

ARTIST'S ARTICLE

The Crying Post Project: A Multi-Part, Multi-Media Artwork to Memorialize Global Sites of Pain

Dennis Summers

For many years my artwork was inspired by my readings in physics (especially quantum mechanics), linguistics and the worldviews and spiritual beliefs of non-monotheistic cultures. Some of these works were large-scale pieces consisting of small elements separated by large distances. This led me to an interest in mapping theory and in turn to consider environmental issues. These concerns have been realized in *The Crying Post Project*, an artwork manifested in multiple media. The project began with the physical placement of wooden posts at sites of environmental and/or sociological damage across the globe. The project also includes a series of digitally created photographic prints that are an abstracted mix of images and text fragments and an interactive web site [1]. Finally, articles and presentations such as this one supply a context for understanding the concepts inherent in the project. I will begin this article with a description of the posts and sites and follow with the conceptual background.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

The Crying Post Project consists of painted wood staffs (1 in. or 2.54 cm diameter) that rise above ground to about 9 feet

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(2.75 m). Each staff includes a solar-powered "cry" generator. This small device at the top of the post emits a tone of randomly varying lengths, which can be heard for up to about 30 to 40 feet (about 10 m) away. The cry generator includes a programmed computer chip that controls the voltage to a piezo buzzer. This voltage slowly ramps up, holds for a period of time and then ramps down, with corresponding changes in the nature of the tone emitted.

The geographic location and elevation of each post is recorded using a global positioning device. This information is made public at the web site and on the prints. The posts are intentionally left unprotected and will eventually fall to the elements, or possibly vandalism.

In 2001 I was invited to participate in the Mildura Palimpsest Art and Science Symposium #4 in Mildura, Victoria, Australia. In addition giving a talk, I installed my first post near the conference site (Fig. 1). I fully appreciated this opportunity because the original inspiration for this project came from my interest in the indigenous Australian people. With this memorial, I am responding to the tragic social history of the orig-

ABSTRACT

The author describes *The Crying Post Project*, an artwork consisting primarily of wood staffs with solar-powered "cry generators" placed at different sites throughout the globe, at locations of environmental and/or social damage. Its two other components include an interactive 3D web site, which has been created as an alternative, data-rich venue for the project, and a series of digitally created photographic prints designed to capture the artist's emotional response to the sites. The artist also discusses how this artwork has been inspired by his research on the cross-cultural symbolism of trees, the indigenous Australian worldview, mapping theory and the relationship between language extinction and environmental destruction.

Fig. 1. *The Crying Post Project: Post #1, On the Road to Lake Mungo*, mixed media including wood, raffia, paint, copper wire, solar panel and piezo buzzer, 9 ft tall, New South Wales, Australia, 2001. (© Dennis Summers/Quantum Dance Works)



inal inhabitants *and* the environmental damage caused by the poor irrigation practices of people of European descent, which are converting vast tracts of land into salt, thus making even more of the continent inhospitable to life.

I installed the second post at the historic public site of the Cherokee Court House in Gore, Oklahoma, to memorialize the infamous Trail of Tears (Fig. 2). The Trail of Tears refers to the 1838–1839 eviction of 19,000 land-owning Cherokee Indian farmers living in thriving communities throughout the American Southeast. Rounded up by gunpoint, they endured an 800-mile (1,290 km) forced march westward in which at least 4,000 people died. Furthermore, the post location is literally across the road from the Kerr-McGee Sequoyah Fuels Corporation uranium-processing factory, which closed down in 1992 after a series of fatal accidents and uranium leaks into the surrounding environment. These leaks far exceeded U.S. federal regulations, and Kerr-McGee was fined for lying and withholding data from the government.

The third post (Fig. 3) is in France, in the mountains near Lyon. It memorializes the killing of Fernando Pereira, a photographer for Greenpeace who died when the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* was bombed in 1985 by French agents while docked in Auckland, New Zealand. Additionally, the two largest corporate “owners” of global freshwater resources are headquartered in France. The fourth post is in the beautiful hills outside of the Sellafield nuclear energy complex run by British Nuclear Fuels in Northwest England (Fig. 4). This location has been plagued for years with problems and “irregularities,” and is also one of the last two nuclear processing sites in the world where radioactive waste is dumped “legally” directly into the ocean.

