



BROKEN CHORD

JEN VALENDER





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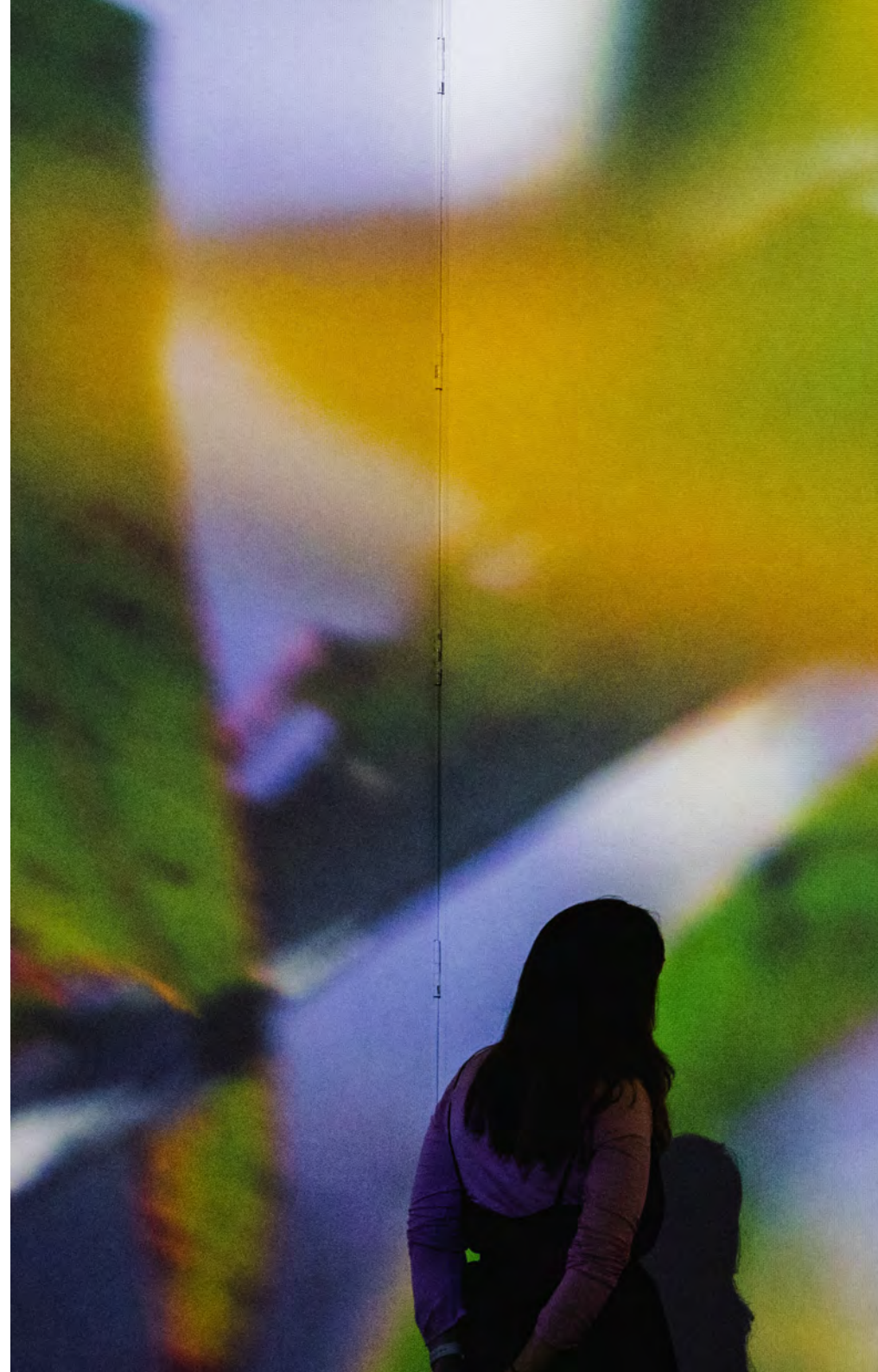
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Broken Chord

This project celebrates the persistence of life in the forests of the Blue Mountains as the area continues to recover from fire damage. The ecology of the chosen site is explored through the nature-culture-human intersection, as identified by pioneer multimedia performance artist Joan Jonas. When discussing the role of the elements in one of her early moving image works, *Wind* (1968) Jonas stated that, “the wind takes on a character.” Equally, the landscape and the elemental others of the Blue Mountains ranges can be viewed as collaborators. Natural phenomena, the site and human creative practice are seen as one.





