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## *So experimental your wickets will fall, off!*

*hows its*, Nick Whittock
Inken Publisch, 2014
ISBN N/A, RRP $60

*A system became necessary; how else could I see more concentratedly, find some interest, continue at all?*– Hanne Darboven (1968)

The Australian poetry book is getting more and more inventive, more and more outrageous, *and that's a good thing.*

Nick Whittock's poetry is so experimental, the first time I read it my socks almost fell, off, like wickets! Now, when I think of Whittock, I hardly know what to say. This is some of the most hypnotic avant-garde poetry being written in Australia today.

It is customary in Australian poetry reviews to praise the conventional poems in a volume, then express some mild shock at the experimental pieces, the "hermetic" pieces that were supposedly less "easy" to understand. For me it's the exact opposite: I like to praise the *most experimental* bits in poetry books and leave the more normal bits out. The critical eye desires to be nourished by the unknown, the unexpected, the pleasures of exploratory poetics, the desire to be astonished. I want to challenge my reading habits, to expand my geometries of attention. I want disjunctive poetics, procedure, open fields, closed fields, constraint, citational poetics, plagiarhythm, poethics, wild text, strict text, subversion, inversion, insurrection, notationality, oppositionality, tediousness, tininess, expansiveness, explosion, shock, confusion, pleasure, lettristic delight.[1]

The good thing about Whittock's *hows its* is that I didn't need to pick out the most inventive bits of it to praise, because the *whole thing was inventive.*
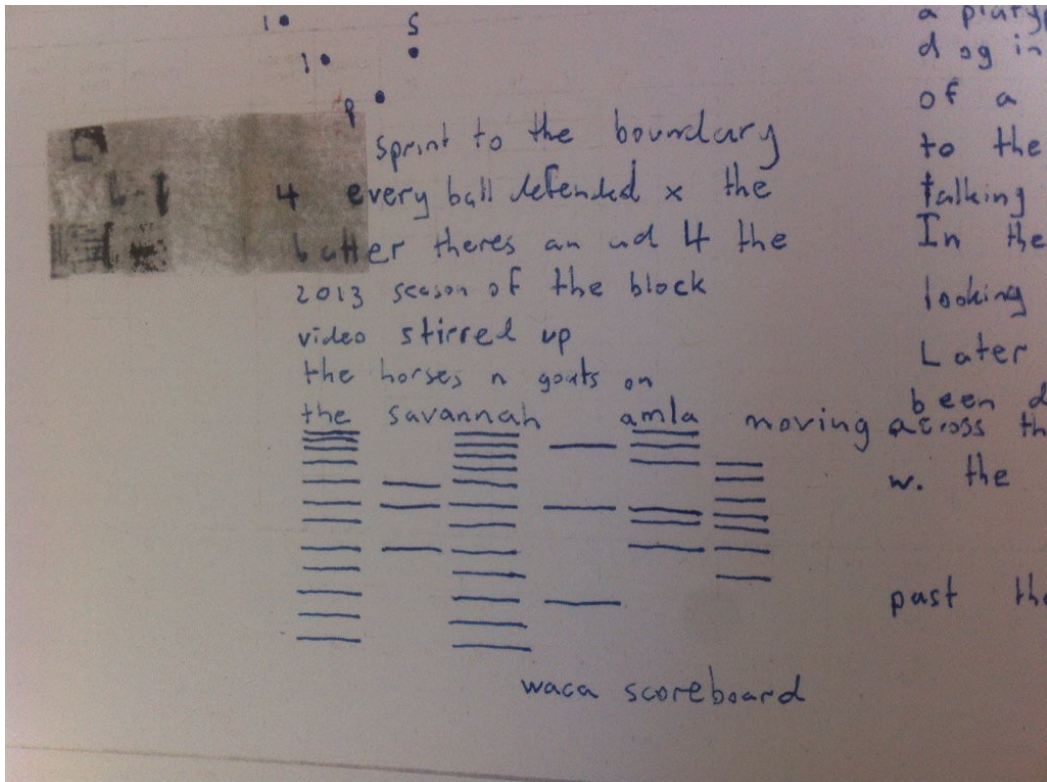
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[1]  The "Mud Map" anthology of women's experimental writing is one such joyful thing: so full of delight.