Although some of these posts were sometimes put up “under the radar” of local authorities, at each site one of the highlights for me has been the opportunity to collaborate with local people, who helped me locate and work within the placement sites. Unconfirmed future sites include Chernobyl, South Africa, Patagonia and Bhopal.

OTHER MANIFESTATIONS

The Web Site

For many people, their only experience of this artwork will be via modes other than seeing the actual posts. One of the more accessible modes is a web site, whose design was driven by the same aesthetics, content and form as the actual posts. However, owing to the nature of the web, I was able to create a flexible, data-rich environment that includes photographs and short texts and allows participants to make their own conceptual links [2].

The user is presented with an image of a spinning globe covered in clouds. When the user rolls the cursor over the earth image, the clouds fade and posts slide up out of the earth’s surface at their correct geographic locations (Fig. 5). Rolling the cursor over a post activates an animated “plasma” cylinder, along with a title announcing the post’s name. Upon clicking the post, the participant is sucked into the earth. As this happens, the earth’s surface pattern swaps back and forth to two different maps as a sub-

Fig. 2. (left) *The Crying Post Project: Post #2, Trail Where They Cried*, mixed media including wood, raffia, paint, copper wire, solar panel and piezo buzzer, 9 ft tall, Gore, Oklahoma, U.S.A., 2001; (right) detail. (© Dennis Summers/Quantum Dance Works) Here the post references the events of the forced removal of the Cherokee people and the radioactive pollution of the Kerr-McGee uranium processing plant.





Fig. 3. *The Crying Post Project: Post #3, Abandon Ship*, mixed media including wood, raffia, paint, copper wire, solar panel and piezo buzzer, 6 ft tall, Yenne, France, 2001. (© Dennis Summers/Quantum Dance Works) This post references the bombing of the Greenpeace ship the Rainbow Warrior by French agents and the privatization of the world's fresh water by corporations, of which two of the largest are French.

liminal symbolic reference. As the viewer goes through the earth's surface, an animated unfolding takes place, revealing a 3D polyhedron cage with symbols at each point. The 12 symbols at the polyhedron points are taken from Nordic runes and alchemy (Fig. 6). One also hears a heartbeat. In the center of the polyhedron cage the participant can see a pulsating green plasma ball.

Participants can zoom in and out, rotate the model and slide the viewpoint. When rolled over, a symbol pulsates; when it is clicked, a translucent 2D rectangular "dataplane" scales out and dissolves (Fig. 7). On this dataplane is a short text or photograph. The photographs are of the post for that location, and the texts are quotes from sources that relate either specifically to the site's environment or to larger interconnected themes between sites. Clicking anywhere on the dataplane closes it [3].

After a symbol has been clicked it turns a translucent gray. This not only allows users to keep track of where they have been, but metaphorically communicates the idea of resources being depleted. This idea of resource depletion is further communicated by a counter at the bottom of the screen, which simply counts down from the moment the viewer enters polyhedron space until she has quit the site. The participant leaves the earth's inner core by clicking on the plasma ball, which sucks her back out of the globe, where she can select another post and repeat the process. There are appropriate sounds for all of the behaviors that occur.

I would like to increase the extent of the aural experience, but as I am already pushing the limits of bandwidth, pro-

Fig. 4. *The Crying Post Project: Post #4*, mixed media including wood, raffia, paint, copper wire, solar panel and piezo buzzer, 9 ft tall, Sellafield, England, 2002. (© Dennis Summers/Quantum Dance Works) This post references the ongoing pollution and technical accidents at the British Nuclear Fuels plant in Sellafield.



cessing power and RAM, this will be postponed until the technology allows it [4].

The Print Series

The Crying Post Project also includes a print series. I have produced a limited edition of digitally created images for each post site. The dimensions of each are 10 inches by 20 inches. These prints are more abstract combinations of images and very short texts (generally sentence fragments), which are designed to capture my *feelings* about the post locations in a less explicit, and more evocative, way than the web site (see Figs 8 and 9 and Color Plate B No. 2).

