

In 2019 Angelica Mesiti represented Australia at the Venice Biennale, and had a survey show at Palais de Tokyo, Paris. This interview conducted in Sydney in 2011 charts her work up until that point.

John Gillies: Angelica, I wanted to ask you about early video works that you made and the work that was happening around Imperial Slacks, and also talk a little about that space and your first work with video.

Angelica Mesiti: Well, I guess the first work I exhibited is probably the best one to start with. It was a piece called *Reconnaissance Mission* which I produced in 2000. A lot of the works I was making at that time were pretty much documentary in approach and style, quite observational, hand-held, Mini DV - kind of very DIY in approach. So *Reconnaissance Mission* is a series of long takes of a friend riding a skateboard holding onto the back of a car as we're riding through the streets of Surry Hills late at night. The image has been pixelated using a filter so that the faces are unrecognisable, and it's a series of geometric shapes, and you can follow what's happening through the soundtrack.

John Gillies: So it goes between abstraction and a representation of the streets?

Angelica Mesiti: Yes, I guess it's a recording of an activity and a moment in time.

John Gillies: But it's also a portrait of that particular place or a ...

Angelica Mesiti: Definitely.

John Gillies: ... of Surry Hills ...

Angelica Mesiti: Yes

John Gillies: ... and the kind of people that were part of your milieu then in a way?

Angelica Mesiti: Exactly, yes. The person who was on the skateboard was Shaun Gladwell. Técha Noble and Wade Marynowsky were in the car and Chris Fox was driving. So we were all friends who were living and working at Imperial Slacks at that time.

John Gillies: Can you just explain Imperial Slacks, what was that?

Angelica Mesiti: Imperial Slacks was a gallery space and also artists' studios based at 111 Campbell Street in Surry Hills, Sydney. It came out of a gallery that Michael Schiavello had set up, with Léa Donnan, called Herringbone. They'd established that in the warehouse space, and around 1999, they decided that they no longer wanted to continue in that model. We were all living around the perimeter of the gallery spaces in studios – there was

about 14 of us at its peak – and we were all mostly friends from COFA. I think I was still doing my honours when I was living there but a lot of the people there were doing their MFAs on, scholarships (APAs); finishing their degrees at COFA; running the gallery space and working out of their studios.

So the people involved were Wade Marynowsky, Alex Davies, Michael Schiavello, Christopher Fox, Shaun Gladwell, Técha Noble, Melody Willis, Emma Price, Monika Tichacek, Sean Cordeiro, Claire Healy, Laura Jordan, Jessie Cacchillo, Simon Cooper and myself-

Most of us lived in Imperial Slacks and we all co-ran the space. The first year we divided up the program into one month blocks for shows. We paired up so either two or three of us got together and were allotted a one-month period within which we had to curate a show. I think we probably did about two each a year.

John Gillies: What did you curate?

Angelica Mesiti: I curated a show called *Nostalgia for Obsolete Futures* with Monika Tichacek. That show featured TV Moore, Simon Yates, Adrian Thomas, Monika and I. Monika and I did a collaborative video performance work for that show.

John Gillies: Where were your influences for video work coming from at that particular time?

Angelica Mesiti: I guess the sort of work I was interested in around that time were artists who were looking to the relationship between art and cinema through video. So Douglas Gordon, Lisa Elisa Attila, Pierre Huyghe - artists that were developing work that analysed or mimicked or drew attention to certain structures within cinema, performance or narrative systems.

This was also when Mathew Barney's *The Cremaster Cycle* was being released and so his work was definitely having an influence on all of us young artists.

I think a big thing for me at that time was a growing awareness of this newly developing genre and massive impact of reality TV around '99, 2000, which was quite new then. I was interested in how a faux documentary look became a real aesthetic in television and popular media at that time – and what that meant. A contrived sort of urgency borrowed from reportage and news footage but used for drama. So I think at the time my work was analysing some of that, and deliberately I guess adopting that documentary approach and aesthetic, but often the subject was either banal or everyday, or simply kind of documenting a moment or a landscape or a space, or something.

John Gillies: So how long did that collective last for?

- Angelica Mesiti: Imperial Slacks ran for three years
- John Gillies: And did you work on other – did people swap skills and work on each other's projects?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yes, definitely. There was a lot of collaboration. Everyone helped on everyone's projects. Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy were doing, as they always have done, very big ambitious installations, and they would need just, you know, labour, help, so we would all get called in. Michael Schiavello and Shaun Gladwell used to shoot The Kingpins videos for us. It was just whoever was around and could help– we all shared skills. So Técha used to design a lot of the invitations, Melody did a lot of writing of press releases and texts for shows, as well as people we asked from outside.
- John Gillies: So were you influencing each other's work, or when you worked on someone else's work it was all subsumed into that particular aesthetic of that person? Was there identifiable aesthetics between the people in the group at that stage?
- Angelica Mesiti: For sure. Well, we started collaborating on joint works together. Monika and I did a piece where she had a concept for a performance and then we discussed it and developed an idea for a video work out of that. She made the sculptural set pieces and was the subject of the video, and then I developed the video aspects of it - so the coverage and the shooting and the editing, and installation.
- And then around that time I started working with Técha Noble, Emma Price and Katie Price with The Kingpins, and that was really – that was a bit of a skill-share kind of organic process. Emma and Técha had been collaborating on live performance pieces, for a long time. They'd done projects at Performance Space and Sidetrack Theatre, so had that history. I have a performance background as well in dance, and I'd spent some time with Tess de Quincey's company. So it was just a natural organic thing.
- John Gillies: Plus you had the video aspect to this thing?
- Angelica Mesiti: Exactly. We started performing together and at first it was just an extension of our social scene really- the drag nightclub performances. Then we began to want to bring that back into our art practices. And so it was quite a logical move to turn the stage shows into faux video clips. And so naturally I kind of ...
- John Gillies: And where were you performing those shows?
- Angelica Mesiti: Nightclubs around Taylor Square, Oxford St.
- John Gillies: So they existed within that subcultural ...?

Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, definitely. It was just the queer nightclub scene around Surry Hills and Darlinghurst at that time.

John Gillies: Did you do many performances? How long did you do that?

Angelica Mesiti: We did a lot of club performances. At first we were part of a competition, like a drag king comp, and we won the competition. So I think we had the first heat, then the semis, and the finals. Then around that time we started making videos as well, and so we began to become known for them in the art scene.

John Gillies: Did you ever perform at Club Bent at Performance Space?

Angelica Mesiti: No, we didn't actually. We kind of kept it to clubs because the style of performance that we did relied on the energy of a nightclub dance floor environment. We tried a few times to translate it into more of a theatre spectacle and it just didn't work. It fell flat. The audience/performer dynamic in the theatre just didn't suit what we did at all.

Angelica Mesiti: Around 2007/2006 we did some performances that were for an art museum context.

John Gillies: In Paris?

Angelica Mesiti: Yes. We had to really develop a performance specifically for that context. So our performances changed quite a bit, depending on the context.

John Gillies: So how did you show Kingpins work in the gallery, in Imperial Slacks originally?

Angelica Mesiti: The first video we showed was a work we made specifically for one of the annual Imperial Slacks resident artist group shows. This first video work was called *This is My Remix Baby*, and it was done in the style of a boy band video clip. We exhibited that in the gallery space on a television monitor, sitting on a plinth. Above the monitor on the wall we hung four portraits that we got made by a portrait artist down at Paddy's market. They were charcoal drawings, one of each of us dressed as the characters from that video. So yes, we experimented with how to situate the video clips in the gallery space.

John Gillies: Okay, you were also showing your own work as well. Can you talk about those other pieces that were shown in the gallery?

Angelica Mesiti: I was doing some photographic prints from video stills. I was shooting video from my bedroom window into the building across the street which was a men's refuge home – very voyeuristic. This developed into a series of prints of video stills.

Another video work that followed that would've been the piece *Heroes*, which I showed as a video projection at Imperial Slacks. The video is a series of portraits of five women including me, all cast, because they are brunettes, with similar length brown hair,

and they're all dressed the same in a red T-shirt. In the video they're posed for the camera in the style of, I guess, family portraits, commercial portrait photography. I asked the subjects to hold a pose for several minutes, so it appears like a still, but it's a moving image of someone being still.

John Gillies: And this is backlit like a '70s music clip?

Angelica Mesiti: That's right.

John Gillies: And the title's a reference to ...?

Angelica Mesiti: David Bowie's song *Heroes*. The soundtrack of the work is actually a slowed down version of David Bowie's *Heroes*. And just as an aside, I saw his video clip for the first time the other day, and I must've seen it as a child and forgotten it, because he's very similarly backlit, standing in silhouette

John Gillies: What about the work *Generation*?

Angelica Mesiti: *Generation* was a work I made for Mori Gallery, for a group show that the artist Fiona Lowry curated. The theme of the show was around labour and work, and particularly the idea of administrative labour or office work. I made a piece with a collection of Macintosh computers that were probably two generations older than the current model of Mac at that time. They were the models that preceded the blue G3s, so they were still in the beige boxes before the Mac design revolution. So they're basically obsolete technology. I got around 15 computers with matching beige monitors and, with the help of Wade Marynowsky, wrote a little basic script that made all the monitors illuminate, with a pulsing green screen. So they pulsed individually and sat on the floor, kind of like a little army, I guess, of pulsing toxic screens.

John Gillies: So Imperial Slacks came to an end in 2003 or 2?

Angelica Mesiti: Yes

John Gillies: Yeah, and what happened to everybody after that?

Angelica Mesiti: We ended up closing because of rent rises in the area. But also I think it came to its own natural end. Everyone was at different stages in their practice and we kind of knew that to continue the gallery, it required a lot of extra time and work, and people were going off in different directions. So at that time, I think Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy had just won the Helen Lempriere Travelling Scholarship so they were heading overseas. Shaun Gladwell had just got the Samstag so he was going to London. The Kingpins projects were beginning to get more ambitious and opportunities were coming up for us – everyone was pretty much needing to go further afield to expand their own practices at that time, so it sort of naturally disbanded.

