



Izabela Pluta Signs #1-9 2009
Courtesy the artist



Izabela Pluta *Untitled (convic yard)* 2009
Courtesy the artist

Izabela Pluta was born in Warsaw, Poland, and migrated to Australia in 1987. She graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Art (Honours) from The University of Newcastle in 2002, and is currently completing her MFA at The College of Fine Arts, UNSW in Sydney. Pluta has exhibited widely in Australia and some of her most recent solo exhibitions include: *à la dérive*, Mop Projects, Sydney (2009); *In (and against) time*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra (2009); *Singularity*, The Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney (2008); *Home(land)*, Westspace, Melbourne and The Fremantle Arts Centre (2007); *Making Mirrors*, Artspace, Sydney (2006); and *Still (between)*, Esa Jaske Gallery, Sydney (2005). Pluta has participated in numerous group exhibitions including: *Un, deux, trios*, Alliance Francaise, Melbourne (2009); *An ideal for living*, Linden Contemporary Arts Centre, Melbourne (2008); *Here and Beyond*, Newcastle Region Art Gallery (2007); *In hindsight the narrative may/may not have been as intended*, Inflight Art, Hobart (2007); *Scene—Observe the lay of the land*, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery (2007); *Unsharp Unconscious*, Queen Victoria Museum & Art Gallery at Inversek, Launceston (2006); *In cold light*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (2006); and *From Space to Place*, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, Perth (2005). She has undertaken artist residencies at the Cité Internationale des Arts, Paris (2008); The Australia Council for the Arts Studio, Barcelona (2006); Red Gate Gallery, Beijing (2005); and International Art Space Kellerberrin (IASKA), Western Australia (2004). Pluta was recently awarded a Qantas Foundation Encouragement of Australian Contemporary Art Award. She has received other grants including an Australia Council for the Arts New Work Grant (2008); The Ian Potter Cultural Trust Grant (2008); and The Freedman Foundation Traveling Scholarship for Emerging Artists (2007). She lectures in photography at The National Art School, Sydney; The College of Fine Arts UNSW and Sydney College of the Arts.

List of Works

Izabela Pluta

Untitled (caravan) 2009
300 x 400cm
photo mural on adshel paper

Untitled (sign) 2009
100 x 135 cm
Lambda print unframed

Untitled (convic yard) 2009
100 x 135 cm
Lambda print unframed

Untitled (wind turbine) 2009
100 x 135 cm
Lambda print unframed

Untitled (container) 2009
100 x 135 cm
Lambda print unframed

Untitled (estate) 2009
100 x 135 cm
Lambda print unframed

Untitled #1-16 2009
30 x 40cm each
Screen print on paper framed

Rooms 2009
6 x 200cm
Pencil on wall, site specific drawing

All artworks are courtesy of the artist.

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(Cover image) Izabela Pluta *Untitled (caravan)* 2009 (detail)
Courtesy the artist

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GESTURES OF THE LANDSCAPE

IZABELA PLUTA

PERTH INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS
19 AUGUST - 18 OCTOBER 2009

On Longing and Other Journeys

The photographic essays of Izabela Pluta

I like to think of Australia as a vast continent bound together by a tracery of lines and arteries. And silently, with a momentum completely their own, a population traverses and interweaves these snakings of bitumen and sand. These are the 'grey nomads'; people of a certain age who choose to exist on the margins of society: a transient population of wanderers who, for a period of time or perhaps even as an ongoing lifestyle, eschew suburban sprawl in exchange for an ever-changing, ever-moving travelling home. Their travels may take them on a highly structured tour from one pin-pointed town to the next, or on an ever-evolving journey as one place leads to another in a series of arbitrary associations and connections. But each type of traveller needs a series of ports of call, or points of location. They in turn each have their own architectural forms as shelters, temporary harbours for those passing through.

The small towns and hamlets that intermittently stud the ribbon roads stretching the length of Australia's West coast (and inland routes) lend themselves ideally to this particular form of itinerant travel. Fremantle and Perth were the first ports that many early immigrants landed at after a long sea journey. These arid regions continue to be inextricably linked to ideas of migration, relocation, and passing through. Perhaps this is why Izabela Pluta chose to start her Australian road-journey here, travelling from Perth to Darwin in four weeks. Driving through parts of the Pilbara that many Australians have never heard of, let

alone visited, she stayed at places like Tom Price, Newman, Karratha, Wittenoom and Port Hedland, today largely sites for enormous mining excavations, where each town's economy is largely transient: exploring and exploiting the country's riches before moving on to the next location. The population here is even more transitory, often flying in for a few weeks' intensive labour before going 'home', far from the dust, the heat, and the flies.

