

DOT MATRIX OF HUMANITY

**Artist Boardriders Club
(ABC)**

**THE WALLS
ART SPACE**

Metro Arts, Gallery One
20-27 November, 2021

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Presented by The Walls Art Space and Metro Arts

Dot Matrix of Humanity, 2021

Tents, tent poles, surfboards, blanket, canvas camp chairs, gaffa tape, hooks, projectors, single channel videos: *Komune* (2 mins 30 secs, silent); *The Stoke* (5 mins 36 sec, with sound); *Wash and Wax* (2 mins 19 secs, silent).



Go Surfing, 2021
Spotify Playlist, QR Code

There has always been an affinity between surfing and art.

There is the obvious metaphor, the wave as canvas, the surfboard as brush, the surfer as artist.

But there are more nuanced connections at work here. The instinctive reading of unseen signals, responding intuitively to the mysterious flow of energy, a non-verbal language with beauty and transcendence at its core. Entering a realm where we surrender control and hitch our wagon to higher forces. Ancient Hawaiians had chants to extoll the skills of competitors in surfing contests. Ceremony and ritual marked the felling of trees to shape surfboards. Petroglyphs chipped into rock were the first depictions of surfing.

It makes perfect sense that artists are attracted to surfing and vice versa. Both seek and are granted fresh perspectives by plunging headlong into an alternative realm of freedom and creative self-expression. The surfer contemplates the view of the land from sea, from the inside of the

wave looking out, from beneath the surface looking up to the light. Their play is found at the fringe where land and sea meet, governed by tide, wind and swell, the fickle fluctuations of sand banks, like artists requiring the necessary alignment of forces to create.

The Beats and counter-culture thought leaders of the '60s saw surfing as a physical manifestation of the "be here now" ethos they had borrowed from eastern mysticism, a passionate commitment to live in the present moment. Champion surfer of the '60s Phil Edwards once sympathised with the plight of the non-surfing masses, what he dubbed "the legions of the unjazzed".

But for all this pseudo-spiritual exclusivism, we are all drawn to the coast, swarm to it like ants to sugar, infest it, swarm over it. Aerial views of our crowded beaches or surfing lineups might almost be dot art. The human dot matrix shapeshifting with the pulses of the ocean.

Tents and high-rise neatly bookend our colonisation of the coast,

displacing an eons-old love affair between the first Saltwater People and the coastal zone. Our inhabitation grew increasingly permanent and imposing, from tent cities to crude fibro shacks, kitsch motels through to vast McMansions and high-rise towers.

The first European holiday makers on what became known as the Gold Coast set up camp in the Coolangatta foreshore with a simple sheet of canvas, some rope and two tea tree poles. The moral conduct of the dune dwellers was often called into question by the authorities, as if surrendering to the sensual pleasures of the beach at such close quarters to nature and each other would lead to some sort of catastrophic moral failing. Even mixed surf bathing was seen as scandalous.

A century later, high rise towers rise above the coast like the smokestacks of industry, physical signifiers of our economic mainstay. The quest to accommodate ever greater numbers of humans as close to the beach sand as possible saw the smokestacks push ever

higher. Sensuality has always been inherent in our dance with the coast. Elaborate mating rituals are intrinsically wrapped up in the coast's appeal, from the Hokey Pokey at Greenmount in the 1940s, pyjama parties in Surfers in the '60s, to the debauchery of Schoolies Week today.

Surfing is a place for us to connect. We connect with nature in the waves, in the water and under the sun, dancing amongst our friends. It's calming, intentional, rhythmic. The idea of humans moving with nature, moving with the elements, is reflected in the tents. They have to be assembled to fit in with the natural world around them. In a tent you are among the elements, the sun, the rain, as you are in the ocean. They move and shift with weather patterns. They are assembled and disassembled, warping and changing over time according to the life they've lived. Wild weather threatens to erase their presence all together. There is a striking contrast between the temporary, malleable qualities of a tent and the permanence of the high rise towers scraping the Gold Coast skies.

Tents are metaphors for grounding and stand in opposition to high rises which provide an eagle eye view of the world beneath. Both are designed for those wishing to escape the realities of everyday life. Some seek solitude in the simple promise of peace and tranquility, away from the banality of working life. Others seek refuge in the luxe of sky-high living, far from earthly quotidian problems. Others still seek solace in the ocean, with each new wave a gentle reminder that none of this is permanent.

While artists are more stereotypically portrayed in cold, dark urban settings, lofts, grottoes and warehouse studios, there is something irresistibly alluring for the artist in this sparkling and dynamic environment of the coast. Just paddling out commonly cures creative blocks, an unfailing muse of negative ions, sea spray, sunlight, salt and sand. Surfing, rather than suffering, for your art.