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Why a Post?

The Body in the Tree

Trees have played a large and important symbolic role in all cultures throughout history. One example is the *axis mundi*, or axis of the world, as described by Mircea Eliade in his review of anthropological literature. The *axis mundi* can be seen in a wide variety of symbolic and ritualistic examples. It is seen as a link from



Fig. 5. *The Crying Post Project: 3D Web site.* (© Dennis Summers/Quantum Dance Works) When the cursor is rolled over the earth image, posts spring out of the plant's surface in an interactive 3D environment that allows users to rotate the globe or zoom in and out of it.

the earth to the sky, which can take the form of a special tree, manufactured pole or house pillar. Spiritually appropriate individuals can climb the *axis mundi* to reach the heavens and to communicate with higher spirits. Eliade describes the *axis mundi* in cultures such as Native American Indians, Siberian shamans, the people of Sumatra, the Eskimo, the Tartars of Altai, the Buryat, the Soyot, and on and on [5]. For many peoples there exists an explicit *world tree*, which “represents the universe in continual regeneration, the inexhaustible spring of cosmic life, the paramount reservoir of the sacred” [6].

Symbols of ladders and chains as seen in various cabalistic and alchemic European traditions are closely related to the cosmic tree. Such symbols are commonly understood as a connection from humanity to the Judeo-Christian god. Perhaps less widely appreciated is that the ladder also symbolizes the climb toward rational thought. In medieval times it was typical to conflate the two. Furthermore, the ladder was often used metaphorically and literally as a tool of both spiritual and material transformation. Additionally, in the European tradition, the Tree of Knowledge known as the *Sephiroth* is the symbol at the heart of the cabala. It has an interconnected tree structure, and its multiplicity of links contains the whole of information, the history of humankind, and the universe itself [7].

More recently there has been interesting anthropological research into the more subtle significance and meaning of trees. Laura Rival has collected some of this in her book *The Social Life of Trees*. She

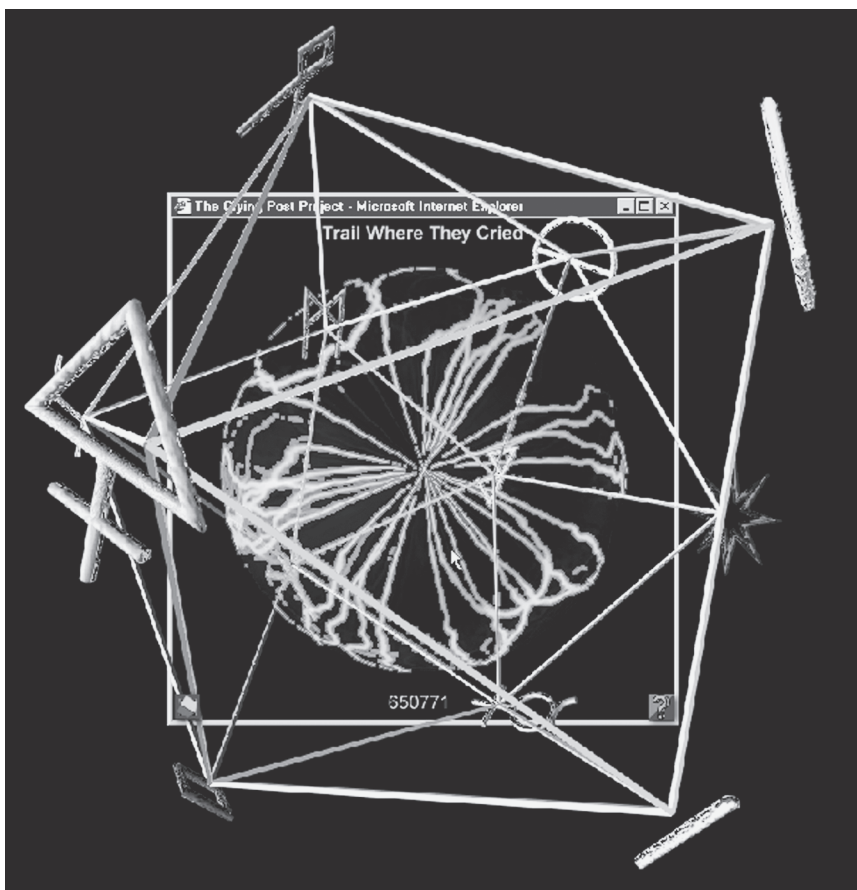
writes that “what comes out of the ethnographies [collected here] is that trees are used symbolically to make concrete and material the abstract notions of life, and that trees are ideal supports for such symbolic purpose precisely because their

