Art Historian and Environmental lawyer, Tim Bonyhady states that in ‘the Eurocentric view of the world, Australia was empty until 1788 and lacked the monuments and places hallowed by historical associations which provided one of the great sources of romantic sentiment in Europe’.

I would agree and affirm that this view is still the stereotypical non aboriginal experience of inland Australia. It encompasses a sense of ‘other-ness’ and often a disconnection to place.

With strong cultural influences from mother England or Mediterranean Europe, the earliest post-colonial contact perpetuated the notion of terra-nullus (or empty land). This embodied, (in addition to the political aspirations of conquest) the perceived intangibility of habitation or of a sustained civilisation in the ‘dead heart’ of Australia.

The creation of the phenomena of a nation crowded onto a green, fertile coastal ribbon, looking out to sea with their backs to the centre, is a continuum in our history. Even the nomenclature of the nations major chain of mountains, the’ great dividing range’, attests to the geographic separation of culture, from the arid desert.
In 1963, Alan Moorehead in his book titled, *Coopers Creek*, which references the most notable disaster in the colonial exploration of Australia's vast interior, the Burke and Wills expedition of 1860, writes, 'the settlers had yet to take possession of, or even explore the land they were confidently governing...for all the broughams bowling down Collins Street (central Melbourne) the ladies in crinolines and the champagne being drunk at the balls in the exhibition hall, they were living in a little capsule, encompassed by a huge wilderness, they were suspended, as it were, in space. If they stepped outside the capsule they were lost.'

When I first moved to Mildura in the North West of the State of Victoria at the crossroads of Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide (some 20 odd years ago), my friends who did visit, would arrive after a long drive from Melbourne, numb and incapable of articulating any valued or meaningful experience. The endless, parched flat plain often results in feelings of agoraphobia and alienation. The subtlety and nuance derived from a more sustained appreciation was often overlooked in the frustration or ennui of sensibilities attuned to the iconic, the accessible and of course the picturesque or sublime.
Rex Butler in discussing Colonial artist, Eugene Von Guerard in a secret history of Australia, would refer to this as the 'mechanical result of layering a picturesque or sublime template over the countryside'. It is within this context that one of Australia's most interesting and idiosyncratic art events was born — Palimpsest. Mildura Palimpsest was born in 1998, building on the artistic heritage of the Mildura Sculpture prizes of the 1960's and the Sculpture Triennials of the 1970's and early 80's. Following the 1st Mildura Palimpsest in 1998, number two was conducted in 1999, #3 in 2000, #4 in 2001, #5 in 2003 and in 2006, the re-vamped Murray Darling Palimpsest #6.

**palimpsest:**
(say 'paluhmpsest) noun a parchment or the like from which writing has been partially or completely erased to make room for another text. [Latin palimpsestus, from Greek palimpsestos scraped again]

**work submitted for Mildura Palimpsest should respond to this definition:**
Writing on an old parchment (the land), which has been obliterated (indigenous culture, redundant land & water uses) and written over (current land & water uses).

Palimpsest is an Australian contemporary visual arts event, remarkable for its locations in distinctly regional places, rather than capital cities, and significant for its direct engagement with issues of environmental and social sustainability. It is un-apologetically from the periphery, leading Benjamin Genocchio (then art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald) in visiting Palimpsest #4 and subsequently reviewing it, to refer to it as the 'Biennale of the bush'. Although some at the time of this comment accused the centre of paternalism, it nonetheless was received as an audacious challenge to the hegemony of the city centre mainstream.
The land lies beneath a palimpsest etched erased and re-etched by wind and time.

Symbols in ancient script...

We slice the ancient parchment into squares and parallelograms, the straight line rampant...

Then what is Palimpsest? Palimpsest (from the Greek word, Palimpsestos, palin (meaning again) psestos (meaning scraped or rubbed smooth) is a word referring to the successive texts on a manuscript (generally of Medieval origin) on which the original writing has been erased for re-use.

