HUMPTY DOOM
LISS FENWICK

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TYPICAL LANDSCAPES, ADEQUATE FIGURATIONS

In Alice in Wonderland, Humpty Dumpty sagaciously reminds us that all that counts in defining the meaning of words is who is the boss.
– Rosi Braidotti, Nomadic Subjects (1994)

Our continued interest in automatic, or "dumb", image-making, using devices as divergent as a plastic disposable camera loaded with Kodak ISO 800 colour film, or a digital camera that comes factory standard as a feature of our mobile phone, has now become such a commonplace that we can finally say the "cost" of making these pictures is now cheaper (and easier) than purchasing a pencil and paper. Jean Cocteau's definition of the minimal medium-conditions for making an artwork appears almost naive today. Intuitively we know the technical apparatuses assembled for our recording devices are complexified by an order of magnitude far in excess of a pencil's graphite and timber, the latter also pulped to make paper. Graphite is now used in the production of lithium-ion batteries, which power many of our devices, like digital cameras. Even the oily inks that support the text you are presently reading seem almost quaint in contrast to our other systems for writing. If writing is telling ourselves something about ourselves and others, or as Anne Carson has said is "to find out what I think about something", we could lean further on Cocteau's famous claim: pictures have become an artform precisely because they are now accessible like writing is, or like thought. This also suggests a new mode for comprehension, sometimes termed photo literacy.

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In a recent text for newly minted design imprint called Anima magazine, its editor (former director of London's Design Museum) Deyan Sudjic, seeks to frame the Narwala Gabarnmung rock shelter on the traditional lands of the Jawoyn people as "amongst the world's oldest works of architecture." The hesitation in Sudjic's phrasing—"amongst"—is palpable in the awkward way that the shelter has been pressed into the service of contemporary design discourse. Its location is explained by its proximity to Sydney, likely because it is the only city in Australia Sudjic's readers might know of. The architectural attribution relies on photographs taken by Australian architectural photographer John Gollings, who is based in Melbourne, and who was flown to the site with a Jawoyn elder and permitted to photograph the carved rock, an open shelter supported by thirty-six pillars. By emphasising the remoteness of the location from European invasion, yet still pointing out the closeness of the shelter to the Jabiluka uranium mine that sits within the Kakadu National Park in Arnhem Land, Sudjic plots the peculiarly specific logic of the colonial geography of the so-called Northern Territory of Australia by using the evidentiary paradigm of photography.

At the terminus of the Arnhem Highway, a few hours drive to the west of Narwala Gabarnmung, which is inland from Maningrida, and before reaching Darwin/Garamilla, travelers will find Humpty Doo. A rural district on the way to Kakadu National Park, but also a model for the remotest antipodean location imaginable (WWE wrester Outback Jack was from Humpty Doo). This is where photographer Liss Fenwick grew up with her family, who had first moved to the area in the 1960s. As the second family that came to reside there, they have since witnessed its growth to accommodate just over 4,000 inhabitants today. It is to the current generation that this major series of Fenwick's work is explicitly addressed. Furthermore, Humpty Doom operates as the antithesis to settler fetishization of the region. Where Sudjic attempts to determine the pre-colonial rock shelter as a colonial possession, Fenwick imagines a possible future whereby this logic is made inconceivable. Instead, Humpty Doom expands outwards from the grand, impossible architecture of the region like the termite mounds that are all aligned along a north-south axis—one face exposed to the heat of the sun, the other protected from it.

Given British colonisation of Australia and the Pacific in the late eighteenth century, Bernard Smith proposed the art historical category of the "typical landscape" to conceptualise images of it. These pictures were supposed to represent foreign country to European audiences, especially country that felt frustratingly alien to its explorers, missionaries, colonisers, and transportees. Contemporary with the colonisation of Australia was a fateful conjoining of English academic art with the Royal Society—the so-called "invisible college" that had first emerged in the seventeenth century in the wake of Francis Bacon's Novum Organum—which meant that the first pictures made of the continent were not quite picturesque landscapes nor documentary evidence for scientific analysis. Rather, typical landscape painting was subsumed by the apparent difficulty of seeing the country that the non-Indigenous inhabitants had arrived at as anything other than potentiality. How to see past this land as becoming "productive" for colonial purposes remains a problem for writing on Australia centuries later. Witness the opening lines of Gerald Murnane's The Plains, from 1982: "My journey to the plains was much less arduous than I afterwards described it. And I cannot even say that at a certain hour I knew I had left Australia." The academies were fraudulent; in fact, they were mostly thinly disguised and facile covers for the real colonial project of expropriation. A case in point is the Jabiluka mine site within Kakadu National Park, which despite its revegetation is currently owned by mining company Rio Tinto, who have made clear that they may reopen it to further uranium mining in the future. Just to the south of Humpty Doo is the Finniss Lithium Project, operated by Core Lithium, it is currently contracted to provide Tesla with over 100,000 tonnes of the alkali metal used for rechargeable batteries. The question becomes how the artwork interacts with this logic of "development", and whether photo literacy is even possible given the scale of this intervention.

