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**Critical Wonder: Lynette Wallworth's art in the age of spectacle and socially engaged practice**

**ABSTRACT**

In contemporary art theory, much has been written about collaborative and socially engaged artistic practices, and their relationship to spectacle. The use of spectacle in contemporary art is frequently viewed pejoratively, connoting a waning of critical potential and the pacification of the audience. Australian artist Lynette Wallworth, however, shows that these two tendencies in contemporary art do not necessarily need to be so polarised. For the last two decades, Wallworth has synthesised a research-based, socially engaged practice with a commitment to creating spectacular multimedia experiences that engage the viewer critically and affectively. Through consideration of Wallworth's practice from early interactive pieces to more recent ambitious, immersive projects, this article explores how she sympathetically engages both her collaborators and her spectators, while still maintaining her own clear authorial voice. Her proficient use of new media technologies generates the possibility of 'critical wonder' in her audience, by activating curiosity, self-awareness and criticality via aesthetic, emotive and sensorial modes. Wallworth's practice thinks beyond common understandings of spectacle—and its critique—within art history, to consider how spectacular effects or approaches can be used to speak critically about topics *other* than spectacle itself.

In Australian artist Lynette Wallworth's installation *Hold: Vessel 1* (2001), a dark gallery is punctuated by columns of gently coloured light.<sup>1</sup> Their immaterial presence imbues the gallery with extra architectural dimensions and spatial markers. This initial simplicity seems reminiscent of works by James Turrell or Anthony McCall, artists who understand the 'sculptural' possibilities of light and the desires of audiences to interact with their ethereal spectacles. As *Hold's* title suggests, the installation also includes a centrally tactile component. Visitors interact with the light by holding large glass bowls under each luminous column (fig. 1). This reveals them

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<sup>1</sup> My sincere thanks to Lynette Wallworth for taking the time to speak with me about this research, and to Sarah Tutton for introducing us. My development of this article benefitted greatly from early discussions with a number of people, especially Tim Alves, Alison Bennett, Samuel Harvey and David Wlazlo. Thank you to the two anonymous reviewers whose feedback and suggestions have been extremely valuable. Finally, my thanks to the editors of *emaj* for their support, especially Helen Hughes and Giles Fielke.

as not shafts of pure light, but rather projections of moving images. In order to 'catch' the image, the viewer must adjust their posture to find the sweet spot of focus, whereby the bowls fill almost magically with colourful images of corals and underwater life, which were developed by Wallworth with cinematographers filming on the Great Barrier Reef (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> Art critic Bruce James eloquently describes the experience as 'like fossicking for stars', capturing the sense of surprise and wonder that *Hold* often evokes.<sup>3</sup> This inversion and synthesis of looking downwards and upwards, inwards and outwards, characterises much of Wallworth's ongoing practice and informs my argument in this article. Over the last two decades, Wallworth has developed a distinctive and skilful creative practice, creating works ranging from traditional documentary films to multi-sensory installations and immersive cinematic experiences; however, she remains under-represented and under-discussed within Australian art history and theory.<sup>4</sup>

This relative lack of critical attention makes this article a timely contribution to Australia's contemporary art discourses, because Wallworth synthesises ideas around spectacle and socially engaged art in ways that few artists have been able to achieve. Drawing on work done in this arena by Claire Bishop, Mark Godfrey and others, I argue that Wallworth's practice represents an alternative way to approach these highly debated discourses, and the binaries that are frequently inscribed within such debates. In particular, Wallworth's practice helps us think beyond common understandings of spectacle—and its critique—within art history, to consider how spectacular effects or approaches can be used to speak critically about topics *other* than spectacle itself. I consider Wallworth's early pieces as well as recent works including *Collisions* (2015) and *Coral: Rekindling Venus* (2012) to explore how she sympathetically engages both her collaborators and spectators. As such, I argue that her work opens spaces for wonder, which can provoke curiosity, empathy, self-awareness and criticality in her audience. Wallworth does this not simply through her collaborative actions but by also insisting on her own authorial position. Crucially, it is her use of new media

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<sup>2</sup> Mooney, 2008, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup> James, 2001, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Of the few peer-reviewed articles or book chapters that discuss Wallworth's work most consider her practice in relation to other topics, rather than singularly. See Barrett and Millner (2014), McFadzean (2012), Nicholls (2013) and Rey (2016). Most reviews or short articles have appeared in local art and film magazines such as *Art & Australia*, *Artlink* and *Metro*. See Edmunds (2009), Kemp (2009), Mooney (2008), Schenkel (2015), Snell (2008), Walker (2009).

technologies, with their haptic and aesthetic capacities, that generates the possibility of 'critical wonder' as a mode of viewer engagement.

### **Lynette Wallworth's multimedia practice**

On the surface, the relative lack of academic recognition of Wallworth's work may connect to her presumed status as a 'new media artist'.<sup>5</sup> As Claire Bishop has observed, the so-called realms of new media art rarely overlap into the mainstream contemporary art world.<sup>6</sup> Wallworth in fact began her creative practice as a photographer, however, since the late 1990s she has worked primarily with video, interactive and media art. Wallworth says that the switch in practice was motivated by a gap she felt in the exhibition of her photography. She 'wanted a more direct relationship with the viewer' and, when combined with her longstanding interest in science and technology, she saw the possibility for this in interactive art forms.<sup>7</sup> Another pivotal moment was a performance that she wrote and staged in the early 1990s at Sydney's Performance Space, titled *God, the Doctor and the Impossible Body*. The performance involved seven female performers and a set that Wallworth describes as being like an on-stage installation space. From this experience, Wallworth took the idea of transplanting the performative space into a gallery setting and replacing the performers with the viewers.<sup>8</sup> This early example shows Wallworth's central creative desire to place her viewers in the middle of her artworks.

In a short but insightful article, Kristy Edmunds describes her own experience of Wallworth's practice: '[h]aving trained as a filmmaker, I immediately recognised the degree of commitment Wallworth [has] in gathering ... footage: the patience, the stillness, the pure knowledge of location'.<sup>9</sup> Wallworth's work is highly cinematic, not just through the visual elements that Edmunds identifies, but also in her commitment to narrative and storytelling. While she exhibits extensively within spaces of the visual arts, her practice is characterised by populist elements that have arguably fallen out of favour in contemporary art history and theory: beauty (often linked to seduction

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<sup>5</sup> Since 2017, the commercial success of *Collisions* (which, amongst other accolades, won an Emmy Award) has meant that Wallworth has received significant press coverage. However, detailed analysis in academic and scholarly contexts still lags.

<sup>6</sup> Bishop, 2012b, np.

<sup>7</sup> Wallworth, 2017, np: Telephone discussion with author, 30 March 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Wallworth, 2017, np.

<sup>9</sup> Edmunds, 2009, p. 655.

or aestheticisation),<sup>10</sup> interactive technologies (often perceived as gimmicky),<sup>11</sup> and immersion (linked to spectacle).<sup>12</sup> These key elements of her practice have complicated (and perhaps overshadowed) how her works have been viewed by the contemporary art world.

Yet Wallworth's practice also consistently involves a high engagement with social and environmental concerns. In this sense, she straddles the boundaries between two of contemporary art's most analysed and polarised tendencies: the use of spectacle, and the rise of participatory and socially engaged artistic practice. Claire Bishop acknowledges the opposition and binary distinction that is often reinforced between these two dominant artistic modes, stating that 'spectacle is the backdrop to which all discussions of collective production and reception of art are staged'.<sup>13</sup> In her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), Bishop argues against the unhelpful binaries often established in current discourses, including between "active" and "passive" spectatorship, and—more recently—the false polarity of "bad" singular authorship and "good" collective authorship'.<sup>14</sup> Instead, she advocates for artistic responses that maintain tension, antagonism and discomfort between these dichotomies. Such antagonistic approaches are often powerful and confronting; however, in Wallworth's practice we can observe an alternative mode of engagement, which synthesises and draws together elements from both sides of these binary oppositions. It is a balance that few artists achieve, offering us important opportunities to think *beyond* spectacle—or at least, beyond the ways that contemporary art history and theory predominantly consider and appraise spectacle.

