

The History-Reporting Artist

Mandelbrot is very interesting. The process of taking successive finer and finer measurements comes to an end eventually. One limit might be one specified in molecular physics. We are interested in maps because they map in part a limit of visibility. Hurrah for Mandelbrot!

- Terry Atkinson, from *coast map, how long is the coastline of Britain? (Mandelbrot)*, 1967

The 'era of testimony' began, by most accounts, with the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961, the first major war crimes trial since Nuremberg and Tokyo and the crucible of all the great debates about international criminal justice and accounting for atrocities since. In the two chapters of The Juridical Unconscious devoted to Eichmann, Shoshana Felman argues that the new political agency of survivors as witnesses established at the trial was acquired not in spite of the fact that the stories they told were hard to tell, hear, or sometimes even to believe, not in spite of the fact that they were unreliable, but, paradoxically, precisely because of these flaws.

- Thomas Keenan & Eyal Weizman, from 'Mengeles Skull', 2011

The imperative to become a witness, to experience an event and to render it knowable to others, is an ever more dominant characteristic of the human condition. The advent of digital and social media as tools of accelerated documentation and communication, and the insurgence of data-based surveillance into everyday life, exemplify the refinement of technologies in response to corporate, military, state and individual needs to make visible, to plot actions, motivations and causalities at increasingly molecular depths. In the popular imagination, an antagonism is forming between nefarious forces of data gathering, weaponised in order to manipulate mass populations, and the capacity of individual 'testimony' and 'lived experience' to bear moral weight, amplified by new forms of representation.

In human rights discourse, concretised in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust in the UN adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 'era of the witness' has structured processes of international justice and war crimes investigations. Historian Annette Wieviorka has articulated the ways in which, particularly following the Eichmann trial in 1961, a disregard of survivor's stories was replaced by the centrality of the image of the witness as 'bearer of history'¹. The survivor becomes a conduit into the space of history as it is actively constructed, rather than as viewed remotely. Witness testimony moves beyond the empirical ground of evidence gathering, and into a more strategic space of pedagogical and political use, where linguistic slippages and flaws in memory offer an understanding of trauma, the broader ethical consequences emanating from individual events, and a greater motivation towards action. The 'phantom' of history requires the messy aura of reality for validation. In the words of political scientist Michal Givoni: 'what turns testimony into a

¹ Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 2006 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press)

distinct form of action is the multilayered bonds that it effects between a witness, a public and an (often internal) other ... Political testimony, if one must define it, is a way to say “we” without dissolving the “I” and without excluding the other. And it is every bit as tentative, unsettled, and bound to failure as it sounds.’²

In this formulation, the witness hovers in a space between the collective and the individual: the singularity of their subjectivity is a necessary function in the ability for their testimony to operate within processes of collective valorization. This is the ground of our contemporary conception of human rights: the communication of an incursion upon an individual’s inalienable, ‘natural’ rights, as it pertains to a group experience, as the foundation for regional or global actions, policies or judgements. Within this conception is an inherent paradox, where individuals are called ‘to fashion themselves as witnesses’ in order for their political or personal struggles to become visible, ‘while their witness position is never guaranteed and their mode of witnessing is questioned.’³ A person can only ‘become a witness’ if the structures that validate their witnessing recognise their personhood in the first place.

Written into the essential contracts of human rights – genealogically bound to John Locke’s conception of ‘natural rights’ that lies at the core of his central political analysis *The Two Treatises of Government* (1690), and, in turn, his influence on the US Declaration of Independence and classical notions of political liberalism – is an inception point of this paradox. In Locke’s philosophy, in the pre-political state of nature ‘men’ were born free and equal, ruled over only by the law of nature. The law of nature, or ‘reason’ as Locke frames it, teaches principally that ‘being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, liberty, or possessions.’ The right to property that Locke introduces with the word ‘possessions’, stems from a synthesis of the corporeal and the self: ‘... everyman has a property in his own Person ... The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his.’⁴ As man exerts labour to extract ‘something that nature has provided’, so labour mixes with the object and is made into property. In Locke’s view, labour, as the creator of property, is to be taken broadly – from acts of foraging, to production requiring planning and skill.

