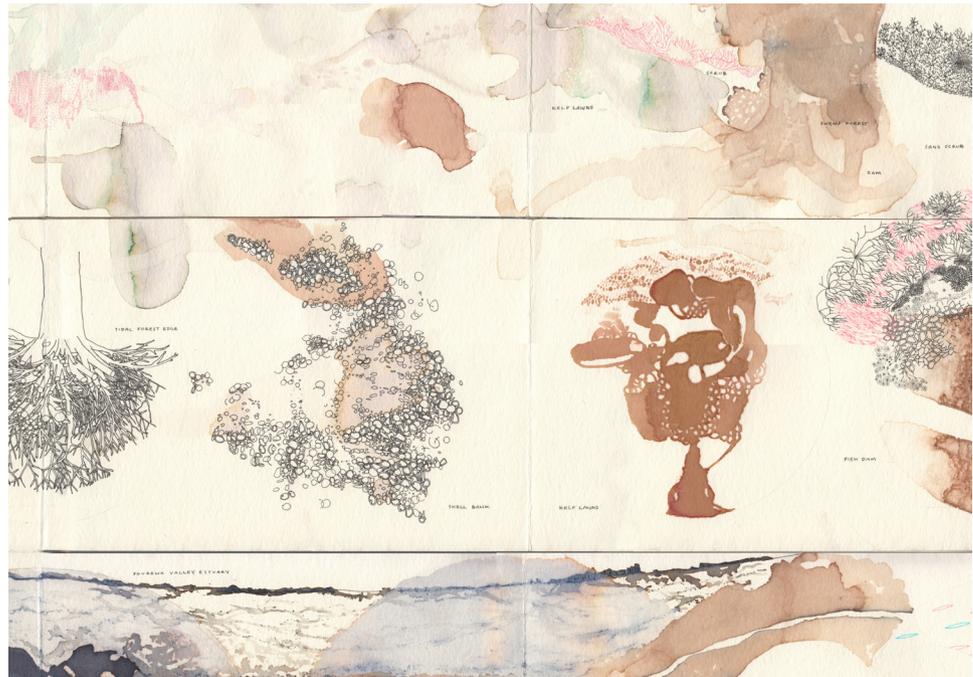


XAVIER ELLAH with CARL DOUGLAS

INTERSTICES 20

## Intimate displacements: Peripatetic cartographies across the Tāmaki isthmus

Fig 1. Xavier Ellah (2019). Detail of *Outflow* [Pencil, ink, and natural pigments on cut and folded paper, 841x594mm]



Landscape drawing has often privileged a fixed optical view, inculcating an idea of landscape as capable of reaching a stable, finished state as an object or scene. Among the effects of this static view are a loss of public agency. When landscapes are understood primarily as a surface apportioned into legal property, those who live through them are reduced to users and consumers of an opaquely managed resource. In this creative-practice research project I explored relationships between pedestrian agency and the articulation of possible worlds latent in landscapes by mapping a series of walks across Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. These surveys suggest how a patient practice of relational drawing can disclose new opportunities for finding agency, countering experiences of alienation and disenfranchisement.

Landscapes are unstable processes unfolding on a multitude of timescales, themselves operating in a shifting patchwork of emergence and succession (Ingold, 2000: 201-7). So rather than beginning with a presumption of equilibrium, this project presumed *disequilibrium*. Walking itself is a dynamic state of disequilibrium implying a force-field of changing relationships and timescales. When we

take the time to walk, we expose ourselves to the immense richness of emergent rhythms, flows, and (dis)continuities of place. As Stephanie Springgay and Sarah Truman suggest, walking is “a way of becoming responsive to place; it activates modes of participation that are situated and relational” (2018: 4).

Rather than rushing to fix solutions, this practice lingers and loiters off-balance, “staying with the trouble” as Donna Haraway has suggested (2016: 1). Isabelle Stengers similarly values this type of lingering: “the idea is precisely to slow down the construction of this common world, to create a space for hesitation”, one in which new values might precipitate (2011: 995). Accordingly, I have not produced *designs* or *proposals* per se, but rather speculative maps capable of broadening engagement—a quality Cassim Shephard sees as critical to “the practice of citizenship” as it informs making and imagining urban landscapes (2017: 24).