Wallworth's practice contributes interesting questions within discourses around socially engaged practice, politics of representation and the spectacularisation of art and entertainment. In an interview with Peter Sellars, she is described as having 'built a career making art that gives voice to the truly excluded'.<sup>15</sup> An enormous amount has been written on 'socially engaged' art in recent years, and as Bishop acknowledges

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<sup>10</sup> Godfrey argues that 'some critics would associate these features [beauty and seduction] with collapse of all criticality'. Godfrey, 2007, np.

<sup>11</sup> What Nicolas Bourriaud terms "Nokia art". Simpson, 2001, p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Bishop, 2007, np.

<sup>13</sup> Bishop, 2007, np.

<sup>14</sup> Bishop, 2012a, p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Mooney, 2008, p. 82.

these practices assume myriad names—community-based, dialogic, interventionist, collaborative, contextual, research-based, and participatory art (which is Bishop’s key focus). These definitions frequently merge and overlap with each other, and Wallworth’s practice includes elements of all of these; however, it is her combination of collaborative and interactive characteristics that prevail. Wallworth approaches her subjects as fellow ‘collaborators’, and for Edmunds this reflects her ‘creative intent [as] directly linked to the ethical representation of the people she shoots’.<sup>16</sup> These relations are often also linked to specific place and country, and to this extent Wallworth’s approach resonates with Claire Doherty’s definition of the situation, whereby ‘the roles of artists have become redefined as mediators, creative thinkers and agitators, leading to increased opportunities for longer-term engagement between an artist and a given group of people...or situation’.<sup>17</sup>

Ethics is not, however, the only criteria by which Wallworth’s works demand to be evaluated. Through her use of interactive and multimedia technologies she extends the collaborative engagement between artist and subject to also include her audience’s experience and engagement. Her works are almost always experiential, interactive and multi-sensorial constructions. From the audience’s perspective they are less participatory and more interactive, but nonetheless they precisely address and involve their viewers. The way that she integrates her collaborative research and her attunement to the aesthetic and interactive possibilities of presentation combines to form a sense of reciprocity so characteristic of her practice. This reciprocity exists between artist and subject, *and* between artist, subject and viewer. When visitors hold the glass bowls in *Hold*, for example, it is not possible to ‘capture’ the entirety of the images projected. The bowls’ shapes mean that images spill over their edges, disappearing and reappearing as the viewer moves and adjusts their stance. This element gives *Hold* an impression of expansion, impermanence and flux, forcing viewers to delicately search through the imagery presented, and engage in a process of discovery and rediscovery on an intimate scale. The viewer is always involved and

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<sup>16</sup> Edmunds, 2009, p. 659.

<sup>17</sup> Doherty, 2004, p.10. Such open-ended engagements have only increased for Wallworth in recent years. *Collisions* was developed out of ongoing collaborations between the artist and members of the Martu community. Furthermore, upon the international release of the film, Wallworth was contacted by the indigenous Amazonian Yawanawá people and invited to create a follow up virtual reality film with them, *Awavena* (2018).

implicated in Wallworth's works, not through strident didacticism or antagonism, but by creating spaces that are precisely crafted to address viewers instinctively and emotively. Wallworth is as attuned to her spectators as she is to her direct collaborators; it is this dynamic that opens the possibility of generating 'critical wonder' in her audience, activating criticality via aesthetic, emotive and sensorial modes.

I will unpack these qualities of collaboration, reciprocity and critical wonder later in this article, in relation to Wallworth's most recent and ambitious projects. However, these qualities are evident in much of her early practice, including in a duo of works that she made in the mid-2000s—*Invisible by Night* (2004) and *Evolution of Fearlessness* (2007)—both involving subjects who are marked by grief and trauma.<sup>18</sup> The two pieces resemble each other, both including life-sized screens in which figures emerge from a blue background when visitors touch the screens' surfaces. In *Invisible by Night*, a woman is seen slowly pacing, her figure slightly obscured behind a sheen of condensation. The visitor's touch beckons the figure forward, and as she wipes away a strip of mist it becomes clear that she is in mourning. Viewer and subject are brought face to face in an intimate setting, facilitated by a simple yet instinctive gesture.<sup>19</sup> In a review of the artwork's original installation at the Melbourne Festival, Jeff Khan writes that it 'overcame its weighty, potentially didactic proposition to create a subtle, understated work. The open-ended nature of the encounter left ample space for viewers to locate themselves within the work as participants, thereby aligning the social and historical with the personal'.<sup>20</sup> In these early works Wallworth crafts deceptively simple experiences that are in fact highly engineered to facilitate the audience's own performativity.<sup>21</sup>

Although inspired by specific people, *Invisible by Night* does not reveal the reason for the woman's mourning.<sup>22</sup> Its companion piece, *Evolution of Fearlessness*, extends this encounter to focus more on resilience than on the immediacy of grief. Wallworth

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<sup>18</sup> Mooney, 2008, p. 85.

<sup>19</sup> The work is made up of seven separate, randomly triggered films.

<sup>20</sup> Khan, 2004, np.

<sup>21</sup> Wallworth, 2017, np.

<sup>22</sup> The work connects to specific histories. It was originally installed at Federation Square, one of Melbourne's busiest public spaces, which was once the site of Melbourne's first morgue. Mooney, 2008, p. 85.

worked with eleven displaced women, most of them political refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, El Salvador, Greece and Senegal.<sup>23</sup> The final installation is composed of two elements. Based on her meetings with each woman, Wallworth wrote accounts of their stories which were included in a single booklet for viewers to read in the installation. On the screen nearby a patch of smoke or haze beckons the visitor to touch it, triggering one of the video portraits that Wallworth created with each participant. Each woman is filmed in the same way—emerging from the image’s shadowy middle ground, she walks towards the camera and raises her hand, mirroring the visitor’s own pose (fig. 3). *Evolution of Fearlessness* stages the act of meeting as an encounter that is both impactful and fleeting.

Like the sculptural lights in *Hold*, *Evolution of Fearlessness* is tightly choreographed and economically staged, working through the relationship between text and video.<sup>24</sup> The women’s stories are concise and the video portraits are only a few minutes long. There is a pared-back simplicity to *Evolution of Fearlessness* that belies the technological dexterity and interpersonal connections that have constructed it. Like much of her practice, this piece was borne out of relationships developed over time, however, these research processes are not overtly exhibited in the installation. Other than the written account and the video, no further documentation is included. As a work of art made using other people’s stories, it both represents its participants and it provides context. Yet, there is no guarantee that the story that the visitor last reads will correspond to the figure they encounter onscreen. This sense of chance, combined with the women’s common gestures, creates interplays between repetition and difference, between both the commonalities and uniqueness of these women’s experiences.

*Evolution of Fearlessness* poetically reveals the processes of its collaborative creation without disavowing authorship or sacrificing aesthetic drives. The relationships between Wallworth and the eleven women are clearly evident, but not through detailed documentation of process. Rather, these relations are distilled and crystallised into the concise stories and simple gestures that make up the installation. This strategy has the double effect of opening space for the viewer in an immersive, emotive and

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<sup>23</sup> Mooney, 2008, p. 86.

<sup>24</sup> Edmunds, 2009, p. 656.

tactile experience. *Evolution of Fearlessness* literally features the hands of the subjects and the hands of the visitors. Wallworth foregrounds these two elements and does not overtly include her own personal, self-conscious reflections on the process. However, her artist's hand *also* remains present through the precision of her aesthetic and experiential choices. Wallworth's artistic touch is light, but it is deft and central to her practice. When combined with the subjects and stories that she approaches, this light but technically adept touch often makes her installations highly memorable. They linger in the memory, a key characteristic that makes possible criticality and self-awareness in their spectators.