This fragment of a poem titled ‘view from a plane’ by Jennifer Hamilton, eludes to the central premise in this presentation, ie the exploration of a Palimpsest space. Interestingly enough, Hamilton
wrote this poem while reflecting on a flight over Mildura. For the uninitiated, the geometrical patchwork of vivid green horticultural blocks butted against the tonal, organic texture of the semi-arid desert, is profound. This is then overlayed with the evidences of ‘process’- the natural and human made scarring of roadways, rivers, cutaways and crusts of white salinity breaking the lands surface. Palimpsest becomes the metaphor for the way in which land is changed by human activity.
CULLULLERAINÉ, AERIAL PHOTOGRAPHS, (DETAIL)
When Henri Lefebvre, in 'the production of space' creates a spatial literacy based on the physical, conceptual and metaphysical phenomena's, he embraces a notion of space that is both dynamic and interactive. Lived spaces. Spaces that develop, grow, decline, metamorphose. Hence, a palimpsest space is non-linear, is layered by intention, accident, ambition, progress and failure. The palimpsest space is often a contested space. Butler would qualify this by saying the space is 'not opposed, but co-implicated'.

ANNABELLE COLLETT, THE NET (INSTALLATION VIEW) 2001 MILDURA PALIMPSEST #4

BUDHI 1 ~ 2006
Paul Carter in an essay titled ‘Sustaining Places’ calls this the mythopoetic. Carter (a palimpsest #5 symposium speaker), articulates the challenge for an environmental art that contributes to a cultural debate, as needing to engage with the historical myth — the mythic narratives and symbolic thinking that transforms places into what he calls mythoforms.

Many of the artists responding to palimpsest, embrace this idea of Carter’s mythoform. When French Philosopher, Roland Barthes wrote his book, Mythologies, between 1954 and 1956, laying out the secondary signification of encoded meanings in images, we in palimpsest also wanted to ‘bend it like Barthes’. Palimpsest artists engage with the site-specific mediations between the natural and cultural worlds. Carter would also refer to this activity as ‘place-making’, the interface of politics, economics with the philosophical.

Much of the work produced since 1998, occupies this area of critique about contemporary environmental practices. The battleground between ideologies of land use. Earlier this year while I was attending the Melbourne writers Festival, author Maria Tumarkin read from her first book, Traumascapes. Tumarkin discussed the power and fate of places indelibly marked by histories of violence and loss — the
notable examples used being NY, September 11, 2001, Port Arthur on the 28th April, 1996, and even the Alma Tunnel where Princess Diana was killed in 1997 or even here in manila in what is now called Rizal park, on December 30, 1896 when Rizal faced the firing squad.
Unfortunately there are too many examples. She speaks of ‘lived geographies’ where death and memorialisation have rendered the past as unfinished business. Events experienced are re-experienced across time, triggered by visual and sensory associations. In an essay titled, ‘the post modern turn’, American cultural critic Ihab Hossan writes, ‘history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeable to time past, time present, and time future’. Palimpsest is hence intrinsically pluralist. It responds to the flux of perpetual change where as Nietzsche says, ‘one cannot dip into the same river twice’.

The places marked by the trauma that Tumarkin refers to have an ability to produce a surplus of meanings and unsolicited interpretations. They are fertile ground for artists interested in mnemonics. The powerful visual proof of absence.

Echoing Tumarkin's voice, Paul Carter states, its landscapes increasingly express a collectively self-destructive place myth.
Mildura, the central site of Palimpsest, however is no Rwanda or Hiroshima. It is not a place on the geographic map synonymous with when the world was unequivocally changed by a cathartic event.

But Mildura is, like practically all places that have had a history of human placement and displacement, a place of layered myth. It did experience the inevitable clash of culture — Aboriginal culture with the colonising European culture leading to the marginalisation of the Barkindji river groupings and the destruction of the neighbouring Latje Latje tribes.

