

## Changescapes

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Some aesthetic forms 'dramatise' change. I call them 'changescapes'. They help us know mutability by immersing us in it, by letting us be with it. Change is their theme and it is often their matter too, for they are usually of fragile and ephemeral stuff that reacts to altering conditions in the larger world. Transformations happen at their boundaries, at the limits between the inside and the outside of their systems, and then the symptoms of change become manifest in them, palpably available for our contemplation.

These aesthetic forms have become plenteous recently because we are ready now to understand them and because we need now to understand mutability with them. Versions of these forms have been in human cultures for ages. For example, in the Chinese shopping district of almost every sizable city in the world, you'll find a wonderful shop dedicated to 'live arts', where you can buy your aquarium, horticultural and water-fountain supplies. But there's something about the present historical moment that's calling changescapes forth in greater numbers and greater variety.

Assaying these developments, this essay will finish in aesthetics and linguistics. But it starts with a story.

In 1992 I spent some wondrous months in the Pilliga Scrub, a vast scree of native forest gone feral in north-west New South Wales. I was working with John Cruthers, Joel Peterson and Eric Rolls, grafting a film out of Eric's marvellous vast scree of a book, *A Million Wild Acres* (Rolls, 1981).<sup>1</sup>

One afternoon Eric took me unusually deep into the forest, proffering the chance to meet a white man we'll call Muller, whom I'd heard about and whom Eric had met a couple of times. It had been a parching hot day, breezeless mostly, except for some flukey little gusts and spiralling willi-willies that haggled with the Land Rover whenever we broke out of the foliage-cover and traversed a seared dirt clearing. But by the time we got close to Muller's compound, the sun was dropping and some humid clouds had climbed out of the river-junction not far away. Before long, light rain was spritzing the dusty pines and eucalypts, releasing into the air a round tang that soothed the soft palate like a lozenge.

Eric drove around for a bit, doing that directional divining of corrugated tracks that mystifies anyone new to the Pilliga. Finally we pulled up at a walking track and ventured in. Ten

minutes from the road, we came upon a clearing bounded on all sides by stacked short bolts of timber that were commercially useless but aesthetically breath-taking, with their knotty convolutions and sappy striations presenting all the colours of blood in sculptural arrays aligned in every which way as if to give shifting volume and spectral tone to the gloaming air. Eric called out several times: a few words, including Muller's full names, but mostly variants of coo-ee noises that were more like birdcalls or the creaking of timber, as if he was loath to startle the place with too much sociability. But all was quiet, deserted right now except for us, so incursive and puzzled.

I remember padding around the compound awe-struck, alarmed by the noise my boots were generating in the red loamy gravel. I recall calculating how it would have taken one man maybe a thousand mornings of work to make just the timber stacks in this 'installation', let alone all the other details of the place. And I recall thinking that this must be all Muller does: tend and change the place each day.

This had been a timber-mill once but it had undergone some slow metamorphosis, till now it was a devotional kind of site. Devotional to WHAT, I still can't say exactly, but devotional all the same. For it could have been sustained in this serene appearance only by dint of a devoted lifetime spent designing and laboriously maintaining. And such custodial labour had occurred recently, for the entire clearing – about half the size of a cricket field – had been raked so the ground was free of footprints and was linearly pulsating with confluences of curved and rectangular tracts that seemed to be mustering the breezes in cooling little arabesques all around us.

At least, the compound had been free of footprints till we had blundered in. Which makes me think the raking was not only one of the most beautiful aesthetic configurations I've ever seen but also some wary means of intruder-detection.

I couldn't resist exploring, all the time listening for other footfalls and the noise of a rifle cocking. Near the northeast of the clearing, zinging with a keen sensory acuity that had been stimulated by the mystery and the gravelled delicacy of the place, I ventured over to a covered contraption. Under a timber structure that I can best describe as a free-standing rustic carport in style and proportions worthy of epithets like 'minimalist' and 'zen', an old wheel-less truck was installed on blocks. From the truck's unimpeded back axles several heavy drive-belts extended in different directions across the compound, connecting to blade-benches and sawpits. Evidently you could start the truck, slip it into gear and thereby have an entire sawmill humming and zinging, complete with a feature whereby one driver-belt conveyed sawdust out to a fragrant disposal-pit on the southern edge of the site.

