Maddie Leach
Let us keep together

Curator
David Cross

Wk 1 19 September, Monday 7.27am, airdrop at Antill Ponds, flags and posters at the Mercury building, 93 Macquarie Street, Hobart and posters at selected newsagents in Launceston CBD.

Wk 2 26 September, Monday 7.27am, airdrop at Antill Ponds, flags and posters at the Mercury building, 93 Macquarie Street, Hobart and posters at selected newsagents in Launceston CBD.

Wk 3 3 October, Monday 7.27am (delayed until 5 October, 8.30am), airdrop at Antill Ponds, flags and posters at the Mercury building, 93 Macquarie Street, Hobart and posters at selected newsagents in Launceston CBD.

Wk 4 10 October, Monday 7.27am, airdrop at Antill Ponds, flags and posters at the Mercury building, 93 Macquarie Street, Hobart and posters at selected newsagents in Launceston CBD.
During a number of research trips to Tasmania, Maddie Leach became interested in a small cluster of what initially seemed disparate and unconnected threads. She was initially fascinated by the systems of pre-telegraphic communication used on the island from the nineteenth century, especially the different semaphore codes employed in the north and south of the state. Leach was at the same time also struck by the distinctly bifurcated split of Tasmania between the two major towns of Hobart and Launceston. Like a curious social cartographer, she became focused on plotting the liminal space or contested boundary that demarcated these two distinctly partisan and competitive rivals. Ultimately, it was in the daily newspapers of both centres – the *Mercury* in Hobart and the *Examiner* in Launceston – that she found key points of connection, which would draw together the twin concerns of communication and trans-city rivalry.

In research at the state library archives, the artist discovered a long-forgotten event that was largely a stunt by the *Mercury* newspaper to get the jump on their rivals up north. Showcasing the first commercial flight in Tasmania, they staged a highly theatrical drop of free papers from a small aeroplane along the length of the road between Hobart and Launceston early one Monday morning in 1919. The *Examiner* got wind of it and rushed a truck along the route southwards to try and pip the enemy at the post. After the plane got lost in fog, the result was a small propaganda win for the north, albeit with the south securing a pyric victory based entirely on sheer audacity.

For her commission, Leach borrowed elements of the story to restage an aerial newspaper drop, this time at the site of a tiny farming outpost called Antill Ponds, where a ruin of the old ‘Halfway Hotel’ sits crumbling in a paddock.

Each week for four weeks an aeroplane dispatcher aimed a bundle of *Mercury* newspapers as close as humanly possible (which wasn't very close) to a flagpole the artist had set up in a farmer’s paddock. The pole stood out from the landscape because it flew two flags, both taken from International Signal Code in use at the time of the original newspaper drop. Combined, the flags spelt out the strangely prescient words ‘*Let us keep together for mutual support (or protection)*’. At the same time, both flags also flew on the elegant flagpole atop the Mercury building on Macquarie Street in Hobart with day bills below in the street front vitrines promoting the Monday headline ‘*Let us keep together*’. Leach also negotiated for these Mercury day bills to be placed out the front of assorted ‘Mercury friendly’ newsagents in Launceston. Attempts to have the *Examiner* reciprocate both gestures each Monday were firmly declined on the grounds that there was no benefit to stirring up a perceived rivalry between the towns.
September, Monday 7.27am, airdrop at Antill Ponds, flags and posters at the Mercury building, 93 Macquarie Street, Hobart and posters at selected newsagents in Launceston CBD.

We were halfway between the two main towns in Tasmania and halfway between a lopsided game linking the two major national news corporations in the local sphere: Murdoch and Fairfax; Hobart and Launceston. And in her nod to 1919, Maddie Leach had designated a time near enough to halfway between now and an era when an unsavoury citizenry was ruled by a Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen’s Land (northern half) and a Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen’s Land (unspecified, but based in the south). Clear as hell then, but less clear now. The artist set up conditions to unravel the regional loyalties and idiosyncrasies fermented under the originating governing culture – bringing into playful relief the contemporary attitude retained under the parochial politics and veiled civility on the island today.

