

SUPERESTE UT PUGNATIS (PUGNATIS) UT SUPERESTE.

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Abstract

The title of the work discussed in this paper, *Supereste ut Pugnatis (Pugnatis) ut Supereste*, is derived from the motto (*Fight to Live*) of the Chemical Defense Establishment located at Porton Down in the UK. The work is a mixed media installation that examines the intersection between the Visual Arts and Bio-Sciences and is conceptually focussed upon the development of metaphors that address the membrane in terms of biology, politics, language and culture.

Keywords: Bio-art, Multimedia installation, Art and Science, Immigration Policy, Chemical Warfare.

We are defined, structured and bounded by membranes, selective barriers that function at a molecular level within our bodies and operate at the macro scale as socio-political boundaries.

My French raincoat (a membrane of sorts) bears the legend Impermeable, I can assure you it is not, like most membranes worth their salt it is semipermeable!

Membranes are selectively permeable structures, controlling the exchange of ions in our synapses, transforming photons into carbohydrates in plants. Membranes form the meniscus of the world ocean, trading gasses with the atmosphere which regulate our climate.

Manifest as an architecture of power, the membrane is the portcullis and drawbridge regulating access to a Norman Castle. It is a filter of economic privilege to the VIP lounge and the algorithm that structures the flow of surveillance information at airport security.

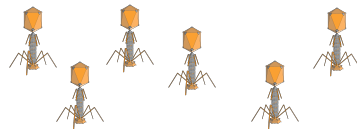
The membrane is the tissue of language that described the legal pressure valve transporting the poor and disaffected to Australia in a risible attempt to rid England of its criminal class, and that provided the tongue twisters that policed the White Australia policy.

It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven. [1]

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Fig. 1. *Supereste ut Pugnatis (Pugnatis) ut Supereste* at the PowerHouse Museum ISEA2013. Photo © Ian Hobbs.



Supereste ut Pugnatis (Pugnatis) ut Supereste [2] drifts in these interstitial spaces between biology, politics, culture and history, constantly recalling the functional significance of the membrane as border; as a cultural and linguistic filter; as a generator of difference.

Supereste ut Pugnatis (Pugnatis) ut Supereste is offered as an omnisexual bacterium ingesting histories and narratives that associate through a labyrinth of metaphorical bonds, some faint and tenuous, others powerful and robust.

A sonic sculpture illuminated by canary yellow [3], the yellow of egg yolk, the pallor of yellow fever, the threatening yellow flag of quarantine and contagion and more prosaically the globalised yellow of international art crates.

Take a journey down any of these wormholes to discover a centripetal force that pulls back to the centre of this metaphorical nexus.

Here we encounter morphological references to antique Chinese gunpowder rocketry [4] carrying payloads of poisonous and infected material, hybridised with the physical structure of the Bacteriophage [5], a semi-living viral entity that pierces the membrane of a host Bacteria, injecting its DNA and

commandeering the genetic machinery of the Bacteria to replicate itself; all this done without an entry permit!

My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples; and as one gathers eggs that have been forsaken, so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing or opened the mouth or chirped. [6]

The payload of these mutant rocket forms, glass cylinders containing infected eggs, pay an ironic homage that reprises the origins of modern bio-warfare research, where chicken eggs were the bio-reactor of choice at the Chemical Defense Establishment at Porton Down near Salisbury UK [7] (the motto of which, *Supereste ut Pugnatis*, this work is named after) as well as the Russian weaponised Smallpox facility at Zagorsk [8].

*Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the King's horses
And all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty Together again.*

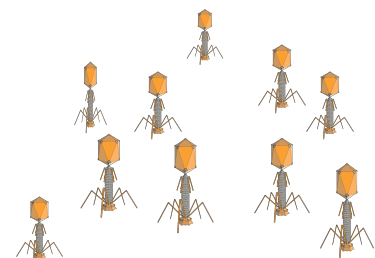




Fig. 2. You Won't Be Settled in Australia, *plus ça change!* (Australian Government Advertisement).

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“the question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master, that’s all.”

And so to the slippery membrane of language, a tissue of words that wrap us in culture and identity and one that attempted to render Australia as white as egg albumen, protecting these shores from the influx of Chinese migration, a migration according to the xenophobes, as yellow as egg yolk.