In the nineteenth century invention of the camera, we have realised a European technology for the typical landscape encoded by the aperture. What Abigail Solomon-Godeau called the "miniature guillotine" in an essay for Artforum in 2004. That the British presentation of photography to the Royal Society eventually led William Henry Fox Talbot to call his first book of photography The Pencil of Nature in 1844, should tell us everything we need to know about the endeavor: nature does not exist but by writing. It is not the revolutionary moment, therefore, nor Adam Smith's invisible hand of the market, which determines our encounter with the natural world—although it would arguably have been this tricky metaphor that oversaw the development of the NT through the twentieth century—it is a sovereign hand that authorises the compact: nature fits the glove for the emperor's new clothes. This misdirection of authority—where the invisible is proposed when the visible remains—

was there all along, indicating our route and paradoxically pointing us towards what Smith termed "European vision" in 1950. Seen from the perspective of art history, the structure of the typical landscape has become the way we understand the landscape photograph, "the component parts of which were carefully selected in order to express the essential qualities of a particular kind of geographical environment." This assumption is what Fenwick's photographs push back against. These works are instead portraits of the land (and people) in Humpty Doo, not landscapes as such.

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In Australia, the most commonly uttered place-names refer to large unities: "Australia", "Melbourne", "The Northern Territory" and even "The Kimberleys". These unities are so large they become abstract and general, they evoke stereotyped and familiar responses which feed off ideologies, like nationalism, "statism" or the urban/rural division. The study of specific, local places puts things more on the scale of everyday living.
– Stephen Muecke, Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology (1984)

I am writing during the coronation of the first British Monarch in over seven decades. The disorderliness of the imperial pageantry, presented half a century after decolonisation, suggests the redundant decadence of the whole affair. But now that we have King Charles III, I return to the persistent notion of so-called "crown land". Has it become an empty concept? Must we imagine the state of Kingsland? Or does this shift reveal something more profound in its apparent "post" lateness?

To exhibit these images of Humpty Doo, in fact to make this work in Melbourne/Naarm (where Fenwick is far from at home), creates a distance that threatens to collapse their local nuance into empty tropes: Humpty Doom, Humpty Don't. These images refuse to conform to the type of exotic landscape described by Smith, whilst knowingly participating in vernacular photography. Well-lit fashion photography, bright and in high-contrast (strobes, light-boxes), it is suggestive of an advertisement for the town. These visual languages seduce the viewer to look at subject matter that also makes this language perverse. Fenwick's family members, scorched lands, scraggly foliage appear in equal measure. These things that can't be sold as a tourist package experience, are nevertheless packaged up. From Melbourne we know that the mineral resources—gold in particular—funded the nineteenth century cityscape. But following the economic crash of "Marvellous Melbourne" in the 1890s, the twentieth century saw the city progressively replaced with its newly international and modernist façades. Companies like Whelan the Wrecker became synonymous with the replacement of the old with the new, demolishing buildings financed by gold, and replacing them with building financed by iron and coal. Today Melbourne's CBD is dominated by the global headquarters of mining giants Rio Tinto and BHP.

The major distinction to be made in Fenwick's typical images of Humpty Doo, then, are between those images that depict people, and those that do not. The reflection of the human, mediated by the camera, is easy to forget in the landscape. But there is also an equivalence being made here, the distinction is not human/non-human, but between the land and its use-value, which sometimes includes people. These are images made over decades, and show fire, weapons, built infrastructure and kinship in a town most often figured as a waystation for exchange: goods (out) and services (in). The earliest images in Humpty Doom show Fenwick and her friends photographing their own bodies for trading with the older men in the town, for weed, alcohol, etc.

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Krim Benterrak, Stephen Muecke, and Paddy Roe begin their 1984 publication Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology, by recalling navigator William Dampier's journey to what are now called the Roebuck Plains in 1699. Dampier was the first English person to explore these parts of what is now known as Australia, but was then called New Holland by the Europeans. As such Dampier is figured as the prototypical coloniser. Yet the image of the plains remains the poetic shifter at the crux of the text. As they are figured in Murnane's writing, the plains as an image of the blank page become for reading what the typical landscape is in painting. The arrival of photography then, mediates between the two, and Murnane appears to realise this as he concludes The Plains, when his protagonist attempts "to expose to the film in its dark chamber the darkness". In fact, when Fenwick sent Murnane the proofs of Humpy Doom, his response was typically adroit: "Until I looked at these pages, I had never supposed that a book might have little need for words."

In the work of philosopher Rosi Braidotti, nomadism is figured as multi-lingual, acoustic. Extending on this expanded notion of writing, for Braidotti (as for Muecke), we might imagine a language of gestures, of pictures that touch the typical landscapes as letters touch a page. After all, these images are writing. The ermites also write, in their negative language of excavation. Researchers at the CSIRO once proposed that if they could decipher this architecture, the termites might lead them to gold deposits. This is how the typical landscape operates today, as a vision of the land and what value it holds in potentiality. Instead of "kincentric" knowledges, described by John Bradley as an "immense web of being"—which might be productively compared with Braidotti's idea of situated knowledge as embodied and embedded, grounded—we have instead imposed an econometrics that in retrospect look not unlike the alchemical, or early modern interest in the transmutation of base metals into more noble forms: always a proto-scientific, or "natural" philosophy. In Fenwick's portraits of Humpty Doo, the typical images portray the landscape, in a way that alternatively "draws forth," that is: they are extractive, but extractive in reverse. Portraits, not landscapes. Humpty Doom aims to extract its substances from these subjective impulses, not from the land. This extraction is not mineral, it is spiritual. Here we might begin to "see" our thoughts.

Do we see the "typical form of beauty" that Smith and others have described as the vanishing point of European vision on the other side of the world? Is it possible that writing as a nomadic subject, one that Braidotti claims in her self-diagnosis as a "grapho-maniac," can be expanded to include the typical images of the camera? What are we writing between the lens, and our pens and pencils? "Filling in this gap," Braidotti writes of living and representation, "with adequate figurations is therefore one of the greatest challenges of the present…" And are we not simply searching for such adequate figurations to reveal ourselves more fully to ourselves?

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