Panning to the left, I noticed there was a small wooden shack nearby. Well, it was more like a roofed box, two metres long, one metre wide, the height of a man standing. Peering through the door, I saw that it was an enclosed bed, empty right now but installed there at the centre of the compound, insulated from intrusion by sixty paces across the gravel on all sides. From the bed, one had a direct sightline to the main sawpit. Alongside the bed, a car battery was connected to a radio that sprouted an Alexander Calder type of aerial.

As the sun waned, I had time to discover just one more detail. Out on the western boundary of the clearing, behind a thin stand of gum trees, there was another simple structure that you could barely see from the precinct-proper. It was a smaller version of the 'car-port' that housed the truck. As I closed in on it, I could see that it was a kind of miniature temple. Suspended from the rafters or balanced on plinths made from logs, there were maybe thirty 'relics' of the forest, startling things, some of which might have been macabre except that their relative placement and scale and the particular qualities of each object all mitigated systematically against repulsion. There was a delicate skeleton of a small marsupial coiled as if about to spring back to fleshy life; there was a split rock showing a fossilised fern-print; a melted bakelite telephone; the bonnet mascot of an old Chevrolet; a shiny clean skull that might have been of a cat but was larger than any domestic feline I'd ever seen. All these things were arrayed like treasures the forest had yielded to a dutiful fossicker. The collection was strange, but it was special.

Devotional. That word came to me again. Each of the roofed structures I'd found were like emotional compression-chambers. Their placement, their volume, their material, their contents, the counterpoint between the cool grey light inside and the sharper, golden light outside: all these features rendered each structure into a little zone making a great emotional charge inside this larger compound which was already so atmospheric, so deliberately rarefied and intensified in comparison to the rest of the forest. I remember marvelling at how effectively Muller had made and located these three little aesthetic 'power-plants' inside the bigger force-field of his compound. He knew something about rhythm, about establishing frames in space, matter and time; he knew how to manage bounds that off-set relaxation and tension, vacuity and intensity, downbeat and upbeat, the one side and the other side. There was something about the wild and the tame in there too, nature and culture itching at each other. I was thinking like this as I daydreamed in the reliquary.

Back at the edge of the clearing, Eric whistled. Having installed himself on a stump near one of the woodstacks, he'd been jotting in his notebook, taking care to be less of a sticky-beak than I. He called out that he was keen to get away before all the light was gone. As we

trudged to the head of the walking path I turned for one last view of the site. In wide-shot I could see how the record of our visit was footprinted all over the clearing. As stark as a surveillance camera report, there was the single track that Eric had made over to his tarrying-spot and you could deduce everything I'd inspected, how snoopery I'd been, where I'd come in and out of the compound, how I'd breached its porous boundary, brought my strangeness in and bandied it about.

Driving back to our base camp in the last half-hour of evening, we could smell recent burning. The tasty aroma of damp ash. Now and then we could see where a gentle fire had knocked back some of the undergrowth but had not taken to the trees. Eric noted the oddness of the burning pattern. As we turned on to a larger track we came upon a Forestry Department truck. As is usual, we stopped for a chat, keeping the engine running. No, they hadn't been burning. They were on the way back from road maintenance, as the small 'bobcat' grader on the trailer behind the truck testified. 'Hmmp, funny', said Eric. 'Yeah, funny', said one of the Forestry blokes, who then bunted his truck out of neutral and waved a gesture as they beetled off, as if to say funny's just ordinary.

Well, I was intrigued. I badgered Eric to go back the next afternoon. This time we tooted the Land Rover's horn as we approached the pedestrian path and once we were walking, Eric coo-eed ahead. When we got to edge of the clearing, Muller was standing there, his single line of footprints graphic against the freshly raked ground of the entire compound. He was spry, strong, smelly. Maybe sixty-five years of age, but this was indiscernible, truly. He was plainly suspicious, not to say hostile, until Eric spoke and explained how they'd met years before and how they had a couple of mutual acquaintances in town. Muller relaxed a tad, unclenched his jaw and started talking quickly in a soft brogue that was 'country Australian' but sometimes had Irish and sometimes Germanic patterns in it. We asked a couple of times if he had any objection to our filming. He hefted the camera, cocked an ear to listen to its gears whirring, showed some interest in the vinyl dust-cover, and made no objection.

