

of the stones. Including the two mural works (*Seven Sleepers* and *A Sleeper*, both 2023) within the Verge exhibition enabled me to re-introduce work from this interrelated series of ‘exhausted’ paintings and sculptures to the *A redistribution* exhibitions, and it has also united divergent strands of my art practice from the last few years.

In the studio, I paint on an inverted horizontal plane. I move my hand-made paper over the tops of individual diffusers while they remain stationary, the clouds of ink which lightly touch the paper registering my movement. It is a meditative process that I can perform in the studio time I fit in around my day-job, often when I’m feeling exhausted myself. I try not to predetermine the composition, and the colours which I overlay combine unexpectedly in places to form rainbow gradients with a backlit luminescence. The resulting marks suggest recognisable glyphs or letters, yet the build-up of finely layered ink obscures any direct reading. Lately, I’ve been presenting these works on paper on reclaimed timber railway sleepers, the choice of substrate contributing to the linguistic play between object, process and referent. It is this rectilinear form I have co-opted for the mural at Verge, the splayed composition of shapes mimicking the proportions of the railway sleepers I have used as the bearers for my works on paper.

Language has provided a structure for the conceptual development of my paintings, and it has become a pattern that has guided the motion of my body while making marks with the diffusers. Rather than considering what has been revealed by this painting method and the increased scale of a mural, I’m curious about what has been excised or obscured. This line of thinking includes the illegibility of overlaid marks made with the diffusers and extends to the masked rectangular shapes that repeat on the gallery wall. This is a shape that is echoed in the black bars that redact sensitive documents and images; a shape that is found in the springboard notches carved by timber-getters into the stumps of trees (source of the sleepers?) logged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and a shape located in the slice of basalt cut from a 700-year-old Polynesian adze crafted on Norfolk Island and taken from a midden on Worimi Country in the 1920s, ground down to a thin section and fixed to a 3” x 1” glass microscope slide.

I think about the tension between what has been removed in the pursuit of development and knowledge, and what has been lost as a result.

CF: To borrow your words Mitch, *a trajectory open to change* is a great way to describe your years of investigations and explorations in which limitations have generated new paths of inquiry and collaborations. It’s also a guiding principle that Adrienne Maree Brown in her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Changing, Changing Worlds* posits for shaping personal and political futures in a world that is in constant flux and that is, in effect, shaping us. In her writing, Brown invites those working for social and environmental justice causes to humbly attune to, and learn with, the natural systems within which we are enmeshed, as opposed to resisting change by trying to best nature. Tangentially, I’m thinking of edges and the pursuits of improvement that you mention – repair of the gallery walls, resurfacing of the stones and flattening of land for agriculture. These are all acts of smoothing out bumps and cavities in the name of human-centred progress. Rather than becoming complicit in the perpetuation of such ideologies, I like to think of you more as attuning with the holes,

cracks and crevices of the basalt. These are the places where water flows, seeps, pools and evaporates. In tidal rock pools, it is where a diversity of sea life finds refuge and has adapted to thrive in the constantly changing conditions. Most of these creatures would suggest you stick to the rock. The waves would tell you to keep moving. The algae would say to keep things slippery.

This conversation took place via email between August 2022 and February 2023. It will continue across future iterations of *A redistribution*.

Under the microscope it looks like an olivine basalt. There are plentiful phenocrysts of olivine, many with magnetite inclusions. There is abundant plagioclase feldspar, and fine-grained augite, magnetite and olivine in the ground-mass. In places the feldspar laths wrap around the olivine phenocrysts. There are occasional olivine alteration veins to a chlorite. Occasionally feldspar laths clump together as ‘dots’. The groundmass looks slightly ‘cloudy’ and finely-granular.

2022, latex ink on Proclear self-adhesive vinyl, 3” x 1”

This exhibition has been developed upon the unceded sovereign Country of Yugarabul, Yuggera, Jagera, Turrbal, Worimi, Dharug, Gadigal and Bidjigal peoples, and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge their intricate networks of knowledge sharing, engineering and food production, and their histories of navigation and trade within and beyond this land.

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*A redistribution*  
 Mitchel Cumming &  
 Kenzee Patterson  
 February 16 –  
 March 31, 2023  
 Verge  
 Gadigal Country/  
 Sydney

*A redistribution* is an iterative exhibition project by Mitchel Cumming and Kenzee Patterson, built around a pair of early colonial basalt millstones used by Thomas West at his Barcom Glen water mill from c.1812–1830. These millstones, now held in the Powerhouse Museum’s collection, function as a conceptual locus around which the rest of the exhibition centrifugally spins.

