

# PERDITA PHILLIPS: SOUNDING AND THINKING LIKE AN ECOSYSTEM

*Perdita Phillips is a Western Australian artist working across the media of walking, sound, installation, photography and digital media. Through her multi-disciplinary multi-media art practice she explores the mutual relationships between people and the nonhuman world. Over the past ten years she has worked on art projects drawn from, and co-produced with, termites, minerals, bowerbirds, rabbits, cane toads, salmon gum trees and thrombolites, amongst others. With a background in environmental science Phillips' work is often complementary to, though not constrained by, scientific understanding. Indeed her work often focuses on matter(s) that exceed scientific understanding or which might not be considered logically sensible in order to recover a sense of astonishment or wonder often stripped from scientific interpretation.*

Text by **Merle Patchett**

**W** envisage a spiral of tiny sounds like the descent into the geological past and tiny pinprick sounds like the multitudinous field of microbes beneath us with their sharp aragonite grains, oxygen burps and hydrogen sulphide farts" [Phillips 2010: 3]

Underlying Phillips' practice is a general concern with imagining environmental futures. For example, her longest running art-research sound project, *The Sixth Shore* (2009-2013), explores the complex (and contested) ecosystems past, present and possible at the site of Lake Clifton, south of Perth, Australia. The work emerged from SymbioticA's research and residency project *Adaptation* which sought to encourage the engagement of

artists with the field site of Lake Clifton and its unique ecology, history, surrounds and community. So far two sound works have come out of *The Sixth Shore* project: *The Summer Flurries* (2011), a sound walk outside the Science Gallery in Dublin and *Cusp* (2012), a gallery-based spatial sound installation. The final work, which will also be titled *The Sixth Shore*, is intended as a site-specific spatial sound installation down at Lake Clifton itself.

In *The Sixth Shore* sound composition the sonic landscapes of Lake Clifton are imagined and realised, including the sound worlds of a colony of thrombolites or 'living Rocks' (Glasgow 2010). Six strands of sound, representing shifting shorelines past, present and possible at Lake Clifton, are woven together to produce a rich sonic aesthetic which evokes a strangely animate



**Perdita Phillips**

*The Sixth Shore* (2010) altered digital image of saline lake froth (with additional ink on digital print) © Phillips

wonderland where not only birds but 'living rocks' sing, or at least as she puts it, fart. In this way *The Sixth Shore* introduces people to sonic geographies of the natural world that we normally ignore or, indeed, cannot perceive through human capacities. The shifting shores also bring together human and more-than-human stories and perspectives to narrate the complex and competing ecosystems and environmental issues evolving over time at Lake Clifton.

Phillips describes one of the aims of the work as wanting to "articulate competing agents at Lake Clifton in a way that decentres the current environmental impasse to encourage new solutions to human-nonhuman interactions." To do so, Phillips combines complexity and sensitivity to attune our aural awareness to these competing agents while providing multiple more-than-human pathways for us to rethink and reset

our environmental and cultural priorities in response. A marker of the works' success in this regard is that an entire issue of *Dialogues in Human Geography* was recently dedicated to remaking aesthetics for a more-than-human world using Phillips' art practice, and *The Sixth Shore* in particular, as inspiration and example.<sup>i</sup> What these geographers' recognised in Phillips' practice was her works' ability to be responsive to, whilst at the same time offer, more-than-human sensory and aesthetic modes of thinking through, living with and finding solutions to environmental uncertainty, which is why her work is so critically important.

