

EMPIRE OF DIRT

JAMES GEURTS

STAGE 1:

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ESSAY by PROF DAVID THOMAS

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“Empire can be viewed as the apotheosis of the drive in civilisation to turn the world into an abstract geography, under singular rule. Dirt is the embodiment of the visceral and life-generating matter of the world. When these terms are placed together they serve as a reminder of the cyclical nature of time, expressed in phenomena that return to permeate the architectures and frameworks of value that the human constructs.”

DR JULIE LOUISE BACON



INTRODUCTION:

EMPIRE OF DIRT

EMPIRE OF DIRT is a site-responsive project, exploring soil biology, earth based architecture, and modes of species adaptation. This installation brings art and science into conversation with the construction site of RMIT's New Academic Street. The research involved a collaboration between artist James Geurts and environmental microbiologist, Distinguished Professor Andy Ball at RMIT University.

The light-boxes works include images made at Rodda Lane, laboratory research involving a soil sample from site, Litchfield National Park, and archival material. The sculptures migrate termite structures from the Northern Territory to colonise the Rodda Lane site.

Emerging from RMIT's Centre for Art Society and Transformation, the project was supported by a number of partners, including Carbon Arts, RMIT's New Academic Street's Urban Animators: Living Laboratory program, and Lightscape Projects RMIT. The project is funded by Wonderment Walk Victoria.

Presented by:



Urban Animators :
Living Laboratory



Links:

<http://nas.rmit.edu.au>

<https://www.rmit.edu.au/research/research-institutes-centres-and-groups/research-centres/ensure>

<http://www.carbonarts.org>

<https://www.rmit.edu.au/research/research-institutes-centres-and-groups/research-centres/centre-for-art-society-and-transformation>

<http://wondermentwalk.org.au>

<http://www.jamesgeurts.com>

A CURIOUS WORK SOME THOUGHTS ON EMPIRE OF DIRT

A temporary public artwork by JAMES GEURTS

Empire of Dirt is a response to many things. It consists of images, light boxes electricity, light, conduits, dirt, site, social, bureaucratic and natural processes and limitations.

It consists of vegetation, bricks, dirt, microbes. It consists of histories, cultural, social, biological. It consists of personal responses, intellectual, intuitive, the felt and the known. It consists of forms, natural and cultural. It consists of facts, questions and poetics.

Art like life is not simply concerned with concrete or material facts, but is an activity where energies, feelings, change and curiosity are manifest through the material reality of form and images, experienced in the imaginative and actual time and space of the sensitive viewer.

Successful art generates wonder.... this wonder is manifest through the artists and the audiences encounter with the world via an artwork.

James Geurts' work Empire Of Dirt demonstrates this.

He also demonstrates that material forms are not fixed, but are in a state of flow, of change, of transience, of interconnectedness.

To re-iterate Empire of Dirt is multilayered, it is a complicated site-sensitive work...My definition of site includes the physical, natural and man-made environment, the political institutional, the cultural and the personal.

Empire of Dirt is concerned with the macro and the micro, or to put this another way with the issue of the one and the many....

It demonstrates how things are connected. It helps us understand our SITUATION.

RESEARCH AND ART

As I suggest from the title of this essay, Geurts' work results from asking questions and manifesting questions... wonder, after all can be translated as "?", a place where words fail and sensations remain.

Specifically Geurts' work gives us a range of experiences, of contemplations, of connections between things. His work researches biology and geology. This research involves working with scientific processes of analysis; of soil, of micro-photography, imaging and models. He researches facts -ethnographic, biological, social.

This kind of research can be a dangerous space for art, for it can be a space where a conservative art is made. If an artist is not careful, art in this space can simply become an illustration of what is known. It can become an illustration of other disciplines' knowledge.

