

A living social document: Kate Robertson's *Recording the medicinal plants of Siwai, Bougainville*

Our lives intersect with the natural world in complex ways. Kate Robertson's community-led project, *Recording the medicinal plants of Siwai, Bougainville*, addresses the impact of global technologies on the loss of traditional knowledge and language specifically as they relate to the medicinal plants of the region. Crucially, the works are co-authored; by Robertson, the community and the environment. Through her practice, Robertson raises important ethical questions about the role of photographers working with communities whose lived experiences are very different to their own; seeking to question the traditional relationship between photographer and subject. Ultimately, *Recording the medicinal plants of Siwai, Bougainville* has encouraged openness and exchange between members of the community and provided exposure to and respect for the relationship between traditional knowledge and modern technology. It ensures the preservation of knowledge and language for years to come.

In her work, Robertson is uncomfortable identifying with the role of the photographer as an 'outsider'.¹ Instead, she develops genuine, empathic relationships with the communities she engages with. Her early photograms and prints examine notions of natural healing processes, documenting a sense of what it feels like to interact physically with the environment. The series *Dust Landscapes* (2012), for instance, makes use of dust collected from ConFest to create alchemical, galaxy-like impressions of the dry Australian bush. She emphasises this relationship to the environment is, importantly, interdependent; immersed in the landscape, covered in a fine layer of red dust, festival goes, and, indeed, Robertson herself, become energised by 'community rituals and spontaneous happenings.'²

It was around this time that Robertson's friend, Chief Alex Dawia, Taa Lupumoiku Clan, expressed concern to her about the loss of traditional knowledge due to the influence of global technologies, particularly the increasing presence of the Internet, in Bougainville Island, an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea. Familiar with her work, Dawia invited Robertson to travel to the Siwai region of Bougainville to begin a process of documenting medicinal plants. He told her, 'You have the tools, and we have the knowledge. Together we can make something unique.'³ Dawia emphasised to Robertson the aims of the project were twofold; in addition to recording the traditional knowledge of medicinal plants, the project

provides a positive record of place for a region still healing from the trauma of a recent civil war.

Significantly, the project also preserves language. The works are titled individually by plant name, listed first in Motuna, the language specific to the region, and secondly in English. The plants are named for their purpose, such as: *Tuung* which is used to heal a strong headache or *Rungiwo*, used to relieve itchy sores. Project collaborator Chief Jeffrey Noro, Rura Clan, explains, ‘When you lose the traditional name, you lose the knowledge of the plant. Therefore when we lose our language, we are bound to lose our biodiversity because we can no longer find the value in it.’⁴ The way the project benefits the community is tangible; it offers an opportunity to regain knowledge of traditional medicine, assures the recording of it for the forthcoming generations and it extends and emphasises cultural value.

A camera-less method was favoured by Robertson for the project to emphasise the importance of working with materials, rather than capturing them in a process that aligns to the history of colonisation. This enabled the community to be involved with the lumen printing process in a very hands-on way. Though Robertson directed this aspect of the project, alongside Prisca Noro, members of the community were encouraged to assist with the placement of the medicinal plants and tape on the expired black and white photosensitive paper. In addition to this, the prints were placed on a table near a busy walkway in Kainake village so they could be viewed during exposure which took anywhere from hours to days. The ecological and social attachment to place reveals itself in the creation of the work too: ‘careful observations of weather and climate were imperative to this project, where sunlight and humidity activate potent properties within the plant, transferring curative virtues into pictorial language.’⁵ The moisture in the plant matter created a chemical reaction with the paper, changing its colour and transcending the object to allow the different components of the process to interact with one another.

Following this, the works were brought back to Melbourne for the final part of the recording process. The prints were not fixed physically but become so digitally, evidenced by glitches. Here, Robertson considers the use of the plant, for example, *Uraiwo Pango*, used for healing during times of crisis, and applies this knowledge by ripping the image from the scanner – as a wound – before returning it to allow the continuation of the digital impression. This aspect of the project references the changes in the way knowledge is recorded and disseminated,

which is sometimes fractured, and perhaps might also be read as a comment on the control we have the ability to exercise over the dominance of digital technologies in our lives.

The site-specific work for Chapter House Lane is a development from the outcome of an exhibition at Photobook Melbourne in 2016 where Robertson rejected the white walls of the gallery, using an alternative method of presentation. The work was situated within the space of the room, prints placed facing up on a table, to be navigated by the viewer; much like the way the community interacted with the production of the prints in Kainake village. Here, she creates arrangements of these same works, to scale, on fabric; the images become infinite, without a beginning or an end. Through this repetition the images transform into threads of code, like those used to communicate digital information, and even overlap and fade as knowledge has a tendency to do.

It is no coincidence, either, that the work resembles the earlier table arrangements or perhaps even plates of food; these fabric works are to be given to Kainake village for their purposes, which may be inclusive of use as table cloths at community feasts. That the images will perhaps inform discussions around the table is another important step in transferring the knowledge of these plants. This idea of a table cloth, too, has feminine associations, which reminds us the Siwai region of Bougainville operates as a Matrilineal society; although the figureheads in the community are male, land ownership is passed through the female line and decision making processes are the roles of women. These remarkable, continuous works extend to the earth; extracted from memory and transformed as knowledge gained.

Now, Robertson is well and truly a part of the community. Having made numerous trips to the Siwai region, Robertson was initiated into Dawia's clan as a sign of respect for the work being made and for spiritual protection. At the request of the community, the next stage of the project will come in the form of a book. It will be written in Motuna and English, to be used primarily as a teaching resource for young students. By recording knowledge in this way, the community has agency over the impact of new technologies and imparts appreciation for its unique biodiversity. Regardless of how you examine *Recording the medicinal plants of Siwai, Bougainville*, the project, due to collaborative efforts, is a testament to the redemptive qualities of traditional knowledge and community engagement in an increasingly globalised world.

By Christine McFetridge

¹ Edmund Pearce Gallery, 'EPTV Episode #2 / Kate Robertson', accessed April 25, <https://youtu.be/ZCDgXCQXErc>.

² Edmund Pearce Gallery, 'Dust Landscapes / Kate Robertson', accessed April 25, 2017, <http://edmundpearce.com.au/dust-landscapes-kate-robertson/>.

³ Kate Robertson, 'Chronicling Communities: Embodiment and Feeling in Photography' (paper presented at Echo Chamber, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne, August 31, 2016).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jake Tracey, *Kate Robertson: Chronicling Communities*, accessed April 23, <http://kate-robertson.com/news/2016/5/12/essay-recording-the-medicinal-plants-of-siwai-bougainville>.