- John Gillies: And is that when you did *Serial 7s*?
- Angelica Mesiti: *Serial 7s* came in the first year of Imperial Slacks. It was a project that I did as one of my curated projects at the Gallery. I was inspired by a similar model I'd read about that was happening in London, and something small in Melbourne as well. At the time there was a lot of local artists making video work and there was willingness, I guess to find a larger audience for our work. Plus I felt that being such a transportable medium, I wanted to see if we could find a way of assembling the videos together and distributing them further afield
- John Gillies: What do you mean by distribution?
- Angelica Mesiti: Well, basically it was a curated project that existed as a compilation video cassette, a VHS tape. There were seven artists per volume and we produced 2 volumes. So it was like a curated show. I invited an artist, asked them to nominate a work or sometimes I selected a work and that was edited into a program that we duplicated onto the VHS cassettes (VHS was still the medium of choice for exhibition of video work in gallery's and at home). We did a run of maybe 100 copies of each edition, and then at the exhibition they were available for sale at the same price that a movie on VHS would cost.
- John Gillies: So around \$30?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yes.
- John Gillies: And what artists were on those?
- Angelica Mesiti: The first edition had Shaun Gladwell, Kate Murphy, TV Moore. I had a work on there, the Kingpins also.
- John Gillies: And the second one?
- Angelica Mesiti: Andrew Liversidge, Todd McMillan. I think that was a collaborative piece; Brent Grayburn. Local artists who were actively showing work at that time.
- John Gillies: Anyone from Melbourne?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, Brendan Lee from Melbourne was involved. He was simultaneously working on something through the ARI Kings that he was involved in in Melbourne, and he also produced a similar model, like a video collection that was distributed. He was more consistent than us. He got more editions going, and kept it going for a while. I think his version lasted the lifespan of the ARI Kings as well.
- John Gillies: Okay. So how was that *Serial 7s* received? Did it have any life after Imperial Slacks, and was it shown in places?

- Angelica Mesiti: It was received well by artists and peers. It went into the library of a couple of art institutions, COFA, University of Western Sydney purchased one. It was of most interest to artists, I think.
- John Gillies: This group of artists wasn't selling editions of work in galleries at this stage?
- Angelica Mesiti: No, no, and we didn't even have our head around that stuff at that stage. I mean, very few of us were even represented. So issues about editioning and copyright and all of that; we could kind of foresee that it would become an issue, but artists who were concerned about it selected works that were more minor pieces in their bodies of work that they didn't mind getting distributed.
- John Gillies: All right. So do you want to talk about the body of work that you created after that with the Kingpins
- Angelica Mesiti: So that first video we exhibited, was seen by Emil Goh at Imperial Slacks, and he curated it into a screening program for the Sydney Biennale for that year in 2000. It was screened at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Kate Murphy and TV Moore were also in that screening. So that gave us a boost of confidence about the videos we were producing. Next we were invited by Blair French to participate in an exhibition curated by Gary Carsley, called *Cerebellum*, at Performance Space during Blair's co-directorship. And that was a group exhibition with the Kingpins alongside Monika Tichacek, Charles Atlas and Leigh Bowery. We produced our first commissioned work which was called *Versus*, which was a parody of the Run-DMC Aerosmith song, *Walk This Way*.
- So that was probably the first larger scale installation work for us. There were sculptural elements in the exhibition. A graphic wall piece made up of badges; there were graphic posters; we started developing merchandise style graphic paper pieces.
- John Gillies: So again, it's a kind of a drag and a slight parody of a kind of commercial representation?
- Angelica Mesiti: Definitely, definitely. Yeah, and the mass production of music and iconography
- John Gillies: So it's kind of an anti-merchandising?
- Angelica Mesiti: Well, I guess it was reactionary. All the running themes throughout those early videos is about the inherent misogynistic portrayal of women in popular music in particular genres, particularly rock and rap. And so we were parodying those video clips.
- John Gillies: Do you think you were also within it as well, those kind of stereotypes?

- Angelica Mesiti: Possibly, because we were also fans of those genres, so ...
- John Gillies: So is there kind of contradictory impulses going on here?
- Angelica Mesiti: I think we wanted it to appear as authentic as possible but, we were consistently undermining those images. I mean we would appear in gold bikinis, but we had our face painted like a dog, so I think the contradiction was safe.
- John Gillies: Did that work ever go to a different kind of audience that may not have ever seen it in the normal context that you'd be presenting it in?
- Angelica Mesiti: So outside of an art context?
- John Gillies: Yeah, outside of a gay subcultural kind of context as well?
- Angelica Mesiti: Well, when we started showing in art spaces, it felt like it had left its queer context, but I think it was always read as art that had its origins in that world. But when we were curated into *Primavera* at the MCA in 2003 we were exposed to a much broader audience than before. The work we produced for that exhibition was *Welcome to the Jingle* where we all appear in male drag as a jogging team representing Team Starbucks. So yeah, the videos kind of got more – drag was a consistent element throughout the work, and that was our main key into the parody of our subjects.
- John Gillies: Do you want to talk a little bit more about *Welcome to the Jingle*, because I think it's quite an important work.
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, in our development, for sure. I guess with *Welcome to the Jingle*, a number of things happened. It was a different style of performance to what we'd done in the past, which was either studio-based or performed for camera. The performance in *Welcome to the Jingle* was an endurance performance that was structured as a live situational activity, and the video that came out was the product of three cameras that were just set to record our actions in a documentary fashion.
- John Gillies: Who were the videographers?
- Angelica Mesiti: Nigel Begg, Gotaro Uematsu and Michael Schiavello, and we had photographic documentation by Liz Ham. Performance-wise, it was a very different approach.
- John Gillies: It was also intervening into a real situation?
- Angelica Mesiti: That's right, so it was the first time we'd done that. They were site-specific interventions.
- John Gillies: So you actually performed in Starbucks unannounced, without permission?
- Angelica Mesiti: That's right. So we set up a route that we would take, and the idea was that we would perform in every Starbucks in the

Sydney CBD over one evening. So I think we did seven Starbucks in that night. We had a van that we were all inside of in costume, with our camera crew. We had a decoy with a stereo who would enter first, order a latte, put the stereo down, press play and then we would come in and do our routine in the main part of the shop, until we got kicked out. We said that we'd do it until we got kicked out, or until our routine was finished.