Whittock might well be Australia's most experimental poet. *hows its* was probably the most experimental book of 2014. And that's a good title to hold, perhaps the best title to hold. To be at the vanguard of the vanguard is an achievement.



It is 10:59 AM, 6 Dec, 2015. We who love to be astonished.

The German conceptual artist Hanne Darboven (1941-2009) was one of the most disciplined and austere artists of her generation. One might even say what Jackson Mac Low was to poetry, and John Cage to music, Darboven was to the visual arts. She was also, significantly, a writer, and described her practice as *Schreiben nicht Beschreiben* (writing without describing). This was "asemic" writing, but, more broadly, part of a poetic artistry of continuation and accumulation. Some of her exhibitions contain thousands of accumulated pages of writing on calendars, musical scores, sheets of lined paper. Her work has been described as strict, disciplined, monastic, austere, uncompromising, spectacular, breathtaking . . . and between these an infinite array of monikers could be deployed to try to describe the immensity of her life's work.

I would like to see Nick Whittock become something like the "Hanne Darboven" of Australian poetry. Whittock is an artist, collector, historiographer, labourer, writer, and poet. Whittock's work is with and beyond the printed book. His work with & in language is "assiduous," though still "loose." Writing is writing, not always describing, always a practice of living, of everyday life, not epiphany. Whittock avoids epiphanies, the romanticism of revelation. Whittock *continues*. I can imagine a 1000 + page book of Whittock scores.

9:30 AM, 5 Nov 2015. There is a certain beauty about grids, and in art that creates grids. Whittock has sent me grids by mail: he is known for intricate gridwork, for using the cricket scorecard as a formal template. I'm reminded of the work of minimalist Agnes Martin, Channa Horwitz and Darboven. All harness the grid in scintillating, often scintillatingly austere ways.

It's December. This is a review. This review both evinces and betrays *hows its,* his release with Inken Publisch. *hows its* could be described as an "artists' book". In *hows its,* the game of cricket is less referent as process. Whittock's poetics is accumulative, reproducing cricket scorecards over and over, writing and marking them in variant ways. Though not necessarily painstaking, "cricket" means writerly labour, possibly obsession, cricket as historical labour.
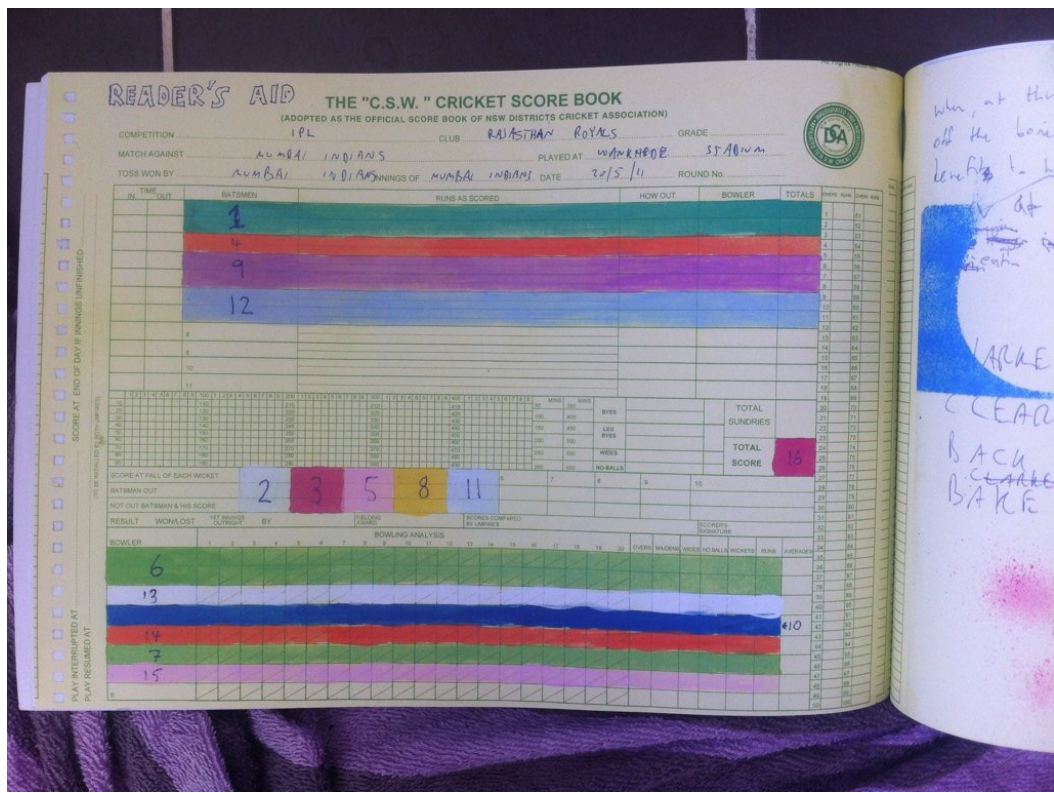