心灵的控制首先在于物理的掌握。这是常人难以置信的简易。真正的掌握来自于宁静，从意图的思考到最终的言行。宁静是最高尚的美德一位男士或女士的静坐是多么少见

That mental control depends, first of all, on physical mastery, is so obvious that few believe it. Real control begins from stillness, from deliberation of manner, and eventually speech and action. Stillness remains the rarest of virtues. How seldom does one see a man or a woman sitting still?

These words, scrolling across the LED display and sounding in a Chinese translation, are an example from hundreds of pages of *Dictation Tests* that operated in all Australian ports of

entry from 1901 until 1958 with the primary function of excluding undesirables (specifically Asians) from migrating.

This policy was coupled with the general and popular understanding that the indigenous population would be ‘bred-out,’ lightened and whitened until their genetic traces disappeared. With an ominously contemporary resonance;

“A message was sent out to the world that *coloured* people could not settle in Australia.” [9]

The membrane is after all a skin; a skin of colour; a skin of language and culture, a flexible container designed to keep



Fig 4. *Supereste ut Pugnatis (Pugnatis) ut Supereste* (detail). Photo © Ian Hobbs.

what is of value within and what is perceived as a contaminant without. Its permeability determines the nature, rate of change and adaptation, the type and efficiency of cultural metabolism.

To conclude with another Dictation Test passage for good measure, its jingoism recalling John Howard’s obsession with Cricket trivia as a criterion for citizenship. Perhaps you might like to take the test?

The swagman wrapped his gnarled and desiccated digits round his minuscule ukulele and with prodigious and egregious deficiency of musicology essayed a resounding, cacophonous rendition of 'Waltzing Matilda' that caused a phobic frog to hurl itself suicidally into a brackish billabong.

Maybe that is Impermeable!

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Fig 3. An exemption certificate from the Dictation Test (National Archives of Australia).

References and notes

1. The New Testament, Matthew 19:24, The Eye of the Needle was a small gate in the walls of Jerusalem.

2. *Supereste ut Pugnatis (Fight to Live)* is the motto of the Chemical Defense Establishment, which is located at Porton Down in the UK.

3. In Ancient China yellow was considered the colour of joy, glory and wisdom. However from the 3rd millennium B.C. yellow was associated with power and domination. In contemporary China it is associated with pornography as it is with prostitution in Russia.

4. The Fire Drake Manual 14th Century Chinese military treatise, edited by Jiao Yu and Lui Ji, details the evolution of rocketry circa C10th.

5. A Virus that infects and then replicates within a Bacterium.

6. Isaiah 10:14

7. In 1940 biological warfare work began at Porton Down, UK in a highly secret autonomous group called Biology Department Porton now known as the Chemical and Biological Defense Establishment.

8. The first smallpox weapons factory in the Soviet Union was established in 1947 in the city of Zagorsk, close to Moscow. The bio-weapon was produced by injecting small amounts of the virus into chicken eggs. An especially virulent strain (codenamed India-1967 or India-1) was brought from India in 1967 by a special Soviet medical team that was sent to India to help to eradicate the virus. The pathogen was manufactured and stockpiled in large quantities throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

An outbreak of weaponized smallpox occurred during its testing in the 1970s. General Prof. Peter Burgasov, former Chief Sanitary Physician of the Soviet Army, and a senior researcher within the program of biological weapons described this incident: "On Vozrozhdeniya Island in the Aral Sea, the strongest recipes of smallpox were tested. Suddenly I was informed that there were mysterious cases of mortalities in Aralsk. A research ship of the Aral fleet came 15 km away from the island (it was forbidden to come any closer than 40 km). The lab technician of this ship took samples of plankton twice a day from the top deck. The smallpox formulation— 400 gr. of which was exploded on the island—"got her" and she became infected. After returning home to Aralsk, she infected several people including children. All of them died. I suspected the reason for this and called the Chief of General Staff of Ministry of Defense and requested to forbid the stop of the Alma-Ata to Moscow train in Aralsk. As a result, the epidemic around the country was prevented. I called Andropov, who at that time, was Chief of KGB, and informed him of the exclusive recipe of smallpox obtained on Vozrozhdeniya Island." A production line to manufacture smallpox on an industrial scale was launched in the Vector Institute in 1990.

9. Jupp, J. (2002) *From White Australia to Woomera*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.