

A Touching 'Contract'

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On an island surrounded by the Southern Ocean, an arduous ascending trail carves a pathway between a river and a mountain range. This trail, which I will call the 'Track', is a border zone between urban developments and the wilderness the island is known for. As the human population increases, the Track is becoming more susceptible to damage, becoming gradually wider, with vegetation being pushed back and the dense basalt rock face becoming exposed. The Track follows a creek bed before mounting towards the summit. I stop at a waterhole, unpack my equipment and set up to spend the afternoon drawing. As usual, I have sketchbook, pencils, water, fruit, hat, jumper, jacket and boots but this time I have also carried a large heavyweight roll of imported French paper, 18 metres long and over a metre wide.



I soak the roll of paper in the waterhole, which is deeper than I thought. The boots, socks and tights come off as I enter the freezing water to gently unravel the paper down the creek bed ensuring the water soaks into every fibre of the paper. With difficulty, as my feet, blue with cold, are stabbed by the rocks and branches in the creek bed, I drag the paper up onto a section of the Track. Here, the ground is softer and a canopy of trees provides shelter from the elements. The paper settles along the indentations and curvature of the Track wending its way around a bend and beyond sight. It matches exactly the width of the Track and to save my feet I walk back along the paper. The soaked fibrous surface reveals the contours of what lies beneath, like the membrane of skin over our bodies, the hard, bony skeleton of the earth presses and stretches the surface. This membrane inhales the touch of everything it comes into contact with, retaining traces

of a memory of an encounter across space, time, matter: a 'contract.'

Michel Serres suggests we engage with the Earth through its language of 'forces, bonds, and interactions,' entering us into a natural contract binding 'each one of the partners' in 'symbiosis' to a commitment of 'life to the other under penalty of death.'¹ The 'contract' I engage with on the Track folds the parties into the matter of paper, into a legible form, and into an ethical entanglement. The exchange of matter between things becomes tangible in this expanded form of drawing, exploring what Stacy Alaimo in her theory of 'trans-corporeality' calls 'the interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures.'²

Vicky Kirby in her quest for a radical reconceptualisation of nature asks, 'What do we forfeit if we concede that Nature reads and writes, calculates and copulates with itself in the most perverse, creative, and also destructive ways?' What if it is political through and through, and this very discussion ... is a manifestation of natural intent?³ Extending Kirby's thinking I propose that processes of art can take on this language of the land, becoming an intermediary, paying attention and revisiting sites to renegotiate the shifting terrain that this more-than-human world constantly engages in, never stable, always changing.

¹ Michel Serres and Felicia McCarren. 'The Natural Contract', *Critical Inquiry* 19, no.1 (1992): 1–21.

² Stacy Alaimo. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

³ Vicky Kirby. *Quantum Anthropologies: Life at Large* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 86.

This large roll of paper is a witness to the exchanges that occur on the Track, shifting the prevalence of law's discourse where a contract is considered an 'arms-length' transaction between two parties, to a haptic natureculture continuum where the laws of nature are acknowledged and entwined in humanity's legal theories. In contract theory, a 'fundamental feature of law's self-understanding is that it presumes a close link between law and morality. More specifically, laws are understood, from the inside, as providing morally good or justified reasons to do what the law requires.'⁴ Opening out the ground of a contract to include the haptic exchange that occurs in place, encourages an ethical exchange, entwining nature's laws into concepts of morality and ethical engagement. If law's reach extends into the atmosphere, as Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos contends, then a natural contract could find ways to engage with what the world is telling us.⁵ Immersing the paper on the Track allows for process to engage the world of materials in a zone where flows and counterflows occur, inhabiting paper, a form that can be interpreted and used by all parties concerned.

The Western landscape tradition separates the viewer from the natural environment. W.J.T. Mitchell eloquently states, 'the concept of landscape that dominates the discourse of Western art history is one that is resolutely focused on visual and pictorial representation, the scenic, picturesque, and superficial face presented by natural

⁴ Stephen A. Smith. *Contract Theory* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), 15.

