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## *Baroquetopus: Humanimal entanglements and tentacular spectaculars*

Baroquetopus is a *portmanteau* – a chimerical word made of an interspecies, trans-categoric coupling: Baroque + Octopus. What happens when you hybridise a historical European art movement with a mollusc, and why would you? Imported artistic frameworks seem irrelevant on the Countries that make up so-called Australia, and First Peoples do not draw a line between nature and culture. We need to trouble Western categorical systems, and the happy accident of *Baroquetopus's* partial rhyme allows for a momentary relaxation of the English language and its artificial binaries. This neologism becomes a provocation, to attend to the intersections and entanglements of the naturecultures that give us life and purpose.<sup>1</sup>

Gertrude Contemporary has held the annual “Octopus” curator showcase exhibition for 22 years. The origins of the name are as murky as a cloud of ink, but one thing seems clear: none of the shows were ever about octopuses. What would happen if the title signalled — like cephalopods, through colour, light and texture — a relationship to animal and underwater realms? These thoughts were nascent before the exhibition *Oktolab* celebrated all things artistic and tentacular,<sup>2</sup> and before TV documentaries brought the formerly mysterious octopus into the living room, literally and figuratively.<sup>3</sup> In the world of ecofeminist and posthumanist thought, Donna Haraway’s insistence on tentacularity, and her renaming of our current, crisis-ridden epoch as the Chuthulucene, has also reached a kind of saturation. But rather than turning away from these intriguing images for their “too-muchness”, I suggest we go further in, complicating and continuing our relations to cephalopod and other animal cultures, and acknowledging that they are on a continuum with human aesthetic languages. After all, the Baroque never shied away from being “too much”. Named after the Portuguese word *barroco* meaning misshapen pearl, the Baroque can be said to have oceanic origins, as do many of the works in this exhibition, not least Sebastian Wiedemann’s *Deep Blue*, and the Bunyip known as *Muriel*, lovingly fashioned from kelp by artists from Mornington Peninsula’s urban Aboriginal community arts centre Baluk Arts.

It was Baroque music that first earned the term *barroco*, intended to insult its supposedly excessive ornamentation. Similarly, Baroque art favours emotional intensity and sensual engagement, exceeding boundaries, and choosing multiplicity over unity. This exhibition imagines the Baroque as a tendency rather than a period or movement fixed in time and space. Nevertheless, it can be instructive to consider one of the most famous works of the Baroque period: Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1647–1652), in which the Saint is pierced through the heart by God’s arrow as she sits atop a billowing cloud, lost in the folds

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<sup>1</sup> Naturecultures is a term coined by Donna Haraway, introduced in *The Companion Species Manifesto: dogs, people and significant otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003, and used in subsequent Haraway publications. I use the word “purpose” here purposefully, as the Kulin greeting Wominjeka, often translated as “welcome”, means more accurately, to come with purpose. See Mandy Nicholson, “Wominjeka – Awakening Aboriginal Language”, *Clothing the Gaps*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FvFZONoFEOs>, November 8, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> *Oktolab19: gallery of octopus aesthetics*, curated by Yvette Watt, Toby Juliff, André Krebber, Maike Riedinger & Anne Hölck, Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, Hobart, 2019 and at the Academy of Media Arts, Cologne, 2020, see: <http://www.okto-lab.org/Exhibitions.php>.

<sup>3</sup> See the 2019 BBC documentary *The Octopus in my House*, and the Netflix 2020 documentary *My Octopus Teacher*. The latter was brilliantly critiqued by Sophie Lewis in “My Octopus Girlfriend: on erotophobia”, *n+1*, Issue 39, 2021, <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-39/reviews/my-octopus-girlfriend/>

of a rippling garment. Her face expresses an agony of ecstasy and the ecstasy of agony – analogous to the short but intense lives of cephalopods who continually change colour and pattern, what Vilém Flusser has called an “artistic orgasm”.<sup>4</sup> Cephalopods often provoke comparison with artists: science writer Peter Godfrey-Smith named the cuttlefish he swam with Matisse and Kandinsky for their use of colour, and Brancusi, for that individual’s uniquely sculptural arrangement of tentacles,<sup>5</sup> whereas Flusser maintains that clouds of ink can be “sculpted” by the arms of squid.<sup>6</sup> This continuum of cultural practice in natural domains extends beyond the deep blue sea and into the vault of the sky: Deleuze and Guattari once said “all art begins with the animal”, tracing painting, sculpture, music and architecture back to the chirping of a small bird,<sup>7</sup> while in Yarralin cosmologies, birds have their own distinct ceremonies.<sup>8</sup> In Tara June Winch’s novel *The Yield*, a broilga appears at a key moment during ceremony, dancing in direct relationship with its human kin. The emotional pain the narrator experiences as she witnesses the dance is heightened by the intense beauty of the passage.<sup>9</sup>