Pluta describes her arrival into Port Hedland, one of the many places on a carefully charted itinerary:

We arrived in the caravan park just outside of town. A curious position on the flats near the airport – our site was on the park's edge, parallel to the terminal and the main road. My own 'epicenter' to observe the arrivals to the caravan park and the traffic to and from the airport. A small part of the park was for tourist visitors, it mainly comprised of 'permanent' housing (dongas) and anchored caravans that housed the town's fly-in-fly-out population.¹

For this current exhibition, *Gestures of the Landscape*, Pluta renders these 'dongas' as an extended pencil wall-drawing directly onto the gallery wall. It too becomes a 'between space', an embodiment of what could have been rather than an actual reality. Though normally a three-sectioned unit, Pluta has expanded and repeated this form to become an almost abstracted, series of geometric forms, far from

their original design of 'permanent' temporary homes. For those passing through, their very name embodies an air of the unfamiliar: a 'donga', in this far North-Western country commonly refers to a washed out ravine or gully – difficult to equate with more Western notions of shelter.²

Miwon Kwon, talks of the idea of a 'wrong' place in her book *One Place After Another* to explore the idea of 'belonging in transience'. With the increase of global travel, and a person's success increasingly measured by the accumulation of frequent flyer points, one is always travelling and transiting 'through elsewheres'. As she suggests, 'the distinction between home and elsewhere,³ between "right" and "wrong" places, seems less and less relevant in the constitution of self.'⁴

As a Polish immigrant, born in Warsaw and migrating to Australia at the age of seven, Pluta's work regularly explores these ideas of a 'wrong' place. The places she photographs are 'other': neither home, nor specifically elsewhere. There is a universality to their anonymity, that talks instead of broader ideas of migration, cultural dislocation, nostalgia and remembrance. Her images often chart a memory of a site and space that has been lost, whether through migration, or cultural ebb and flow. Contained within the photographic images is a constant desire to rediscover a sense of self by reflecting a shared experience in the unfamiliar sites and spaces that she photographs. She focuses on concrete, plastic sheeting, and the structures and details of buildings rather than the people who have inhabited them. The layerings of texture and a narrative of absence create a landscape of longing, of what was not and what was left behind.

Detritus, and what has been left behind, is not a new subject-matter for Pluta. In 2005, she spent three months on a residency in Beijing, China, documenting a rapidly changing built environment, and the spatial remnants and ephemeral qualities of both the new and old building remains. Out of this process came a series of exquisitely lyrical explorations of old and new: of un-peopled spaces in the process of birth, and those in the process of unmaking. The only trace of past inhabitants, or previous use, was the occasional cheap canvas trainer or thong, discarded and dusty in its concrete tomb. There is a stillness to these images that is at odds with the unquietness of everyday.

In a similar way, the photographs, drawing and large photo mural wallpaper work shown in *Gestures of the Landscape* display ambiguity. Each work is untitled, though the discarded and found objects find form in parenthesis. *Untitled (Sign)* is what once was: the sign aspect no longer present in the photograph, and all that remains are the four vertical supports that stand as sentinels to what has been. A lonely caravan sits abandoned in the scrublands; a wind turbine supine on the ground.

Pluta's photographs and large photo mural installations of her images are often ambiguous. An artwork shown at Artspace in 2006 captured the possible collapse or construction of a domestic house. A pastiche of European and Asian styles of architecture, the edifice disappeared beneath a rampant Bougainvillea creeper. These parodies of architectural styles are not unique to Australia. They allude to a desire to acknowledge past roots, as well as a desire to demonstrate a nod towards internationalism. The spread of capitalism in the name of progress is universal.

Coincidence is another characteristic of Pluta's work. On this carefully orchestrated road trip between Perth and Darwin, the element of coincidence is the aspect that is unscripted. As author and academic Susan Stewart has written, coincidence 'preserves experiences and knowledges from the ephemerality of time passing, making them, by their intersection, cohere as events and phenomena of significance.'⁵ Whilst proposed itineraries are carefully charted, it is not the familiar and picture post-card images that Pluta chooses to document. Rather, the points along the way that cannot be planned or foreseen. Those details impossible to predict at the outset of a journey: the discarded caravan, or the fallen wind-tower; all elements long discarded and forgotten. In part, perhaps, it is the coincidence and haphazard, the random and the unplanned, that intrigue and compel.

Perhaps the most literal documenting of Pluta's most recent journey is the series of screen prints on paper included in the exhibition. *Signs #1–16* are reproduced from signs that Pluta photographed at the numerous caravan parks that she visited on the way. They become a series of messages, or codes, somewhat absurdist in their desire to instil order and structure on an ungovernable shifting tide of humanity.

Pluta's wall drawings and photographs have a 'memorialising and temporising function' at the same time. Though left and discarded by those passing through, there is a picaresque aspect to her themes. She documents a disappearance that, through its very capture, positions it within a present, allowing it to become permanent at the

moment of its destruction. There is a romanticism to many of these images, a narrative that intersects with every other narrative that is yet to be discovered, uncovered or revealed through the process of capturing the moment.

Rebecca Coates

August 2009

Rebecca Coates is an independent curator, writer and lecturer. She is Associate Curator at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), and lecturer in the Art History Department at the University of Melbourne. She is completing a PhD on ephemeral practices and site-specificity.

The title of this essay, *On Longing*, acknowledges Susan Stewart's book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*.

¹ Email correspondence with the writer, 21.7.09

² In an email to the author, the artist states that the original etymology of the word 'donga' derives from the Nguni group of languages. These are spoken by a group of clans and nations living in South-East Africa.

³ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after another. Site specific art and locational identity*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002, p. 157

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Susan Stewart, 'The Coincidence Keeper', in *Tacita Dean UNDER/ABOVE*, exhibition catalogue Visual Arts Program, Melbourne Festival 2001, unpag.



Izabela Pluta *Untitled (sign)* 2009
Courtesy the artist



Izabela Pluta *Untitled (wind turbine)* 2009
Courtesy the artist



Izabela Pluta *Untitled (estate)* 2009
Courtesy the artist