Walking to the end of the world

How do you unmap the end of the world? Do you take an existing world map, rip out the borders, turn it upside down, or perhaps inside out, and rename what you see? Maybe you draw lines where the earth, joining virtual communities connected by technology, and forget geography altogether. Is Australia “the end of the world”, a place still regarded elsewhere as a mythical South Land? And if it is, how do we unmap our colonial past, and ourselves in the process?

In April, 14 artists gathered at Lake Mungo to begin a journey that would invite them to consider such questions. Their adventure took them to three UNESCO World Heritage sites in different countries: the Willandra Lakes in Australia, the Kumano Kodo in Japan and the Valcamonica Rock Art sites of Italy. Over the course of a month, they spent a week “walking country” in each place. They talked to locals, immersed themselves in unfamiliar terrain and learnt about the history and significance of each location.

After long days of walking, they set down at night and talked about how time becomes elastic away from the city, about the ancient tools they found in Mungo’s dry creek beds, about the 8000-year-old rock drawings of northern Italy. The work they’ll create, titled Unmapping the End of the World, will form part of this year’s Mildura Palmsees.

The project’s curator is Jonathan Kimberley, an artist whose preoccupation with maps spans decades. In 2004, Kimberly and Aboriginal artist Jim Everett collaborated in an exhibition that captured Everett’s country in Tasmania in a series of medieval maps. Unlike colonial maps, which introduced borders and European notions of ownership, these depictions were imbued with mythology, story and imagery. For Kimberley, they represented a means for a “whitefield” to engage with Aboriginal country in a way that respects Indigenous beliefs.

He returns to maps in this project with the idea that “unmapping” a territory, or an idea, might prompt us to reconsider our preconceptions about identity and place.

The 14 artists he’s chosen come from different countries and disciplines but share an interest in examining the way cultures merge, fracture and eclipse each other.

Where Belgian artist Mishka Henner toys with online technologies such as Google Earth and YouTube to imagine “the earth’s terrain as a map of the social brain”, Tasmanian Julie Gough’s interest lies in “examining history and the way we inherit things we don’t completely understand”.

Kimberley has spent many years running art centres and collaborating with artists in remote regions of Australia. Six of the artists are Aboriginal; Ricky Mitchell and Daryl Pappin hail from the Lake Mungo area. In the year leading up to the expedition, discussions were held with elders from the Willandra Lakes region; 25 agreed to welcome the group with a traditional smoking ceremony and escort them along the ancestors track ways. Julie Gough holds a degree in archaeology; she describes the experience of walking along ancient creek beds and picking up stone tools that date back centuries as “mind-blowing”.

“The landscape has this incredible haunted and ancient feeling. Time takes on a different quality when you’re following a track and thinking about the people who walked it 40,000 years ago.”

After the lakes, the group headed back to Mildura, then Melbourne and on to Japan, where they embarked on the second stage of their journey: the famous Kumano Kodo pilgrimage trail. For Japanese-born Koji Ruiy, the transition from the Australian outback to Japan’s mountainous Kii peninsula provided a sense of homocoming.

“Walking country in Australia [for me] is going into a complete unknown. Certainly for the Aboriginal artists on the trip, being at the lakes, surrounded by the trees and plants, makes sense. But in Japan, the landscape and energy . . . makes sense to me.”

By day, the group walked between sacred sites in the mountains; at night they talked about their own histories and time. Ruiy says: “In the city, I’m locked into this clock. One hour means certain things to us, and with certain times of the day come expectations of what we should be doing: working, sleeping, eating. When I walk country, I feel like I leave this time behind me, and this opens up lots of possibilities of what time, or life, or I, could be.”

After Japan, the group continued to Italy, where they explored the 14,000 engravings that adorn the valley of the Valcamonica region. For Gough, the dizzying speed of the trip, the richness of experience in each location and the intensity of travelling in a large group left her overwhelmed.

“All these amazing things get burned into your retina at light speed. But how do you process such a volume of information to create a work of art?” She thought about what it means to learn about historical sites from academics and archaeologists rather than people with ancestral ties to the land. The idea that in cities, individuals can be displaced and disconnected from their countries indefinitely is that the world a state of being where your spiritual home is imaginary rather than real?

After the trip ended, with the group dispersing at Venice Biennale and going their separate ways, Gough travelled on to England and the Lake District, where she found herself filming tourists at a stone circle, eating ice cream and wandering the site with a tour guide despite hail and strong winds. It occurred to her that she must have looked like that when she was travelling with the group.

She started filming, “because I can’t process the experience of the trip yet.” I’m replicating parts of it instead. Not in a literal sense but the sensation of being out of time and out of place, and the confusion of that.”

Back home in Sydney, Ruiy is still unravelling the riddle of what it means to unmap the end of the world. “The end of the world could mean so many things. Is it the end of diversity? For me, coming from Japan and in the aftermath of Fukushima, it’s more of an apocalyptic idea, a coming to the end of our time.” The idea of unmapping is just as complex.

“It is undoing a western idea of mapping, a geographical map that stakes ownership of the land! I think more of the avant-garde movements that came out of Europe in the late ’60s and the practice of drifting where people move around the city without any particular purpose or direction. They see and experience whatever they come across, or they use a map of Paris to explore London or vice versa.”

He thinks too of architectural practices that involve mapping the experience of a site, the elements that have shaped it, rather than traditional measures.

And the work he’ll make? Much like Gough, he’s less focused on the individual places he visited than the epiphanies and sensations he felt along the way.

His work seeks to create moments of joy and wonderment by recontextualising familiar objects in unexpected ways.

“You know, really, this trip is going to inform my work for the next 10 to 20 years. I’m only just starting to understand the smallest parts of it now.”

Mildura Palmsees Biennale runs October 2-5.
mildurapalmseesbiennale.com