

KELLERMAN: EXPANDED

A Live Audio-Visual Performance in the Whitsundays

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Abstract

'Kellerman: EXPANDED' was a live audio-visual performance and improvisation, specially produced for the Seventh International Small Island Cultures Conference in the Whitsundays (June 2011). It was a 'live cinema' remix project, in which footage from films featuring and about Australian champion swimmer and silent film star Annette Kellerman was mixed live against a soundtrack made up of songs about the Whitsundays and tracks by sound artist Mike Cooper. Annette Kellerman was an Australian performer who achieved fame as a synchronised swimmer in the London and New York Hippodromes in the 1910s and, later, as a silent film star. She spent a year in the Whitsundays in 1933/34, performing at resorts and appearing as a mermaid in a series of quasi-documentary films about coral reefs. In this performance, undersea footage was mixed in with the Kellerman films to produce an undersea fantasia, a meditation on the expanded temporality and fantasy of the island paradise. Audience members were invited to interact live with the performance, by submitting silent-film inter-titles as blog comments, which were mixed into the performance via RSS feeds.

Keywords

Annette Kellerman, live cinema, Whitsundays, VJ, performance

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'Kellerman: EXPANDED' was a live audio-visual performance produced for and performed at the Seventh International Small Island Cultures Conference in Airlie Beach in the Whitsundays region of Queensland, Australia in June 2011. The performance was a live remix of film footage featuring and/or about Australian champion swimmer and silent film star Annette Kellerman. In this article, I will explore the context in which this performance took place and give background on both the Whitsundays region and the rationale for presenting the work in such a context and I will also explore the make-up and underpinning concepts of the performance. Video footage documenting this performance can be found at the following URL:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK8Pdsa-nTY

The Whitsunday Islands are a collection of islands off the tropical coast of Central Queensland. Comprised of over 70 islands, and situated around 150 kilometres north of Mackay, they are a popular tourist destination, attracting over 500,000 domestic, and

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200,000 international visitors per year to the islands and adjacent shore (Tourism Queensland, 2010) (see Figure 1).

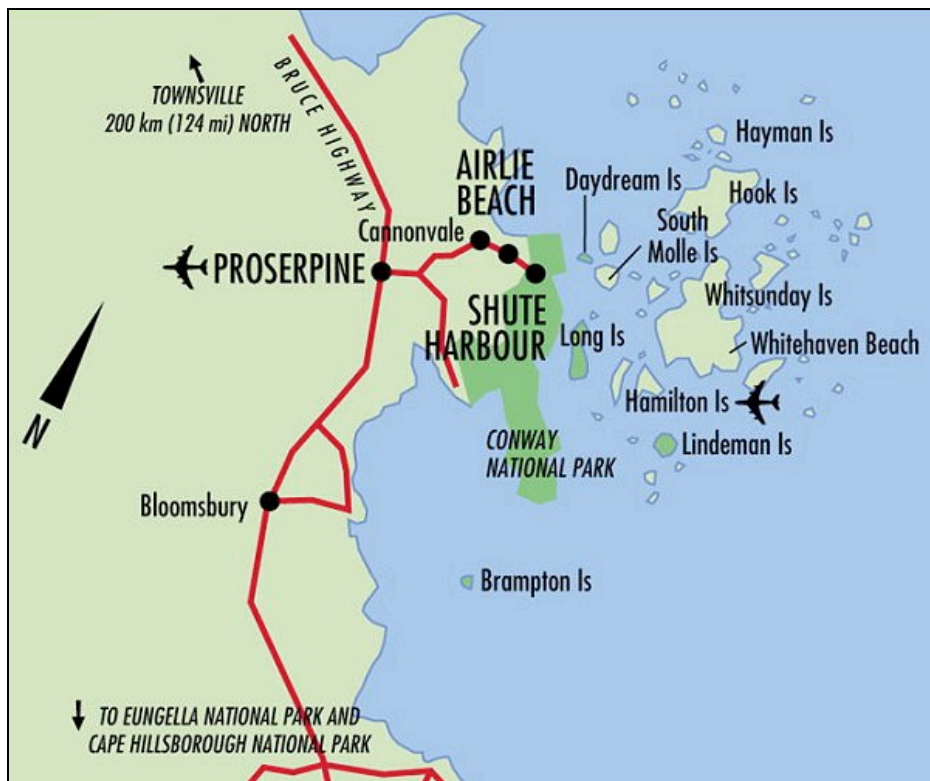


Figure 1: Map of Whitsundays
(from www.bcl.com.au/northqueensland/maps/m006.htm)