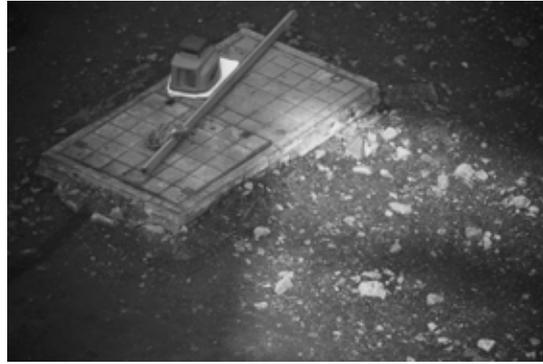
Thankfully, Geurts avoids this.

Critically though, Empire of Dirt also researches art.

He interrogates how forms, visual language and composite relationships can create new artworks.

SITE:

RODDA LANE RMIT



His work reveals multiple forms and multiple contents. It includes diverse combinations of techniques, genres, of forms that contain singularities. Composites occur when things different in kind are placed together. These composites are placed throughout the site of Rodda Lane. They demonstrate Geurts' ability to combine diverse styles and processes. They consist of combinations of found objects: plants, dirt, light, architectural structures, and formal visual languages: texture, materials, line, colour, light, image, the diagrammatic. These are brought together within the conventions of installation in time and space.

Geurts reveals a sensitivity to deferring and revealing content through the orchestration of these diverse components in time.

In the end, Geurts is an artist, not a scientist. His research gives him stuff to make art from.

To paraphrase the popular idiom, "data is not information, information is not knowledge and knowledge is not wisdom".... Wisdom means we know how to use knowledge et al.

Wisdom or knowledge applied through a sensibility is what shifts the collected information into art.

This enables Geurts' work to offer us knowledge not only of what constitutes the materiality and history of this particular site, but also importantly what art does, and how it does it in order to help us negotiate being in the world.

THE ENCOUNTER WITH ART

The problem with this essay is that it remains a generalised account of Empire of Dirt.

Yet the experiences offered by the Empire of Dirt are specific. Empire of Dirt enables us to engage with our experiences of a series of specific encounters. It enables us to be attentive as to how images are constructed.

It asks what does layering superimposition or juxta-positioning reveal and how does our understanding of imagery, construction and relationships change as we move through the site?

What does this do to our understanding of content and of our experiencing?

How do textures, natural, artificial, random and considered sit with ordered constructions?

If you cannot experience the work, I suggest that you look at the reproductions in the publication. Investigate, look closely and inspect them with an open mind, move closer, further away, tilt the image and you will get a sense of the movement that occurs in actual time and space, of how meaning and sensation unfold in time and space. If you do this and create the dynamic of looking you will find that the relationships move, and therefore the order of content shifts.

NOT ONLY WHAT IS, BUT HOW IS WHAT MANIFESTS

The temporalities of artificial or natural light, of the growth of ivy or the constructed order of weathered brick, or our own passage through and around the site generates energies and an awareness of our own temporality amid this shifting empire of dirt. These situations create encounters, not simply with place but with the reality of metaphor and the matter(s) of art and poetics.

Empire of Dirt amplifies these experiences.

DAVID THOMAS
Melbourne 2017

Biography

David Thomas is an artist living and based in Melbourne, Australia.

He is Professor of Fine Art (Painting) in the School of Art. RMIT University

He has exhibited widely in Australia and internationally since 1980. He curates and writes on contemporary Eastern and Western art. His work explores the contemplative function of painting, photo-painting and installation in the contemporary world, in particular how new iterations of the monochrome tradition can address issues of the perception of time and space, complexity, knowing and feeling.

His work is represented by Tristian Koenig Gallery, Melbourne, Australia.

Minus Space, New York, USA and raum 2810, Bonn, Germany.

www.davidthomasartist.com.au

LAB:

ANDREW S BALL
RMIT DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR
THE CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENT SUSTAINABILITY AND REMEDIATION
SCHOOL OF SCIENCE, RMIT UNIVERSITY

"Soil is the top layer of the land surface of the earth that is composed of disintegrated rock particles, humus, water, and air. In terms of biology it represents one of the most diverse environments on earth; every gram of soil contains up to 5000 species of microorganisms. Soil health (biological, chemical, and physical) provides an overall picture of soil functionality.

