

Abbra Kotlarczyk and
Kate Hill
the scribe notes, slight

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In conversation

AK: I thought I could open the conversation up by speaking to some of these intersections—of language, geographic space and the body—to ask how the gestural mappings on the etching plates came about and how they continue a certain trajectory in your practice that spans various geographies and physical circumstances. I understand these works were created during bush walks around Bogong Village, so through quite active means?

KH: Yes, they're always created through an intentional, active journey, and most recently this has become deliberately attached to a material or place. This series was created over five walks, which followed tracks and rivers leading into and out of the village. Whilst I had a plan to explore the site through walks, the directions and destinations were left to intuition. I was going to say that the plates are always made through walking, but I remember carrying plates to Japan once, across the sea, and leaving them in my room for the entire duration of the visit, and then carrying them back again. Here they seem to be charting a space around stillness or waiting.

AK: I see the plates as a kind of framing device for your journeys (as you mentioned with the earlier ones you carried to Japan that were active on

both sides of the trip, but that sat still during your time there). I've been thinking a lot about this in relation to my own work and this project of note taking; how peripheries inform, but more than that, how they are so often overlooked as extraneous—immaterial even—when in fact they are so important to the existence of the main-frame. When you're working in a given space, for instance this residency at Bogong Village, how important is it to have a material trace or marker that can continue to inform that experience? And do you see these material traces as archival in the sense of them being re-iterated or incorporated into future work?

KH: It's interesting, I've never considered the plate projects as artworks in isolation.. they're always secondary, or a background to the main project going on. In Japan this is so, as they waited while I worked on a completely different project, in Eltham I carried them on a series of walks to different parts of the Yarra River in which I was focusing on water and clay, and in Bogong Village they operated in between a more focused project on collecting and working with earth originally from the hydro-electric dam bed. The background part is what is actually important about them—physically there is a layering of marks that erase and override others, and conceptually they sit behind a main project. There's also the fact that I have no control over the marks or narration being created—mostly it's left up to chance—which is a nice contrast to perhaps more intentional work in the foreground. Perhaps because of this positioning I've rarely analysed them and I have never had a plan to show them until now. I'm not sure that really answers your question! But, yes, they are certainly part of an archive that I can see in my practice now. Again there are parallels here in the way that the plates materially archive an experience, and how the plates as objects, along with the rocks I've removed from hand dug clay (I have a box in my studio I continually add to) and a growing pile of chips from broken vessels, are all forming part of a larger ongoing archive. They become more important as time goes on, both as a material marker, as you say, to a particular project, but also as something that reinforces choices happening now.

I remember seeing that you keep your pencil shavings in a tub on your desk in the studio—so you also engage in a kind of material archiving. Do you do this intentionally, with the idea of incorporating in a work one day, or is it a kind of intuitive practice? And how does this kind of interaction with materials sit with your interest in storing and working with digital data?

AK: I think the fact of these trace objects forming and remaining in the background to a main project—and you not considering them work as such—is along the lines of this (mild?) obsession I'm having with the central peripheral. They exist as sub-texts to the primary project, but they also can't be separated out from the 'work'. These gestures (you travelling to and from Japan and the walks in Bogong) are always already happening in order for the work to be made. I'm really interested in what we're saying when we give material voice to these backgrounds.

I tend to hold on to certain material outtakes or offcuts when I'm making work, for example the graphite shavings that you mention that I keep in a little bamboo vessel in the studio. It's common practice for artists to hold onto this waste material—I know that lots of painters make sculptures and new paintings out of used masking tape, and works like Georgina Criddle's studio floor sawdust ball she had at West Space come to mind. I think of this material as refuse—the word itself has a double meaning of refusal on the one hand and discarded matter or rubbish on the other. There's a paradox in this for me, because works of art can't exist when the conditions of their making are refused, even if they're not visible or present, or even appreciated. I've used a portion of these graphite shavings to render the digital prints, which has given the works a certain haptic quality where scratches and rubbing marks are visible. The digital paper is not at all forgiving so once that mark is committed there's no turning back. The graphite rubbings becomes another ground on which to inscribe layers of marginalia, through the use of an electric eraser, which has in turn brought the works back to the territory of the hand. But in any case, the ritual of collecting them each time I sharpen a pencil to make work is holding up this space I want to create for the support or refuse(d) material. It has larger connotations for me, such as making space in my awareness for people whose voices and experiences are literally refused.

