

# REGISTRATIONS OF PLACE

If today's hyper-accelerated world functions in an impossible temporality, its spatiality is similarly compromised, increasingly dispersed over the dematerialised territories of cyberspace. As Jenny Odell has remarked: 'What is missing from that surreal and terrifying torrent of information and virtuality is any regard, any place, for the human animal, situated as she is in time and in a physical environment with other human and non-human entities'.<sup>28</sup> Capitalism's corrosive influence on our relationship to the earth and to other living things is of course not new, having been prophesied by Karl Marx a century and a half ago as labour was organised away from agrarian models, with their reliance on seasonal and diurnal cycles of time, towards the round-the-clock temporality of the modern factory. However, formal scientific recognition of the colossal and irrevocable impact that human life has had on the earth since the Industrial Revolution has only recently arrived with the coinage of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, by Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen in 2000.<sup>29</sup>

Responding to this unfolding environmental crisis, many contemporary artists are today re-orienting their practices away from an anthropocentric perspective to a more ecocritical refiguring of our relationship to our environment. Taking their cue from philosopher Rosi Braidotti's notion of the post-human, which posits the human and non-human as a continuum and argues for a 'posthuman ethics of collaborative construction of alternative ways of being-in-this-together', they are exploring our precarious and embodied entanglements with other species.<sup>30</sup> In works which make visible what Professor Timothy Morton calls the 'sprawling mesh of interconnection', they find value in the intimate interdependence and ontological equivalence of all human and non-human beings.<sup>31</sup> Dissolving traditional distinctions between nature and culture, this fluidity of relations becomes the starting point for how we might imagine, and then enact, sustainable futures.

## Situated slowness

A profound belief in the interconnectedness of the earth's ecologies filters through the perspectives of a number of the artists in the Biennial, a foil to the sense of disorientation and perpetual disequilibrium that is increasingly a function of the contemporary human condition today. As a working farm and vineyard within a rural setting, the TarraWarra Estate (within which the Museum is located) provides fertile ground for these artists looking to understand and restore the rich heterogeneity

of the world through creating situated instances of individual and collective slowness. Several highly site-specific new works explore time as it is lived within TarraWarra and its surrounds, excavating the singular history, geology and culture of this place in ways which take account of its past uses, present traces and future incarnations. These works place trust in the direct, sensorial reality of TarraWarra, finding in its cyclical rhythms and ecological interconnectedness an alternative template for relations of synergy, intimacy and harmonious co-existence over ones of expenditure, extraction and atomisation. In the resonances of the natural environment, and in the praxis of its care, they identify touchstones by which we can orient ourselves and navigate the multiple dimensions that currently claim us.

Yasmin Smith is one of several artists in *Slow Moving Waters* whose works, having emerged from local collaborations and residencies undertaken on-site at TarraWarra, uncover the hidden narratives of the land. Taking its shape, colour and texture directly from the vineyard of the TarraWarra Estate, her installation *Terroir*, 2020, intimately connects a forensic approach to form and material with an archaeology of place. Gnarled forms of ceramic grapevines climb the gallery wall, their gradient in tune with the raked vines visible outside in the landscape. Enlisting TarraWarra's viticulturists' knowledge of the local hydrology, geology and soil composition, Smith cast grapevine prunings in clay before firing them with a glaze developed from the ashes of their burnt remains. Ribbons of bark formed longitudinal impressions in the direction of the plant's growth during the casting process, subsequently allowing the glaze to pool in the bark's fissures and run off its ridges. Removed from the vine, these cast specimens assume the appearance of old bones, animal skeletons or detached limbs. The glaze's mushroom-brown patina and satin texture is decided by the particular balance of macro- and micro-nutrients which have travelled into the vines via natural means and through human intervention. The unique properties of this site-derived glaze find parallels in the viticultural concept of *terroir*, a French term used to describe how the character, colour, texture and flavour of different wines is determined by environmental factors (soil composition, bedrock, climate), and by human activities (agricultural management), which exert a dual influence over the specificity of the yield.

The outcome of another residency, Caitlin Franzmann's experiential sound work *to the curve of you (TarraWarra)*, 2021, shares Smith's interest in the enmeshed ecologies of TarraWarra and in collaborations

that connect local people to each other and to the land they inhabit. Interestingly, both Smith and Franzmann are among a growing number of artists choosing to live primarily outside metropolitan areas, often pursuing itinerant modes of working which foreground a proximity and responsiveness to site. Against the global economy's insistence on mass exchange and circulation, their integrated approach to work/life signifies a restored preoccupation with the intimacies of the local, while at the same time refraining from the susceptibility of slow thinking to retreat into a mode of pastoral romanticisation. Rather, by focusing on the abundant multiplicity and ecological interconnection of their immediate environment, these artists attempt to remedy the widespread degradation of local events and exchanges that is taking place today.