Resisting dominant Western narratives of settlement, growth, industry and the developmental to which the millstones have been tethered, the artists instead follow the poetic, speculative threads that the stones themselves suggest. Working across sculpture, print-making and installation, Mitchel and Kenzee refine the various material, ethical and political implications bound up in the complex, animate histories of the millstones.

The first iteration of this exhibition took place at Metro Arts, Meanjin/ Brisbane in October 2022.

## Yielding: a conversation between Caitlin Franzmann, Kenzee Patterson & Mitchel Cumming

CF: Let’s begin with the origins of this project, which I feel is anchored in basalt rock. I don’t mean anchored or weighted in the sense of a ‘millstone around one’s neck’. I’m thinking of anchored as in the moment of contact between forged metal and bedrock. Human action, gravity and impact. I’m also casting thought lines to oceanic travels, stillness and the rippling effect of relations.

We could attempt to stretch our minds to billions of years ago when the solar system was a rotating cloud of dust and gas. To motion and speed generating heat and energy. To matter colliding and atoms fusing. Are there too many unknowns to begin at this point?

Maybe there is more sense in starting with the unfolding and folding of Earth’s crust, when volcanic eruptions released water vapour and carbon dioxide, magma very quickly transformed to basalt and new life emerged from ancient oceans. I feel like it is here, in deep time, that we can understand a stone as a being that is active, in process – a being that holds some of the mysteries of life.

I’m questioning the starting point, as it feels like *A redistribution* is about an encounter with ‘very hard stone’ and the process of sensemaking that ensued – searching for meaning in relation to your experiences, asking questions, finding clues, interpreting histories, establishing ethics, following feelings. Waste materials have been transformed physically and conceptually. Stories have been generated and learnings shared, bringing into question how value is attributed to material and labour. An early 19th century millstone might be of value to one person because it is held in a museum and there are written words that confirm its role in the sustenance and growth of the first British penal colony on this continent. The value might be attributed to where it was extracted and the qualities of stone in producing the finest flour. It might hold significance to a descendent of a miller, a stone mason or a convict, whose ancestor’s hands and sweat may have touched and left impressions on the stone.

I can’t help but wonder what drives you to keep asking questions about this material and invite others in on the process. I know that there are so many tendrils of inquiry within the project, but what would you say underpins your research?

KP: I want to begin answering your question by quoting two lines from the 1971 poem *Truth* by the Papua New Guinean poet and scholar Apisai Enos: “Those rocks are not dumb/they have life like we.” I included this quote for several reasons. Firstly, because it highlights the fact that these millstones are

rock, something that is easy to overlook despite the word ‘stone’ appearing in their name, and due to their careful shaping by chisel. They could be mistaken for cast concrete, and sometimes the artwork that I have made from basalt is similarly misread. This has something to do with the blue-grey colour of the stone, but it also relates to the bubbles that are frozen in the surface of the material. This vesiculation, as it is known, would have once been pockets of gas that were trapped as the molten lava solidified.

Another reason for including the lines from Enos’s poem is because these millstones have life, just as we do, albeit life that we cannot fully know. Basalt is a material that wears a clue to its fluid beginnings, and perceiving these two stones also means considering the larger flow of material from which they were originally quarried. Once aware of this, we can then be led to thinking about the molten pools of liquid magma circulating beneath us in the Earth’s asthenosphere, the source of this lava. There are scales of temporality and geography/geology at play within this material that defy easy comprehension, and these millstones have a life history that sits within a geological time frame. They also have a liveliness that occurs at a molecular level, unfolding in the complex relationships with the environments and more-than-human world they have been in proximity to, existing beyond the sensory perception of humans.

I want to emphasise this last point, because while Mitch and I have been getting to know these millstones over the past two years, we recognise that we will not comprehend them absolutely. Ours is an artistic inquiry, following the leads suggested by the stone itself with no endpoint in mind, and we accept that the findings may be inconclusive. We are motivated by speculation into the cycles of material and bodily displacement represented by the millstones and the basalt they are carved from. This is a movement of the human and more-than-human across bodies of water including the Great Ocean, which is tied to both violent colonial expansion and intricate networks of voyaging and exchange.

In our interaction with these stones, we have adopted modes of inquiry native to other disciplines like history and archaeology. We have participated in truly interdisciplinary collaboration with geologists and archaeologists, generating new knowledge about the provenance of the millstones. Sometimes artist-led research like this has real world implications in terms of our understanding of histories and objects. These details are important because they can help to reframe accepted narratives, and this is work that is especially important in the context of Australia’s violent history of invasion and ongoing colonisation. To refer once more to Enos’s poem, these rocks aren’t dumb; they speak some of their story if we know how to listen.

