Being lost in an idea and uncertainty can speak louder than that little practical guy that says, wow, this has potential, now let’s act. After the pursuit of an idea and writing a proposal that seemed far more serious than the reality of it, I received the wonderful news that, yes, you have received a scholarship to Barcelona and now you must grab the opportunity and act, refine your idea and….

I had never travelled and finally going overseas at the age of 43 was both daunting and exciting—the idea that I have the opportunity not only to travel but also to incorporate the one thing in the world that makes absolute sense: Art. Uncertainty was at the forefront of my thinking processes. I found myself running on the spot in fear and excitement, which transferred into procrastination and feeling lost.

My initial ideas for a project stemmed from those feelings of uncertainty and being lost. And I decided that I would use them as a jumping-off point, which would allow my research to be underpinned by my fascination of embodiment and phenomenology. In an attempt to reveal and
understand how I embody my living environment and how I orient myself to the moment, I began photographing my local environment. That’s how I came to make a map, documenting my physical trajectory from Bangalow, which is a sleepy little town on the north-east coast of Australia, to the other side of the world, Barcelona.

To make a map is representative of the process and experience that precedes it. To explore how to document my journey, as I prepared to depart, I looked at the environment of my home and local environment, the everyday objects within my house and the larger landscape that is Bangalow. Walter Benjamin considers the difference between ‘not finding your way and losing yourself’ as the ‘art of straying’. To lose yourself in Benjamin’s terms is to be capable of living in uncertainty and mystery (Benjamin 1979: 45-106). I took notice of all the little things and observed the juxtaposition of the rational act of calculation against the intangible nature of the unforeseen.

I felt that my perception of spatial somatic responses was in flux, as I walked as a tourist in my own town. Photographing the spaces and the landscape reinforced the notion that I could lose myself within the lived moment. The photographs were the beginning of a visual representation leaving a reflection, a stain or remnant of my bodily experience, the notion of a trace… a residue of the experience of my home and wider environment. The focus now shifted to the corporeal—

Figure 2. “There is a complex web of traces linking my body to the world”
body mapping—and to the sensorial meaning of spatial perceptions. My research was underpinned by a phenomenological approach, using all my bodily senses to ‘make sense’ of the world: I was exploring cartography as an ontological question, one that proffers an ongoing mediation within contemporary art, developing in response to the challenges that arise within the multiplication of sites, practices and materialities that artists occupy.

I felt observing spatial analysis only within the paradigms of cultural landscape, architecture, material culture and cartography would omit the body, due to conflictive differences between the material and representational limitations of accepted conventions. I started to explore image transfer processes which allowed me to fix the photographed image onto another surface. I adapted techniques from Robert Rauschenberg’s binder emulsion transfer process, which he developed while living in New York in the 1960s. Using this technique of photography and mixed media to document urban street culture, he imbued the documentarian aspect of photography with cultural and historical importance, balancing his photographic results between “the medium’s inherent technological objectivity and his own subjective framing” (Acampora 2014). With my little iphone in hand I suddenly became Rauschenberg, immersed in the task of documenting the histories imbedded within photography and the embodiment of experience, allowing the true nature of the forms and surfaces to be the mutable data of embodied space: a trace and distillment of a lived moment.

After a few experiments I decided that paper held the visual qualities of residue as well as being practical for the purpose of a journal. I was led by the idea that images can be understood to reflect traces, a residual impression made by the presence of the object, place or event, that photographs are in fact the preservers of traces. This was an exciting discovery as this methodology suited the time restraints and available media that I had to work with, and complemented my initial idea of documentation via a journal as an object.

On the plane!!! Oh, me navigating terminals, customs, and actually experiencing being in a chair in the air for what seems forever. After five days, I hit the streets of Barcelona, with my new Rauschenburg persona and my little iphone. I have time to orient myself, meet up with my fellow research compadres, and settle in. Photographing and absorbing, I am in love. The city is drenched in cultural heritage; it has such a density that my senses are afire. Thankfully the camera allows me to maintain a productive distance, to take a step back and absorb a city that contains so many histories; the very nature of the streets seems embedded with layers of cultural residue.