At the same time, salt water is our great equaliser, the trinkets of class largely useless here. Creatives drawn to the coast have no exclusive

claims on its potent role as a creative muse, a supreme solace in so many lives, what author Tim Winton calls "this vast salty poultice that can suck the poison out of you". We literally swim amid the populace rather than isolating in our own arts enclaves. The coast becomes a primary source of inspiration, literally and energetically.

To experience such intimacy with something so indifferent and unknowing can only inspire awe. We witness events in the ocean beyond words, moments of skill, drama, grace, colours without names, liquid sculptures constantly morphing between beauty and chaos. We lose ourselves in the ocean, drawn into something greater than ourselves. A crowded surf break moves like an amorphous mass, responding to the signals of the ocean. The once freedom-seeking surf ethos of yore seems to have been replaced by a sheep-like herding instinct. Where territorial instincts can be reined in, surfing can then become a more social pastime than the so-called soul surfers of a previous age seeking solitude. And yet the impulse for transcendence

endures.

An Artists' Boardriders Club seems an entirely natural expression of the Gold Coast artistic aesthetic. Surf art need not literally reference surfing, or even the ocean or coast, but seems stimulated by a similar wild, unpredictable energy, a beguiling geometry to it one moment, a surreal confounding chaos the next.

The process of collaboration, like surfing, means relinquishing some control. In the truest sense the work draws us into the moment and allows us to play, just as we did as children, camping and exploring the world and the wonderment of the coast. We are still children, searching in rock pools for some pleasing shell or anemone, being dashed forward atop waves, washed up on sand and racing out to do it again.

Surfing, like art making, seems the closest we will ever get to God on the physical plane. They are a bridge to something bigger than us and we are humbled by both.

— Tim Baker, 2021

Tim Baker is an award-winning author, journalist and storyteller specializing in surfing history and culture, working across a wide variety of media from books and magazines to film, video, and theatre. Tim is the best-selling author of numerous books on surfing. *Occy* was a national bestseller and chosen by the Australia Council as one of *50 Books You can't Put Down* in 2008. "Surfari" tells the story of his family surfing road trip around Australia in 2011. *Century of Surf*, a history of Australian surfing, was published by Random House in 2013. His children's book *The Surfer and the Mermaid* was adapted for theatre for the Bleach Festival. *The Rip Curl Story* documents the rise of the iconic Australian surf brand to mark its 50th anniversary in 2019. Tim is a former editor of *Tracks* and *Surfing Life* magazines. He has won the Surfing Australia Hall of Fame Culture Award three times.

Hailing from Queensland's Gold Coast, the **Artist Boardriders Club (ABC)** surf and make art on the fringes of the 8th World Surfing Reserve, a 16 km stretch of coastline from Burleigh Point in the north to Snapper Rocks on the Queensland/New South Wales border and all the breaks in between. *Dot Matrix of Humanity* is their inaugural collaborative exhibition. The exhibition takes shape as an immersive installation, and through the process of artmaking and surfing, celebrates their Coral Sea camaraderie, contemporary surfrider culture and art in their paradise city (on the Gold Coast), and for the first time in 'the city', in Brisbane.

Communing in the 'matrix' are current and active club members John Anthony Forno, Emily Rose Hastie, Andrew Cullen, Dion Parker, Rebecca Ross, Thea Skelsey, Ez Larmor, Byron Coathup, Shanene Ditton, Claudio Kirac, Tessa Bergan, Courtenay McCue and Fran Miller. These artists are members of some of the Gold Coast's most notable Artist Run Initiatives including Mint Art House, Art-Work Agency, THE WALLS and Maverick Artspace. Since forming in the line-up at

Snapper Rocks in 2018, the ABC has exhibited over thirty artists in three curated exhibitions: *Surf Salon* (2019) at THE WALLS and *Surf Salon* (2018) at THE WALLS/Maverick Artspace. As well as hosting workshops, screenings and artist talks: *Dandy Savage*, ABC in conversation with Fran Miller (2020); *Party Wave*, Tessa Bergan (2019); *Smiling Bag*, Shane Fitzgerald and Dion Agius (2019); *Surf Salon Artist Talk*, with special guest Tim Baker (2018).

The ABC hosts monthly social surf meet-ups throughout the year. Counter to localism, their motto is 'No Postcode', preferring to surf nomadically, mostly on the Gold Coast and in Northern New South Wales. ABC is supported by THE WALLS and Vissla.

THE WALLS ART SPACE



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Metro Arts and the artists acknowledge the Jagera and Turrbal peoples, as the custodians of this land, recognising their connection to land, waters and community. We honour the story-telling and art-making at the heart of First Nations' cultures, and the enrichment it gives to the lives of all Australians.



**Queensland
Government**

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