Extractive Realism

ROSS GIBSON

Here is a fine haiku by the Japanese poet Seishi, a twentieth-century master:

The signal pistol
Echoes on the hard surface
Of the swimming pool.
(Blyth 346)

And this tiny gem is by the contemporary Australian writer Robert Gray, matching Seishi for precision even though Gray's poem is fashioned from a much looser part of the world:

Torpid farmland afternoons.
A windmill stirs
as a bubble breaks in buttermilk.
(Gray 'Twenty Poems' 91)

Entire systems of reality are sketched quickly but exactly in these works. Shifts of scale spring from quickly conjured settings. Note all the perspectives offered in each poem, how in an instant your sensibility grabs several vantages on the scenes. Conjunctions of heat and smell and sound all shuttle across your cognitive frame, putting you here and there in a flash, giving you sudden and intense access to realities within the settings that are being witnessed. From the intimacy of your own witnessing body, you span out to encompass sharp details of large places—the hard acoustic slap in a swimming pool that's big enough for tournaments; the almost-imperceptible transpiration across flatland paddocks that need more water than raw nature supplies. And then in the next instant, as the meagre syllables slip along, memories pulse suddenly within you to bring you quickly back close to yourself via past time. All this occurs in a rhythm that folds the larger world and you together unstintingly. Appreciating Seishi's and Gray's crystalline miniatures, you know closeness as well as vastness in a retinue of glimmering moments. Emphasising definitive details of lived experience so exactly, both poems are realist.

Seishi once explained why utterances as tiny as these can be so thrilling, so revelatory. In an aside made to acknowledge his admiration of the French symbolist poets, he quoted Mallarmé asserting that '[because] objects are

already in existence, it is not necessary to create them ... all we have to do is grasp the relationships among them' (Yamaguchi xix). This chimes well with Thomas Hoover's vivid account of what happens in a successful haiku: 'the mind is struck as with a hammer, bringing the senses up short and releasing a flood of associations' (Hoover 205). In the moment of intensified perception and interpretation that gets laid out across three concise lines, messy existence can be rendered as an essence so that the gist of an experience is offered as a refined set of organised elements and shaping influences that hold a larger world intensified on a page and poised to expand again in your mind.

I remember being warned off traditional Japanese aesthetics in Graduate School, when I was being trained to assay the political affordances in all cultural processes and products. I recall being told that statements such as Hoover's and traditions such as Zen and the symbolist credos all peddled a belief in some illusory and immaterial essence that purports to float freely above the everyday struggles of citizens labouring in the messier world of material exigency. I remember being warned that aesthetes such as the old Zen masters and their modern apologists were haughty Platonists wrapped about with false consciousness and uninterested in the material work that politics must engender in the real world, in the objective realm of pragmatic action.

However, these condemnations missed the fact that immaterial *relationships* always insinuate the material componentry of the world, that combinative influences are coursing constantly amidst all secular experience, and that such systems combine to cause reality. True, it is tempting to assert that some patrician or *ideal* state beyond politics has been extracted in these tiny poems, rarefied and diamantine as they appear. But it is misleading—perhaps it is fair to say it is *unreal*—to insist that these reduced impressions of habitable scenes are so refined as to be ineffable and depoliticised. When Thomas Hoover declared that a haiku can provide a quick metaphysical jolt that helps a reader discern some larger connective pattern of valence in the everyday world, he was not arguing for the aesthetical transcendence of political affairs. Rather he was describing how the reader can be brought dramatically close to the often covert connectivity that subtends and really arranges the world.

Granted, I've spent these opening paragraphs chasing some esoteric concerns, but by clarifying this notion of the *extract* I've found a useful way to start thinking about 'the art of the real', particularly as it can be practised in my own society. Australia is a nation where much has depended on concealment—think of the landgrabbing, think of the withholding of payments and wages to Indigenous workers, think of the reluctance to acknowledge the damage that's been caused by water wastage, carbon emissions and by imported systems of land-use. In such a society it is useful to deploy the trope of the *extract* provocatively because a well-chosen detail can act as the startling trigger that

releases the flood of associations for anyone who has been primed to perceive what lies beneath the surface of ordinary experience. An extracted detail might grant a focused observer access to the systematic understanding of a larger reality. Next question: how to turn oneself and one's readers into focused observers?

I can begin to exemplify this extractive method with brief reference to three projects from my own research. Example 1: for many years I've been ruminating on the enigmatic notebooks of First Fleeter William Dawes, who recorded weather conditions and astronomical patterns as well as a tiny but hugely significant fraction of Indigenous vocabulary and grammar in the Sydney Cove district between 1788 and 1791. The evidence in the taciturn notebooks is truncated because Dawes was sent home to England just as he was beginning to grasp and extract the material components (vocabulary) and the essential organizing principles (grammar) of the local language. What we have to work with, therefore, is a set of intensely significant clues and a world of absences across which we must speculate imaginatively yet rigorously. In Dawes' notebooks, a flood of associations can flow, but the reader needs to learn how to strike hammers on the limited set of keys that have survived the past via the meager transcriptions. In doing so, the reader is trained to get a sense of the relationships that held the world together even as it was beginning to fall apart. The reader is trained to understand the world of Sydney Cove *relationally* and always *provisionally*, with a postulative understanding always in process.

Example 2: a few years ago I wrote a book called *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*. It examines a landscape where colonial landgrabbing and monocultural farming have plundered the environment until the place now appears like a defiled and exhausted thing. Over the past three decades I've crossed this broken country many times, with a growing conviction that it is a scree of evidence bearing witness to the unruly historical forces that have shaped it. In such landscapes—and they're everywhere in Australia—we have to ask, what can be made of this scene now? Attending to relationships amongst a constrained array of details that were highlighted through the selective and combinative procedure of my writing in *Seven Versions*, I nudged the reader into asking questions. For example, what can we know about the ecologies that have gone feral in Central Queensland? What of the wrenched geomorphics, the weed-infested gullies and floodplains, the roofless towns with a dozen residents still hanging about? How can we overhear the pertinent gossip—the attempts at truth and the self-serving lies—that buzz about it? What of the journey-patterns, the shuttling rhythms stitching the country together in time, now and in the past? What can we make of the documents that have been generated in response to this country? And what of the absences blotting the retrieved documentary evidence—when are they meaningful, when are they nothing?

In the book I tried to use all these scrappy details to help people think about the absences and silences between all the pinpointed examples that made up the scenarios that I presented in prose that was designed to spur rigorous speculation rather than lock down singular conclusions.

In Example 3—a series of computer-activated works of video art known collectively as *Life After Wartime*—viewers are given textual and musical prompts encouraging them to account for a salvaged batch of crime-scene photographs that no longer have any conclusive documents attached.¹ As *Life After Wartime* has grown, project by project, a cluster of imaginative and analytical responses to the photographs have aggregated into a database that works as a kind of story-engine proffering an infinite set of plausible but inherently contentious and restless speculations concerning the enigmatic scenes in the archive. Here is one little example from the ‘Life After Wartime’ suite, an excerpt from a 100-page poem called ‘Accident Music’:

Everything is worth something—Make rust with blood—

A fact, blunt and material—Fluid on a breadboard & a smear on the doorstep—

You might wash your hands all morning, but they’ll never be clean again.

1 This is a long-running collaborative project with Kate Richards. See www.lifeafterwartime.com.

In each of these instances selected from my research portfolio, I try to draw some relational understanding out across a sparse array of essential evidence. I try to show how worlds that are usually riddled with concealment and absence can get provisionally and provocatively highlighted and integrated so that, in a flash of connective apprehension, people engaging with the work might know more fully the forces and flows that truly prevail in whatever reality the extracts come from. The details have the impress of the originating reality; and for all their fictional ‘panache’, the artworks that get brewed from the details still display a staunch allegiance to something real.

Restlessness is a crucial factor in these artistic investigations. By restlessness, I mean the way the artwork—be it a book, a database, a building, a garden—can activate your imagination by offering to your mind a system of artful imbalances and implied possibilities that are available for patterned completion within your own imagination with reference to what you already believe to be tested and true in reality. Supreme examples of this aesthetic of generative incompleteness can be found in Zen temples and gardens, where the visitor experiences environments that seem ‘charged’ with a powerful integrating ‘urge’, a flowing potentiality for overcoming incompleteness. The urge presses in response to something that is implied rather than shown. To be precise, the urge arises in the visitor; not in the environment. The visitor often feels compelled to imagine a pattern cohering across and between the essential elements and the artful absences that have been offered or extracted for appreciation. Even though the larger pattern is not explicitly present in the deliberately ‘unresolved’ space, it is available because the abstemious offering of extracts prompts the viewer’s urge to complete the inherent pattern. This urge often helps the viewer feel inseparable from the environment, to feel responsible for and attuned to some flowing integrity in the domain under consideration.²

In Zen treatises this connective drive is often called *ma* (see Nitschke 117). Applied to contemporary Western experience it might be dubbed *the forensic impulse*. This compulsion to bring previously occluded factors into the public view of the *forum* (hence the adjective ‘forensic’) seems to be ubiquitous now in popular culture. Much verbiage could be spent arguing how distrust of the illusory surfaces skinning contemporary political and commercial systems has strengthened a vernacular desire to see behind the scenes, and to draw covert nuances out from concealment. Clearly this crisis in governmentality accompanies the emergence of online and interactive communication networks which allow citizens to seek out and ‘triangulate’ their knowledge and to coordinate their agitprop campaigns (think of getup.org.au and their effect on the Kevin07 electoral push) instead of passively receiving information in one uninterrupted

² See, for example, Carver 1955. Carver explains that in Zen architecture, ‘all relationships are abbreviated and subtle, encouraging the exercise of the imagination in grasping the whole’ (156).

flow of opinion. In such a restless world, never-ending scepticism gets aligned to continuous, rigorous postulation. It is a creative rather than a cynical impulse. Moreover, in schools and universities there is a shift away from the expectation that citizens are merely receptive, and it coincides with a general abandonment of didactic modes of teaching, to be replaced by the heuristic or discovery-based mode that encourages students into guided learning that is stimulated by curiosity and by the careful priming of essential clues prompting students into further inquiry. (In powerpoint shorthand, this shift is usually glossed as 'The Sage on the Stage gives way to The Guide Alongside'.) Scholars and citizens are encouraged to become detectives seeking out an ever-expanding array of hammers for their minds. Attuned to this heuristic mentality, many *artists* are drawn similarly to resonant details, to essences and extracts that are designed to enhance active and sceptical speculation about the ever-building world.

Having pondered and practised this 'aesthetic of the detail' for a couple of decades now, I've begun to understand how to weld some of my late-acquired insights about the haiku onto yet another strand of criticism that I encountered at Graduate School, namely the realist analyses of the great Hungarian critic György Lukács. Whereas I once would have expected these two approaches to cancel each other out, I can appreciate the poetry in Lukács's Marxism more readily now, just as I can see the sly politics in the Japanese aesthetics.

In Lukács' bravura essay 'Narrate or Describe', he sets out a distinction between naturalism (which he finds alluring but diverting and suspect) and realism (which he admires and endorses because of its active and revelatory qualities). Lukács conscripts the work of Zola and Tolstoy to illustrate his polemic. Zola exemplifies an alienating style of naturalism because he is somewhat too adroit at petit-pointing details in a process whereby intricate scenes get '*described* from the standpoint of an observer'. By contrast, Tolstoy purveys a vital and stimulating realism because he always hacks out the definitive aspects and grabs the key vectors inside dynamically evolving scenes that are '*narrated* from the standpoint of a participant' (Lukács 111). This selective and active realism causes a kind of Zen *satori*, an awakening blow to the mind of the reader. I like to think of it this way: naturalism is *additive* and diffuses focus as more and more details are supplied, which means that realism is bolder and more useful than naturalism because realism is *extractive* in the way it draws out the definitive, structuring elements of a scene. Whereas naturalist art casts gentle light on surfaces concealing a deeper reality, realist art helps us probe into the reasons and feel the shaping forces subtending reality.

Here is the connection back to the haiku and to the examples from my own research, cited earlier in this essay. In the Lukácsian mode of realism, because it is extractive, artists are determined to shuck away extraneous detail so they can learn how the *relationships between essential elements* all cohere contingently

to make the overall, dynamic experience that is everyday existence. The artist and the audience engage in a forensic process, seeking out and extracting the key elements or clues that will lead to fuller, more causal understanding of the scenes being represented.

Rather than risking too much subjectivity by propounding more examples from my own portfolio, let's exemplify this practice of extractive realism more exactly by examining an artform that might at first seem misplaced here: Jamaican dub music. For me, alongside the centuries-old tradition of the haiku, dub is the other great example of essence-aesthetics, even though the artform is barely four decades old. One of the finest practitioners was Osbourne Ruddock, a.k.a. King Tubby (1941–1989). Tubby produced thousands of remarkable tracks. A brief soundscape called 'Version Dub' is one masterpiece among many. It is worth describing and analysing closely, to show how Lukács's literary insights might be ported over to help with realist appreciations of other media.

In less than three minutes, 'Version Dub' builds a world, sets a stage, and on that stage Tubby arrays a set of powerful feelings and conducts a subtle argument about history and art and the place of subjects (be they vociferous, be they voiceless) within the legacy of colonialism and slavery. The tune commences with a quiet cymbal stutter that sounds like wind agitating seedy gourds hanging off jungle vines. This dry rattle lasts exactly one second before it gets settled by electric guitar that is highly reverberant, almost pedal steel, but more peppy with jazz tonics that stretch singing over a sonic bed of crackly distortion pushing up through the top registers. This crackle is no accident or problem in the mix. It is meant to be there. It might be the inserted sound of a stylus grooving on degraded vinyl or it might be grain in the ferrous oxide of magnetic tape that has been deliberately dubbed and over-dubbed and amplified a dozen times or more until the producer has heard and logged the 'trouble' he has in mind. There is wow and flutter in there too, purposefully included. As soon as we have understood all this, we get a few beats more of the grit, and then we hear some drawly, massed brass instruments blowing underneath the guitar, pushing between the plucked strings and the crackle. And now a bassline settles in—solid, dry, no reverb in this last burr of the sound.

Thus with the tune only twenty seconds old, Tubby has already sketched out a space for us: the reverb accords dimensions to a sonic world with audible boundaries, the crackle puts a dirty ground under our feet, the bass gives a dependable schedule and encourages trust that this ground will hold while, now and then, the cymbals will agitate and the horns will blow a flitting breeze that measures the atmospheric pressure. This world is an aural island of some kind, with edges, resonance, humidity and a localised sense of time and tone.

But is the island populated? Yes! There it is at the 30-second mark: a little falsetto vocal gulp. An emotional utterance rather than a semantic statement, this gulp anticipates Michael Jackson's yelps in 'Billie Jean' but it also harks way back to African singing techniques as well as Caribbean church music and early American R&B crooners like Sonny Til from the Orioles.³ Clearly, the human voice has a place in Tubby's world. Into his ever thickening soundscape, he has dropped this startling ululation by Yabby You, a vocalist renowned for silky melodies that smuggle politically and spiritually 'conscious' messages across to the local 'sufferahs'. Constrained and intensified, the sound might be anguish or it might be rapture. Of course, in Tubby's world it is both, it is complementary as well as contradictory.

Then, as if in response to Yabby's call, we get a barely audible and deliberately thin and degraded skerrick of choral singing—perhaps it is an ensemble of singers, or perhaps it is one voice re-copied severally upon itself to form a slightly out-phased harmonic. This sound is not words you can decipher; rather it is a vocalised, aestheticised echo that has been conjured and shaped in response to the first voice. These 'answering' voices are a long way back in the mix, as if coming from across a river, off in a yonder valley, or drifting over the sea from out past the horizon. The distant call wafts a couple more times and then Tubby pulls all the environing sound down almost to zero for a moment so that in this lull he lets the faraway voices register unchallenged, as if they are carried on a pushing breeze or in a momentary wave of radio transmission.

Only fifty seconds into the song now, we have an aesthetic model of Jamaica—not just the geography, ecology and atmosphere of the island but also its history and ideology. Hearing the sound from the inside, from the standpoint of a participant and an inhabitant, we experience an extracted model of this place where absence is a defining feature, where influences drift in partially and perennially over the horizon, where radio programs come and go from Florida, Cuba and coast of Texas. We can sense how, in this place of traces, the ancient indigenes have long been obliterated and the contemporary inhabitants are migrants always searching for orientation, always harking back in memory to some elsewhere in their heads even as they know that *this place here* is their lot now, that they have no other home to make but here. With the aesthetics of seepage and submergence that define dub music, we hear and feel the silence, exile and cunning that often define a migrant's life.

One and a half minutes into the song, the 'sound weather' that Tubby has been conjuring finds its full, stealthy shape. And straight away the song begins to form its finish. The distant voices are quickly engulfed again by the drums

3 Listen especially to Sonny Til's keening in 'It's Too Soon to Know' (1948) on *Sonny Til and the Orioles, Greatest Hits* (Til 1991).

and horns, louder than ever, making a swell of larger elements momentarily washing over the human presence in this world of restless sound. Bringing the tune home now, Tubby waits for the symphonics to lull once more, wavelike, before cuing the humanity one last time. The voice resurfaces nearby and the guitar, horns and drums slowly ebb with the diminishing vocals till the entire composition goes down to a kind of sunseting silence thickening all around the listener.

What strengthens, as the song wanes, is the notion that 'Version Dub' is a sonic island, closely and sensually modeled on an actual island. The tune is realist, therefore. From the reverb we can estimate the scope of the world. From the crackle we get a haptic sense of how that world might grip. From the emerging and submerging insinuations of the different melodies, we sense the dynamics flushing through this domain made of sound. It's as if we're left hearing, from the inside, an exquisite abstraction of the geography and fecundity of Tubby's kingdom. Which is both a fantastic and a real place.

To the extent that the song refers to the drift and decay of radio transmissions emanating from Florida and Cuba, it is a quick lesson in international relations. There's that word again: relations. It links us back to the haikus with which we commenced this essay. And it helps us bring the essay to a close. The poetry of Seishi and Gray and the music of Tubby all extract intensified reality through the same process: instantaneous, immersed perception gets interwoven with volatile, voluptuous remembrance, altogether releasing that now-familiar flood of associations. Like a condensed guide to a globalising existence, Tubby's tune offers a sensory commentary on the memory-waste, the associative rumination and the institutional thought-policing that abrade any migrant's attempt to find a home or a voice in any place, new or old, where one might need to establish an identity founded not on origins but on ingenuity and persistence. Displacement, persistence, ingenuity, changefulness; these real elements have been rendered into art that can orient you. 'Version Dub' is a plangent thesis explaining how the modern consciousness is inevitably a variable work in progress, something that has to be asserted and endlessly earned and performed moment by moment in negotiation with prevailing conditions. Not 'grounded' in a homeland, the modern consciousness cannot rely on myths that celebrate how people can *arise* from their original, hosting soil; instead the modern citizen tends to *arrive* and *survive* in a place where no birthright is readymade. Hence the defining and completely pertinent sense of erasure and incompleteness in dub, the sense of a musical form in which utterance competes with voicelessness, where agency contends with anonymity. And hence the 'x-ray' quality of this music, the way it is built from extracts and underlying hints that grant the listener a clearer apprehension of the tangled contemporary world' (Veal 196).⁴

4 Veal acknowledges Luke Erlich and Lee Perry as the sources of the 'x-ray' description.

Tubby's compositions are forensic and Lukácsian therefore, in the way they extract and emphasise the previously covert principles that organise the real place that he represents. Having made this link, we can bring the essay full-circle to its close now by noting how Tubby's music is useful and inspiring in a way that matches Seishi's and Gray's poems: all these artworks are poetically forensic and extractively realist; they inkle out the resonant details and the immaterial relations that really matter, that galvanise a scene and keep the artist and the audience allied to reality. In this tense but thrilling interplay between the urge to select and the urge to combine, the artist can make sure that a provocative, contentious, continuous and pinpoint-efficient realism is always playing out.

In a globalised, saturated world of networked glut, realism like this can be a beacon. In its brevity and speculative association, this extractive but active realism helps us find some way to maintain our allegiance to the world of everyday experience. As another of Gray's miniature poems says:

The world, it seems, is the maximum
Number of things, or of forces,
That can exist together.
(Gray, 'Epigrams')

To know this world properly we need art that lets us comprehend just as many extracted things and forces as can relate well together. Realistically, we need to be in the midst of only what's essential. No more details than that.

Ross Gibson is Professor of Contemporary Arts at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney.

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