The Cube

Broken Chord, 2022

Five channel video, 4:30min

DoP & film editor: Gene Alberts

Working with the premise of a broken chord—a chord that is deconstructed into notes played separately—a fractured composition is performed with a disfigured cello for the fire damaged forests of the Blue Mountains.

The artwork aims to re-imagine troubled ecologies between human-nature relationships through ruptured song. It may be read through multiple lenses: that of colonisation, feminism, isolation, phenomenology, coexistence, trauma, loss and life cycles.

How do we discuss difficult things while keeping in tune? This is an emotional engagement with the complex history and scars of a landscape. It positions art as a navigational tool to work through dissonance and to find the points at which harmony sits, strikes or sings.







Journey, Memory, Anastrophe

Ben Matthews

Jen Valender's Broken Chord presents a transmediated response to the resurgent life in the forests that cloak the Blue Mountains near the small town of Blackheath. Devastating fires ripped through the area in 2019, and Valender makes use of various spaces in the Multi Arts Pavilion (MAP), mima, to celebrate its recovery with four interrelated works including: Broken Chord, a 4:30 min five channel video visitors can experience in the Cube; Under Soil & Skin #1-4, a series of sculptural works installed in the Discovery Ports; External Score, a six channel sound installation positioned externally in the North Wall; and The Violin Does Not Play the Bow, a single channel, 5:00 min video that is projected by night and viewable by passers-by in the Node.

The works trigger memory, of many journeys.

Perhaps memory compelled us to try. Of the journey, away from the coast and through the messy sprawl of suburbs toward the outskirts of Sydney and the mountains beyond. When you finally hit Richmond, you cross the river and cop the humid stink of turf farms where rotting blood and bone are fed to grass that, once grown, will be sliced and rolled and laid out across the suburbs. A stinking, endless quilt whose purpose is to keep the mowers buzzing, and our feet from the dirt.

But after that low place, a sudden climb, and sweet relief as the mountains appear. You roll down the window as the bends lift and pull you into a lush green world, and you breath deep and smell the bush and love the trees that, rushing by, lure you further on into the blue.

And the wild places.

But our Christmas would not be spent with family, because the road would remain closed for weeks as fire swept through Bilpin, the Megalong Valley and beyond. Eventually, it would engulf over 17 million hectares across NSW, Victoria, Queensland, ACT, Western Australia and South Australia. According to the NSW Department of Planning, Industry and Environment more than 80% of the World Heritage listed Greater Blue Mountains Area and 54% of the NSW components of the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage property were affected. A WWF commissioned report argues almost three billion native animals were in the path of the flames.

Of course, the bush recovers, and fires are important to the life cycle of many species in Australia, but they are now occurring with unprecedented intensity and frequency and it is unclear what the future holds. So how do we make sense of these events and what they portend?



The 2019–20 Australian bushfire season became known as the Black Summer, and due to the intensity and scale of the destruction, the Blue Mountains portion was considered a ‘megafire’. What is a megafire? It sounds like some kind of protean machine, a cartoonish robot that turns into a flying flame thrower on demand, or some such thing. Perhaps this is the ultimate conceit? The label megafire? To confer a narrative of wholeness on the making/unmaking that is fire, and particularly in its diverse contexts and the vast distances that marked that period of time. That’s how we make sense of a universe teeming with possibilities, and which threatens to enfold us in complexity. Categories, that provide some kind of ontological stability. Numbers, ratios, metrics.

