

## Light strained through smoke<sup>1</sup>

Fire scarifies—by way of tar, ash, wax-promoting germination

The seeds of the *Guichenotia macrantha*

(after Antoine, the gardener's boy, all other names lost)

are tiny and wait.

A gentle touch down on this tussock and that,

in a map known only to the firehandler,

Then, ruby, yellow and green ignite the land

*some yam flowers, some medicines, some food, some poison, some  
magic, some paint, some secrets, some for rheumatism, some for the  
tip of the spear, some for bread and some for thread.*

A sweet drink

those are not for you, though.

You build a fire from sticks whose names you don't know and you think you know fire.

You don't know fire.

You don't know fire.

Fire knows you, though, and will chase you down.

In January we coughed

Light arrived on skin strained through rough smoke, dirty yellow.

A dreadful pall rose past the blackened torsos of trees, carrying ghosts of koala,  
possum, joey, bright bird, microbat, snake, the smallest hearts of marsupials.

We breathed in the remains.

We coughed.

This was not the first settler conflagration.

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<sup>1</sup> This poem was written for artist Deborah Kelly's project *Create*, as a lyric for a sung arrangement

Much earlier there was the desecration of the yam fields, the camps, the tree kin, the birthing pools and then later the blinding whiteout of the radiocephalic mushroom clouds

So many faces turned towards it, the spectacle mirrored multiple in eyes that didn't know to not watch.

Shiny shiny (my whiteness burns me like that)

The ash settling, light as down, on Tjarutja lungs.

Bodies whose strontium-infused bones ended up in laboratories and burned for their ashy secrets were buried without those small pieces of living mineral and could never rest  
never rest

And some had spines missing and some hearts and couldn't rest  
couldn't rest

And babies made stranger

there can be no reparation.

Fold upon fold, these wounds shimmer across ecologies, across a stolen, a contested, an impossible idea of nature, across bodyworld, across quaking bone and tidal bloods, across deep open cuts and shuddering worldskin.

This deep entanglement is hook, sinker, fish.

Tool and weapon.

Control and demise.

Melancholy and joy.

It matters how we fold.

Not facing outward, but pressed together, fold facing fold,  
sealed with ash.

## Chapter 5: GEOTRAUMA: Entanglement, Rupture, Equanimity

As if gold scribbles through the crow-black night—sharp and erratic, stop and start—like the tongue of one wracked with anxiety, to stall at the cliff-face of words, in the space between sound and silence.

—Kate Wright *A Manifesto for Creature Languages*

Imagine that your body and the world are entangled. Imagine that your body is the world and the world is your body. Inside out. Outside in. Bones your mineral—quaking. Blood your ocean—boiling. Both the human and the non-human in this wild embrace are fractured, oceanic, tempestuous, atremble, stripped bare, warring, dying. Both subject to breaches from insideout and outsidein. The intensities, or violences, wrought upon this entire assemblage are not, as philosophers and theorists of environmental ethics Tim Matts and Aidan Tynan put it, “reducible to either side of that division”.<sup>2</sup> The origin of the tumult is unthinkable, as unthinkable as time and as unspeakable as a language fit for the flesh of the world. There is no purely human space, no purely “natural” space. Social anthropologist Mikkel Bille and human geographer Kirsten Simonsen use the phenomenological lens of Merleau-Ponty to discuss this entanglement. They point out that “the body” is “always in process”, and that it emerges via a “perceptual engagement with the world”,<sup>3</sup> “chang[ing] through interacting with an environment that it both responds to and actively structures.”<sup>4</sup>

Imagine a strip mine. Draglines scouring the earth.

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<sup>2</sup> Matts Tim and Tynan Aidan, “Geotrauma and the Eco-clinic,” *Symploke* 20, no. 1-2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.5250/symploke.20.1-2.0153>. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5250/symploke.20.1-2.0153>.

<sup>3</sup> Mikkel Bille and Kirsten Simonsen, “Atmospheric Practices: On Affecting and Being Affected,” *Space and Culture* 24, no. 2 (2021): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331218819711>. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1206331218819711>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

As I have already intimated, use of the term “*the body*” complicates notions of subjective embodiment, creating a separation between, for example, *my* lived experience of (dis)embodied panic, and the body as an object or a field of perception which is out there, which I can perceive as separate from me, which I can look upon from afar. In considering panic, I engage with the idea of the body as a something which is in and of the world, something I can both look upon from afar and also perceive from within. Panic as an affect arises from this entanglement of worlds. I can’t say that my body ends at my skin, or even at the walls of my house, or the borders of my neighbourhood. My body is part of cargo shipping lanes that transport food. I am part of the pharmaco-industrial complex—I take clonazepam twice a day.<sup>5</sup> My body is part of the forest that is logged to create furniture for my home. My body is part of a nuclear power plant, and the mining of uranium and the activist community and sovereign lands destroyed in the process of creating heat for my home.

Imagine your skin being peeled off, layer by layer, exposing raw nerves.

All is relational, an entanglement producing a bodyworld assemblage.<sup>6</sup> This assemblage exists in a cyclic relationship to the social and cultural, such that wounds inflicted on the earth are also wrought on the collective body in a ripple effect, trauma upon trauma upon trauma. This is a relation in crisis, a violence relation, not a generous *being open to* but a constant “being opened—with all the violence that implies.”<sup>7</sup> Perpetually breached and breaching, inflaming, assimilating, and so on. Never settling, never resting. There is only perpetual and simultaneous reproduction and destruction. By turns destructive and generative, or both simultaneously.

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<sup>5</sup> Clonazepam is a benzodiazepine drug which is prescribed for panic and anxiety, and also as an anti-convulsant drug for people who live with epilepsy. I take this drug twice a day.

