

Crossing Over: Raising the ghosts of Tasman-Pacific art exchange: ANZART-in-HOBART, 1983

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Introduction

It has long been assumed that New Zealanders and Australians have ignored one another's art, with intra-regional concerns of the Asia-Pacific displaced by deference to and /or defiance of Northern Hemisphere models. However, in the 1970s and 1980s there was a time of buoyant and diverse exchange, of cultural 'rafts' plying the Tasman Sea. New Zealand artists actively participated in 1970s Australian events such as Mildura Sculpture Triennial and Biennales of Sydney but ANZART changed this tack and brought Australians to New Zealand. This trans-Tasman event was launched in Christchurch in 1981, remained afloat until 1985 and by 1983 became 'the most significant art event in the last three years'.

ANZART proposed a different focus; celebrating its Tasman-Pacific location through informal and socially engaged artistic structures. Based on principles of collaboration and site-specificity, it was low budget, artist-driven and a remarkably successful model of exchange. In 1983 ANZART-in-Hobart moored in Tasmania and although, this trans-Tasman vessel represented a major event, it was swamped by ambitious scale, lack of resources and changes in the prevailing winds of Australian arts funding towards professionalisation and curatorialism. In 1984 ANZART would be appropriated, indeed 'pirated' by arts bureaucracy and exported to Edinburgh. Because the re-invented event was collaboratively disabled, it became rudderless and was critically shipwrecked in the North Sea. By 1985, the last ANZART exchange event in Auckland would reduce previous relations to bubbles on the Tasman, as Asian trade opportunities and U.S. nuclear warships loomed large on the horizon. This paper explores the scuttling of a significant but fragile Australasian endeavour and questions assumptions about non-indigenous cultural similarity between Antipodean art communities. It asks whether, in terms of Australian exchange within the wider Asia-Pacific, size really matters.

Within the Asia-Pacific region, Australia and New Zealand may be regarded as an 'odd couple'. These two Antipodean settler societies share geographic proximity and familiarity in terms of language and shared British colonial heritage, not to mention significant alliances in the form ANZAC (Australia New Zealand Army Corps), the ANZUS Security Pact and the Closer Economic Relations Trade Agreement (CER). Paradoxically, however, the inhabitants of each country know surprisingly little about each other's culture. In non-indigenous relations across the Tasman Sea, differences appear subtle and have, therefore, tended to be disregarded, creating a taken-for-granted-ness. In this way foreign relations operate more like family relations. Indeed, familial metaphors characterise much official rhetoric between both countries, from trade and defence to immigration and cultural issues. Former Australian Prime Minister, Paul Keating for example, noted that "In some ways, Australia's relationship with New Zealand is so close that it hardly seems appropriate to think about it as foreign policy at all ... it is easy to slip into thinking about New Zealand as something like another Australian state" (Keating 2000: 219). Moreover, for Tara Brabazon the relationship may be familiar, but it's dysfunctional, as well, like "an old married couple who (sic) have nothing left to say" (Brabazon 2000: 33).

Such closeness has created a relational awkwardness that habitually inhibits acknowledgement of deeper cultural differences. Historically, this lack of lateral curiosity derives from a sense of unease in inhabiting 'the South'. The ubiquity of perceived cultural inferiority to Euro-American metropolises, combined with the effects

of indigenous displacement, has produced a profound sense of longing and un-belonging. (Schech and Haggis 2000: 232). “Australia and New Zealand look steadfastly back to the northern hemisphere”, explained Judith Brett, only a decade, “with scarcely a sideways glance” ago (Brett 1995: 328). As a result, colonial mindsets have structured relations between the ‘neighbours’ in terms of relative power. Size matters and, as the smaller entity, New Zealand tends to be considered culturally inferior by the larger country and therefore, by definition, necessarily dependent or imitative in terms of relations - not different or complementary in nature. For many Australians the Antipodean ‘cousin’ remains a site of magnificent scenery, funny ‘eccents’ and crude rural jokes (Grant 2001), not art. Conversely imaginings of Australia tend to be cast in terms of monotonous topography, crassness and (less) crude rural jokes.