status as living organisms is ambiguous” [8]. There is a wide range of attitudes toward the nature of trees. One that has bearing on *The Crying Post Project* is that trees are “animated but not quite alive, or [alternatively, the] dwelling places of spirits who are alive” [9].

Another key point made by Rival is that there is an analogous relationship between the morphology and life cycle of trees and of human beings. Additionally, in some cultures trees link people within webs of relationships; sometimes trees represent the community as a whole [10]. Finally, pertinent to the following section on the environment and indigenous people, “trees are systematically associated with environmental health, community welfare and prosperity” [11].

For example, Rodolfo A. Giambelli describes the many spiritual and practical ways the coconut palm is incorporated into the lives of the Balinese people of the island of Nusa Penida: “Botanical metaphors play a central role in conceptions of growth and of the relationship between humans and the natural world” [12]. Giambelli also describes complex nested relationships between language, ritual, the human body and the coconut

Fig. 6. *The Crying Post Project: 3D Web site.* (© Dennis Summers/Quantum Dance Works) Upon selecting one of the posts in Fig. 5, a viewer is sucked into the earth and sees this polyhedron, where s/he can zoom, rotate and select one of 12 icons.



tree, a concept this article will return to when I discuss the relationship of language to the physical environments of indigenous people.

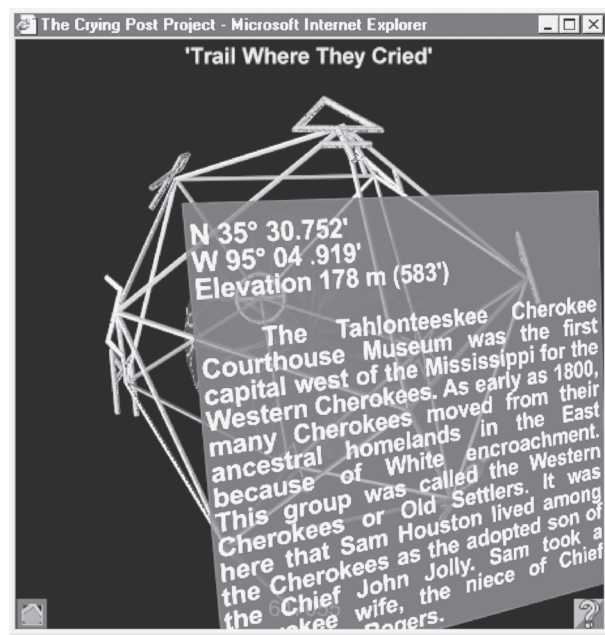
To the extent that I am consciously aware of the meaning behind a Crying Post, the previous is consistent with the following: a Crying Post acts as a symbolic human, linking the earth in which it is planted to the sun (spirit) from which its energy is literally supplied, crying out in pain caused by the history of its environment; it marks the site as a funereal location; and finally, it links the individual site to the other Crying Post sites through an unseen but extensive root system (symbolically visualized in the web site).

The Indigenous Australian Worldview: A Network of Shared Intentionality

My understanding of quantum physics led to my initial appreciation of the indigenous Australians. At first, my interest was purely a formal one. Anthropologist Tony Swain had described a conceptual framework for aboriginal culture that depended on linking distant geographic sites through a “common intentionality of place” [13]. Similarly to quantum physics, indigenous Australians believe that one’s consciousness and behavior create reality. Furthermore, I was stimulated by the idea of considering a world without time.