John Gillies: You had tight parameters for this piece?

Angelica Mesiti: It was really rehearsed.

John Gillies: And you had rules of how it would – and you did it once?

Angelica Mesiti: Definitely. That's right. Yeah, we had done reconnaissance to each of the locations and worked out our entry and exit points and also the space within the store that we would be doing the performance and the camera positions. We had a choreography that was one minute long and we had decided how we would enter etc. So it was really quite scripted.

John Gillies: So what did you think about this public intervention, this intervention to a public – with all the uncontrollable elements? What was the thinking behind that?

Angelica Mesiti: In what way?

John Gillies: Was it like, yes we're going to go this way because of x, y and z, or ...?

Angelica Mesiti: The public intervention approach was a way to perform a reaction to the multinational corporation of Starbucks that had very aggressively launched itself across the city. We were interested in the strategies behind corporations like Starbucks used to market and brand themselves in new markets. The way they map out the terrain of a city and slowly infiltrate it by strategically taking over key points across the city space.

We were also wanting to point out the way the company presented itself as this mass produced idea of the café as the heart of culture and exchange of ideas in the city. We saw that as a kind of drag show in itself: a corporate masquerade pretending to represent a focal point for a local community but actually its purely economic. Our public intervention is an absurd and kind of futile response in the face of the power of an economic juggernaut to effect the cultural terrain of the city.

The idea was that we were going to perform this activity within this space without permission, Then we were going to present a video out of the footage. That was our primary objective. The locations and our placement were really determined by what kind of coverage we'd get for the video. So the video was our final outcome. But it still was documentation of an event.

- John Gillies: And were you considering all of that in the beginning as a two-screen installation?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, we were.
- John Gillies: So the interesting thing about that work is you have two very disparate – you were both performing on both screens – you have two genres of music, two whole different performance styles you're taking off, fighting, interrupting each other, and between two screens with the audience in the middle.
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, we wanted to create an experience for the audience to feel like they were caught in the crossfire of some kind of battle between these two screens and these two sets of performers. So the main protagonists were the Starbucks team that were jogging and performing this endurance activity at the Starbucks, and the opposing screen was inhabited by the voice that pushed on the team, like they were like the coach, and these characters were dressed as rock and roll wrestling über monsters.
- John Gillies: Almost Scandinavian death metal?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, and singing in the style of Nordic death metal. So that was the first time we'd produced original music for one of our pieces as well.
- John Gillies: Who produced that?
- Angelica Mesiti: We collaborated with Dylan Martin, a Sydney electronic musician.
- John Gillies: So one screen has a remake of *Oxygène* by Jean-Michel Jarre.
- Angelica Mesiti: That's right.
- John Gillies: And the other one is like a death metal ...
- Angelica Mesiti: ...rendition. The lyrics of the song come from the iconic Australian war film, *Gallipoli*, which is where the soundtrack comes from. So the main piece of dialogue that we pulled from the film, becomes the lyrics for the song.
- John Gillies: The death metal song?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yes: 'What are your legs?' The death metal singers are the vocalists throughout the song. And they're singing these lyrics from the film, which is, '*What are your legs? Steel springs. How fast can they run? Fast as a leopard. How fast are you going to run? As fast as a leopard.*' So the idea of sport and war is expressed through this remix .
- John Gillies: So that work was in Primavera 2003, created quite a bit of interest?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yes.

- John Gillies: And the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney bought that work?
- Angelica Mesiti: They did. And then it was selected for participation in the Gwangju Biennale in Korea in 2004. And we were invited to create a site specific version of the performance in Gwangju at the Starbucks locations there. Gwangju was actually almost like the Starbucks capital city. At that time it had the most Starbucks per capita for a city.
- John Gillies: So was this now ...
- Angelica Mesiti: That was the peak of Starbucks as a corporation in 2004.
- John Gillies: In Gwangju, was it done with the cooperation of the Starbucks corporation?
- Angelica Mesiti: No, no, it was done in the same way.
- John Gillies: As a guerrilla raid on Starbucks?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yes, but with a very different responses from the public. There's a real culture of street marketing in Korea, where young, good-looking girls and guys would be dressed up and employed to walk around and hand out free stuff as publicity people. They're dressed up in costumes almost like cheer leaders, but they'd be advertising or trying to sell promotions for mobile phone companies and stuff. So there was much more confusion about whether we were actually with Starbucks or doing something else.
- John Gillies: Okay, then you made a number of works for different Biennales with The Kingpins, Liverpool and ...?
- Angelica Mesiti: Taipei followed immediately after Gwangju in 2004 and for that Biennale we were invited to submit previous works that we'd already created. So it was the videos *This is My Remix Baby*, and *Versus*, and another video *Men's Club*, which I didn't mention, which we'd made before the *Versus* work. So those three videos played within an installation. Again we made wallpaper that was graphically produced portraits of the characters from the videos, which came from Técha – Técha does all the graphic design stuff – and we also had, text neon signage made. We created tunnels that you walked down to enter the projections space, with these flashing neon signs, so it was almost like entering a club.
- John Gillies: So in the group, so you said Técha was doing all the graphics. You worked collaboratively, so ...
- Angelica Mesiti: So conceptually it was pretty much a four-way collaboration, although sometimes someone would have an idea we'd run with for a video, but there was always an exchange. In terms of the practical roles, Emma and Katie really designed the costumes

and Katie made a lot of the costumes. Em provided a lot of the direction for the costumes. Técha was involved in costumes, graphic design, character design. Music production was really collaborative. I did the music editing. I did the coordination of the videos - so direction - although everyone had input into the direction of the video and editing.

