



Songlines

TRACKING THE SEVEN SISTERS

Travelling Kungkarangkalpa

Landscape is fluid — it flows around us and encompasses us. It is not, however, external to the individual; landscape is an assembly of sensory information which generates a seen and felt experience of the world. It is a symbolic constitution of the environment within which humans exist.

Paul Faulstich, 1991¹

A focal point of the *Songlines* exhibition is a dome experience conceived to immerse audiences in significant sites of the Kungkarangkalpa (Seven Sisters), including Walinynga (Cave Hill), at Amata near the tri-state border. Kungkarangkalpa is a Tjukurpa that covers vast tracts of land in the Western deserts of Australia and beyond. This digital sanctuary simultaneously expresses the sphere of the world around us, the sky above and the ground below, enveloping viewers in depictions of the Seven Sisters as they travel through country avoiding the unwanted attention of the lustful Wati Nyiru. As these creation beings travel, they leave land formations in their wake and later continue the chase, now visible to us as Pleiades and Orion in the southern night sky. The architectonic form of the dome provides an ideal spatial canvas, inviting viewers inside to lie down and look up — *Travelling Kungkarangkalpa*.

The rock art caves found throughout Australia can be considered early forms of contemporary projection-dome theatres,

Discussing the appeal of projection domes in the present day, media theorist Nick Lambert argues that these ancient caves, where etchings and paintings were animated by fire and torchlight, represent the beginnings of cinematic imagery, and were arguably the first immersive experiences created by humankind.²

This affinity between contemporary dome experiences and ancient painted caves was recently celebrated in an interactive digital dome experience of the pyramidal grottoes at Dunhuang, China, installed at the 2015 World Economic Forum.³ A sublime art treasury, the surfaces of these caves are rendered with a thousand years of mural painting that began in 400 BCE. Standing beneath the dome's curved ceiling, visitors were transported to the desert of north-western China inside a life-sized interactive three-dimensional model of Cave 220.

The perceived hemispheric curvature of domes has been rendered architecturally by many cultures throughout the world and used

to enfold the most sacred environments. From Buddhist stupas and Jain temples to Islamic mosques and Christian cathedrals, dome constructions are places of ritual, communion, and transcendence. With both internal and external surfaces infused with iconography and geometric symbolism, domes continue to represent the world views of many traditions. Throughout the ages, such arched enclosures have often been used as surfaces upon which to represent 'psycho-cosmological constructs', decorated with 'incorporeal archetypes'.⁴

A dome's ability to completely envelope the visual field of viewers in a mediated environment has continued to provide a

(below) *Cave Dome: Inside the Mogao Grottoes at Dunhuang, World Economic Forum, Dalian, China, 2015*

(opposite) The dome in the *Songlines* exhibition will display artworks from the Seven Sisters story

PHOTOS: SARAH KENDERDINE, UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES



revolutionary framework for pioneers in the arts and sciences. The concept of an 'experiential' domed environment was created by the art and engineering collective Experiments in Art and Technology in the Pepsi Pavilion for Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan. Described at that time by art critic Barbara Rose as a 'theatre of the future' and a 'living responsive environment', this dome was envisioned as a 'total instrument' to be played by the participants, providing them with 'choice, responsibility, freedom, and participation'.⁵ Such early developments in dome projection theatres emerged from attempts to simulate the 'spherical gestalt of the human visual field' and were designed to exploit and extend sensory perception.⁶ Many of the pioneers involved in conceiving dome experiences from the 1960s onwards believed that spatialised multisensory embodiment made possible in a dome would enhance the capacity and speed of human cognition, and ultimately a sense of presence or *being there*.



Travelling Kungkarangkalpa invites viewers to enter two distinct journeys: one, *The Walinynga (Cave Hill) Experience*, as witness to Walinynga, with its ochre-painted ceiling giving an animated canopy of Kungkarangkalpa. The cave was photographed to create a three-dimensional model for the first time, providing visitors to the dome with intimate views of the stories contained in Walinynga's folds. The other journey, *The Artwork Experience*, immerses visitors in a series of projected artworks of this Tjukurpa, following the Seven Sisters as they travel country. In the final scene, three-dimensional models of the extraordinary trussed grass *tjanpi* figures are seen taking flight, prefiguring their final destination in the night sky.

The dome provides a modality of visitor experience that is suited to maximising the senses of kinaesthetic embodiment, audiovisual concentration and emotional engagement. Entering beneath the suspended dome, viewers look up into the hemisphere.

A reclining position relaxes the body and focuses the receptivity of the viewers to the visual vault that envelopes their field of view. The prone body position effectually associates this installation experience with others familiar to the viewer: that of sleeping, where dreams take place; of lying on the ground; or camping in the desert, gazing up to the sky. These embodied memories serve to amplify the receptivity of the viewer. This encompassing perceptual field is complemented by the dome itself, which acts as an acoustic cloak amplifying the all-surrounding sonic architecture of the work. Like its predecessors, this modern multi-sensory sanctuary continues to reflect the cosmologies and the world view of its creators from which *Travelling Kungkarangkalpa* emerges.

Embodied space is the location where human experience and consciousness takes on material and spatial form.

Setha M Low, 2013⁷

ARTWORK FEATURE BY SARAH KENDERDINE

Travelling Kungkarangkalpa 2017

- i. *The Walinynga (Cave Hill) Experience* (left)
- ii. *The Artwork Experience* (opposite)

TRAVELLING KUNGKARANGKALPA IS STAGED IN DOME LAB, THE PRODUCT OF A RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE PROJECT SUPPORTED BY THE AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL AND LED BY PROFESSOR SARAH KENDERDINE, UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES, IN COLLABORATION WITH NINE OTHER TERTIARY AND CULTURAL ORGANISATIONS, WWW.NIEA.UNSW.EDU.AU/RESEARCH/PROJECTS/DOMELAB.

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Just like the old people, we are dreaming. We have a new dream with technology. We're using the newest technology with the oldest culture.

Curtis Taylor, 2017