### **Spectacle and social engagement in contemporary art**

Since these early works Wallworth has made pieces across various media, including interactive video works such as *Still: Waiting 2* (2006) and *Duality of Light* (2009); the three-channel video *Damavand Mountain* (2006); a commissioned installation for Melbourne's Immigration Museum, *Welcome* (2011); the feature documentary *Tender* (2013); a multi-part collaboration with Martu women *Still Walking Country* (2012) and *Always Walking Country* (2013); *Coral: Rekindling Venus* (2012), which uses immersive planetarium experiences; and her most recent virtual reality film *Collisions* (2015). Covering all of these works is beyond the scope of this article, so I will focus the remainder of this article on the final two examples, because they represent some of the most developed ways that Wallworth synthesises aesthetics, spectacle and socially engaged practices.

My opening discussion reveals how Wallworth's practice is guided by strategies of reciprocity, between herself, her subjects and her spectators. These experiences and relationships are made explicitly possible through her use of new media and interactive technologies. She creates immersive, interactive and multi-sensory environments, and her precise interplays between darkness and light are highly theatrical. Her works are technically proficient, spectator-focused, and visually stunning. Indeed, Wallworth's pieces are often described as 'spectacular' or 'seductive'; writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, Kenneth Turan describes *Coral: Rekindling Venus* as 'immersive cinema at its most spectacular'.<sup>25</sup> Film critic Turan

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<sup>25</sup> Turan, 2013, p. D1. See also Dethridge, 2016.

uses 'spectacular' as a positive descriptor, however, in art critical discourses the opposite is more often the case. Thus, before investigating Wallworth's practice further, it is important to sketch out some of the discussions and discourses around spectacle in contemporary art, and its relation to socially engaged practice.

Particularly since Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's influential response to Harald Szeemann's 2001 Venice Biennale, spectacle has been a keenly debated topic in contemporary art history and criticism, often assuming pejorative connotations.<sup>26</sup> Art critic Maureen Mullarkey writes of Wallworth's *Hold* that, despite its compelling content, it 'shrinks every miracle to a spectacle'.<sup>27</sup> Wallworth's works have been compared both favourably<sup>28</sup> and unfavourably<sup>29</sup> to contemporaries such as Bill Viola—an artist regarded as the *sine qua non* of the 'totalizing claims' of visual spectacle in contemporary art, and a particular target of Buchloh's critique.<sup>30</sup> For Jacques Rancière, the "critique of the spectacle" often remains the alpha and omega of the "politics of art".<sup>31</sup> Charles Green and Anthony Gardner have related the increase of spectacular art forms (such as expansive video installations and large-format photography) and the growth of institutions needed to adequately exhibit such works, to what they term the 'biennialization' of today's contemporary art landscape, 'irrevocably tied to the spectacle culture of neoliberalism'.<sup>32</sup>

Due to its co-option by neoliberal ideologies, spectacle often makes the art world anxious. This is largely rooted in an intellectual tradition following Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord, which views spectacle as aestheticising political action and protest, thus neutralising the effectiveness of activism.<sup>33</sup> In relation to the 'social turn' in art, Bishop argues that Debord's critique in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) has been a seductive one for progressive art critics because it 'rehumanises a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production [and entertainment culture]'.<sup>34</sup> However, one of the consequences of a Debordian focus on

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<sup>26</sup> Buchloh, 2001, p. 163. See also Schjeldahl, 1999.

<sup>27</sup> Mullarkey, 2008, np.

<sup>28</sup> Snell, 2008, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, 2008, np.

<sup>30</sup> Buchloh, 2001, p. 163.

<sup>31</sup> Rancière, 2009, p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> Green and Gardner, 2016, p. xiii–xv.

<sup>33</sup> Groys, 2014, np.

<sup>34</sup> Bishop, 2012a, p. 11.

the spectacle is an overriding assumption that spectacular images and experiences innately pacify their audience. Mark Godfrey argues that there is a widespread belief that the spectacularisation of contemporary artworks, exhibitions or institutions necessarily leads to a 'waning of critical potential'.<sup>35</sup> As such, many critiques of spectacle and socially engaged or participatory art frequently reinscribe a binary distinction between active and passive spectators.

Critical anxiety around spectacle in contemporary art is also, by extension, anxiety around the popularisation of contemporary art practices. For Jacqueline Millner, 'anxiety still surrounds artworks that too actively court public attention through their popular-culture strategies and modes of address, in particular through pleasure and spectacle'.<sup>36</sup> These critical anxieties lead to situations where certain types of audience engagement are prioritised. Projects that revolve around overt physical collaboration and participation are held up and commended for 'activating' their viewers, while projects that engage their audience visually through popular, accessible or pleasurable viewing experiences are presumed to still produce 'passive' viewers. There are problematic implications at play here; in particular, the presumption that if something is enjoyable to watch or interact with, it must also be pacifying and, by extension, uncritical. As Bishop further observes, these distinctions reflect deeper presumptions that spectators with less developed skills in visual literacy 'can only engage physically, while the middle classes have the leisure to think and critically reflect'.<sup>37</sup>

A number of art critics and theorists, including Millner and Godfrey, have challenged assumptions that spectacle, when deployed in contemporary art, inevitably equates to a waning of critical potential. Millner argues convincingly for the possibility of 'critical spectacle' in the large-scale video installations of Russian collective AES+F, writing that 'artworks that employ these [spectacular] aesthetic strategies can also effectively critique the socially alienating aspects of the society of the spectacle itself'.<sup>38</sup> Godfrey proposes a number of categorisations of arts practice that function similarly, including 'self-critical spectacles' (in the work of artists like Christian Marclay, Spencer Finch and Gabriel Orozco) and 'spectacular art against the society

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<sup>35</sup> Godfrey, 2007, np.

<sup>36</sup> Millner, 2011, p. 99.

<sup>37</sup> Bishop, 2012a, p. 38.

<sup>38</sup> Millner, 2011, p. 103.

of the spectacle' (in Pierre Huyghe's practice). Both Millner and Godfrey advocate for the potential of artists and artworks to '[construct] novel forms of spectatorship' that engage the audience critically through cognitive and affective means.<sup>39</sup> While both critique the Debordian passive spectator as an 'outmoded' construct,<sup>40</sup> they are limited in the lengths to which they pursue the critical possibilities of spectacle, both focusing their critiques and reassessments on artworks that turn spectacle *against* itself.<sup>41</sup> In other words, they focus primarily on artworks that use spectacular means to critique spectacle culture.

I do not disagree with their positions put forward, particularly the belief in the potential for spectacle to engage and produce active spectators. However, we can go further and consider the possibilities of using spectacle to critically talk about things *other than* spectacle culture itself. The focus on Debordian passivity in art theoretical discourses—even when it is considered as an antagonist or straw man—can foreclose any broader or alternate thinking of spectacular art that operates via processes such as wonder, affect, pleasure or the haptic. It is at this juncture that an artistic practice like Lynette Wallworth's becomes of interest. Wallworth works *with* spectacle, not against it, in order to go beyond spectacle as 'topic' and talk about non-spectacular subjects and stories. She balances the affective and engaging possibilities of spectacle culture with a socially conscious and engaged practice that acknowledges and reciprocally respects the roles of subject, artist and viewer.

### ***Collisions: Storytelling and authorship through virtual reality***

Wallworth's most recent projects, including her immersive film *Collisions*, are key examples in this balancing act. *Collisions* is a seventeen-minute virtual reality film shot in the Western Australian Pilbara desert. It is a platform for Martu elder Nyarri Nyarri Morgan to tell his story of unexpectedly witnessing the British Government's atomic tests on Maralinga Tjarutja lands in the early 1950s (fig. 4). The project emerged out of experiences and connections that Wallworth developed over a number of years. She first visited Maralinga in 2001 as part of her involvement in the *Desert Oaks* program of the 2002 Adelaide Festival, controversially directed by Peter

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<sup>39</sup> Millner, 2011, p. 99.