<sup>6</sup> The term “bodyworld” is, firstly, a non-dualist opposition to the Cartesian mind-body split. Since in this configuration mind is inseparable from body, “bodyworld” contains also the mind (which is in both the body and the mind and exceeds both). The term is also an extrapolation from the term “flesh” used by Merleau-Ponty to discuss the entanglement of the body and the world. In his final text *The Visible and the Invisible* he makes many references to flesh and poses a question: “Where are we to put the limit between the body and the world, since the world is flesh?”.

<sup>7</sup> Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia* (Melbourne: re:press, 2008), 200-03.

Imagine miners, lungs clogged with the finest black talc.

Social geographer and feminist theorist Rachel Pain echoes Matts and Tynan by reinforcing the notion of the feedback loop between humans and nature/the world—neither one existing without the other—and introduces the term “geotrauma”, which she describes as “multiscalar, intersecting and mutual relations between trauma and place”.<sup>8</sup> Pain applies this term to discuss the notion that “trauma is located not only within people’s minds and bodies, but in the social, environmental and structural contexts around us.”<sup>9</sup> Architect, curator and editor Ana Dana Beroš, when writing on transmigration and human geographies of refugees, describes geotrauma as “not merely a wound, incised in organic texture by means of a foreign object, or even an individual experience; instead, it is a physical and material reality onto which all of life on Earth is inscribed, with its traces accumulated and entangled within us.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, my panic arises out of the bodyworld assemblage—erupting, flooding, scarifying.

Imagine the floods coming, drowning the miners in the old open-cut, and down the road away, in the gold shaft mine. Now we slide down the slag heaps of coal dust, as fine as talc, and drop into the water, swimming in the black waters of the flooded open-cut mine.

Imagine trying to breathe.

*Creek beds, rivers underground, rising up, joy and terror.*

*A tsunami of grief, an atom split, a birthing of monsters.*

*The earth heaves, ripples of affect turn ground to water, we rise and fall with the  
flows.*

*A scar on the landscape, a nation obliterated, a cosmology interrupted. Shadows.*

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<sup>8</sup> Rachel Pain, "Geotrauma: Violence, place and repossession," *Progress in Human Geography* 45, no. 5 (2021): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520943676>.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0309132520943676>.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ana Dana Beroš, "TRANS|MIGRANCY: The Psychogeographies of the Threshold,," *Život Umjetnovski* 101 (2017): 4. <https://zivotumjetnosti.ipu.hr/101-2017/>.

*Tears of sap, a severed limb, a mothering tree.  
A painful extraction, blood diamonds and wedding rings.  
A waterway choked, black gold for some.  
Dead and grounded birds, slick and darkly glistening.  
A yellow flower, a laboratory, a rat and compliance.  
A genocide of entanglement, a supremacy of destruction.*

## **Pre-emptive knowing**

I was born into a world in which the conditions for my existential precarity already existed. Capitalism, the scaffolding for all gross and micro-oppressions, is a system all are born into. It marks us from before we are born. Conception is often a violence, regardless of the privilege of our beginnings, regardless of the gentle beasts surrounding us, regardless of the crib we are ensconced in. The imperative for pair-bonded coupling to produce a child is a violence in and of itself. Capitalism is ravenous for a labour force, more squalling pink babies to grow into human suits and plug into the machines of production.

My dad was a farmer, my mum the farmer's wife, and I was born into the bucolic surrounds of an agribusiness homestead. This land was the stolen land of the Wurundjeri people, though I didn't know that then. How much of this does a bunch of cells know? Maybe a lot. Maybe everything. I felt like I knew everything, and it was terrifying.

I was born into the waiting room of the Third World War, the finger never more than an instant away from the button, stuck in a terrible and infinite breath-hold that started before I was born. We are all cyanotic. I learned to read early—books, newspapers. I always already knew the shape of a mushroom cloud and the oblivion delivered by its oversized head, the blinding whiteout and bodies melting as they ran naked from the burning. The valence of words like “pearl” or “mushroom” shifted and changed from benign and beautiful to ominous and imminent.

My mother told me I was reading the newspaper before I started school at the age of four. By then I had seen photos of those mushroom clouds and knew they were associated with my demise, the demise of my family, and the demise of the planet. I

knew the term “Third World War”, and I waited in resigned anticipation, looking for a flash on the horizon, translating the rumble of a truck into a sonic boom. I probably didn’t know the term “nuclear winter” but I knew that not all white Christmases were full of joy. I dreamed sometimes that the world was falling through space, on fire. I would sleep under my parents’ bed for fear of abandonment, imagining that in the event of a crisis they would flee, leaving me and my siblings to fend for ourselves in the white death. In 1968, young boys from the village I lived in were drafted for the Vietnam War. In 1969, I watched the moon landing on a black and white television somewhere in Queensland. Both these things were important to our security, to our continued occupation of home, in some puzzling way. And home was very intimately connected to my personal feelings of existential security. My investment was extreme. We moved a lot, from one remote rural location to another. The bucolic pastoral was a lovely conceit, as if disconnected from the ills of the world. Close to nature. As if nature is a thing out there.

The country is a great place to raise children.

For me, though, panic lurked in the pastoral. Seeing with something other than eyes, I perceived the connections rippling upwards and outwards. My whole body was in the state of bearing witness. I knew that the slaughter of the sheep, the farming of the land, the setting of 1080 dingo baits, the trucks filled with grain rumbling towards shelves far away, the locusts that landed in clouds to devour the grain, the rain that never came, the cloud-searching eyes of my father, the pig shooters coming at night with their floodlights, the unmarked graves in the paddock out back, the silent hulks of agricultural machinery rusting in the bush—these were all somehow connected to that silent, malignant winter of my imagination. This is all I knew, but the connections were forming. Later I would know more, would come to know that I was implicated. But for now, the seeds of panic were sprouting, fed by the daily ruptures that shivered across the surface of my scrutable existence.