Nevertheless, in the 1960s, while teaching at Auckland’s Elam School of Fine Arts, New Zealand artist, Colin McCahon “predicted that the Pacific would become the centre of the art world” (McCahon in Mane-Wheoki 1996: 28). To New Zealanders, whose gaze was firmly fixed on more northerly climes, this must have seemed a “bizarre” prediction at the time; to Australians, it would have been unthinkable. If, however, we include in this geography Pacific Rim countries, including parts of Asia, McCahon’s prediction appears more prescient - at least for the Australian mainstream art world three decades later. It was in the early 1990s that major, non-indigenous art institutions in Australia rushed to embrace the exotica of contemporary ‘Oriental’ art - a decade after other Australian sectors had already set sail upon prosperous trade winds from Eastern Asia.

The South Pacific, however, was another matter; it remained a site of anthropology and tourism, not serious art. Within the vast watery map of Oceania, New Zealand held even less aesthetic credibility as another – smaller - pink country on the map of Empire. In 2000 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Cultural Relations Branch Director Gregson Edwards remarked that New Zealand was regarded “almost like Tasmania”, quoting Keating’s warning that same year to “mend our ... relations with Asia (or) Asia would soon look at Australia like Australia looked at New Zealand”(Edwards 2000). Clearly New Zealand was almost invisible on the Asia-Pacific horizon to which Australian foreign policy so fervently wished to belong. Against such a background the Pacific had nevertheless been ‘discovered’ as a minor site of art by Queensland Art Gallery’s Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art in 1993. Overwhelmingly, however, this new wave broke on an indigenous Pacific; Aotearoa was now being re-mapped on Australia’s regional art horizon. The pale pink Pakeha version of New Zealand remained a foreign country (Morrell and Neale 1999: 96). In the 1996 Triennial for the first and only time, Pacific/New Zealand art represented twenty per cent of curatorial selection; Australian participants were also included under the category of “Pacific” (Turner et al 1996: 143-149). Nonetheless, for Australians, Pakeha New Zealand has been decidedly less attractive than the more obvious and exotic differences of indigenous Pacific or Asian cultures. While, Pakeha, Maori and Pacific Island artists in New Zealand seem acutely aware of cultural differences between neighbouring indigenous, as well as white, tribes of the Tasman-Pacific, there is little acknowledgment of Australasian difference in mainstream Australian art circles - unless these are marked by skin colour.

The situation has taken a dissimilar path in the crafts sector, where vigorous two-way traffic across the Tasman has been established between both indigenous and non-indigenous makers in New Zealand and Australia (Cochrane 2003). Non-indigenous visual arts relations have often been framed, from Australian institutions, at least,

within an unspoken discourse of neo-colonialist disdain, contempt, or more commonly, indifference. Such attitudes tend to be based on assumption rather than experience (McPhee 1987), despite legislated Australian policies on multiculturalism, enmeshment with the Asia-Pacific region and the presence of half a million expatriate New Zealanders living near the shores of Bondi (Dobell 2000: 117).

As with trade routes, a large number of individual New Zealand artists, many of them expatriates, have exhibited in Australia, with far fewer Australians crossing the Tasman. Apart from the legendary McCahon, Hotere and more recently, Len Lye, art production per se from New Zealand is rarely acknowledged in Australian art schools or exhibited and collected in public galleries (Gardiner 2000). Pakeha New Zealand, or even Aotearoa, for that matter, is not sexy. No-one teaches New Zealand studies in Australian universities; it's not, according to Brabazon "a trendy academic enterprise" (2000: 34). As the only possible place of exile for Australian artists, New Zealand hosts no Australia Council-funded studio, nor attracts Samstag scholarship holder. Paradoxically however, any imagined inferiority on the part of the 'junior sibling' is not easy to locate, especially in terms of independent positions concerning maritime, defence and asylum seeker policies, women executives and more recently, the issue of entertainment for ANZAC commemoration services at Gallipoli.

Nevertheless, there was once a time of engagement, a period of excitement, experiment and buoyant optimism in the 1970s and 1980s, when artists from both sides of the Tasman consciously explored the Australasian region. They challenged the authority of Euro-American models of art and seriously examined their shared Antipodean backyard as much more than a 'backwater'. In these heady, perhaps 'adolescent', days of Post-Object art, socially and/or intellectually committed artists from both countries established and maintained a number of significant encounters throughout various cities, many of them regional; Mildura, Adelaide, Christchurch, Hobart and Auckland. This development paralleled a similar tendency in cross-Tasman popular music (Brabazon 2000: 95-112).