Holiday resorts and hotels are located on Daydream, Lindeman, Long, Hayman, Hamilton and South Molle islands and around the town of Airlie Beach on the mainland, which is also the jumping-off point for visits to the Great Barrier Reef (via Shute Harbour). As such, the Whitsundays are a tourist destination that typifies the notion of the 'tropical island' or 'island escape,' with an aquatic experience and aesthetic at the centre of this notion. For example, a Google image search on the term 'Whitsundays' brings up a representative selection of images of azure waters, yachting adventures, wedding parties, fishing, snorkelling, swimming and sunbathing. Likewise, Tourism Whitsundays, a division of Tourism Queensland, highlights the centrality of water and aquatic activities to the Whitsundays experience on their website: "you can enjoy Australia's marine playground from above, under and on the water, relax in beachside resorts and soak up the sunshine and sparkling views" (Tourism Whitsundays, 2011).

The experience of water – being "above, under and on the water" – is clearly central to the appeal of an area such as the Whitsunday Islands. But of course tropical island holidays are also about the *time* spent in or beside water, and they are about letting time pass in a way that is fundamentally different from the way it passes 'back home.'

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The temporality of the tropical island experience is an expanded temporality, a time (albeit briefly) halted, slowed down, the time of a hiatus in which the 'normal' temporality of urban existence is refused in favour of a holiday temporality. The phrase 'island time' in some way typifies this temporality. While the phrase is frequently used to refer to the time it will take native islanders (of whatever island – the phrase is not confined to any particular island or nation) to accomplish a task, or the likelihood that events will happen 'late' rather than 'on time,' it is based on the assumption that a visitor to an island that operates under 'island time' will need to adjust their rhythms and expectations to the temporality of the island and its inhabitants. Under island time, life is temporally suspended, projected into a chronotope characterised by minimising movement and expanding the time any movement takes.

In 'Kellerman: EXPANDED,' I wanted to explore this notion of the experience of water and its temporality, within the dual context of both an actual and a fantasy tourist location. That is, a conference at a tourist resort in the Whitsundays seemed like the perfect context in which to explore the elements, both fantasy and real, of the island escape. At the suggestion of the conference convenor, Philip Hayward, I decided to do this via the films of Annette Kellerman.

Kellerman was an Australian champion swimmer who achieved fame in the early 20th Century performing first in aquatic ballet sequences in London and Chicago, and later as an actress in numerous silent films. Born in Marrickville in Sydney in 1886, she spent her early years with her legs in steel braces to reduce the effects of rickets. She overcame this limitation when she began swimming regularly, and was soon winning swimming races and performing exhibitions of swimming and diving around Melbourne. Her career as a vaudeville performer began in 1903 when she starred in Bland Holt's stage production of 'Breaking of the Drought', performing in a swimming pool sunk into the stage in the Royal Theatre in Melbourne (Gibson, 2005: 19). At the age of 19, she moved to England, achieved notoriety by conducting a number of long-distance swims (including three unsuccessful attempts at the English Channel), and finally achieved fame performing diving and underwater routines at the London Hippodrome. In 1912, Kellerman married her manager, James Sullivan, who encouraged her to pursue a career in film. Her skills as a vaudeville performer and synchronised swimmer, as well as her ability to hold her breath underwater for extended periods of time, led to numerous film roles which culminated in 1924 with *Venus of the South Seas*, her final film, which was shot in New Zealand and directed by Sullivan, and which forms part of the content for 'Kellerman: EXPANDED.' Almost all of her films featured aquatic themes, and provided ample opportunity for Kellerman to continue to grow her reputation as the 'Australian Mermaid.' *Venus of the South Seas*, the only Kellerman film that survives in its entirety, features numerous underwater sequences: firstly, Kellerman is seen swimming underwater and battling pearl thieves as Shona Royale, the daughter of a South-Seas pearler; and later, she stars in an extended 'fantasy' underwater sequence as both the princess Gwytha, who dives to the bottom of the sea in search of the Flower of Love, and also as the Little Mermaid, a somewhat image-conscious beauty who safeguards the Flower of Love in her underwater boudoir.