In a similar way, the content for these new visual poems is about holding up that space, except that I've set out to create the material in a disciplined manner rather than using existing words. There's an intimacy for me with digital data—whether it's writing or image making—because it's often performed in a very private context, and there's also endless possibilities for reworking this stored matter. I think of digital works as being slippery, and kind of dissident in their democratic potential. In terms of a material practice, digital data is interesting because it can output in so many different directions. With this new work, I'm using digital practices to honour a really old world tradition of hand-written





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note taking in the margins of manuscripts. Digital data and its material traces have both replaced and kind of erased this tradition, which was considered a really important social and even public practice in previous eras.

Could you speak about your time in Bogong Village and the specific environmental/industrial history that that location has. What are your thoughts on the position of the residency in relation to its foregrounding narrative, that of the hydro-electric dam?

KH: Yes—that residency was incredibly potent for me, as it was the first time that I was able to inhabit a site that was built on one of the interests of my practice—mining and processing materials. This was both challenging and rewarding, as I was constantly faced with the tangible reality of such a practice, and the associated social and environmental effects. This is something that surfaces continuously for me, interacting directly with materials from their source.

The residency program, Bogong Centre for Sound Culture (BCSC), operates out of a former primary school in Bogong Village, Victoria, in part of Australia's Alpine National Park. This area has a history of mining, which has seen Australia's first hydro-electric scheme. This controversial power generating system consists of a network of dams that regulate the flow of water from rivers feeding out of the nearby mountains. Bogong Village was built around 1940 to support the construction of the initial site of this system, Lake Guy, and was literally terraced from the earth dug out of this dam. The interesting thing is that the village was never meant to be permanent, but rather a temporary site for housing workers and family during the period of construction. The cabins and infrastructure remain; though are visibly disintegrating through weathering and the increasing occurrence of landslides. Walking around the village I got a sense that everything was slowly sliding back into the large basin from which it came. Throughout these two weeks I was reminded of Lucy Lippard's writing in *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, and Art in the Changing West*. From her examination of material use to the discussion of rural/urban dichotomies, Lippard notes that:

The gravel pit, like other mining holes, is the reverse image of the cityscape it creates - extraction in aid of erection...Gravel mines are metaphorically cities turned upside down, though urban culture is unaware of the origins and birthplaces.¹

On one hand, the earth from the dam is visible in the make up of the local village ('the reverse image'), but the less tangible material—electricity—travels to locations far off and unseen. I remember feeling distanced from my friends back in Melbourne whilst there but eerily connected as I heard rumours of a heat wave sweeping through, and watched the dam empty in preparation for the increase in air conditioning.

This invisibility of the origins of materials and industrial processes is something I'm really interested in, and I think it ties to your thinking around the notion of refuse.

AK: There's a sense in which refuse material occupies certain spatial and psychological territories, which we naturally separate according to perceived use value—for instance, when we consider materials and processes according to their proximity to a centre position or main-frame (such as your observation about the water levels in the dam, as an out of mind reality for people in urban contexts who are relying on this vital resource). But there's also another sense of refuse that I think is akin to the kinds of productive invisibility you're also speaking about, which has been central to my thinking for this body of work.

