

# AT THE WATER HOLE

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## IN RETROSPECT

ARTWORK BY GERDA STEINER AND JÖRG LENZLINGER  
TEXT BY GABRIEL GARCÍA

Uncoiling like a dreamtime serpent, a tunnel of foil leads the way to a land unknown. The tunnel is supported by a canopy of branches and appears to breathe with my every move. I look inside the silvery cavern. Do I want to know what lies ahead ...?

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A decade ago, Melbourne witnessed the start of the artistic collaboration between Swiss artists Gerda Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger. Their creativity has travelled far and wide since then.

In 2003 they represented Switzerland at the Venice Biennale with the installation *Falling Garden*. They reached Japan with the *Brainforest* in 2004, and built a *Moon Garden* in France in 2007, to name only a few of their works. Their exhibitions teem with life and thought, death and renewal—beauty in its most bizarre and unexpected forms.

Steiner and Lenzlinger were back in Melbourne last year. From December 2008 to March 2009, Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art played host to their thought-provoking exhibition based on the Australian drought—*The Water Hole*.

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Upon reaching the end of the aluminium tunnel, *The Water Hole* journey begins. I find myself facing the exhibition's main installation: a forest of the future.

A mobile phone with canary-yellow spider legs lays prostrate at my feet, while tiny hybrid reptiles breed from a nest of water bottles. Fertilizer crystals grow, forming stalactites and stalagmites, the exhibition staff feed the crystals daily doses of water. As the crystals grow, they creep like vines, imprinting lapis blue and coral on their surroundings. Uprturned umbrellas searching for water look up to the skies, and along with sinks, toilets and bathtubs form an entirely new vegetation. Interconnected through a tangle of tubes and pipes, this new growth bends itself towards its one and only life source—water.

At the centre of it all, surrounded by a luscious doona, rests the water hole—a muddy pool. I stand in front of it and see my reflection in its surface. The image breaks into a myriad of wavelets with a *plop!*—the heartbeat of this world. Hanging from the roof like a frozen star, a medical bag drips water into the stagnant pool. Like any other heartbeat, it will draw unparallel attention if it becomes silent.

Next to the main installation I find myself inside an observation deck—a different world altogether. I help myself to a cup of water from a water fountain. From behind tinted glass windows, and with the aid of binoculars, I inspect the forest of the future. Distance brings perspective.

I join other onlookers at the deck in a heated discussion. We criticise our fellow human beings and comment on their lack of environmental awareness. We vent our frustrations about their irresponsible use of water, their carelessness. As I move to the next room of the exhibition, I leave my half-empty water cup behind ...

A set of curtains ripples sinuously. I walk through to find myself greeted by a potpourri of beds—massage beds, waterbeds—hanging from the ceiling,

resting on their legs. Paired to each bed is a minor installation. I hesitate for a moment, then proceed to lay back, relax, and observe.

Footage from the artist's *Moon Garden* exhibition in France spreads like paint across the walls and ceiling. Each projection is bisected by a line of symmetry, travelling hand in hand with its mirror image. I lie on a king-sized waterbed, wobbling to my heart's content while watching projections of dripping water in an abandoned silver mine in the French countryside.

My memory stirs, taking me back to when I was sixteen, stepping into a restaurant in Chinatown back in Mexico City. After a meal heavy with fried foods and MSG, my best friend and I sat ready to crack open our fortune cookies and oraculize futures before gulping down green tea. With all the refinement a sixteen year old could muster, I proposed we append the words 'in bed' to every phrase in our soothsaying biscuits:

*'Love doesn't make the world go round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile—in bed.' – 'Do not hesitate to look for help, an extra hand should always be welcomed—in bed.' – 'It is better to be the hammer than the anvil—in bed.'*

I chuckle. In a much more sophisticated way Steiner and Lenzlinger have done the same. Observing their installations whilst lying on a bed gives the viewer a different perspective, a fresh new angle altogether.

Still wobbling, I leave the room of projections, only to come across a fragment of meteorite—a real meteorite—hanging over a massage bed. The rock weighs 33kg, is 4.5 billion years old and swings scarcely 15 cm above my face, suspended by a fishing net. It is older than Earth. I find it surprisingly relaxing to look at.

In another corner of the room, a second massage bed, hanging from the ceiling, with nothing above it but ... ceiling. I hop on and start to swing. Nothing special happens. A mystery without a Sphinx. One of the



