

**‘Troubled Waters Art Exhibition’, opening address by Professor Ian Jacobs, UNSW Sydney,
18 August 2016**

In opening the ‘Troubled Waters’ suite of three exhibitions, I can’t help responding with enormous interest to what this art represents - the great challenges facing our planet as we move deeper into the 21st century, but also the inter-disciplinary approach to creativity forged by UNSW Art & Design that exemplifies what universities should be about.

Firstly, the great challenges that are brought so vividly to life in these projects. The central and homegrown project here, *River Journey*, is a true inter-disciplinary initiative that brings together researchers from UNSW Science, the UNSW Galleries and leading Australian artists to interpret and enhance our insight into the impact of climate change on the health of our rivers and wetlands. Here science finds a voice in art, and art advances our understanding of important scientific research, including the work being undertaken by Professor Kingsford and his team in the School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences. Their project is supported by other artworks that collectively underline the importance of scientific research in helping to track, and perhaps alleviate, the worst effects of climate change.

The installation upstairs - by the Ghana-born British artist John Akomfrah OBE - was one of the standout works at last year’s Venice Biennale. *Vertigo Sea* blends the visual language of the 19th century with some gruesome snippets of archival whaling films, and interweaves it into a hypnotic and compelling cinematographic masterpiece, showing the beauty, the inherent dangers, and the threats to our marine environments. UNSW is proudly staging its Australian premiere and we thank the artist for entrusting UNSW Galleries with bringing to the southern hemisphere what’s clearly a landmark work.

And finally Georgia Wallace-Crabbe’s film *The Earth and the Elements* focuses on the mining and resources trade between Australia and China. The imagery and stories from both countries encapsulate the complexities of the mining trade and the threat that it poses to Australia’s fragile natural environments.

In their own very unique ways, each of these compelling works speaks to the Grand Challenges we’ve committed ourselves to tackle as part of the UNSW 2025 Strategy. Those challenges, which include the impacts of climate change, of migration and refugees, demand that universities to provide global leadership on some of the key issues of our time, and one striking way of doing that is by generating the sort of cutting-edge works we see here tonight, that go well beyond traditional art genres.

Which brings me to my second point, about inter-disciplinary collaborations.

Traditionalists might baulk at the interaction of established art genres like painting, sculpture and drawing with digital technologies, and with areas as varied as medicine and engineering, but the reality is that creativity has become central to contemporary lives, from riveting TV dramas to the shape and feel of the latest iPhone. Striking new art forms are emerging - witness tonight - and I’ve no doubt the new wave of students coming through institutions like UNSW Art and Design will be among the creative, economic and social entrepreneurs of Australia’s future.

The other key to this future is building collaborations, partnerships and networks. Our role as universities can only be enhanced by closer ties with our immediate communities, and by reaching beyond the campus to help create vibrant cultural quarters in the city. UNSW has long been engaged here in Paddington, where studios and venues are clustered around our refurbished Art and Design Faculty, encouraging interactions and fostering acceptance and enjoyment of art that breaks down barriers.

Art and design education shouldn't be peripheral to what Australian universities are doing but absolutely central to it. The loose boundaries of what constitutes 'art' can make that difficult sometimes - but that's no reason not to go there, to apply fresh thinking and ideas and chart a positive course into an uncertain but exciting future. I know UNSW's Art and Design Faculty is embracing that challenge - and this exhibition, 'Troubled Waters', is an exceptional illustration of what can be achieved. I'm honoured to declare it open.

Thank you.

Professor Ian Jacobs is President and Vice-Chancellor of UNSW Sydney.