After attuning myself to his morse-code verbiage, I understood that a Forestry fella had told him this morning that there'd been strangers about, but he knew this much from the footprints, two strangers, who'd never been here before, yes you two. Eric explained how we were interested in the history of the forest and how I'd been fascinated by his mill. I added that I thought his mill was beautiful. Muller registered that I was genuine, but it was clear the 'beauty' topic was not going to sway him much. I added that I was wanting to understand how everything that had happened in the forest was still producing effects there, still hanging around the place.

This seemed to light him up. He quipped, 'like ghosts, you mean'. Not really a question. 'Kind of, I replied'. And he was off. He talked at pace about how he'd see things sometimes at night and how the radio tells him stuff you wouldn't expect it to. Outside of the specific environment we were standing in, this might have been crazy talk, and clearly he was living a hard life, but it seemed prissy to judge him by any standards I'd walked in with. He was functioning in a place that remains aesthetically unmatched in my experience – except perhaps for some gardens in Kyoto – and he was devoted to it somehow. Sustained by it too, not in body so much as in whatever spirit or mania drove him along day by day.

Once Muller had finished the ghost monologue, I seemed to have licence to ask him more questions. Most of the time he ignored them and I noticed that he had no censoring sieve between thinking and speaking. Living alone out here (by Eric's calculations Muller had been here for more than forty-five years since first leaving the closest town to take over the family mill when he would have been in his late teens) ... living alone out here he'd probably always let his thoughts get vocalised as they formed. Decades of solitude had led to this: he didn't talk to himself so much as he told the place what he was thinking. Anyway, one of my questions elicited a short, lucid response. When I asked him why he continued to work so hard every day making this worthless cache of lumber, he said that the forest is always offering timber ready for cutting. I asked him about the fires we saw yesterday. He wondered out loud if I ever speak much to the Forestry fellas. I responded I never run into them, except for yesterday, which was not at all normal, and besides, I don't live around here. He countered with a long stream of consciousness, within which there was some information to the effect that yesterday afternoon he had lit out from the compound when the clouds had come up because it was a good chance to do some firing in a nearby tract that needed some heat in it, because he was confident that the rains would contain the burn exactly as it had to go.

I was keen to get him talking more about this, for he had some fire-farming knowledge and an ecological philosophy. But he wanted to start the truck and cut some timber. So that's what happened. He got the mill going. And it was beautiful, by which I mean there was an elegance and a design to it all, a sense of its rightness in cohesion but also some enigmas that drew you back to consider it repeatedly. It was loud, acrid and dangerous too. But it was beautiful. He had made it so. Or at least it had become so as a consequence of how he'd immersed himself in the place, in the feedback patterning of action and reaction amongst the trees over extensive time. After cutting some timber, he mentioned to no-one in particular that he was keen for us to go now, and it would be good if we didn't come back. Which

seemed fair enough to me. So I've never re-visited, even though the place has stayed vivid in my memory.

Muller features for a few minutes in the film we made but I know I've never found the right context to bear witness to what I think is so significant about him. Straight away, I have to emphasise here that these are just my interpretations, perhaps my projections. As far as I could tell, Muller himself cared not one bit about his meaning or about how a stranger might use his mill for rhapsodies and theories. He had no explicit thesis, no evident need for a reader or an audience. He was no local reincarnation of Henry David Thoreau. But he built his compound. And it means something.

I've thought about it all these years and I'm just now getting a better grasp of how remarkable it was, that clearing in that forest. I see now that Muller's compound and the encounter I had with him helped me understand my notion of the 'changescape', this idea I have that there are long-established aesthetic systems that are built purposefully to intensify our experience and to enhance our understanding of the complex dynamics that are at play when our natural, social and psychological domains commingle and alter each other in this world so full of mutability. Like Muller's mill, a changescape is something predominantly aesthetic rather than pragmatic. Productive of understanding primarily, a changescape is designed to produce cognitive wealth rather than material profit. It helps you think and feel so that you are *engaged* with a changeful world, so that you feel informed about its maintenance and motivated by its momentum rather than distressed by its entropy.