Now we are in the one-teacher school of a mining town out west, built on the sovereign lands of the Wangan-Jagalingou people. The land has other names: the Bowen Basin, part of the Galilee Basin, lately a site of great contestation over the Carmichael Mine. Blair Athol is the settler name of the town. It’s been sitting atop a huge seam of steam coal since the late 1880s. There’s a community hall, a corner

store, a cinema, a post office and a telephone exchange. We are all on a party line. Mrs Robbo, at the telephone-exchange-cum-post-office, listens in to all our calls. We all listen. Short-short long is our ring. Every day the blast alarm sounds. Children run to their posts, guarding trophies in display shelves, arms outstretched across bookshelves, inkwells shivering, pens rolling and dropping one by one across the room. The schoolhouse shakes with each blast. Mr Stevenson sits on the edge of the teacher's desk dangling his leg, swinging it gently back and forth, and tells us, a few kids around the ages of eleven and twelve, that by the time we are twenty the water will be poisoned, the air will be unbreathable, and we will be unprotected from the relentless sun. The world will be uninhabitable. We will die horribly.

After Mr Stevenson's devastating lecture I go out into the dusty yard bordered by the open cut mine and looked up at the sun which explodes in a slow motion brightout. I burst into flames. My body melts. This isn't the first and only time I've disintegrated.

Living on the edge of the flooded open-cut mine, water sources all poisoned, we float in the cold dark waters, swimming with the ghosts of the Wangan-Jagalingou people. All of us covered in coal dust, all of us gasping for breath. How much of theft does a child of the empire know?

"Boo!" say the ghosts.

Old man blue tongue, a first kiss of dispossession haunting generations. How much does a bunch of cells know?

*Tell me what you see outside, tell me everything.*

This question, query, plea, was the beginning of a video work I made for an exhibition in 2020 in Graz called *Badeverbot*. The work was made in collaboration with Francesca da Rimini, who co-wrote the script for the soundtrack.

The title *Tell me what you see outside* is taken from the television series *Chernobyl*, and is a line spoken by a dying frontline worker.



The six-minute single-channel video and audio work has a soundtrack driven by a polyvocal text, spoken by 3D animated speculative familiars. The work is accompanied by twelve-page A5 monochrome zine.

The familiars evolved with the pandemic virus in 2020, to reflect upon the heightened conditions of crisis that the biological virus has precipitated across all ecologies—human, non-human and systemic. In installation the video was projected into a cylinder lined with a reflective surface, as a gesture towards warped and altered perceptions arising from extended periods of enforced lockdown and the associated shaping of informatic mediascapes.

The work explores hybrid conditions of being, our blood and flesh intertwined with the slow emergencies of species extinction, climate catastrophes and the systemic murder of First Nations people, while successive governments of all stripes sweep these violences under a carpet of coal and gas extractivism. The work was made under the very particular context of the time, in the fallout after Black Summer and in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. It channels the lived experience of beings breathing ash under red skies, the perishment of species, the heightened affective politics of the Black Lives Matter movement after George Floyd's murder and the ongoing genocide of First Nations people by the carceral state.

This is the social context of *Tell me what you see outside*

Burning trucks follow the mercantile maps carved out by traders before, bringing the gift of dark skies and stinking waters to the choking and the thirsty. The child standing alone stares into the sun, knows the trouble, connects the undrinkable, the unbreathable, the skin bubbling under a relentless sun.

*Tell me what you see outside, tell me everything.*

Melting permafrosts, beds of bleached sea antlers, carpets of heat-felled bats, Black lives unmattering, the human-gun assemblage, the infinitely recursive machines of production, flows of capital leading straight to your heart, machine insects crawling over beached blue whales, frakked wastelands, icebergs calving stillborns.

