest enclave at WMC's Olympic Dam mine at Roxby Downs 180 kilometres to the south. The Peace Bus and the urban camouflaged van Marc referred to as a 'Dis-army Diprotodon' parked in opposing positions on the road, providing bunkers for rival MCs to perform 'rhyme battles', and a context for DJs to launch tracks overlaid with provocative audio samples.<sup>24</sup>

A source of solidarity for its participants, this DiY multimedia event was also a context for extraordinary 'guerrilla theatre'. Drawing on a pool of talented artists and performers present, a theatrical production was improvised and performed at the mine's gates for an audience of police and protesters. The cabaret style circus show told a story of greed and corruption unleashing a sinister menace on the world. Charging these forces with 'crimes against humanity', an 'intergalactic superhero' arrived to save humanity and vanquish the forces of evil. But since the egoic 'saviour' reacted violently and aggressively (rather than 'through love'), there would be no real resolution. Dramatizing corporate greed, land dispossession, radiation sickness and the struggle to retain a non-violent activism, the Half Life Theatre Company went on to perform for school children, miners, Aboriginal communities and non-Aboriginal audiences. Endearingly regarded as 'feral theatre', this off road show was a performative dialogue with the wider community. Since it was designed to 'draw in, involve and challenge the public observer' rather than merely occasion the 'emblematic performance of group membership', the guerrilla performance resembled a contemporary form of street protest known as Reclaim the Streets (Szerszynski, 1999, p. 221). As it toured north and as more Earthdream participants (and new props and potential characters) arrived or were recruited, and others left, the show mutated. But while the cast changed regularly, the ecology of issues dramatized—radioactivity, ecological degradation and land dispossession—endured. In June, performers cobbled together shows punctuating a doof for Coober Pedy locals held outside the town. As further performances were mounted in Alice Springs, Katherine, the Darwin Fringe Festival and East Timor, and as agit-house and political hip hop was amplified and zines produced, Earthdream was manifesting quite an identity.<sup>25</sup> By 2001, Earthdream theatre influenced local and European productions.<sup>26</sup>

Far from mere entertainment, the Earthdream2000 theatre would inspire an interactive approach involving art and music workshops run in remote communities desperately requiring new tactics of youth re-engagement. Travellers discovered for themselves the many social problems suffered by remote Aboriginal communities, teenage petrol sniffing not the least of them. Such was discovered by a crew who improvised circus and music shows for around 80 people (mostly kids) at Inmanpa near Mt Ebenezer in the Northern Territory after the Bedlam truck sought repairs there on 14 June 2000 en route to Uluru. Another crew would later spend four days painting murals and playing music with Walpiri kids at Yuendumu. As Izzy explains, in 2000 a small group of artists and performers worked with:

the anti petrol sniffing program in Yuendumu in the Tanami desert, where we ran hip hop workshops and a roller disco, painted a mural on the youth centre and screened the local favourite, *Bush Mechanics*. It was pretty wild. Some of the kids had never seen records before and were keen to use them as frisbees. In an attempt at damage control we played music in a cage in the youth centre . . . The sniffers found our fuel tank, but to their dismay only found veggie oil and decided to smash our window instead—all part of the excitement in front of the roller disco. (Brown & Peckham, 2001, p. 106)

Interactive adventures with Aboriginal youth in remote communities during Earthdream would inspire tours in subsequent years as Labrats collaborated with artists from Circus Boom, a collective of musicians and performers specializing in youth development. According to journalist James Norman (2003), equipped with video camera, audio instruments and computers, these artists were ‘combining anthropology and hip hop to make reconciliation with a beat’. On their DesertED tours, Circus Boom members journeyed to Alice Springs and the remote Western Desert communities of Kintore and Papunya in veggie oil vehicles in 2002 and 2003 where they conducted workshops (e.g. stilt walking, face painting and hip hop) in a region where petrol sniffing and alcohol abuse are rife. For Marc (in Norman, 2003), it was ‘heart breaking . . . to see kids walking round in big mobs with buckets of petrol attached permanently to their faces . . . You can try to talk to them but they just rock back and forth and laugh at you.’ Encountering such destructive behaviour inspired efforts to ‘provide an alternative . . . an empowering creative outlet through music and art, and also a documentation of a culture in crisis.’<sup>27</sup> Describing Circus Boom’s arrival at Kintore, Marc states further: ‘they haven’t seen mob like us before. When we go out there with a full set up, big speakers and the movie set up, they get so excited . . . They jump over the car going wild, grabbing you and you’ve got three kids on your shoulders and your arms, and they’re pulling your hair and showing you their favourite camel’ (in Middlemast, 2004). And distinguishing the experience, Izzy recalls: ‘Aboriginal Michael Jacksons moon-walking through the discarded rubbish piles, an absolutely heaving dance floor of under-12s shaking their asses like an African lambada and some keen local DJs. It had more vibe than a thousand rave parties’ (in Norman, 2003).