⁵ Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos. *Spatial Justice: Body, Landscape, Atmosphere* (London: Routledge, 2014).

terrain. Landscape is something to be seen, not touched.⁶ As Mitchell expands in his treatise *Landscape and Power*, the development of the representation of the landscape has a dark side that is 'not merely mythic, not merely a feature of the regressive, instinctual drives associated with nonhuman "nature" but a moral, ideological, and political darkness.'⁷ He traces the rise and development of landscape paintings with the rise of capitalism and the drive of imperialism where the violence perpetrated in the land is cleansed with a better 'view'. 'Landscape', Mitchell writes, 'is a medium not only for expressing value but also for expressing meaning, ... most radically between the Human and the nonhuman.'⁸

I spend over a year revisiting the Track each week with the roll of paper. After walking along the paper in my bare feet, I decide to limit the materials and processes used. The sense of touch becomes the dominant mode of engagement. Due to the size of the paper I cannot hold it in my gaze or control the flow of materials. More importantly, though, touch requires a more intimate encounter. Being required to walk, crawl and tip-toe on the horizontal surface shifts my perception from the dominating discourse of landscape art, where the viewer is separated from the land. Working on the horizontal employs peripheral vision in the development of the contract. Peripheral vision assists our sensual body

⁶ William J. T. Mitchell. 'Holy Landscape: Israel, Palestine, and the American Wilderness', *Critical Inquiry*, 26, no.2 (2000): 197.

⁷ William J. T. Mitchell. *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

as it negotiates its way through the landscape. It acts to shift the language from landscape's traditional mode of perspectival representation, which makes 'the eye the centre point of the perceptual world' and 'which not only describes but also conditions perception.'⁹ The horizontal world of process immerses me in another understanding of the land, making stronger connections with the more-than-human world.

As I negotiate the paper on the ground, I learn to read the shifts in tone, the varied marks from insects and plants, rocks and branches. I become woven into the myriad of networks in this Track, touching and being touched by the more-than-human world as I slow down and become aware of my surroundings. Physicist Karen Barad reminds us that 'so much happens in a touch: an infinity of others – other beings, other spaces, other times – are aroused'.¹⁰ I am careful of my tread as I recognise the smaller creatures scuttling across, under and through the paper. The minute scale of their touch gains momentum over time, as matter is taken away and brought into the paper, microbes and worms beginning the composting process that the forest floor loves.

The sense of touch 'arouses' an intimate, more personal knowledge of the world, engaging us, if we only pause long enough, in an ethical engagement as it shifts from landscape's dominating view. Each touch we make has an impact. The 'contract' picks up the traces of each touch.

⁹ Juhani Pallasmaa. *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 16.

¹⁰ Karen Barad. 'On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am.' *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, no.3 (2012): 206.

The paper stretches out, leaving its own touch upon the earth while gaining traces of space and place, the caress of small creatures and the detritus of the bush floor. The way the matter accrues in the paper is from the multiple laws within the atmosphere. The gravitational pull to horizontality, to the lowest point in reach. Liquid's cohesive stickiness forms rivulets in the flow across the surface, gradually transforming back into the atmosphere, leaving residue of matter in patches caused by the hollows in the ground below.

The 'contract' enters and participates in Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh of the world'¹¹ to mediate in the multiple differences on the site. According to Merleau-Ponty the sense of touch involves a reciprocal arrangement. He describes touch as the double sensation: the hand embodies both the agency of touching and the receptivity of being touched.¹² The paper reveals so sensitively that to touch the earth, the earth touches back. Merleau-Ponty models his theory of the two-sidedness of touch on the Möbius strip, where vision and the invisible form together an atmosphere which guarantees their connection.¹³ He contemplates where touch occurs: does the hand sense on its outer surface or from within, from the internal body pressing out? My contract engages in this two-sided, 'Möbius strip' structure of tactile engagement. Constantly rolled and unrolled, my paper has no inside or outside, switching

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 106–107.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Steven Connor. *The Book of Skin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 275.

between roles on different occasions, one time cast into moist shadows, traversed by light-avoiding critters, and at other times being caressed by the breeze sliding down the mountain's edge. The sense of touch is dispersed in this intermediary form; it is multilayered, being internal and external, and everywhere all at once.