More than a decade of informal and formal connections between Australian and New Zealand artists in the 1970s resulted in a series of ANZART encounters during the 1980s. These events represented buoyant and diverse 'rafts', specific projects that were set up to promote trans-Tasman exchange. Originating in Mildura in the early 1970s, the trans-Tasman 'tie up', as it was known, became a continuing source of Antipodean connection and ANZART was officially launched in 1981. It remained afloat until 1985, when it sank almost without trace, in Auckland's designated non-nuclear harbour. In the meantime, a vigorous, two-way flow of artistic traffic had resulted from these encounters; this was manifested not only in the work of, and social relations between, participating artists, writers, administrators and audiences, but also through the radiating effects of associations between individual artists and private galleries. Substantially more New Zealand artists exhibited and resided in Australia than vice versa. Little, however, remains recorded in Australian art history of this period or its protagonists who explored various kinds of 'Southern' consciousness.

Notwithstanding these complex artistic entanglements, it is time to salvage something of the Good Ship ANZART, less in terms of its aesthetic merit than its significance as an artistic marker of broader attitudes towards place and regional difference within the Tasman-Pacific. While this may no longer represent an issue for New Zealand artists, who are re-examining the 1970s and Post-Object art, some self-examination of the role of Australian art institutions in the rise and demise of ANZART is long overdue.

The disappearance of trans-Tasman events from recent Australian art narratives about the so-called 'discovery' of the Asia-Pacific was not entirely due to institutional amnesia. It also owes something to the intrinsic structure of these encounters. Artist-organised and democratically conceived, their ideological base was modest, inclusive and based on relational values of artists working with artists, rather than conventional exhibition aesthetics. Site-specific, collaborative and under-funded, these 'do-it-yourself' events resisted institutionalisation; they were open-ended and unassuming, while ironically assuming that their acknowledged success would prove historically self-evident. In short, these encounters were generally poorly documented from 1970 to 1983. They also proved unacceptably daggy for a new wave of image-conscious postmodernism and professionalisation deluging Australian art by the mid 1980s. As early as 1970, distinctive regional differences between Australian and New Zealand artists were frequently noted by critics. Mildura Sculpture Triennials, directed by Irish-Australian artist and director of Mildura Arts Centre, Tom McCullough, with renowned New Zealand sculptor, Jim Allen, forged dynamic and enduring trans-Tasman links. These were deepened through early Biennales of Sydney, events at Adelaide's Experimental Art Foundation and the Sydney College of Art, which Allen headed from 1977 to 1987. Indeed, between 1970 and 1978, major Australian art events were awash with over fifty Kiwi artists, discoursing and often collaborating with 'Aussies' in site-specific work; performance, video, sound and sculptural installation. Hatched in Allen's unique 1960s and 1970s 'laboratory' of Elam School of Art in Auckland, New Zealand artists' work was frequently considered by Australian critics as "more creative and intellectual ... than their Australian counterparts". At the 1975 Mildura Sculpture Triennial, Daniel Thomas pronounced New Zealand work "the most professional avant-garde pieces" (Lynn, Thomas, in Gardiner 1975). The 1978 Triennial at Mildura further demonstrated recognisably different approaches between Australian and New Zealand artists; the latter revealing heightened concern with socio-political issues and aspects of aesthetic 'finish'.

After such long-term bonding with their Australian 'cousins', New Zealand artists were anticipating strong national representation at the 1979 Biennale of Sydney: European Dialogue. However, this was unexpectedly reduced from an anticipated six artists to two (Hunter 1980a: 20). Unlike the Australian situation, New Zealand arts infrastructure - of funding, national events, published criticism and professional networks - was minimal, so these offshore opportunities across the 'ditch' had become a vital national and international life-line (Spill 1979: 4).

Biennale Director Nick Waterlow's curatorial decision unleashed the unexpected. An airlift of fifty indignant, spurned Kiwis descended upon Sydney, where, supported by Australian artists, they staged an alternative Biennale, Prime Export. Consequently, this solidarity launched the art journal, Art Network, as well as precipitating ANZART. This was an initiative captained by Ian Hunter - another Irish artist, resident in New Zealand - as a strategy for remedying "the ... imbalance in (trans-Tasman) cultural exchange" (1980b: 1). "One way to educate Australians about the possibilities of the Cross-Tasman connection", he explained, was "to offer them a well structured and attractive proposition, in the form of a 1981 art encounter in Christchurch" (1980b: 1).