For landscape architect James Corner, the agency of the map lies in its ability to surface potentials, themselves constituting “artificial geographies that remain unavailable to human eyes” (2014: 200). Maps can represent many connected situations at once, becoming complex decision-making fields where multiple possibilities are cognitively explorable. For example, landscape architect Walter Hood utilises mapping methods to better grasp the middle scales of daily life. In a series of urban diaries, Hood documented West Oakland in the 1990s, an area marred by failed urban regeneration schemes and the municipal splintering of a once socially coherent working-class community (1997: 6). The diaries reveal an *improvisational* methodology, a toolset generating a range of creative insights spontaneously adapting to changes and unforeseen public uses. By walking (rather than, for example, studying aerial photographs) I aimed to remain in the improvisational middle scale of life on the ground.

Fig 2. Xavier Ellah (2019). Line drawing sketches made while walking [Scanned images]



### Cuts, folds, openings

Drawings can be places of dialogue between times, conditions, places and their inhabitants (Fig. 2). The German concept of *landschaft* or “working landscape” suggests this quality and underpins my idea of drawing as a conversational exchange (Corner, 2014: 243). My drawings are working surfaces describing interactions within cognitive landscapes themselves rich in analogical potency and metaphoric relationships. In short, they document land processes much as *landschaft* captures the variability inherent in duration as Henri Bergson has identified (Barnett, 2013: 18).

For John Berger, drawings operate in “three distinct ways” that I have come to refer to as *drawing tenses*, engaging as they do the past, presences, and aspects of the future (2008: 46). In this project I adapted these tenses to organise my encounter with landscapes. Live-drawing while walking activated presence, capturing immediate details. Drawings subsequently enacted in the studio reflected on these field impressions by seeking new connections. Futurity emerged as a process of anticipation whereby expected landscape dynamics could be imagined and speculated upon indirectly. This became a planning phase which would inform the shape of a walk and the schema through which a new live-drawing would grow.

Prompted by the need to fold large sheets of drawing paper for convenience while walking, I developed a series of concertina-folded “drawing constructs”—a practice I borrowed from Hannes Frykholm, Henry Stephens and Amy Tong (2011). The seemingly awkward creases and cuts allowed for the drawing to grow sequentially and iteratively, but also disrupted the inherent linearity of long paper sheets through folds, overlaps, and layering. While walking, these surfaces condensed into pocket-sized books; at the end of a walk, when unfolded, they revealed unexpected relationships and consolidations. In the reflective phase, they allowed for the replaying of a journey, making evident both cognitive dead-ends and new paths.

### Present, past, future: Sites of drawing production

In addition to my solitary walks, I tested these drawing strategies and practices in a group walk (Fig. 3). Participants were led on a looped route through the inner-city of Auckland. Each participant was given a folded drawing surface pre-printed with overlapping circles, the intention being to prompt, in an open-ended way, consideration of possible thresholds between intimate and peripheral details. The results showed a fascinating divergence in ways of sensing and recording demonstrating how the act of walking and drawing could renew a dialogue, not only between self and landscape, but also self and other.

When I walked, I drew mostly with pen and pencil. Back in the studio, however, I employed a range of water-based inks and tea pigments whose gradual absorption worked against the economy of the inked lines. These pigments in turn evoked my recollection of the passage of light and water through the landscape. In redrawing, and therefore revisiting the walk on paper, my consciousness, in turn, deepened and mutated.