MC: We encountered these stones in a museological context which frames them not as the active, agentic matter that Kenzee describes, but as relics of a sort. Their use-value as millstones having been exhausted, they came to rest in the collection as static checkpoints in a historical narrative of linear, industrial progress. This speaks very clearly to the way the Earth has been perceived within a dominant Western ontology: valued for its productive potential in service of the human, as a resource to be ab-used (literally used up) before being cast back into the category of the inert. And so our initial engagement with the stones was driven by a desire to reanimate them or, rather, to point out that they remain active in and of themselves. The prints that comprise *Redistribution (forbearing / forthcoming)*

seem to suggest that perhaps the problem with written words is not so much that they are slippery, but rather that they are *not slippery enough* to keep up with a world that is constantly moving.

The *Spelt Flour* work speaks to this possibility of a more malleable relationship with language, one that might allow it to better remain in step with matter. It begins as a wall painting of the word ‘basaltes’ as printed in Agricola’s Latin transcription. The word is then sanded back, its materiality ground down into a flour-like powder which is reassembled – temporarily – as another unstable statement hovering between the written and the oral/aural. As a fellow lover of etymology (and coincidence), I find it interesting that until 1830 – the year we estimate West’s mill ceased operations – the English word for finely ground grain was commonly spelled f-l-o-w-e-r. Basalt, an igneous rock formed from once-liquid lava, is of course its own kind of flow-er. And to cap it all off, Pliny himself was killed by the volcanic dust of Vesuvius!

To petal back to the paint staffs, at first I was drawn to these forms because of their functional overlap with maintenance labours in the gallery. In traditional mills, paint would be applied to the staff’s flat edge, which would then be pushed and dragged over the stone’s grinding face, allowing the miller to identify any high points or aberrations that needed flattening. As *Double Zero* also explores, this same obsession with flatness appears in the gallery too, with installers working to ensure its white walls remain pristine, smooth, ‘neutral.’

It was only later that language started to trickle into the paint staff works, both at the level of their titles and also their mode of installation. As we’ve already discussed, the stone’s incorporation into the Powerhouse collection renders them – as writing does for Le Guin – an artefact. Having exhausted their utility, they become a plot point in a linear narrative of technological progress: a *period*. Against this logic of the full stop, our iterative approach to these exhibitions hopes to keep a reading of the stones alive, to think of their apparent stillness more as a pause in a trajectory open to change.

In poetry, the caesura – often represented graphically as two parallel strokes – is a particular kind of break between words: a pause that is guided by the breath of a reader who finds themselves “out of wind” while orating. Here is a stopping that is not full but incomplete, not an end but a necessary moment of rest. For me, the two staffs that form *Caesura...* act as a graphic rupture, and turn the show into a kind of spatialised, rhythmic text.

The virgule (/) is another form of poetic notation used to indicate line breaks in a written poem, which often occur midway through an incomplete phrase. This enjambment, which causes a rift between metrical and semantic sense, is for theorist Giorgio Agamben where poetry’s true power lies. As readers, we have been trained to expect that a logical conclusion will arrive at the end of a line of text, that we will be rewarded with an outcome or resolution of thought. Enjambment toys with this expectation, refusing to deliver discrete closure. In each of the two iterations of *A redistribution* held so far, the virgule has been installed as the last work in the show (if we follow the generic clockwise-from-entry model common to exhibition roomsheets), suggesting the open-endedness of the project Kenzee and I are undertaking.

CF: I want to return to something that was touched on in our last conversation, which is the theme of exhaustion. It exists in your descriptions of the industrial use-value of the millstones being exhausted, of labour, and of non-renewable resource depletion.

It is present materially in Kenzee’s transformation of offcuts – the sculpting of reject sections of bluestone, the assemblage of salvaged railway sleepers and car exhaust pipes and the pulping of discarded matboard collected from various art institutions. It comes through in your explorations of language and many of the work titles. Kenzee, your new wall works for the exhibition at Verge are an extension of your ongoing series of ‘exhausted’ paintings, where you use ultrasonic diffusers to create elegant paintings on handmade paper. My understanding is that you have made hundreds of these whilst living in Brisbane and not yet exhausted the possibilities of the method. Whilst the gestural marks appear considered, it is also apparent that the handling of paint, and the outcomes of diffused paint meeting the textured surface of handmade paper, cannot be entirely controlled. Is this a tension that you are striving to capture in these works? What led you to this method of painting, and what is being revealed to you by extending the process to a larger scale in a wall-based iteration?