Working with collaborators across disciplines and with the particularities of site, Caitlin Franzmann's participatory works develop around slow practices, conversation, critical listening, and collective forms of care. Bringing together material and immaterial forms, *to the curve of you (TarraWarra)* proceeds from a sculptural installation of foraged, fermented and preserved foods in the gallery space to take in the surrounding grounds of TarraWarra. Within the gallery, reformed laboratory glassware houses live cultures such as kombucha and plant matter foraged from the local area, a sensory prompt for an intimate audio experience that is accessed via a QR code on the work's wall label. As a voice guides visitors out of the gallery and walks them around the Estate, objective accounts of the ancient practices of cultivation and fermentation give way to more discursive reflections on cellular ecologies, borders, plant consciousness, and the intricate microbial relations between humans and their environment. Traversing biology, agriculture, history, mythology, philosophy and Indigenous cultural knowledge specific to TarraWarra, Franzmann's guided walk encourages the slow practices of dwelling in, and aligning with, place: walking, observing, conversing, listening, growing, foraging, tasting, feeling and fermenting. Weaving connections between the microbiomes of soil, plants and humans—networks that can be physically sensed through sight, smell, taste and vibration—Franzmann opens up a space that is dynamic, fluid and, for the most part, invisible. *to the curve of you (TarraWarra)* unearths the microscopic cultures of TarraWarra, drawing on the simple activity of a guided walk to extend attention to the cellular level, to those essential cycles of decay and transformation that sustain all life.

## Walking the River

Franzmann's guided walk participates in an established tradition of walking as a means of reflection from the French poet Charles Baudelaire's flâneur to the peripatetic conceptualism of the British artist Richard Long. It is a practice that has long been inscribed in a certain spatial politics, frequently framed as a strategy for heightening observation and 'slowing down' the world. For the writer Tony Birch, whose river poems are threaded throughout this catalogue (a line from one provides the title to this essay), walking affords a meditative stimulus to writing and a connection to place. Often deployed as a 'preamble' to writing, it assists him in recovering stories of place, and in recentering absent and forgotten narratives.<sup>32</sup> Belgian-born artist Francis Alÿs shares Birch's regard for the political implications of this private navigation of public space, believing that 'walking, in particular drifting, or strolling, is already—within the speed culture of our time—a kind of resistance ... a very immediate method for unfolding stories'.<sup>33</sup> In its conscious, grounded mapping of time and space, walking is a way of exposing ourselves to the world, making sense of its everyday rhythms and assigning meaning to our experience.

Walking is also a central trope of Jacobus Capone's practice, interwoven with intimate gestures and acts of endurance in performances within nature that the artist refers to as 'uncertain pilgrimages'. *Sincerity and Symbiosis*, 2019, is the second act of an ongoing project entitled 'Forewarning', which takes shape around expressions of ecological grief, manifesting as a series of reconciliations and farewells within environments imperilled by human behaviour. The three-channel video documents a six-week-long durational performance that Capone undertook in an undisclosed plantation forest in Shiga prefecture in Japan in 2019. Each day, the artist performed a solitary, highly ritualised choreography of walks through which he sought, over time, to honour every tree in the forest. The repetitive failure of Capone's outstretched hand to make physical contact with the tree implies the fraught symbiosis between humanity and nature, a relationship increasingly marred by entanglement and rift. The pathos of this engagement is amplified by the realisation that the forest has been compromised by deforestation. Barefoot in mid-winter, the artist tentatively navigates this environment of devastation, repeatedly traversing a symbolic threshold between the sacred and the profane. As he does so, the landscape leaves scratches and bruises on his body, unseen marks exacerbated with each daily ritual.

While the communion that Capone seeks with his surroundings in *Sincerity and Symbiosis* is withheld, his humble ministrations of care sound a redemptive note, suggesting a heightened alertness to the precarity of the natural world and our implication in its survival.

### Environmental Fragility and an Aesthetics of Care

In his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), Rob Nixon uses the concept of 'slow violence' to give visibility and urgency to the gradual devastation wrought by climate change and related environmental crises, whose dispersal across time and space makes them difficult to apprehend at human-scale.<sup>34</sup> Crary attributes this impending environmental catastrophe directly to our age of acceleration, perceiving the latter as inseparable from the former 'in its declaration of permanent expenditure, of endless wastefulness for its sustenance, in its terminal disruption of the cycles and seasons on which ecological integrity depends'.<sup>35</sup> Responding to this clarion call, artistic practices like those of Caitlin Franzmann and Jacobus Capone enact a sort of cultural rewilding—at times actual, at times symbolic—as a way of slowly regenerating exhausted ecosystems and their delicate interdependencies. Such expressions of 'ecosympathy' are symptomatic of a growing interest among politically and environmentally engaged artists in an aesthetics of care.