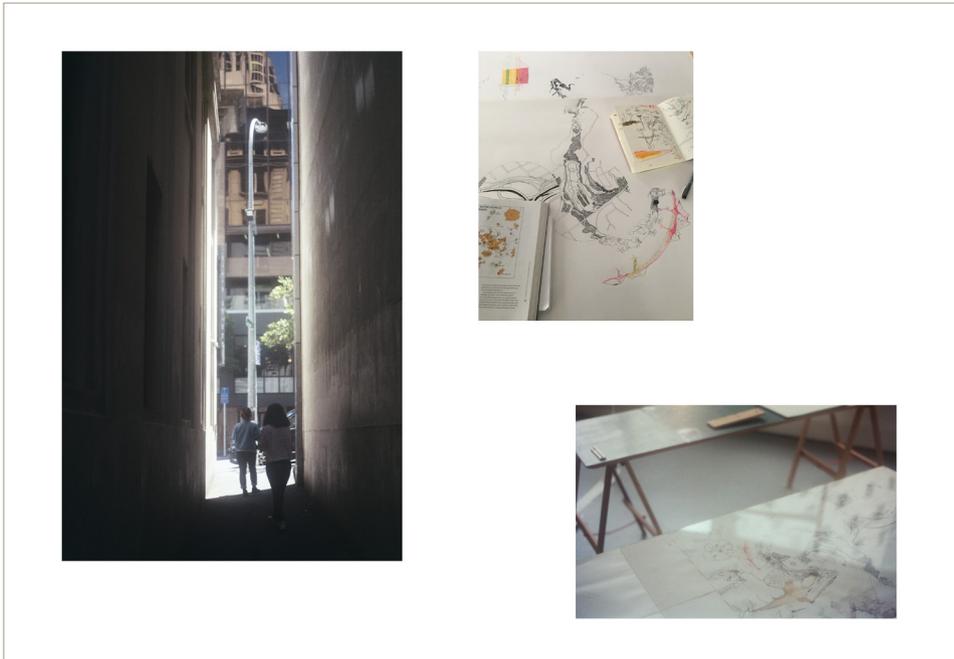


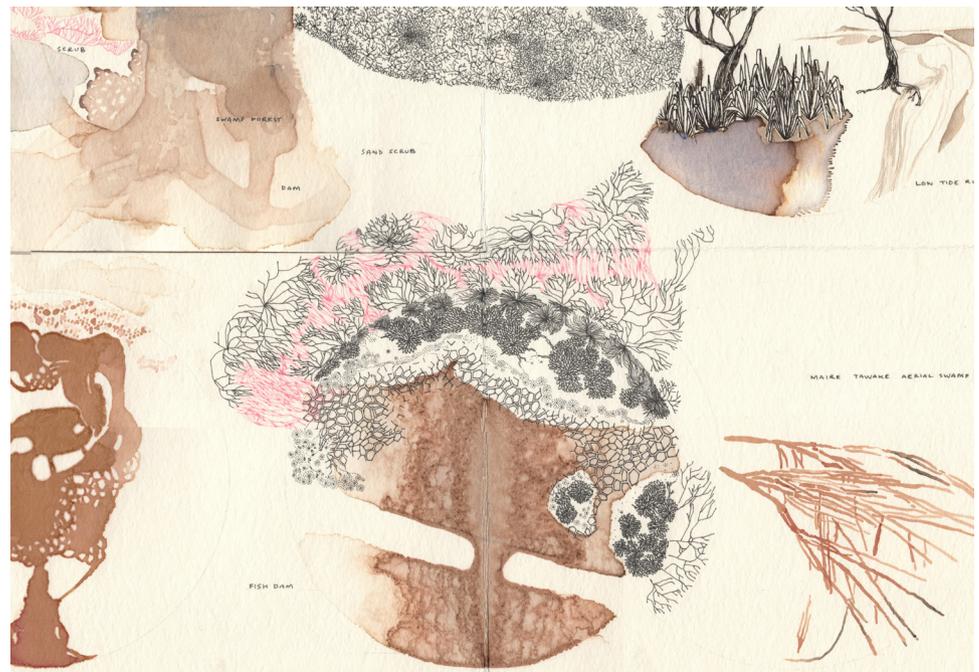
Fig 3. Xavier Ellah (2019). Sites of production: street, drawing table, and exhibition [Photographs]

### Outflow, spill, echo

The project also developed out of six day-long walks that drew on three themes specifically: outflow, spill and echo. Three maps resulted, each providing different lenses through which to understand and relate to territories. The maps fold together according to a particular pattern of cuts and creases. The intention was that the creases would thicken and soften with their repeated unfurling and this allowed the drawings to be recomposed and reoriented.