In the same way that Western “Enlightenment” has torn apart nature from culture, so too it has wrenched spirit from matter – another dichotomy that makes no sense to First Peoples’ ways of knowing. The Baroque remains an anomaly in the West, because extreme piety is entangled with carnal sensuality, when the soul discovers its own “vertiginous animality”.<sup>10</sup> The works in *Baroquetopus* cross boundaries between human and animal worlds, as well as spiritual and material ones. Possum skin cloaks are ceremonial garments with histories extending back for thousands of generations in the South East of this continent. The brutal rupture and erasure of this history due to invasion is being carefully restitched in a reclamation project by many hands and bodies, including the bodies of the possums themselves, which have also, due to colonisation, been uprooted from their homelands, only to become *possum non grata* in Aotearoa. A twisted series of colonial blunders means that contemporary Aboriginal cloak makers must import the skins of their sacred kin animals from Aotearoa where they are exterminated as pests, because possums here are now protected by the same colonial framework that systematically destroyed their habitat in the first place. Far better that the bodies of the exterminated paihamu or NZ possum are celebrated in sacred artworks than left to rot, fed to dogs, or turned into socks. Yorta Yorta and Dja Dja Wurrung man Tiriki Onus, who is an artist, film maker, opera singer, cloak maker, and Head of the Wilin Centre for Indigenous Arts and Cultural Development, University of Melbourne, recounted a story about road trips with his father, celebrated artist Lin Onus. Lin would collect roadkill for use in artistic projects, telling the young Tiriki, “There is magic inside these

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<sup>4</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis: a treatise: with a report by the Institut scientifique de recherche paranaturaliste*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds: the octopus, the sea, and the deep origins of consciousness*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017, pp. 114-127.

<sup>6</sup> Flusser, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p. 183.

<sup>8</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Shimmer: Flying Fox Exuberance in Worlds of Peril*. Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh Press, p. 75. Here, Rose is quoting an unnamed Yarralin Lawmaker, peoples she spent much time with and gained permissions from to share knowledge.

<sup>9</sup> Tara June Winch, *The Yield*. Melbourne: Hamish Hamilton, 2019, pp. 162-165.

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The fold: Leibniz and the baroque*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 11. He also notes that the “pleats of matter” and the “folds of the soul” are “marbled together”.

animals and it's our duty to see that magic continue".<sup>11</sup> It is our duty to remember paihama are not pests, but sacred beings who have been misplaced, as collateral damage, or roadkill, if you will, of colonisation.

Yuin/Monaro woman Gina Bundle and Ngarigu artist Peter Waples-Crowe have created new pieces in possum skin which highlight the importance of certain animals for kinship and symbolic reasons. Waples-Crowe has always identified with the often misunderstood and mistreated dingo, since, as a queer Aboriginal man, he too feels he inhabits the margins of society. In *Sorry Business*, he uses the possum pelts as a "cultural canvas"<sup>12</sup> on which to draw in order to make sense of a close personal loss. These lines reinforce the artist's spiritual connections and demonstrate grief as a form of love and care. Bundle's cloaks celebrate the animals of her Country. *Bangu's (Flying Fox) Cloak* features jewel-like coloured and patterned bats, each expressing its own unique identity, yet remaining connected to its kin through a series of interlocking branches and vines. *Camouflage Cloak* features lyre birds' tail feathers and fern fronds in a vertiginous dance of spirals.<sup>13</sup> As Wurundjeri Woiwurrung knowledge keeper Mandy Nicholson put it recently, people love lyre birds because "they speak everyone's language".<sup>14</sup> Baluk Arts materialised spirit when they created two life-size Bunyips for the exhibition *Too-roo-dun* in 2018.<sup>15</sup> *Baroquetopus* brings the epic beach guardian *Muriel* northside to meet a new audience. Made collectively and featuring various materials including kangaroo bones, kelp, and the destructive residue of ghost nets, *Muriel* radiates power and brings with her messages from the deep.