<sup>40</sup> Millner, 2011, p. 102; Godfrey, 2007, np.

<sup>41</sup> Millner, 2011, p. 110.

Sellars.<sup>42</sup> *Desert Oaks* involved the 'remote' Aboriginal community of Oak Valley, located on the southern fringe of the Great Victoria Desert on Maralinga Tjarutja Lands, which was established in 1985 as a community outstation for the Anangu people displaced from the Maralinga Lands for the atomic tests.<sup>43</sup> Wallworth visited the community as part of this multi-collaborator festival project, which included Anangu stories and paintings responding to the history of atomic tests, as well as the community's efforts to reclaim their lands.<sup>44</sup> Wallworth's connection to Maralinga also precedes this collaborative project, to what she describes as the 'first collision'. Wallworth worked as a researcher on Robert Hughes' documentary *Australia: Beyond the Fatal Shore* (2000); becoming more involved after Hughes' near-fatal car accident in Western Australia in 1999, one of her contributions was to research a story involving a Maralinga veteran.<sup>45</sup> Thus the title of *Collisions* is a reference to this broader personal and Australian artistic lineage, as well as Nyarri Nyarri Morgan's story.

In 2010, Wallworth was invited by Martu artists to work with them in connection with *We Don't Need a Map: A Martu Experience of the Western Desert* (2013), an ambitious exhibition developed by the Fremantle Arts Centre, Kanyirninpa Jukurrpa and Martumili Artists.<sup>46</sup> Wallworth collaborated with Martu women and produced a number of works including *Still Walking Country: Ngalaju nyurri parra yarnkuni—we are here, still walking around* (2012) and *Always Walking Country: Parnngurr Yarrkalpa* (2013).<sup>47</sup> Given her previous experience at Maralinga, Wallworth was introduced to Morgan through his wife and Martu artist Ngalangka Nola Taylor. Morgan's story is one of collision, displacement and survival. Born in Myirr Myirr, he spent his early life walking around the tri-state area with his family.<sup>48</sup> His first contact with European people and technologies was an almost unimaginably overwhelming one: Morgan was in the Maralinga area at the time when the British Government was testing atomic weapons and, without any warning, he witnessed and

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<sup>42</sup> Sellars' tenure found controversy due to his programming choices and use of an image of Adolf Hitler in an advertising campaign. The board of directors forced Sellars' resignation only four months before the festival was due to open.

<sup>43</sup> Oak Valley Aboriginal Community, nd, <http://maralingatjarutja.com/community.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> Wallworth, 2017, np.

<sup>45</sup> Wallworth, 2017, np.

<sup>46</sup> Rey, 2016, p. 46.

<sup>47</sup> See Rey, 2016. The project also features Anohni, from Antony and the Johnsons.

<sup>48</sup> Collisions, 'The Team', 2016, np.

survived a nuclear test. Morgan's story reveals the immediate, earth-shattering impact of the atomic tests and also the devastating (and ongoing) after-effects. The nuclear fall-out killed and contaminated the region's flora and fauna, poisoned the water, and had lasting effects on Aboriginal people like Morgan and his family who were present in the area.

Morgan's story is a simple but powerful one. Thus it is reasonable to ask, why the need for virtual reality to tell it? To answer this, we need to consider some of the preconceptions and common usages of virtual reality technologies. Sitting at the apex of immersive experiences, virtual reality technologies are experiencing a surge in interest. This is due in part to the development of platforms like Oculus Rift and iPhone-enabled headsets that allow for a less physically cumbersome experience than their predecessors. Despite a history that extends back to the 1990s, contemporary virtual reality technology is still in development. As virtual reality designer Daniel Fraga writes, 'it is hard to find VR [virtual reality] content that doesn't derive at least some of its value from the technological novelty that the medium represents'.<sup>49</sup> For Fraga and others, the novelty value of virtual reality remains present, which limits the development of modes of creative expression that is 'truly native to the medium'.<sup>50</sup>

Rather than being limiting for Wallworth, though, this novelty aligns with a key characteristic of her practice: while she has always embraced new technologies, she does not succumb to gimmicky applications of them.<sup>51</sup> Nor is her use of new technologies motivated by a desire to explore their capabilities at the level of 'medium-specificity', which is what Fraga's comments imply. Instead, Wallworth's use of new technologies is always at the service of the story being told and the engagement of the viewer in that story. This approach is not without its difficulties, particularly when it comes to foregrounding narrative in a medium like virtual reality which is geared towards expanding fields of spatial and affective experience. Indeed, gaming theorist Brenda Laurel argues that '[of] the many uses to which VR may be put, explicit narrative storytelling is one of the least effective'.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Fraga, 2016, np.

<sup>50</sup> Fraga, 2016, np.

<sup>51</sup> Edmunds, 2009, p. 656.

<sup>52</sup> Laurel, 2016, np.

In *Collisions*, Wallworth constructs a delicate balancing act between many competing and complex priorities. As an outsider to the Martu community, Wallworth regularly acknowledges that she needed to be invited in.<sup>53</sup> She uses virtual reality as a means of extending the invitation to a broader audience, many of whom would have no prior connection to Martu knowledge and culture. Kristy Edmunds' observation that Wallworth 'frames a first-person experience for the viewer'<sup>54</sup> applies pertinently to *Collisions*. Wallworth deploys the spectacle of virtual reality gently but efficiently, amplifying but not overwhelming the intensely personal nature of the story.<sup>55</sup> Wallworth foregrounds Morgan's presence in the project, emphasising that *Collisions* is, self-evidently, *his* story. He was involved centrally in the creative decisions of filming, as the key agent who 'decided what was seen and what was not to be seen, what was told and what was not told'.<sup>56</sup>

In her discussion of Wallworth's earlier collaborations with Martu artists, Una Rey makes a comparable point, saying that there is 'a perceivable disavowal of authorship in Wallworth's pronouncements'.<sup>57</sup> However, I would also argue that while Wallworth is undoubtedly 'sensitive to the scrutiny applied to cross-cultural engagements',<sup>58</sup> this disavowal of authorship is neither total nor entirely necessary. Claire Bishop identifies the abrogation of authorship as a dominant characteristic amongst contemporary collaborative and socially engaged arts practices. While Bishop does not deny the need for consensual dialogue in such artist projects, she argues that when this is the exclusive focus of the projects' production (and reception), these desires can create a situation where 'sensitivity to difference risks becoming a new kind of repressive norm',<sup>59</sup> limiting the ways that such projects are conceived of (and critiqued) on *artistic* terms. The danger that Bishop sees in this discourse is that 'artistic strategies of disruption, intervention or over-identification [become] immediately ruled out as "unethical" because all forms of authorship are equated with

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<sup>53</sup> Wallworth, 2017, np; Dethridge, 2016.

<sup>54</sup> Edmunds, 2009, p. 655.

<sup>55</sup> Morgan and his family are the central loci of the film. While it begins with Wallworth narrating, it soon shifts to Morgan telling his story with his grandson Curtis Taylor translating.

<sup>56</sup> *Collisions*, 'The Film', 2016, np.

<sup>57</sup> Rey, 2016, p. 45.

<sup>58</sup> Rey, 2016, p. 45.

<sup>59</sup> Bishop, 2012a, p. 25.

authority and indicted as totalising. Such a denigration of authorship allows simplistic oppositions to remain in place'.<sup>60</sup>

Bishop counters this over-emphasised consensual discourse by arguing that discordant experiences, such as 'unease, discomfort or frustration—along with fear, contradiction, exhilaration and absurdity'—also have an important role to play in socially engaged artistic practice. Bishop's argument in *Artificial Hells* continues her longstanding predilection towards the antagonistic efficacy and criticality of contemporary art.<sup>61</sup> However, in Wallworth's practice we can observe another approach based neither on pure consensus nor overt antagonism. Wallworth's unique authorship comes through in her use of technologies and her ability to synthesise them with the needs and agencies of the stories being told. As well as understanding the nuances required in cross-cultural collaborations, she also comprehends how spectacle facilitates an immediacy of engagement for the spectators. Her role as author and director of *Collisions* is to manage and enhance the possibilities of both subject representation and audience engagement.