The sense of touch is located in the membrane of our skin but is most sensitive on the extremities of our body; it is our borderland where the world is continuously negotiated. From our fingers stretched out in curiosity, to our toes as they negotiate our passage across the earth, touch is the sense that reveals the way that borderlands and peripheries become the heart of negotiation; a negotiation where the inscribed and the inscriber are in a reciprocal relationship. Elizabeth Harvey comments that 'recent biological research has focused increasingly on the membrane as the cell's command center ... the cell membrane functions much as skin does: both are sensory envelopes, boundaries of communication or exchange.'¹⁴ In the 'contract,' the surface of the land, of the paper, of the skin, acts like a cell membrane, allowing communication to occur.

Touch is also a place-based phenomenon. Place is where touch starts, it comes out of place, interacts with place, where else could we place it? For us to understand ourselves as being in existence we need to be 'placed' in the world, our boundaries located in a specific locale, otherwise we would be 'nowhere,' in a void. 'A thing is

¹⁴ Elizabeth D. Harvey. 'The Portal of Touch,' *American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (2011): 388–389.

not merely *in a place*,' Edward Casey explains, 'but *a thing constitutes its (own) place*.'¹⁵ Casey emphasises that 'place serves as the condition of all living things.'¹⁶ In order to be in existence, to engage with matter sensually, we need to be in place.

What then, does place bring to existence? Val Plumwood suggests that by 'Looking at the land in ecological and geological, as well as human-cultural terms, we must surely see it as the product of multiple, mixed agencies. For any given piece of the earth's surface, we can, indeed must, tell a story of landforms created by motions of the earth, by volcanoes, tsunamis, earthquakes, meteorites, geological depositions, and weatherings, for example.'¹⁷ Engaging with the Track, the localised events of the land become embedded in the contract, binding me into mutual obligation as the intricacies of place are revealed.

Paul Carter in *Ground Truthing* argues for the role of places and smaller regions in revealing the complexities of a world in motion. In his investigation of the Mallee region in Australia, Carter searches for 'the creative principles that bring regions into being,' arguing that these smaller places are microcosms of the world, revealing the world in turmoil.¹⁸ As I settle into this small microcosm of the environment, the generative, creative power

¹⁵ Edward Casey. *Getting Back into Place* (Bloomington and Minneapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 16.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁷ Val Plumwood. 'The Concept of a Cultural Landscape: Nature, Culture and Agency in the Land', *Ethics & The Environment* 11, no. 2 (2006): 125.

¹⁸ Paul Carter. *Ground Truthing: Explorations in a Creative Region* (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2010), 2.

of the place becomes animated and seeps out into the imagination that sustains places. Carter points out that the 'ground is not passive, it is the generative matrix of an understanding that exists solely at that spot – situated, timely and often rubbed out.'¹⁹ The 'contract' recognises the ground as a palimpsest, that touching can both erase and uncover the more-than-human world. The Track has an interweaving narrative of marks, the minutiae of ants and insects interlace with small mammals and birds that scurry over the broader path caused by the human body. As Carter points out, this is a creative region, often overlooked or walked through quickly, but essential for the co-existence of the human with the nonhuman.

The site of the 'contract', this Track in place, bears the name of Truganini, contentiously labelled Tasmania's 'last full blood Aboriginal',²⁰ revealing the entanglement of Australia's colonial past with the matter of nature. The landscape is haunted by the past lives of the land, the once-was sea-bed encrusted and forced to the surface, the impressions of joggers and dog walkers entwined with the creek's original passage, the weaving of multiple footsteps following Aboriginal passages across mountains.

