

From a deep burial pit I throw a femur so high it becomes a space station

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Document 6 Sunday 31 July 2016 11:43am

I am writing about an exhibition I never physically saw. I am piecing together a response based on the second life of the exhibition. I have the artist's statement the gallery's floor plan, photographic documentation from the artist's website, and from the gallery via Dropbox. (Dropbox 6.4.14 up to date.) I am visiting the past. Simultaneously, the past is feeding me in the present, and it (the past) will potentially exist *in the future*.

The exhibition *Javelins in the Scrum* (23 April – 21 May 2016) by Australian artist Abbra Kotlarczyk at North Projects in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, is about the future (and the past). Kotlarczyk approaches the future from two interwoven perspectives: precarity and hope.

Tucked away in the back room at North Projects, documentation of the work *Will You Exchange Gold for Eastern Funds* (2016) drew me into the themes of the exhibition and then outwards. On somerset paper (I instantly think of Somerset), Kotlarczyk has poked tiny pinholes of varying sizes into this page, throwing tiny javelins all over the surface of paper (56 cm x 76 cm). These holes render and bunch up around two words: "any aoriana". The page, oriented horizontally, is practically the height of A1 paper and is about eight centimetres off the width of A1.

The pairing of the two words together is deceptive. An English speaker recognises "any" and might guess a Polynesian origin for "aoriana". The latter is, in fact, the Malagasy (the national language of Madagascar) word for "after". A little research reveals that "any" is also a Malagasy word and that "any" and "aoriana" together mean "in the future".

In English or Malagasy, the richness of this word play offers two interlinked semantic interpretations. The first combination translates as "any after," whilst the Malagasy, somewhat more optimistically, means "in the future." In this one work of word play, Kotlarczyk has combined the dual themes of precarity and hope that thematically interweave and bookend her thinking around the future in this exhibition.

This work, *Will You Exchange Gold for Eastern Funds*, is installed suspended in the air, as if it could be one moment in time, against a window. Recalling that "any aoriana" is written in reverse, and only made visible through small pinprick pockets of absence, the two words are only rendered comprehensible through shadow falling at the other end of light. At night this work sleeps.

Will You Exchange Gold for Eastern Funds holds within its short life as of now (this now, this now, this now) "in the future" and "any after [?]" It holds time. Each pinprick hole is a marker of time and evidence of labour: of Marxist "self-activity" perhaps, in which the artist fulfils a project generated from and for self. This work speaks its labour quietly, like the charcoal star fields of Latvian-American artist Vija Celmins

(1938-), in which the stars become perceptible through the layers of charcoal by the micro-abrasions of an electric eraser. Kotlarczyk's small javelin pin and Celmin's electric eraser are deployed similarly to pock presence from absence.

Kotlarczyk's labour, particularly in the hand-poked pinprick works is conscientious, mulling, mulled, careful and repetitive. But any latent fetishization of labour is offset by other digitally printed works in *Javelins in the Scrum* such as *Stock Taking to Distort Future Proportions I, II*, (2016).

In the nano-blink of time from Kotlarczyk's exhibition to my—and now your—interaction with it, the archive has existed into this short future through digital technologies and platforms. In this way, and through broader cultural practices of storage and dissemination, the artist, as Jonathan Schell notes, can be said to create as much for the archive as for the present.¹ Yet, as with *Will You Exchange Gold for Eastern Funds*, the “archive,” like the “future,” embody precarity as well as hope. Any sense of satisfaction in the creation of a record for an imagined future viewer is immediately beset by anxiety that it – and therefore we – may not survive, or not survive intact, or be incomprehensible to a future audience.

The question implicit in *Javelins in the Scrum*, and most elegantly expressed in *Will You Exchange Gold for Eastern Funds*, is: how long will the life of these (and other) works last? And within that question is the more nuanced one: what messages are we sending the future? As the word play “any aroiana” suggests, the message this exhibition picks up on arguably the dominant strain of human consciousness *now*, in 2016, which is anxiety and uncertainty. More broadly speaking, our cultural narratives take in reckless hubris, considered empathy and a deep sadness for this world we have created – one in which we can end it all ourselves.