Although much of her career was spent first in the United Kingdom and later in the United States, Kellerman maintained strong ties with Australia throughout her life, and had a particular fascination for tropical Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef (Gibson, 2005: 187). In 1933 Kellerman and Sullivan commenced a 15-month stay in the Whitsundays, staying primarily on Lindeman Island but embarking on regular camping trips to islands around the region (Hayward, 2001: 23; Gibson, 2005: 188). While in the

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area, they made a number of short underwater films, one about a sea-nymph who steals a mermaid's baby. According to Gibson, they were intending to sell them to cinemas as shorts to play before feature films, but nothing ever eventuated and none of these films survive (Gibson, 2005: 188). On Lindeman island, Kellerman also lent her name and show-business acumen to a number of regional tourism events, organising and performing in a number of balls and parties at local resorts (Hayward, 2001: 24). After their time in the Whitsundays, Kellerman and Sullivan moved down to Sydney, then came North again to spend some years on a family property on Newry Island, off Mackay, before returning to the US in 1937. Newry Island became a regular home for the couple, who visited intermittently until the 1950s. They later returned permanently to Australia in 1970, settling on the Gold Coast, where Kellerman continued to swim regularly, lecture on women's health and organise public events, before her death in 1975.

For the purposes of 'Kellerman: EXPANDED,' the life of Annette Kellerman serves to locate a cluster of associations that exemplify the notions of tropicality, temporality and aquatic experience, notions that likewise encircle the Whitsundays and other island tourist destinations. Her use of the mermaid figure, in film as well as in her performances, presents the spectacle of a life lived in relation to and under the water. Indeed, her biography, *The Original Million Dollar Mermaid* (2005), by Emily Gibson, references the 1952 MGM biopic *Million Dollar Mermaid* (directed by Mervyn LeRoy) which starred synchronised swimmer Esther Williams as Kellerman, and this film in turn references her moniker as the 'Australian Mermaid.' It is not insignificant, then, that arrivals at the resort on Daydream Island are presented with a sculpture of three mermaids situated at the edge of the main resort beach (see Figure 2).¹



Figure 2: Mermaid sculptures on Daydream Island (photograph by Sue Hopkins, May 2010)

'Kellerman: EXPANDED' builds on two previous works in which I have explored various aspects of the tropical aesthetic and experience. In a previous new media CD-ROM and installation work, 'Desert Island,' which I produced with my then partner and collaborator Dea Morgain, and exhibited at the Bundaberg Regional Art Gallery in 2004,

I explored the tropical aesthetic as it related to the environmental experience of sub-tropical Queensland. 'Desert Island' is an interactive work built in Adobe Flash, a kind of interactive jig-saw poem laid out in a grid, where clicking each grid tile allows the user to cycle the tile between a series of images, videos, words and sounds. Water, both aurally and visually, plays a central role in the project, operating as a cipher that unfolds through the experience of the project. The fantasy of the desert island, with its palm trees and azure waters, likewise serves to locate the emotional and conceptual centre of the project. Then in 2008, my first live audio-visual collaboration with sound artist Mike Cooper was also an exploration of Pacific kitsch and the tropical aesthetic. 'Tropica Exotica' was performed in an outdoor projection area at the Bundaberg Regional Art Gallery as part of their '4th Dimension' outdoor screening series. The show featured visuals culled from many different sources; alongside my own visuals produced from images taken in Fiji and tropical Queensland, I mixed footage from surf films, underwater documentaries, and 1950s South Pacific adventure films. Cooper's lap-steel guitar and electronics provided the soundtrack for the show.