*Outflow* (Figs. 1 & 4) examines how water runoff-related drainage catchments find different ways of leaving land. The drawing began by walking the sedimented

Fig 4. Xavier Ellah (2019). Detail of *Outflow* showing pigments and creases. [Pencil, ink, and natural pigments on cut and folded paper, 841x594mm]



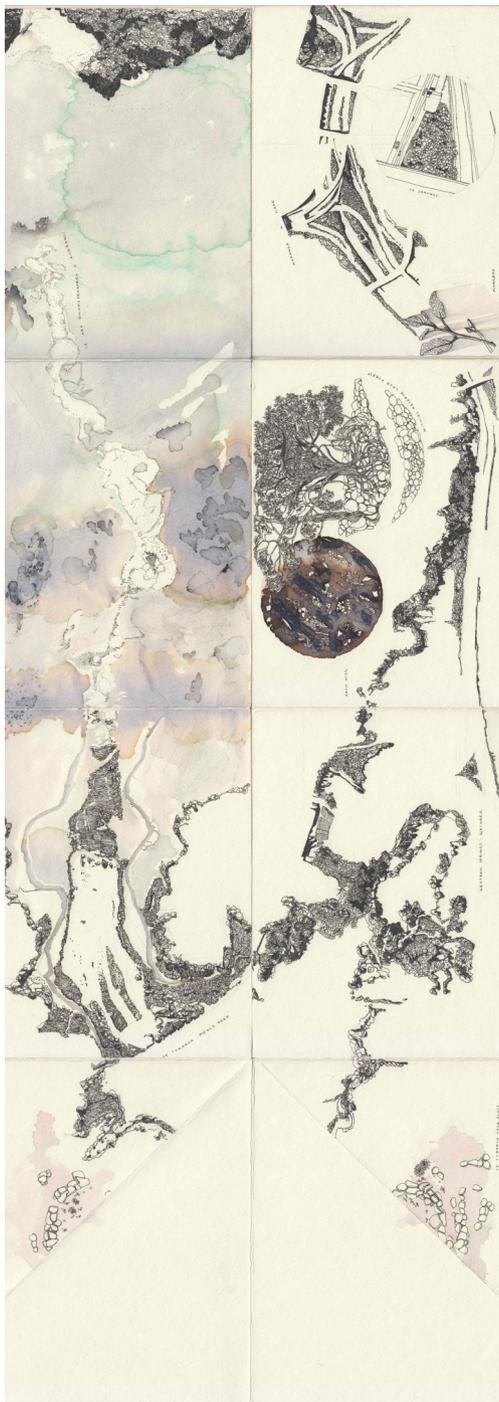


Fig 5. Xavier Ellah (2019). *Spill*  
[Pencil, ink, and natural pigments on  
cut and folded paper, 841x297mm]

Fig 6. Xavier Ellah (2019). Detail of  
*Spill* showing Te Tokaroa /Meola Reef  
[Pencil, ink, and natural pigments on  
cut and folded paper, 841x297mm]



landscape of Tahuna Tōrea, a sandspit of the Tāmaki River at the threshold between two urban waters. I mapped here the qualities of absorption and erosion, themselves signs of a water table bubbling just underfoot. Soaking mud, crushed shells and roots could be seen caught in the drag and pull between wet and dry imposed by tidal forces.

*Spill* (Figs. 5 & 6) focuses on one of Tāmaki's volcanic basalt flows. Its gradient, levelling, and porosity has allowed for a motorway, spring, and forest corridor to coexist. Curiosity about the last remaining basalt rock forests in Auckland led me to probe the way traces of ancient volcanism continue to shape urban flows today. Such forces strikingly converge in a partially forested valley running almost unbroken to Te Tokaroa/Meola reef, the tip of a lava flow which extends into the Waitematā Harbour. *Spill* depicts scenes drawn from this intersection of lava spill, transport infrastructure and forest.

*Echo* (Figs. 7 & 8) is preoccupied with ambient flows such as thermal pressures, air movement, and tidal rhythms as they intersect with urban channels of mobility. Where *Outflow* and *Spill* sought their findings in and with the ground, *Echo* lifts its gaze to the sky and the horizon. It delineates a space between the mud (where I found a car inverted, immobile, and partly ingested), and the air about and above Tāmaki's maunga (or volcanic cones). It is here that shorebirds flock and kāhu or harrier hawk wheel in thermal updrafts. Moments in time echo radially, generating a lens through which to prioritise diffuse, rather than channelised flows in the landscape. The drawing seeks resonances across space that make intervals audible. As such, the overlapping figures in *Echo* remain discrete and self-contained, yet speak to one another.