100 kms due West of Mildura, at Lake Victoria, (geographically located at the corner of three states), witnessed one of Australia’s notable indigenous tragedies, historically known as the Rufus river massacre. What followed were the 1840’s pastoralists that cleared large areas of scrublands (eucalyptus Dumosa — or mallee forests) for crop production. The second wave of colonists, returning soldiers from World War 1 were given small blocks of unsustainable land, and with inappropriate farming techniques, erosion, a rising water table, the rabbit scourge, degrading soils, heat and drought all added to the collective mythopoetica. Quoting Carter once again, but this time from his 2002 book, ‘repressed spaces: the poetics of agoraphobia’, he states
that these second wave settlers experienced agoraphobia, 'the more they tried to drive the symptom out, the more they reproduced it. In the process of removing trees and over grazing, they advanced towards self destruction. Yet the panic to produce an ideal flatness from which every ghost of the environmental unconscious had been removed seems to have been irresistible. One unsustainable place after another is abandoned, and the ruinous wake is not picturesque'. Even now in one of the fastest growing
regional cities in Australia, Mildura the horticultural oasis is traumatised by an economic downturn influenced by the worst drought in over 100 years and the un-quantifiable effects of climate change, cheaper global markets, irrigation vs environmental water wars and severely declining natural ecosystems. The recent unsuccessful, but expedient decision by the Victorian Government to impose a toxic waste dump into the region confirms the prevailing cultural *terra-nullus* politics continues to self perpetuate.

These are the issues that underlay much of the artwork from Palimpsest.

Neither people nor places should be thought of as entirely independent entities, writes Philosopher Edward Casey, ‘persons who live in places — who inhabit or re-inhabit them — come to share features with the local landscape, but equally so, they make a difference to, perhaps indelibly mark, the land in which they dwell’.

Even to use a sporting analogy, the spatial neurotics described by David Winner in his book, ‘Brilliant Orange’ which hypothesised on the recent Socceroo coach at the World cup, Guus Hiddinds tactics, where his players create spaces to squeeze the ball through as influenced by the tight contrivances of space in his ancestral Dutch homeland landscape.
Let me change tack for a while and discuss Mildura Palimpsest prior to this 2006 event. Palimpsest #1 in 1998 involved 25 artists, by the fourth Palimpsest, over 100 visual artists from around the world participated. Artists from Russia, France and the USA gathered (some with a virtual presence), to work next to and in some instances, in collaboration with regional artists. Collaboration has been an important motivation for artists; to work with Scientists, Farmers, Industry and Community groups. Palimpsest has captured the imagination of younger and emerging artists who are often disillusioned with the established commercial gallery system. Pragmatic conservatism, where even alternative exhibition spaces are structured on user pay principles, has attracted these artists to look beyond this establishment. Palimpsest is un-curated, inclusive, democratic, artist driven, collaborative, experimental and cross disciplinary. Despite support for an open and un-curated exhibition, the only negative impact of this is the sometimes disparate and un-even quality of the work presented. Its venues have been abandoned warehouses, fruit packing sheds, shop fronts and site specific as well as formal gallery spaces.

Palimpsest #3 in 2001 was combined with an Artist in Industry project where 5 artworks were commissioned contrary to the un-
curated events previously outlined. This formalised the process of interdisciplinary collaboration.

In 2006, it became clear that as the event grew, a new approach was needed to manage the scale and complexity of the project. Although it may sound like a contradiction, the solution was not to diminish its scale but rather to expand it. Instead of a Mildura Palimpsest, the concept was pitched to encompass the entire Murray Darling Basin. A diverse region, geographically linking 4 states — Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. The basin is defined by a network of river systems, fed by the comparatively larger rainfall that falls along the Eastern escarpment, that meander thousands of kilometres (in an east/west and north/south direction) across semi-arid lands. Ultimately their waters confluence and then empty into the southern ocean at Goolwa in South Australia. This system of major rivers, the Murray, the Barwon/Darling,
Murrumbidgee, Lachlan, the Gwydir, the MacIntyre, Condamine and the Loddon among other smaller rivers and creeks are vital to the socio and economic future of this area (a land mass of 1061,469 square kilometres, representing 14% of the country’s total land mass).

Communities across the basin share a common challenge. How does one sustain the environmental health of the rivers and their environs within the increasing demands for water by irrigators expanding into horticulture, viticulture, rice, cotton and vegetable production? When the mouth of the Murray is closed due to a lack of flow, how do you balance these competing interests.

Enter Murray darling Palimpseg.

We are not delusional about a biennale art event having the ability to solve issues of such complexity, but Palimpseg does add to the debate and raise ideas at times with surprisingly effective resonance.