KP: This unusual mark-making process has its origins in stone. After completing the basalt sculpture commission in early 2019 I was utterly depleted, and for the first time in my

career I went on a hiatus from artmaking while I repaired my body, relationship and finances. This lasted until the end of 2019, coinciding with the start of the Black Summer bushfires in Australia. As blackened gum leaves fell from the sky and into our yard on Gumbaynggirr Country on the mid-north coast of NSW, I tried to imagine sustainable ways of being an artist. As a reaction to working with the heaviness of basalt I began contemplating how stone could be imitated or implied through other materials, like paper. This led me to marbling, the centuries-old technique which uses ink or paint suspended on the surface of water to transfer marmoreal patterns onto paper. It also led me to debossing, a letterpress process where text and patterns are pressed into the surface of paper, the resulting furrows resembling the subtractive effect of chiselled stone.

After researching paper marbling, much studio experimentation followed while I delved into the etymology of the word ‘exhaustion’ - a sentiment collectively experienced over the past few years. I have often been drawn to unorthodox processes in my artmaking, and when observing a plume of water vapour emanating from an essential oil diffuser my partner had purchased, I was struck by the possibility of using this as a method to transfer paint onto the surface of paper. While I built my own ultrasonic diffuser units and trialled different pigments, paints and inks in the studio I learned that the Latin root of the word exhaustion is a verb which means “to draw up, as in water.” The syntactic relationship between the method of painting and the origin of the word exhaustion has reinforced a conceptual and physical framework for the paintings I have been making, and for a series of sculptures that incorporate reclaimed railway sleepers and car exhaust pipes with the same diffuser units that I use to paint with.

One of these sculptures, *bird of paradise* (2021), was included in the Metro Arts iteration of *A redistribution*. Due to the environmental conditions required to borrow the millstones from the Powerhouse Museum, we decided to remove this work from the Verge exhibition, as the diffused water and Wintergreen essential oil mixture it produces would have posed an unacceptable risk to the preservation



from the Earth’s hollowing crust, or mimic the monocultural farmland that fed the stones while draining the soils of this continent. At the same time, however, they are testament to an admirable form of tireless reproductive maintenance, the endless dressing and redressing of the stones’ faces was a working-in-circles that mirrors the reproductive labours of the artist or arts worker. Again, there is that ambivalence bound up in the stones that won’t let us read activity or stasis, disturbance or rest in any simplistic way, and that instead challenges us to think more deeply about the interplay between these states.

I think it’s also worth noting that Kenzee and I listen differently, are attuned to different stories the stones might tell, or perhaps the different ways they might tell them. Kenzee’s practice is grounded in an intimate, bodily relationship with matter, and his work with the millstones builds upon an existing sensitivity to basalt that he has cultivated over years of working the rock by hand. In my own practice, I am often more concerned with the way art is framed and contextualised than with the actual production of discrete artworks, and I think this has informed the way I’ve approached the millstones to an extent as well. I’ve become very interested, for example, in how the same ideology that drove their extraction and operation persists in the logics of exhibition and display that we, often unwittingly, perpetuate as artists. The erection of West’s Mill on unceded Gadigal land, for instance, depended upon a violent flattening of that terrain – a negation of what Paul Carter would call the ‘lie of the land’ – in favour of a literally stream-lined surface, a smoothed space of frictionless productivity. It is interesting to me that art spaces, supposed respites from this logic of utility and production, so consistently replicate this idealised flatness: walls painstakingly patched and sanded, leaving no trace of their layered histories. Listening to the millstones speak of their colonial past from within the contemporary museum has helped me better understand the links between these two sites, to identify another subtle way in which that colonial mindset persists.

KP: It may seem paradoxical, but the way that I begin to attend to relations that exist among multiple contexts and entities is by narrowing my focus to the personal and the historical.

While these two labels can suggest a type of inquiry that is exclusive and remote, I find that on the contrary they can initiate a generative and inclusive engagement with people, materials and narratives; one that enables urgent and direct connection, and which can collapse temporal and geographical distances. What are initially very specific points of entry gradually open out into expansive, manifold fields of exchange.

Picking up on a tension within your questioning, Caitlin, I too think carefully about the risk of instrumentalising the more-than-human world, or of projecting my own human subjectivity onto it. I see it as an ongoing process of decentering the *Anthropos*, and of recognising the basalt stones “as key constituents of their place”, to borrow from the late eco-philosopher Val

Plumwood. As you suggest, by participating in this kind of dialogical work “feedback” can be produced, and this can also be understood as mutuality or reciprocity.

In responding to your powerful idea of *sensing bodies as receptors of geological messages*, I think that it’s necessary to describe how Mitch and I first came to be in dialogue with the millstones and the larger network of material, historical and geological relationships that converge upon and radiate out from them. In doing so, I think it’s also important to note that within a dialogue there is *somebody* that speaks first: the conversation must be instigated. This exhibition began as a conversation between Mitch and I in which we addressed the millstones. It is a dialogue that continues throughout the iterations of the exhibition, and which has extended to include other collaborators.