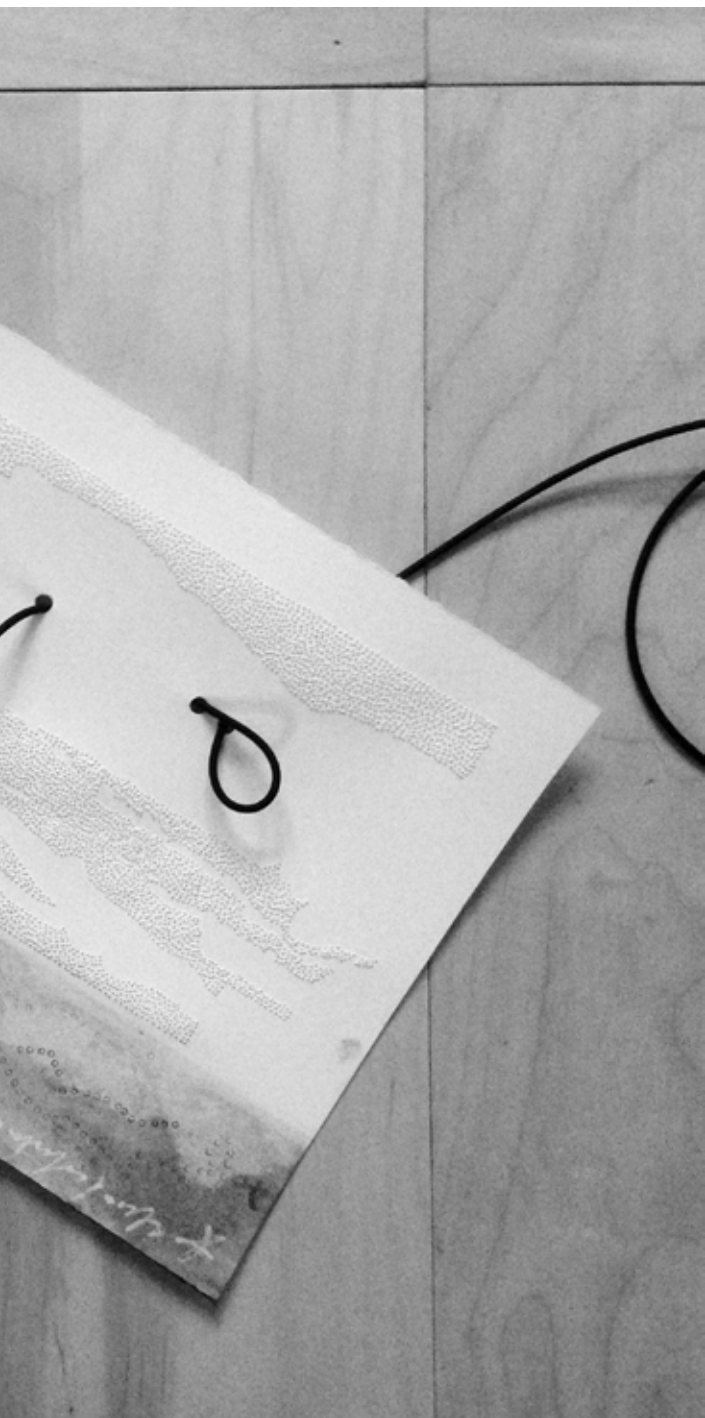
In a chapter from their book *Seepage*, Raqs Media Collective speak of marginalia not so much in terms of location—"as in something peripheral to an assumed center"²—but rather in terms of levels of attentiveness:

A figure may be located at the very core of the reality that we are talking about, and still be marginal, because it does not cross a certain low visibility, low-attention threshold, or because it is seen as being residual to the primary processes of reality.³

In this way, I think of the current situation with the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees: the people at the centre of the conversation are the ones who are actively marginalised from it, both geographically and otherwise kept at the peripheries, behind fences and on remote islands. Raqs also speak of labouring bodies that are central to the means of production and consumption that we are all implicit in—one example being the call centre worker who is at the heart of the global economy, but who is barely visible as an agent within it.