Truganini's spectre haunts this path. The Track is Mouheneener land and Truganini was a Nuennone woman from Bruny Island situated not far away in the Derwent River's broadening estuary. Though forced to move to areas around Australia as she negotiated to save

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁰ Lyndall Ryan. *The Aboriginal Tasmanians* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin 1996), 75.



Aboriginal people from genocide, it is hard to fathom a reason for her to walk on this particular track. But then there are trails in the Victorian bush on the mainland of Australia that have felt her feet traipsing the terrain in her brief stint as a bushranger. Her life is an entanglement of the possible and impossible. By 1829 when settlement extended to her country 'her mother had been killed by

sailors, her uncle shot by a soldier, her sister abducted by sealers, and Paraweena, a young man who was to have been her husband, murdered by timber-getters.²¹

Tasmanian Aboriginal academic Greg Lehman mourns 'the fact that Truganini is still held as a symbol of 'rape, murder, invasion', when she should be so much more. 'An artist-maker of maireener necklaces and baskets, a diplomat seeking treaties to end Tasmania's Black War, a guerilla fighter seeking justice denied.'²² The naming of this Track as the *Truganini Track* aims at acknowledging injustices of the past, but its strange location, away from her country on Bruny Island, continues the disturbance. The ongoing problems of colonisation result in the wishes of Tasmanian Aboriginal people not being heard. Truganini holds particular significance for Tasmanian Aboriginal people who 'spent decades scouring the collections of the world to obtain the return of ill-gotten artifacts and grave-robbled remains', as Lehman observes, and 'fought tirelessly for the release of her bones from the basement of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and who sought peace for this woman as her ashes were scattered in the waters of her mother's country.'²³

Each time I revisit the Track, I soak the paper in the small waterhole surrounded by large dolerite rocks that have been manoeuvred into the creek as stepping-stones. I attempt to wet the paper without having to enter the cold creek water but I am forced to take my boots off each

²¹ Ibid.

²² Greg Lehman. 'Fearing Truganini', *Artlink* 31, no.2 (2011): 52.

²³ Ibid.

time in my fear of tearing the paper. Sometimes the minute residents of the creek have begun to inhabit the dark recesses of the paper before I pull it out of the waterhole. The small pearly white inhabitants are rudely exposed to the light and quickly scuttle back into the water or below the paper's surface, hiding in its shadows.

In the early stages of negotiations, the expanse of white paper is in high contrast when placed in the environment – an alert to both humans and nonhumans of an intrusion. My use of paper is instinctual to my training as an artist, but where do all the other responses come from? Why this place, at this time, in these conditions? Brian Massumi in his examination of animal instinct states that the conditions of adaptation and behaviour induce the 'performance of an "improvisation"'.²⁴ In reflecting on my decisions in engaging in this 'contract' I realise that I am entering into improvisations within the patterns of my cultural tendencies, but also that these actions 'jump start' an active dialogue. My instinct to wet the paper in the waterhole initially seemed informed by a desire to fully immerse it in the environmental conditions, but it also allows for a reply from the environment. The water softens the fibres and allows matter to begin its improvised reply. An opportunity arises and modifications begin between the seemingly disparate cultural and natural tendencies of the parties concerned.

²⁴ Brian Massumi. 'The Supernormal Animal', in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).



I leave the paper on the Track and continue to investigate around the site. I pick up some ochres found tumbled from a rock face onto the path. The earth gives up a beautiful array of colours, from whites and greys to yellows and reds. I treasure these gifts and take them home to grind and smooth into a paste to make a softer, more

tactile, more malleable ochre that I can rub with my own fingers. I collect leaves and barks also found scattered around where I feel the removal will have least impact on the resident life forms and the building up of detritus and decaying matter required for renewal. I boil these into a eucalyptus-infused ink that I leave in the soup tureen to continue brewing in the backyard.