'Kellerman: EXPANDED,' then, allowed me to revisit an aesthetic I have been attracted to for some years, while at the same time it allowed me to expand my use of live technologies and introduce elements such as audience interactivity. In this project, using the VJ software VDMX I performed a live mix of video clips sampled from two films: the Kellerman/Sullivan film *Venus of the South Seas*, and the 1952 feature *Million Dollar Mermaid*. Into this mix I also added coral reef footage shot in a local aquarium. The soundtrack is likewise constructed from a number of sources: to selections from Mike Cooper's album *Rayon Hula* (itself a remix of samples from, and tribute to, lounge/exotica vibraphone player Arthur Lyman)², I added two tracks from the companion CD to Hayward (2001): 'Moonlight on the Barrier' (1935, performer unknown, originally from the soundtrack to the film *White Death* [1935, directed by Edwin Bower]) and 'I Lost My Heart on Hayman Island' (1950, Max Blake and the Radio 3DB Orchestra). I also mixed in vocal samples from conference attendees, whom I had recorded speaking about their own experiences of being underwater. While this may sound like a rather heady and varied mix, all the materials, visual and aural, were sufficiently 'of a piece' that they dovetailed together into a kind of 'undersea fantasia' that referenced the Whitsundays as a tourist destination and site of island fantasies, as well as the life and works of Annette Kellerman.

The term 'expanded' in the title operates in a double sense. Firstly, as I have already indicated, one of my desires was to meditate on the expanded temporality of water and the tropical tourist and island experience. I wanted to present the audience with a palpable sense of this experience, so I limited the types of footage I used to sequences featuring people diving into, or swimming under, the water (see Figure 3). Because I used short film clips that loop by default in my VJ software, the result was a series of changing vignettes in which Kellerman's various characters appear permanently suspended underwater. Kellerman's prodigious abilities in holding her breath underwater while performing acrobatic or ballet routines, are here taken to an extreme, presenting the audience with the spectacle of the Australian Mermaid trapped, somewhat ironically, in her own persona.