Despite this broad view of labour, Locke’s thesis on property was deeply entwined with the colonial operations of the British and Americans in the 17th Century. Locke explicitly excluded the indigenous peoples of the ‘new world’ from the right to property, on the basis that their hunter-gatherer society did not, in his perception, improve the land on which they lived. This judgement allowed for the rampant expropriation of land by settlers, as an act towards the ‘greater good’. Similarly, Locke justified the enslavement of African people with the caveat that chattel slavery, with power of life and death, was reasonable in the case of ‘prisoners taken in a just war’. The trade in people in Africa – caught in conflicts that became

² Michal Givoni, ‘Witnessing/Testimony’, *Mafte’akh: Lexical Review of Political Thought*, Issue 2e – Winter 2011 <http://mafteakh.tau.ac.il/en/issue-2e-winter-2011/witnessingtestimony/>

³ Givoni, op cit.

⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* ed. Thomas Hollis, 1764 (London: A. Millar et al.)

self-perpetuating as the trade grew and the dependency of local economies on it increased – and the setting of enslaved people to work on sugar and cotton plantations in the Caribbean and North America, became intrinsically tied into the generation of property and wealth, through the planter’s ‘labour’ mixing with the ‘objects’ of the slave and land. Within Locke’s formulation of liberal governance – backed up by the ingrained Doctrine of Discovery followed by European settlers⁵ – the personhood of indigenous and black peoples is denied, and they are reduced to the nonhuman, their lands and bodies ‘something that nature has provided’ to the settler to appropriate for their use. In the 18th Century, the logic of ‘improvement’ extended to the application of asset based lending, the lives of slaves and expropriated land becoming collateral in cycles of credit and debt that rendered economic growth through abstraction, and spread further to forms of class-based dispossession.

The figure of the witness enshrined in human rights discourse, along with the growing imperative to ‘become a witness’, is therefore bounded by interwoven and exclusionary notions of property, personhood and the abstraction of value. It is a pretence towards the possibility of universal individual agency within the collective, one that is dependent on theatrical and rhetorical processes of valorization, rather than formal ones. As Givoni states, ‘testimony has been reinterpreted as a performance that was elicited by psychotherapists, staged by filmmakers and curators, and utilized by politicians and ideological apparatuses.’⁶ Following the thought of theorist Mijke van der Drift, the ‘logos’ that is within individual testimony is therefore organised towards a monological order, one that reaffirms a distribution of marginalities, as opposed to a condition of multilogics, where the binding of language with everyday practices and transitioning forms of life might open up to agential opacity not circumscribed by interiority and self-possession. In the monological order the question of the limits of visibility is governed by semantics, rules and solutions to forces; in the multilogical, it is one of geometry, forms, and processes of dissolution.

In a narrative well rehearsed by the artist himself, in 1974 Terry Atkinson left the conceptual art group Art & Language (A&L).⁷ This movement from the ‘we’ to the ‘I’ could be superficially read as a reclaiming of individual artistic subjectivity. In Atkinson’s case however, the move responded to his experience of A&L shifting from the ‘social space of a group to that of a caucus.’ In the early ‘70s, the number of interlocutors within A&L – as it revolved around the journal *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art* – grew significantly, along with the formation of a New York based group and parallel journal *The*

⁵ The Doctrine of Discovery is still cited today in legal land disputes. It dates from papal bulls issued in 1452 and 1455 by Pope Nicholas V, that authorised King Alfonso V of Portugal to reduce any ‘Saracens (Muslims) and pagans and any other unbelievers’ to perpetual slavery, and ‘to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit’.

⁶ Givoni, ‘Witnessing/Testimony’

⁷ Much of the following owes a considerable debt to Atkinson’s own writing, and the vital mode of auto-critique he has adopted since the 1960s. Where quotes below are not footnoted, they are taken from Terry Atkinson, *The Indexing: The World War I Moves and the Ruins of Conceptualism*, 1992 (Belfast: Circa Publications)

Fox, only for the authorial identity of the group to contract sharply to three people towards the end of the decade. The intervening evolution of transatlantic discourse was concretised in two distinct projects: the work *Index 01* (shown in 1972 at Documenta V and Hayward Gallery) and the booklet *Blurting in A & L: An Index of Blurts and Their Concatenation* (published in 1973). Both projects endeavoured to formalise the ongoing exchange of theoretical texts generated between the members, and, in the words of art historian, critic and A&L contributor Charles Harrison, ‘to map a form of conversational world, and to find a representation, however schematic, of a place where meanings could be made.’⁸