John Gillies: And you were performing as well?

Angelica Mesiti: And I was also performing. We worked with videographers, usually Gotaro Uematsu, and Michael Schiavello and Nigel Begg, and then I would do the editing and production. They were quite edited videos too, because they're mostly parodying video clip styles.

John Gillies: So did you watch a lot of video clips to get the language?

Angelica Mesiti: In my lifetime, yeah! It came pretty naturally I found, just from being overly familiar.

John Gillies: In *Heroes*, you're mimicking a David Bowie clip from the '80s, which you've never seen, or supposedly seen as a kid?

Angelica Mesiti: I must've seen it. But you know, video clip styles are so different from the '70s to the '80s. The '70s are really long takes, and based on performance. And then in the '80s, which is probably when I was watching the most video clips, it was the era of the über clip, you know, fast video editing and all of that narrative and stylistic stuff.

John Gillies: Yeah, so MTV and Motley Crüe, and ...

Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, and Run-DMC.

John Gillies: ... and the excesses of video editing.

Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, and that's probably the period that we were stylistically following the closest.

John Gillies: So did you want to talk a bit about Liverpool?

Angelica Mesiti: For the Liverpool Biennale we were invited to conceive a work that engaged with the nightclub culture of Liverpool. Liverpool has a really big nightclub district, and a hard partying scene. Although not a big queer scene. I guess we were invited because of our relationship to music, and that part of the culture. So we ended up developing an installation with multiple components: two videos, one a large projection and one a wall-mounted plasma image. The music for the clip was made by a Melbourne band called Jimmy And Johnny's Band.

Again we created this entire environment with wallpaper and a perspex tudor window and fabric flags, lifesize cutouts of photo's of local ladies. There was a slideshow, big graphic

wallpaper elements.. It was the biggest environment/installation that we made.

John Gillies: So at this time, are you starting to work in the film industry as well, as an editor or assistant editor?

Angelica Mesiti: Yes, and prior to that I always earned a living by freelance editing and teaching editing, Final Cut Pro and things. Plus teaching at COFA.

In about 2007, I started working as an editor's assistant in feature films, and some ABC Television series stuff.

John Gillies: And do you think that that work's influence is where you went next?

Angelica Mesiti: Definitely. In 2008, I had a job assisting on a series of films called *A Bit of Black Business*, which was commissioned by SBS Independent, and they were short films working with a number of young indigenous filmmakers. Warwick Thornton was one of the filmmakers and he produced his short *Nana*, which was a study that led to *Samson and Delilah*. I think I was really inspired by his approach to image-making, and his very visual non-verbal style. I think that was a really enriching experience that made me more interested in perhaps returning to something that was more cinematic in its approach. And I guess I was also wanting to try my hand at something longer form, and exploring some of the technique and craft that I'd been developing during that period as well. I was also interested in moving away from a focus on parody, and maybe doing something that was a little bit more reflective.

John Gillies: Did you find that parody is a bit of a trap in a way? Why did you want to move away from parody?

Angelica Mesiti: It didn't excite me any more. I don't know, it didn't feel like it was going anywhere for me at that time. There were other things I was more interested in looking at and pursuing and were actually talking to me more. And that was, I guess, returning to landscape, a different relationship with music, different music was interesting me. And so during that time I became interested in folk music, and music that was about storytelling, and more traditional instrumentation. A return to things that were craft oriented and hand made. It felt like I'd spent a lot of time making work about the things in the world that bothered me and now I wanted to focus on things that I connected with in a more positive way.

John Gillies: So one of the works you made after that, *The Line of Lode and Death of Charlie Day*, you wrote a song for the beginning, correct?

Angelica Mesiti: Yeah.