A playful radiance emanates from Ivor Cantrill's hand-coloured lino-cuts of animals made from 2010 to 2016. Intended as greeting cards, Cantrill's productive energy was in excess of potential recipients, leaving an accruing surplus of animal images every year. Seen together, the viewer can trace connections between series, noting varying colouring strategies, almost as if they were watching creaturely evolution and differentiation on hyperdrive. Similarly to Bundle's *Bangu*, Cantrill's brilliant colours evoke the stained-glass windows of cathedrals, including their heavily leaded outlines. Akin to Baroque music, endless repetitions on a theme gain momentum, and pulsate with life: with *joy*. This seriality is also present in other works in *Baroquetopus*: in Ani O'Neill's proliferating 'eke which are crawling up the walls, and in Debris Facility Pty Ltd's laminated ceiling tiles, because more is *always* more. Cantrill's short animation is weirdly and wonderfully entangled – a trip to the zoo becomes a throbbing mass of humans, animals and plant-life, inextricably intertwined.

The rococo vases of Kate Rohde are joyfully tangled co-productions of nature and culture. *Hoard of the Baroquetopus* 1, 2 and 3 could be said to possess a "crystalline style" which is, coincidentally, the scientific term for the digestive organ of molluscs. Such elaborate

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<sup>11</sup> Outtakes while filming an Acknowledgement of Country for VCA students in the Wilin Gardens, Southbank, February 9, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Personal communication with the artist, March 21, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Although they are from opposite sides of the continent, Bundle's spirals echo the beautiful writings and lore of Yolngu women known as "song spirals", see the Gay'wu Group of Women, *Song spirals: sharing women's wisdom of Country through songlines*. NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Mandy Nicholson speaking at the formal celebration for *Emu Sky*, curated by Zena Cumpston at Old Quad, University of Melbourne, on March 10, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> *Too-roo-dun* showed at Fortyfivedownstairs and Bunjil Place and featured Bunyips made by seven Aboriginal organisations.

language in relation to digestion brings back the whole concept of “taste” in all its connotations: octopuses taste everything as they touch the world around them, so why is being “tasteful” generally synonymous with restraint? The term rococo comes from *rocaille* or rock, relating to the rubble and pebbles used to fashion artificial grottos, places of wonder and worship, as redolent of pagan nature deities as of the church, and never, ever, “tasteful”.<sup>16</sup> Fanciful architecture is also hinted at by Debris Facility’s false ceilings, *Falsework (toxicology)*, recalling the Baroque emphasis on ornate ceilings, replete with scenes of ascension to heaven. Here, we do not see the feet of saints but a series of shapes, patterns and colours that operate like cephalopod skin: sometimes warning, sometimes camouflaging, and sometimes enticing.<sup>17</sup>

The Facility has an ongoing interest in ultraviolet light, often known as blacklight, which Denise Ferreira da Silva mobilises for its critical theoretical potential to Black Studies. Because UV light can break down cells, it provides an opportunity for “recoding”, and what she calls “poetical readings”. Such “re/de/compositions” are necessary to challenge the entrenched structures of Western thought by dissolving determinacy.<sup>18</sup> Ultraviolet is also a reminder of the narrowness or fallibility of human bandwidth: many birds and undersea creatures are sensitive to parts of the spectrum we cannot fathom.<sup>19</sup> At night UV light bathes *Falsework (toxicology)* in an eerie, otherworldly light.

Other worlds, underworlds, and undersea states are evoked in Sebastian Wiedemann’s *Deep Blue*, made during lockdown in Colombia in 2020. Wiedemann sees the pandemic as a Gaian provocation to look within, to the involutions or folds of matter that unite us all, from microbes to stars, from *Homo sapiens* to *Medusozoa* (jellyfish). Wiedemann calls for cinematic immersion, to make the “invisible visible”.<sup>20</sup> Pandemic suffocation and apnea-like pauses promise a future in which we come together to breathe-with, or *conspire with*, the planet, including our undersea kin, our oldest ancestors. Appropriately, *Deep Blue* is presided over by *Muriel*, a female Ancestor emanating from the depths of the sea. *Muriel* materialises in kelp, and Lichen Kelp is, as her name indicates, also deeply connected to vegetal growths on land and in the sea – she founded the Seaweed Appreciation Society International, or SASi.<sup>21</sup> In *Chromatophores*, Kelp creates an evolving series of ephemeral landscapes – frozen forms that only fully reveal themselves once the ice melts. Periodically activated in a “Kelping” performance, frozen biomodels of cuttlefish habitats are extricated from their ice cave to melt, paralleling the sped-up lifecycle of cuttlefish: their excessive displays, glorious fecundity, and dishevelled decay. Kelp’s practice is alchemical; like the shifting skins and the