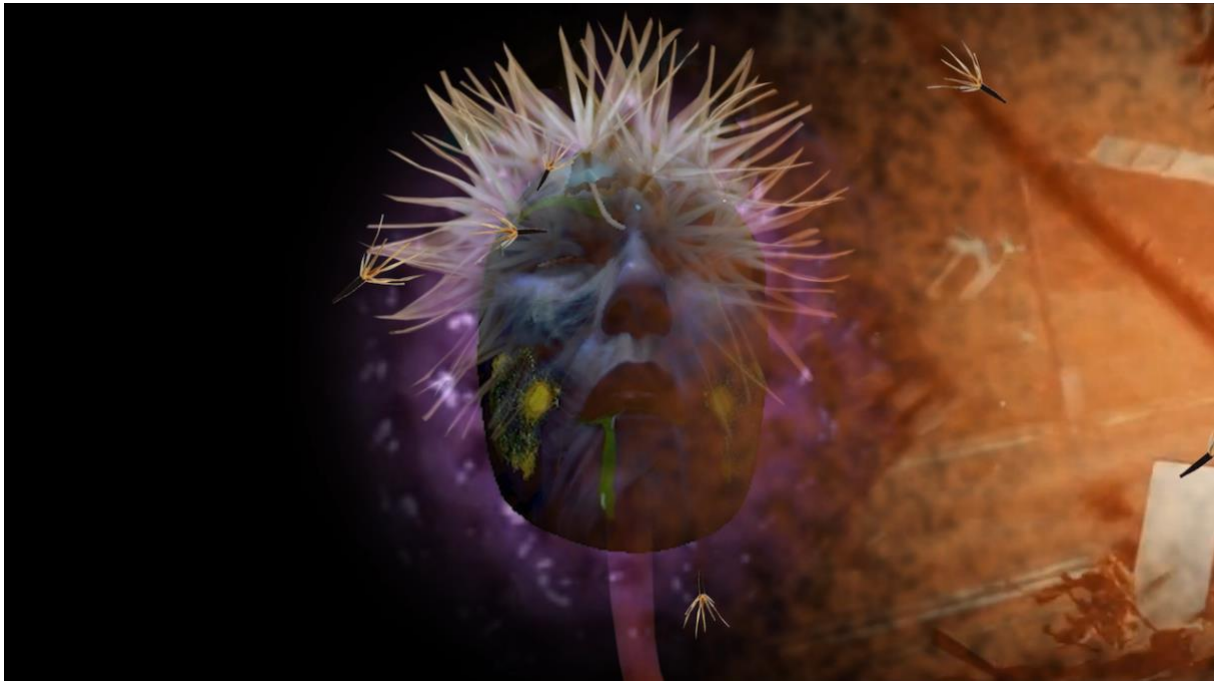


Figure 1: V Barratt (text, video, sound, 3D animation) F da Rimini (text), *Tell me what you see outside*. Badeverbot, Graz, 2020

Watch *Tell me what you see outside* here [LINK](#)

## Intersectional Addiction

I was pretty young when I was first prescribed pharmaceutical medications to control whatever it was that was making me different in a bad way. A lifetime of turning the volume down on me, and blanketing affect, blinkering the far sight afforded when panic tears the veil in two. These days I am prescribed a medication for anxiety and panic which is also a drug for epilepsy and akathisia (commonly known as restless legs). The drug, of the class benzodiazepine, which goes by the names *Rivotril*, *Clonazepam*, and *Klonopin*, among others, is well known as a drug of addiction. Dependency can develop in as little as four weeks. The initial prescription from the doctor is approved for four weeks. By then, of course, some are dependant and have to increase the dose. Increasing the dose leads to a deeper dependency. At some point, if you continue on this sanctioned elevator, your drug intake and therefore your very self is considered amoral and irresponsible. The options at this point are further treatment, via institutional intervention and other drugs, or accessing the drugs by any means possible. I have been on the drug for twelve years. Prior to that I was on

other drugs whose names are well known to all—*Valium*, *Xanax*, *Temazepam*—in addition to drugs for depression and temporal lobe epilepsy (which I do not have). These drugs fall under various classes, such as SSRI, SNRI, MOAI, tricyclics and so on. These all act on different parts of the brain, affecting biochemical production and reuptake. There is no definitive explanation of how and why these drugs work. It is not magic, though it is marketed as such. In many cases, they don't work. In some cases, they exacerbate existing conditions and generate dangerous side effects, such as suicidality, agitation, seizures, fatal depression, and psychosis.<sup>11</sup> I can tell you from personal experience that the withdrawals from these—despite medicine's disavowal of anti-depressants as drugs of addiction and the demarcation between dependence and addiction—is brutal. I have been what I call a “legal addict” for a long time. In another context, I might have found respite through opiates such as heroin or other street drugs, which, through prohibition, have become a gateway to the carceral system. The difference between street drugs and prescribed drugs is government regulation and control. This is comprehensively unpacked by Richard J. DeGrandpre, psychopharmacologist and scholar of “technologies of the self” in his book *The Cult of Pharmacology*. He explains how chemical substances came to be, and still come to be, regarded as either “the “illegal drugs” of the black market, the “ethical medicines” of the pharmaceutical market, and the drugs of the gray market ... alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine.”<sup>12</sup> deGrandpre suggests that these classifications are the result of “an irrational and unpredictable enterprise driven by the historically contingent forces of culture and commerce”,<sup>13</sup> and don't emerge out of a science that has patient care, safety or curability as core values. He explains how at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, advances in pharmacology and especially psychopharmacology created a “new, molecular pharmacologicalism...[which was] then used to forge a modern pseudoscience of good and bad drugs...The “rational” science of drugs, in other words, carried myth along with it...a myth of angels and demons.”<sup>14</sup>

The regulation, governance and prohibition of drug classes is deeply entangled with problems such as addiction, homelessness, suicide, access, inflated market values, and beyond that, poor conditions for workers on illegal plantations and distribution

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<sup>11</sup> Richard J. DeGrandpre, *The cult of pharmacology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), vii.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 104.

workers. At the entrepreneurial level, marketing is a key to growth of the industry. Diagnostic practice is inextricably linked with new avenues for marketing. For example, some antidepressants are also used for smoking cessation, or erectile dysfunction<sup>15</sup>, thus opening up other markets. It does not benefit the complex to cure these conditions (which exist in part precisely because the complex invented them), only to manage and maintain them, creating more and more novel ways to invent medications and push into new markets. In my life, the very drugs which are prescribed to alleviate my panic and anxiety also create a dependence, which I battle with daily. It's anxiety-producing to be at the mercy of, not just a drug—but a machine—the pharmaceutical-industrial complex.

Jacqui Orr calls this confluence of panic processes and their intervention, or the paradoxical incitement and management of panic “PSYCHOpower”<sup>16</sup>, riffing on Foucault’s ideas of biopower and social control through agencies of power. She explains this cunning, self-serving paradox, through a poetic explication of the aims of PSYCHOpower. “If calming panic disorders through prescription drugs is one of its aims, so is promoting the panic attacks that extend the market reach of a pharmaceutical cure”.<sup>17</sup> She goes on to say that the “PSYCHOscentific reason that designs the pills and the public opinion polls, the diagnostic categories and the civil defence protocols, is a reason that knows it has nightmares and is trying to learn how to use them.”<sup>18</sup>

Personally, I am deeply embedded in this machine of control and disruption. I take the pastel pill, I become compliant and congruent, but only for a half-life of four hours or twelve hours. Then it's time for another dose. These are lifer drugs, bolstering the chemical carceral state.