I became aware of the existence of the millstones while I was undertaking research for a sculpture commission for the inaugural exhibition at the Lyon Housemuseum Galleries in Naarm/Melbourne. When I visited the galleries building in 2018 while it was still under construction, I observed that the entire exterior of the building was being clad with slabs of basalt, commonly referred to as bluestone. I was immediately drawn to this material, and in seeking to learn more about the cultural and material history of basalt in Australia, I discovered the entry for the millstones on the Powerhouse Museum’s online catalogue.

Soon after this, I began a lengthy process of embodied engagement with the basalt that constitutes the galleries building: first tracking it back to the extinct volcano from which it originally erupted at Mount Rouse, near the town of Peshurst in southwestern Victoria; and then working with the stone in a studio at a bluestone processing facility in Port Fairy, located near the end of the 330,000-year-old lava flow. The Rouse-Port Fairy lava flow belongs to a landscape known as the Newer Volcanics Province, and it contains a cultural and geological topography that is indivisible from the effects of volcanic activity that has occurred there over hundreds of thousands of years. The people, stories and landforms I encountered while undertaking this commission were all interwoven within and among these basalt flows.

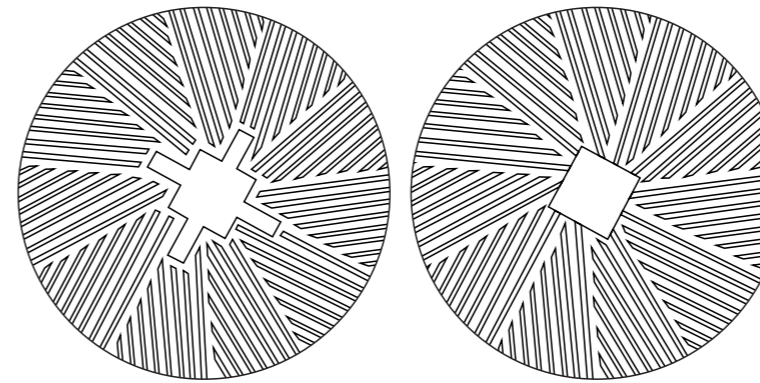
Over millennia, generations of Gunditjmara engineers have worked with the basaltic material of this Country, reshaping the volcanic landscape through the placement of stone, and forming an intricate aquaculture system of dams and eel traps. Through this activity, Gunditjmara people have created what artist and writer Ross Gibson describes as “an abiding memory shared with the basaltic matter.” To work with basalt from this Country then, is to be aware of this abiding memory and the more recent experiences of Welsh, Scottish and Irish dry stone wall builders who also appropriated this material.

In producing this commission, I gleaned my material from piles of offcuts and reject sections of stone: the simple action of lifting and placing the basalt slabs connecting my labour to the techniques of the past. In the studio I sculpted this stone with tungsten carbide tipped chisels and diamond cutting blades and grinding cups. It is a hard, heavy, and sometimes brittle material. Highly vesiculated bluestone holds water like a sponge and cutting into particularly porous sections of stone released a slightly sulphuric smell, bringing the deep past of this matter into the sensory experience of my present. While I was shaping the basalt it was also shaping me, both strengthening and injuring my body.

Returning to the millstones, it is the granular understanding of the basalt I developed during the Lyon Housemuseum Galleries commission that affects my interaction with the millstones now, and it is a comparable curiosity about the provenance of the basalt and a consciousness of the creative and narrative potential embedded within the millstones that have prompted some of my lines of inquiry. In 2020 I spoke

about the millstones with Matthew Connell, Director of Curatorial, Collections & Programs at the Powerhouse Museum, and he informed me that it was his opinion that they had not been quarried in Australia. Reading historical newspaper articles and other texts, Mitch and I developed two theories about their origins: one is that they were quarried on Norfolk Island during the first colonial settlement there in the late eighteenth century; the other is that they originated in the millennia-old basalt quarries in the Eifel region of Germany.

What I find compelling about the theories surrounding the millstones, whether they are accurate or not, is the way in which they parallel the movements of my own convict ancestors. I am still formulating my response to the overlap between the punitive bodily transportation of my ancestors and the extraction and displacement of this stony material, but my inquiry has led to an engagement with museum artefacts and the institutional collections and Traditional Custodians who care for them. Accessing these objects for research and artmaking has necessitated much consultation, and this is another, fundamental form of dialogue within an ethical framework that extends to local First Nations and non-Indigenous people, Country and materials.