A place is created by the action of an “Ancestor” emerging from the earth, moving across it, and then going back in. This behavior is manifested in unusual topographic formulations such as rock outcroppings. This is not a from-to movement, which would imply time. Rather, the Ancestors link these sites together with a simultaneous presence in all locations. The physical landscape is the evidence of these transformations. In turn, all of the locations are linked together in a vast network of shared intentionality. Because of the simultaneity of events, there is no central locus that organizes the other sites. Each location is unique yet inextricably tied to all the others. Consciousness, human and otherwise, is in turn connected to place. “All that is land-derived—people, knowledge, cultural objects—is related along lines of place” [14]. The indigenous Australians play an active role in creating and supporting their environment. “The cardinal human endeavor is to maintain the shape of the world” [15]. Through their ceremonies and general activities they keep their country alive. It is the concurrent physical nature of these stories and ceremonies, or in other terms, the

Fig. 7. *The Crying Post Project: 3D Web site.* (© Dennis Summers/Quantum Dance Works) After the user selects an icon, a dataplane scales out with texts or images and links to other web sites.



landscape, that determines and reflects the matrix of their thinking.

Swain and others describe a group of people for whom all metaphors, all methods of conceptualizing, all social rules are based on place, or topographic relationships. This is in dramatic contrast to European-based cultures, where language is permeated by time-based metaphors.

Additionally, as Eric Michaels explains, indigenous Australians utilized an information-based economy millennia before capitalists even began to consider such things. The Eternal Truth—that is, their spiritual, political, ethical and social intellectual framework—is “managed by recourse to a spatial metaphor corresponding to identity with the land. By distributing information, as story, differentially throughout the society via the interlocking kinship matrix, the Warlpiri establish a network of information specialists. Each maintaining some aspect—but never the whole—of the truth” [16].

These stories, commonly misnamed “songlines,” and the associated information are owned by certain individuals, and can be shared only with others under specified circumstances. Ownership is not understood in the same way as in capitalist economies. This conflict of definitions is commonly seen in the relationship between corporate businesses and many indigenous peoples throughout the world and has led to recent problems such as bio-piracy. “Probably ownership concepts for aboriginal orality concern obligations to transmit and exchange rather more than to acquire and hoard in a capitalist sense. Instead of restricting use by signature and copyright,

the social engineering required to assure value in oral traditions involves restricting access to performers and performances” [17]. I will return to this idea in subsequent sections of this article.

Furthermore, David Turnbull has written that “the landscape, knowledge, story song, graphic representation and social relations all mutually interact, forming one cohesive knowledge network. In this sense, given that knowledge and landscape structure and constitute each other, the map metaphor is entirely apposite. The landscape and knowledge are one as maps, all are constituted through spatial connectivity” [18].

Influenced by quantum physics, I found indigenous Australian culture to be a useful model for linking physical objects and disparate content over visually distinct distances. Each post is linked to the others by a “network of shared intentionality.” Each Crying Post carries interlinked information that, taken together, tells the story of the slow dissolution of our environment. In *The Crying Post Project* this data is presented on the web site, and to a lesser extent in the prints. As seen in the Turnbull quote, this indigenous model demands a further study of mapping concepts. In the early 1990s I began creating artworks consisting of small sculptural elements placed at specific locations in large geographic areas. Books with maps and texts were created to tell the “stories” [19].

Mapping Theory or Defining Reality

All maps, not just indigenous Australian songlines, are about relationships. “In



Fig. 9. *Abandon Ship*, digitally created photograph, 10 × 20 in, 2002. (© Dennis Summers/Quantum Dance Works)

guage that commodifies life forms and other natural materials in ways that are simply impossible to do in other languages?

2. What happens to our intellectual wealth when we lose alternative and unique ways of creating realities?
3. Why should we care?

After these questions are answered, I will discuss their pertinence to *The Crying Post Project*.