My behaviour is an improvisation of the moment. Why do I decide to keep to natural materials? I am worried that if I over think or plan too much I will lose the moment, I will analyse and block the fluid collaboration and begin to make decisions based on aesthetics or purely social and cultural forces. I return again with the ink generated from the site's refuse. I re-soak the paper in the waterhole and unroll it down the Track. The flow of the ink and its reception on the paper are influenced by the environment; the shadows formed by the angle of the sun at that moment of time and season of the year, the humidity, wind velocity and the pressures of the ground beneath the paper all have their input. I pour the ink from jars I have carefully carried along the path. The ink follows the laws of gravity, tenderly finding the lowest points to trickle their way across the fibres. The paper continues its transformation.

Chance, intention and intuition make the first marks and I was mesmerised by how quickly the paper melded into the environment. It revealed the contours of the land beneath, with sharp edges of rocks and winding roots being exposed by the rivulets of ink. The shadows, having already moved with the rotation of the earth, emphasised the temporality of the moment. The canopy of trees,

the narrowness of the path and the warmth of the sun formed a eucalyptus-infused cocoon that acknowledged the intention of the moment.

My skin acts as a sensitive border to shadows that alert me to change in the weather, or more importantly to the presence of something else. My behaviour changes in this environment. I enter into the dynamics of the earth. An itch, a slight irritant on my leg, alerts me to the onslaught of leeches that made their way across the paper's surface in response to the lovely, insanely attractive warmth of my flesh. I have learned to get leeches to drop off through the use of whiteboard markers that make them release without damage to my skin or to the leech. Do the drops of my blood and the creatures 'unclotting' saliva from this improvisation become part of the contract? I'd like to think there was some positive from this interaction, but the encounter also highlights the scales of time: the leech is a fleeting life in human terms, and one human life is also fleeting in the life of a mountain.

In 'The Supernormal Animal', Brian Massumi reflects on the nature of instinct and the inspiring achievements of the natural world. 'The complex weave of the orb spider's web' and the 'productive beauty of the hive' highlight the accomplishments of instinct, but Massumi goes on to question its reputation to always respond appropriately. He states that 'the same drive that so naturally leads it through to its normative accomplishments seems to push it, just as naturally, to overshoot its target.'²⁵ This 'impulse

²⁵ Ibid., 480.

to excess', he argues, suggests a different type of aesthetics beyond 'the beauty of utility.'²⁶

Massumi's writing builds on Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy linking the theory of the animal to the theory of art. He writes, 'Deleuze and Guattari replace adaptive evolution under pressure of selection with the concept of becoming as the pilot concept for the theory of the animal. Becoming is taken in the strongest sense, of emergence. "Can this becoming, this emergence, be called Art?"'. Massumi extrapolates on the possibilities of this thought: 'Called "art," the formative movement of animal life is no longer analyzable exclusively in terms of adaptation and selection. Another name is called for: expression. In what way do the animal and the human, each in its own right, as well as one in relation to the other, participate in this expressive becoming? Together in what natural "sympathy"?'²⁷

Massumi highlights the instinctive qualities of the human, placing us back in the field of nature. He outlines the 'creative life of instinct', quoting the science philosopher Raymond Ruyer that it is 'of the nature of instinctive activity to produce an 'aesthetic yield.'²⁸ The aesthetic excess that becomes art, placed in the cultural domain, is due to our instinctive improvisations, our distinctly animal instincts. The urge of the supernormal animal to

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 489.

²⁸ Ibid.

excess, suggests that our mutual improvisations assist in sympathetic ‘becomings’.²⁹

To consider the paper as a contract is an instinctive reaction on my behalf, as is the site, the times of engagement and the materials used. Does the site draw me into this location? Is it a natural meeting place for many elements of the natureculture continuum, a patch of ground that allows for interaction? It is protected from wind and sun, has flowing water, soft earth and rocks that encourage habitation by multiple species. This instinctual response allows me to think past my ‘authorship’ of the work, allowing agency to be shared with the other inhabitants of the site, animate and inanimate.

