

**Thirty Million Carbon Stories, Stacked To Slender Crest  
(on Hartmut Veit's 'COAL' exhibition)**

It was during an episode of *Away!* on ABC's Radio National that I first encountered the Australian Indigenous term *baray-gir*. It is a Bundjalung word, and travels to us from the north-eastern most corner of NSW, up in saltwater country. As I listened on, I learnt that the meaning of the word—ranging from 'youngest child' to 'apex of the tallest tree'—is multi-storied; both as a noun and an adjective with various definitions for 'upward' and in its dynamism of dreaming. It is a word with various social, familial and spatial connotations, as it quite literally reaches from the fledgling rungs of familial life to the heights of the natural world. Elsewhere in her book *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics and Art in the Changing West*, the American writer and activist Lucy R. Lippard delivers a thought experiment similar in its vertical expansionism but acute in its consequence. "Extraction in aid of erection"[1] explains the pragmatic equation of how our efforts to survive must go down before they can go up. Where *baray-gir* welcomes us to country, Lippard jolts us toward the conditions of our current mistreatment and complex entanglements with it. For his exhibition *COAL*, artist and graduate researcher Hartmut Veit works to shift our awareness towards a plural appreciation of human and non-human kinship by addressing the ontological dichotomies that have resulted in the current ecological crises of the Anthropo-cene. Held over three days at the Victorian College of the Arts, this exhibition presents the outcome of four years of socially engaged art practice in collaboration with Latrobe Valley mining communities at the coalface of mineral extraction and sweeping changes in power generation. Where *Away!* program host Daniel Browning introduces *baray-gir* as a neat bundling of human and natural world relations, Veit's musings are anything but. This exhibition is messy and multifaceted, with a diversity of work presented across three galleries and 210 square meters of space. Concerned with the long-term physical and emotional health effects of a community confronted by brown coal's daily extraction, this exhibition presents the lived experiences of coal's multi-dimensionality as a manifest diagram of a central nervous system. Gallery one—the entrance to the exhibition—functions as the head and central control station for the subsequent two galleries that sit either side of it.

Veit uses this space to present a range of material central to the project's socio-political substratum: photographic documentation and a live-feed webcam bring us one-to-one with the city of Morwell, the place where the cleaning cart was employed as a performative device to engage members of the community through informal conversation. The cart's role as a cleaning apparatus further supports Veit's actions of sweeping and gathering coal ash vis-à-vis domestic dust from the roof cavities of Morwell houses; a collaboration supported in part by an initiative of the Department of Health and Human Services. The material gathered from these sweeps has been reworked into small carbon capture and storage sculptures, presented alongside other material in gallery one. Beyond the black curtains in gallery three is a small tree hanging upside down from the centre of the ceiling. The otherwise mobilised apex of this tree is upside down, its orientation working to convince our focus down towards the surface of the earth. It is a directive that reinforces the sheer gravity of the exhibition's concerns. The tree is enveloped by the slow and steady canter of human breath, with an immersive multimedia installation of pulsating red and blue lights illuminating the scene around it. Over the course of the exhibition, dust collected from the streets of Morwell is mixed together with domestic flour to resemble coal ash and is slowly released as dancing dust motes in a beam of light.[2] The omnipresent dust will be collected through a daily ritualistic process of floor vacuuming, which is then loaded back into the dust feeder mounted at the base (ceiling) of the tree. This allegorical act of taking dust from the ground to suspend it in space poetically illustrates the cyclical forces of nature and the mobility of carbon. Furthermore, it demonstrates how coal inevitably becomes airborne once it is excavated from the earth.[3] Compounded with the metaphoric significance of the tree as a pair of human lungs and the broader neural workings of this project in gallery one is a three-dimensional confrontation with the ancient heart of this country. In the centre of gallery two, a one-tonne boulder of exhumed coal sourced from the Hazelwood mine sits stoically on a pallet jack, held company by a small decorous coal dust painting. As a means of honouring the ancient origins[4] of this large wedge of geological matter—and as an empathic gesture congruent to Veit's performance opens the exhibition up to the public. By gifting breath to the coal, this performative gesture is both redolent of the slow metamorphosis of coal's creation by compression (and subsequent lack of