Through processes and technologies of indexing, including filing cabinets and cards, *Index 01* organised 87 texts by A&L members in relation to one another, detailing their compatibility, incompatibility, or incommensurability. The work could be seen as a computational device, enabling a central logic to be applied to an accumulation of individual reasonings and testimonies on the nature of art. There is the suggestion of a possible resolution in the work, in its transposition of complex texts into a set of quantifiable relations – yet this mapping or schematising also holds the retrospective characteristics of an archive. However much the work parodied the bureaucratic undertones of museums and galleries, and reflexively challenged the conditions of arts production, it also rendered a particular history of linguistic exchange as a bounded (and notably commodifiable) entity. *Index 01* exuded the cosmopolitanism of Conceptual art in its expansive and amorphous approach to ‘where art takes place’, yet simultaneously took on an air of officialdom, and the instituting of a temporal marker – what Atkinson has called ‘the imprimatur of a conceptual career publishing house.’ An underlying sense of self-historicization in *Index 01* was indicative for Atkinson of a wider condition within Conceptualism, with the early ‘70s as a period of ossification for the movement, ‘marshal[ing] the resources of an official history... and foreclosing the provisions of theory which it had done so much to plenary.’ In the ‘open theory situation’ of A&L, individual processes of valorization and proprietization became entwined with the strategic space of writing history.

Atkinson’s subsequent 45 years of artistic and critical production have interrogated a complex set of image, language and material relations, operable in the communicative space between the individual and the collective. Beginning with the understanding of art as intrinsically part of the ‘circular causal’ relationships that constitute our social, economic and political structures, Atkinson has particularly addressed the construction of the artist as witness and ‘bearer of history’, with history as both a register of past events, and a set of sensing, documenting, and interpreting systems. While ‘74 marked a conscious break with A&L and with Conceptualism as a ‘capital C’ movement, Atkinson’s involvement with the group, and to a lesser degree with the earlier Pop Art collective Fine Artz, have continued to exist as facets of an artistic subjectivity that has sought to index its own formation through social, political and historical forces. Where latterly in contemporary art discourse a rather facile

⁸ Charles Harrison, *Essays on Art & Language*, 1991 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press)

binary has taken hold between individual and collective artistic practice – where collectivity takes on a superior moral status for its supposed disregard of singular authorship and self-interested careerism – the ever-present dynamics between the two states, particularly in the productive relationship between artist and viewer, incapsulates for Atkinson a more nuanced set of considerations around transmission and the forms it takes under different forces. In his works across different media, Atkinson has articulated the entanglements that exist within a particular liberal democratic and capitalist conception of history, and its outgrowths in notions of subjectivity, agency, and culture.

In *Untitled* (1965-1974), comprised of two separate schematic drawings from '65 collaged onto a sheet with an appended text from '74, Atkinson narrates the point of his departure from Fine Artz, and the beginning of his collaborations with Dave Bainbridge and Harrold Hurrell that formed into A&L. The work could be taken as a working sketch from a notebook, in that it brings together external references, diaristic reflections on the artist's own motivations, and two diagrammatic sketches of possible 'chemical sculptures' – simple closed geometric structures, labelled as containing 'reactants'. The point of connection with Bainbridge and Hurrell is the work of cybernetic theorist Gordon Pask, with passages from Pask's 'An Approach to Cybernetics' (1961) quoted on the two drawings from '65, and the introduction of Atkinson to Pask's theory by Bainbridge and Hurrell cited in the appended '74 text. On one drawing, the Pask quote posits the 'advantages' to being in a 'group of observers', where the 'private images' individuals develop to allow them to 'deal with and decide about their environment', are replaced by one commonly understood and communicated abstraction – 'a public image of the world'. Looking back from '74, Atkinson reflects on this as relevant to his situation on the cusp between Fine Artz and A&L, from the perspective of relations with Bainbridge and Hurrell as a more viable context for substantive communication – in Pask's words, a 'group of observers, anxious to make the same sort of predictions.' Atkinson's two '65 drawings speculate on the difference between a 'chemical sculpture' produced by a group of artists, and one by a single artist. Citing the law of equilibrium maintained within a closed system, where an assembly of chemical reactants act to nullify thermal or chemical disturbances, Atkinson seemingly compares this maintenance of stability to both the public exchange that leads to consensus within a group, and the opposing private determinations made by the individual artist. The underlying question perhaps, with art taken to be a known 'ensemble of attributes', is at what point or within what set of relations does art achieve predictive value, while remaining 'open' as a system – the ability to offer an understanding of recurring behaviours and conditions in the world, from the molecular to the global, without contributing to the feedback loop within a closed system?