TAKE ONE PILL TWICE A DAY

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<sup>15</sup> Ronilee Shye, "5 Medications With Multiple Uses, Depending on the Strength of the Pill," *GoodRx Health* (2018). <https://www.goodrx.com/healthcare-access/medication-education/medications-with-multiple-uses-depending-on-the-strength-of-the-pill>.

<sup>16</sup> Orr, *Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder*, 11-17.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

I have spent a lifetime rolling with the currents and tides of panic. The spring and neap, the gentle and treacherous. Never resting, never settling. I'm not sure what happens if it stops. There's an end, then. But not just to me, to everything. There is something important about the panic state, if I can just access it. If I can just tear the veil and have the courage to look upon the flesh of the world with many eyes, scanning in all directions at once. Panic asks me to become one with the flows that pass through all things, to merge with all ecologies, including the machines of production, to be "no longer contained—or even defined—by the boundaries of [our] skins",<sup>19</sup> to become nature, fold upon fold upon fold. This act of resistant acceptance, the act of truly becoming flow, asks me to mobilise the revivifying power of violence inherent in the bodyworld assemblage.

*You wished this upon yourself. All this contemplation of the world as it is or the world as it seems, the structures we co-create*

*I am a building, I am a system, I am labour, I am value, I am space and time becoming, I am already exhaling for the last time, no more space taken up, I am an empty bed. I am no longer I*

Entanglement as collaboration is a core value of my creative practice. I chose this. I chose this modality of working-with—in the Harawayan sense—all the others, including but not limited to the humans, the non-humans, the elements, the ethers, the quality of light, the temperature of the air, time, space, cosmos. The infinite and the infinitely small. Things that don't have names, and that are also impossible to even think about. We're working during a bushfire, or a flood, or a pandemic. We're working while people are having somebody kneeling on their neck and being unable to breathe. None of these things are separate from the making. When Haraway speaks about "making-with", she is talking about sympoeisis,<sup>20</sup> a term coined by author and environmental scientist M. Beth Dempster to talk about open systems of production. Sympoiesis derives from "the Greek words for collective and production

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<sup>19</sup> Katherine N. Hayles, *Unthought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2015), 58.

systems”, and she conceptualises them as “complex, self-organizing and boundaryless”.<sup>21</sup>

I believe that collaboration is the only ethical mode of creative production in late Capitalism. As a person who is often struggling to get out from under, or to break, the glass, I rely on creative mutual aid to bring complex concepts to life, and to evolve them beyond my capacity. Beyond that, it's a simple acknowledgement of the fact that we are never making alone. We are always making-with. We are working in collaboration with the social, cultural, political and ecological conditions of our times. You have to abandon any notion of ownership, any notion of authorial control. The single author/genius narrative is a competitive, accelerating, institutional and hierarchical notion that is incompatible with an ethics of entangled worlding, a bodyworld assemblage that honours all creatures.

Making-with is a constant process of letting go, letting go, letting go, and a wounding and a healing. It's a making that is in a state of crisis. You must become boundaryless again and again as the complex relations form, dissolve and reform. There is always an opening in the system, through which anything surprising can enter and suggest another direction. Things never settle, there is always a new surprising intervention. It's like a mouth swallowing and assimilating over and over again. This never ends. It's generative, fecund, hot, foetid and messy.

In 2018 I began to work with activist trans-media artists Jessie Boylan and Linda Dement, and psychotherapist Jenna Tukes, on a work called *RUPTURE*. I was invited to contribute to the work precisely because of my work on panic, its relationship to ecology, and the slow emergencies of a body. After working in an installation modality for some time, primarily in sound and video, the collaborators decided they needed an embodied presence to mobilise affect in the space.

*RUPTURE* weaves a layered mediaspace and embodied performance narrative around the concepts of slow emergencies and geotrauma—the world as flesh and the flesh as the world. There are ruptures in the earth as there are ruptures in the body. The earth is affected and affects others. The earth panics! I feel this. I shudder

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<sup>21</sup> Dempster, "Sympoietic and autopoietic systems: A new distinction for self-organizing systems."

as it passes through me. These resonances wind around all earthly bodies like a silken shroud with no beginning and no end.

The work has passed through numerous iterations, the first of which was at the Bendigo Art Gallery in 2018. It is currently in development towards its (potentially) final form, in late 2022.



Figure 2: V Barratt, J Boylan, L Dement, J Tukes, *RUPTURE*, Bendigo Art Gallery, 2018

In late 2019 we presented a work-in-progress version of *RUPTURE* for the Big Anxiety Festival. We presented it at the The Esme Timbery Creative Practice Lab at the University of New South Wales on Bidjigal land. I performed the work based on poetic texts I had written during my candidature. It was the first time there had been a body activating the immersive installation. It was Black Summer.

## **RUPTURE**

October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Bidjigal Land, Black Summer

Virginia Barratt: writing/scripting, video, performance; Jessie Boylan: video, sound, tech; Linda Dement: video, sound, coding; Jenna Tukes: trauma informed psychology consultant

*Watch the RUPTURE video from The Big Anxiety Festival here [LINK]*

*It's Black Summer, 2019, and the work of RUPTURE and its groundings in entanglement are coming to life in distressing ways. I am driving towards Sydney from Adelaide with my sister as my long-distance travel companion. We breathe in smoke as we drive through regions that have been utterly scarified. We are breathing in ashy particles of cremated wildlife and tree beings. It's devastating. The fires have been burning for weeks, months. We alter course, drive away or into the smoke, it's hard to predict. The fires are flighty, they leap highways and railway lines, they spiral up it to the air, raining down sparks. This is just the beginning, and already the beaches are littered with koala, goanna, deer, kangaroo corpses with burned feet and lungs collapsed, frightened to death. This is the worst fire season that Australia has faced, and we fear it's a harbinger of what's to come.*

*RUPTURE* sits at the junction of performance, video and installation and investigates the ways in which the body and the world mimic each other in modes of panic and crisis and how symptoms of environmental and human "disorder" can be seen as an appropriate response to personal traumas and global catastrophe. It is uncanny timing to be performing this work as the smoke waits just outside the stage door. It would enter if we offered it a crack. It's a four-day install. As we work, we feel the air shift, the tingle of anxiety creeping its way through the blood into the skin, lifting the hairs on the surface of our bodies.

