

Melanie Upton
It Spoke, I Listened

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The vacant block – fenced, demolished, and strewn with rubble – is first perceived as an empty space. Yet, it is full of (still) life and force. In this vague terrain; the broken brick, the flattened basketball, the torn glove and the shattered rock, convene and commune with the space that they occupy. Left to their own devices, such spaces and objects become something more than the role they were consigned to inhabit. Ejected from the ordinary circuits of consumption, production and habitation, these empty spaces and discarded objects co-opt their own production and/or demolition, in order to become something other than what they were. Their persistent presence reminds us that human interventions are not the only forces at play.

It Spoke I listened investigates the inherent and vibrant power of non-useful things and the sites in which they are found. Shattering, fusing, smothering, compressing – *It Spoke, I Listened* is an examination and re-enactment of these forces that occur in these sites of flux. This mimicry of effects doubles as an investigation of the past, present and future temporalities of these objects and the spaces they inhabit. This is a laboratory of things, where the aeons of geological time intersect with the freneticism of the built environment. Slow evolutions and violent disruptions are here displayed as form. present and future temporalities of these objects and the spaces they inhabit. This is a laboratory of things, where the aeons of geological time intersect with the freneticism of the built environment. Slow evolutions and violent disruptions are here displayed as form.

Ace Wagstaff

It Spoke, I Listened

A rock drifting through space. A pebble sinking slowly, downwards through thick mud. Minerals coming together on a minute level. Asteroids crashing in the intangible black void, violently intersect in a dance that lasts a moment, before leaving in new directions that have been influenced by each other. A mountain concentrates on being still. Tectonic plates, anxiously shiver, another quivers, but with excitement. Grains of sand, grains of sand, grains of sand, an old shell from a long dead mollusk, grains of sand. The calcium carbonate of which the shell is composed is gently caressed by endless waves. Elsewhere: lava stews.

Curiously, the inanimate is actually animate: is anything ever truly stagnant? It is the actions of objects which Melanie Upton has used to inform 'It Spoke, I Listened'. By 'listening' to rocks, stones, and other detritus in its natural habitat, Upton has compiled a list of behaviors, or actions, that are native to these otherwise overlooked and humble, common artifacts. Building and construction sites are environments that have become areas of study for Upton because of their rich and varied examples of material actions at play; some of which occur naturally or by chance, and others being the result of more purposeful forces. Upton defines these actions as: Stack and Support, Pile, Lean, Cover, Curve, Submerge, Patch, Plug, Mark, Suspend and Bung. As instructions, these actions are as physically economical as possible, they're provisional, and together they repurpose their location away from that of a gallery space and toward a laboratory of minimalist construction, or a playground of materiality.

These actions are eternal and ancient, utilized with mechanical intention within architecture and various other pursuits of crafting materials by, humans or animals, but they have also occurred by accident throughout most of the earth's history, they are the latent kinesthetic language of matter: broken branches leaning where they fall, spider webs and reed thickets catching the inconsequential twig or leaf floating on the breeze or water, massive continental geological strata enveloping and smothering one another. Each action is a sonnet to mass and energy, a repetition of the first actions carried out after the big bang as particles came into existence and began speaking, socialising and interacting, the language physical, and the relationships either

complementary, or destructive. We too, our physical selves, are an extension of these dialogues.

A mammal, approximately 40 kilograms, grazes on the tough grasses that surround it. It does not know its own name and for now, it has no name, but later, people will refer to it as an antelope. From a distance, the relatively small mammal is barely visible; it blends in with its environment. The rest of its herd is no longer on the same side of the soft hill and it is alone. At this exact moment during the Pleistocene, the creature is in trouble. Dire wolves stalk slowly forwards. The wind blows which makes the grass look like the surface of running water. In mere seconds the wolves will launch their attack and the antelope will flee. The pursuit will be an explosion of fevered survival for both predator and prey. Gravel will scatter underfoot, the wolves paws will scrape along slabs of stone, and the antelope will swerve and weave in an attempt to lose its pursuers but neither party will be victorious: the antelope will turn too late and slip from the grassed edge of a tar pit, followed closely by a few wolves, which make the same error. With their old feud forgotten, their skeletons keep each other company for thousands of years while the shape of the landscape changes: dust gathers and settles, hills rise and fall, mountains shift their weight. A moment is trapped for millennia.

Upton is not only interested in the actions of these stationary objects, but also with the objects themselves. There is a deep sincerity in Upton's admiration for the materials she is working with and observing, as she goes to great lengths to preserve the integrity of sites that she is studying, ironically so because these sites are tumultuous and by their nature go through great upheaval and transformation making her care to maintain the original authenticity of a site seem somewhat redundant. A 'catch and release' system is implemented in which rocks or stones are only removed from the site in order to be cloned, in the form of a cast, before being returned to their natural habitat, regardless of the imperceptible difference that their absence would make. It is this level of attention that she seeks to replicate the processes in the gallery space: materials performing as themselves, and not merely used in the construction or manufacture of another form.

A construction worker, approximately 6'4", picks up two lengths of wood and calls out to a workmate. The workmate laughs. Soft-rock plays on the building site radio. Various power tools can be heard. Traffic. Somewhere

in England. The accents are varied and give nothing away. His boots sink uniformly in the mud with each step. He walks across the site. A bobcat pushes detritus, offcuts, soil and rubbish into a pile. He approaches a forklift laden with a pallet of bricks. The weight of the bricks pushes down. The forklift denies gravity of its power and its desire that would see the ordered bricks smashing into the ground. The laborer places the two pieces of wood on the ground beneath the load. The hydraulics of the forklift gently lower the load onto the two broad pieces of wood and they are pinned in place by the weight. Again, gravity is denied. Work resumes. After lunch.

The man-made materials at play are hyper-versions of their natural counterparts: bricks surpass stones in their geometric stackability and consistent structural strength; poured foundations surpass bedrock in its flat, level perfection; and mortar surpasses mud in its unwavering stability. Despite these specific advantages that relate to very defined purposes, it is the unplanned physical dialogue between them and their more natural companions which helps both types of materials transcend their intended functionary roles and become an aesthetic poetry of matter: mud and concrete blend, trapping stones and brick fragments as an adhoc aggregate and abstract sculptural form; painted and staked boundaries become areas of focus despite the absence of action or spectacle; visibility markings on the edges of protruding posts become spotlights of attention; and newly laid slabs and mounds of dirt become theatrical stages of invitation, potential and anticipation. Shh! The materials are speaking...

Melanie Upton is an artist working across sculpture, installation and two-dimensional media. Upton's work is heavily invested in the exploration of site, in particular the intersections between the human, the natural and built environments. Upton's work finds inspiration in the urban and natural spaces around us, the process of decay and renewal, evolution, and the inherent power of things.

Melanie Upton graduated with a bachelor of fine art from the VCA in 2006 and has shown in group and solo exhibitions throughout Melbourne and Brisbane. In 2015 Upton undertook research in New York and was also published in Scottish online journal, Unthunk. She is a recipient of local and federal government grants and has been awarded the Dr Rosenthal Award for Sculpture, the National Gallery Women's Association Encouragement Award and the George Tallis Foundation prize.

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