Deleuze and Guattari explain that the ‘painter and musician do not imitate the animal, they become animal at the same time as the animal becomes what they willed, at the deepest level of their concord with Nature.’³⁰ In the ‘contract’ I engage in interspecies intermingling, improvisations with matter and across matter, to become intimate with the ‘flesh of the world’. Adopting Deleuze and Guattari’s thesis that ‘becoming is always double’,³¹ the contract binds me to this place as this place enters my pores and becomes part of me. By attending to touch, the connection between the human and nonhuman world conjures a responsibility to matter.

²⁹ Ibid., 664.

³⁰ Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 355.

³¹ Ibid.



On the horizontal surface, where matter can interplay on the same level, with the weather and the lay of the land influencing the marks, the continuing negotiations become part of the phenomena of the world, allowing the differences across our natures to meet for a moment in 'sympathy'. Jane Bennett argues that 'materiality is a rubric that tends to horizontalize the relations between

humans, biota and abiota.³² The multiple traces hold a memory of the meeting across differences. And while all parties are never present at the same moment, the intention is to enter into what Barad terms ‘the *spacetime-mattering* of the universe.’³³ The ‘contract’ under the weight of its sensual engagement with more-than-human matter absorbs and holds together events from the past at the moment of the present viewing, and through the repetition of phenomena at this same location over time I gain an imprint of ‘memory’, so that ‘the pattern of sedimented enfoldings of iterative intra-activity ... written into the fabric of the world’³⁴ will be materially present as a contractual agreement.

Each visit I become more intimate with both the paper and the site. I get down on my hands and knees and caress the paper with combinations of ochres and the dirt of the Track. There is no longer a distinction apparent as the paper lies on the ground. There appears a palpation, a lifting of the surface as if the earth’s crust could be peeled back. On the ground I gently massage the paper, sometimes lifting it to see the textures my fingers have encountered. I come across a rock bed containing thousands of shell fossils, pitting the surface like a discarded snakeskin embossed in the earth.

³² Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 112.

³³ Barad. ‘On Touching’, 216.

³⁴ Karen Barad. ‘Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come’, *Derrida Today* 3, no.2 (2010): 261.

Edward Casey claims that the 'sensuous surface' of wild places engages with our sensory systems. The texture 'embodies the peculiar tangibility, or "feel"'³⁵ of a place. What texture offers in particular, is a 'place's distinctive configuration, its physiognomy.'³⁶ And in wild places such as bush tracks, or passages of land away from the manicured garden and tended suburban plots, Casey states their sensuous surface 'can be construed as an exemplary instance of the flesh of the world.'³⁷

Tears are starting to occur in the paper, and the porous seepage through the paper's matter is becoming apparent. The duality of front and back, light and dark, is broken down as the repeated dousing in water leaches out the paper's manufactured starches, replacing them with particles of dust, eucalyptus, animal droppings, plant inks and rock ochres. The paper shifts in texture and starts to resemble an animal's hide or a cloth made from hand-beaten plants, like the Tapa cloths of the Pacific Islands, more than a traditional Western art paper.

The contractual paper develops its own patterns; every part of its surface has built new relationships but it still maintains its laws, it still retains the paperyness of paper: it bends, it folds, it absorbs. It reveals, though, that it is not neutral: it is matter that sits alongside other matter and it can hold many differences within its borders. The ground and the meaning are inseparable in the expression of drawing.

³⁵ Casey. 'Getting Back into Place', 210.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

My fingers press and release against the surface, creating nuances in tone and texture as I enter into the contract. Matter and stories are folded into its creases, seeking to touch and be touched. The work develops with all my senses as I feel the land beneath my hands and knees and feet. I feel softer areas where clay has collected between rock beds and where animals have made networks of pathways in the undergrowth. The memory of the rock's creation and the development of this particular environment become integral to the mark-making. I begin to see where plants grow according to their desire for sun or shade. Sometimes the stench of decaying matter forces me to leave the site but still imprints itself on my memory of the place and in the memory of the paper.