Wallworth achieves this by deploying spectacle strategically and with restraint. *Collisions* is not about 'becoming' another person or adopting someone else's subject position (which virtual reality technologies certainly make possible). Rather, *Collisions* facilitates an embodied sense of being immediately present for a story—an immediacy made possible through the technology. Virtual reality not only enables Wallworth to capture Morgan telling his story, its immersive qualities also emphasise to viewers how that story derives its impact and significance by being told from a vantage point surrounded by country. One of the key qualities of virtual reality, as opposed to cinema or theatre, is that viewers do not simply watch movement but they feel and experience the movement through (virtual) space. In *Collisions*, this movement is slow and restrained; there is no 'whizzing through' vast landscapes, theme-park style. Wallworth relies instead on the panoramic qualities of virtual reality, often restricting the viewers' position to a defined vantage point which can be explored in 360 degrees but not fully entered into (fig. 5). This is the case with the moment that recreates the atomic explosion. It is undeniably spectacular and dramatic,

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<sup>60</sup> Bishop, 2012a, p. 25.

<sup>61</sup> Bishop, 2004.

as is the aftermath of radioactive ash coating the expansive landscape. Yet, as viewers our vantage point is restricted, and the animations that recreate the scene of destruction are not completely photo-realistic. This moment addresses its viewers on an affective level, but it simultaneously acknowledges the deeper unknowability of this experience and the inadequacies of representing such traumas. It connects to Dominick LaCapra's discussions about the productive use of empathy in representations of trauma that 'puts oneself in the other's position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place'.<sup>62</sup> As viewers, we are invited into an immersive world, country that many Australians would not have visited in person, yet the detached vantage points insist that we remain visitors.

*Collisions* combines these elements of historical drama of Morgan's story with ongoing Martu cultural knowledge and custodianship of the land. Most telling is the contrast between the charred, post-atomic test landscape and one of the final scenes that pictures Morgan burning spinifex grass, as a means of maintenance and regeneration. Shot with a virtual reality camera mounted on a drone (fig. 6), this sequence elevates the spectators to a viewing position high above the smouldering landscape and moves them slowly over the unfolding scene. By swivelling in their chairs, viewers can track the path of the burning, and in doing so they (perhaps unwittingly) experience a moment that synthesises past, present and future. The traumatic effects of colonial violence (towards land and people) is palpably contrasted with an ongoing culture and tradition of maintenance of the land for future generations. *Collisions* not only presents Martu knowledge to its viewers, it also mirrors Martu cultural codes of representation. It connects back to a 3 x 5 metre canvas titled *Yarrkalpa (Hunting Ground) Scale 1:2500 (or thereabouts)* (2013) that featured in *Still Walking Country*. The artists who created this painting—Kumpaya Girgirba, Yikartu Bumba, Karnu Nancy Taylor, Ngamaru Bidu, Yuwali Janice Nixon, Reena Rogers, Thelma Judson and Ngalangka Nola Taylor—describe their creation as such: 'Like so many Martu paintings, *Yarrkalpa* is not a historical painting. The story it tells is not a history of people leaving their home, but one of people continuing to make their homes in the desert'.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> LaCapra, 2001, p. 78. As Una Rey writes, 'Martu invite the viewer into an empathetic relationship where they might become implicit in, rather than a consumer of, the art object'. Rey, 2016, p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> Girgirba et al., p. 166.

In an interview after the premiere of *Collisions*, Nyarri Nyarri Morgan commented that, ‘I saw the film, my story *Collisions*, and it’s very good. This video, very good, my name and my spirit in that video, in that picture’.<sup>64</sup> I quote this not to indicate a seal of approval. Rather, Morgan’s comments acknowledge that not only has his story been told collaboratively, but it has been retained and transformed through a new medium, embodied in a final artwork that is sensitive to both narrative and aesthetic imperatives. Morgan’s observations further reinforce the dynamic ways in which Wallworth synthesises a number of binary distinctions—such as between singular and collective authorship and the quality and equality of production—that according to commentators like Bishop have characterised discourses around socially engaged and spectacularised contemporary art. From my discussion of *Collisions*, it should be clear that Wallworth’s work is quite far removed from ‘socially oriented art projects ... that claim to reject aesthetic quality, in order to render them more powerful and grant them a place in history’.<sup>65</sup> Wallworth shows us possibilities for engaging both sides of this opposition. In my final section I explore this relationship further, specifically in connection to my contention that Wallworth is *equally* sensitive to the ways that her works engage their audience. In particular, I will argue for the critical potential in the wondrous aspects of her practice.

### **Critical wonder**

Returning to my first discussion of *Hold*, this early piece is one whose ideas, themes and conceptual approaches Wallworth has returned to over her practice, particularly in her 2012 project *Coral: Rekindling Venus*. In *Hold*, viewers gaze down into a concave bowl, revealing scenes of underwater life and extra-terrestrial views. In *Coral*, Wallworth inverts and greatly expands this gaze. The piece is an ambitious one, with multiple components and collaborators. At its core is a film that Wallworth made with footage of mass coral spawning events, and screened in domed planetariums (fig. 7).<sup>66</sup> Developing her longstanding interests in the connections between art and science, aesthetics and technologies, Wallworth collaborated with scientists researching coral biology and the fluorescence of coral reefs in Australia, Papua New Guinea and

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<sup>64</sup> Ash, 2016, np.

<sup>65</sup> Bishop, 2012a, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> She has also shown it in modified domed constructions in galleries as well.

Indonesia. Using this example, I will explore the possibilities for artworks to challenge the assumption of the 'passive' spectator *not* by moving them physically, but by evoking the contemplative and emotional state of wonder.

I will return to discuss *Coral: Rekindling Venus* in more detail shortly. However, what should be clear in my discussion so far is that Wallworth's works are as technically and aesthetically precise as they are socially engaged. They are always visually striking and often very beautiful; however, this use of digital and new media technologies leaves her work open for criticism. The aesthetic and 'awe-inspiring' potentials of digital and new media art have been the locus of prominent critiques. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's criticism of the spectacularisation of contemporary art was specifically connected to the rise of electronic, multimedia practices and the sense of awe, religiosity, 'humanist, if not outright mythical or religious, themes'<sup>67</sup> that they evoke. More recently, Boris Groys has made important connections about the perceived return of the auratic in the art gallery that digital and time-based media have produced.<sup>68</sup> While some recent post-internet art has embraced the chaotic, over-the-top or ugly aesthetic,<sup>69</sup> much contemporary video and media art subscribes to a certain 'high-definition' approach. This is evident in works by artists such as Ryoji Ikeda, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Bill Viola, whose large-scale installations create forms of digital sublime and multimedia beauty.<sup>70</sup>

Contemporary art has had a problematic relationship with beauty. As Arthur C. Danto writes, the development and historicisation of western modernist art involved a trajectory where beauty largely disappeared from the artistic agenda.<sup>71</sup> In the wake of conceptual art, art that is deemed 'too beautiful' (Danto's example is Robert Mapplethorpe) does not qualify for critical endorsement; in the words of poet Bill Berkson, beauty is a 'mangled sodden thing'.<sup>72</sup> If the art world remains suspicious of spectacle, this is also because of spectacle's links to beauty.<sup>73</sup> A case can certainly be

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<sup>67</sup> Buchloh, 2001, p. 163.

<sup>68</sup> Groys, 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Douglas, 2014, np.

<sup>70</sup> Viola has been critiqued particularly heavily. See Buchloh, 2001, p. 163; Young, 1997.

<sup>71</sup> Danto, 2002, p. 37.

