

A black and white halftone photograph of a tree trunk, showing the texture of the bark and the branching structure. A circular text overlay is centered on the image, following the curve of the trunk. The text is written in a bold, sans-serif font and is oriented vertically, reading from top to bottom.

and which salt
soil in the
wind returns,
near the
ocean

These works were produced on the sovereign lands of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people of the Kulin Nations. Many more conversations and encounters which prodded the works along took place on Arrernte Country and Dhudhuroa Country, as well as the sovereign nations connecting these places that I passed through or over while in transit. Which is to say, the sovereign Countries spanning this continent underpin all our labours—creative, relational or otherwise. The false division of labour and land is part of the mechanics of settler-colonialism, a mechanics which jiggers an opening through which a logic of violence and expropriation can and does tumble.

It is this same logic which we see bolster the intensification of genocide in Palestine. The abject violence inflicted upon, and the wilful attempt to obliterate, the Palestinian people is not discrete from the struggles against, and resistance to, colonial-capitalism on this continent and across the globe. While the distribution of duress is agonisingly lopsided, to paraphrase Dr. Lilla Watson, our liberation is bound up with one another's. I pay my respects to the Traditional Owners of the Countries we labour and relate on and extend my solidarity to all those fighting for self-determination and justice.

All power to the resisters of colonialism.

Spit In the Wind Near the Ocean and Which Salt Returns?

Just now, out of nowhere, heavy rain pinned me under an awning for its duration and I was stunned by how suddenly the snug environs of the city can be overcome by intense expressions of nature. A week earlier, a high wind hurled a body-length column of grit at me which stung and, like the rain, undid the pretension that the city coddles you from harsh, though minor, encounters with natural forces. Wiping the grit from my eyes it almost felt to be an event the council should be on top of, like roots encroaching too audaciously onto the pavement, pigeons nesting in community kilns, anything that threatens to remind you that the city is elaborately decorated ply. Natural disasters don't feel as preternatural as an unusually dense downpour that overflows the gutters or higher than usual winds whipping filth into your retina. It's difficult to explain why. Slighter rips in the metropolitan flow delineate more clearly how infrastructure governs our expectations, and with our expectations, so too our behaviour, and with our behaviour, so too our governing of other's behaviour.

The slogan of the rural town where I went to high school was *The Ultimate in Liveability*. Melbourne often swaps places with Vancouver on various lists proclaiming one or the other to be *the most liveable city in the world*. No one I've spoken to has ever been able to put their finger on what makes somewhere liveable, what comprises liveability. My sense is that it has something to do with what keeps smooth the life of the prosaic citizen—awnings to ensure dryness, trains to deliver them to labour or leisure more or less on time, an ever growing range of establishments at which to spend money on alcohol and music and food. Infrastructure, in short, that orders things but also proposes or demands an order as to how one should behave while using it. Liveability points to places where the public is least likely to

have to adapt to failures in infrastructure, places that boast some level of consistency that both disciplines and rewards those who submit most fervently to being disciplined. Two men boarded the train last week with a shaggy dog. The woman next to me said *Oh for christ's sake* under her breath and spent the duration of the ride scowling at the dog and huffing, even though the dog sat very calmly at their owner's feet, bothering no-one, in fact only moving once to scratch behind an ear. Dogs aren't allowed on trains, they rumble the unspoken code of practice for using them—keep them quiet, keep them liveable. The ultimate in liveability really precludes a lot of life, not just the species that can't ride the train or that were displaced so the tracks could be laid, but also the folks that bring unwieldy objects or companions along with them, who play music or yell or assault the senses or body in other ways. Real life is uncomfortable and flea-ridden, loud and prone to bite.

Lauren Berlant says in their last book, “to loosen an object is to make it available to transition.”¹ Bringing your dog on the train is a kind of loosening. And so for some, a promise, and for others, a threat. There are other sorts of aesthetic encounters that loosen things too. I poured 125ml of a 150ml carton of milk down a green motel sink. Being so used to the way water swirls down the drain after nearly three decades of baths, showers, brushed teeth and dishes, I became attuned to the attributes milk displayed as it performed the same task. How it grouped in small white islands on the upright sides of the basin, how it was sluggish as it twirled toward the hole. It had a tempo to that I wasn't used to and all I could think was *this is an odd place for milk to be*.

¹ Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 12.