From the vantage point of '74, when Atkinson was consciously reordering an artistic subjectivity away from the group dynamic of A&L, the decision to append and reframe the two '65 drawings suggests a renewed import to their speculation on collective discourse and production. Taken in the context of Atkinson's disquiet at Conceptualism's 'marshal[ing of] the resources of an official history', *Untitled* is also notably a marking of a personal history, one that specifically addresses the ongoing formation of an artistic 'self' as a product of

relations with others. And furthermore, viewing the work from the perspective of Atkinson's decision to include it in this volume published in 2020, we are presented with something akin to a historical fractalisation, a recursive registering of waypoints of subject formation fluctuating between the individual and the collective. This self-historicizing of the self is notably averse to any sense of finality or authority. Rather, it critically gestures towards broader questions around the 'private' and 'public' images that constitute predominant notions of history; history itself as a closed system of abstractions, leading to particular understandings and maintenances of behaviour; and the possessory character of art as a particular functionary within this feedback operation.

Atkinson has commonly spoken of his decision making as an artist as 'moves', or even 'betting and trying'. This sense of strategy, shot through with a degree of indeterminate gambling, is forthrightly transparent about the reactive space that art occupies. Or, more specifically, it articulates a dynamic between the reactive, the predictive and the speculative. At the end of the passage appended in '74 to *Untitled*, Atkinson quotes Barbara Rose from her seminal 1965 essay 'ABC Art', quoting Marshall McLuhan in 'Understanding Media' as saying: 'I am curious to know what would happen if art were suddenly to be seen for what it is, namely, exact information of how to rearrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties.' McLuhan writes of our 'private senses' as open systems, whereas our 'extended senses, tools, technologies, through the ages, have been closed systems incapable of interplay or collective awareness.' Through the technology of literacy, the ability of humankind to 'act without reacting' enables dissociation and non-involvement; yet McLuhan highlights how, with the rise of instantaneous communication and the proliferation of electronic media, our 'central nervous system is technologically extended to the whole of mankind and to incorporate the whole of mankind in us.' Art for McLuhan is a progenitor of the synthesis of our private and extended senses, offering insights to contend with the impact of communications media on the equilibrium of the senses: 'The artist can correct the sense ratios before the blow of new technology has numbed conscious procedures'⁹.

A work such as *Index 01* itself operated as a media form, existing as an ordered extension of the group mind of A&L, and in Atkinson's experience, leaning towards a managerial structure that had the effect of closing down 'interplay'. Atkinson has highlighted how one of the arguments for the 'we' of A&L, that 'concepts were more easily kept "open" by a community rather than an individual', had been 'flatly contradicted' by the experience of producing *Index 01*. In the mid-'70s, Atkinson's 'betting and trying' sought out a 'counter-irritant' to Conceptualism, and the form of liberal governance and historicization that he saw as active in the evolution of the movement. He landed on both an event and a cultural form, the combination of which spoke to the scale of particular ideological abstractions that governed the 20th Century, and that threatened in the '60s and '70s to cause permanent global schism. Picking up from drawings and paintings he had made in the early '60s, Atkinson produced a series of figurative works depicting events from World War I, taking on a formal style that

⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 1964 (New York: McGraw-Hill Education)

while not totally disassociated from the prevalent '60s 'Pop' figuration of R.B. Kitaj and David Hockney, owed more to the compositions of Soviet Socialist Realism. These works drew on audio and video interviews conducted by Atkinson with veterans of the 1916 Battle of the Somme, and from materials archived in London's Imperial War Museum. At the height of the Cold War in the '70s, the political and social reverberations of WWI – particularly the emergence of the Soviet Union and the U.S. as key world powers – provided a set of causal factors that were at once far-reaching and multitudinous, and prone to false transmission and mutation.

Such a move from Conceptualism to figuration – and particularly the realist representation of war that had been anathema to Western modernism since the early 20th Century – would have appeared reactionary in the mid-'70s, even with the simultaneous emergence of a 'postmodern' critique of 'how pictures mean'. To a degree, this reactionary appearance was the point for Atkinson, as he sought to harangue the 'alienating effects' of Conceptualism in its outgrowth from Euro-American-centric avant-gardism. However, while Atkinson himself has described the works as a 'a kind of fake of a fake', taken as a set of images the WWI works do not overtly resemble pastiche or parody; in places they adhere to certain heroic tropes of Socialist Realism, but the drawings and paintings of soldiers largely privilege degrading scenes of war, rather than being propagandistic. And, neither are the images seemingly intent on translating the traumatic testimony of soldiers in an evidentiary manner. They are instead distinctive in their style, with the expressions and gestures of soldiers often subtly distended, sometimes to the point of grotesquery. Rather than treat the distance of sixty years as a nullifying force, and the reduction of WWI history to a set of abstracted 'public images' (for Atkinson, notable in the statues and memorials commemorating the war in towns and cities around the UK), the works retain something of the necessary conviction of depicting the 'horrors of war'; yet with the 'self' at the centre of these depictions being the 'history-reporting artist', without first-hand experience to translate. Atkinson's interviews with WWI veterans were undertaken not to achieve any aura of authenticity to his images, but rather to observe these individuals as 'instruments of transmission', their memories pulling as much from existing historical representations of the war as from their own experiences.