Where a substantial nuclear denotation or catastrophe has the immediacy of explosion followed by a lingering nuclear winter, extinction by anthropogenic ecological collapse is incremental, imprecise and erratic. It is a piecemeal unravelling of the project of life.

One of the motifs of our “throwaway” culture is its corollary: what will last? As part of *Javelins in the Scrum*, Kotlarczyk buried a time capsule in the North Projects courtyard: an act that once again draws together this seesawing (long) moment of precarity and hope. Burying a time capsule is simultaneously whimsical, for the chance involved in its discovery, and an indicator of our great need for whakapapa, for genealogy, progeny, continuance, communication, testament.

In considering what would definitely last, I realised, more than somewhat sadly, that the testament to “our” Western-permeating culture is nuclear waste. The dangerous by-products from nuclear weapons and nuclear power plants are buried in deep geological disposal facilities in Europe, North and South America, and Asia. Much of this material is categorised as “high-level waste,” and buried to depths ranging from 60 to 750 metres, in a variety of geological conditions, from granite, to salt to clay and mudstone. Nuclear waste remains radioactive for tens of thousands of years to hundreds of thousands of years.²

Given the relative number, size and dispersal of deep radioactive burials, and the potential instability of both the housing infrastructure, and the threat of natural

disaster or anthropogenic attack, these time capsules are best left unearthed and untouched.

What such deep burials do require, in the most literal sense, are future messages: messages of warning. Agencies charged with the task of creating a warning that will last a minimum of 10,000 years have been unable to devise any. What earthwork arrangement, icon, or colour combination will be able to convey “death” to any living beings in one hundred years, let alone one thousand or ten thousand, and beyond?

If explorers of the future continue past any extant warning, it is envisaged that there will be more detailed information advising them to turn around and go back. One proposed phrase is:

*This is not a place of honour...no highly esteemed deed is commemorated here.*³

Of course there may not be a Rosetta stone to help decipher our poignant but utterly meaningless hieroglyphs to the explorer of the future. Nuclear fission cannot be undone. The toxic materiality of this message is already delivered to the future. Safeguarding the contents within the radioactive burial and engaging further in the design of strategies to prevent contact with the waste are the very least we can do with regard to this material legacy.

Before there was a need for deep burial of radioactive waste, before there was a need or a desire for a certain amount or type of energy, before there a desire to drop a nuclear weapon, there was a before. Before there was a materiality there was a message, or a series of messages produced within a certain cultural environment. For the message to become materiality it had to be accepted and enabled into existence. Our materiality was first informed by messages, messages that grew out of the living stew, the consciousness of the culture, and the consciousness of the culture before that. And so on.

There are so many messages existing as *struggling* inter-coherence. There are conversations between the moon and tides; honeybees are struggling to maintain communion in failing colonies; taproots and fungi: misheard, faintly delivered, undelivered symbiosis of mycorrhizal networks as they try to hold up forests; and each grain of human consciousness that thinks or doesn't think about how the world is, where we appear to be heading, and what the future might look like.

Considering our address to the future involves a deep understanding that we are making the present-becoming-future with each gesture, thought and intention that accretes materiality. It also involves the development of a particular ethical imagination of goodwill for the beings that may or may not read our (extant) words, interpret any existing artworks and structures; who may, with the greatest hope, marvel at the ecological restoration of our oneness.

9:20pm

¹ Jonathan Schell. *The Fate of the Earth: And, The Abolition* (California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 144.

² “What is Nuclear Waste?” <https://whatisnuclear.com/articles/waste.html> Accessed 26 July 2016.

³ Quoted by Juliet Lapidos, "Atomic Priesthoods, Thorn Landscapes, and Munchian Pictograms"

http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/green_room/2009/11/atomic_priesthoods_t_horn_landscapes_and_munchian_pictograms.html Accessed 26 July 2016