But what happens if you imagine the bush to be dark, tangled machinery? As you wander down a narrow trail, over broken stone and between the grappling eucalypts you can hear the gentle evidence nearby. A clicking insect, perhaps? A rustle, probably a lizard dashing away. A few moments later, something big moves in the distance. What sounds like a falling branch; a rumbling crack in the valley beyond. Then, perhaps, a whiff of smoke drifts through, and the rest falls away as you wonder—what is it doing, this machine? Opaque in its operation, it becomes a schema of the lost: a figure that imbibes you; a category you cannot define and an argument against which you lose. Best run away, before you suffocate, back to your lawn. It probably needs mowing, after all.

The ‘reality’ is... perhaps better captured in speculative fictions like that woven in Jen Valender’s exploration of the contiguity of entities and the inter relation we imagine for them. By decomposing the order of such accounts, the artist draws us into a journey through the unwinding of a history of thought by destabilising its ontological footing. The setting is apropos of a suite of works that both cannibalise for reuse and are the progenitors of the architecture of MAP mima. This pattern of decomposition and regeneration repeats in a play of emergentism that enfolds structure, and vice versa. Valender said of the work, “I’m turned on by forces and perspectives colliding. Like two opposing concepts rubbing up against one another or two rocks struck together to spark fire. That’s the space I want to exist in.”

In Broken Chord, the paradoxical outcome is anastrophic: an account of history in which the narratives that drive our imaginary refiguring of the landscape come to a (tenuous) order. This is, of course, itself a delicate tableau, but on it, on this temporary pseudo-real plane, the instruments that figure classicism are decomposed. Stripped back. Laid bare. Reconfigured. Redeployed. Engaged in part to reconstitute a piecemeal order, where the artist is presented as a mournful, reflective figure in the darkened, yet vividly renewed terrain. Here, the bush is summoning up an array of colour and life, a kinetic scene on which the sculptural—if not sepulchral—forms of trees that have been rendered darkly skeletal by fire take their revenge. They capture the artist in an embrace, and through that stasis trap, the performance stumbles out

in narrow strains that enwrap the haunting beauty of the coals with a single, delicate string. The face of Valender becomes our lens to that complication of renewal and mourning, that place of refraction and profusion where the reminder of cardinality—the certainty we share that we are born, and will die—is plunged into the recursive drama of life re-emerging. The broken chord is just so: shards fractured away from, then woven into forests of the Blue Mountains. The catastrophe rendered as memory in the unwinding resonance, and its play upon the landscape.

What is left to us are these prisms on the mind-stage, moments in which we capture the story of our misprision. The aporetic co-presentation of the artist, clad in mournful garb, and the bush that frames a performance of the catastrophic with immutable life, burgeoning, and effulgent. At different points, and depending on your vantage on the Cube, Valender is balancing in the burnt remains of a tree's branches, or lying prone at its base. The cycle of five channel video that projects in 360 degrees on the walls of the Cube immerse the viewer in varying states of agency, as the artist attempts to extract a note from the remains of a cello in the silence of the bush. But of course, it is not silence, and the symphony of the wind and life that surrounds takes up the slack for the broken chord: a disjunction further emphasised by the rifts in visual flow that mark the channels. Some are shot wide and clear in real time, others crop in and zoom to focus on the minutiae of the bush, carrying the

participant along with the kinetic shifts from glimpse to careful gaze. From defocus and reflection, to studied closeness. From the precarity of climbing and perching, spectral and yet concentrated, to lying prone and vulnerable with remnant instrument held in the mouth, child-like perhaps, or like a creature of the bush. Waiting and watching... or simply having fallen, the artist chooses not to rise. Of these, the undecidable agency of the protagonist persists, and insists in turn that we remain there, in a forest of possibilities. Waiting with the others that have gone and for those who are yet to arrive.