I come from a young country with a lot of open spaces, so Barcelona stretches my limited white middle-class Australian viewpoint and it dances with me begging me to explore. My focus shifts and alters away from the initial direction of reflective surfaces of puddles, to now capture form and surface by reducing the lens to the surfaces, forms and stains found on the streets. Photographing form and surface, I transfer the notion that my lens on the world informs me of live phenomena but creating a figurative distortion of an actual lived moment. I expand on my current research and visual language, and debate how to lose myself in such a lived moment and how to represent the notions of cartography and embodiment through traces. Photography documents what has taken place and creates an ambiguous relationship with reality,
illuminating the subjective nature of the photographer and viewer. The relationship of the subjective and objective is always in play. This ambiguity is inherent to the photograph and it allows and invites the artist as well as the viewer to refine and re-read the re/presented moment as a lived experience. This experience becomes art itself and is an embodiment of trace, which becomes the trace of my trajectory. A vestige of the lived moment.

Figure 3. “A figurative distortion of an actual lived moment”

I look into phenomenology to link cartography and trace in photography, and I read more by Maurice Merleau Ponty. He approaches the notion of trace in an unconventional way. In the essay “Eye in the Mind” he suggests there are less tangible traces that are not as visible. However, they are clearly sensed in the present moment. Ponty poses that memories place themselves into the present moment through a hidden avenue, and these traces are indeed sensed. These traces move past the perceptual capacities beyond the eye, past the indexical sign, and are sensed by the entire body’s gesture. Ponty suggests that trace is something experienced by the body and can then be externalised by the artist. Trace can be seen as a link between inner and outer experience, not simply as an impression within the subject. Both the subjective and objective forces are at work. Ponty states: “... quality, light, colour, depth which are before us ... awaken an echo in our bodies, the body welcomes them. Things have an internal equivalent in me: ... and things arouse in me a carnal formula of presence” (2014:125-6).

Ponty’s notion of trace suggests the awakening of a dormant interior that is equal to its outer world yet a translation of things. His statement, “a carnal formula of their presence” seems to
suggest the integrity of the thing itself and a translation into the interior language of the body. Ponty argues “those correspondences in turn give rise to some tracing rendered visible again”(year & page). His suggestion relates the body as an origin of perception to the artistic methodologies involved and so forms the subtext of my work. At the base of my work is the idea that there is a complex web of traces linking my body to the world, and the journal is an embodiment of this process. My body and experience become the residue, an echo, which translates onto the map.

Time just flies by—four weeks in a nano second—and I have a huge amount of images and data locked and mashed up into so many experiences. It is Christmas in Barcelona and the colour of the street is on show. Everywhere I visit adds another little snippet to my ever-expanding vision. Then it is time to go home....

On my return, after recovering from feeling like a hologram, the force field that seemed to encircle my home having dissipated, I remembered I was well over my deadline (as one had to pop over to Paris for ten days—out of respect, of course). I had started to create while travelling but the messy way I usually work seemed impossible on the move. Now my work space spread across my entire house and my living became my favourite space—a working studio! I can’t tell you the joy and clarity I received in the creative process; it made all that reading, experiment and exposure come to life, and watching concrete ideas turn into a solid form was an adventure in itself.

To add to Ponty’s notion of trace I began to look into other artists who use surface and form to transpose a visceral embodiment. Antony Gormley is a hero of mine and has been a re-occurring influence in my work to date. To re-examine how the body can be used as a visual language and as the tool to express the interior nature of experience, I had to revisit his oeuvre. Gormley allows the process of making, the site and present events to inform his work. He uses his own body as his starting point. I identified with this idea from the moment I discovered him and now saw it was interrelated to my project, too.

Gormley sees the body as a place of events happening, suggesting that it is the only part of the material world you can work with from the inside and he uses his body as a material to explore a real lived moment, in real time (2014). That is exactly what I’d say if he hadn’t said it so beautifully—and, oh, not to forget, first. He says, to start a work with your body is an exploration into what it means to locate ‘place’ and where we stand as humans in the universe (2005). The idea that the body is seen as a location, a place of events happening, is exciting because it translates into a phenomenological viewpoint. I feel it re-enforces the visceral and corporeal parts of phenomena and like Gormley I have used my own body as a material, as a diving point into my sensorial experiences, informing my decisions, vision and focus.

As I printed, I started to look at all the things I had collected: from train tickets, cigarette packets etc. to the quirky little maps I had drawn to find my way around. I decided to incorporate some of these little mud-maps re-drawn under the surface of my transfer images in ink and sewn thread to indicate where I had actually been that day. After making a few prints, I understood that if every image contained a map, I would lose some of the ambiguity that I loved. I didn’t
want it to be a literal map, so I selected a few that suited certain images as merely a suggestion of travel—no need for overkill, right? These images reminded me of Antoni Tàpies in a flashback of the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona where I had spent a day with his works.