It was around 7.30am at Antill Ponds and the plane was late. A small, obedient audience was marshalled in a designated safe area – acclimatised to galleries, they fidgeted against the chill. In view was an unusually verdant scene typical of a colonial-era painting – a gentleman’s park surrounded by hills peppered with native shrubs; bright sunlight threatened remnant fog and pretty cirrus clouds, while a refrigerated breeze stirred the magpies, ancient cherry trees and two semaphore flags. At full mast, the flags’ synthetic colours and immaculate patterns secreted their mysterious codes while offering up the wind direction and, had we been thinking, revealing the flight path of a tardy Cesna.

Finally, amid mounting anticipation, the Cesna droned in from the south-west to pass near the drop zone. Following an unhurried circle, it then crawled back through a useful headwind, low and purposeful. When almost overhead, a bundle of neatly strapped and wrapped newspapers arced away from the plane, rotating earthward on a barely perceptible trajectory. At some point in those few seconds, the quasi-historical spectacle shifted into a sharp moment of awkward fear – the apparent danger rapidly switched to concern for those closer to the line of the fall. A winded-sounding thump of wood pulp returning to earth was quickly followed with the hollering of excited relief – art and prank were laconically and momentarily conflated. The bundle was then inspected, patted, documented and finally left where it had landed – closely the stone remains of the original Half-Way House – to await connection with future iterations.

All that day, under a set of immodestly bright semaphore flags identical to those at Anthill Ponds, a day bill poster on the façade of the Mercury building in Hobart
announced active participation, albeit enigmatically, with 'Let us keep together,' Monday, September 19, 2011'. Not without some irony, that message faced boldly away to the south.

I'm saturated from the knees down and it’s freezing. Last week’s grass has turned out to be very damp, fast-growing, newspaper-eating millet – or wheat. The Cesna did an encore pass over and I waved, unconvinced about where the bundle had landed. But I clearly saw it leave the plane – the size of a new lamb – and fall in an easy and curiously animate tumble. The impact was surprisingly loud too; wood fibre displacing muddy earth displacing air through plastic wrapping – a decidedly woodwind thump reverberated through the paddock. Like space junk, its first pervasive message was as an ominous warning to the rabbits and assorted macropods resident in the area. Just the one definite sound, the epicentre of the artwork, and a few sheep looked about.

I alone witnessed the first repeat of a dramatic gesture. (The sheep merely heard a noise.) Drawn-out months of negotiations and applications eventually gave up the suite of permissions (mostly from men who control farms, corporations, clubs and the airspace of the birds) to eject nine kilograms of newsprint from a plane on multiple occasions and in the middle of nowhere. The compliance of those men is testament to the artist’s skill in telling a story – or part thereof – in which they knowingly, yet unwittingly, were part. Warm and dry in New Zealand, Maddie Leach kept up her frenetic texting throughout, living vicariously through her ‘plan’. Prior to the drops, the news media had dutifully disseminated their self-interest with a few other misconstrued facts, often segueing into the potential for ovine sacrifice. Through them, Leach’s germ had been dispersed – for when the Mercury and the Examiner newspapers are so deliberately coupled, islanders are want to consider their tribal stances and inherited prejudice, before again politely relegating such thoughts with other disavowed histories long buried in Van Dieman’s Land.

But Leach’s strategies reach far beyond the hoe-down drama of the falling newspapers. Nearby in the paddock, her flaccid signal flags effect an intermittent and intangible broadcast that is echoed on the day bills posted in their brass-bound cases around 80 kilometres to the south, and in their wire frames, equidistant to the north. Her message infiltrates through radios and permeates random conversations; it rides through the web and pops up in blogs; it gets muttered in bars where newsprint workers or ‘aero-buffs’ drink; and it resonates in the minds of distracted commuters and passers-by. Her open-ended appeal is not incessant; it is simply repeated each Monday, and from there it builds a register of familiarity, along with another invitation for misinterpretation. Together, us, let, keep: these form intriguingly a well-meant offer, a pledge; or, then again, it just may be feint mockery.
**The third iteration and the plane** is devilishly late (a crook magneto). A perfect day, the package tumbles rapidly and lands in a cushioning plant in full flower located in the remains of one of the larger rooms in the original house. Nice one lads. Three days earlier, on impeccable schedule, the Mercury building flew the signal flags and day bills. I was surprised by their emphatic presence.