- John Gillies: What was the starting point for that? Do you want to talk about that?
- Angelica Mesiti: Well I wrote it during the editing process actually, but there were a whole bunch of reasons for starting on that project. I was going through a lot of change in my personal life - end of a long term relationship etc, lots of changes going on. I felt like I really needed to make a new work on my own, and I wanted it to be a project that I could do in a sustained way. I didn't really have a big plan at the beginning. I'd been to Broken Hill in 2003 and had always wanted to go back, plus it was really far away- so it seemed like the perfect place to go.
- John Gillies: Why did you go to Broken Hill originally?
- Angelica Mesiti: I went with with DLux Media Arts, who were taking artists from Sydney to Broken Hill to do workshops etc. It was at the beginning of their relationship with the Broken Hill Art Exchange.
- John Gillies: Do did you just sign up for that?
- Angelica Mesiti: I was invited to go in 2002 with Mari Velonaki, Alan Giddy and Leah Grycewicz.
- John Gillies: So did you create a work there? This was the starting point of *The Line of Load and Death of Charlie Day*?
- Angelica Mesiti: No we did workshops, we talked about our work to local artists, and people who were interested in art, young people from high school. And then we had a small show where called *Broken Hotel* held in one of the shop fronts that ended up becoming the Broken Hill Art Exchange Centre.
- John Gillies: In South Broken Hill?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah.
- John Gillies: So had you been to a place like that before?
- Angelica Mesiti: No.
- John Gillies: So how did it strike you?
- Angelica Mesiti: It was a really affecting experience. We drove there, and we drove together in a van, and I had never been in a landscape or environment like that before.
- John Gillies: Because you'd grown up in suburban Sydney?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah.
- John Gillies: To migrant parents?
- Angelica Mesiti: My parents were born in Australia.
- John Gillies: They were born in Australia?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yes I'm second generation Italian, but I grew up surrounded by the culture in a really Italian community.

- John Gillies: So did they have much relationship to outside of the city?
- Angelica Mesiti: Well, they're both come from market gardener backgrounds, and we always had relatives in what used to be the country, Kellyville, and you know not any more. But we were always in the bush and in the country in that way, but more on farms, cousins' farms. And so yeah, I don't think I ever went to the Blue Mountains until I was 17 or something. So yeah, it was a very alien, foreign environment for me.
- Actually, just backtracking, I had gone with Tess de Quincey to one of her Body Weather workshops outside of Alice Springs, in probably 2001, and that was actually my first experience of the desert landscape. And I think that's why I was interested in going to Broken Hill. When that offer came up, I jumped at that.
- John Gillies: So you trained in Body Weather technique with Tess de Quincey?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, very briefly, sporadically over a one-year period. I think I was involved in one public performance with her. But I had a background in contemporary dance and ballet.
- John Gillies: As a kid or a teenager?
- Angelica Mesiti: From 9 till 19. After high school I got a scholarship, I went to London to study at the Laban Dance Centre, but then decided to come back and go to art school. So I was pretty serious about dance.
- John Gillies: Big decision! So did you come to art school to do painting?
- Angelica Mesiti: I went into the sculpture department at first. But then in second year, shifted over to time-based art pretty quickly. It excited me more.
- John Gillies: So that experience of going with Tess de Quincey was seminal in the development of what happened later?
- Angelica Mesiti: Probably yeah, because she introduced me to the idea of developing site specific performances. The experience with Tess was probably a really important one in hindsight, because up to that point what I had been familiar with in terms of dance and performance was about narrative, I guess, and she was teaching or passing on a method that was stripped of narrative and psychology, that's about de-aestheticising movement. It comes from very pragmatic origins, like the movement of bones and muscles, and your direct relationship to the environment, so the stone or the concrete or the trees, or the sounds of the environment. So that was hugely eye-opening for me. I felt like a dancer when I came to her and started these techniques, and then felt like everything I knew was being confounded by her methods. And it really excited me. I loved the way that she was

talking about the relationship between movement and the body in the environment, and the kinds of things she was exploring.

John Gillies: So then you went a second time, to do a residency in Broken Hill?

Angelica Mesiti: I went with the intention of staying there for a week so I could just start developing ideas for a piece. I went with very, very vague ideas. I just knew that I wanted to explore video in a new way. I wanted it to involve performance on some level.

The year before, while overseas with The Kingpins, we'd been to the Tate Modern and seen Pierre Huyghe's solo show. What I saw him doing in situational performance stuff translated to film I really connected with. I think that probably had a big impact.

John Gillies: Do you want to talk a little bit about the process of making that work in Broken Hill?

Angelica Mesiti: So for the first visit I just did a lot of talking to locals. I guess I was researching the history of the area, but also really just looking around. In South Broken Hill, where I was staying, there is still a number of the old miners' huts, so I became interested in that history. I guess I realised that I was wanting to make a work that was a bit of a portrait of the place but also beginning to understand the iconic nature of the town and the surrounding landscape and its relationship to a collective image of Australian-ness.

I was meeting with people who were telling me about Aboriginal creation stories from that area as well as people from the mines who told me about the geological history and origins of the mineral deposits.

I visited Broken Hill about three times during that year, just kind of on research trips, and then also setting up and planning potential shoots. And then shot the work in January of 2007 over a 10-day period. I just went with the videographer, Evan Papageorgiou, and a camera assistant, and kind of pretty much set up the shoots and shot them while we were there in that 10-day period.

John Gillies: So the one element of performance in that, was the kids from South Broken Hill?

Angelica Mesiti: When I'd been on my early research trips, in South Broken Hill, there were always kids in the street riding BMX bikes, and I began thinking about the development of a performance with local kids and bikes, and this daily activity that could be perhaps considered as a way of relating to the environment. So we coordinated with the PCYC groups and they let us develop a workshop with kids on school holiday care. We developed a workshop using their own bikes to create a choreography.