### Madder than Max

An innovative ‘journey to the centre’, the inaugural Earthdream was a cultural mission consisting of intimate and tactical performance. While dance parties would be a primary medium for group identification and intercultural rapprochement, *in situ* ‘doofumentaries’, theatrical productions and footage projected at a disused drive-in near Alice Springs were important means of telling stories, of mediating Earthdream2000, as it happened, to those who participated in its production. The multi-mediation of direct experience, recorded, remembered, remixed, edited and updated using intimate media would affirm collective memory, galvanizing an imagined community. On and off the road—on stage, on radio and in print—one could see, hear and read about it. At the same time, guerrilla theatre and circus workshops represented counter-colonial incursions on the threat to country. A response to the ‘call’ for assistance from indigenous communities, such initiatives were a means of expressing empathy with beleaguered culture and country in remote regions, and performing dialogue with the wider community regarding the threat to those communities. While the early mobile techno-punks, much like their champion Mad Max, respected no authority other than that of the road itself, their descendants

were seeking a respectful relationship with indigenous land and people. In this latter climate, sound systems had become media-assemblages that were as tactical as they were convivial. Their attachment to country would be signified by a commitment to intervene in its despoliation, and their compassion for culture illustrated by efforts at re-engagement. Venturing outside the post-apocalyptic narrative, Earthdream would revise the script of the UK technomad exodus. Rather than becoming 'rulers' of a radioactive 'wasteland' (as with *Mad Max*), seeking to thwart a future delivered by reckless governmentality, working with Aboriginal peoples and employing 'direct theatre', new actors are implicated in a struggle for post-settler presence.

## Notes

- [1] Many thanks to Graeme Turner for comments he provided on an earlier draft.
- [2] [http://www.graffitihalloffame.com/campaign\\_trail.htm](http://www.graffitihalloffame.com/campaign_trail.htm)
- [3] A track on *Combat Wombat's* debut album. See below for discussion of *Combat Wombat*.
- [4] Bey was writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s. With its roots in Situationism, Immediatism is essentially an 'outsider art' movement seeking to eliminate 'the gulf between the production and consumption of art'. It reaffirms the creative power of everyday life by withdrawing from the world of the market and commoditization of art (1994, p. 8). 'Intimate media' is discussed in 'Media hex: the occult assault on institutions' (<http://www.t0.or.at/hakimbey/hex.htm>), and 'Media creed for the fin de siecle' (<http://www.left-bank.org/bey/mediacr1.htm>).
- [5] And what has been termed the inclusive 'Xerocracy' (see Ferrell, 2001, p. 111)—conveying the means by which the repurposed office photocopier, (text and screen) printers and computers have become cheap and effective media for the production of zines, posters, patches, Websites and other insurgent ephemera—assists to undermine the top-down political organization and the exclusionary practice of the mass media.
- [6] John Jacobs—personal communication.
- [7] Yet the culture has significant home-grown characteristics. For a discussion of the origins and character of Australian feral or eco-radical youth culture, see St John (1999, 2000, 2005). Attention to local DiY music and media developments is also found in St John (2001a).
- [8] See the writings of Alan Lodge (<http://tash.gn.apc.org/desert1.htm>).
- [9] London's *Bedlam* sound system would later tour the United States and arrive in Australia in late 1999 with a custom-built 20 kW PA, and in 2003/2004 the *Boundaries-to-Bridges* (*Circus of Madness*) tour would see artists, media workers, scientists and technicians form a 'caravan' functioning as a sound system, circus, mobile cinema and a stage for theatre and performance in Spain and North Africa ([http://www.memenet.de/tour\\_phil\\_eng.html](http://www.memenet.de/tour_phil_eng.html)).
- [10] [www.tash.gn.apc.org/mutoid1.htm](http://www.tash.gn.apc.org/mutoid1.htm)
- [11] Evidence for this was provided in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall when former Soviet military hardware—including MiG 21 fighter jets and amphibious tanks—were transmuted into objects of wonder.
- [12] From 'Vibe Tribe: the blag so far'—distributed document, 1995.
- [13] The collective emerged amid outrage at French nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific. They were originally called 'Oms not Bombs', the name inspired by the US-derived international anarchist free food kitchens *Food Not Bombs* where the 'Om' (ॐ) substitute 'represents universal peace in the ancient Sanskrit symbology'. They would later become known as *Ohms not Bombs*. According to Strong, 'ohms' is 'a symbol of resistance [which] ... can apply to

sound or the mass of people power needed in our non-violent war against the enemies of the earth' (Strong, 2001, pp. 82, 87).

