

## Matting

It glints dully on the side of a branch of cobbled pathway that passes through a gap in a straggly hedge. It is a strip of metal sheeting—laterally ribbed, punched with an even array of holes, a long piece of mottly rusted steel not quite flush with the ground so that a sort of malaise emanates from its patently temporary presence. It's a metre-long length of so-called Marston Matting, or Perforated Steel Planking (PSP), which has migrated down the hill from the erstwhile French military training areas around the Wankheimer Täler, to the residual hippy trailer park that we call the Wagenburg—a now more-or-less permanent settlement of construction-workers' caravans converted into a sort of a commune-cum-trailer park. This sheet of Marston Matting is probably of American origin. The stuff was first manufactured during the Second World War for use in the Pacific campaign and the invasion of continental Europe. The prefabricated matting was intended to provide an easily assembled road or runway surface to stabilize muddy or marshy ground. The individual elements were perforated to reduce weight, given lateral corrugations to stiffen them, and were equipped with a hook-and-slot system on opposite edges to allow each sheet to be connected to its neighbours. The modular units were designed to provide an artificial ground more permanent than the shifting soil they covered. But by the same token, they could be transported easily, laid quickly, and if necessary, ripped up equally rapidly to be rebuilt elsewhere.

Typically, the steel matting has always been geographically mobile, also being used in Germany, for instance, to strengthen the runways at Tempelhof and Tegel airports during the Berlin airlift. This is perhaps the 'origin', if one can use this term at all for such ephemeral building material, for the matting that I am photographing here. Marston matting has been frequently reused for more peaceful purposes than originally intended: as fencing material, as door strengthener, or in one of my favourite examples, as wine rack (you can slot a lot of bottle necks into a slab of Marston!). Symptomatically, when I went back to the Wagenburg to take more photos of this material, I discovered that it was no longer where I had last seen it. It had migrated onwards on its trajectory of serial temporarinesses.

The steel matting was produced with a high manganese content, so that it was resistant to corrosion, as the reasonably good state of the sheeting I found showed. This means that, paradoxically enough for a building material designed for the construction of temporary runways and road surfaces and frequently transported to new sites and re-used for diverse projects, it is itself endowed with a considerable degree of permanency. A recent clean-up of the now decommissioned military zone (one of a series that has progressively removed old munitions and military junk from up on the hills) dredged up quantities of this

steel matting in pretty good nick. It is entirely plausible that the sheet that I photographed has an eighty-year history of repeated usage in various theatres of war or mock-war, from the Second World War through the Cold War, into the post-Cold-War era—a concatenation of epochs that has seen so many low- and high-tech conflicts around the globe. The steel matting, in its very material existence, or perhaps more appropriately, existences, is an embodiment of the dialectics of temporariness and permanence that is a core preoccupation of this book.

This relic of numerous wars, non-wars or proxy-wars, lying about in a hippy commune on the edge of a South German university town, fascinates me. It seems emblematic of the relationship to place that John Kinsella and I explore in these pages. The sheet of matting lies on the ground, propped lightly against the base of a tree trunk, half in contact with the earth, half floating in the air around it—displaying its readiness to go elsewhere at the drop of a hat. The matting is a prosthetic analogy for the ground, porous like the soil and its latticework of crystalline particles, constructed of minerals drawn from the earth, of it but not of it. It is a modern technological hybrid, derived from but somehow alien from the ground. It is both related to the soil, yet oddly remote from that with which it so intimately snuggles.

The matting creates around itself a palimpsestic, laminated configuration of elements—earth and air, perhaps also water and fire—which might be construed as a concrete metaphor for the very nature of the temporality of the earth and our modern relationship with it. Indeed, the iconic similarity between our title, *temp(ə)rərɪnəs* ('Temporariness')—transcribed into International Phonetic Alphabet in a gesture towards the contingent singularity of the verbal speech act itself—and the perforated steel matting is not coincidental. If language, for Heidegger (1949: 24), was the house of being, we implicitly suggest in this way, that temporariness, in its material and linguistic forms, is the latticework of becoming.