<sup>72</sup> In Danto's narrative not only is beauty unfashionable or critically vapid but it is subject to the more morally serious charge of "beautification", or aestheticising trauma. Danto, 2002, pp. 50–1.

<sup>73</sup> Millner, 2011, p. 100; Bishop, 2012a, pp. 26–7.

made for the conservative and technologically determinist underpinnings of artists working in such modes.<sup>74</sup> However, as I have already argued, the assumption that too easily accompanies these critiques is that such experiences serve to wholly mystify and pacify the audience.<sup>75</sup> Bishop notes that frequently the 'answer' to countering the 'passive spectator' is a literal one, to physically activate the audience through participatory projects.<sup>76</sup> Rather than considering the expanded possibilities of an 'active spectator', such approaches can in fact negate the position of the spectator entirely, prioritising 'participants' instead. Yet in other media, such as the cinema, physical engagement is not usually an option: the presupposed passivity of spectators is even more pronounced due to the nature of the apparatus. Despite this, scholars in cinema studies have thoroughly critiqued the figure of the passive spectator, with a number of theorists questioning whether it was ever a useful or viable concept.<sup>77</sup> Such critiques have led to more diverse understandings of the possibilities of critically activating spectators sensorially, emotionally and haptically.

Wallworth's practice often employs multiple spectatorial positions. Works like *Hold* and *Evolution of Fearlessness* do move viewers through space, but in precise and choreographed ways. Pieces like *Collisions* and *Coral: Rekindling Venus* offer forms of virtual movement, while the spectators largely remain in stationary viewing positions. Yet one thing that remains consistent in Wallworth's address to her spectators is her works' ability to generate a sense of wonder. This state of wonder, even if it is experienced by a physically stationary, non-actively collaborating spectator, is not by extension a necessarily passive state. In the history of philosophy going back to the ancient Greeks, wonder has been said to be the state from which philosophy begins.<sup>78</sup> It involves a moment of surprise or astonishment that initiates a curious and intellectual journey. The link between wonder and intellectual or scientific enquiry is crucial one. In his book *Wonder, the Rainbow and the Aesthetics*

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<sup>74</sup> Bishop argues that, for example, Rancière's theories of the politics of aesthetics have 'been co-opted for the defence of wildly differing artistic practices (including a conservative return to beauty)'. Bishop, 2012a, 29.

<sup>75</sup> Bishop, 2012a, pp. 37–8.

<sup>76</sup> Bishop, 2012a, p. 38.

<sup>77</sup> See Carroll, 1988; Mayne, 1993; Sobchack, 1992.

<sup>78</sup> John Llewelyn summarises this philosophical lineage: "Wonder is the only beginning of philosophy", Plato has Socrates say at 155d of the *Theaetetus*. And at 982b of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle says, "it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophise". Llewelyn, 2001, p. 48.

of *Rare Experiences* (1998), Philip Fisher argues that the ‘aesthetics of wonder has to do with a border between sensation and thought, between aesthetics and science’.<sup>79</sup> Fisher contrasts his exploration against the more prominent historical and philosophical interest in the sublime. While both involve experiences of surprise and power, the sublime overwhelms with fear and power while wonder engages the viewer in an ‘aestheticization of delight’ and pleasure.<sup>80</sup>

Through her sensuous and immersive practice, Wallworth aims to engage her viewers by offering possibilities for emotive connections, empathy and wonder. Fisher’s analysis reminds us that these qualities should not be dismissed as purely pacifying or diminished in criticality; rather the pleasurable and delightful elements of wonder are also inextricably linked to critical thinking, in a ‘lively border between an aesthetics of wonder and ... a poetics of thought’.<sup>81</sup> Wallworth uses spectacle and sensuous technologies to amplify these aesthetic and critical potentials. When I first saw footage from *Coral*, my first presumption was that the specimens must somehow have been stained with fluorescent markers in order to achieve the astoundingly vivid colours (fig. 8), but this is not the case. The film depicts the spectacular but poorly understood phenomenon of coral fluorescence and spawning. This is nature’s spectacle writ large—examples of which have become regular fodder for IMAX films and David Attenborough documentaries. While these examples are often associated with conservation movements, they have also been critiqued as glossing over the reality of human impacts and destruction.<sup>82</sup>

In *Coral: Rekindling Venus*, Wallworth presents a work guided by a sense of wonder, in the dual sense of the word. As Fisher writes, in English ‘wonder’ is used as a verb to mean intellectual curiosity (‘I wonder if...’), but also as a noun to denote ‘the pleasure of amazement, that is, wonder taken in the aesthetic sense of admiration, delight in the qualities of a thing’.<sup>83</sup> In English, this connection between pleasure and the ‘poetics of thought’ is preserved,<sup>84</sup> and *Coral* displays a similar logic. The aesthetic pleasures and delights of the work are immediately obvious, as the vivid

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<sup>79</sup> Fisher, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> Fisher, 1998, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> Fisher, 1998, p. 6.

<sup>82</sup> Hughes-Games, 2017, np.

<sup>83</sup> Fisher, 1998, p. 11.

<sup>84</sup> Fisher, 1998, pp. 6–7.

underwater images are projected immersively for viewers in the domed planetariums. Yet these aesthetic wonders that Wallworth presents are derived directly from intellectual wonderings. Wallworth works closely with scientists and researchers, meaning that scientific investigation and inquiry are imbued in the project from the outset. Much of the spectacular footage was provided by Dr Anya Salih, the project's chief scientific advisor and researcher into coral biology at Western Sydney University.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, in a recent discussion with Wallworth, she immediately made the connection to Albert Einstein's own interest in the wondrous, in particular his observation:

The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science. He who knows it not and can no longer wonder, no longer feel amazement, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle.<sup>86</sup>

For Einstein too, the capacity to wonder is at the core of the potential for critical thought. Wonder does not guarantee criticality; yet in going beyond empirical information it can provide a pathway to generating new modes of thinking about complex issues.<sup>87</sup>

Both scientific and aesthetic wonder are at the core of *Coral's* conception and reception. This is the point where Wallworth's recourse to aesthetic wonder opens possibilities for self-awareness and criticality within her spectators. At its heart Wallworth's practice is an intellectual and socially engaged curiosity, which she expresses through aesthetic and affective means. She does not negate her practice's foundations of research and collaboration, but by amplifying the spectacular and wondrous qualities, she is able to synthesise the critical with the pleasurable in her address to spectators. Wallworth also punctuates these strong affective devices with

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<sup>85</sup> Wallworth and Salih first worked together in 2001 on *Hold* and have collaborated ever since. Salih assisted in the development of an associated augmented reality component to *Coral*, titled *Rekindling Venus: In Plain Sight*. She also accompanied Wallworth to the Amazon in 2017, helping film fluorescent species for *Awavena*. Wallworth writes, "the relationship to scientific endeavour, [Salih's] in particular, is one of the key components to my environmentally focused works". Email to the author, 9 January 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Einstein, 2007 p. 5.