Te reo Māori has a broad vocabulary for different kinds of rain: uapūkohukohu is a misty rain; ua kōpiro, a drenching one (Keane, 2006). Rain can be desired or unwanted depending on its social, emotive or phenomenal contexts. In a similar vein, my relational maps have sought to expand the richness of our visual language for the landscape of Tāmaki. I have aimed to deepen intimacy with different qualities of porosity and flow in order to more fluently describe rhythms

and movements making up urban landscapes. I have walked the city in the hopes of building a spatial imaginary that challenges the alienation often held to define such places.

My maps insist on the worth of intimate knowledge. They build on displacements and remind of our ability to create new paths of meaning and experience. By deepening ways of seeing, rather than simply offering new images, we can become more active readers and producers of landscape. Michel de Certeau famously claimed that walkers are to cities what speakers are to language. The walker “enunciates” space and in turn renders place a thing practiced (1984: 98, 117). In these drawing series I have sought a counter-practice, one whose enunciation is also political in so far as walkers are capable of cutting across the spatial demarcations of capitalist landscapes.

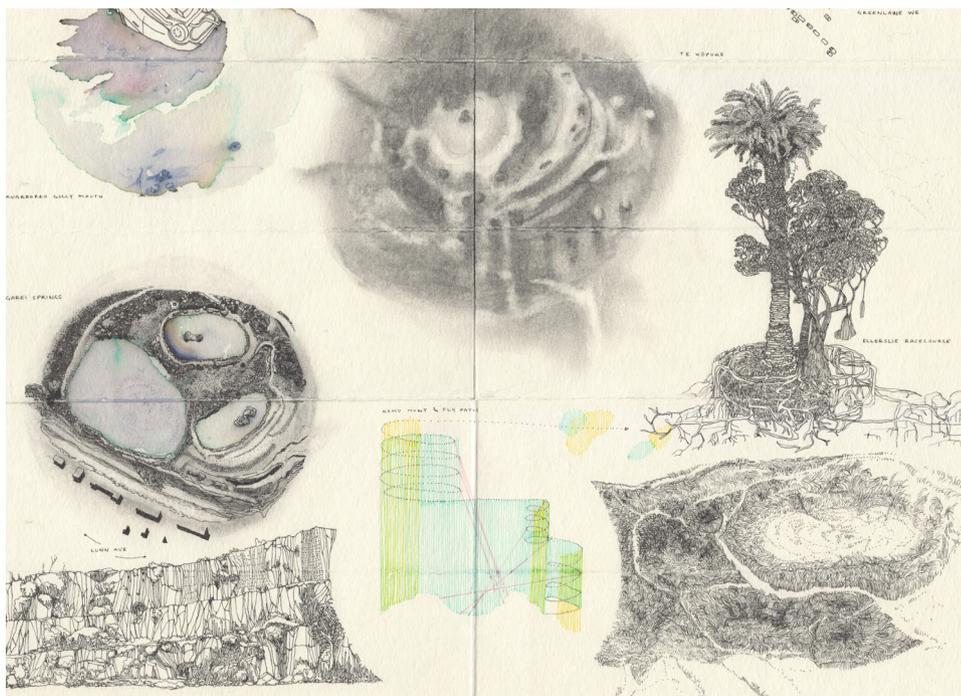
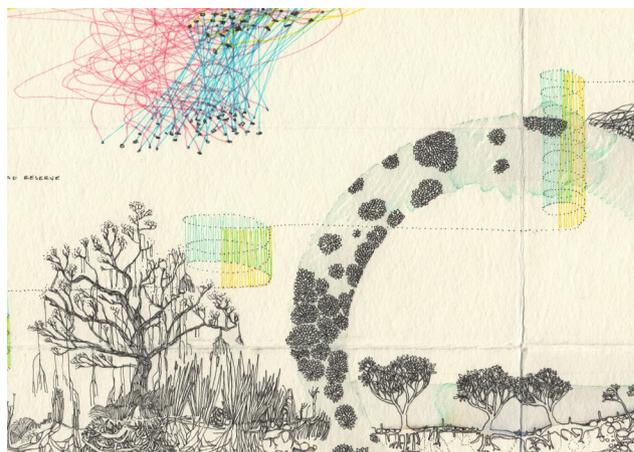


Fig 7. Xavier Ellah (2019). *Echo*  
[Pencil, ink, and natural pigments on cut and folded paper, 594x420mm]

Fig 8. Xavier Ellah (2019). Detail of *Echo* showing bird flight paths  
[Pencil, ink, and natural pigments on cut and folded paper, 594x420mm]



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