Coeval with the ground, the steel matting both connects and separates the earth and those who stand upon it. The matting migrates, like those who walk or work upon it. The metal sheeting exists in an uneasy semiotic relationship with its environment. Is both an icon of the surface of the ground and a metonymy of it, and in my recycling of it here, a metaphor for the complex relationship between temporariness and permanency that John and I explore in this book. It is also an artefact of war, which destroys many of the relationships that language depends upon and that it seeks to illuminate. So close to nature in its intended capacity of lying layered upon the earth, but so immensely indicative of what Sebald (2004) has called 'a natural history of destruction', this sheet of matting is an index of the annihilation of the earth of which John and I are constantly

reminded—not unlike Sebald himself, who discovers on his walk through Norfolk and Suffolk ‘traces of destruction, reaching far back into the past, that were evident even in that remote place’ (2002: 3).

I am fascinated by this material—I say it again. It exerts a powerful attractive force upon me. Inert, passive, but at the same time absolutely interactive (any one sheet of Marston matting is designed to slot into others), it also interacts with me. Like a dumb interlocutor, its perforations so many mute interrogations, it coaxes me into speech when I encounter it. An unnatural prosthesis of nature, it behaves, indeed, like any other inhabitant of the natural environment, giving me, quite literally, ground to stand upon in my own capacity as a walker and wordsmith. To the extent that it is there and calls to me, speaks with me, it gives birth to me in this particular instant and instance of my own series of temporary moments of existence.

The matting is a living entity—yes, living: it moves, it acts, it interacts, it signifies, indeed, it is also a site of feeling. It is an emblem of affect—that powerful attractive force that operates at the somatic, visceral level and connects entities, alive or half alive, human or nonhuman, to each other, in ways that cause them to change in the course of the encounter—if only then to disengage, transformed, ready to enter into a new transformative dialogue with a new interlocutor, and on and on, in an endless creative process of connections, de-connections, reconnections. The matting I have photographed is both a visual metaphor of the affect-ridden, affect-driven world we live in and an indexical manifestation of its ‘relational pull’ (Eckstein 2017) *because* I have been drawn to photograph it.

Yet at the same time, it is also an index of the no-less powerful forces in our world that seek to exploit, divert, pervert and destroy the immense fabric of creative relationships that make up the cosmos: war, environmental destruction, the necropolitical annihilation of humans, animals, the forests and the earth itself. These forces also exert a powerful, sinister and unsettling fascination, meaning, if nothing else, that we can never claim we are not complicit in these ubiquitous processes of destruction (Sanders 2001)—even if that uneasy knowledge founds and fuels our dogged resistance to such forces. This play of positive and negative affects means that even our moral stances, our political engagements, are not permanent places to stand, but temporary site of resistance that in this ongoing war of manoeuvre must constantly be reassessed and renewed. No theory, no manifesto, no work of art, is permanent or eternally sufficient. Each of them serves a purpose for a period of time and then, as circumstances change, must be replaced by another one that is more appropriate.

That is why, in writing this book, John and I have implemented the genre of the collage of micro-essays. The book is made up of units that, not unlike

the steel matting, can be combined and recombined at will with other units. We have chosen a particular sequence, but of course you can take the fabric of matting apart and put it back together in another sequence or collage as you wish. Indeed, in the process of writing, we have constantly tried out new permutations and combinations of the units making up this book, slotting them together in ever new configurations.