Atkinson has contrasted this approach to the understanding of the relationship between historical events and selfhood in the work of WWI poet Wilfred Owen in Seamus Heaney's 1988 essay 'Nero, Chekhov's Cognac, and a Knocker'. Heaney considers Owen as an unequivocal case of 'the poet as witness', representing 'poetry's solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimised, the underprivileged. The witness is any figure in whom the truth-telling urge and the compulsion to identify with the oppressed becomes necessarily integral with the writing itself.' For Heaney, the authority in this truth-telling comes from Owen's own experience of the war as a soldier. Yet for Atkinson, the motivation in his WWI works lies not in the immediate conveyance attached to witnessing, but in the operations around it, that structure and define an understanding of history enclosed by ideological imperatives: 'What I was trying to comment upon was the general point about the transmission and construction of history and the specific point about the transmission and construction of the

history-reporting artist.’ An official British war artist scheme was instigated during WWI, under the auspices of the British War Propaganda Bureau, with the intention of generating information, historic documentation, and propaganda; likewise, the US Committee on Public Information sent artists and illustrators to the front. It is the individual subjectivity of the artist, and accordingly the singularity of the work in tandem with the aura of truth-telling, that reinforces the efficacy of the ‘transmission’ of the experience of the event, into a space of collective valorization, and towards a monological order. While the general character of much ‘official’ war art of the 20th Century is generic and interchangeable, that which is held up specifically for its artistic value acquires transhistorical resonance. With the benefit of temporal distance, there is legibility to the ways in which even the verse of Owen, that was direct in its depiction of the horrors of trench warfare, in its very individualism becomes enfolded into a mode of memorialising and remembrance driven by the same ideological forces that perpetuate violence and erasure.

In Atkinson’s break with Conceptualism, and the ‘aping [of] the formal resources of Socialist Realism’ in order to ‘concretize the ruins of Conceptualism’, there equally lay a desire to maintain the ‘supply lines of theory’ that had invigorated the movement. Drawing closely on the Wittgensteinian explorations and linguistic games that echoed throughout art of the late ‘60s, Atkinson’s WWI works emphasise the ‘transmission and construction of history’ as a question of language, both visual and textual. The WWI works are accompanied by extended titles that read in places as poetic, satirically reflexive commentaries, and in others as pseudo-social-scientific analyses, putting pressure on the conventional and subservient relation between picture and title. *The long-winded, hysterical and pretentious titles of Marxist prejudice... Event: Tankshit. Shrapnel, (made by Krupp, Essen) bursting upon Mark I tank (made by Metropolitan Wagon and Finance Co., Wednesbury), Black Watch (Dundee) and New Zealand (Otago) infantrymen, Battle of Flers-Courcelette, Somme, September 1916* (1979) depicts a battlefield with a tank in the background, and a soldier in the foreground caught in an explosion of shrapnel. The work’s title draws on the historical specificity of the event the image represents, notably, the first battle in which a tank was used, and the first instance of New Zealand soldiers fighting in WWI. However, it also steps beyond the informative with the shorthand summation ‘Event: Tankshit’, a crude portmanteau that might stem either from ‘tanks hit’ or ‘tank shit’. The word game is a reduction of the novelty and terror that must have accompanied the presence of a trench-spanning armoured vehicle on the battlefield for the first time, or perhaps a reduction of history’s attempts to render such moments as meaningful and knowable on both humanistic and scientific terms.