Hunter's strategy envisaged a sustained, long-term relationship, not "an Australian art invasion". As an 'outsider' like McCullough, he acknowledged the significance of regional differences, having experienced these in Northern Ireland, where, he asserted "you have on the surface people who are much the same but just underneath you have

differences that stem from religious convictions. Those differences run very deep” (Hunter 1981).

With this concept firmly in place, forty artists from Australia and New Zealand were thus brought together within a highly productive model of exchange entitled ANZART, which was praised for its low budget, high attendances, community involvement, hospitality, artists responsive to vicissitudes of site and weather, and minimal administration¹. For predominantly white artists against a background of racial conflict during anti-Springbok Tour demonstrations across New Zealand during 1981, this situation further highlighted cultural differences in indigenous issues between and within both countries. Australian and New Zealand artists, critics and their audiences bestowed high praise on the event. Thereafter ANZART went biennial. By 1982, however, with McCullough’s withdrawal from the Australian art scene, there was no longer an Australian counterpart to Hunter, with longstanding commitment to forging links with New Zealand’s art community. Nevertheless, after Hunter’s crossing to the island of Tasmania, an enthusiastic Australian committee, led by Leigh Hobba, took the helm of ANZART-in-Hobart, which was staged from May 19 to June 12, 1983. Hunter and his committee would steer New Zealand’s curatorial course to try and maintain an even keel with ‘Aussie’ developments.

By 1983 ANZART had become “the most significant art event in the last three years” (Hunter 1983) and New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged its diplomatic value in culturally lubricating wider “trans-Tasman links” of politics and trade (Volkerling 1983). Indeed, from the 1970s onwards, these artist-centred initiatives dramatically increased cultural awareness in general as well as the flow of government and privately funded “trans-Tasman art traffic” (Curnow 1985:4). In Australia, ANZART-in-Hobart was considered to be “the most exciting thing to happen in Tasmanian art so far” (Bingham 1983). This status was evident at an illustrious Hobart opening on May 19 by vice regal and cultural officials, an occasion that “compared more than favourably”, according to Daniel Thomas (Thomas 1983: 7), to that of the national biennial exhibition, Australian Perspecta, recently opened in Sydney.

Strongly supported by the Tasmanian government and the Tasmanian School of Art, ANZART continued its experimental and site-specific focus of performance, video, photography and installation but also added categories of painting, film and a major sound festival to the program. In other respects the organisation diverged radically from Hunter’s model, creating a much larger event on a D.I.Y. scale funding and administrative base. Unlike the modest but successful Christchurch encounter, this event was faced with new and more complex problems. Last minute unavailability of the proposed venue created a space crisis and subsequent bureaucratic obstruction threatened cancellation of the event. Furthermore, after an initial fanfare of media enthusiasm, ANZART-in-Hobart’s fragile structure became vulnerable to unexpected media hostility and public indifference, despite extensive information campaigns.

Sydney artist, Adrienne Boag (1983) of the Hardened Arteries collective complained: “We’re getting sick of artists watching artists. It’s getting really boring. The problem is nobody seems to be really interested”. One local wit advertised “DURING ANZART, before and after, George Richardson is staying in the bush painting for his Exhibit at Devonport Gallery” (Amusements 1983).

Despite structural and artistic similarities, ANZART-in-Hobart steered a different course from ANZART-in-Christchurch. It was dominated by Open Sandwich, the first national conference of alternative (subsequently re-named ‘contemporary’) Australian art spaces and was organised by Adelaide’s Experimental Art Foundation. ANZART-

in-Hobart thus became significant as a major national event by galvanizing Australian artists' concerns. New Zealanders, however, were virtually unrepresented at Open Sandwich, an imbalance that recurred through other aspects of the encounter.