Similarly to the sheets of steel matting, each of the textual units is porous. The perforations reduce the weight of the steel matting. Likewise, the essay has a certain lightness that eschews monumental and the exhaustive modes of academic writing—attributes highly valued in the Germanic academic system in which I work, where the essay, according to Adorno (1991: 3-4), is a subaltern and subversive genre. This lightness arises from the fact that the essay seeks to maintain an open structure that communicates with its environment. Iconoclastically, the essay refuses the customary distance between scholarly observer and the object of commentary. It thus threatens, however discretely, a tradition of 'science' ('Wissenschaft') that legitimizes its gravitas on the basis of objectivity, that is, non-involvement with its objects of study. It's a good century since quantum theory recognized that no scientific experiment can take place without the necessary precondition of the 'entanglement' of, respectively, observer, scientific instrument and the natural phenomena under investigation (Barad 2007). Yet the essay still creates a stir by virtue of its mixing of the distanced mode of academic commentary and the participatory mode of creative connection—by virtue of its contamination of academia with art.

In its very generic features, the essay is a hybrid genre, thereby advertising, performatively, the nature of its task. Adorno (1991: 14-15) identifies the essay as a genre that is inherently inimical to Descartes' dictates about the functioning of analytical reasoning at the dawn of the modern—and beyond, right up to the present day. Analysis, for Descartes, divides the problem into a number of atomized elements that can then be addressed one by one. The principle of divide and rule in the world of polemical thought. Or the principle of the anatomy lesson, that violently takes the body apart in order to understand its workings. The essay, itself at first glance a fragment rather than a whole, does none of this, says Adorno. It addresses an issue in its entirety, in its complexity, without seeking to dissect it and thereby reduce its living, organic complexity. By the same token, it renounces any form of totality or exhaustiveness, contenting itself with the contingent, the provisional, the temporary—in other words, the only sort of encounter that can be had with a dynamic, actantial Other.

In this book, our essays, themselves dynamic entities, enter into a dialogue with one another. Within that conversation, the essays, apparently stable in their black and white adhesion on the page, are in fact transformed by the man-

ifold and shifting connections that the intelligent and alert reader, if she listens carefully to their subterranean or submarine murmur, will hear them making among themselves. Indeed, although we have orchestrated these pieces in a certain configuration, John and I have constantly been surprised by what the micro-essays get up to among themselves when our backs are turned. Accordingly, we have been reminded, time and again, of Thoreau's (1908: 8) words: 'We are made to exaggerate the importance of the work we do; and yet how much is not done by us!' We are aware that our own configuring work leaves ample space for the essays to work their own magic and weave their own connections without our help.

But that is not all. The essays seek to engage in turn with their environment, to be open to the world. One might imagine the steel latticework as a material icon or a very objective correlative of the written text—its lateral corrugations mimicking the lines on the page and the perforations the chain-like sequences of the words themselves. Conceived of thus, it is striking that in this visual simile both lines and words are staged as absences: the lines are long open grooves and the words have literally been punched out on the production line. Both are open to the air. The steel matting provides a literal visual metaphor of what Eco (1989) called 'the open work'. Literary poesis, and by extension, intellectual creation, does not result in an autotelic, autonomous work of art or a hermetically sealed work of scholarship. Rather, from the outset it is engaged in a constant dialogue, from the smallest unit of the letter or the phoneme, with its neighbours. The visual metaphor of the steel latticework, even though it portrays an artefact that is independent and may travel, suggests a notion of creation that eschews the paradigm of Saussurean difference. Rather, it imposes a notion of interrelationship as the driving force and the underlying precondition of artistic creation and inquiring thought. Each of these essays seeks to communicate with its neighbours and could not exist alone. Each one entertains a myriad of vital connections to the earth, to the forest, to animals, to other walkers, to the wind and the clouds.

To that extent, this collage of essays stands, in the manner of a complex synecdoche, for a worldliness that we believe is the only viable mode of being for the humanities if they are to survive as part of the educational institutions of the future. This book is a plank—modular, open-ended, dialogical, contingent—in a programme for a temporal (as opposed to spiritual) humanities that has yet to be invented, but we believe to be our only chance for saying something of relevance in the era of multiple global crises that forms our dangerous Now.