Preliminary Analysis of Dry Soil (% w/w)

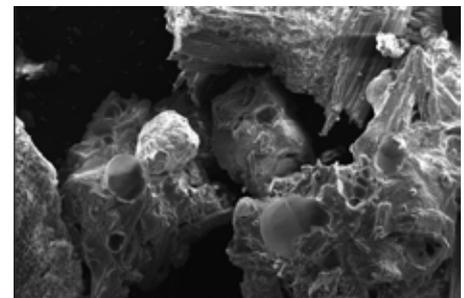
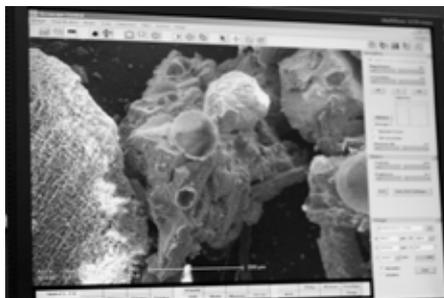
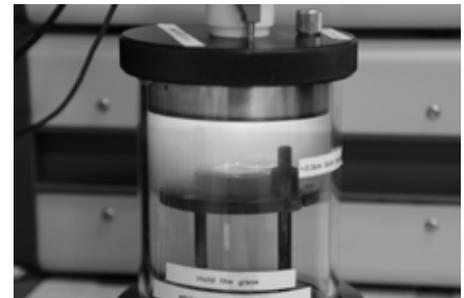
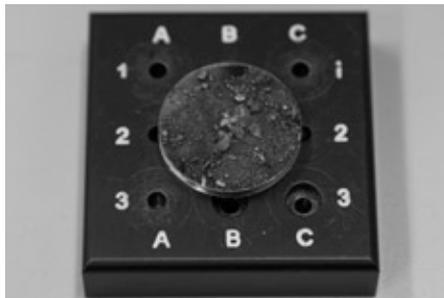
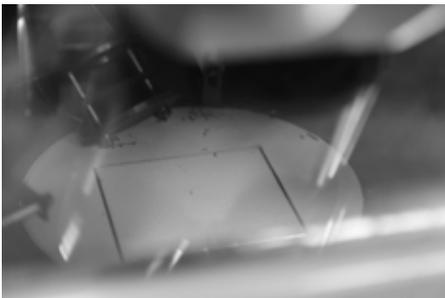
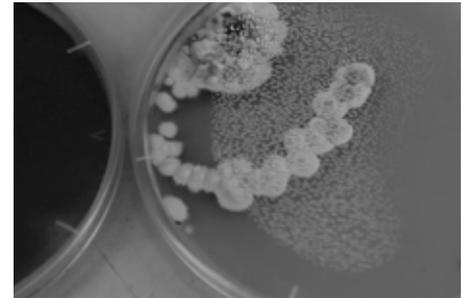
Sand content 34%
Silt content 28%
Clay 16%
Organic content 8%

Contaminants:
Metal (mainly Fe): 2.3%
Cellulosic material: 2.8%
Glass 3.2%
Plastic 3.4 %
Oil 0.1%
Unidentified 2.2%