The result? A patterned, detailed, yet overwhelmingly rich presentation of documentation as poem. A system poetics.

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Continuation in *its* …

    Is "Whittock" a pun on "wicket"? Who umpired in that match against William Carlos Williams? Let's check. Modernism versus The World. Scorecard filled out meticulously. Sunset over bent road. Shrimp flowers in neat rows. Shrimp flowers on strewn art bed. Written over "HINTS ON SCORING". Over.

    Cover of *hows its*: a lovely, stale green. It is 2:26 PM, 11 Nov 2015. A luminous light shines from the window igniting the stale green of the cover. An experimental poet has an epiphany. The room begins to sway, to swell, drop in heat. I hear voices, the voices of cricketers celebrating a wicket. The game is real. Everything has changed.

The deoedipalisation and demasculinisation of cricket.

*hows its* rethinks the "how's that" by saying goodbye to representation in order to enter the world of *presentation*. A cricket field-map, a presentation of forms, like a stanza, a score, or course (of course). *hows its* punctures time, while "how's that" establishes, acknowledges, even *scores* the short temporal gap between event and signifier. *hows its* hangs up on the

object that took the call: Whose its is it? Who owns its? As its? For *hows its IS* it, here and now, despite evental time and deictic static.



Whittock on the toilet.

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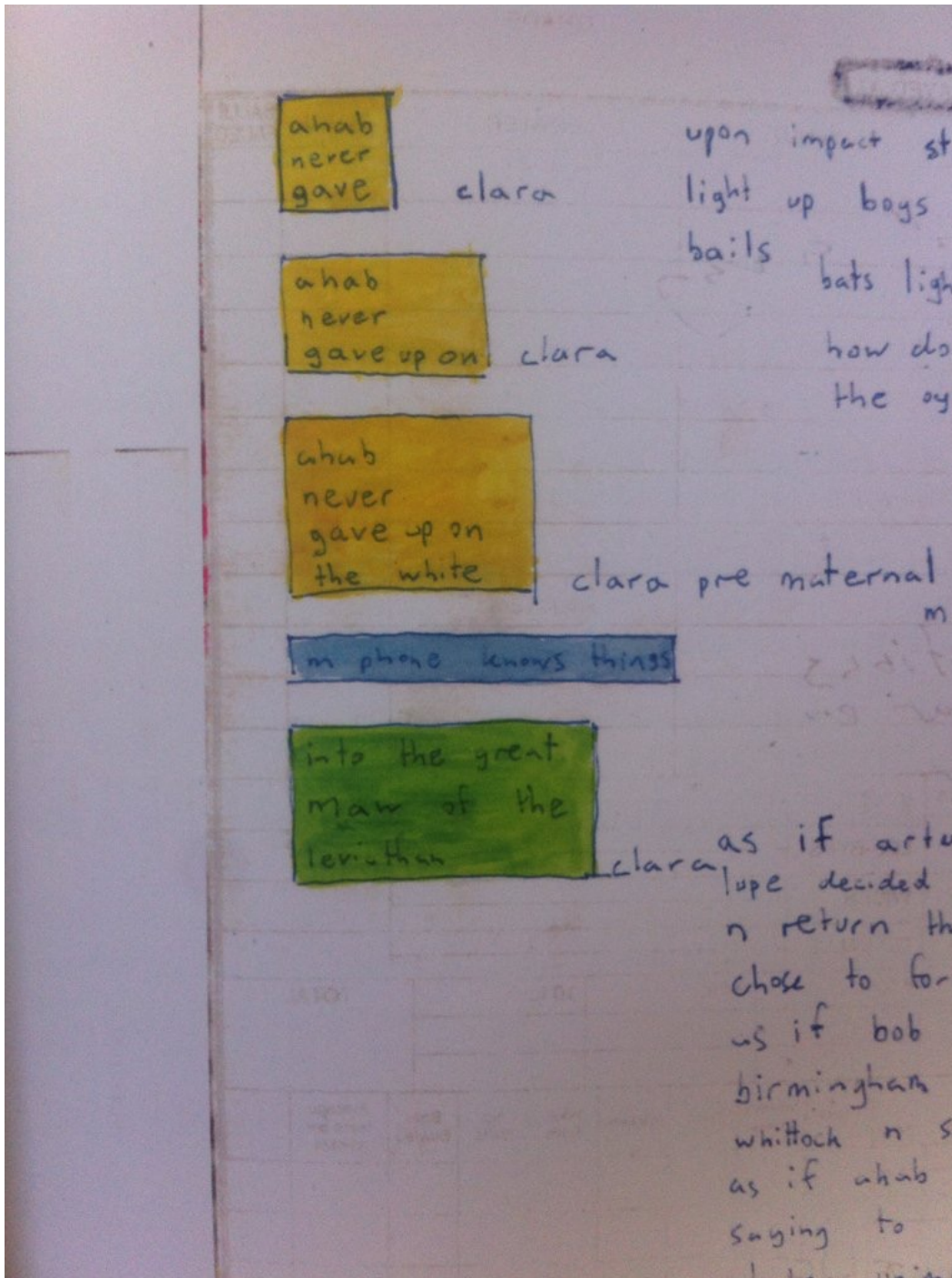
Whittock is it. But *hows its* is deictic to nothing and everything in particular. *hows its* thinks the sign without object, signifier without signified, language without *that* it, the referent.
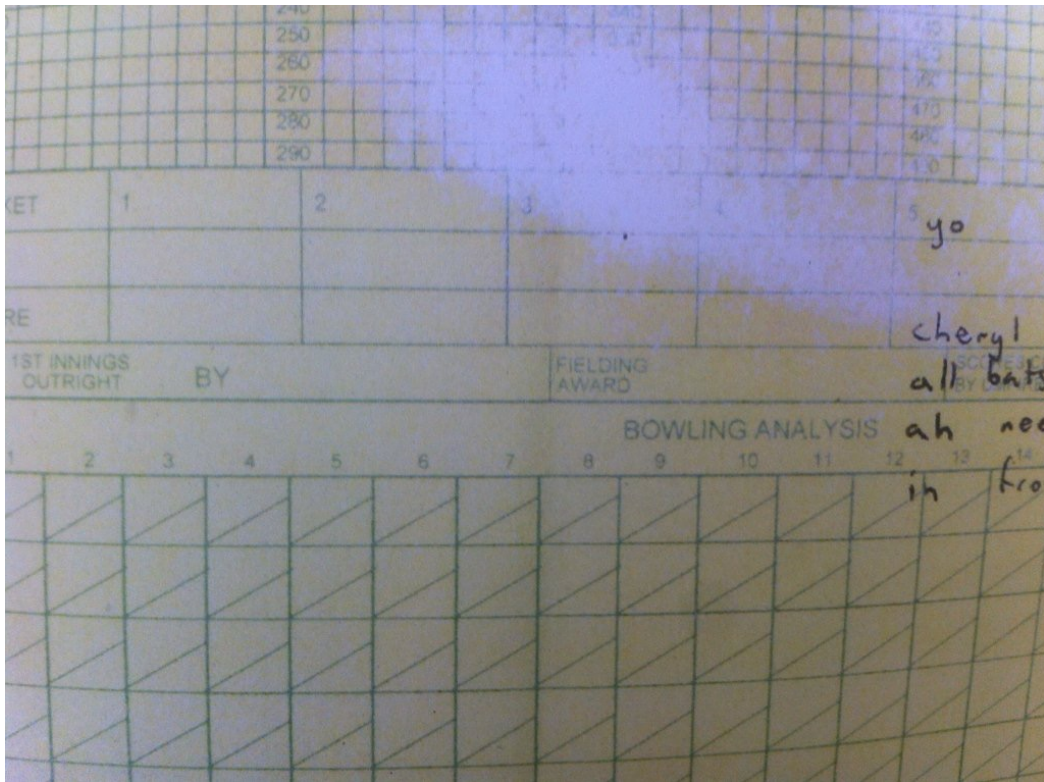
Scientists *must* conduct experiments. So why not poets also?