Muller's clearing was a superb aesthetic system whose matter, method and thematics were the fragility, mutability and fecundity of the world. It was an exemplary changescape, therefore, a predominantly meditative, albeit laborious, construct maintained and evolving in concert with a dynamic environment. By dint of daily work and thoughtful, adaptive design inside the compound, and by occasional actions (the fire-farming and the relic-fossicking, for examples) in the outside environment, Muller produced a complex aesthetic expression of the cohesive energies and the disruptive instabilities that entangled the forest, himself and the clearing. The mill was a zone for intensified perception, reflection and conception. (And for me it has produced some slow-burn understanding, if not a revelation.) Muller marked an edge against predominant, primary energies (which we can call 'nature') and produced a system of prevalent design (which we can call 'culture'). He worked always with the fact that his creation was brittle. He knew that he must constantly improvise reiterated and ever-modifying actions and reactions to keep the compound composed. He knew that alterations come in unbidden from 'nature' as weather, as windborne seeds, as fire, as intruders like

us and the Forestry fellas. And from all this contentious knowledge, power, impotence and ignorance, he fashioned a living, habitable meditation on his place in the world.

Muller's clearing helped me understand better how the edges between culture and the cosmos are porous and how startling pulses of energy surge within and across us so that everything at any one moment is unlike before, even though historically determined tendencies also govern the continuing cohesion of the cultural systems we have made. Muller must have known this too, at some level, when he fashioned the mill into an aesthetic thing, changing it from its previous economic function. So much hard work must have been founded on a belief or a philosophy. Otherwise, why toil so ardently, when money was not the issue? At some stage he ceased being a miller and became a changescaper.

A changescaper is more concerned with *systems* than *structures*. A structure is founded on the permanence and solidity of its constituent parts and joints, whereas a system is a set of contingent relationships evolving, shifting yet persisting through time. A structure is mechanistic, deployed against devolution whereas a system is fluid, in slippery balance with mutability. A system finds this balance when its several simultaneous modes of action, information, remembrance and alteration are moderating each other for the purposes of its survival within the host environment. And a system becomes a changescape when all this complexity is marshalled by human care for aesthetic rather than pragmatic ends.

When something is 'aesthetic' it is taken out of the explicitly functional realm and offered in the service of contemplation. By dictionary definition, the aesthetic is 'perceptible by the senses' (Wilkes and Krebs, 1991, p. 24). Which leads to another definitive characteristic: so they can be informed by the most comprehensive array of sensory stimulus, changescapes require your presence in them, preferably by your physical immersion in the space-time configurations they present, but possibly also by the imaginative projection of yourself into the scenarios they offer. A changescape ignites your sensorium and cerebellum; and you enliven it with your presence so that the instabilities you cause become fascinating, informative and somewhat constitutive of the system. A changescape works best when you know you are inside it and when you know it inside yourself somehow, when you know it because of what you can 'grasp' with your inquisitive bodily senses as they get cross-referenced against your memory and imagination. A good changescape can stimulate interplay between sensation and cerebration, a nervy investigation of space, time, energy and self. You can use a good changescape to feel the options as well as the obligations it presents, to speculate about possibility in a world of uncertainty. A good changescape is a system you can use to contemplate dynamics, to be with complexity more effectively.

In Paul Cilliers' lucid book *Complexity and Postmodernism*, he explains that 'complexity is diverse but organised' and that 'descriptions of it cannot be reduced to simple, coherent and universally valid discourses'. To know a system, it's best to describe it. And 'to describe a system,' he observes, 'you have ... to *repeat* the system'(Cilliers, 1998, p. 130, 10). You cannot reduce a complex circumstance to a simplified model or to stabilised essences, for complexity is definitively dynamic, relationally intricate and also evolving. You need to *experience* a complex circumstance, to be with its changes through time, to feel its shifts whilst also being attuned to the historically determined tendencies and feedback patterns of stimuli and responses that organise it. Or as Cilliers explains, 'complex systems have to grapple with a changing environment. ... To cope with these demands the system must have two capabilities: it must be able to store information concerning the environment for future use; and it must be able to adapt ... when necessary' (Cilliers, 1998, p. 10).