<sup>87</sup> Wallworth, 2017, np.

pauses and moments of stillness. Edmunds argues that Wallworth's use of technology creates a simple yet effective oscillation between movement and stillness, an 'emptiness ... where the interactive aspect of the work moves from being a device for the artist into a kind of provocation of self-awareness in the viewer'.<sup>88</sup> Wallworth tailors her use of immersive and interactive technologies to match the specificities of her subject matter *and* to create the most engaged audience experience possible. As Edmunds writes, her 'offering is put directly to you' in a way that addresses her viewers as active spectators, even if they do not collaborate in the work's production. Instead, they mobilise and reflect Fisher's understanding of wonder as 'a phase of the *alert mind*, of the mind in its process of learning'.<sup>89</sup> Wallworth's offerings remind us that critical thinking, problem-solving and questioning can all take place in the domain of spectacle or wonder.<sup>90</sup> Her works frequently linger in the memories of her viewers, opening up further spaces for ongoing critical reflection and rumination. For Ted Snell, 'the process of interaction [Wallworth] effects induces both personal and more public after-shocks that are designed to impact in an effective manner'.<sup>91</sup> *Coral* is a particularly memorable experience because of its scale, however, this also holds true for the more simple examples, such as *Hold* and *Evolution of Fearlessness*, which also elicit highly memorable responses.<sup>92</sup>

There are also clear political intents and imperatives at play in Wallworth's address to her subjects and spectators. Recent projects like *Collisions* and *Coral* have been more pronounced in their political messaging. Nyarri Nyarri Morgan's story is not simply a tale of nuclear testing in the past, it is part of complex and ongoing discussions about the future of uranium mining in the Western Desert.<sup>93</sup> Morgan's extraordinary personal experience brings into sharp relief the disconnect between the mining of uranium and its end effects, something he emphasises at the end of *Collisions* by painting a mushroom cloud. Morgan and his Martu community are acknowledged as active political agents, seeking direct political outcomes. Wallworth describes Morgan

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<sup>88</sup> Edmunds, 2009, p. 655.

<sup>89</sup> Fisher, 1998, p. 56.

<sup>90</sup> Fisher, 1998, pp. 6–7.

<sup>91</sup> Snell, 2008, p. 14.

<sup>92</sup> Having had a long association with the Australian Centre for the Moving Image as a curator, to this day I encounter colleagues and visitors who vividly remember their experiences of *Hold: Vessel 1*, fifteen years earlier.

<sup>93</sup> Morgan's grandson, filmmaker Curtis Taylor has been an active campaigner, organising a protest walk from Parnngurr to the Kintyre uranium project in 2015. Sprague, 2016.

as ‘more of an activist than I am’, someone who has always wanted to tell his story and use his experience to speak directly to diverse audiences, including to politicians and policy-makers.<sup>94</sup> Quentin Sprague acknowledges that for some *Collisions* may seem ‘a touch heavy-handed’.<sup>95</sup> Perhaps the ‘gentle hand’ of Wallworth’s earlier works has slightly hardened in the face of the urgency of these situations. Both *Collisions* and *Coral* have been exhibited at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, and *Collisions* was made at the invitation of the WEF.<sup>96</sup> Her growing international profile has meant that Wallworth has increasingly been able to exhibit and target her works towards organisations, policy-makers and people in positions to potentially effect concrete change. She is increasingly explicit about these goals of her practice going forward.

Exposure to such settings alone does not confer considered political engagement. Yet for me, these political underpinnings have always been present in Wallworth’s practice. To return to the example of *Evolution of Fearlessness*, it was made at a period in contemporary Australian politics when refugee policies—and, more problematically, the experiences of refugees themselves—had become highly politicised. Whether these types of artworks can mobilise direct social or attitudinal changes in its audience will always be difficult to quantify, and is connected to the vexed discourses around the ‘efficacy’ of political art more broadly.<sup>97</sup> What *Evolution of Fearless* does do effectively—in its intimate, emotive and sensorial address—is to identify the empathic dimension that has diminished in recent Australian social and political discourses surrounding immigration, refugees and displaced people. Its simple gesture of touching hands reflects Wallworth’s practice more broadly: a moment of sensorial and emotive connection that balances the mediation of the subjects with the experience of the viewer. Through her use of immersive technologies, Wallworth opens spaces for wonder that incorporate criticality and curiosity, as well as political underpinnings that linger after the experience of the work is over.

## Conclusion

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<sup>94</sup> Wallworth, 2017, np.

<sup>95</sup> Sprague, 2016, np.

<sup>96</sup> Wallworth, 2017, np.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Rancière, 2010; Mouffe, 2013; Ross, 2012.

Within contemporary discourses in art history around socially engaged practices and spectacle, the stakes often seem very high. As Bishop writes, a frequent criticism levelled at participatory and socially engaged projects is when they ‘[fail] to “fully” represent their subjects (as if such a thing were possible)’.<sup>98</sup> Bishop critiques practices that, in attempting to counter such criticisms, disavow their relationship to the aesthetic, privilege the abrogation of authorship, and reinstate binary distinctions such as individual/collective, participant/spectator, active/passive, quality/equality, socially engaged/spectacular.<sup>99</sup> Bishop advocates for artistic responses that maintain tension, antagonism, discomfort and contradictions between these binary oppositions.<sup>100</sup> Such tensions can be seen in artistic approaches that mobilise spectacular means in order to critique spectacle. As Millner writes of AES+F, their videos possess ‘an uncanny dimension that makes the viewer feel uncomfortable, as if they have overindulged’.<sup>101</sup> In contemporary art history and theory, it often seems easier to consider how spectacle might be self-reflexively ‘turned on itself’ than it is to think how spectacle can be deployed to critically approach topics *other* than spectacle per se.

This is not to say that spectacle is always a useful or appropriate mode of representation. However, it is too easy to assume that spectacular and popular modes of representation are innately pacifying or devoid of critical potential. The work of Lynette Wallworth provides an example of how spectacle *can* be deployed in ways that maximise its accessible, engaging, populist and beautiful characteristics while still offering spaces for criticality and self-awareness. Wallworth’s practice operates by reciprocally engaging her collaborators and her viewers, while still maintaining her own distinctive authorial position. In doing so, Wallworth negotiates these binary distinctions in a different but equally effective *and* affective way. By drawing from both sides of the opposition, Wallworth performs a generous synthesis. *Collisions* displays a clear concern with equality of representation and collaboration, and yet Wallworth maintains an equally observable preoccupation with the film’s technical and aesthetic quality. Nyarri Nyarri Morgan retains clear authorship of his story and

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<sup>98</sup> Bishop, 2012a, p. 19.

<sup>99</sup> Bishop, 2012a, p. 18.

<sup>100</sup> Indeed, in the conclusion of *Artificial Hells*, Bishop argues that: “This new proximity between spectacle and participation underlines the necessity of sustaining a tension between artistic and social critiques”. Bishop, 2012a, p. 281.

<sup>101</sup> Millner, 2011, p. 104.

agency of his experiences, yet authorship of the overall artwork also bears the trademarks of Wallworth's artistic vision.

From the tactile engagements of early works such as *Hold* and *Evolution of Fearlessness* to the more haptic experiences of *Collisions* and *Coral: Rekindling Venus*, Wallworth's filmic, interactive and immersive practice challenges presumed distinctions between the active and passive spectator. All of these elements of Wallworth's practice combine to create moments of astonishment and wonder for the viewer. If we take wonder to be a process potentially generative of an alert and inquisitive mind, we can consider how spectacular, populist and aesthetically beautiful works can nonetheless engage an active spectator. Considering the possibilities of a critical wonder gives us opportunities to think beyond the critique of spectacle within contemporary art history. Of course not all (or even most) artistic spectacles involve socially engaged subjects. However, Wallworth's practice reminds us, importantly, that using spectacular, accessible and engaging modes does not intrinsically pacify the audience, nor does it infer an uncritical or apolitical stance by default. If deployed carefully and strategically, spectacle can open spaces of wonder; a mode of critical, empathic and active viewer engagement.