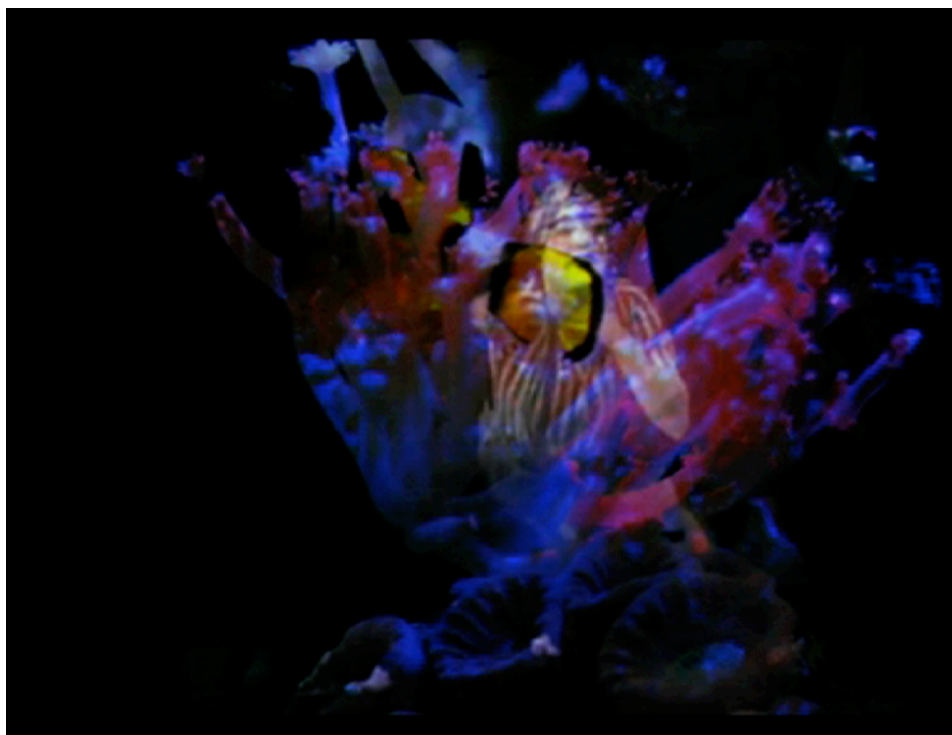


Figure 3: The Australian Mermaid

The second sense of 'expanded' is a reference to the tradition of 'expanded cinema.' Expanded cinema is a term first used in the early 1960s in relation to the multi-media performances of Stan Vanderbeek and Carolee Schneemann, where multiple projections and performance were combined in an immersive and multi-sensual experience. Writing in the *Village Voice* in the mid-1960s, filmmaker and critic Jonas Mekas used the term to refer to a cluster of emerging avant-garde art, performance and filmmaking practices, such as: the multiple-screen spectacles of Charles and Ray Eames at numerous World Fairs; the flicker-films of Brion Gysin and Ian Somerville; the slide shows of Harry Smith; Stan Brakhage's hand-painted direct films; and the light films of Nam June Paik and Peter Kubelka (Rees, 2011: 12). In 1970, Gene Youngblood discussed these and other practices together in his book *Expanded Cinema*, arguing for the emergence of an expanded *consciousness* via the employment of new image, sound and telecommunications technologies: "Expanded cinema isn't a movie at all: like life it's a process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes" (Youngblood, 1970: 41).

While Youngblood's claims regarding these practices' potential to introduce a New Age of existence were perhaps far fetched, he nevertheless foregrounded the commonality between a series of explorations of the cinematic apparatus *outside the cinema*. Expanded cinema stood for artists' probings of the borders of the cinematic, refusing narrative and focusing on formal and material concerns, extracting the camera from filmmaking, fragmenting and multiplying the screen, reducing film to pure light,

projecting onto bodies and architecture, and involving the audience in the simultaneous construction and experience of film.

It is this final, interactive aspect of expanded cinema that I sought to explore with 'Kellerman: EXPANDED.' Having already experimented in prior projects with multi-projection and the notion of audience 'immersion' in an image-space, I wanted to take another approach to probing audience engagement, by involving the audience directly in the performance. While the expanded cinema tradition experimented early on with audience involvement – for example in the Exploding Plastic Inevitable parties of Andy Warhol (Rees, 2011: 13), or the live-camera feeds used by Peter Weibel in his 1969 'Audience Exhibited' installation (Meigh-Andrews, 2011: 127) – the recent development of internet-based technologies and mobile media presents different possibilities for audience engagement. Most importantly, there is now a culture of participation that has arisen as a function of the popularisation of social and participatory media, and my intention was to harness this culture and the competencies it involves, in inviting the audience to interact with the performance.

Using popular blog software Wordpress, I set up a URL address where audience members with laptops or smartphones could enter a comment on a blog entry. These comments were then fed to the VDMX software as an RSS feed in real time, allowing me to select comments from the live comment feed provided by the audience. As evident in the video documentation, I composited the comments onto a traditional silent film inter-title background and swapped across to the comments intermittently through the performance (see Figure 4). In this way, the audience was able to 'narrate' the performance, responding to the images and sounds as they unfolded in front of them.