Similarly, in *The Violin Does Not Play the Bow*, the artist takes the revenant bow and moves through a perverse series of phenomenological experiments in which the studio supplants classical instrument. The audience is shifted from the composite enclosure of the Cube to the cunning placement of the Node. The Node is, in point of fact, a window that extrudes from MAP mima toward the lake. At dusk, the blind is drawn down to become a projector screen on which Valender's performance unfolds. The cables on the staircase are bowed by an unseen hand to produce mournful, dissonant strains and soon after the artist's face moves in to view revealing a puerile, innocent fascination. Perhaps confusion? In the next scene the bow is plunged into fire, the crackling song of its burning marking a shift away from cacophonous experiment to a curious warming as the delicate bow is taken in and eaten by flames. When viewed at dusk, the evening flares into stark



relief with the dark lit geometry of the cube shaped gallery, framing the Node with sunset colours that remind the viewer of a universe beyond. The collocation of the single channel video with oncoming night creates a layering of the horizon with the immediacy of the foreground, transporting the viewer to an undecidable, refracted space and state. The moving images cycle, their flow a challenge to the relation of screen and imaginary, to beginning, and end.

The Discovery Ports and the North Wall host a purposeful aggregation of the material and immaterial residue of these cycles of innocence, immolation and putrescence. The North Wall surprises the passer-by with a ludic presence in six movement triggered sounds: recordings of fire and the artist's own composition translated from Awaba_Salt Water Lake, an artwork by Claire Lavis and Kira Jovanovski, that is an Acknowledgement of Country in Morse code built into the brickwork. As I watch, a family passes. The infant children tottering and surprised, the adults pointing, but restrained, careful not to react too strongly. Each ostensive gesture, each approach to the source of the sounds, begins with trepidation, then a strange confidence. After initial accidents, they return to trigger the sounds of fire popping and humming, or sudden tones from bowed strings. They pass each in turn, then in random orders, then loop back to attempt to capture the experience as a whole. In some complete way, in some order. But their

diffusion compels reflection on what may have been behind the wall, behind the sound, behind the game. In the spaces between. Aporia.

The Ports are small stages cut low into the walls of the entry hall to the Cube. As you pass them, you must bend (depending on your height) to witness a series of tableaux, or perhaps dioramas, woven of wood, steel, cotton, horsehair and the artist's own hair. They are sculptural re-enactments of the events that unfolded in the bush: fragments of children's instruments recapitulate and transfigure the pieces we glimpse elsewhere. A foreshadowing, or a reflection upon the anti-events of the Broken Chord in small, surreal moments that oscillate between modern forms and postmodern nihilism to retain a certain romance. Here is pastiche, and something after that, and something after, and again. Hope, I think, that all is not lost. Or is it 'fuck hope'? If these small treasures can re-emerge, be rediscovered, revived through the diverse application of an artwork, then something can always be done? Or is it undone. You decide.

Dr Benjamin James Matthews is a Lecturer & Program Convenor in the School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Sciences at the University of Newcastle, NSW.



The Node

The Violin Does Not Play the Bow, 2022

Single channel video, 5min

A recording is like a ghost or an echo of a performance, reverberating. This film applies temporal stretching to the moving image cycle, bending sound into a foreign otherness, reminiscent of a distant whale cry.

Having sacrificed her string instruments, the artist bows a section of her studio generating new modes of performance. Life and death cycles are similar in essence: for instance, certain plant species and ecosystems require fire for their seeds to propagate. This artwork aims to recognise such dualities, perseverance and potency of regrowth, in the midst of devastation.

This work can only be viewed after dusk.



Discovery Ports

Under Soil & Skin #1-4, 2022

**Wood, steel, cotton, horsehair and the hair
of the artist**

**This series of sculptures repurpose forgotten
and discarded children's string instruments.
The precarity and neglect of these objects
echoes our own current ecology story.**







North Wall

External Score, 2022

Motion activated, six channel sound installation, 1min

To create this soundscape, Valender has worked with Awaba_ Salt Water Lake, an artwork by Claire Lavis and Kira Jovanovski, which features an Acknowledgement of Country in Morse code built into the brickwork of the North Wall. Valender's sound piece translates the Morse code pattern of the brickwork into music, surrounded by a chorus of fire. External Score captures the dynamic between message, translator and receiver, seeing the translation as a process that evolves content into something new and of itself.

Jen Valender is an Aotearoa born, Naarm/Melbourne based artist who works primary with moving image, performance and sculpture to express her interest in ethics, history and coexistence. Jen has exhibited in galleries and public spaces in Australia, France, Germany, South Africa and Portugal; and holds an MFA (Research) from the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne.

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Broken Chord

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