

Topographies | SCA Gallery, Sydney College of the Arts | 8 August – 7 September

Curator: Vicky Browne | Artists: Ben Denham, Vicky Browne, Rachel Peachey & Paul Mosig, Magnetic Topographies & Friends, Brendan Van Hek and Amanda Williams.

“We are interested in the elaborate strange logic of the world. Being in the scene that is pulsating, not separating what’s out there or in us.”
Lauren Berlant & Kathleen Stewart, ‘On Collaboration’ *The Hundreds* (2019), p. 28

How might we approach the practice of topography, the process of marking out the shape of the world? Perhaps we could chart the course of a river, noting its incursions, its blockages, its subjugation, its wildlife, its currents, its contamination and its renewal. Perhaps we could render a landscape in thread, or expose a sheet of film to sunlight, in an alpine field, in the middle of summer. It might involve mapping in an embodied sense: to *move* topographically, to hear the changes in vibrating soundwaves, to perceive yourself as a body *within* an ecosystem, as opposed to a body responding to it. It might mean being always-already in collaboration: nothing is background, everything is here (including clouds, seeds, shoots, ants, dust particles, chemical spills, UV rays, microbiomes, shopping trolleys, electrical circuits, stormwater drains, cut grass, power cords, tennis balls, oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide).

Topography’s cousins, then, are the index, the inventory and the list. Just as we might propose an index of atmospheric colonisation, we might also propose a topography of invasive species, of plant forms who leapfrog over their forebears, who showcase a peculiar talent for rotating with the sun, who make their way across continents just to prove their robust capacity.

If, as Dionne Brand says, capital controls “every metre of land, air and life”, is it possible to envision a form of topography that doesn’t regiment or proscribe or codify, a topography that doesn’t advocate for property ownership, boundaries and enclosure?¹ Can we trace back and turn over? How to traverse what M. NourbeSe Philip terms “forensic landscapes”: “arenas where great crimes have been perpetrated, but which have never been acknowledged as crimes.”² How to uncover and surface these crimes, and how to propose new methods, new sensibilities of world-making, that do not reproduce existing hierarchies, that do not spawn more plastics, more forever chemicals.

How to summon illegibility, mystery and hesitation rather than the desire to pin down? How to shudder with plants, or how to avoid the long arm of the law, the boot on the neck, the sandstone weight of the institution on stolen land?

If topography isn’t innocent, is it possible to have a topography of repair, a topography that isn’t also a topography of economic conditions, casual contracts, invoices and payment processes? A topography of the various hands of day-to-day existence: the hand that holds, the hand that makes, the hand that folds, the hand on the back, the hand on the trigger, the hand pushing you forward, the hand threading the needle, the hand saying stop? Etel Adnan: “Yes, I contemplate the sea, what else is there to do?”³

Should we turn inward, to blood vessels, capillaries, veins and tendons, or outward, to the planetary and the cosmic, to dark oxygen production, to carbon capture and rock weathering? “I also think that the world will fit within,” writes Olga Tokarczuk, “into a groove of the brain, into the pineal gland – it could well be just a lump in the throat, this globe.”⁴

Should we offer a topography of compromise and partial views (a topography of the necessary components for living)? Or a topography of atrocity, of tanks and missile strikes, of the impertinence of blue sky in war; a topography of disease, arms sales, the farming industrial complex, the equations of contamination control? Or a topography of beauty, which cannot be ignored or denied—a way of describing place that refuses to chastise or cast aspersions on beauty’s value?

Let’s go underground, let’s get into the baseline, let’s think about the geological strata and burrow down. Let’s unstitch the prerequisites and make do with a guttural language of zinc and cobalt and iron ore. What will we find here?

What if our goal was zero? What if topography meant simply the friction between air and skin, what if it meant walking, what if it meant kinship, care, reciprocity, replanting and rewilding. What if it meant past/present/future, it meant carrying the vessel, keeping the key, being open to chance. What if it meant taking the insect outside instead of squashing it.

¹Dionne Brand, in conversation with David Naimon, *Between the Covers Podcast*, TinHouse (2022)

<https://tinhouse.com/podcast/dionne-brand-nomenclature-new-and-collected-poems/>

² M. NourbeSe Philip, in conversation with Philip Metres, ‘Poetry as Untelling’, *World Literature Today* (June 2021),

<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/interviews/poetry-untelling-conversation-m-nourbese-philip-philip-metres>

³ Etel Adnan, *Of Cities & Women (Letters to Fawwaz)*, (Sausalito, California: Post-Apollo Press, 1993), p. 79

⁴ Olga Tokarczuk, trans. Jennifer Croft, *Flights*, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2017), p. 59

Image on overleaf: Wollie Creek – concrete attacked by chemically polluted water detail from the Cooks River Environment Survey and Landscape Design: Report of the Cooks River Project, 1976.