Linguist Jeffrey Wollock argues that the environmental problems we face are not the specifics of polluting industries or wasteful energy practices. They are symptoms of a “particular way of thinking.” The state of the world’s environment is, as it were experimental proof that there is something fundamentally wrong with this way of thinking, today strongly reflected in most of the world’s dominant languages” [26]. There are, however, other cultures speaking different languages, using different maps. Perhaps they could be useful in helping lead us out of this cul-de-sac. Unfortunately, the dominant European and American culture, and a few dominant languages including English and Spanish, are destroying indigenous languages along with local eco-systems through a wide range of cultural and economic strategies.

We need to understand the way language is used within society and the natural environment. Wollock writes:

Many linguistic constructions of nature are possible, but some are more appropriate than others. . . . Language plays

the key role in “misreading the environment.” An inappropriate linguistic construct of nature will lead to inappropriate actions, like deforestation. In some cases deforestation will naturally lead to drought. When nature yields no water, humans and animals die of thirst. Dying of thirst is not a linguistic construct [27].

Many studies have shown that where linguistic diversity thrives, biodiversity thrives, and in cultures that retain their original languages, the environment remains healthy [28,29]. According to linguist Darell A. Posey, the

failure to understand that “wild” landscapes often are actually modified by humans has also blinded outsiders to the management practices of Indigenous peoples and communities. Many “pristine” landscapes are, in fact, cultural landscapes, either created by humans or modified by human activity, such as natural forest management, cultivation, and the use of fire [30].

Given this, we can see that indigenous people, in addition to creating a wide range of cultural artifacts, act as artists in the creation of their natural environment. This is not surprising, as indigenous people commonly make little or no distinction between the natural and the man-made.

This idea brings us back full circle to the indigenous Australians. They are known to have spent millennia managing the natural environment in such a way that it remained viable and continued to support human life. This was done with a culture rich in storytelling, per-

formance and visual creations. For them the cultural landscape and the physical landscape are indistinguishable.

For most of us, it is generally not controversial to assert that keeping the ecological environment healthy should be a priority. Less well understood or appreciated is the assertion that keeping small indigenous languages healthy needs to be a priority as well. Linguist Stephen B. Brush has written, “Just as the ‘information age’ has commenced, two of the world’s great stores of information, the diversity of biological organisms and of human languages are imperiled. The loss of species and human languages is an emblem of a subtler and pervasive impoverishment of biological and cultural information that follows the widening embrace of the global economy” [31].

The loss of indigenous languages is serious and happening almost too quickly for any remedial action. Most will be lost or on the edge of extinction within this century [32]. If we neglect the link to the environment and selfishly consider the intellectual value of keeping languages viable, one can see that we are at the edge of a dangerous situation which if unchecked can only lead to a kind of global, feeble-minded monoculture.

Linguist Christopher Jocks points out that differing languages can solve problems creatively in different ways [33]. Generally, indigenous language solutions are more appropriate to their environmental setting than exogenous ones. It seems to me a likely possibility that the

dominant global culture may one day find itself dependent on others for new cognitive maps in order to save us all from “dying of thirst.” This point is relevant as global water supplies are being concentrated in the hands of only a few corporate entities, answering to distant stockholders rather than consumers.

Perhaps owing to my bias as an artist, I desire to find new forms of information and creativity. I have tried to show how influential the indigenous Australian worldview has been for me. Of course, I am not the first artist to benefit aesthetically from other cultural worldviews. Perhaps Picasso is the most famous example of cultural *borrowing*. As more American culture is locked up in ever-longer copyright periods, and simultaneously the planet is losing its cultural diversity, our so-called information society is increasingly constrained.

Biologists tell us that any kind of monoculture will inevitably fail. I believe that we are approaching the event horizon from which we may be sucked into a spiral of irreversible loss. I think it is appropriate for artists to draw attention to the loss of culture. I believe the loss of culture is inescapably intertwined with the loss of biological diversity. The study of non-European and -American cultural symbolic systems helped to supply the form for *The Crying Post Project*. Indigenous Australians and mapping theory supplied me with the model. The global environmental crises and closely related linguistic crises gave me the purpose.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Daimen Duncan for his help in programming *The Crying Post Project* web site and Michael Rodemer for programming the computer chips and other electronic support.