oxygen) and as a redemptive act for the residents of Morwell, for whom breathing is a troubled metaphor and reality. For the majority of Victorians, the consumption of coal is denoted by a detached experience with its manufactured bi-product (coal makes up 85% of the state's daily electricity supply). But for residents of the Latrobe Valley on Gunai country in Victoria's Central Gippsland, residing in close proximity to the mining and processing of coal quite literally means to take it in, through the body. In one way or another, each aspect of this exhibition resonates with Veit's own life narrative. His father was a 'Sprengmeister' (a master of mine explosives) who took the family to live in various regional mining areas in Australia, Papua New Guinea and Canada. As with the character portrayal of John Mulholland, the tunnel tiger (mine explosive expert) in Maria Fusco's radio play and book *Master Rock*, Veit's father represents a living, walking monument to the mine(s). Of these tunnel tigers (and Sprengmeisters), Fusco explains: "Every job they've ever worked on, they're carrying around in their chest." [5] This condition of interiority strikes me as both insidious, and also as a kind of communion with the real. It warrants a comparison between physical acts of environmental destruction (such that the Latrobe Valley is experiencing through coal extraction), and the kind that Donald Winnicott's theory of the parent-infant relationship describes: that in order for a child to know that her mother is real and an authentic other, she must first attempt to destroy her and observe the mother's defence of this process. By entering into this psychoanalytic thought experiment, we return to the mother as earth and to the upward mobility (for better or worse) of baray-gir and Lippard's extraction in aid of erection. Perhaps as a reaction to his own nomadic upbringing around mines, Veit has intently positioned his work in the Latrobe Valley as a critique of the Fly-in, Fly-out (FIFO) activities of city-based activists, politicians and researchers. In turn, he has established long-term friendships and connections, mainly in and around Morwell and Traralgon, where he has staged temporary pop-up exhibitions and performances with coal in neglected historical buildings and deserted shops. [6] Working in these spaces has yielded a collaborative model of practice-led research, resulting in intuitive, multifactorial and holistic working relationships with community members affected by coal's extraction.

For residents of Morwell, their communion with the real harbours a less grandiose, and much more grave reality. Years after the Hazel-wood Mine Fire of 2014 and long after the operations of the mine cease (it is due to close in March 2017), detrimental health effects can be observed in conjunction with coal contamination, resulting in Victorian Government funding and support for long-term health studies in the Latrobe Valley. For Veit, one of the fundamental questions at the centre of his work in this region has been: how can creative collaborations with coal re-activate dialogue in the community to aid recovery following such traumatic events and in light of ongoing effects and dis-ease for residents living next to the source of coal's extraction? Collaboration occurs not only within distinct parameters of this exhibition's research fields, but more broadly through its consideration of future human and non-human entanglements. The two sites of the human body and the Hazelwood coal mine symbolically collapse through the aesthetic experience of this project, rendering COAL a nonsite[7] representation of a multiscalar site that is both fixed (in the case of the Latrobe Valley) and nomadic (in the case of the body, pollution and electricity). Between these seeming binary points-fixed/nomadic, body/landscape, clean/dirty— is Veit's triadic project, laden with dense symbology and expanded potential for a re-thinking of coal's empathic potential. For the writer Evelyn Araluen—whose poem Learning Bundjalung on Tharawal Country was the inspiration for Browning's entry on baray-gir-Indigenous languages have the potential to eschew the limitations of western linguistic interpretation. Araluen's attention to poetic devices of cadence and intonation are used to explain how Australian Indigenous people assume, through language, the specific qualities and textures of a given landscape. As she explains: "The way that you speak has to reflect the landscape." [8] It is curious then to wonder, what would the language used to speak in the presence of a coal mine sound and feel like? Would it be spoken in verbatim through engraved staccato and oppressive tongue to address the vilified landscape, contoured of the kinds of widespread environmental degradation and human ill-health continued by the fossil fuel industry? Or would it employ soft modulations and inquisitive inflections, as if greeting an old friend, the 30 million year old compression of carbonated trees that make up—along with the songlines of its orator—one of the oldest surviving ecosystems on the planet? The difficulty of locating such a linguistic and embodied encounter in a space and time

where coal is touted as dirty and immoral, assumes the underlying poetic responsibility of this project: to address country with our minds and vocabularies cast, from the fledgling rungs of its origins to the heights of our future coexistence with it..

Abbra Kotlarczyk 2017

[1] Lippard, Lucy R. *Undermining: A Wild Ride Through Land Use, Politics and Art in the Changing West*, The New Press, New York and London, 2014.

[2] Inspired by naturally occurring phenomena, such as dust motes dancing and colliding with each other in a shaft of light, the installation establishes metaphoric parallels with early Greek atomistic materialist theories that lead from Epicurius's concept of the unpredictable swerve of atoms, all the way to new Materialist concepts in the 21st century (from Veit, Hartmut. *Extended Abstract*, 2017).[

3] Veit, Hartmut. *Extended Abstract*, 2017.[

4] Brown ash lignite coal is believed to be some 30 million years old, with the conditions of its formation dating back to the Carboniferous period of about 300 million years ago.

[5] Talk: Maria Fusco in conversation with Joanna Walsh

<https://www.artangel.org.uk/project/master-rock/>[6] Performative acts of labour, such as sweeping and cleaning in these public spaces, draw on a long tradition of ecological performance art by feminist artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Jo Hansen (from Veit, Hartmut. *Extended Abstract*, 2017).

[7] Robert Smithson's theorising of the 'site/nonsite' dialectic helps to establish a distinction between work made in and away from the Latrobe Valley, with the exhibition echoing Smithson's self-conscious removal from the original site in order to map the environment through studio-based nonsite practices.

[8] Araluen, Evelyn. *Word Up, Away!*, ABC Radio National, Saturday 29th October, 2016. <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/away/saturday-29-october-2016/7962366>.