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<sup>16</sup> The best local example of a grotto is the Elvis Presley Memorial Garden in the Melbourne General Cemetery.

<sup>17</sup> Flusser writes that the vampire squid utilises a “peculiar type of cryptography that is not meant to be decrypted, or rather, its decryption yields further deceptive encryptions”, which makes sense in relation to *Falsework* (p. 52).

<sup>18</sup> Denise Ferreira da Silva, “In the Raw”, *e-flux*, Issue #93, September, 2018, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/93/215795/in-the-raw/>

<sup>19</sup> The colours of the limited-edition poster/ catalogue essay printed for the exhibition by Glom Press reproduce Ivor Cantrill’s drawings in shades of purple, pink and blue, reflecting the ultraviolet end of the spectrum – how a non-human animal might see them.

<sup>20</sup> Sebastian Wiedemann, “Deep Blue”, *Alienocene: Journal of the First Outernational*, May, 2021, <https://alienocene.com/2021/05/02/deep-blue/>

<sup>21</sup> See: <https://www.seaweedappreciationsociety.com/>

inky squirts of *Sepia apama*, she is interested in the metamorphic nature of matter.<sup>22</sup> Evoking tenuous shared existences, melting permafrost and climate change, Kelp's *Chromatophores* also hint at ancient stories, lost knowledges and the communities which emerge under chaotic conditions; truly, this is artwork of and for the Chthulucene.<sup>23</sup>

While *Baroquetopus* has been assembled under the sign of the octopus, this exhibition is a menagerie of various creatures, from dingos and flying foxes, to jellyfish, cats and dogs, as well as ambiguous patterns that could signal insects, nudibranchs, or other undersea creatures. But octopuses themselves do feature, in Kate Rohde's fanciful "plinths" which might crawl away with their decorative "hoards",<sup>24</sup> and the crocheted baby 'eke by Ani O'Neill. These 'eke have left their mother's lair and swum all the way from Aotearoa, although O'Neill is channelling the totem of her homeland in Titikaveka, Rarotonga. She also takes inspiration from the Samoan belief that the world we live in was built by a primordial Octopus who pulled up rocks from under the sea.<sup>25</sup> The great Māori anthropologist Sir Peter Buck/ Te Rangihiroa conceived of the Pacific Ocean or Moana as a Vā or relational space, and drew the Polynesian islands as the outstretched tentacles of an octopus. Similarly, O'Neill's 'eke stitch together the disparate works in *Baroquetopus* with playful humour, love, and joy.

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<sup>22</sup> Kelp organises an annual artist migration to dive with the giant cuttlefish in South Australia. See: <https://www.forumofsensorymotion.com/fsm-x-la-cephalopod19>

<sup>23</sup> Donna Haraway coined the term Chthulucene to counter the reinforced anthropocentrism of the term Anthropocene. Her emphasis was on chthonic or earth-beings, including "squid, jellyfish, neural extravaganzas, fibrous entities, flagellated beings, myofibril braids, matted and felted microbial and fungal tangles, probing creepers, swelling roots, reaching and climbing tendrilled ones." Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016, p. 32. Taking pains to distance herself from the phobic, racist literature of H.P. Lovecraft in which the Cthulu are first named, rather, Haraway claims she is honouring a spider, *Pimoa cthulhu* and adds an h to emphasise the chthonic, or earthbound nature of the Chthulucene, in contrast to transcendent philosophies that attempt to leave the earth behind.

<sup>24</sup> Rohde's vases held aloft by underwater creatures become all the more poignant considering her recent exhibition at Lismore Regional Gallery was flooded; evidence of the extreme vulnerability of naturecultures in the Chthulucene.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication with the artist, March 20, 2022.