‘Host’ organisations drawn from regional, public and commercial galleries, art schools and community-based agencies, were invited to develop their own regional projects under the aegis of Murray Darling Palimpseg. 13 hosts and 75 artists were involved. Warwick Art Gallery, Balonne River Gallery in Queensland, Moss Vale, West Darling and Mungo in NSW, The Australian National University art school in
EDWINA KEARNEY, EARTH/HEARTH (INSTALLATION VIEW) 2003,
MALLEE ROOTS & STAINLESS STEEL WIRE
MILDURA PALIMPSEST #5
THIS
GARDEN
DOES NOT
WHET
YOUR
APPETITE
BUT
QUENCHES
IT

IAN MARR, EPICUREAN PILLAR STONE
(INSTALLATION VIEW) 2002
CARVED MINTARO SLATE, MILDURA PALIMPSEST #5
Canberra, Swan Hill, Mildura Arts Centre and Gallery 25/La Trobe University in Victoria and Alexandrina City Council Murray Bridge, Berri and the Palmer group in South Australia, ensured that the project has wide coverage.

Queensland artist, Yvette Burge, for example, created and documented an installation called *Flow signal* which was floated at various sites along the course of the Dalyrmple Creek, Condamine, Balonne, Darling and Murray rivers progressively increasing in scale in proportion to the body of water travelled through. Re-cycled timber was used, assembled to form three large floating circles of red, amber and green colour. The installation embodies the symbolism of the traffic light and therefore reference control of flow.

The Project manager of the 2006 Murray Darling Palimpsest event, Ian Hamilton wrote about the launch of the Palmer project in South Australia in August of that year, 'yesterday was the opening of the palmer leg of the Murray Darling Palimpsest project. And what an experience it was. Situated on the eastern escarpment of the Adelaide
RODNEY SPOONER, PUMPHOUSE, 1999
Hills, with views across the Murray River flats, the Palmer property is rugged and extremely exhausting to walk over. To get to the eight artworks involved a great deal of climbing, scampering over rocks and across gullies. This was not like entering a gallery where you could leave after a few minutes; this was commitment! And it all added to an experience not to be missed. This, I felt, is what Murray Darling palimpsest is all about. The artworks were mostly ephemeral, ranging from Anthony Hamilton’s sheep skins draped over rocks like lichen to David Kerr’s spiralling rock wall. Some one hundred people made the one and half hour drive from Adelaide to participate in this event. Walking across the scape I encountered old friends and met strangers who directed me to hidden artworks. Conversations were struck up and critical observations made.

And the artworks? Some lay silently on the earth while others seemed to float gently above it. Others made soft sounds of broken oaks that could not compete with the wind that blew across that barren land. When I left, four hours later, there were still cars arriving along the dusty dirt road from palmer’
Murray Darling Palimpsest # 7 is set for September, 2008, badged under the conceptual theme of displacement. Water displaced through excessive use, through to the ultimate displacement of people as well.

In concluding this presentation, I would like to make reference to the 2003 novel by Adelaide author, Peter Goldsworthy, 'three dog night'. The title euphemistically refers to the Australian bush analogy of the degree of warmth required to survive a cold desert night. Goldsworthy plays with a Palimpsest space. In three dog night, the fictional character, Martin Blackman returns with his new wife Lucy, to Adelaide after 10 years away, and is reconciled with an old friend, Felix, once a brilliant surgeon, now barred from practicing and changed beyond recognition. In a complex triangle of events, the three begin the darkest of all journeys. Layered with 'Goldsworthy disquiet', the human capacity for love, jealousy, retribution, forgiveness, deception and fidelity are palimpsested over a journey to a mythic waterhole, only accessible through Warlpiri Aboriginal trackless desert country. This
INSTALLATION VIEW, 2001, AURORA PACKING SHED, RED CLIFFS
FOREGROUND: CAROLYN SANDERS, 18 MONTHS IN MILDURA, WALKING MOSTLY.
MILDURA PALIMPSEST #4
journey into empty space at the edge of unconsciousness, is both the navel of creation and the arsehole of the world. As Goldsworthy writes, ‘the oasis is a sinkhole of carrion, a stinking oubliette, a doorway into hell’

As Felix is granted his wish, ie ‘to die at the void’ although in reality the void is nothing more than a cesspit, Goldsworthy is able to dream places into being.

This approach of layering human aspiration over the metaphor of place and space is an ambition shared at least with Murray Darling Palimpsest.