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## Wading in, pieces of light

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When I was a boy we had these red plastic cups. They were hard and made a high, sharp sound against the teeth. Drinking the last of its contents, I would hold my cup against my face, its circumference covering my eyes and blocking out the light of the day outside. Staring into its base, I could make out my reflection. No one else could see me at the end of that cup. It was a personal universe, which only I could experience.

This childhood memory was triggered by my experience of *Heat death in the afternoon*, an exhibition of sculptural and 2D works by Melbourne-based artists Nathan Barnett and Robbie Dixon. Entering the gallery, Barnett's freestanding forms made from plastic tubing, bent cleanly into shape, sit comfortably in the centre of the space. Diagrammatic drawings of these forms are positioned to one side and on the facing wall, on a shelf, is a collection of plastic cups and plates, all with their edges and lips gnawed. Interspersed with Barnett's work is a series of structures by Dixon, which feel like they would be at home at the shorefront or at sea. One is possibly a signpost or a kind of gauge with a specific nautical function. On the back wall is a painting that uses what look like maritime signal flags as its subject. Another work is a broken banner-like structure, which is also present—in its unbroken form—in two photographs taken on a pier facing Melbourne's city skyline. In the photographs, the banner either effaces the city or adds to the objects on the pier, depending on the angle of the camera.

While my childhood memory more obviously resonates with the tactile plasticity and physicality of Barnett's tubular forms and gnawed plastic

cups and plates, it was equally provoked by the intimate sense of subjectivity and relativity put into play by Dixon's nautical structures and signs, which reminded me of my own discovery of subjectivity at that young age. Experiencing Barnett's work, I had an immediate bodily response—I could actually taste plastic in my mouth. With Dixon's work, however, it was more psychological. His objects felt relative, mutually dependent; they came together like a sentence that reveals some meaning greater than that of each distinct part. In experiencing his work, I found myself interpreting and making connections like I was learning a language.

A further parallel between my memory and Dixon and Barnett's work is the sense of annihilation at play in each. By raising the cup to my face, I briefly deleted the world around me. In Barnett's work this annihilation occurs on a material level, where plastic itself is formed in a process that annihilates, in the true sense of the word. To annihilate is to 'reduce to nothing', and plastic is the product of the most spectacular reduction. Millions of years ago, sunlight was stored as carbon via the photosynthesis of plant matter floating at sea. This plant matter, and the remains of the animals that lived off it, settled on the ocean floor and slowly became oil, a by-product of whose refinement is plastic. In this way, sunlight—vast, intangible, breathtaking nothingness—has been fixed into the concentrated, solid world of stuff that we surround ourselves with. Plastic becomes a model for thinking about the transition from immateriality to materiality, and the role of form in this transition is where Barnett's tubular sculptures find their voice; they are momentary structures on the timeline towards total collapse. Bits of matter and particles of light come together to make neat powerful shapes. Barnett's forms are drawings in space; his actual drawings their counterpoints. They are diagrams of form, maps of spatial relationships. Barnett's work recombines, rethinks and repositions. It reflects plasticity in a material and non-material sense, and positions the world itself as mere composition: stuff comes together and then it comes together again differently, and then again, and again.

The more visceral side of Barnett's work is embedded in his plastic cups, plates and other vessels that have been eaten away at the edges. They have been partly ingested. In those vessels, sunlight is swallowed. Plastic has

become prosthetic for us, it is an extension of our bodies, but more than that, it represents an invasive force. Plastic permeates the skin, it crosses membranes, becomes internalised, gets stuck inside. It makes us sick. It holds us tightly in a state of disease, in the thick of our last mutated fight, as conversely, we hold on just as tightly to it. In this sense, Barnett's work talks of the suffering of humanity at this point in our history. Plastic's toxicity is a warning shot, and in this way, Barnett's work is alarming and disconcerting as much as it is elegant and direct.

While in Barnett's work annihilation is present in its material make-up—in the plastic itself—in Dixon's work it operates on a semantic level: the 'reduction to nothing' takes place in the way things are structured, in the relationships between things and in what those relationships set in motion. More than a reduction, an erasure or elimination is present. Dixon presents parts of a whole that cannot be seen entirely. There is a sense that the inclusion of some things is a result of the exclusion of others, and that something remains unsaid in what is said. In this way, a subjective space is set up in which knowing in a particular sense is privileged over knowing in an absolute sense. This is most clear in the two photographs of the banner. In one photograph, the banner is one of a number of objects on the pier; it adds to the world of objects and to the city, which lies in the background of the photo. In the other photograph, the camera angle is shifted, and the banner becomes the main event; it eliminates the city, deleting it from the world. There is no absolute version of the banner or the city; the two exist relative to one another. This relativity is reiterated by the painted gradation of greys on the largest of the nautical structures. Here, the achromatic spectrum of the structure talks of subtle variations, small changes and gradual shifts.

In Dixon's work, nothing is either black or white, and if an extreme position is possible then it is temporary and contingent. Elements like the banner and the scale of greys unlock the other works; they establish a relationship between an all-or-nothing audacity (the annihilation of the city) and a fragile recognition of dependency. On the one hand, Dixon's work awakens a powerful sense of autonomy, independence and freedom; his structures are signposts that point outwards, marking a point of departure. On the other hand, although the structures indicate

where a path lies, they embody uncertainty; they mark the beginning and end points of a trajectory that is unknown. This sensation of freedom in uncharted territory is appropriately oceanic. In response to the amorphous, terrifying nature of the sea, the structures that act as its counterpoint—its ships, signals and ports, even its sailors—embody an attitude of defiance that is bold, fearless and heroic. Although Dixon's structures express intimacy and fragility, they occupy this position of defiance.

Thinking again about the universe at the bottom of my red cup, I am struck by the capacity of a simple gesture to dramatically alter the surrounding world, and how gestures of this kind are present in both Barnett and Dixon's work. In Dixon's two photos of the banner and the city, the difference between adding and subtracting is a movement, a simple shift of the camera angle from one photograph to the other. The movement is relatively minute, but the implications in the change from addition to subtraction are radical. Similarly, the bite marks on Barnett's cups and plates create a significant shift in how we regard these objects and their purpose: the vessels of daily consumption have been consumed. Barnett's bite marks reference a pervasive toxicity and dramatically function as an omen of humanity's collapse.

While different in content and form, both Barnett and Dixon's work can be seen to use simple material gestures to engage with the idea of annihilation. The annihilation of the self and the annihilation of the surrounding world are inseparable; they are mutually dependent, locked in a firm embrace. In a material sense, our annihilation is a reduction; we exist as recombinant forms, continually reimagined, increasingly complex.