During a school trip years ago I pretended to be asleep on the bus. At some point we stopped for a long while and the bus grew animated, 35 students wild about something out the window. I refused to open my eyes. Sat with my forehead against the glass thinking poisonous thoughts about my classmates, determining the object of their enthusiasm, whatever it might've been, to be idiotic. Later when I ended my pretend snooze, performatively rubbing my eyes and groggily sitting upright, looking about with an exaggerated *huh, is that the time?* expression, I was told a milk tanker had rolled in front of us and its tank had been punctured. 30,000 gallons of milk had spilt across the road and side-of-highway grass. *Everything was white.* It upset me that I missed such a spectacle by way of my own obstinance. I can see the scene very clearly in my mind's eye though. Perhaps you can too. It is a striking image and I like the version of it I conjure from time to time, wonder if the imaginary scene is more potent than the one I might remember if I'd clapped eyes on the real thing. There's a whole sub-genre of this kind on the internet—food transport trucks that have spilled their cargo on a road or highway: Alfredo sauce, cherry tomatoes, salami. It's like the milk in the motel bathroom sink, something appearing where you think it ought not to and so loosening, slightly, whatever convictions you have about what belongs where and why. My housemate breastfeeds and drops of milk are found all over the house in odd locations—lounge room floor, study desk, dining chair. Mostly they dry in coin size splats on the floorboard and blend into the day to day until someone regards them as too numerous and wipes them away. I had the thought to replicate the droplets in a painting. When I did, the knowledge that the pale liquid I dripped intentionally onto linen was a polymer emulsion thinned with water and not a miraculous living substance teeming with cells and antibodies made the result seem tremendously dead. But the point oftentimes is not painstaking reproduction but locating a gesture that moves something along.

My friend’s supervisor left a comment on his postgrad application suggesting he read Gertrude Stein’s thoughts about repetition. We looked it up together: “I am inclined to believe that there is no such thing as repetition [...] The inevitable seeming repetition in human expression is not repetition but insistence.”² Potential gestures bombard us from without—we see errant breastmilk polka dotting the house and one thing or another makes it available to us such that it may be repurposed to ballast an opinion levied at the pub or to move a painting into another problem-zone or send you to the fetch the mop. Bernadette Mayer has this wonderful list of writing experiments, one of which is *attempt writing in a state of mind that seems least congenial*.³ I used to worry that my creative work was in essence a series of repetitions concealed by a thin veneer of aesthetic difference. So I liked this prompt of Mayer’s as a means of sidestepping this tendency. What Stein proposes put me on another track entirely. One of insisting on something to the point that the presumptions that gird decisions are dissembled. In the massive accumulation of repetitious gestures, even those made in a similar state of mind, something will eventually be produced that reveals what seems congenial to be mostly the affect of a mystifying process of call and response. The question of why something belongs where is momentarily vanquished and in its place a life-process gets archived in an object or routine. This archiving doesn’t make the object it’s contained in particularly interesting, but insistence has no conclusion, is heuristic, and so the object is always open to another question, another droplet of milk, it becomes both an index and something in transition. That is, the floor gets mopped only to be muddied again.

² “Miss Stein States There Is No Such Thing As Repetition,” *Ann Arbor News*, December 15, 1934, https://aadl.org/aa_news_19341215_p1-miss_stein_states

³ https://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Mayer-Bernadette_Experiments.html

In the studio Dora is making tiny apoxie lobelias. Aaron is painting flowers, Cam too. Clare has begun a painting with a stylised floral background. And lo, flowers creep into my work too, in an infusion or transfusion none of us notice until the petals are too numerous to ignore. In this instance, flowers are the salt whipped off the peak of waves surging shoreward and my painting is the spit I launch into the wind which stirs the salt in and drives it back toward me. It is a mingling and a repetition, but a repetition of something external, another person's insistence, as though the studio were joined in a collective, non-verbal interrogation—*where do you belong and why?* I don't think a painting is equivalent to bringing your dog on the train or any of the more radical acts that stymy (or *inconvenience* as Berlant would have it) the reproduction of capital relations, values and violence. In their holier moments though, they can perform a loosening akin to dogs on board, unexpected weather and spilt milk.