**RWP**

*Atomic Swans, Neckar River, Germany*

River rising out of Black Forest is the river  
 you walked past and will walk past again, again,  
 Neckar rising and falling all the way to the Rhine  
 at industrial Mannheim, flowing with swan  
 families keeping zones, maintaining half lives  
 in the dip of seasonal sheddings and re-applications,  
 wingspread to hold warmth, to harbour  
 the cores of their legacies, codes we stumble  
 around, taking photos. And then, downriver  
 from Tübingen, on a train to Stuttgart,  
 later approaching Kirchheim, across  
 the waters, hook of the river, swans familiar  
 but different, chain of being, or reaction  
 against corruption of fundamentals.

Across there, summer family, Schwäne,  
 Gemeinschaftskernkraftwerk, GK N2  
 with its hybrid cooling tower suppressed  
 volcano eruptive as the Börse Frankfurt  
 doesn't want to be, *steady steady*  
 goes the hebephrenic—broody reactor  
 in its oven nest reminds you of Frost's  
 'American' ovenbird, but this can't be enclosed  
 in a sonnet reactor vessel, can't be shielded  
 against its wild prosody when life goes on  
 and on all around, cheap land for wealthier than-  
 usual families who don't maintain  
 anxious states, who let the becquerels  
 wash over them in health denial.

The big flood of extra *warm* water  
 in 2004, the heating river with happy  
 expanding fish, the Simpsons laugh-off  
 at mutating presence, those drones  
 out of Stuttgart, the ongoing states  
 of warfare. Wonder if the mines in Western  
 Australia on stolen land stealing spirits  
 and unbalancing will feed its last years,  
 the swans' white labours in the wastes,

the 'historic hiking path', the respect  
 a Mayor has for tradition and rites  
 of way, trek on to Heidelberg escorted  
 through the plant by 'guard and German  
 shepherd'. Matrix of traversal. Swan spectres.

Wondering how people could live within  
 a few hundred metres of the plant, of Unit 2  
*itself*, how? Benign as 'Wouldn't know anyway',  
 and 'Better dying first than lingering longer  
 being further away'. Quid pro quo choice  
 exchange not likely to rouse as much interest  
 as Boris Becker's financial solvency or Bernard  
 Tomic's 'un-Australian' statement of fact: 'little bit bored',  
 shattering a sponsor's illusions of a too busy to  
 notice enculturation. Radiation gets places,  
 works its way in, speaks its mind. And white swans  
 mute and full of voice, the songs of culture pledge  
 benefits of plant, and company's people-skills,  
 localising instillation. Benefits. Privileges.

Of 'German Engineering'. Safe as houses.  
 But what do flight and song and Hölderlin  
 have to do with violence of matter, of a split  
 in the forest's fabric, the potatoes bulging  
 in the fields right up to the ramparts,  
 tours through a 'sterile' environment:  
 clean is unseen. So who's to watch CNN  
 on atomic television, or atomic rail past steam  
 rising or the quiet hum of plant transpiration?  
 These networks of empowerment, these liberations  
 of carbon futures, carbon credit slaughterhouse?  
 Incongruous change of tone, shiftback phonemes,  
 almost passive observation recollection  
 data collation—stay safe within the poem.

All these *voices* that make schematics, make  
 policy for energy to cloak the wor(l)d, to screensave  
 and dilate our spectres. Late day travelling  
 past, even in summer light with the risk  
 of a shower, your swans show the way,

cygnets trailing, blazing a generational  
 pathway; for no Reactor Birds are alone  
 for long, and even diminishing, register  
 strong—what does it mean outside  
 the ancient sources, the languages  
 that have gone into making up the grid?  
 And to cap it off, waste from elsewhere  
 arrived on a barge, a ghost-train passes  
 on the other side, on the far bank, shielding you?