CF: It’s been a few months since your exhibition *A redistribution* at Metro Arts in Meanjin/Brisbane. I’ve experienced your works in the flesh and had the chance to be in conversation with you both at the opening event. The works are now coloured by my memories of their texture, sense of weight/weightlessness and perceived relationships to each other. The ideas and stories are flavoured with the immediacy and vitality of speech and body language. When I mistrust my memory, I can return to the audio descriptions of selected works that you developed for the blind and low-vision community in collaboration with Sarah Empey and Sarah Barron. Through these voice recordings, I picture details in my mind of what I did not notice with my eyes – *some of the clear acrylic sheets that from the frames have scratches and markings across their surfaces*. I’m invited to imagine the gravity of the millstones, *wide and squat, mottled from centuries of wear*, the ‘eye’, the edges, the chiselled furrows.

I’m wondering how you are feeling about having the millstones present in this second iteration of the exhibition. How do you think the context of an art gallery might shift the engagement with, and perception of, the stones? What is your intention with moving the stones from one place to another?

KP: These millstones with a deep past have been moving from one place to another for centuries, their origin and earliest paths forgotten for now. Lately, they have sat (relatively) still for decades at a time: first lodged in the ground at the site of Thomas West’s mill in what is now known as Paddington; and subsequently on the pallet racking in the Powerhouse Museum storage facility at what we now call Castle Hill. These millstones are instructive in their dormancy: they inculcate patience in those who address them.

I first entertained the idea of incorporating these millstones as physical objects within an exhibition three years ago, in late 2019. I was hoping to borrow them for inclusion in my solo exhibition *½ to dust* at Darren Knight Gallery, together with basalt sculptures I had made and the work of six other artists I had invited, including Mitch. At that stage I only had access to the upper floor exhibition space at the gallery, and because there was no way of getting the nearly two tonnes of stone up the stairs, I didn’t pursue the loan. Access limitations related to the physical properties of the millstones have consistently affected how we have engaged with them, these constraints often leading to allusive representations as we have explored other ways to presence them.

*½ to dust* took place in March-April 2021 after twice being delayed by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The stones obliquely made their way into the exhibition then, functioning as an oversized paperweight in an offsite, collaborative publishing exercise. Over the course of the exhibition, one of the stones quietly, patiently pressed its weight onto a stack of handmade paper at the Powerhouse Museum’s storage facility, creating the blind debossed print edition *Redistribution (forbearing / forthcoming)* which Mitch has already referred to. It was fitting that the very feature that prevented the millstones’ inclusion in *½ to dust* – their mass – is what we harnessed as our rudimentary printing press.

In August 2021 Mitch and I began planning the exhibitions that would go on to become *A redistribution*, and we again investigated the possibility of borrowing the millstones. We considered including them in the Metro Arts iteration, but we soon realised that the door into the gallery space was not wide enough to allow the millstones’ passage. Instead, during the Metro Arts exhibition in October 2022, the millstones were intimated via the inclusion of *Redistribution (forbearing / forthcoming)*, and by the material properties and embedded narratives of other exhibited artworks like my carved basalt arm *Deep Heat* (2020) and Mitch’s timber paint staffs *Caesura (Out of Wind)* and *Virgule (nothing / Becomes better)* (both 2022). The recordings we created with Sarah Empey and Sarah Barron for the Metro Arts exhibition, which included a physical description and cultural history of the millstones, added extra dimension to this imagining. Through these various metonymies a reasonably full conception of the absent millstones emerged.

As you point out, Caitlin, at Verge we are exhibiting the actual millstones. Arranging to borrow the stones has been a lengthy process of negotiation and consultation, patiently stewarded on our behalf by Tesha Malott, the director at Verge. The formal loan request was submitted in February 2022, after registration staff from the Powerhouse Museum had first visited the gallery in January to evaluate access for the transportation of the millstones, and to install a data logger which measured fluctuations in relative humidity and temperature within the gallery. Approval for the loan was confirmed in August 2022. In the intervening time much work has been done by Tesha attending to the conditions of the loan, with support from Powerhouse Museum registration, conservation and collections staff.

During this period, I visited the millstones in storage with James Flexner and Nicola Simpson from the Archaeology department at the University of Sydney. While we were there,

Nicola used a portable X-ray fluorescence (pXRF) analyser to measure the elemental composition of the stones.

Her analysis of the results supports a convincing argument that the millstones originated in the Eifel basalt quarries of Germany. With Grey Hand Press, a printmaking studio in Meanjin/Brisbane, I've been making polyester plate lithographs based on the bivariate plots Nicola generated during her analysis. These works on paper visualise the millstones through their component trace elements, like yttrium and strontium, as a spray of coloured dots – another form of redistribution.

The materiality of the millstones has contributed the information used to indirectly represent them within the exhibitions and has influenced the environmental conditions deemed safe to accommodate them within the gallery. It has also determined much about how and where they are installed. Powerhouse Museum staff have plotted the route the stones will take from delivery truck to gallery floor, assisted by traffic management contractors. Structural engineers have inspected the suspended floor slab that Verge sits on, their report recommending exclusion zones and a distance between the two millstones that have impacted our curatorial decisions about the placement of these objects and surrounding artworks.