References and Notes

1. *The Crying Post Project* <<http://www.cryingpostproject.org>>.
2. I have closely followed the development of 3D technologies for the Web since the early days of Virtual Reality Modeling Language (VRML). Although

I am not entirely satisfied with any current software application, I chose Viewpoint Experience Technologies (VET) to create an Internet-based, interactive environment for *The Crying Post Project*. I created the digital content using “discreet 3ds max” and was fortunate to find a programmer, Daimen Duncan, to collaborate on the necessary coding. Curious World Maps from Curious Software was used to supply global image maps.

3. The content and animation of the dataplanes are created in Macromedia Flash 5. One of the weaknesses of VET, at this point, is that it does not yet allow for Flash interactivity within the Viewpoint environment. This caused some frustrations in the design process, but did lead to acceptable workarounds. For example, I would have liked hyperlinks within the dataplanes, but it could not be done. Duncan created a solution where an invisible box with a blinking asterisk acts to open a separate browser window with a list of links. This is not as graceful as I would like, and it will be changed as soon as the Viewpoint software allows it.

4. For those who have slower Internet connections, there is an alternative 2D Flash site that contains all of the same data with a much simpler interface.

5. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974) pp. 125, 136, 140, 259.

6. Eliade [5] p. 271.

7. Alexander Roob, *Alchemy and Mysticism: The Hermetic Museum* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2001).

8. Laura Rival, “Trees, from Symbols of Life and Regeneration to Political Artefacts,” in Laura Rival, ed., *The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism* (Oxford, U.K. and New York: Berg, 1998) p. 3.

9. Rival [8] p. 23.

10. Rival [8] p. 23.

11. Rival [8] p. 13.

12. Rodolfo A. Giambelli, “The Coconut, the Body and the Human Being. Metaphors of Life and Growth in Nusa Penida and Bali,” in Rival [8] p. 134.

13. Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993) p. 33.

14. Swain [13] p. 34.

15. Swain [13] p. 50.

16. Eric Michaels, *Bad Aboriginal Art: Tradition, Media, and Technological Horizons* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994) p. 32.

17. Michaels [16] p. 31.

18. David Turnbull, *Maps Are Territories: Science Is an Atlas* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989) p. 30.

19. Dennis Summers, *No Material Existence: Cincinnati—the book* (Detroit, MI: Quantum Dance Works, 1994). Additionally described in Dennis Summers,

“Presenting Scientific Concepts with Forms and Methods from Primal Cultures: Mixed Media and Installation Works,” *Leonardo* 29, No. 4, 283–290 (1996).

20. Denis Wood (with John Fels), *The Power of Maps* (New York and London: Guilford Press, 1992) p. 139.

21. Geoff King, *Mapping Reality: An Exploration of Cultural Cartographies* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996) p. 18.

22. Wood [20].

23. King [21].

24. Doug Aberly, *Boundaries of Home: Mapping for Local Empowerment* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1993). He writes, “The mistake of science is that its goal is to describe the world as a complex machine, and to replace the vagaries of nature’s chaos with ‘management.’ Bioregional mapping is about something else; processes and relationships rather than disembodied facts. . . . [One can] fill the world again with personal and communal descriptions of time and space” p. 5.

25. Wood [20].

26. Jeffrey Wollock, “Linguistic Diversity and Biodiversity: Some Implications for the Language Sciences,” in Luisa Maffi, ed., *On Biocultural Diversity: Linking Language, Knowledge, and the Environment* (Washington, DC, and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001) p. 248.

27. Wollock [26] p. 255.

28. Wollock [26].

29. Darell A. Posey, “Biological and Cultural Diversity: The Inextricable Linked by Language and Politics,” in Maffi [26].

30. Posey [29] p. 383.

31. Stephen B. Brush, “Protectors, Prospectors, and Pirates of Biological Resources,” in Maffi [26].

32. Ken Hale, “On Endangered Languages and the Importance of Linguistic Diversity,” in Lenore A. Grenoble and Lindsay J. Whaley, eds., *Endangered Languages: Current Issues and Future Prospects* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998).

33. Christopher Jocks, “Living Words and Cartoon Translations: Longhouse texts and the limitations of English,” in *Endangered Languages* [29].

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