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This kind of invisibility seems to me to be distinguishable from the invisibility of say, disappearance (I'm now sitting in the domestic departure lounge having just come from the Embassy of Disappearance as part of the Sydney Biennale, where I've been pondering these distinctions). When something disappears it often presents as *more* visible—through attempts at documentation and conservation—whereas when we speak of marginal, we're speaking about a prioritising of certain ways of seeing, or not as it may be.

So this new work is really an attempt to recalibrate the margins—of the page, of the body, and of what an intimate response to public life might look like. I'm interested in reappraising these agents of refusal that are so omnipresent. So I've set out to present a poetics of dominant discourse, where I've used poetry as a means of absorbing and then outputting fragments of information passing around me. I see poetry as a kind of digestive tract, able to absorb and metabolise a whole range of material that becomes subjective and abstracted in the process. There are all these levels of morphology between the page and the body that go beyond the spatial coordinates of: the spine, head(er), foot(note) and body (passage), but which help me to place these different considerations of marginalia within the topos of the body politic. Astrid Lorange is someone who has been central to my thinking around poetry and the political body, particularly the correlations she makes between languaged bodies and rituals of eating and ingestion. The refuses of the body are scatological, but they are also moral, ethical and often largely invisible. I think about this in relation to writing and the work of ideas, as opposed to physical work. We're still struggling in a culture that quantifies physical labour above intellectual labour.

In thinking about the body, I wonder, could you talk a little about how you see the role of bodily expenditure in relation to the processes you engage in your work—digging, sourcing, refining.

KH: Yes, maybe. I guess it comes out of an interest in experiential learning, or practice led research. I'm interested in understanding a material or process through direct engagement and making a connection with actions and the responsibilities that are associated. These responsibilities feed into and further inform my political and ethical beliefs. I also like to do things slowly. It's more than ok that they take a lot of time. I can't see any other way for this to occur rather than through a physical interaction, and though yes, there is and has been more weight on these

kind of forms in our culture, there is also the questions around socio economics in regards to this terrain, which goes back to your discussion of margins, and voices or people intentionally excluded or included.

Would you say that your practice, across the realms of material works such as painting and drawings, and theoretical works such as academic writing, sit within these two worlds too? Do they inform each other?

AK: Yes absolutely. Academia for me is so far a borrowed term. It's a space I'm working into, as opposed to one that shows where I've come from (art making on the other hand has been with me since I was a child). That said, writing and conceptual problem solving is as intuitive if not moreso than my material art practice. I see the two forms as increasingly co-dependent, with the physical making proving to be a kind of cohesive mechanism for complex ideas which, presented alone, would tend to be much more one dimensional and cerebral. My desire to work with subjects of language and textuality within a visual arts practice has a lot to do with exploring these tensions around physical and cognitive labour.

While we're thinking of academia in terms of class—and I have a troubled relationship with this fact—art making in material terms tends to bring my concerns into a different spatial reality. In a way, this relationship itself is about layers of visibility and how we 'get in' to reading something from the outside. It's a really important point you make about access regarding various forms of labour and associated value systems. There are so many capacities in which the verb 'marginal' can be considered, that are both positive and negative, as you've touched on with this question of labour and how people are included/excluded accordingly. I've been motivated to explore these productive tensions, making work that can be viewed as both macro and micro, and to kind of confuse the distinctions we make regarding hierarchies of formalism. Within the works there is the potential to access the real and the symbolic (such as the significance of the five scrolls to represent the five appendages of the body and in reference to the five-pointed pentagram of marginalia that Raqs speak of). This way of working, with multiple sub-texts and layers of articulation tends to reflect my thinking around socio-political forms of subjectivity and agency.

1. Lippard, L. R. *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics, And Art In The Changing West*, The New Press, New York. 2014, pp.10-11

2. Raqs Media Collective, 'Notes on Practice: Stubborn Structures and Insistent Seepage in a Networked World' in *Seepage*, Sternberg Press. 2010, p. 106.

3. *ibid.*



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