Experimental writing does not presuppose judgement. Therefore it does not presuppose that a poem must communicate anything. Strangely enough, it does end up communicating something. Whittock performing his poems (complete with coordinated dance movements) is a real hit. It gets the crowd really going.

Whittock performing: time suspended, from the ground up.

Whittock: a poetics of ground.

Perhaps experimental performance draws audiences in precisely because it isn't what we expect (the poetry reading, *per se,* the polite acknowledgement, the poetry "reading voice").

You do not need to know anything about cricket to enjoy cricket poetry, but you do need to know about cricket to enjoy cricket.

So we are behind description. Welcome, "descriptor".

"Merleau-Ponting": DREADFUL!!!!

11:55 AM, 3 Dec 2015. Perhaps strictness is set to become an aesthetic category in Australian poetry and poetics. A new generation of Australian writers are ready to reject expression in favour of a much sterner approach. They embrace an aesthetics of the

strictly procedural, the unfeeling, the apersonal. *Language as asemic, plus . . .* Language as stave-work, the scoring of. Express everyone or the cosmos (it's not ventriloquism, its: is not ventriloquism).

To garner interest in processes and procedures is not to enforce anything on other writers. Other writers may always do as they please. These urgencies are directed towards oneself. A system unaffected by writer's block. Manage language with care and precision and with the acuity and stern devotion of a stenographer, bibliotician or manuscript illuminator. Listen to liturgical music. Do we have to try to get inspired. Be always inspired: continuation as a practice of simply *being-in-language,* as opposed to "using" language to describe one's *being-in-the-world.*

Write when one *least* feels like writing, those are the best moments, and they are always happening.

8:55 AM, 24 Oct 2015. Listening to *The Musical Offering* with *hows its* on table to the right of me. J.S. Bach famously wrote one cantata per week. Wager: consider writing free of freedom. What would it feel like? Writing as backbreaking, difficult. Rework large swathes of linguistic material extracted from source-text of all sorts of discourses and disciplines. How's hours, days, months, years of work?

Curious how us procedural poets live and exhibit qualities of strictness, stubbornness, obsession, commitment. Perhaps a private ecstasy, but often choral, outwardly focused, social. Procedure: a way of life. It follows that such work looks and feels strict. It follows that such work isn't always easy to process. Still, Whittock plays loose with procedure.