*It is such a pleasure: books and Google just don’t cut it as seeing work in the flesh. I read up on Tàpies’s methodologies before I left with the intention of researching the available archives. However, due to the time of year and access problems this idea falls flat. The space is closed! Outrageous! I’m sure my people sent a memo I was coming...*

*Figure 4. “Antoni Tàpies’s work invites curiosity into a Zen-like space”*

Tàpies was a self-taught artist. He was an extensive reader and was journal-led, writing and drawing his ideas and notions in order to return later to the memory or residue of his observations. This is a great method to leave a trace of an experience: to collect, read and document in order to return to it again and again as fodder for your larger works. As it turns out, its genius is in the nature of this journal-led investigation.

*It is the simplicity within his works that is so appealing. To me his work translates feelings of the visceral within the use of the formal qualities and materiality of form and surface. His work invites curiosity into a Zen-like space. It prompts me to start reading Heidegger off the beaten track, hoping to reveal the poetry and Zen aspects of phenomenology. It reminds of André*
Martus, a German-born artist who lives and works in Barcelona whom I’ve met through my supervisor, Fiona Fell.

I visit him in his studio in Barcelona and spend an afternoon discussing his thoughts on art and his inspirations. He draws from the experimental corrosion of material surfaces in an attempt to place within his work the historical, linguistic and philosophical notions that lie embedded in our own individual human experience. The transformation of material and matter in his work gives birth to his art. We discuss Heidegger and poetry, which he says underpins his work. He states:

If we choose to understand the mother of all art, poetry, as an act of condensed or ‘gedichtet’ expression, all works of art are the necessary result of a process of condensation or ‘verdichtung’. However any process of condensation presupposes its start in a diffuse, even empty space. It is the emptiness that gives shape to the act of creation, which gives shape to its silence in visible and audible condensations through a process of transformation.

Heidegger claims that phenomenology needs a reduction to show the essence of being. Paradoxical and problematic, this idea proves confusing, so I keep my focus on the idea that a reduction of belief allows another perception—a doorway between the interior and external essence of phenomena. It is art itself that embodies experience. Trace is the art. The ‘reduction’ Heidegger discusses is the famous ‘bracketing’: the act of suspending judgment (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy 1995). The phenomenological reduction is an invitation to suspend our naïve belief in the ‘real’ world around us.

I use Heidegger’s theories to back up literal reduction with my camera lens and imply a metaphysical reduction of reality. The outcome is a suspension of judgment and focus solely on the surface, form, remnants and stains of the cultural density accruing and found on the streets of Barcelona. This enables me to re-enforce the idea that the cognitive leap evolved in metaphor—when one thing stands for another—can be removed and the subject can be translated as a trace, a lived moment.

Merging all these ideas I have linked the methodologies involved in my selecting and filtering of images and materials. This process gives the images an ambiguity, and this in itself informs and gives birth to the work. The photographic documentation and the methodologies involved, from the focal reduction of the lens to the image transfer process, the way I documented location, surface and form around Barcelona, and linked this with research, have created an ambiguity within the photograph and materials used to allow both the artist and the viewer to re-define and re-read the present moment as a lived experience, where the echo of my trajectory is represented by the journal and art itself becomes an embodiment of trace.

What an amazing time and opportunity; life has a knack of leading you where you need to go if you’re listening. This project has expanded my current research and visual language vocabulary, and left me a rich tapestry of ideas and inspiration. I have made a photographic journal as a platform for other larger-scale works. Thanks Barcelona and to all that were involved.
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Georgina Milln (georgistarr@gmail.com) is a second-year Visual Art Undergraduate student at Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales, Australia. This article is her final assignment of a project that she completed as part of the Barcelona Scholarship Program 2014, a student exchange program between Southern Cross University and the University of Barcelona. This article examines the paradigm of photography as preservers of “trace”. Milln poses the question: How can I lose myself in a lived moment? She also seeks to represent the notions of cartography and embodiment through traces. Her research takes a phenomenological approach and explores cartography as an ontological question—one that proffers an ongoing mediation within contemporary art. It is developed in response to the challenges that arise within the multiple sites, practices and materialities that artists occupy.