The Tangible Trace

The idea for this exhibition developed from a conversation with the artist Sangeeta Sandrasegar. We have long wanted to work together and we have often discussed the meaning and metaphor of the shadow, a primary element in her oeuvre. In thinking about the shadow, one inevitably recalls Pliny's claim that the origin of painting lay in the story of Kora, daughter of the potter Butades of Sicyon, who made an outline of a shadow cast on the wall by her departing lover.[1] A second myth that is often cited in relation to the shadow is Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave', where he describes the shadows experienced by prisoners in a cave.[2] Victor Stoichita argues that while Pliny sees the shadow as 'the other of the same', for Plato the shadow is 'the same in a state of double'. [3] From these classical beginnings, the idea of representation is seen to be something other than mimetic: there is a difference between the origin and its representation. In the hands of an artist such as Sandrasegar, the shadow is elevated in importance so that its 'otherness' or 'doubling' are transformed into the primary place of metaphor. While her shadows may appear intangible, their presence is tangible. They seem material, physical, and even tactile.

While Sandrasegar and I were in conversation over a period of two years, I was working on the art of the Australian modernist Joy Hester, and came across the following phrase in one of her extraordinary poems: 'the tangible shadow'. I immediately thought of Sandrasegar's work and then wondered if there might be another word we can use to honour the presence of these palpable and lingering shadows. A trace, in its most basic form, is a mark or imprint made by a person or thing. To trace is to draw a line, make an outline, to ponder, to investigate, to map out. Indeed, Pliny's account is as much about the act of tracing as it is about the shadow. The shadow of the lover's profile on the wall engenders both the action and residue of trace.

This exhibition, *The Tangible Trace*, evolves from this cluster of concepts—tangibility, the shadow or imprint as a metaphor for the 'other', the 'double', and the trace. Francis Alÿs, Carlos Capelán, Simryn Gill, Shilpa Gupta, Hiwa K and Sangeeta Sandrasegar explore the concept of trace through tangible fragments—natural materials, pressings, mappings, markings, journeys and gestures. The artworks in *The Tangible Trace* use the metaphor of the trace to invoke sensations that can be seen, felt, experienced and even touched in our real environments. The trace is both an absent presence and a present absence and evokes the complex ways in which the artists engage with the world around them. For each of them, place and situation are entangled. They apprehend their surroundings as a living body of knowledge, tracing and retracing their more often than not oblique relationship with it. In their artworks, the trace is both a residue of an absent or past situation, and also part of the formation of a new memory or action.

In his *Natural History*, Pliny claims that while the geographic location of the first painting is uncertain, 'all agree that it began with tracing an outline around a man's shadow and consequently that pictures were originally done in this way'.[4] He goes on to cite the aforementioned myth of Butades, a potter from Sicyon, who modelled the first portraits from

clay. Butades pressed clay onto his daughter's drawing of her lover's profile and made a relief. As Hagi Kenaan has shown, Pliny's recall of the birth of painting is more about the 'act' of painting, than about painting as an object:

> Butades draws the first line as she finds herself in and responds to an unresolved tension intrinsic to the human condition. This is the tension between the character of the world as a domain of meaningful things which we want and love and care about and the character of the world as a place in which we inevitably also find ourselves separated and cut off from, forsaken by the things and people we care about and love.[5]

And further:

> Her act is not an attempt to replace absence with a new form of presence but, on the contrary, it reflects an attempt to create a new place for her self in between the opposite poles of absence and presence.[6]

To trace, then, is arguably to not simply see the world, but to reflect upon it, to find a place for oneself between its absence and its presence. It is an action of uncovering and unfolding. It is also an action of being in the world. Kenaan's observations allow the term trace a wider metaphorical horizon: 'Butades's act reveals the depth of the visual … his is the possibility of not merely seeing the world, but of seeing the world as that which is seen'.[7] As is outlined below, the artists in this exhibition are engaged in this action of placing themselves between the 'opposite poles of absence and presence'.

The term trace is also often associated with the archive: specifically an archaeological collection of objects or traces from the past. In his analysis of the differences between the term archive, and the term trace, Gavin Lucas suggests that conventionally the concept of memory has been understood in terms of mental testimony on the one hand, and material trace on the other.[8] Historians have conventionally looked at written documents, while archaeologists have looked at material traces. Documents and photographs are seen as evidence of an event, while material traces are seen as evidence of a solid entity, such as an ancient monument. In order to question this separation of terms, he draws on the concept of the palimpsest, a manuscript that has had the previous text washed away, but nevertheless bears signs of the original text under the new text. Using the palimpsest as a metaphor, Lucas suggests that both archival documents and material traces have a temporal life cycle. Moreover, he argues that:

> The notion that a trace can be defined as a material memory highlights the importance of how the past is preserved in, or is contemporary with the present … An imprint on a block of wax or a footprint in the sand is not a sign of an event (even though that is how one can see either of them); they are actual physical remnants of the event itself, of someone writing or of an animal walking across the desert.[9]

Most importantly, for Lucas, is the temporal nature of these traces, the fact that they exist both in the past and in the present. Rather than see the palimpsest as a product of inscription and erasure, he suggests that it is 'more fruitful to see it as a process of de-organizing and reorganizing of matter'.[10] Following on from this argument we can understand the trace to be a product of an assemblage of events and material objects that has re-materialised over time and is not easily reversed. Through his analysis, we can see that when the artists in this exhibition engage with the trace, they do so with the knowledge that a trace exists in both the past and the present. A trace re-materialises over time; it is temporal.

In his analysis of how memory works, Sigmund Freud drew on the analogy of the 'mystic writing pad', a tool that was readily available in the 1920s. Not unlike today's 'magic slate', the pad was made of three layers. The bottom layer was made of resin or wax, the middle layer was a wax sheet, and the top layer was transparent. When one writes on the top layer it is erased by lifting the celluloid sheet, but the imprint is retained on the lower layers. This palimpsest represented for Freud the layers of perception, short-term memory and permanent trace that occur in our memory system. Memory acquires resilient traces while also receiving new imprints. Memory is an active intersection of traces.

In his analysis of Freud's 'Mystic Writing Pad', Jacques Derrida proposes that there is not a simple relationship between a trace and its origin. In Freud's texts on the memory-trace, the unconscious follows a pathway of traces, and a system of deferrals. Derrida extends the analogy to apply to language itself. Language operates through a series of traces. He comments: 'we must be several in order to write, and even to "perceive"".[11] Seeking to liberate the concept of trace from the idea of its presence, he instead focuses on the fact that it 'is constituted by the threat or anguish of its irremediable disappearance, of the disappearance of its disappearance'.[12] Derrida's deconstructionist project seeks to break down a direct link between a written word and its meaning. Instead, according to Derrida, the written word inherently suggests the absence of a presence, a trace. Language is complex, meanings of words do not have a simple origin, and instead, there are differences between meanings, deferrals of meaning, which he terms '*différance*'. Each word has within it the traces of other words. If everything is a trace, then nothing can be universalised, but also, if everything is subject to its absence, through its not being there, there is always a slippage of meaning. While Derrida's project is far more complex than these brief comments indicate, it does point to the complexity of the concept of trace from a philosophical point of view, a complexity that is embraced by the artists in this exhibition. Their works play with a rich array of metaphors that arise from the trace's ability to defer meaning over time. The shuttling that is inherent in the trace, between presence and absence, is the space of their creativity. Therefore, the material 'remains' that they work with resist representing a singular impression of the world around them.

As we have seen above, the trace can be understood as an action of being in the world; it can be a product of the assemblage of materials and events that re-materialise; and it can be an analogy for the ways in which language constantly defers meaning. There is a performative

nature to these qualities of trace. Rather than being a signifier of disappearance or death, the trace comes to be an action, performed, resituated, re-assembled in a place between absence and presence. There are echoes at play, resonances between traces within individual works, and also between them.