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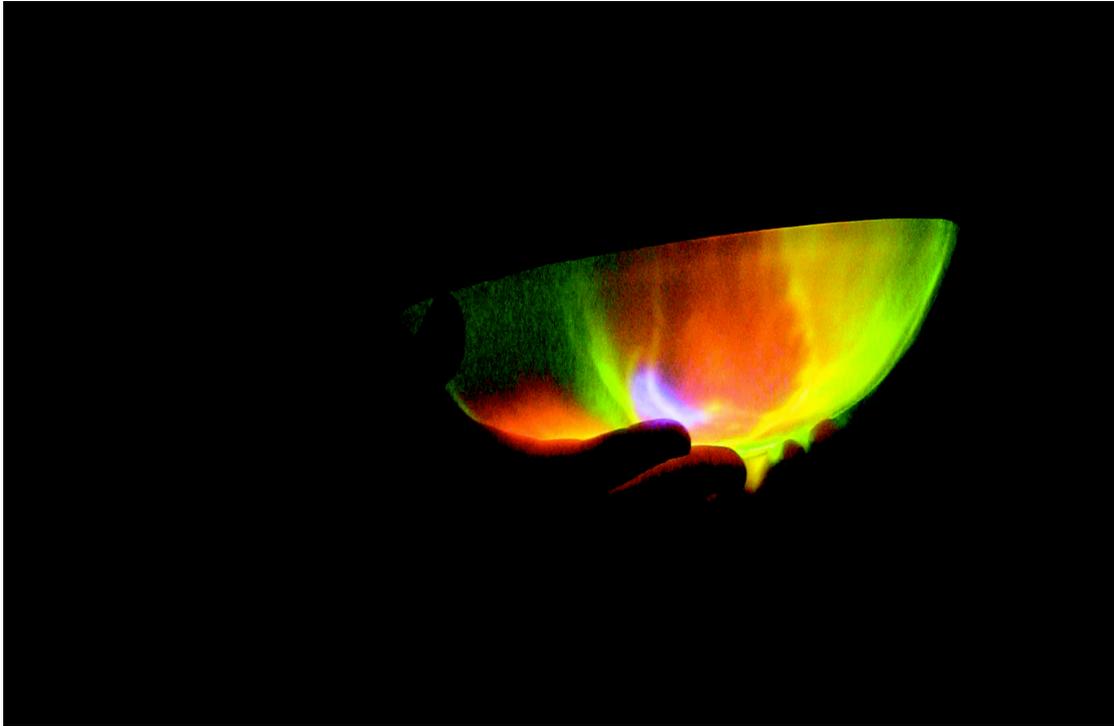
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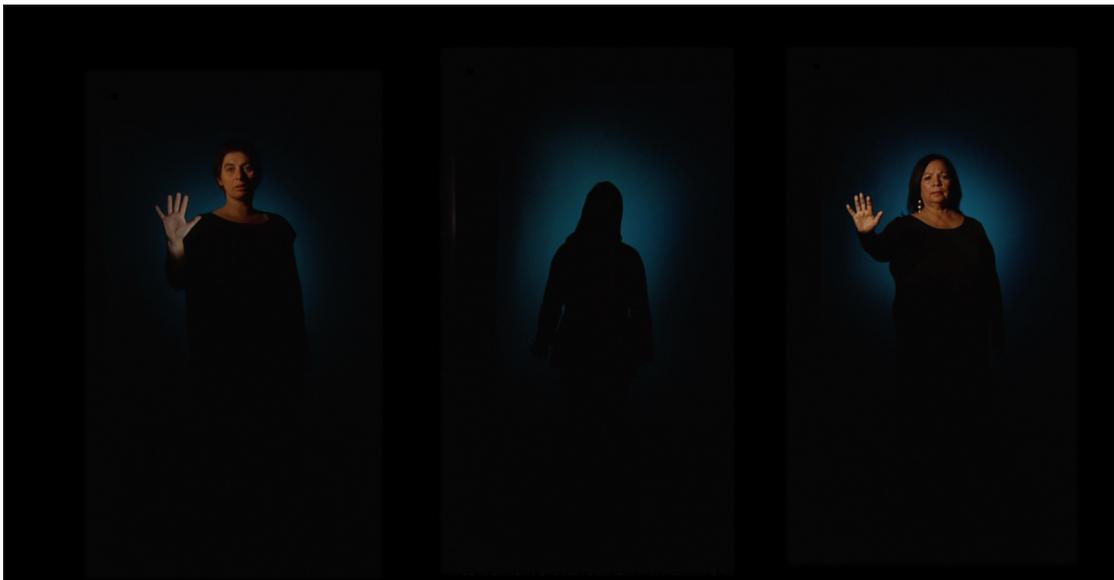
**Figure 1.** Lynette Wallworth, *Hold: Vessel 1*, 2001. Interactive installation, projections with glass bowls, dimensions variable. (Lynette Wallworth.) Photo: Colin Davison. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 2.** Lynette Wallworth, *Hold: Vessel 1*, 2001. Interactive installation, projections with glass bowls, dimensions variable. (Lynette Wallworth.) Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 3.** Lynette Wallworth, *Evolution of Fearlessness*, 2007. Interactive installation, dimensions variable. (Lynette Wallworth.) Photo: Rocco Fasano. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 4.** Lynette Wallworth, *Collisions*, 2015. Virtual reality film, 17 minutes. (Lynette Wallworth.) Photo: Piers Mussared. Courtesy of the artist.



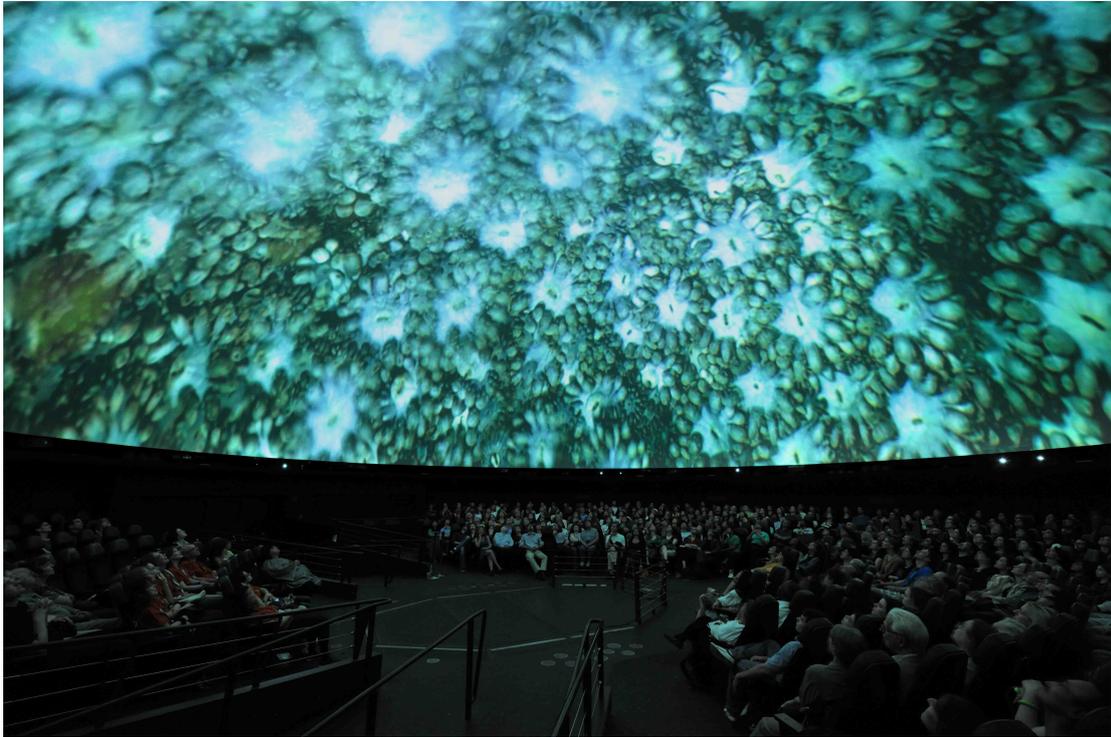
**Figure 5.** Lynette Wallworth, *Collisions*, 2015. Virtual reality film, 17 minutes. (Lynette Wallworth.) Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 6.** Lynette Wallworth, *Collisions*, 2015. Virtual reality film, 17 minutes. (Lynette Wallworth.) Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 7.** Lynette Wallworth, *Coral: Rekindling Venus*, 2012. Full-dome digital projection, 45 minutes, dimensions variable. (Lynette Wallworth.) Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 8.** Lynette Wallworth, *Coral: Rekindling Venus*, 2012. Fulldome digital projection, 45 minutes, dimensions variable. (Lynette Wallworth.) Courtesy of the artist.