The 'contract' on Truganini Track emphasises the role of matter in having its say. The material of manufactured paper that I introduced as cultural, combined fluently in conversation with the 'natural' elements. Matter has agency in these negotiations. Barad comments that matter 'continually opens itself up to a variety of possible and impossible reconfigurings ... nature is not mute, and culture the articulate one. Nature writes, scribbles, experiments, calculates, thinks, breathes, and laughs.'³⁸ This is becoming apparent through the ongoing negotiations. I begin to see myself more as an element, where I even begin to question how the intention of the contract was formed. Am I the instigator or just a cell floating by in one small exchange of data?

³⁸ Barad. 'On Touching', 268.

The paper is not a neutral 'ground', to take meaning into, to become representative of a particular place and time, to be viewed and possessed as culture, it is a part of the matter of the world. It creases, ages and disintegrates back into the earth. For a small moment in time it is a milieu, an environment, a folding and unfolding between figure and ground. A line on the land that is itself inscribed with lines by the nonhuman, a place for learning and philosophising. Susan Merrill Squier, in *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine*, states that 'material conditions shape and reshape what we can put into words.'³⁹ I would argue that it structures what we can even think; that the tactile immersion of art allows humans to recognise and imagine themselves within and continuously become matter within nature.

The Track becomes a site of reading nature, moist, undulating, complex and shifting; with changes of weather, time of day, or season, the ground feels different and reveals different traces and patterns. I gain a heightened awareness of the forces in our environment, of the past leaking into the future, of particles intermingling. In the tactile time-based immersion on the site both the paper and I began to change as Deleuze and Guattari predict. The initial state of the paper as a 'cultural' form became more in tune with the natural matter that it was composed of, and I become aware of the matter that I am made up of. Quantum experiments confront us with evidence that finds 'initial conditions' within 'final conditions' and signs of what comes second in what

³⁹ quoted in Alaimo. *Bodily Natures*, 8.

must logically come first. Consistent with this spacetime condensation, the difference between concepts (ideality) and material reality (physical objects) seems to collapse, or at least to go awry in some way that no longer makes sense.⁴⁰ The sequence of events that was put in place to make the contract becomes difficult to untangle. When placed on the Track, the differences become less apparent, the contract becomes camouflaged and suggests that this is its true resting place; the land where all matter will compost and renew itself in vital exchanges.

Taking the contract back to my home to repair some damage, I pull the paper onto my lap to mend a tear. As I work with the drawing draped across the room and over myself I am astounded at the tenderness for the materials and the traces of the site embedded in the paper. Rhythms of daily life, of care, the act of repairing in a domestic setting, weave the story of the contract into my everyday life. The processes of art making, in a time and place-based haptic encounter, shift the knowledge of the historical past into a physical, material and empathetic encounter. The land shifts from being a background, the ground where history and events have occurred, to an elemental and agential force in the events. This paper becomes flesh, it has been stretched out, an epidermal layer sensitive to each step, each nibble, each rock and stick stabbing into its underbelly. What happens when we imagine the land as this biological flesh, capable of haptic sensibilities? As Vicky Kirby probes; 'If it is in the nature of biology to be cultural – and clearly, what

⁴⁰ Kirby. *Quantum Anthropologies*, 96.

we mean by 'cultural' is intelligent, capable of interpreting, analyzing, reflecting and creatively reinventing and memorializing – then what is this need to exclude such processes of interrogation from the ontology of life? The difference between ideality and matter, models and what they purportedly represent, or signs of life and life itself, is certainly difficult to separate here.⁴¹