Philosopher Magdalena Gorska states in their thesis *Breathing Matters* that panic attacks are not merely reactions or responses to things happening or potentially happening, but "powerful temporal moments—and anxieties are powerful temporal durations—that break normative worlds apart in their captivating, exploding and immobilizing, failing, exhausting and reconfiguring dynamics".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gorska, "Breathing Matters," 286.



This is what the performing/!ictic! body does in *RUPTURE*—it breaks normative worlds apart and the body’s breath becomes what Gorska describes as “matterwork”, a process of “political matter, a matter of corpo-material and corpo-affective agentiality”.<sup>23</sup>

After four days of installation, there is a pause, a deep inhale, and we are ready.

Audience members enter through a side door and walk down a narrow dark hallway, guided forward by red strip lighting on the floor, like aircraft emergency lighting, such that you might see if the plane was going down...Is this plane going down?

A low drone rumbles throughout the space, coming from all directions. Vibrations shake the walls, at times it makes one feel queasy, creating a turmoil in the guts.

At the end of the hallway is a body, pinned with its back against the wall by an unseen energy, knees bent, in a constant tension between flight, fright and freeze. Hands flicker, grasp, fly. The breath is audible, gasps, sighs, noisy exhalations, pauses—breath held. It doesn’t see you.

The gaze is elsewhere.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3: V Barratt, *RUPTURE*, Big Anxiety Festival, Esme Timbery CPL, University of NSW, Bidjigal Land, Sydney, 2019

The members of the audience have to come face to face with the body before entering the performance space proper. This uncomfortable proximity to the body against the wall might make laughter bubble up, or annoyance surface. Might make eyes drop and steps quicken to pass. *Why do I have to pass by this body?* Inside, stools are messily arranged, quite close together. The house lights are dim with a reddish tone, there is a softness to the lighting, but also a foreboding. People take their seats.

The audience members chat with each other in quiet voices. There is a long landscape-oriented screen along the wall they face. To the left side of this is a tall portrait-oriented screen and a hanging shelf with a device on it, cables looped. This arrangement of screens is roofed by what seems to be a black sky—a lowering cloud or the roof of an underground mine. It is black and textured and has some shimmering edges. It flickers irregularly, with lightning or the flash of a headlamp, perhaps. Above the heads of the audience a body moves slowly in mid-air—falling upwards/flying downwards through undifferentiated space, limbs slow-flailing, never landing, never disappearing. There is some grace in this flight, and also some horror.



Figure 4: V Barratt, *RUPTURE*, video still, 2018–2019

The dim house lights fall, leaving some shards of red light, as if shining through bars, the flickering lightning, and some twinkles.

The body from the hallway weaves its way through the audience, slowly, haltingly, stopping and starting erratically, as if pushed from behind or struggling to move through something thick. The audience is bathed in the eerie sound of choughs calling, high-pitched whistles, winds and atmospheric noise. They can hear the breath of the body if it pauses beside them.

The body takes its place on the stage, in the dark.

A voice enters.

*Now I remember*

*Now I remember*

*Standing outside at Blair Athol Station, west of nowhere, in the noumenal night with my head flung back to fix my eye on a star, keeping both the horizon and the star in my field of vision, watching the earth turn. Standing there on the earth—that seemed to me flat, and like a plate about to break so precarious was its spin—I disappeared into the eye of*

*the infinity storm, “a mid-point between nothing and everything... suspended between the  
two gulfs of the infinite and the void”*

*I am maybe twelve years old, shivering, feeling vertiginous, sensing the shadows just  
beyond the curtain of dark.*

*Why was I out in the dark alone?*

*Maybe I was walking back with my dad from the genny and I dawdled, or maybe dark fell  
when I wasn't watching, dreaming in the gidyee.*

*[Upward cadence, an intensity in the voice]*

*I felt alone in all the world, family beyond reach, flying up, out, into the void without a  
name. I was pure sensation, a flood of icy terror, a head coming off, a planet falling  
through space, on fire. Every which way, there were lines passing through me. Inside out  
I turned. As above, so below. As the cosmos, so the interior universe.*

*I am becoming the everything, vibrating in neverending expansion and collapse. I am the  
star and the star is me. I am a million million points of light above and below. I hold the  
cosmos in my terrified heart, and it explodes all over my body. How many nerve endings  
do I have? How many stars are in the cosmos? There is nothing between me and the  
milky way, no—beyond that! Oh, but what is beyond the stars? I am fallingflying up into  
the nowhere, the elsewhere, and it is blowing my mind.*

Suddenly, as if a door is opened a crack, the body is illuminated in a sharp slice of bright  
light. Arms lift and hover. Chest inflates, back arches, head drops back. The gaze is  
elsewhere.

A body of light arrives on the tall landscape-oriented screen alongside the performing  
body. I'll call this the !ictic! body. The hands flick, as if flicking off water, or an excess of  
energy. The body in mid-air continues its neverending fall/flight, undulating through  
emptiness. Bodies everywhere respond to their conditions.



