



# BENDIGO ART GALLERY

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JESSIE BOYLAN: RUPTURE  
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Jessie Boylan | *Rupture* | 2018 | video still | courtesy the artist

Jessie Boylan | *Shimmer Body (Ictie)* | 2018 | video still | Jessie Boylan, Linda Dement & Virginia Barratt

Jessie Boylan | *Rupture (Shimmer Body (falling))* | 2018 | video still | Jessie Boylan, Linda Dement & Virginia Barratt

## Endnotes

- 1 Virginia Barratt, 'Performing Panic: How does your data glow?', *Artlink* Vol 37 No 3, 2017
- 2 Virginia Barratt, Performance, *The Expanse of a Dead Open Mouth*, Queensland School of Continental Philosophy, Brisbane, October 2016
- 3 Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision, Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art*, Stanford University Press, 2005, p.49.
- 4 Donna J. Haraway
- 5 *Shift*, with Linda Dement, 2016, in *Black Mist Burnt Country*, a national touring exhibition curated by JD Mittman, Australia, 2016-2019, and *Ngurini (searching)*, 2015, with Nuclear Futures.
- 6 Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014
- 7 Ibid

- 8 These ideas draw in part on Isabelle Lamotte's work on her own epilepsy. Through software experiments, Lamotte captured the internal pounding, confusion and chaos of a seizure, visualising the loss and subsequent recovery of self, language, memory in endless repetition: see *Epileptograph: The Internal Journey*, Artspace, Sydney, 1996.
- 9 Virginia Barratt, 'Performing Panic: How does your data glow?', *Artlink*, Vol 37, No 3, 2017.
- 10 [...]from the Latin ictus, meaning literally 'a blow, stroke, thrust.'
- 11 Arran James, 'Vulnerability, Meaning and Death: On the aetiology of panic disorder', *Synthetic Zero* online journal, <https://syntheticzero.net/2013/07/16/vulnerability-meaning-and-death-on-the-aetiology-of-panic-disorder/> 16 July 2013
- 12 Virginia Barratt, email conversation with artist, July, 2018.
- 13 Magdalena Gorska, *Breathing Matters: Feminist Intersectional Politics of Vulnerability*, Linköping University Press, 2016
- 14 In the words of Virginia Barratt, conversation with author and artist, August 2018.



# JESSIE BOYLAN RUPTURE



# RUPTURE

BY JESSIE BOYLAN, WITH VIRGINIA BARRATT, LINDA DEMENT AND JENNA TUKE

*The panic is immanent: it is the shape of a seizure bumping into a language, leaping into a body, becoming sound in an ictic dance of hands, feet, head – reterritorialising as m/emetic contagion, sticky abjection...*<sup>1</sup>

*Panic was there as you exited the womb, it is the critical event that mobilises, that moves one on from stasis.*<sup>2</sup>

Fear is debilitating, as anyone who has experienced a panic attack can attest. But fear is also integral to our survival: it is a warning, a visceral signal of impending danger. Panic and anxiety disorders – whose incidence especially among the young has exploded in recent years – are, however, clinically defined as fear responses without due cause, where the body is primed in the absence of threat. But what if the threat is real? Could anxiety and panic be the ‘canaries in the coalmine’ that compel us to confront the pervasive social, political and environmental toxicity we have come to normalise? Instead of pathologising the panic response, what if we acknowledge that this fear is justified and legitimate? These are questions at the heart of Jessie Boylan’s new work *Rupture*, a work that also explores how panic and anxiety can be communicated through art to allow us to explore how trauma in an individual has a ‘palpable extension in the world’<sup>3</sup> and to find new ways of ‘staying with the trouble’<sup>4</sup> of our catastrophic times. Boylan created *Rupture* through an interdisciplinary and collaborative process that brought together researcher, writer and performer Virginia Barratt, digital media artist Linda Dement and trauma-informed psychotherapist Jenna Tuke. These perspectives, adduced over many months through the sharing of personal stories as well as professional expertise, imbue the making of the work with the very politics of vulnerability it explores.

In the development of her artistic career, Boylan has been continuously attuned to mounting social, political and environmental anxiety. Growing up in Canberra in the 1990s, aware of her father’s anti-nuclear campaigning in Sydney the previous decade, she had to countenance early on the existential threat of mutually-assured destruction. This concern has driven much of her practice: she has documented the anti-nuclear movement over time, and more recently collaborated on a series of major video installations based on her extensive research of the sites and histories of the British nuclear tests in Australia and their contemporary legacies.<sup>5</sup> One distinctive and particularly disturbing aspect of nuclear toxicity is its initial imperceptibility: wasted sites often lie calm and empty, unlike those landscapes ravaged by natural disaster or bearing the scars of war. In other words, the threat may appear absent, and yet what is appropriate is a fear response. Boylan’s interest in remembering the aftermath of acts of human hubris and destruction also extends to the effects of anthropogenic climate change, ever present in central Victoria, where Boylan relocated in 2012.