By some strange instinct I decide to iron the paper. Perhaps to preserve the contract a bit longer, to define sections and clauses or to bring back the nature of paper, its ability to bend and fold, to erase marks only for them to leave a ghostly presence? But I suspect it is my maternal instinct, my rhythm of behaviour when returning from camping: I lay all the equipment out, wash, dry, iron and fold it for future use. Through this touching, washing, caressing, erasing and dusting of the paper I become

⁴¹ Ibid., 75.

intimately entangled with its terrain. I am no longer a separate entity that visits 'place', I become ethically engaged, much as Barad observes 'entanglements are ... irreducible relations of responsibility'.⁴² Through our contractual obligations the Track and I have become entangled in what I can only term 'empathy'. Barad remarks:

How truly sublime the notion that it is the inhuman—that which most commonly marks humanity's inhumanity as a lack of compassion—that may be the very condition of possibility of feeling the suffering of the other, of literally being in touch with the other, of feeling the exchange of e-motion in the binding obligations of entanglements.⁴³

These traces make environmental justice very close. There is a continuous interface and exchange through the corporeality of our body and other bodies and atmospheres. The paper no longer becomes a surface or a 'ground' but material matting, a part of the earth. It is activated and determines meaning through this interface in the same way that our body determines meaning and knowledge of the world through touch.

The contract grounds memory and makes it matter. It reveals the forces that press the body to the earth, reminds us of our future fate and the past that informs our present. As a membrane that records the imprint and traces of touch, Art begins to immerse the viewer in the world. As previously mentioned, the stimulus of the paper is an 'irritant' to the flesh of the world, it 'provokes' and 'stirs'

⁴² Karen Barad. 'Nature's Queer Performativity', *Qui Parle* 19, no.2 (2011): 149.

⁴³ Barad. 'On Touching', 219.

responses from the nonhuman world, creating an 'aesthetic excess'. The contract if left in place would follow this to its natural conclusion, breaking down into matter, becoming one with place. Is this then culture's problem, the archiving of all documents? The fear of the earth's pull back into its flesh, for us to be the internal matter assisting in the pull to the dark, rather than the surface irritant? The full cycle is what a natural contract reveals and which we attempt to break, as I have, by separating it from the land's forces and rhythms, into concrete rooms. I have recognised more fully that we are compost, but this composting, this inter-intra species networking is healthy and rich. We need to enter into negotiations, in recognition of our part in the cycle of the world. As Haraway contends, 'Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earth-bound'.⁴⁴

Michel Serres in the 'Natural Contract', which provoked this investigation, asked:

'What language do the things of the world speak; how can we come to some understanding with them, make a contract? After all, the old social contract itself remained unstated, unwritten; no one has ever read the original, no one has even read a copy. We do not know the language the world speaks, or rather we only know its various animist, religious or mathematical versions. When physics was invented, the philosophers said that nature was hidden in the code of numbers or algebraic word code came from law.'⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Donna Haraway. 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 161.

⁴⁵ Serres. 'Natural Contract', 12.



Jan Hogan, *Memory: Truganini Track, Mt Nelson*, Eucalyptus ink, ochre, charcoal, pencil, washed & ironed Rives BFK, 107 x 790 cm, 2014

Perhaps this natural rhythm of composting is why we do not know the language of the world, because we spend our time trying to be apart from it. This natural conclusion seems to be what we most fear but what our contract with nature is really about. We will return to the earth and become active matter again. Deleuze and Guattari reflect that ‘the cosmic force was already present in the material, the great refrain in the little refrains, the great maneuver in the little maneuver. Except we can never be sure we will be strong enough, for we have no system, only lines and movements’.⁴⁶ My line of enquiry has for a short time followed these movements. The contract initially followed the laws of resemblance, it began to camouflage

⁴⁶ Deleuze and Guattari. ‘A *Thousand Plateaus*’, 408.

itself within the environment but it became more than resemblance through tactile immersion, its direct touch with the earth becoming of the earth, it is the flesh of the world and can so easily return without damage, but with perhaps a soft powdery activity on the Track. A possibility of what happens when a contract is honoured. A passage to another future.

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