With an established system of funded art spaces in place around Australia by the early 1980s, considerable national lobbying had been brought to bear upon the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council (VAB), the primary arts funding agency, to improve working conditions –for art workers, to provide them with ‘economic lifeboats’, as it were. By 1983 gender politics were also beginning to steer artistic agendas in both countries. However, while the notion of artists’ legal and industrial rights took a clear and militant course in Australia, this was not the case in New Zealand. In fact, as early as 1979, such activism was identified as an ‘Aussie’ tendency and was decried by independently-based New Zealand artists/administrators such as Nick Spill, who despite passionate commitment to the trans-Tasman tie-up, viewed the notion of an artists’ union as “a dangerous development ... involv[ing] political power plays” (Spill 1979: 4). Four years later in Hobart, some Australians were also becoming concerned with art world preoccupation with the industrial landscape. Following Open Sandwich, West Australian Co-ordinator of Media Space, Alan Vizents, noted: “It is entirely possible that without realising, we are ... (creating) an alternative art establishment” (Van den Bosch Annette 1983: 18).

ANZART-in-Hobart therefore was constructed as a nationally inclusive event. Artist selection was devolved to art spaces throughout the various states, thereby creating an additional layer of semi-bureaucratic infrastructure. In addition, ANZART represented an important occasion on Tasmania’s marginalised cultural calendar; it was a rare opportunity for local artists to become “very much involved”. As a result, ANZART-in-Hobart swelled to double the previous event’s size.

And what of the New Zealand aspect of ANZART-in-Hobart? For many Kiwi participants, the event seemed to be taking in water. There was a noticeable lack of debate about trans-Tasman issues - or of wider regionality - at Open Sandwich and the major Nationalism and Culture forum. The women’s Art Now forum, however, identified regional difference between artists as well as Australian variations. New Zealand women’s work was considered more introspective than the more theoretically informed Australians. Nevertheless, a number of other significant exchanges did take place between New Zealand and Australian artists, among them nightly, interactive radio performances by Jill Scott, Phil Dadson and Colleen Anstee and a (damaged) tree-healing collaboration on the Hobart waterfront with Andrew Drummond, Steven Turpie and Jon Rose. For Daniel Thomas the latter was “the most beautiful piece ... [he] saw” (Thomas 1983: 7-8).

Following the Hobart event, fourteen New Zealand artists toured Australian galleries and art schools, gaining work and recognition, as well as strengthening their own national networks through becoming acquainted with each other. New Zealand officials basked in the achievements of their compatriots, who, while strongly acknowledging ANZART’s value, critiqued its scale, foci and organisation. New Zealand artist and critic, John Hurrell noted a “lack of curatorial presence”, creating an “unwieldy and unfocused” (1983: 21) event. Hobart’s Mail Exchange building was “a cold empty barn whose floors were covered in leaves and pigeon shit” and was transformed in five days into a “considerably cleaner and visually striking exhibition venue”(Holmes 1983: 3). Hurrell considered most Australian work was “brash and shoddily prepared”, like a “half hearted attempt at an agricultural fair ... filled with artists and their groups lobbying for support from visiting funding administrators” (Hurrell 1983: 21). Opportunities to engage cross-Tasman perspectives on, for

example, the looming Tasmanian dams issue, indigenous land rights or even 'island experience' were swamped within a diffuse program concerned, above all, with size and representation. In structural and regional terms, ANZART had become rudderless.

Adelaide magazine, *Artlink* attempted to capsize ANZART's real benefits to artists, by characterising it as "a club of about a hundred people who had travelled there for the purpose" and erroneously accused the Tasmanian Government of politically censoring ANZART-in-Hobart debate. (Britton 1983: 4; Cochrane 1983: 13).

Thomas' summation, however, is more considered and, taking account of ANZART's difficulties, he pronounced it "[a] historic event... of great value" (Thomas 1983: 7). Of most significance for this critic:

was the educational stimulus ... caused by the coming together, for a few days, of the many experimental artists, young and old, from Tasmania and the mainland, and from New Zealand and Europe. ANZART was conceived ... as an 'artists' encounter' and that, triumphantly, is what seems to have been achieved (1983: 7).