The intensification of the latent violence within the natural environment is a chronic source of anxiety, the insidiousness of the changes rendering them all the more alarming to an attentive soul with young children to

raise. Of course, in recent years, the growing frequency and scale of extreme weather events such as drought and fire have begun to spectacularly materialise the impact of rising temperatures which were previously easier to deny. Such events have provided raw material for Boylan to take her exploration of anxiety to new terrain. For *Rupture*, the artist accompanied and filmed Forest Fire Management undertaking planned burns locally, as well as drew on previously captured footage of the 2016 floods, linking both disaster and the natural world to show the ever-present, yet always impending possibility of catastrophe that we face. In the final video installation, this more tangible reality of environmental damage is contrasted with the incommunicability of a personal panic attack.

Pain, psychic and mental, is notoriously difficult to communicate. As the nineteenth century social theorist Harriet Martineau who suffered from an incurable ovarian cyst once observed, ‘the sensations themselves cannot be retained, nor recalled, nor revived; they are the most absolutely evanescent, the most essentially and completely destructible of all things’.<sup>6</sup> Extreme agony shatters the possibility of speech and painful sensations demand that sufferers channel all their attention towards the machinations of their own flesh.<sup>7</sup> So how can art render discernible that panic that is an ever-present companion to the body and the world?

For *Rupture*, Boylan worked closely with performance artist and writer Virginia Barratt, a member of the pioneering 1990s cyberfeminist group VNS Matrix. Barratt has for many years explored panic and affect, using her body as the site of research and the symptoms of her own panic attacks as material ‘flooding, quake, tremor, getting hot, flying apart, seizure, hypervigilance, shimmer-body, the body beside itself’. As Barratt explains, she wants to transform panic into ‘knowledge’ that goes beyond purely subjective accounts, to uncover ways to synthesise panic and anxiety ‘out of pathology and into ontology and phenomenology’, to render them not as afflictions but as creative behaviours.<sup>8</sup> While panic is deemed to evacuate subjectivity, Barratt asks what is the effect of this dissolution of the self on ‘the sense of trust we have in the continuity of normal routines and social structures which affirm our sense of identity’.<sup>9</sup> In one screen of Boylan’s immersive video installation, Barratt is in eternal freefall. In another, we see and feel her ‘ordinary’ body transformed into the ‘ictic’<sup>10</sup> body: head bucking, hands flying and jerking as if unattached, fingers manically tapping her sternum as she tries to bring back a sense of embodiment when panic strikes. In Barratt, Boylan found the perfect stand in for The Body in panic – including the artist’s own – and a powerful conduit to explore the phenomenology of panic experience.

Can tapping into bodily anxiety connect us to the reality of the world in crisis?

The metaphor of the body politic that likens society to the human body has ancient roots, appearing for instance in one of Aesop’s fables where the other organs enviously turn on the gorging belly only to discover that the whole body suffers unless all its parts work together. Later, the sick body or the body in revolt, exuding pus and foul excretions, was used to describe corrupt or failing societies. In modernity, however, social institutions came to be conceived of more as machines than as natural organisms. Perhaps that machinic metaphor has increasingly dulled us to the empathic potential of sensing trouble in the macro realms of the social and the environmental through our own bodies. In a panic attack, embodiment, consciousness of impending death, and the failure of meaningful communication coalesce. Perhaps panic disorder is therefore ‘first and foremost an intensely experienced corporeal vulnerability to the world itself’.<sup>11</sup>

In *Rupture*, Boylan explores how the felt vulnerability and precarity of body might be extended to the world, iterating how the panic response occurs in both: when the body reaches its capacity to process or react to internal and external forces: like a river, it overflows. That uncontained and unspeakable excess is part of the panic response. Barratt writes that this excess is taken up by ‘the shimmer-body’, ‘that which the body-in-the-world, constructed as it is by language, can’t mouth. The excess which no body in its right mind can speak, it is only possible to speak in this register when one is beside oneself’.<sup>12</sup> This shimmer-body is also witnessed in the landscape,

simultaneously recovering from and preparing for disaster, pollution and destruction, as well as enduring protection, care and awe.

The idea that panic and anxiety harbour insights about new ways to respond to global crisis through a politics of vulnerability is developed by feminist theorist Magdalena Gorska in *Breathing Matters*, a book dedicated to ‘fighting for breathable lives’. Here, Gorska calls for:

politics that are embodied and embedded in a search for breathable living, which are moist with the vulnerability of suffocation of affective exploding implosions soaking through the capillaries of everyday life, that beat in a vulnerable velocity of suffocation and hyperventilation, that work with momentary explosions and steady rhythms, that ...break the world apart in the corporeal-material demand for not only politics of vulnerability but also for vulnerable politics of becoming.<sup>13</sup>

The body is not autonomous from the world. The body in crisis reflects the world in crisis, but also potentially grants access to new modes of comprehending the incomprehensible, of grasping the enormity of what we as human beings currently face and of honouring the wisdom of the shimmer-body and the shimmer-landscape in revitalised collective care for the world. Boylan’s work captures this enmeshment of lived body, body politic, and the world in states of anxiety for strategic purpose, exploring how panic and anxiety can become useful companions that might allow us to ‘turn urgency into agency’.<sup>14</sup>

Jacqueline Millner