Figure 5: V Barratt, *RUPTURE*, Big Anxiety Festival, Esme Timbery CPL, University of NSW, Bidjigal Land, Sydney, 2019

On the long landscape-oriented screen three images flow together and apart, in and out of synch with each other and with the !ictic! body. Lines of light crisscross, fat rain falls slowly, booming as it hits the earth. Repetitive cyclic heartbeat raindrops. Storms double, multiply. Rain gives way to burned forest, smoke winding around the tree trunks like shrouds. The Australian landscape in its gothic death beauty. Next to this, a doubled ghost of the same forest, a shimmer forest. Every now and again they glitch out of time, and the !ictic! body registers this glitch, disappearing for a nanosecond, flickering. The crackle of burning leaves clicks percussively, we are all deep-listening to the forest floor, the infrasonic vibration of smoke moving through air, the earth minutely heaving. The body/earth moves together.

The performing body speaks:

[Arm raised, palm open, head turned to face the hand. This is the drishti, the compelling single-pointed focus. As if a gaze could light a fire. The fire rages on.]

*Panic captures the attention, peripherally, a spark, and spreads from this bright point, feeding on certainty, stripping away all the edges, until there is no body. Organs shut down, becoming a body without. Lungs are dense like wet cement and it's heavy to breathe, throat tightens, breath is like gravel, shoulders solidify, all edges harden, jaw closes over speech, locked. Head falls back. Eyes flicker, persistence of vision fails.*

*There are jump cuts. You struggle to maintain bodily integrity; you flip and flip again. You can taste the electricity in the tips of your fingers. The world hums and shudders. Retina processes light differently—hues take on sinister meaning. Sound is intolerable. Meaning drains out of all things, like dye running from cloth. You are beside yourself. You operate this vibrating puppet of a body from a distance, this shadow, this shimmer body.*

*[Tightness in the fist and the throat, pacing accelerates, stutters, shudders]*

*You wished this upon yourself. All this contemplation of the world-as-it-is or the world as it seems, the structures we co-create—"I am a building, I am a system, I am labour, I am value, I am space and time becoming, I am already exhaling for the last time, no more space taken up, I am an empty bed. I am no longer "I"—suddenly you don't know the world at all. You call your friend, they struggle to help, there is no way to help. You leap as if to run, but there is nowhere to run, because the world is all one thing, and it is ultimately unknowable, and you are sitting in the undifferentiated expanse curled up, crying, crying for a body to return. You no longer know whether you are dead or alive, or you are simultaneously dead and alive, living every moment at once. You knew this time would come, was already here, was with you always.*

The performing body shifts and takes up a position by the floating shelf. Many voices rise up, fill and lift—anxious and amplifying—from the one mouth. It's hard to listen to, and perhaps one might want to leave at this point or close the eyes and cover the ears, as the aural and visual feedback intensifies. There is pain in the chorus, the kind of pain that travels. The kind of pain that wraps itself around you, and nestles, burrows, an earworm, a little thorn in the heart, a hand squeezing the lungs. But there is also a rhythm pumping, a beat below, suddenly music is felt beneath the pain of the piercing, circling feedback loop, feet tap and heads bob in recognition of the rhythm, as if accepting this moment and knowing it will pass.

Climate data fills the screen: speculation, prediction, mined data describing systems exceeding capacity

Floods happen when the capacity of rivers is not enough to carry the water that has entered the river network and the banks overflow.

The body's data collides with the geodata, flooding and quaking.

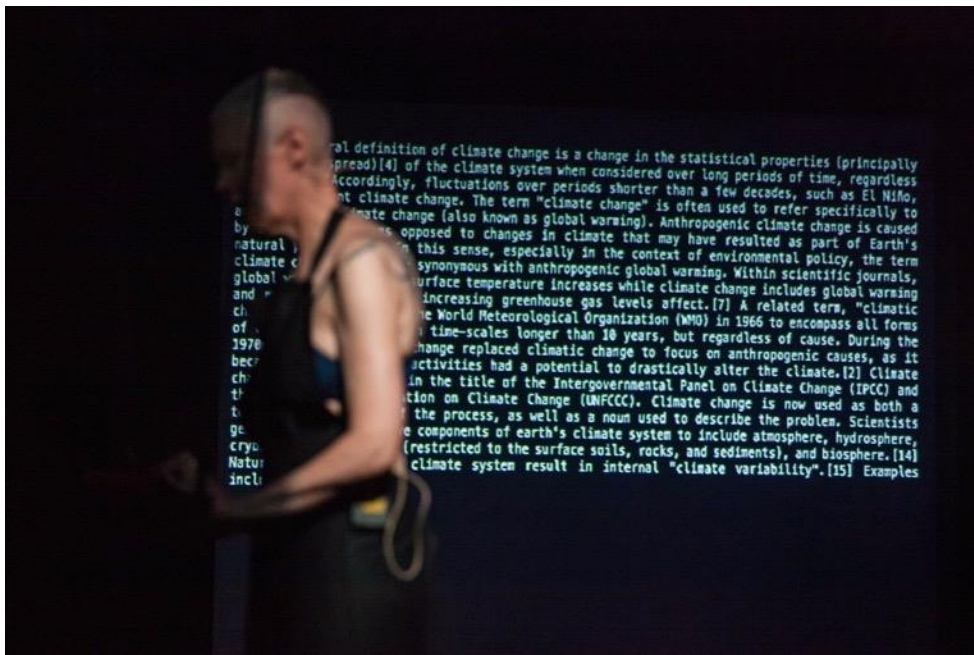


Figure 6: V Barratt, *RUPTURE*, Big Anxiety Festival, Esme Timbery CPL, University of NSW, Bidjigal Land, Sydney, 2019

A catalogue of traumas fills all the screens, line by line by line—geotrauma, affective, embodied and psychic traumas—a whiteout of traumas ablating everything until there is no thing, just infinity, all bodies subsumed into all other bodies, mouths inside mouths inside mouths. Recursive swallowing. There is a whooshing as the lines gouge the screen images into whiteness. Then time moves backwards, and the whiteness is erased, line by line by line into darkness. A doubled infinity. Where are we inside this infinity?