- John Gillies: So you used that methodology in the subsequent works, working with pre-existing groups, or pre-existing performance sometimes, or musical performance?
- Angelica Mesiti: Just activities, turning an activity into a performance. Yeah, like with the most recent work, *The Begin-Again*, I deliberately looked for people who were already engaged in some kind of performative practice. And in some of these cases, they didn't really even consider what they were doing to be performance.
- John Gillies: So you put a frame around it?
- Angelica Mesiti: Exactly, exactly, with some intervention as well..
- John Gillies: You called this a 'ready-made' device?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, I got in trouble for that.
- John Gillies: What is the response of the people that are in them, to be taken out of this context and put into this public context where you put a new frame around it and it's seen in a different way?
- Angelica Mesiti: Well, from the last work that I've just made, the participants were really excited by the process and the final product. I did have a hand in adjusting what they do for my purposes, by either inviting them to sing a particular song, or dance to a particular song, or dance in a set that I've built etc.
- In *The Begin-Again*, we took a deliberately cinematic approach, in the sense that it's got quite conventional 'movie' coverage and editing. So tracking shots, or deep focus images; the editing style is quite conventional as well. This approach was to refer to the Hollywood musical in some way, or that genre of performance on screen.
- John Gillies: You've got genres in your head sometimes when you're making these works?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, definitely. The *Line of Lode* was a western in my mind. The *Begin-Again* was a musical.
- John Gillies: So how do you feel about using these forms? You were using music clips earlier on, weren't you, in a way. Now using the western, the music hall. Why do you do that?
- Angelica Mesiti: I watched too much TV as a kid! I think it's because either the environment or the activity of the performance itself suggests the genre. So for Broken Hill, for the *Line of Lode*, it was a western immediately because of its location in the desert. It was a journey-type film, which is inherent in the western, you know, this quest across the desert towards redemption.
- John Gillies: It's a road movie of sorts ...
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah.

- John Gillies: ... which follows the journey of birds as well?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, migration and native and introduced people, activities, species, yeah.
- John Gillies: That work touches tangentially on the indigenous mythology of the area. So how did you work with that?
- Angelica Mesiti: I heard about one of the creation stories from the area, which explained how the area became so mineral-rich I was interested in an intersection between the indigenous stories and a non-indigenous economic relationship to the landscape. They both had this element that linked them - the mineral deposits -but had very different approaches to that reality.
- John Gillies: So the story that you had heard – this is a public kind of story, it's not ...
- Angelica Mesiti: Definitely, yeah I arranged a story telling with Badger Bates who is a Barkanji man from Wilcannia, and he was the one who was in a position to be able to tell me that story. So I heard the story that they can tell white fellas. And it's well known in that area.
- John Gillies: Yeah, and it's the one that you allude to or use in a way in ...
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, it's pretty abstract.
- John Gillies: I don't think people would get it necessarily.
- Angelica Mesiti: I don't think so either. It just really takes the birds as a symbol, and that's the bronzed-wing pigeon in that story. But the bird is also a metaphor for migration.
- John Gillies: We also see dead birds in that are pinned ...
- Angelica Mesiti: Taxidermy birds in the reception of Marios Palace Hotel. The work is considering our relationship to nature, a difficult relationship to nature in that environment. The taxidermy birds perform a similar role, in the film, to the murals of the landscapes inside the hotel. So it's like this awkward relationship to the natural environment.
- John Gillies: So is *The Line of Lode*... a transitional work for you?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, definitely.
- John Gillies: So it stands on its own in a way, but it's a kind of a bridge?
- Angelica Mesiti: Maybe
- John Gillies: Things hinge on that work, that work suggests lots of other possibilities.
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, I think it was like a way of transitioning into a different way to work with performance. I think the way that performance developed made me interested in furthering that approach. So 'found' situations developed into performance.

- John Gillies: Like collaborating with people?
- Angelica Mesiti: With groups, yes, exactly.
- John Gillies: You know, that it belonged to a very particular place?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yes, yeah. So that kind of led onto a bunch of stuff.
- John Gillies: So after *Line of Lode*..., you did *Rapture*?
- Angelica Mesiti: *Rapture* was shot in the summer of January 2009. It was really a pretty simple concept that I'd had in my mind for some time, which was just documentation of the faces of kids in the front row of a rock concert. I imagined it documented in super-slow motion, very slowed down. I knew people who worked for Ken West, and the Big Day Out felt like the perfect opportunity to be able to get access to that kind of environment, situation. So I arranged for us to get a position underneath one of the main stages, and we shot that in a day.
- John Gillies: So what were the references for that work? Where was that coming from and why were you interested in that subject matter?
- Angelica Mesiti: I think that work came out of the experiences I'd probably had the year before. I feel like that work is still about performance at its heart. We'd done a show in Nantes in France, which was probably to our biggest audience that we'd ever performed to, as The Kingpins, and it brought up a whole lot of stuff. In The Kingpins we'd always talked about this dynamic that happens between the audience and the performer, and how you're feeding off each other's energy, and how it really feeds into the performance, the audience's energy. And so I guess, coming out of that recent experience made me want to— return to the audiences perspective, and also to, you know, my own experiences at concerts growing up and what that feels like. Whether they're aided by drugs or not, feeling (perhaps for the first time) very big intense and public emotional experiences. The group energy that can elevate ones emotional state and generate a fervour and feeling of almost religious transport.
- John Gillies: So was this related to religious ecstasy as well?
- Angelica Mesiti: The work is about this kind of transport that can happen within certain environments. The transport I think occurs when people are assemble en mass, and they're all united and focused by some kind of activity, in close proximity. It's a really extreme environment, it's an incredibly physical environment.
- John Gillies: It's heightened?
- Angelica Mesiti: You're in a heightened state. And I see that kind of experience as linked to lots of religious and cultural rituals throughout history and across civilisations.
- John Gillies: So that work has had quite a significant life?

- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah.
- John Gillies: It's a work that can be shown in galleries or an outdoor projection; it's silent.
- Angelica Mesiti: Well, it's an easy one to show because it behaves like a painting in a lot of ways. It's really linked to portraiture. It's usually shown on a plasma display so it sits within a frame on a wall. So it's easily exhibitable. I think it's accessible as a video because you can relate to it like a painting.
- John Gillies: And it was awarded the Blake prize for religious and spiritual art, which is something you originally didn't conceive of?
- Angelica Mesiti: No.
- John Gillies: And so what kind of reaction did that get?
- Angelica Mesiti: Mixed. I had a lot of positive feedback. Certain critics didn't like it.
- John Gillies: Why?
- Angelica Mesiti: Well, one of the criticisms was that ecstasy is cheap, and what I was showing was not religious enough. And I guess my – the reason why I put it in is because I felt like this work was about the origins of religion and also about religious art. I was conscious of historical examples of religious ecstasy in Italian religious painting the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, and these kind of images of worship that come from, European art, and Christian iconography, which is part of my Roman Catholic background.
- John Gillies: But you've used something that's very profane to ...
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, exactly, so that was the problem.
- John Gillies: ... which was a rock concert.
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah.
- John Gillies: And is it saying something about that?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, I guess. The year before I made *Rapture*, I was in Naples and I went to this religious festival where every year the relic of a Saint apparently liquefies and turns into blood. It's a miracle! It's a national media event, covered by all the major broadcasters and the crowd is sort of swept up into a frenzy. So I guess what I was seeing there was something that I'd recognised in other places. I think that sometimes, religious transport can be, a spiritual experience can be a matter of ...
- John Gillies: Illusion?
- Angelica Mesiti: ... yeah, it could be an illusion, it could just be a matter of lots of physical stimulus, and ...
- John Gillies: Endorphins firing off people around you, and ...

- Angelica Mesiti: Everyone's energy focused on one thing, proximity to other people, you know, nervousness, excitement, you know, all of those things, which kind of – I guess it's the mob, in some ways, as well.
- John Gillies: So it's a kind of anti-religious possibly? It could be read that way as well?
- Angelica Mesiti: It could be – you could read it that way, or the way I look at it is that it's people who make the experience and the feeling of this spiritual transportation. It's not – maybe it's not outside of us, maybe it's all the people that are doing it. So I think that's positive.
- John Gillies: *Do you want to talk about Old Time?*
- Angelica Mesiti: I made *Old Time* between *Line of Lode...* and *Rapture*, that same year, and I think *Old Time* is most related to *Line of Lode...*
- John Gillies: A transitional work?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, I started getting interested in these folk traditions, and traditions that are passed on verbally from person to person. I met Campbell by chance at a folk festival, six years prior to working with him, and he's just an extraordinary performer. He lives an itinerant lifestyle, he basically busks for a living. He lives like a modern-day swagman. He's quite striking looking, and he just struck me as an extraordinary character that I wanted to record. And so it's actually a very straightforward work, just a single close-up shot of his face as he recites a late 19th century Australian poem.
- John Gillies: A bush ballad.
- Angelica Mesiti: Bush ballad, yeah.
- John Gillies: A particular kind of poetry ...
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah.
- John Gillies: ... that'd be unintelligible to a non-Australian audience, I imagine?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, I've shown it to people in Europe, English speaking, and they have not understood a word, but his face is what holds your attention as well as the rhythms of the language. When we were recording it, I stopped concentrating on the narrative of the poem after about the first few minutes because it felt like that wasn't even what you were watching. It was the melodies. It was something outside of the narrative that was more interesting.
- John Gillies: The cadences of his voices and his performance, and his presence?

- Angelica Mesiti: Yes this feeling that he's summoning up something from another time.
- John Gillies: So this is something that you've pursued, or you've taken up. You're basically doing performance documentation of other people?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yes at the moment.
- John Gillies: And the selecting and the juxtaposition, like *Duet for Citizens*, the one you're shooting in Paris?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yes performance in specific contexts. I feel like that's where my interests lie at the moment. So either moving the performer into a context that I've chosen, or the performance itself is interesting because of the context that I've experienced it in.
- John Gillies: And is it also a performance that can be done for camera that would never be done for an audience?
- Angelica Mesiti: Sometimes. In *Duet for Citizens*, Zongo performs water drums which is a tradition from Cameroon, that she learned from her grandmother. It's traditionally performed in rivers and is a communal ritual. Since she lives in Paris she practises the water drumming in her local public swimming pools just for herself it's not a performance intended for an audience. This new context and the translation of the traditional into this context is what I find interesting; the same with Mohammed, who busks on the Paris Metro. Mohammed sings Algerian folk songs accompanied by a Casio electric keyboard. He sings these kind of romantic folk ballads.
- John Gillies: So do you feel an affinity with these people?
- Angelica Mesiti: Yeah, totally. I saw Mohammed on the Metro and I was completely moved by him, not just the singing, but him and the experience of what he was doing and how he got there, and the same with Zongo. Usually the works starting point is from a very strong personal reaction to something I've seen or experienced. That's why I want to make a work with someone, because it's affected me somehow. I feel like I want to record it.

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