Or—later, later—on the intercity express from Mannheim  
 to Frankfurt, the ball in play, everything in motion,  
 the Rhine *enabling* Biblis plant, the Rhine in role  
 of *co-dependent*, the Rhine regurgitating loops leaks  
 breaks quad cooling tower symmetry to placate  
 Unit A and Unit B pressurised water reactors,  
 gloriously twinned with Balakovo's pride,  
 ovens warming to swan silhouettes, a Lotte  
 Reiniger manic design Ordnung, the Neckar  
 warm water merged with the Rhine warm water  
 fed as wedding party bliss! O, but *stymied* with decommission,  
 that slow trek towards non-existence as if it never was,  
 wish-fulfilment a trace in cabbage fields. But good ol' GKN2  
 back up the tributary will stay hot under its collar!

True, true... Neckarwestheim is not *on* the railway  
 but from across the river you join its pseudo  
 symbiosis with plant, with the history  
 of atomic birds: Höckerschwan, Graureiher,  
 Bussard, Kohlmeise, Gartenbaumläufer,  
 and with lists keening through glass  
 you absorb becquerels to add to your stockpile,  
 weaponised psyche to expand human  
 consciousness, ingenuity of refusal and acceptance  
 gathering as the train slows at Kirchheim,  
 Neckar still rising out of the Black Forest far back,  
 as you always travel facing forward if given a choice.  
 These zero-sum gains in which spectral swans  
 are winners averting glances, GPS propositions.

JK



## Residues of Hessian

The residues of the military trying to keep a firm footing on ground they've disturbed, disrupted, brutalised, are a reminder and an affirmation of their failure to hold what they've appropriated, no matter how 'resilient' their technology. The 'essential' nature of manganese for not only anti-rust qualities, but also its qualities of shock reduction on steel, made it a deeply desired commodity in World War II, and the desire lines lead to the 'neutrality' of Sweden (Swedish ships carried and protected German ore shipments during the war) and, say, the Artillery Mountains in Arizona. Manganese mines, like all mines, are places of great natural and cultural disturbance. The exploitation—new waves of colonisation—of African 'resources', including manganese, developed multifold during World War II. All intermediaries between the earth and our feet, between the earth and objects of human design—the 'conductive superhighways' of the false anthropology—create a buffer that can *only* be permeable. A common sight in rural areas around the world is the degraded macadam that has been defeated by 'weeds' and tree saplings, breaking through, remaking habitat. The reclamation of steel matting of many wars and false wars, a reclaiming into the domestic porousness of forest not as monopolised capitalist-military resource, but as a place of nature in which humans are also nature, is a pragmatic dissolution of the vicariousness of conflict and violence, of the sundering of earth to conductivity. All wars are won or lost depending on lines of supply and communication. The matting allows vehicles to move where they couldn't move of their own volition, or where they would be impaired in the usual movement. Tracked vehicles incorporate their own 'matting', of course, but even these sometimes require the extra 'footing' matting provides. And now the matting that fitted together so readily and efficiently is moving as if compelled by itself, and not by the military. A life, maybe, outside conflict—an absorbing of the less destructible into the forest, into the dwelling of 'hippies', into the liminal spaces of the forest-edge dwellers. In the personal essay we are often 'reminded of' and draw analogies because we wish to frame the run of words and yet make it porous enough for 'us' to dip out and re-enter at will. This matting is necessary for the act of reading to 'walk' over the textual roadway laid down to enable the journey we think we require when beginning a text and imagining its possible ends. And in this spirit, yet another ploy, I am reminded of living in 'the shack' in the cow paddocks on the edge of the creek deep in the southwest of Australia, a few kms outside Bridgetown, with marri forest edging nearby, and a giant colonial walnut in the vicinity of the shack. And mud. In winter, it rains heavily and gets muddy. And in the same way turbulence is on the increase due to climate change, and aviation thinkers are trying to out-think the conundrum of flying