The !ctic! body still flies its arms, multiplies, births the shimmer body, taps the atrophied thymus to awaken the ghastly meat, shakes the skull to dislodge a deafening buzzing, flings limbs, becomes wave, fire, chanting crowd. The !ctic! body unleashes a flood of affect.

*shortness of breath feeling faint an elevated heartrate awareness of a pounding heart  
trembling choking sensations sweating nausea gastric discomfort numbness tingling  
sensations derealisation hot flushes the chills chest tightness chest pain an intense fear  
of going insane/imminent death blinding/flickering shaking sweating red/white vision short  
of breath choking nauseous chest pain.*

Numbers fly out:

1900–09 na 429 1910–19 –0.33 442 1920–29 –0.40 425 1930–39 –0.28 416 1940–49 –  
0.41 430 1950–59 –0.27 458 1960–69 –0.22 422 1970–79 –0.12 517 1980–89 0.23 459  
1990–99 0.39 476 000–09 0.49 486 1990 0.50 414 1991 0.68 463 1992 0.15 453 1993  
0.30 484 1994 0.25 336 1995 0.18 517 1996 0.60 459 1997 0.23 508 1998 0.84 548 1999  
0.21 576 2000 –0.21 696 2001 –0.10 547 2002 0.63 329 2003 0.62 470 2004 0.45 495  
2005 1.06 395 2006 0.47 486 2007 0.71 507 2008 0.41 478 2009 0.90 453 2010 0.19 703  
2011 –0.14 p705.

The body is turned inside out, makes a poem of the process of folding into and out of the world.

The performing body opens its mouth wide and lets wordnoises out. The voices are doubled, double-doubled. What kind of body can make such sounds? Not one that falls easily into language—rather, one that falls easily out of language. The body jerks with each noisy expulsion.

With the ringing of the chorus still in the air, and in the ears, a wave crashes over everyone, the hand flies out, as if in slow motion then a wind blows in, bringing with it ash and snow, glinting in the absolute darkness. It's deeply quiet. It's easy to fall into the tunnel. Always the tunnels, the wormholes, the passage from nowhere to nowhere. The alarm rings, there's a catch in the throat, a swallowed cry. It feels like the end.

The performing body returns to its shard of bright light. Speaks. The gaze is elsewhere.

*Suddenly the proposition of “I” seems implausible, or just, unthinkable. Unsayable. We have reached the point where “it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves...We have been aided, inspired, multiplied.”<sup>24</sup> And yet, for those of us plagued by unrelenting panic, it feels necessary to drive this machine towards unity, if there is to be any semblance of control, any capacity to function in the empirical world, the quotidian, knowable world.*

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<sup>24</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3.



*This drive to unify is ambivalent, and feels also like a betrayal, since there is a gift in the dissolution, that is clear. The gift that keeps on giving but is hard to take because the reach is far and frightening. The gift is one of expansion and extension, of seeing farther than you could see before. It is a painful seeing, beyond the visual. It feels like the end of all things, and indeed is the end of all things as we know them.*

*The gift is one of seeing as a river sees, or as the sky sees, or as a star, or the forest floor. Of seeing as “all eye” like the brittlestar, or with no eyes, like mud. This seeing expands and collapses, is breathtakingly vast or close, claustrophobic, inescapable. You see yourself ragged, fallingflying, fucked and fallible, rotting and machinic. You see, suddenly, all the machines at once, and the infinite regression/proliferation of connection that is the realm of machines and assemblages. You see all these things simultaneously.*

*Synthesis is not possible. Seeing becomes structural, in its capacity to read the generative formations that underlie appearance. You see things “as they are” rather than “as they seem”. This seeing beyond the ocular is a direct knowing.*

*Everything comes from nothing and disappears into nothing.*

Perspective is Baroque and the vanishing point is everywhere and nowhere.

On the screen a mine cage falls into the earth, deep down, 400 metres, heart flies into mouth. A cloud monster rises, the thunderhead of all thunderheads. A great billow with a mushroom bloom.

The performing body falls to its knees before this greatness.



Figure 7: V Barratt, *RUPTURE*, Big Anxiety Festival, Esme Timbery CPL, University of NSW, Bidjigal Land, Sydney, 2019

[Body holding itself in rictus !ictus!, a slow descent into quiet, only breath, even, pushing out the last syllables]

*So this is how I am in the long night of the night waiting to die already with the lungs of paper, folding folding with the breath becoming spores and spores becoming stars and all the blood that I spilled the waste of decades and the tears are salt lakes in the middle of the desert and they crunch underfoot and long-stemmed birds eat shrimp and shimmer in the toxic sun and out here out here where the brightest light shone and mirrored multiply in the eyes of those who didn't know to not watch and whose bones ended up in a laboratory and were burned for ash and the bodies buried without the small pieces of bone that could never rest never rest and some had spines missing and some hearts and couldn't rest couldn't rest and babies made strange and there can be no reparation and my whiteness burns me like that atomic shiny shiny how I am how am I I am coming to terms I am on my own terms I am terminal I am a body thinking with itself and learning its trouble I listen to a particular articulation and let my cells know it I am a body dying for sleep and sleeping to die if I could I would and I can I am a part of every thought everyone has ever had and that makes me nothing. Word without end.*

Word. End.