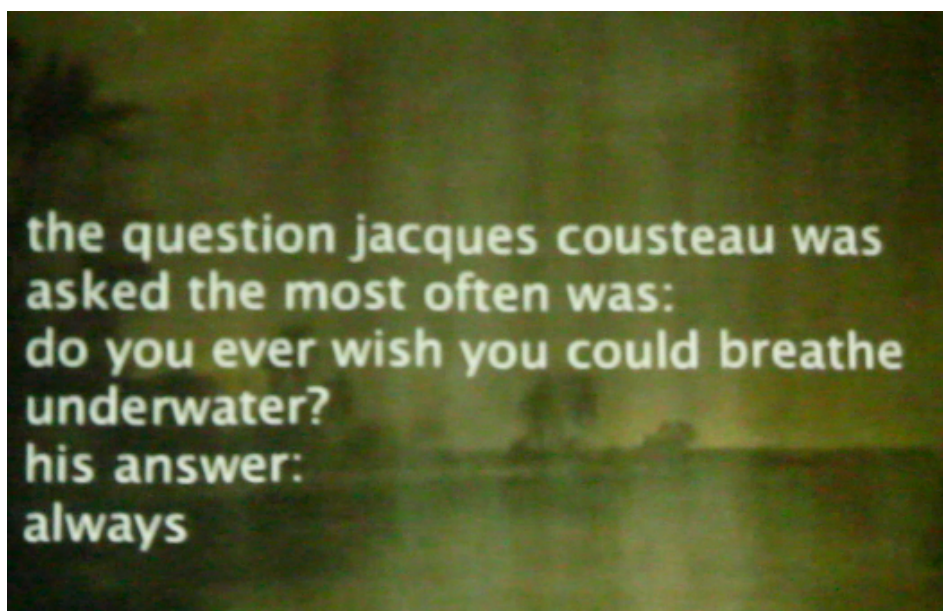


Figure 4: Live comment provided by the audience during the performance

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My assumption with this performance, then, was that the combination of the two approaches to 'expansion' would enable the audience to both reflect on, and experience audio-visually and performatively, the expanded underwater and island temporality I wished to explore. I should note that I saw the interactive sense of expansion *informing* the first sense, where audience interactivity and images of immersion would work hand in hand to entrance the audience breathlessly. Happily, in discussing the project with audience members after the performance, and in a brief email survey of a small selection of the audience, many respondents indicated that they had had a concrete sense of this double immersion. One respondent noted how the audience were "absolutely fixated on the screen," and how "the level of engagement increased once they witnessed the effects of *their* participation" (McDonald, 2011). Another respondent spoke of "suddenly being immersed in another world," noting that she ended up not feeling the need to interact technically with the performance because she found herself "swept up in the mood and music of the piece" (Lucchitti, 2011). Likewise, the actual RSS comments provided by the audience during the performance also indicated they had 'got' this sense of a breathless, expanded temporality. The following brief sample of comments indicates the degree to which the audience experienced this temporality, and most importantly, related it to the bodily experience of being underwater:

suffocating... is it?

you gotta remember to breathe.

remember: don't come up too fast or you'll bump your head on the surface of the sea

*the question jacques cousteau was asked the most often was: do you ever wish you could breathe underwater?
his answer: always*

Taken together, what these comments and responses indicate is that the audience was able to easily – and enjoyably – negotiate the cluster of associations I presented them with across the image and soundtrack, finding pleasure both in the interactive experience and the immersive imagery of the performance. As the comments indicate, the audience was also able to explore both the positive and negative sides of this expanded underwater and island temporality, finding it both claustrophobic and suffocating, and freeing, immersive and entrancing. The ambiguities of 'island time,' then, the push and pull between the time of the visitor and the time of the native or local, were manifest in the experience of this live audio-visual performance in the Whitsundays, re-inscribing Annette Kellerman's filmic exploits and underwater abilities into the fabric of Queensland's tourist industry and the space of the Whitsundays.

End Notes

¹ The mermaids were designed by sculptor David Joffe, of the Brisbane-based company Natureworks, in 2002. An (undated) company factsheet identifies the individual mermaids (from left to right in photo) as 'Serenity' (representing mental relaxation), 'Infinity' (spiritual peace) and 'Aphrodesia' (romance and creative exploration).

² I had previously attended a screening of *Venus of the South Seas* at Griffith Conservatorium of Music in 2010 which Cooper performed an improvised score for, so his music was already associated with this film in my head. (See Hayward [2011] for an interview with Cooper on this performance and a discussion of his approach to live film scoring).

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