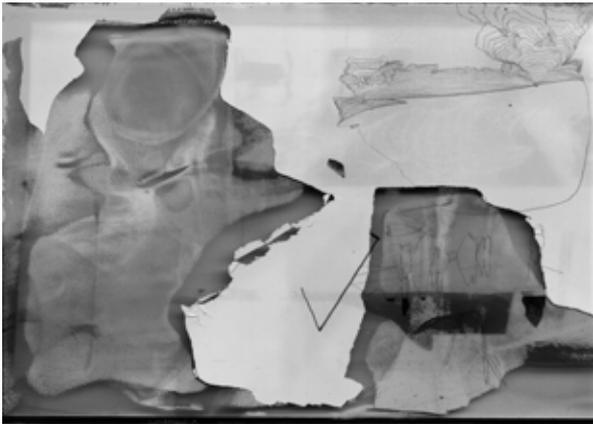
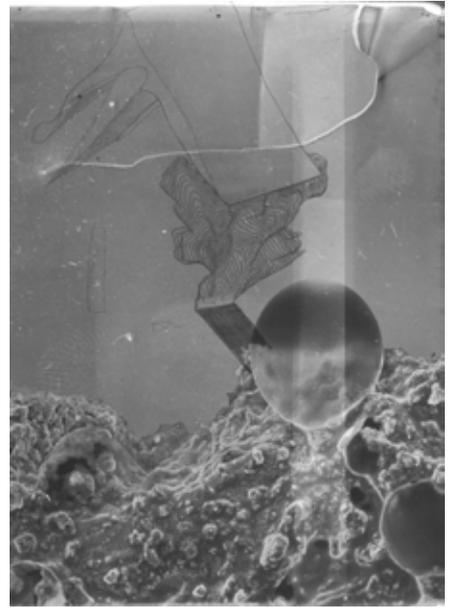
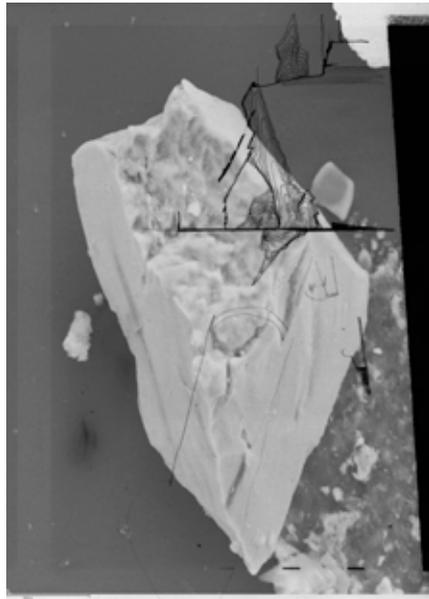
NB Moisture Content of Original Soil 18%

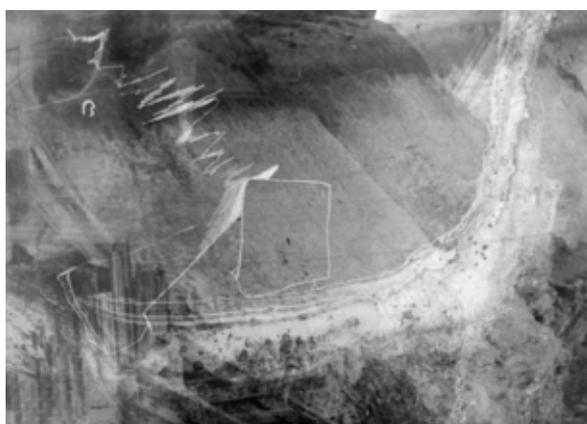
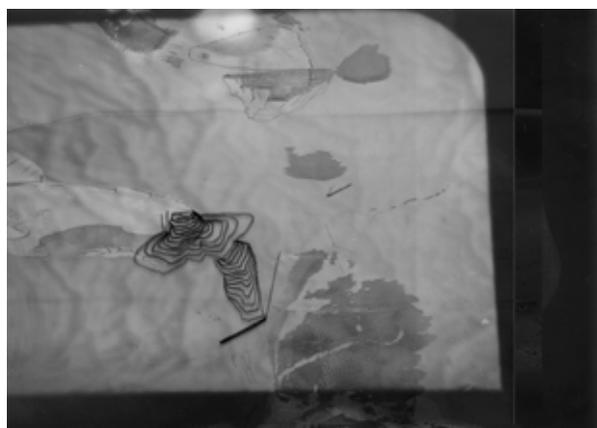
Soils are the most diverse habitats in the world, there are more microbes in just one cubic meter of soil than there are people on the planet. It's an ecosystem that is evolving faster now because of the contaminants, we are finding things that have never been there before because they are man made, so the soils ecosystem is continually adapting.