The series of tall narrow windows along a passageway in the Museum is the site for Melbourne-based Sangeeta Sandrasegar's work, *What falls from view*, 2019. Through this view are Indigenous, settler and immigrant stories embedded in how the land has been interpreted, shaped and cultivated. Sandrasegar covers the windows with five panels comprising a layer of Indian khadi cotton over-hung with silk organza; hand-dyed with indigo and Australian native cherry, the combined materials create an overlay of colours and texture. Each panel covers the window, so that the view is obscured, and instead, the winter sun illuminates and casts an abstract shadow into the space, providing its own natural shifts through the work. While the fabric, touched by the light of the sun, is tangible, it offers an understanding of 'what falls from view', what is absent, what lies beyond the trace. We look at a void in the centre of each panel, where the window is situated. Rather than gaze beyond the window frame, we are forced to recollect the view, through the shifting intensities of light that appear in the fabric and the lingering shadows that fall across the passageway. The work is accompanied by a musical piece by Australian composer Ross Edwards, entitled *Symphony No. 1 'Da Pacem Domine'* (1991), a sombre work that has been described as 'more like an extended chant over a pulsing drone note, interrupted by occasional bursts of sunlight into its sorrowing darkness'.[13] The combination of references to Indian and Australian dyes, in the company of Edwards's composition that mixes Buddhist influences with traces of the Lord's Prayer, not only gestures towards the Tarrawarra Monastery, which lies beyond the view, adjacent to the TarraWarra Museum property, but also to the ways in which a trace can be fed through processes of (re)location and (dis)location. In this installation the trace reverberates both materially and sonically.

Domino Theory, 2014, is a series of vitrines and objects created by Port Dickson/Sydney-based artist Simryn Gill. Created in 2014, this is the first occasion that this major work has been seen in Australia. Domino theory was a belief held from the 1950s through to the 1980s that if one country came under the impact of Communism, others around it would soon follow. Based on the notion of fear it was one of the main reasons why powerful nations, such as America, would have a military presence in smaller nations. Dominoes is also an ancient game of numbers and chance, first mentioned during the Song Dynasty in China, in which one rectangular black piece with white dots is joined to another that matches it in order to form a line. These blocks can also be lined up on their edges so that they 'fall', much like the countries infected by Communism would, one by one.

Gill is a collector who roams and finds objects and substances that have been worn by time, broken down and weathered. Inside each of Gill's vitrines are bits and pieces of clay and stone found on the beach in Port Dickson, Malaysia. Some of these natural forms are the size of a breadcrumb and would normally be absorbed by the ebb and flow of the sea, specifically the Strait of Malacca, a busy shipping route. These small forms would be weathered as much by

water as they are by the leaking elements of global trade. In addition, the vitrines include a number of cube-like forms which the artist has created from soil that she found in and around termite mounds in Port Dickson. These cubes vary in colour depending on what the termites had brought to their nest, be it industrial or natural materials.

Arranged in sequences, questions arise as to what is a trace and what is an object? What comprises residue and what is made anew? How are each of these fragments related to one another, and does one impact the other? These objects do not line up precisely, nor do they 'fall into line' like a domino. Each of these fragments represents a trace of its original yet unknown condition, but is also part of a larger artist's collection, co-belonging, as it were, in a new assemblage that speaks to the survival of minute yet tangible substances. Moreover, Gill's vitrines recall an archaeological record, or archive, yet the pieces are unidentified, and arranged at the will of the artist. As such, her archive misbehaves, does not follow the 'law' of the archive, and instead invokes what Doreen Mende refers to as 'the undutiful daughter's concept of archival metabolism'.[14] The metamorphosis of these forms is imprecise, their temporality is not measured and the objects speak to a different set of principles from the patriarchal nature of the archive—abject, unidentified, unpredictable.

A Malaysian hotel in ruin is the source of a second body of work by Gill entitled *Passing Through*, 2017–ongoing. The series began with photographs the artist made of areas in the bathrooms of a once luxury resort—small crevices under the sinks or the walls from which the copper piping has been taken. What is left is a cavity, a trace, around which Gill inked the square bathroom tiles in bright colours. She then made monotypes from these inked tiles, so that the cavity is transformed into an irregular, white shadow as it were—a negative space in the image corresponding to the negative space in the wall. In a similar fashion, the artist covered large areas of the hotel's former tiled dance floor with ink to produce another series of monotypes. For this exhibition, Gill will pair a selection of these mosaic patterned coloured prints with photographs of the remains of the now less than accommodating building. In this way, the artist's ongoing revisitation of this site in transition 'passes through' various iterations, media and metamorphoses. Like a series of echoes, these traces reverberate in the space of the exhibition with resonances of both past and present, never quite settling, but rather being part of a circuit of impressions.