Up until now, a great amount of labour has been expended in relation to the millstones for *A redistribution*, either in lieu of their physical presence or in preparation for their display. Elsewhere, Mitch and I have referred to the millstones as the “unstable anchors” of our project, reflecting their animate state, their uncertain origins, and the fact that the approval of our loan request was not an inevitability. Working towards moving the stones from one place to another has enabled conversations and collaborations resulting in the creation of artworks that borrow from ancient techniques used to dress and address stone, and the remembering of once-forgotten knowledge. I am unsure what effects bringing the millstones into physical proximity with materially and conceptually linked artworks and audio descriptions will produce, although I am hopeful there will be resonances. I imagine that the exhibition and our understanding of these millstones will be enriched when new audiences encounter these old stones.

CF: The interplay between written text and orality of our conversations reminds me of an essay *Telling is Listening* by Ursula K. Le Guin, in which she describes words as "events" that transform both speaker and listener, feeding energy and understanding (or misunderstanding) back and forth and *amplifying* it. She compares the social dynamics of writing and reading to speaking and listening: the former leading to cultural artefact and ease in replication, the latter to the creation of relationship and mutuality. Words, both written and spoken, seem to be as important as material in this exhibition.

Your titles are playful, offering clues into your thought processes and revelations. Mitch, your works *Caesura* (*Out of Wind*) and *Virgule* (*nothing / Becomes better*) comprise wooden paint staffs crafted to replicate tools that would have been used to dress the stones. *Caesura* – a break between words; *Out of Wind* – no longer turning, out of energy; *Virgule* – the slash that substitutes the word “or”, indicating a choice. A choice of nothing or becoming better? I'm heading down a solitary analytical path, where written words tend to lead me.

Your new work *Spelt Flour* leads me on a different path, to meet you again at the centre of the millstone. You used the word ‘centripetally’ to describe your wanderings back to the stones with new questions. I had to look the word up. I like learning new words and their etymology. Now I know that ‘petal’ means seeking, moving towards. Perhaps a flower’s petal is called a petal because it offers a path to those seeking its centre? I find that studying the origins of words can offer insights into cultural and geopolitical shifts throughout history. It can also lead to poetry. There is a sense in this work that language is slippery. Do you trust words? What has the history of languages revealed to you in this project?

MC: I definitely agree with Le Guin’s description of words as “events that transform,” not only at the interpersonal level of reciprocal exchange between users, but also at the level

of worldmaking: language as something that actively participates in the formation (and reformation) of world/s. In the Western tradition, the written word has historically been used to construct a model of the world: to order and categorise it, to build a supposedly stable and complete image of it, to set that ‘truth’ in stone and *then* to impose that truth onto the ontological – to force the real to fit.

In this process one particular role of words, that of naming, is especially important. Naming is in many ways a form of delimitation, drawing the boundaries of what something or someone can or cannot be within this model of world that has been established. It’s interesting to think about the impact of the written here: unlike the fluidity of the spoken word, the drawn or inscribed name has its own graphic or spatial boundaries which come to coalesce with the edges of the things they represent. The form of the letter remains the same, and so we expect the form of the named thing to remain equally static, to keep within its bounds.

Throughout our research into the stones and their use at West's mill, we have come across countless instances of naming and renaming: of places, of materials, of people. The supplanting of Indigenous place-names with references to settler-colonial homelands and figureheads is of course the dominant example here. In his book *The Road to Botany Bay*, Paul Carter talks at length about this process of naming in the construction of so-called Australia. For Carter, a place-name is not something that is merely appended to a site after the fact of arrival, but is an active writing-into-being of this colonial fiction that makes the space conceptually available to the invader.

Beyond these violent acts of overwriting, we've also encountered a number of examples of misnaming, in which terms are inadvertently transcribed or translated incorrectly from one written source to another. One particularly interesting example relates to the term ‘basalt’ itself. Georgius Agricola, in attempting to produce "the first comprehensive scientific classification system of rocks and minerals" (*De Natura Fossilium*, 1546), takes the word from Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* (AD 77). As it turns out, however, the copy he was citing from contained a transcription error, a “ghost word”: Pliny had actually used the term ‘basaniten.’

These moments where naming – the foundational step in claiming to know something, to have determined its unchanging outline – is shown to be fallible are important to me. They point to the constructed quality of a system that attempts to appear ‘natural’ and are in that sense reminders that changes to that structure are indeed possible. They also

traced the stones’ perpetual movement back down towards the earth from which they were cut, even as they sat, supposedly spent, in the museum’s storage facility.