I think we, as humans, have become disconnected from the land. Through James' work, and the artist's eye, we get a clearer insight into what's happening in response to the constructed environment and are able to better communicate this to the public," says Prof Ball.



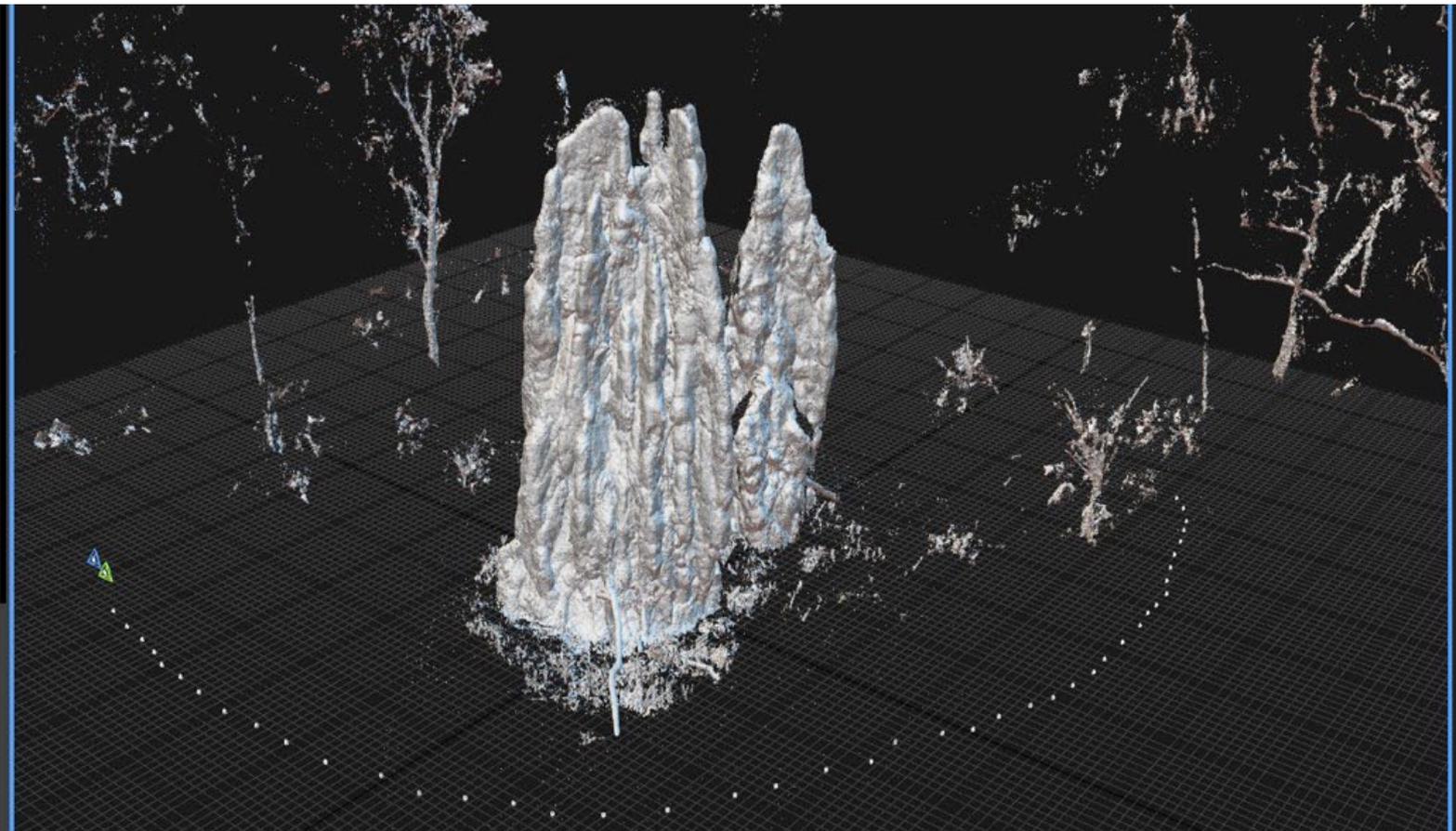
STUDIO:



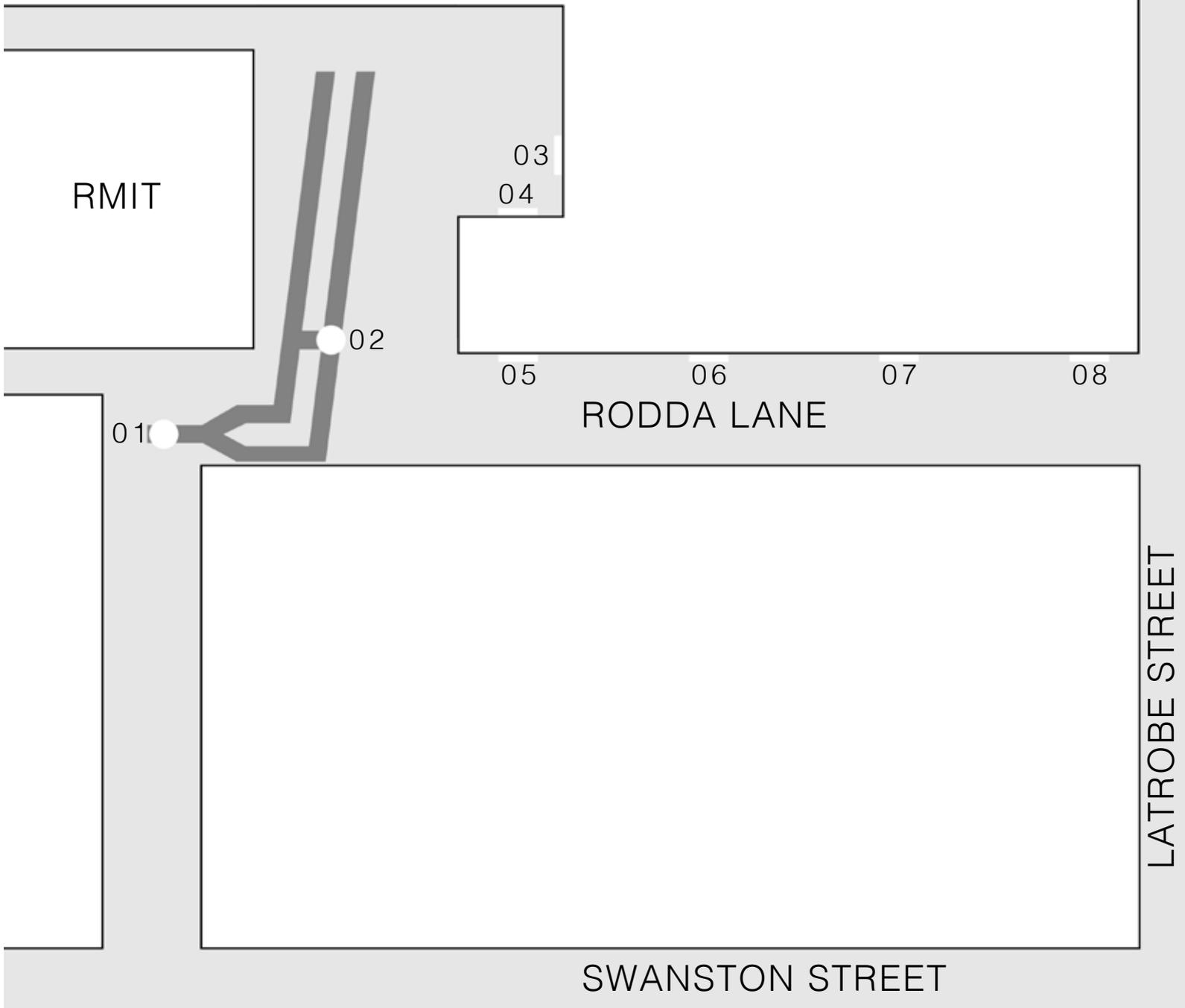


FIELD:

LITCHFIELD NATIONAL PARK
NORTHERN TERRITORY



SITE:

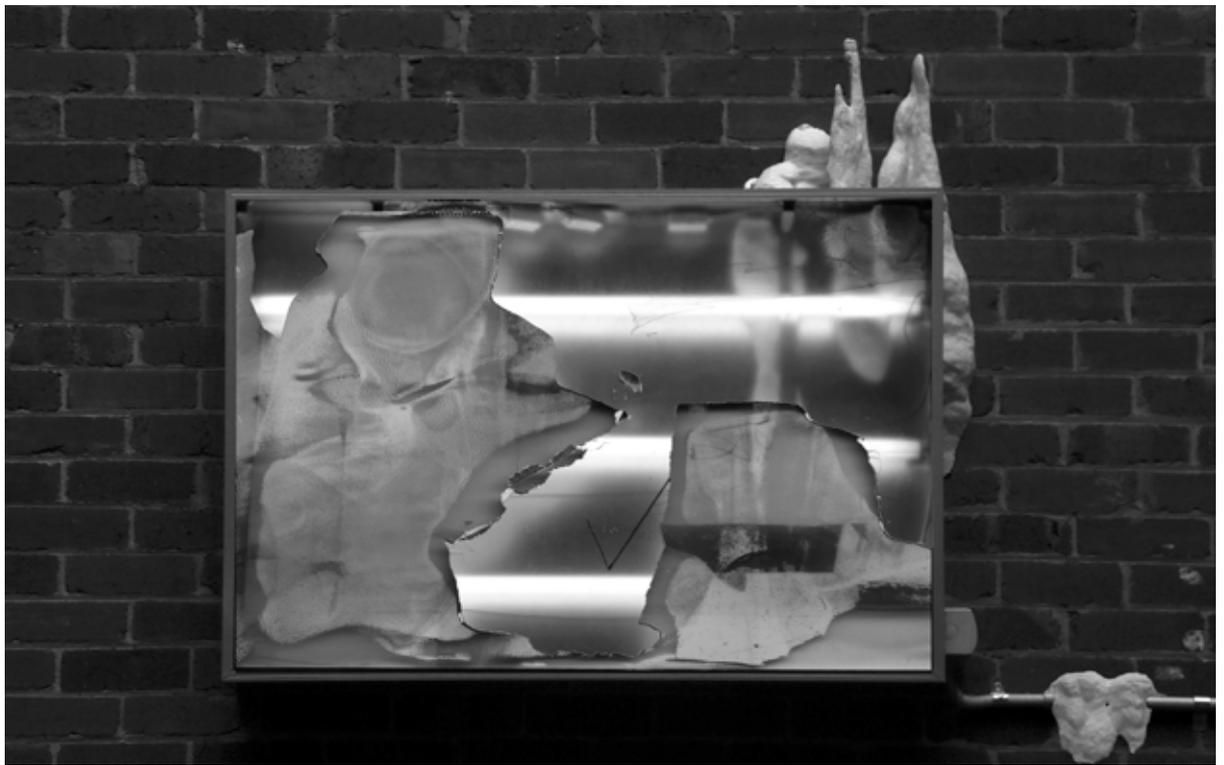




SAMPLE 01:
SITE / FIELD EXPLORATION



SAMPLE 04:
SITE / FIELD EXPLORATION



SAMPLE 03:
SITE / FIELD / STUDIO EXPLORATION



SAMPLE 04:
SITE / STUDIO / LAB EXPLORATION



SAMPLE 05:
SITE / LAB / STUDIO EXPLORATION



SAMPLE 06:
SITE / FIELD / STUDIO EXPLORATION



SAMPLE 07:
SITE / ARCHIVE / STUDIO EXPLORATION



SAMPLE 08:
FIELD / STUDIO / SITE EXPLORATION