In traditional artforms, this sense of complexity and adaptability is often conjured by means of considered absences which goad the perceiver's imagination and by patterns of ambiguity and excesses of plausible meaning that allow several valid interpretations to contend in different contexts. William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is the classic study of this aesthetic and semantic plenitude in literature (Empson, 1947). More recently, Andrew Benjamin's investigation of the phenomenon of 'incompletion' in painting has added to our understanding of the importance of an organised kind of 'endlessness' in an artwork (Benjamin, 2004). In traditional artforms like literature and painting, the adaptability and complexity occur in a 'space' between the perceiver's self and the artwork, in the strummed intellect, memory and senses of the person engaging with the work at a particular instant. In more recent times, digital-computational systems have emerged that enable an artwork itself – not just the relationship between the work and the perceiver – to transmogrify in response to stimuli and at the behest of active and activating codes written into it. (For me the pre-eminent examples are environments such as Gary Hill's *Tall Ships* or Char Davies' *Osmose*.) In such artworks the adaptability and complexity are to be found in the work as well as in the imaginative 'space' between the perceiver and the work. Rather than only being implicit and always somewhat opaque inside the ruminations of each perceiver, the play of relationships and repercussions, activated by the perceiver's engagement with an interactive-immersive environment, can now also be made explicit in the work itself. Whether or not these digital innovations necessarily make for an enhanced aesthetic or intellectual experience, well, the debate is alive and aloud.

Regardless of whether the mode is analogue or digital, traditional or innovative, this drive to understand the dynamics of 'constrained diversity' (Cilliers, 1998, p. 127) appears to be

strengthening in contemporary culture. Which brings us back to Cilliers' thesis about the most effective way to know complexity. Instead of producing a schematised blueprint or a snapshot of complexity, he asserts, you need to generate *an interrelated set of narratives* that help you speculate about the endless dynamics of the system. You have to propose 'what if' scenarios, ways to sense the probabilities of the situation. You have to cross-reference these probabilities against your own history and against the history of action and reaction in the entire system. In other words, you have to *get a feeling* for the way the system is tending. As fuzzy as this sounds, it is true to the workings of complexity.

'Complex systems are open systems' writes Cilliers. Their constituent parts (including yourself, if you are amidst them) and their dominant actions all change from moment to moment, which means often 'the very distinction between "inside" and "outside" the system becomes problematic' (Cilliers, 1998, p. 99). Complexity is not especially tractable to analysis, therefore, because the 'object' under analysis is altering from moment to moment. In Cilliers' words, 'a complex system is not constituted merely by the sum of its components, but also by the intricate *relationships* between those components' (Cilliers, 1998, p. 2). If we try to map those relationships as an active network, 'any given narrative will form a path, or trajectory, through the network. ... [and] as we trace various narrative paths through it, it changes' (Cilliers, 1998, p. 130). If we were to 'cut up' a complex system, we would find that our 'analytical method destroys what it seeks to understand' (Cilliers, 1998, p. 2).

This aligns well with my concept of changescapes. Like Muller's compound, they are engrossing, puzzling, active, reactive, systematic, endless. They facilitate contemplative engagement with mutability. They are lively, which is not to say they are necessarily *live*, although they can be, as in the case of great gardens or aquaria. Therefore changescapes are 'Romantic' in the original and radical sense, as witnessed in William Wordsworth's *The Tables Turned*:

*Our meddling intellect*  
*Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things-*  
*We murder to dissect*  
(Hutchinson and de Selincourt, 1936, p. 377).

Changescapes are not anti-intellectual; they are extra-intellectual, nimble, cross-disciplinary and curious about the paradoxically unstable 'status' of the world. Dynamic and predominantly aesthetic, they are concerned with perception arising through all available senses, perception evolving through inquisitive immersion in the experience that must be

understood. They require the readiness that Wordsworth proselytises later in *The Tables Turned*:

*Come forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.*

Or as Samuel Taylor Coleridge proposed, there is a way to make art based on a 'mode of knowing' that might be deemed 'intuitive apprehension'. Sherman Paul glosses the discourse in his ingenious study of romanticism:

*[For the Romantics,] intuitive apprehension ... was man's creative power, the warrant of his freedom... Not only did its synthesising powers account for the way in which experience becomes meaningful, but being an imaginative faculty as well, it could directly seize reality. And this apprehension of reality, though mystical in the epistemological sense of making the knower one with the thing known, was not the vaporous emotional state usually ascribed to mysticism; it was a cognitive experience, the liberating power of which came from possessing Ideas (Paul, 1958, p. 5).*

A poem, a painting, a garden, perhaps a building: any of these can give form to a set of contentions so that an artwork can insinuate its complexity into you even as your own perceptions and preconceptions also push back to give special valency to the work. William Empson's famous analysis of the seemingly infinite yields in Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The Windhover* might be a good example.<sup>2</sup> By the time Empson has shown us the plenteous ways the poem can buckle, pirouette and take evocative flight, it's clear we are examining a changescape. (By the way, Hopkins' notion of the 'inscape' is certainly relevant to these thoughts too.)

Some of the newest developments in aesthetic form – those facilitated by computers and digital systems of sound, vision and text – are clearly being used by artists to develop better comprehension of complexity. David Rokeby is one of the canniest practitioners in this new field. Being simultaneously an artist and a theorist, he is both creatively inside and reflectively outside the systems he is trying to know. Rokeby suggests that complexity and its dynamics are best understood through *interaction*, which he defines as a means by which the artist contrives a situation which 'reflects the consequences of our actions or decisions back to us' (Rokeby, 1995, p. 133). 'Rather than creating finished works,' Rokeby contends, 'the interactive artist creates relationships' (Rokeby, 1995, p. 152). I would add that because these artworks and their relationships are not entirely controlled or securely bounded when participants' interactions bring new elements into the componentry, the artworks are always

becoming something *other* than (but related to) what they were a moment ago. They perform *explicitly* as changescapes. And in doing so, they lead their interactive participants toward an improvisational capability rather than to the revelation of permanent, underlying principles. Forget the quest for Platonic ideals.

Changescapes are not products. They are more like *projects* or *processes*, because they are made by, through and for the continuous dynamics that get established between themselves and their perceivers. When they help us understand our existence in a world of change, they tend not to finish.

I've used the notion of 'understanding' several times already. It seems a simple enough word. It describes the results of acknowledgement: to stand beneath an experience, to be covered by the experience. It's an aesthetic process. You *conceive* of the pertinent elements by first *perceiving* them all relationally and systematically, through the several channels of your integrated senses. (The French word for 'understand' is 'comprendre' – to *take* this *with* this *with* this, to integrate component elements.) What's more, understanding is immersive and reiterative. You comprehend an experience cumulatively, by delving into it and being inundated by it repeatedly whilst also reflecting on it. Being inside and simultaneously outside.

Raising this notion of the interactive collection of understanding, I hope it is clear that complexity can be comprehended only incrementally, continuously, until one 'has the feeling', 'gets the picture' or 'is tuned in'. And I hope it's clear that changescapes get made, maintained and understood this way.

I take some guidance from Henry David Thoreau's famous paradox: his clearing at Walden Pond was both detached from and immersed in the phenomena of nature and society that he yearned to understand. Or as he wrote in his diary on November 1, 1858: 'You cannot see anything until you are clear of it', and 'you cannot sense anything unless you are steeped in it' (Garber, 1977, p. 2).

Because complex systems have histories which determine the tendencies that brace the systems against changefulness at any present moment, any study of them must also pause now and then to 'read memory', to align the interpretations of present culture with the momentum bequeathed by the past cultural forms. Or to borrow Thoreau's notion of 'doubleness' again, one needs to be able to zoom back and forth instantaneously within a depth of field that connects the past with the present, and with the imminent, so that one perceives patterned continuities operating in concert with change.

By steeping ourselves in changescapes and also getting reflectively clear of them reiteratively, we might understand some of our everyday complexity. Incrementally, we might get a better feeling for our place in the world. It was the germ of this kind of feeling that I first sensed in Muller's compound. A feeling for how we can make contemplative environments. Meditative places. Systems that fold us into our built but ever-unbuilding spaces. And vice versa.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Ross Gibson, director, John Cruthers, producer, *Wild*, (1993), 16 mm film, 54 minutes duration, distributed by Ronin Films, Canberra.
- <sup>2</sup> See the seventh of Empson's ambiguities.