With this early gesture, redistribution as a setting-back-in-motion was posed as a mode of resistance to the stultification of the stone. But this simple dichotomy between ‘good’ movement and ‘bad’ stillness quickly broke down as we continued to explore the millstones’ complex histories. It was, after all, an extractive ideology that saw them hauled out of the ground in the first instance; an expansionist colonial project that set them sailing across the globe; a logic of endless growth and productivity that demanded they labour in support of an invasive settlement on these shores. Their motion is intertwined with the violent displacement of populations and environments, complicating any reading of action as an inherently positive trait. What’s more, to focus on movement alone as evidence of the stone’s agency risks falling back into the same problematic binary logic of the animate/inanimate that has long been used to categorically divide the human from the non-human. So the stones have continually challenged us to reconsider our assumptions about these dual modes of movement and stillness, activity and inactivity.

Beyond this, I think in many ways we keep returning to the stones because they refuse to let us settle on any simplistic reading of their own place in the world. As they oscillate between states of action and rest, they confound and complicate any attempt to know them, to grasp them in a definitive sense. As Robert Grimshaw puts it in his 1882 tome *The Miller, Millwright and Millfurnisher: a Practical Treatise*, “a millstone is proverbially a difficult thing to see through, and what takes place under it is largely a matter for conjecture.” To echo Kenzee, we have embraced the opaque nature of these stones, approaching them speculatively and letting them lead.

CF: There is a sense of humility that I appreciate in your work. Perhaps this is cultivated through your attempts to intimately learn, and unlearn, with the stones. A process in

which knowing the stone is not the priority, or even a possibility. Focus has been placed on allowing narratives to reveal themselves. I too will share a quote, this one by writer and poet Sophie Strand in her essay *What is Ecological Storytelling*: “Human beings did not invent stories, we arrived inside of them. We are told by geological stories with scales too large for us to even grasp.” I offer this quote as I feel it speaks to how, through an unspecified amount of time, you are allowing yourselves to be affected by these stones. And when affected by another entity, there is feedback. Sometimes there is synchronicity.

I wonder about your last statement Mitch – of letting the stone lead. I can relate to this intention within my own processes of inquiry with plants and fungi. I’ve come to accept my active position within the detecting, translating, weaving and telling of stories. I can’t deny that I bring my own histories, my curiosities and my desires to the process and I try to remain aware of perspectives that would benefit unsettling. I experience encounters within an ecology of

networks and relations. It’s like a shapeshifting dance within which there are never just two entities, nor is there a leader. It’s not always an easy dance. I falter when judgement arises. I recalibrate with trust. I find the more that I follow a feeling, the lighter my stride.

How do you let the stone lead? How do you listen? Are your choices based on feelings? Are you engaging your instinct when you begin to follow a new thread of inquiry or to make a particular work? How integral are your sensing bodies as receptors of geological messages?

I’m also curious about the real world outcomes of your interdisciplinary and collaborative inquiry. How much of your inquiry is about confronting and making sense of your own heritage and ethics? What have these stones revealed so far? The tales that lie in their chiselled furrows? What has its bodily weight pressing ‘DEEP HEAT’ into layers of reconstituted paper exposed?

MC: I think you are absolutely right to problematise the language of leading and being lead. It goes to show how embedded these notions are culturally and linguistically, that the complex dynamism of the world is so quickly reduced to one-directional power relations. Simply inverting that dynamic – letting the stones take up the mantle, in this case – only reinforces that limited perspective.

I find your description of encounters and relations much richer and closer to our actual experience, one in which there is more of an ebb and flow between ourselves and the stones. In fact, we’ve started to think of the development of these exhibitions almost centrifugally: just as the rotating millstone drove ground flour outwards from its centre for dispersal, we come to the rock with our own questions and are thrown back out again in various directions, often quite unexpected ones. And then gradually, centripetally, we wander back again with new questions.

One way that Kenzee and I have tried to listen to these stones, a way that doesn’t seek to deny or discount our own intentionality, has been to invite them into the conversations we were already having with one another: about our practices, our ethics as artists, and how these creative pursuits might fit within and impact the broader cultural and political contexts that house them. Rather than making works *about* the stones, then – simply extracting their story as content – they have become active participants in ongoing, reciprocal dialogues: shaping and reshaping our thinking about the field we work in, and the relationship this field has to a wider world.

A persistent aspect of these dialogues in recent years has involved a questioning of what it means to work materially in a time of extreme resource exhaustion, both at the micro/personal level – the physical, emotional and financial toll that maintaining a practice can take – and at the macro/global level – in a world driven to the brink of collapse by extractive ideologies of production and improvement. The stones’ own story bridges these various senses of exhaustion in compelling ways. Their chiselled furrows, for instance, might hint at the violent cuts required to exhume them