Learning to love looser. The feeling for the reader is like that of learning a language. Or reading administrative documents, examining receipts.
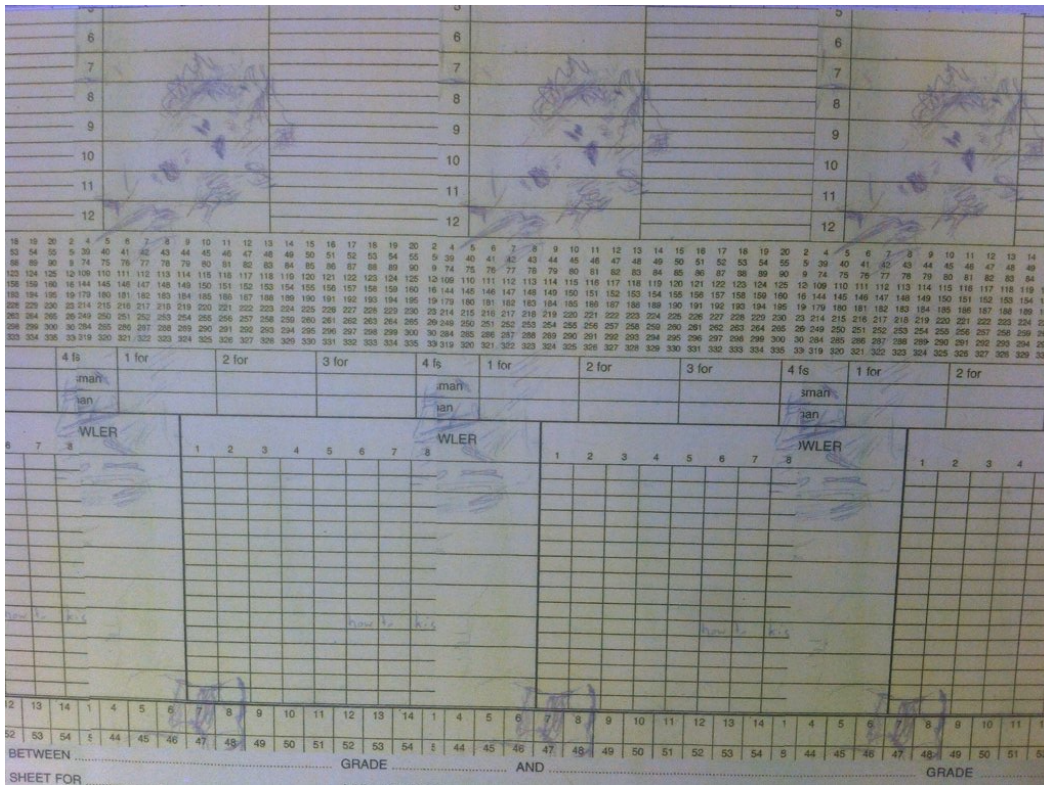
No, also order, please. Hows its. Have you. Punishing writing write, wrote us. Fails us, we feebly slump, type. Has there. Has there been a way of. Has there been a chastising of. Has thereof been. Hows oneself. Hows us. In writing has there. What is. What is, repeat its. Whats its. Repeat then what was a line that was its. Was not once. But a thousand times. But its. Scores its.

Eschew expression or lyric plea. Give notation, greet record. Follow procedures to end, an end. Resist the end, all ends resist. Commit to sequence. Devotion to the work of *poesis*.

Logic of accumulation. Writing a long poem can actually equal laziness: write a word a day for a whole year: that's a 365-word poem.

Whittock bends orange light into distinct yellow zones. Whittock critiques cricket with chronic agar fever.

An index for Nick Whittock's *hows its*, for Astrid Lorange, who launched the book at Gleebooks in 2015:

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*End note*: as a book of poetry almost akin to an artists' book, there is limited availability of *hows its,* understandable because of its immaculate presentation (and conception).

In the end it looks something like this: a grid of *hows its*'s: