

*Trailings*  
Joseph Constable

*The Trailing, for example, only took on meaning for me once, crossing the countryside by train, I experienced each fragment of the landscape as a temporal totality, a totality in the process of forming, of producing itself before my eyes, in the immanence of the moment. The moment, that was the decisive thing.*

*Or another time, while watching the smoke from my cigarette: it was as though time itself were ceaselessly forging its path, annihilating itself, remaking itself, continuously... I already experienced that in love, in my gestures. And each time the expression trailing wells up in conversation, it gives rise to an actual space and integrates me into the world. I feel saved.*<sup>1</sup>

- Lygia Clark

In each of the images that Lygia Clark describes – the blurring, serpentine movement of the landscape behind the train window and the autonomous yet unrelenting movement of cigarette smoke suffusing upwards and outwards – is an embedded process of unfolding, the ineffaceable motion of this moment as it makes and remakes itself in front of our eyes. For Clark, this movement finds a more concrete form in that of the Möbius strip, its potentially infinite continuity becoming the basis for her 1964 proposition, 'Trailings'. But what these two images have in common is a certain slipperiness, a feeling that undermines the ostensible stasis and fully-formed nature of what we are perceiving, such that our vision becomes loose, permeable and subject to change.

Smoke is both a metaphor and a conduit in the opening scene of Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950). A wall dividing two male prisoners is the focus of a tacit communication between them, as one uses a straw pushed through a hole in the wall to blow a funnelled stream of cigarette smoke into the other's cell. This resonant substance enters, is inhaled by the man, but also hangs in the air of the room, slowly diffusing, disappearing. These passing moments of the smoke's unfolding in space are impossible to grasp; try to snatch its whirling form and it will only dissipate faster in a violent scatter. Its slow, trailing movement follows the suspended, liminal space of the prison itself, and the contained yet intensifying lust between these two men locked in acts of non-verbal communication.

Smoke is, of course, an aftermath; it is the consequence of a burning cigarette, a lit match, or the explosive spasm of a firework. Falling across the surface of Mark Corfield-Moore's works (*Celestial Meteors*; *Nitrous Flame*; and *Golden Showers* (all 2019) are fountains of unwoven cotton strands, tassels of smoke that, in varying degrees, simultaneously cover and uncover the partial form of a firework. Displays of these illuminations are always premised on their illusory climax, the gasped intake of breath synced with a desire to freeze-frame the sky's momentary resolution into a complete picture, to hold onto this image, this feeling, forever. What's left after, however, is perhaps more interesting: the drooping strands that slowly fall down towards the ground and the 'fizzy heat' of smoke that dances around them. The edges of an image are never impenetrable, the walls of the prison are only a physical barrier to interaction, and the landscape that is framed by the window will quickly start to dissolve as soon as the train starts moving again. The smoke that is blown between the prison cells in Genet's film, glides out of Clark's cigarette, or lingers in the air once eyes have turned away from the big display, is the smoke that demarcates, albeit temporarily, a sense of continuity.

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, Lygia, 'Nostalgia of the Body' in *October* (Vol. 69, Summer 1994): pp. 99-100.



Mark Corfield-Moore, *Celestial Meteors*, 2019 (left) and *Nitrous Flame*, 2019 (right). Photo: Anna Arca

When looking at smoke as it forms before us, it is difficult not to identify particular patterns within its movement, as if underlying this supposedly random mutability is a series of pre-disposed rhythms that decide its idiosyncratic pathway. Henri Bergson spoke of a similar feeling arising through the interaction between the dancer and the spectator:

*If curves are more graceful than broken lines, the reason is that, while a curved line changes its direction at every moment, every new direction is indicated in the preceding one. Thus the perception of ease in motion passes over into the pleasure of mastering the flow of time and of holding the future in the present.*<sup>2</sup>

A line of grace can be seductive; it lulls us with its continuity and the feeling that through our gaze we might even control its movement. Like the form of Clark's Möbius strip, the linked forms in Lucie Gledhill's work, *Chains* (2019) trace the feedback loop of time as it cycles back on itself, forming and re-forming, augmenting and diminishing. The Möbius loop is a surface with only one side and it is, therefore, unorientable; it is impossible to locate a certain point on this uninterrupted surface as it marks out space and time. As much as we may try to hold onto the processional movement of these looping forms, our ability to predict their movement is an illusion.

In chapter five of Flann O'Brien's novel, *The Third Policeman* (1967), changing states of augmenting and diminishing play out through the narrator de Selby's encounter with an ornamental yet diminutive chest, 'as if you were looking at a full-size one through the wrong end of a spy-glass'.<sup>3</sup> This chest is presented to him by Policeman MacCruiskeen, who proceeds to unravel in front of him a Russian-doll like display:

*He went to the little chest and opened it up again and put his hands down sideways like flat planes or like the fins on a fish and took out of it a smaller chest but one resembling its mother-chest in every particular appearance and dimension. It almost interfered with my breathing, it was so delightfully unmistakable. I went over and felt it and covered it with my hand to see how big its smallness was.*<sup>4</sup>

As the forms of each chest get smaller and smaller, yet maintain their ornate detailing, there arises a distinct mastery and craftsmanship on the part of the creator, of producing a lineage of objects,

<sup>2</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time & Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, 1913 (London: Elibron Classics, 2005), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*, 1967 (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 73-74.

beautiful things to adorn one's environment. The absurd and hyperbolic manner in which this scene unfolds provides a certain level of gratification through predictability, as both de Selby and the reader gain comfort in the process of anticipating what is about to be revealed. This process mirrors Bergson's line of grace, of foreseeing each moment as it plays out in real time. In O'Brien's story, however, the potentially infinite nature of this illusory chest quickly slips into psychological distress, as 'the mechanical lunacy of the modern world, and the hope for physical truth it seems to offer'<sup>5</sup> reveals itself to de Selby. Although we may try to carve out experience through the objects that we surround ourselves with – as containers of memory, keepsakes, signifiers of our status – the linear determinism that binds us to this illusion can quickly collapse. As with Gledhill's line of looping chains, a procession of objects is initiated, only to gradually diminish into minuteness, perhaps to disappear from view altogether.



Lucie Gledhill, *Chain*, 2019. Photo: Anna Arca

Objects of value, those that are made, bought and sold, give tangible yet hollow form to our desires and dreams. As a consequence, consumerism and gratification are often caught in a relentless 'cat-and-mouse' game of disappointment. The ornamentation of our lives through physical possessions takes a new direction when, within our late capitalist terrain, individuals exist both as a productive and consumerist force, but also as the product itself. We live in a landscape in which economic, technological and social channels flow seamlessly alongside the production of subjectivity, such that political economy can quickly become identical to our subjective economy. Within the co-option of interior experience lies the danger of its monotonous demise, an outcome that J. G. Ballard elucidates in his novel, *Kingdom Come* (2006):

*People are deliberately re-primitivising themselves. They yearn for magic and unreason, which served them well in the past, and might help them again. They're keen to enter a new Dark Age. The lights are on, but they're retreating into the inner darkness, into superstition and unreason. The future is going to be a struggle between vast systems of competing psychopathies, all of them willed and deliberate, part of a desperate attempt to escape from a rational world and the boredom of consumerism.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Adams, 'Butter-Spades, Footnotes, and Omnium: *The Third Policeman* as "Pataphysical Fiction"' in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (31:3, 2002), p. 107.

<sup>6</sup> J. G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*, 2006 (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 105.

Perhaps human beings crave the comforting cushion of unreason, to look into a black mirrored surface and see themselves reflected alongside an infinite pool of other possibilities. Tana West's 'Hall of Mirrors' (*Through a Glass Darkly* (2019) offers an enclosure, a space of safety but also one of entrapment, surrounded by reflective surfaces that criss-cross a multiplicity of different realities on offer, full of truths and untruths. Lies are like smoke too – something that permeates the air, encompasses you, but then disappears as if it was never there; it feels familiar and knowing, like it will support you, but you also know that it can be cut through with a single swoop of your hand. You inhale it, and a headiness prevails; it suffuses your mind like a drug.



Tana West, *Through a Glass Darkly*, 2019. Photo: Anna Arca

When we yearn for magic and unreason, to what extent do we commit ourselves to a lie, to the empty, dark echo chamber of our irrational thoughts? Embedded within Ballard's words is the potential for a new kind of unreason that could free us from the determinism of consumer-capital into alternative modes of lived experience. Maurizio Lazzarato says that 'to produce a new discourse, new knowledge, a new politics, one must traverse an unnameable point, a point of absolute non-narrative, non-culture, and non-knowledge'.<sup>7</sup> Rather than adopting magic as something tricky, illusory and dangerously alluring, it could also constitute a mode of magical thinking that frees us from the black mirror bind of superstition and unreason that manifests in Ballard's words and West's mirrored enclosure.

Magic, or more specifically alchemy, is inherent to the illusion witnessed during the process of dendritic mochaware. You have to have, as Bethan Lloyd Worthington writes:

*...a pigmented acidic juice entering an alkaline liquid clay.*

*One way to do this is to extract the bitterness from inside fag ends. Inhale smoke, exhale branches.*

*Keep breathing.*<sup>8</sup>

It is a 'disgusting concoction', 'boiled tobacco juice...it's quite obnoxious'<sup>9</sup>, a witch's brew extracted from the dead end of the burnt-out cigarette. In the first instance, the cigarette is lit, smoke is inhaled

<sup>7</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, 2007 (Los Angeles: semiotexte / MIT Press), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Bethan Lloyd Worthington, *Making all the greens unstable*, 2019 (detail). Two colour riso print on Corono paper [excerpt from text].



and exhaled, emanating in curling ribbons before disappearing into the air; then, fag ends are boiled until a dark, shimmery juice remains, a liquid rendition of its smoky, tar-infused counterpart. When applied to the surface of a pot coated with slip, or a runny mixture of clay and water, this 'mocha tea' forms an idiosyncratic, dendritic channel; we watch this expenditure of energy as it branches out and blooms, weaving an acidic, every-diminishing pathway through the surface. No two trees are the same.

Lloyd Worthington cites the case of the Rustlings Road tree felling in Sheffield – a loss of deep time via destruction and violence - as one of the starting points for her networked installation, *Making all the greens unstable* (2019). Mochaware feels like time travel, accelerated growth in miniature, or an impossible dream in which roots spring up from the ground and reach dramatically upwards into the sky. Like psychedelia or an uncanny time-lapse, each feathery tree makes and remakes itself within the tiny lifespan of its rhizomatic motion. Now static, they appear on ceramic leaves dotted in a line, or contained within a domestic mug that sits on a shelf. As relics of another time, as magical containers, these objects and their embedded processes re-perform countless centuries of growth. This process 'of forming, of producing' before our eyes recalls the immanence of the train window, with its fleeting images, its unstable blur of greens intimating the forms of trees that have far outlived this transient moment in time.



Bethan Lloyd Worthington, *Making all the greens unstable*, 2019 (detail). Photo: Anna Arca.

The smell of burning wood carries far. Unlike the black smoke that it produces, which rises up into the air and quickly dissolves into a greying haze, its scent hangs around for much longer; it travels inside our houses, spreads throughout our clothing, our hair, it can even sting our eyes with its immaterial potency...

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<sup>9</sup> Speech from *Mocha Ware demo* by Tony Remington (2013) YouTube video, added by tony Remington [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynSOt6RjSA4>] (accessed: 3 August 2019).

*But smell, unlike air, is a sign of the presence of another, to which we are already responding. Response always takes us somewhere new; we are not quite ourselves anymore - or at least the selves we were, but rather ourselves in encounter with another. Encounters are by their nature, indeterminate; we are un-predictably transformed.*<sup>10</sup>

These words by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing speak to an inescapable connection: scent becomes an innate, uncontrollable, even unconscious response; it is unlike air, but it also defines air. The fact that when we walk into a room and the first thing we do is notice its smell connects not only to the transformation of space via scent - a lightness, heaviness, sweetness or acridness, etc. - but it also becomes a transcendent method of transportation that is galvanised through this encounter. In Forest + Found's installation, *The Subjective Element* (2019), this act of transportation takes us from Southwark to Sussex, to a storm-felled Lebanon Cedar tree lying fallen amidst the grass. Lowenhaupt Tsing describes smell as simultaneously elusive and certain; determinate in its source, idiosyncratic in its reception. Cedar tar: chemically burnt embers, heady to inhale.

In their work, the scent of cedar tar becomes embodied: it envelops the bodies of those who stand in this space, blackens the abstract forms that surround them, or takes abstract form on cloth. The intermingling of this process follows the motion of Clark's Möbius strip in its potentially infinite continuity: source becomes medium becomes work becomes source. The source itself – the Lebanon Cedar tree – becomes a sensation, the connective tissue that makes us 'not quite ourselves anymore'. In spite of its immateriality, this smell retains the patina of where it came from, the burning embers that it summons are also the wisps of smoke that emanate from them – its trailing movement gives rise to an actual space, integrating you into the world.



Forest + Found, *The Subjective Element*, 2019. Photo: Anna Arca

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This text is constructed around sources provided by each of the artists in Jerwood Makers Open 2019.

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<sup>10</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2015 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 46.