An aesthetics of care assuages trauma as it is held in the body and the environment through forms of affective solidarity and collective healing, standing as a potent counter-practice to the exclusions and disregard of a *careless* society. The time of care is necessarily slow, not the expedient time of the self-serving, but the deliberate time of the selfless, slackened by the affective labour of listening, empathising and nourishing, and permeated with an elevated receptivity to the intensities of the moment. Reclaiming the idea of 'care' from the wellness industry (which has, in recent years, pressed it into the service of selling bath oil) and foregrounding its key virtues of compassion, patience and respect, practitioners of an aesthetics of care revive the notion of care in the activist sense—social, political and economic, as a fundamental human right. As the American activist Audre Lorde writes in *A Burst of Light and Other Essays*: 'Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare'.<sup>36</sup>

### Caretaking for Country

As an embodied practice, an aesthetics of care finds one of its more powerful and spiritual expressions in the Indigenous concept of caretaking for Country which, deriving from a deep-seated sense of custodianship, is so integral to First Nations epistemologies. For the Wiradjuri people of central NSW—to whom the Biennial artists Jonathan Jones and Nicole Foreshew belong—it is intimately bound up in the idea of yindyamarra. An entreaty to go slowly, mindfully and respectfully, yindyamarra has been described as 'a field of mutual respect that is the Wiradjuri way of life'.<sup>37</sup> At a time of accelerating planetary change, the practice of caretaking for Country—of which yindyamarra is a profound expression—is also a grounding force for many First Nations people: a way of connecting to the land, its histories and stories.

The depth of an Indigenous connection to Country is explored in three finely detailed charcoal drawings by Brian Martin that portray sites of personal significance and cultural knowledge on Wurundjeri land not far from TarraWarra. A member of the Bundjalung, Muruwari and Kamilaroi peoples, Martin sketches the works from analogue photographs he has taken of the physical environment, drawing smaller abstractions on approximately A3-sized sheets, before reconstituting the full work at scale in the studio where the composition is further refined. Through this process the picture plane is fragmented and the image subtly dislocated, undermining any reading of the work as a representational landscape drawing in the western tradition and instead expressing an ontology grounded in Indigenous cultural practice. Martin refers to these textured and nuanced charcoal drawings as Methexical Countryscapes—rather than 'represent' the landscape, they seek to reveal Country, indexing the fundamental and sustaining qualities of an Indigenous relationship to territory. (Martin appropriates the Greek term methexis, meaning a collective and ritualistic action or performance that brings something into being). One drawing, oriented on the floor, invites viewers to reflect on these questions of relationality by physically walking on Country, an act which radically refigures our experience of it.

A deep and abiding connection to Country resounds in similar ways through three large bark paintings in the Biennial by Magarrpa artist Nonggirrma Marawili. Marawili paints the natural features of her ancestral home near Blue Mud Bay in East Arnhem land, Northern Territory,

animated dramatically by water, wind and other elemental forces. Having developed a visual language that is characterised by striking innovations within inherited Yolŋu traditions, Marawili is part of a generation of senior women artists who have redefined the accepted conventions of bark painting in recent years. The subjects of these three bark paintings are the imposing rock formations that rise out of the bay at Baratjala, where strong saltwater currents mingle with the freshwater of the inland rivers. Considered variations in the artist's dusky pink palette evoke the undulations of water and its different states of agitation across this intertidal zone. Dominating her energetic compositions, the large rocks situate us firmly within Marawili's Country, their organic geometries wrought by atmospheric and seasonal change. Lashings of sea spray and lightning connect the rocks, rendered through elaborate strings of dots and rhythmical zigzagging lines. As they criss-cross the bark, these streams of parallel lines invoke the lightning snake Mundukul who sanctifies the waters at Baratjala through his command of the weather. But while the spirit world and the natural world are entwined in Yolŋu philosophy, Marawili distances her work from the major ancestral narratives and traditional clan designs, instead conveying the dynamism of this living landscape in a more personal, secular register, one that stands ultimately as a compelling expression of her caretaking for Country.

- 28 Jenny Odell, 'how to do nothing' in *MEDIUM*, URL: [https://medium.com/@the\\_jennitaur/how-to-do-nothing-57e100f59bbb](https://medium.com/@the_jennitaur/how-to-do-nothing-57e100f59bbb), accessed 9 September, 2020.
- 29 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, 'The 'Anthropocene'', *Global Change Newsletter*, no. 41, 2000, p. 17-18.
- 30 Rosi Braidotti, 'Aspirations for a Posthumanist', lecture delivered as part of the 2017 Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Whitney Humanities Centre, Yale University, Thursday 2 March, 2017, URL: [https://rosibraidotti.com/2019/11/21/aspirations-of-a-posthumanist/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=aspirations-of-a-posthumanist](https://rosibraidotti.com/2019/11/21/aspirations-of-a-posthumanist/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=aspirations-of-a-posthumanist), accessed 25 February 2021.
- 31 Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2010, p. 4.
- 32 Max Delany live-stream interview with Tony Birch, ACCA Book Club, 29 July, 2020
- 33 Francis Alÿs, quoted in Russell Ferguson, *Francis Alÿs: Politics of Rehearsal*, (exh. cat.), Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, published by Steidl, 2007, p. 63.
- 34 Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, London: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- 35 Crary, 2014, p. 9.
- 36 Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light and Other Essays*, Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1988, p. 205.
- 37 Abstract from the film *Yindyamarra Yambuwan*, directed by Bernard Sullivan, produced by Uncle Stan Grant Snr AM and Aunty Florence Grant, URL: <https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/en/publications/yindyamarra-yambuwan>, accessed 24 September 2020