

BACK TO LIFE

for Simone

(for the land and waters damaged; for the dis-possessed)

I 'met' Simone's work before I met her, almost exactly 20 years ago. We have been through Masters and PhD programs together. Decades of conversations and critiques have unfolded between us.

What I offer here, by way of opening (speaking of) her show, is a response rather than an interpretation.

What I offer is based on what is called up in my own imagination (what plays upon my mind; touches and troubles me).

What I offer—what seems to be invited by the work of this artist—is a serious kind of play.

A play between what is seen and not seen; what can and what cannot be spoken/controlled/understood; between what has and has not been taken (transformed beyond recognition);

WHAT IS LOST (**SWEPT AWAY**) AND WHAT MAY STILL BE SAVED.

I think about the gulf just beyond the dunes—here—purged of seagrass, of life (swept away)

*'There are no shells here' she says—my friend—Ngankiburka-mekauwe (Senior Woman-of-Water)
Georgina Williams SPIRITUAL ELDER-FEMALE CLAN CUSTODIAN OF THIS COUNTRY: SOUTHERN KAURNA-YERTA*

THERE IS (HERE; INCREASINGLY) NO REFUGE, NO SANCTUARY; NO SPACE FOR RECOVERY; REPAIR

Ernst Van Alphen wrote in 2001 about the French artist Christian Boltanski who declared that 'all his work is more or less about the Holocaust'... Van Alphen notes that this is not obvious when looking at all of Boltanski's work; some of which shows normal everyday images, some playful... comical scenes, that would seem to be 'the opposite of the apocalyptic horror of the Holocaust.'ⁱ He quotes from an interview with the artist who says that his art attempts to 'erase and forget' his own childhood; to normalize it... Van Alphen suggests that this kind of art 'does not represent reality [but rather] ... it is a mode of **transforming** an insufferable reality into something normal, that is something sufferable... [it is] performative [acting upon; acting out] an intense desire for normality'...ⁱⁱ

ON THE PHONE SIMONE AND I TALK ABOUT THE 26 IMAGES (EACH WITH ITS OWN 'ALPHABET PRIMER PAGE') THAT MAKE UP THE SHOW 'BACK TO LIFE'; I LOOK AT THE IMAGES (ANIMAL-VEGETABLE-MINERAL/INSECT-MAMMAL-FISH): FRACTURED PARTS ASSEMBLED IN NUMBERED SEQUENCE, EACH A WORLD A-PART-FROM THE OTHERS, EACH A SINGULAR MOMENT

CAUGHT

I am taken by two impressions—visible and in-visible:

- 1) the—very human; child-like—expressions of the eyes that stare—still—out toward the viewer, TRANSFIXED;
- 2) a text I recall reading years ago: a sequence in a chapter titled THE GEOLOGY OF MORALS written by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattariⁱⁱⁱ. In this text [WHICH I RECOUNT TO SIMONE FROM MEMORY] Deleuze and Guattari tell a surreal narrative tale made up of assembled, fractured, parts. The tale is written with the flavor of stage direction—unfolding as a kind of written dream; comical and strangely unsettling; a flow of free association—which begins as a character from a novel delivers a lecture to a disgruntled audience. In this tale the distinction between geological, organic, and anatomical form is obliterated... as is the distinction between self and other; sense and non-sense; memory and forgetting... expressive forms of one kind or another are **TRANSMOGRIFIED...** undergoing violent permutations; arms cracking and folding backwards; performing impossible involutions. In this narrative the authors, as I recall it, suggest that each human individual has undergone such permutations: the splitting, divisions, and folds of the evolutionary journey of life: from cell to complex structure, from sea to land—experienced prior to conscious memory—as embryo within the womb.

TRANSMOGRIFIED... SHE—SIMONE—SAYS... THAT WORD IS IMPORTANT... I LOOK IT UP AFTER OUR CONVERSATION Online dictionaries list its meaning... in Merriam-Webster it means: 'to change or alter greatly and often with grotesque or humorous effect';^{iv} in Cambridge: to change or be changed completely... an example is given: *Almost overnight, that sweet, little child had transmogrified into an antisocial monster.*^v

WE TALK ABOUT THE 'PRIMER' SHE HAS WRITTEN TO ACCOMPANY THE IMAGES... I PICK A COUPLE OF LINKS FROM A GOOGLE SEARCH... THE FIRST IS FROM WIKIPEDIA: *A primer is a first textbook for teaching of reading, such as an alphabet book or basal reader. The word also is used more broadly to refer to any book that presents the most basic elements of any subject.*^{vi} THE SECOND LINK IS FROM A CHAPTER TITLED '**AVOIDING PRIMER LANGUAGE**' IN A WEBSITE TITLED *THE GUIDE TO GRAMMAR AND WRITING*... THIS HAS THE TONE OF REPRIMAND: *Primer style is characterized by too many short sentences. It is important to note that there is nothing inherently wrong with short sentences. Too many of them in a small space, however, can remind readers of material they read in kindergarten or first grade: See Dick. See Dick chase Jane. See Jane run.*^{vii}

I THINK OF THE MATERIAL **SOAP**—think of a convention anecdotally recalled from childhood, of washing the mouth out—I can recall the taste of the soap but remember experiencing this as experiment rather than as punishment for the use of 'inappropriate language'. I THINK OF THE WAY IN WHICH PEARLS ARE PRODUCED ON THE OCEAN FLOOR, each one made, as I recall, from the re-action of one soft body to an irritant. A grain of sand is the typical catalyst.

I RECALL, AGAIN, THE CONVERSATION WITH SIMONE: **YELLOW** [SIMONE SAYS] is a paradoxical colour... seen against white it disappears; paired with black [SHE SAYS] the same shade provides the very clearest communication— without a single spoken; written word—it operates—emulates/echoing—across vastly different language systems, human and non-human, as the sign of warning: think the stinging part of a bee or wasp; roadside hazard markers... The yellow of the printed script on the primer page for each painting had to be darkened/dirtied [SHE SAYS] to render it visible.

Returning to Van Alphen's text—THINKING ABOUT THE IMPLICIT REFERENCE TO EDUCATION IN SIMONE'S PRIMER—I read his take on the traditional Western convention of learning: 'linear, cumulative and progressive... [leading to] mastery over the object of learning... [a conception of teaching which] assumes a collapse of two forms of mastery: to know and to dominate. If the past is known, the future can be kept under control...'^{viii} The Holocaust, he says: *is first and foremost a history of trauma, that is, a history of non-mastery... [and requires a teaching that] has nothing in common with the transmission of ready-made knowledge. It is rather the creation of a new **condition** of knowledge, the creation of an original learning-disposition.*^{ix} Van Alphen looks to artists of 'second, third and fourth generation... post-Holocaust survivors and bystanders' who address the trauma of the event through art works that take the form of toys—for adults—presenting the possibility of identification with both perpetrators and victims through performance and play-acting.^x These artists, Van Alphen suggests, are making 'purposeful attempts to shed the [feeling of] mastery that Holocaust narratives provide.'^{xi} Rather than raising 'obstacles to a felt knowledge of the emotions these events entailed' by placing the event, safely, in a distant past; these younger artists 'entice' the viewer into an emotionally entangled relationship with trauma and loss that 'does not know that distance toward the event'.^{xii}

IN 'BACK TO LIFE' SIMONE BRINGS TOGETHER PARADOXICAL JUXTAPOSITIONS OF APPARENTLY UNRELATED PARTS IN WAYS THAT ENTICE AND TROUBLE; OFFERING PLAYS BETWEEN DIFFERENT SYSTEMS OF SIGNIFICATION: WORD, IMAGE, MATTER. Viewing these works, in this place, I feel distance collapsing—EXPERIENCE AN ENTANGLEMENT BETWEEN MEMORY AND FORGETTING—between the first European incursions into Ancestral 'country'—cared for, pristine, for thousands of years—and the gentrified amenity of suburban expansion currently sweeping through: altering, appropriating; encroaching again upon the last of the open space places...

ONE FORM OF EXPRESSION FOLDS INTO THE OTHER: UNHINGING—DIS-ABLING, DISTURBING—THE BALANCED ECOLOGIES OF THE NOT-SO-DISTANT PAST

Lisa Harms, May 2018

ⁱ Ernst Van Alphen, 'Toys and Affect: Identifying with the Perpetrator in Contemporary Holocaust Art,' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 2: 2, 2001, 159.

ⁱⁱ Van Alphen (2001), 163.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

^{iv} Merriam-webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transmogrify>, accessed 4 May 2018.

^v Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/transmogrify>, accessed 4 May 2018.

^{vi} Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primer_\(textbook\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primer_(textbook)), accessed 3 May 2018.

^{vii} *Guide to Grammar and Writing*, <http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/primer.htm>, accessed 3 May 2018.

^{viii} Van Alphen (2001), 167.

^{ix} Van Alphen (2001), 169.

^x Van Alphen (2001), 189.

^{xi} Van Alphen (2001), 185-186.

^{xii} Van Alphen (2001), 185.