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CROSS_CURRENTS
NEGOTIATING CULTURAL DIFFERENCE IN DESIGN

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_KARL _LOGGE

_z2229718

_B. DESIGN (HONS)

_COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

_UNSW

ABSTRACT

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"Two Europeans using English as a common language were watching two Chinese men on the opposite side of the street. One of the Chinese was squatting to rest – a common habit there – and I overheard one of the European men say to the other: 'Look at these Chinese – they sit just like monkeys'. Perhaps not a pleasant experience, but for the fact that at almost exactly the same moment my few months of Mandarin immersion brought to my ears a snippet from the Chinese men on the other side of the road: 'Look at these hairy foreigners, just like monkeys.'"

- (Greenhow, 2004)

As the networks and linkages between different cultural groups become tighter and more entangled in our contemporary, globalised world, situations of cultural exchange are bound to occur with greater frequency. Aside from the fact that to each other, we all somehow resemble monkeys, the ways in which we understand and engage with cultural differences can have serious and sobering consequences.

This study seeks to critically examine situations of cultural exchange that occur within or around design practice. By linking current design thinking with theories of cultural translation and exchange developed in the field of art, this research questions current models of understanding exchange within the western institutional design discourse. Through the qualitative analysis of Ruth Hadlow's recent textile work *Kain Adat Kehamilan/Cloth for a Timorese Pregnancy* and of the work of Norman Day + Associates in Reconstructing East Timor, these cases are put forward as exemplars of a more positive and engaged approach to exchange across cultures.

The results of this study identify a range of recommended strategies for approaching and understanding cultural exchange within the context of design, as an ongoing, dynamic and transformative process, in which the benefits of dissonance and connectivity are evenly shared.