For the relatively few New Zealanders attending, it was also a rough passage - which Australians barely noticed because opportunities for serious trans-Tasman debate had not been factored in. This was not ten days that shook the world; it was not even a tremor registering on the Australian art seismograph. Although a number of Kiwi artists felt marginalised and "almost intrusive" (Hurrell 1983: 21) within the seriously professionalising culture at Hobart, they wished to keep ANZART afloat. As Pacific seafarers and inhabitants of 'the shaky isles', they were used to instability and believed such problems could be interrogated, re-negotiated and re-navigated between this and the next encounter. But the Australian gaze was no longer looking out to sea; it was fixed on more solid horizons in the northern hemisphere and the two neighbours were beginning to resemble once more the old married couple looking past each other.

During these days on the island of Tasmania the newly corporatised VAB had already set its next ANZART sights, not in the Antipodes but in Edinburgh the following year. Turning its back on New Zealand, ANZART's ethos and artists involved in these encounters, this funding juggernaut would re-invent ANZART as a highly polished national export commodity, which would be entirely separated from the New Zealand component. Ironically, the New Zealand work gained considerable critical kudos at the Edinburgh festival, while Australians fared badly. In one of the great art debacles in Australian history, this corporatised cargo would start taking in water, to be shipwrecked a year later at the final encounter, ANZART/AUCKLAND '85.

ANZART's fragile structure proved vulnerable to eventual scuttling by the rise of bureaucratic arts infrastructure in Australia, in particular by direct curatorial intervention by the VAB following ANZART-in-Hobart in 1983. Not surprisingly, the ebb and flow of such Australia Council policy was, in turn, subject to broader political and trade currents. After the completion of trans-Tasman trading agreements (CER) in 1983, the Australian government re-aligned its political and economic position with spectacular Asian economic growth. Against these changing trade winds and political currents ANZART's fate was sealed in 1984 by both Australian and New Zealand arts council policies. The former insisted upon rigorous curatorial and bureaucratic control of the event, while the latter assumed a 'hands off' approach that metaphorically abandoned ship as regards effective support or advice for its artists.

Moreover, any values, achievements or failures on the part of ANZART vessels throughout the 1980s were to be further swamped by a stormy diplomatic and security front between late 1984 and early 1985. At this time the New Zealand Lange Labour

Government refused entry to its ports by nuclear-powered US ships; this blew the longstanding ANZUS Treaty out of the water, and its political after-shock was felt in the final ANZART encounter, a few months later in March 1985.

Meanwhile, ANZART-in-Hobart in 1983 became a watershed in cultural connections between Australian and New Zealand visual art communities. Despite being an ambitious and nationally successful event for artists from each country, assumptions about 'special Tasman relationships' that had been renewed and re-investigated in Christchurch in 1981, remained mostly unexamined in Hobart. In particular, Australian art institutions' desire for Euro-American and Asian recognition meant that New Zealand was again represented as the smaller, rather than the different sibling; this precipitated a distinct dive in regional art relations.

Now reduced to oil slicks on the Tasman, only flotsam and jetsam remains of these intrepid cross-Tasman journeys. Nevertheless, they constitute a significant part of our regional art history even if their reclamation reveals uncomfortable aspects of self-knowledge, especially for influential Australian institutions that have dismissed the cultures of smaller nations in the neighbouring region. Singaporean historian, Kanaga Sabapathy explains why we need to salvage these lost treasures:

[S]uch endeavours can also prise open divergences which register differences and intense localisation within the region. In embarking upon these endeavours the writing of history and criticism of art can be moved to deeper, reflexive levels, leading to the provision of art historiographies which can assume contending or competing status with historiographies that are esteemed to be dominant and emanating invariably from the West (Sabapathy 1996: 17).

Or, from our regional perspective, we might add, from the northern hemisphere. Recent re-'discovery' of the Asia-Pacific region has witnessed Australian art institutions ditching the remnants of an embarrassing white (Australasian) past in order to embrace, invent and claim new discourses of regional exchange. These are often simplistically based on exoticised racial difference, providing a spectacular 'Other' to mainstream Australian art. Somewhere between these positions, the spectre of those lost white tribes haunts our histories, demanding re-interpretation and perhaps re-navigation of their complex, fluid and subtle Tasman crossings. Without these shared stories, recent accounts of regional art alliances are doomed to repetition as pallid and parallel, rather than the intense and intertwined alliances they have been and may again become. For Australian and New Zealand artists, the centrality of McCahon's (non-indigenous as well as indigenous) Pacific is once again within sight on our Southerly horizons.

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