The elder of the two children I live with recently asked why and how wombs are different shapes. Unsure on the biology underpinning it, I gave the example of leaves on a tree: they might be more or less the same shape but none are identical, a few are even wildly distinct. As with most answers given to young children asking high-stakes questions, I wasn't sure that it was particularly useful nor was I convinced by my own analogy. It seemed to mollify her though. I wrote a letter to her parents once to accompany sketch books I'd bought the both of them. I realised in answering their daughter's womb question, I'd used the same analogy of tree leaves in the letter but this time to talk about drawing, about how no drawing can be better than any other drawing, just as no leaf can be any better than any other leaf. Perhaps one leaf is uncannily big or speckled with interesting marks or has chunks bitten out of it by an insect altering it into a beautiful

shape. But in all these situations, the characteristic that differentiates them is alluring only due to personal preference, the same bizarre and astounding life-functions grew both the boring and dazzling ones, the ugly and stupefying. I feel this way about drawing. A doodle made while chatting on the phone rocks just as much as Da Vinci's Vitruvian dude. How each is applied in social life is the result of ever shifting zones of discipline. Keston Sutherland said this interesting thing in an interview

It sometimes seems as though a cultural logic [...] is allowed to operate, whereby certain things seem to be proscribed because a consensus emerges that these things have been 'done already' and therefore can't be done anymore; whatever could be put at stake subjectively in them has already been pre-evacuated. [...] My problem with this is that it harmonises frictionlessly with the logic of capital itself. It sounds to me like a classic kind of managerial catch-up strategy, where managers are telling workers that they need to keep up to date with the latest forms of innovative productivity; to increase productivity, we must keep our work practices up to date, make sure there's no backsliding. Ultimately what looks like a cultural imperative boils down to the extraction of relative surplus value. [...] There's a very powerful moment in an essay by Leon Trotsky where he [...] says: I am a Marxist, and being a Marxist doesn't mean destroying the things of value from history and destroying tradition, but trying to give what is valuable in history and

tradition for the first time to people who have never had any of it.⁴

In this instance there is the discipline of tradition and the discipline of the backlash to tradition, which, as Sutherland points out, can end up replicating what is so distasteful about tradition in the first place. What gets missed out and what he intimates with the Trotsky quote, is how one might account not for whether an object is worthwhile or not but to whom it is applied and how, which is to say, how its terms might be loosened. More often than not a loosening is uncomfortable (see the lady huffing at the pooch on the Mernda line) or bewildering (see Alfredo sauce blocking four lanes of traffic). I believe in earnest that painting and poetry have an agency precisely because that agency can't be accounted for. Amidst all the disciplines this text has already mentioned, lets not forget that paintings too have their own inalienable discipline. The materials will always behave within the limits set by their physical properties: acrylic won't bind properly to wax, a slower drying substance will crack if applied atop a faster one. As such, in painting, as in drawing, as in sex, work, love, growth, metabolisation, travel, speech, you have to submit to a logic that will always curtail or order, in nonsensical ways, any volatility you present it with. The world wins out, determines how your inheritance is spent.

I want to engage the world in a state of mind that seems least congenial and I want to be insistent too. Insistent that what makes something agreeable in any one moment is the residue of a process more interesting than any of the opinions it might deposit you at. Links between images, ideas or thoughts can seem inexplicable but the synaptic highways they cruise are engineered

⁴ Natasha Hoare, "Keston Sutherland on Sexuality, Power and Capital," *Extra Extra Magazine* no. 12 (2019): <https://extraextramagazine.com/talk/keston-sutherland-on-sexuality-power-and-capital/>

by tendencies. How one thought becomes another is a procedure pulled into line habitually, or as Paul Killebrew says

[...] the habits of mind
that constrain you
engender a tension
far more interesting
than what you believe
are your best ideas,⁵

I want to insist on deferring to that tension, to employ the gestures it throws up over and over and over until they reach an arrangement that may be beautiful but is mostly perplexing. Perplexing despite, or because of, being composed of what seemed reasonable and cohesive at the time. Sheer mass is one way to loosen reason: two slices of salami or a litre of milk on the road would not raise eyebrows, it's only when their quantity is multiplied that the objects seem at odds. So I stay with each painting, long after I'm welcome, adding and erasing and mingling and scuffing, imitating what I can't help imitating, gesture after gesture, transfusion after transfusion. Because yes, you'll for sure get salt in your eye if you spit into a sea wind, but what returns is what makes any of this at all liveable.

⁵ Paul Killebrew, *Ethical Consciousness* (Iowa City: Canarium Books, 2013).

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The title of the exhibition comes from a poem by Katie Willingham called *Correction: Tonight Is Not the Longest Night in the History of the Earth*.