The opening caveat of the title, ‘The long-winded, hysterical and pretentious titles of Marxist prejudice...’, is reflexive towards Atkinson’s intent (a representation of the representer), and pokes fun at the character of Marxist historiographic theory more broadly. It operates as something of a tautology, as the following text at some length proceeds to emphasise, through naming, the manufacturers and locations of production of the tank and shrapnel, and the geographic origins of the infantrymen, in appropriately historical materialist fashion. The text

suggests a process of mapping – a set of relations between signified places – that in its exactitude posits a knowledge that reaches far beyond the content of the drawing. In its humour, the title proposes a simple act of Marxist ‘truth-telling’: that beyond the event represented within the work of art, and beyond the event of the artwork itself, lies unfolding relations of production that link the artwork, the event, the tank, the shrapnel, the soldiers, and the land. In an echo of A&L’s pivotal work *Map Not to Indicate* (1967), the decision to ‘name’ and list what is *not* represented, but from a particular ideologically grounded perspective is formative to what is present, takes on significant meaning. The ‘limit of visibility’ that is mapped is not one locatable through the logic of semantic rules, but through a shifting topology of material and linguistic relations. The notion of the witness underpinning this position is one of the ‘instrument of transmission’ as a mutable self, where the ‘history’ that is being transmitted is a priori subject to certain structures of belief, and conceptions of subjectivity.

In the mid-1980s, Atkinson produced a relatively small series of works linked to visits undertaken with his partner Sue Atkinson, and young daughters Ruby and Amber, to prominent sites of memorialisation of war and genocide. Under the overarching titles of *Happysnaps/Historysnaps* and *The Stonetouchers*, these paintings and related photographic collages re-render typical family photographs, principally of the artist’s daughters, as they posed within WWI memorial cemeteries or at the site of WWII concentration camps. The works shuffle the pack of the relations within the WWI works, with the witnessing in this instance emphasised as that undertaken by Ruby and Amber, as a nominated function of the sites and their visits. This witnessing is not of an event of war, but of history itself as it is seen to cohere within the public war memorial. The images are highly potent in the incongruity of Atkinson’s daughter’s occasional smiles and postures, and in the underlying portrayal of history at work in the process of subject formation. In *The Stonetouchers*, Ruby and Amber pose among or with hands resting on gravestones at the Delville Wood South African National Memorial, commemorating the members of the South African Expeditionary Force who fought and died in the Somme offensive. The extended titles of these works begin with a poetic stanza, and then move into the diagrammatic structure of a ‘map-key’, which attempts to spatialise the relationships in the image between Ruby, Amber, and the soldiers memorialised in each of the graves around them. In the poetic stanza that opens the title of *The Stonetouchers 1*, Atkinson addresses questions to his daughters, which ape the line of vehement abstract questioning synonymous with a child’s acquisition of knowledge: ‘Do you think God is a dissident? Or is he a South African, or an Argentinian, or an Anglo-Saxon...?/ Do you think he is the best knower?/ If he is a she, do you think all the he’s would admit she is the best knower?’. The work conveys the impotence of an open system of knowledge and subjectivity in the face of history and belief, structured by the naming and propertizing operations of nationalist, colonialist and capitalist relations.

The construct of the ‘history-reporting artist’ is one that, in Atkinson’s formulation, carries a double-meaning: the artist as a witness and ‘truth-teller’ of events around them; and artistic subjectivity as simultaneously a generator and an index of history as a construct. The

formulation emphasises the proximity between the war artist of WWI, and the formation of the avant-garde artistic subject in Western modernism. Modernism positioned the artist at the apex of the 'cultural front', engaged in a quest for newness reflective of wider urges towards societal change. The 'reporting' that occurs is of a world that is of the sensory and aesthetic, but experienced in a state of cognitive fracture and historical rupture, where dominant organising principles and knowledges are taken to be in flux. As the war artist's visions form part of particular engines of transmission, so the mode of witnessing active in modernist art is held within a connected frame of liberal subject formation, the movement towards freedom as explicitly tied to the 'property' of the self – itself delineated by constructs of race, gender and class. The modernist artist operated in a space of exceptionalism; a space for the realisation of the self beyond the constraints of society. Yet in the exploration of the frontiers of labour, objecthood and value that reached its zenith in the dematerializations of Conceptualism, the wilful forgetting of the very *non*-exceptionalism of the artist and of the exclusionary character of the cultural sphere, served to obscure evolving processes of proletarianization and dispossession that fed off the model of individualisation pioneered by artistic labour – from precaritization to gentrification. In Atkinson's WWI works, his 'betting and trying' contrasts the working class 'grunts' on the front line with the rarefied labour of the avant-garde artist, while both occupy pivotal roles in the construction and maintenance of a bourgeois sphere. The presence of his daughters in *The Stonetouchers* underscores the stakes at play in the reproduction of the self under a monological order, and conversely the possibilities within a multilogics that actively seeks to dissolve forces of liberal governance.