- [14] In 1997 Energy Resources of Australia Ltd (ERA) received Howard government approval to build a uranium mine at Jabiluka in the World Heritage listed Kakadu. In 1998, representatives of the Mirrar traditional owners called on supporters to join their struggle to protect the area's cultural and environmental values. After a lengthy blockade, further construction of the mine ceased in 1999, and Rio Tinto (majority shareholders of ERA) began rehabilitating the mine site in October 2003.
- [15] The use of an innovative alternative energy source to power vehicles makes for a curious development in any Mad Max meta-narrative. That is, given that the post-apocalyptic scenario of Mad Max II and III resulted from strategic nuclear strikes 'between the East/West blocs' which were intended to prevent either side from securing scarce petroleum reserves (see the 'Mad Max chronology' at <http://www.zip.com.au/~alexm/madmax>).
- [16] Representing a threat to the physical and cultural survival of Arabunna, WMC had been mining and milling one of the world's largest uranium ore deposits at Olympic Dam, Roxby Downs, since 1988. WMC's growing demands on underground water sources in one of the driest regions on the planet has had a devastating impact on Arabunna and Kokatha peoples since such sources feed the precious springs around the Lake Eyre region essential for their cultural survival.
- [17] Labrats tow a caravan housing a solar/wind/veggie powered recording studio and computer with video editing software. In 2003, their film documentary *Tunin' Technology to Ecology* won a New Filmmakers Award at the Wild Spaces environmental and social justice film festival.
- [18] Combat Wombat consists of DJ Monkey Marc, MC Izzy, MC Elf Transporter, Miranda Mutanta (and occasionally MC Anna and DJ Atom13).
- [19] *Sporadical*, 2001, p. 21.
- [20] Travelling under the name of Bedlam were artists from the UK's Negusa Negast and San Francisco's SPAZ (Semi Permanent Autonomous Zone).
- [21] Radio National's *Radio Eye* programme referred to the convoy as 'Merry Pranksters meets Mad Max' (<http://reflect.cat.org.au/mpfree/earthdreamers>). To the disappointment of many, an outback Mad Max IV remained a rumour.
- [22] Eventually establishing the Keepers of Lake Eyre camp, Buzzacott was preparing for the 2000 Olympics. In July that year, he and his supporters began a 3000 km 'Walking the Land' trek to Sydney in time for the Games to publicize what Buzzacott deemed the genocidal actions of a government and a corporation (WMC) illustrative of the way settler Australians had 'come the wrong way'.
- [23] And who had been subject to atomic weapons testing in the 1950s and 1960s, and have recently (2003) successfully opposed Howard government plans for national radioactive waste dumping in the region.
- [24] Such as 'black, white, brown or brindle, we'll fight this mine', from Adnyamathanha elder Ronnie Coultard.
- [25] Ohms not Bombs and Bedlam artists played live on Radio Dusty in Coober Pedy. *Earthzine* and *Sporadical* were zines produced en route and made available at the mobile Abominable Knowledge Emporium (Williamson, 2001). Radio shows, films and a book were subsequently produced: Radio National's *Radio Eye* documentary 'Earthdreamers' aired on 20 January 2001; films were produced by Labrats (*Tuning Technology to Ecology*, 2002), Matt Bonner (*Earthdream*, 2004) and Enda Murray (*Earthdreamer*, 2004); and several chapters in the book *FreeNRG: Notes from the Edge of the Dance Floor* featured participant experiences.
- [26] In 2001, the anti-uranium road-show Atomic Oz travelled the country. Inspired by the Half Life Theatre Company (and featuring some of the same characters), the European show Operation Alchemy was promoted as an 'environmental hip-hop roadshow circus . . . a nuclear

thriller from the makers and shakers of the Earthdream tour of the Australian outback. Shows were performed in five countries, including the climate change conference in Bonn ([http://www.beyondtv.org/pages/partner\\_page.php/26/#projects](http://www.beyondtv.org/pages/partner_page.php/26/#projects)).

- [27] Circus Boom produced a CD, *Western Desert Mob* (2003), recorded at Warumpi Studio. The CD was compiled from music workshops with the tracks consisting of sounds made by Kintore and Papunya kids sampled and sequenced, with kids singing in traditional language over the beats. Tracks received local, state and national airplay and an accompanying music video (for the track 'Skin Names') made the final of Triple J's national short film competition. The collective enjoys the strong support of various Aboriginal bodies, and has planned a similar project for 2004 (<http://www.myspinach.org/deserted>). The intercultural work of ex-Metabass 'n Breath member Morganics constitutes a more conventional desert hip hop project. Teaching break dancing, MCing and beatboxing to kids around the country, Morganics collaborated with a group of 10-year-old boys from the Broken Hill area (the Wulcannya Mob). One of several pieces recording aspects of daily life, the track 'Down River' became a favourite on ABC youth radio, and led to the Wulcannya Mob touring several Australian capital cities.

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