Later, back in the paddock, I am drawn to the flags signifying a central point for the work. Starkly visible from the highway, they are in fact around 70 kilometres east of the Surveyor’s Monument announcing the centre of the island at Bronte Lagoon. Up close, Leach’s deep connection to the sculptural object is revealed by a ‘truth to materials’ in its components. The signal flags – pattern cut from dyed linen and immaculately double stitched in Lithuania – are supported on marine-grade ropes and guides; the flagpole was professionally crafted from Tasmanian oak; the newspapers are industrially bundled, while the authenticity of the day bills is clearly evident as they are genuine Mercury day bills. Nothing is simulacra and the dense materiality would allow these commissioned articles to shift back into the world as functioning objects. The groaning authenticity is as reassuring as it is unsettling, but to view these few objects as the sculptural residue of a project over 200 kilometres in breadth, reveals that the work is really very minimal indeed.

Nothing, also, is chanced. At least nothing that can be managed. Or is it?

Unable to gauge its public relevance beyond immediate connection, to overhear a local politician refer to the work excitedly, allows me to experience its integral extension into the population, out there in the spectral public realm. The composition orchestrated by Leach exists here in its true form – a kind of discursive vapour occupying an elusive and fluid social space. Triggered by media placements, nourished by history and sustained by hearsay, innuendo and the reiterative structure in play, the work’s viral form as a mutable narrative will find receptive hosts throughout the population.

I receive the message, ’a day bill has been sighted in Launceston’, and another lingering doubt subsides.

**The final drop, and I know** the artist is above me in the plane as the newspaper bundle gets despatched with such force that it starts on a 40-degree angle before disappearing in front of the blinding sun, only to reappear momentarily and then disappear again into the waiting wheatgrass. The angle and the grass diffused the expected sound, and as my anticipation dispersed I considered it one too many repeats for an observant person, while it was probably just right for the less so. Familiarity had rendered it normal.

Months earlier, Leach traversed the north-south axis of the island, bouncing along in an oversprung ute through the ancient agrarian landscape. Looking for
signs, she eventually found the subtle discrepancies and divisions that permeate this place. Sifting conversations, dredging archives and trawling through the relic systems of communication revealed that the original codes and ideologies of the regions were different and incompatible. The artist visualised two trucks setting off at the same time and on the same journey – each starting from the opposing towns, loaded with trade goods and information – and she wondered where en route they would cross.

Antill Ponds. Not 20 metres from the newspaper bundles an old headstone remembers William Hawkins. A good man by accounts of the time (1861), but he trusted his mare too much. We can assume the rein-less horse was as indifferent to the effect of the dray's wheels on his chest and throat as he is to the slow rain of newsprint over recent consecutive Mondays. Four times the Hobart Mercury courted attention from her northern counterpart, the Launceston Examiner. Each Monday newspapers were despatched, day-bills were posted and signal flags flown. Sourced from the 1916 Brown's Signalling code, the flags' code, 'I for India' over ‘N for November', black circle on yellow background over a blue and white check, signalled the meaning, Let us keep together (or in company) for mutual support (or protection). The offers were each ignored. The frisson of their 1919 exchange – when they raced their papers by aeroplane and lorry to jostle in a fledgling marketplace unearthed by then-new transportation technology – simply could not be reignited. As daily papers begin to go the way of the semaphore, the telegraph and other redundant technologies, perhaps there just isn't the will.

Applied to Leach's oeuvre, the term 'romantic conceptualism' initially caused me to snigger, but I've come to learn that that Leach's site-based propositions frequently cover vast areas, plumb earlier eras and rouse odd beliefs and economic forces. As her works filter through local understandings of space, time and incumbent social dimensions, they probe, tease and often induce a faint, ineffable yearning; as un-locatable and unknowable as anything other than a benign and playful phantom.

After travelling 640 kilometres to experience the mechanics of Let us keep together, I think about Leach's imaginary trucks. I need one of the drivers to be a retired seaman who understands the 1969 International Code of Signals in use today. As he passes the other truck, he glimpses some sheep marooned in a landlocked paddock. Below the line of the highway and a backdrop of dry sclerophyll-covered hills, these sheep stand beside a flag signal that he understands clearly, a black circle on yellow background over a blue and white check – he reaches for his iPhone – they require a diver.