Hiwa K's video *Pre-Image (Blind as the Mother Tongue)*, 2017, charts the artist's journey through the streets of Athens, a city that he had walked through some twenty-five years prior when he arrived in Europe by foot from Kurdish Iraq eventually to find refuge in Germany. The artist has constructed an object comprised of motorbike mirrors attached to a long stick that he balances on his nose as he walks. Inevitably, his stride is interrupted, and his awareness is only of what is immediately below him as he gazes up at the mirrors. This vertical gaze creates a series of traces and fragments of his situation and his location and does not allow for the horizontality or panopticon viewpoint that a citizen might have. It is instead an anxious gaze, a journey fraught with a set of what the artist terms 'pre-images'. Hiwa K retraces his original journey, but does so by creating a new set of images that become a mobile assemblage of fragments. We see him

traverse the varied locations of Athens—the port, the centre—as he struggles to navigate and find his way. These 'pre-images' are a composite of appearance and disappearance.

Rebecca Schneider has discussed the notion that the performance artist's body 'becomes a kind of archive and host to a collective memory':

> This body, given to performance, is arguably engaged with disappearance chiasmatically – not only disappearing but resiliently eruptive, remaining through performance like so many ghosts at the door marked 'disappeared'. In this sense performance itself becomes itself through messy and eruptive reappearance, challenging, via the performative trace, any neat antinomy between appearance and disappearance, or presence and absence.[15]

As Hiwa K walks the streets of Athens, his own body no doubt transmits his memories of his previous journeys, not as an original of this trace, but rather as part of the assemblage of seen and forgotten objects and encounters. One journey becomes part of another.

Carlos Capelán's paintings are also motivated by an oblique view of the world. These works depict the outlines of a figure, both as portraits and as a bodily form, against a patchwork of abstract squares and rectangles that have, in turn, been inspired by analytical cubism and geometric abstraction. These figures are like spectral images, and their multiple gazes are both towards the viewer and into an undefined distance. They are like ghosts or echoes from the past. Indeed, he has referred to the faces in his work as 'stuttering portraits'. An enduring image in Capelán's oeuvre is the anamorphic appearance, so that only an alternative perspective onto the picture can bring it back into proportion. This oblique perspective has roots in Capelán's own experience of exile from Uruguay in 1973 (a country that he now continues to spend time in). The figure of the exile is often portrayed askew and here the figure is returning that gaze with multiple images.

Tattooed with broad brushstrokes, the faces that stare directly at us have hollow eye sockets. The faces with eyes avert their gaze, looking out beyond our location in the space. The heads have no body and tumble and turn in the midst of intersecting geometric planes. There is also a recurring image of a headless body sheltering itself from an unknown threat. Capelán's new paintings are layered in the most complex of ways, so that the picture plane is anything but flat as the jostle of abstract planes and figurative traces intersect across the canvas. These lines and traces are entangled, decentred, and fragmented. They seem to both dematerialise and rematerialise before our eyes. We can't help but think of the tides of people on the move, particularly in an image such as *Extended Family (Arrival),* 2019.

Entitled *Implosion*, this series of paintings may be seen as a metaphor for the contemporary experience of complexity. Modernism is imploding here, and by implication so too is the modernist art museum, as the figurative traces give rise to decolonial perspectives. The artist is present in many of these works, as a self-portrait, particularly in the work *Map of the World*

(Thursday), 2018, a painting on paper in which the self-portrait is comprised of abstract geometric shapes and colours. Maps of the world have been determined by colonial power and so too have the institutions of art. In *Self-Portrait as a Museum*, 2019, the artist's own portraits are presented as paintings on a wall of geometric abstract patterns. Flipping the modernist idea of the autonomy of the artwork and allowing the other to speak as self-authorising agent, Capelán's tangible traces reinforce a new position where the colonial subject is speaking back. The averted gaze comes to be a non-representational representation of the 'other'.

Shilpa Gupta has created a map of Australia as part of her ongoing series of *Map Tracings*. The outline of Australia is made with copper tubing that has been rubbed and treated, and the piece is then folded so that its proportions and shape differ from the image that we are used to seeing in Australia. It hangs partially on the floor and on the wall, almost collapsing. Gupta invites us to consider the role of the border as a boundary, the space in which we live and travel from and to, but also as the nation-state, the place of power. Moreover, as Chaitanya Sambrani indicates in this catalogue, the map of Australia invites consideration of the tortuous history of Australia's treatment of its First Peoples and indeed, the myth of terra nullius. This boundary has also provided the terms by which our country accepts immigrants and refugees. As such Gupta's collapsing map no longer holds the nation state intact, but instead posits a porous relationship between inside and outside.

Map Tracing #7 - AU, 2019, is presented in combination with a new floor work engraved with the phrase 'The markings we have made on this land have increased the distance so much' in English, Hindi, Arabic and Chinese. Again there is the suggestion of the colonial encounter: the 'marks' made on the land have the effect of increasing the gap between First Peoples and their invaders. Broken and fragmented, pieces of this work can be taken away by visitors, so that by the end of the exhibition, there is only a trace of the original form. As these traces are carried into the lives of other people, so too are the varied combinations of language and marking, suggesting a transcultural understanding of the world. The phrase also invokes the idea of map-making itself, the marking out of land, and the measuring of distance, but injects into this process an emotional tenor of longing. This emotional component of the movement of peoples and belonging is something that cannot be mapped nor bound by any border. Michel de Certeau asserts, 'surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by' and suggests that map-making, and geographical systems, cause 'a way of being in the world to be forgotten'.[16] Gupta, by contrast, puts into action the practice of being in the world through the literal embrace of the trace.

In the video installation *Paradox of Praxis 5: Sometimes we dream as we live & sometimes we live as we dream, Ciudad Juárez, México*, 2013, made in collaboration with Julien Devaux, Rafael Ortega, Alejandro Morales, and Félix Blume, Francis Alÿs is seen kicking an enflamed soccer ball through the streets of Ciudad Juárez at night. Ciudad Juárez is a border town city which provides the most common routes from North and Central Mexico into the USA. Once identified as the most dangerous city in the world, Ciudad Juárez, while still in the throes of crime, is also now

becoming more industrialised, with many global companies basing their manufacturing there. Within the context of this volatile and tormented city, Alÿs introduces his characteristic act of 'play'. Illuminated only by the light of the fire, we glimpse details of facades, the underbelly of the freeway, shadowy figures in corners, the faint sounds of the city at night, and we wonder at how he does not catch on fire during these tricky manoeuvres. At times, Alÿs is propelled by the soccer ball's route as much as he, too, drives it through the streets. It is a collaborative performance, where the trace of this route becomes a bodily and perceptual memory that illuminates the city's restless energy and imploding violence. In conversation with Russell Ferguson about similar works made in Mexico City, the artist comments:

> Because of the immense amount of material produced on a daily basis by a huge city … it is very difficult to justify the act of adding another piece of matter to that already saturated environment. My reaction was to insert a story into the city rather than an object. It was my way of affecting a place at the very precise moment of its history, even just for an instant. If the story is right, if it hits a nerve, it can propagate like a rumour. Stories can pass through a place without the need to settle. They have a life of their own.[17]

To travel through these streets at night is to also absorb the temper of the city—the sounds, temperature and peripheral activities—into the body as traces. This passage through the city and the aphorism that accompanies it—'sometimes we dream as we live & sometimes we live as we dream'—echoes within our own bodies as we leave the Museum into an environment that is in stark contrast to Ciudad Juárez. Yet, as we depart the Museum via the corridor of fabric panels and lingering shadows by Sangeeta Sandresegar, we experience not the veil of night, but the tangible light of day touching the coloured fabric in a gesture that also brings together situation and trace into an aesthetic collaboration.

The artists in this exhibition have each responded to a given set of sensations, situations and locations in the world, creating and observing tangible traces that reverberate with impressions of both past and present. The artworks in *The Tangible Trace* express the notion that the world can be seen, felt, and experienced through the metaphor of trace. These works consider the implications of (re)location and (dis)location of objects and people, without forming an originary perspective. Rather, the artworks participate in processes of de-materialisation and re-materialisation of these traces, in space, and over time, embracing the continual deferral of meaning that comes about through non-sequential and non-linear assemblages. The gap between these trace fragments is a fertile space for analogy and metaphor. These spaces and intervals between the images, works, objects and fragments, manifest the condition of the trace: being both present and absent at the same time. Material, situated and responsive, the tangible traces created by the artists co-belong in this exhibition. A single artwork is not subsumed by another, rather, they echo one another. Art is seen as something that is not cut off from life, but connected to multiple and changing histories, places, events and situations. This exhibition suggests that it is through the metaphor of the trace—as both noun and verb—that

art connects with the question of what it means to belong in our turbulent and shifting world.

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