**Merle Patchett:** Your multi-disciplinary multi-media art practice is devoted to exploring the mutual relationships between people and the nonhuman world. Could you begin by giving some

## background on your art practice and research in this area?

Perdita Phillips: I guess it begins with curiosity, feeling a keen awareness of co-existing with the world and a strong sense of being engaged in a process of enquiry. I grew up from early childhood in the suburbs but within the sound of the sea, playing as a kid in the scrubby coastal dunes near my home. I have a background in the sciences, too, but was dissatisfied working in environmental management. From my training and experience working with environmental issues that humans had a good hand in causing, I've tried to rethink what I do in a way that takes a scientific understanding but gives much more space to other voices. My work is primarily concerned not with the scale of individual animals and plants, but with how humans and nonhumans relate together. Between 2003 and 2006 I worked on the *fieldwork/fieldwalking* project in the Kimberley of Western Australia for my PhD (2007). This was about going to a place (*the walking country*) a number of times over the different seasons recognized by the local Kija and Miriwoong people. There was a lot of time spent absorbing and recording different sites. Over the years I've also worked on other art projects drawn from termites, minerals, bowerbirds, rabbits, cane toads, salmon gum trees and thrombolites, amongst other things.

Patchett: As an artist you work across the media of walking, sound, installation, photography and digital media. Can you elaborate a little on your multi-media approach to exploring human-nonhuman relations?

Phillips: Like many artists today I respond to the context of a project. Who is being listened to is key and of course the interest over the last decade in a more "conversational" aesthetic, via people like Ric Spencer (2004), has been a big influence. Along with seeing my role more as a conduit for situations, I like to harness multiple knowledge systems but

always in a way that is "warm" and not cold. Humour and absurdity curiously parallel the seriousness of issues – it's no good being desolate and unmotivated, which seems to be a current problem with environmentalism. So employing different media allows me to combine urgency and flexibility.

Patchett: Following on for this, can you tell me why sound in particular has become an important medium in your art practice for exploring and re-presenting the expressive richness of the non-human world?

Phillips: Listening comes before speaking! At times the horizon of sound exceeds vision and it always gives that sense of 360 degrees. For many years I thought of myself as primarily a visual artist but in the late 1990s I grew increasingly interested in walking as a way of exploring places and becoming sensitised to the different and vital things that make up our relationship to place. Some people use meditation to be more open and there are forms of meditative walking. Through walking I learned to listen to others. Listening implies a decentering of the subject; an attentiveness at the same time as it sidesteps insensitive or overly antagonistic actions. The issue is as complex as what people have written about the difference between listening and hearing, but through it all it was important to me to be bodily present in relationship to others.

Patchett: When I first met you, you were wondering around a car park in Edinburgh with a parabolic dish microphone recording seagulls. It struck me then that your sound art practice connects to and plays with the heritage and techniques of wildlife sound recording. To what extent does your use of sound in your art practice draw on, or is inspired by, wildlife field recording techniques and practices?

Phillips: Yes, the British Herring Gulls remind me of radio comedy show repeats at 5:30am on a Saturday morning. There is no common



**Perdita Phillips**

Lake Clifton thrombolites (2009) digital photograph © Phillips

large gull equivalent in Australia and when I hear them there is a strong association with B-grade seaside scenes: “establishing sounds.” For me it’s the opposite of hearing kookaburras (a common bird in Australia) in jungle scenes: the reversal of these gulls *back into* real life always off-centres me – even today. Hence there I was walking the streets of Edinburgh with the gear. Of course there is a marvellously eccentric history of enhancing human hearing abilities and an evolution of the techniques of field recording to the present day. I’ve been interested in the culture of the field for many years and in the case of sound, the meeting of amateurs and professionals in groups, such as the Australian Wildlife Sound Recording Group. The use of sound recording by contemporary artists is relatively widespread, but field recording is a

more specialised area because you are often aiming to capture low sound levels outdoors or sounds at a distance. I use listening activities as part of engaging participants with more-than-human worlds and for events such as World Listening Day, but with the use of recorded sound there are other possibilities for creating experiences for audiences at other times and places.

**Patchett:** On Fieldcraft. Getting good recordings goes beyond having the right equipment and is often more a matter of knowing your creature [often birds in your case] and how and when to approach it. Can you reflect on this notion of wildlife sound recording as a form of fieldcraft and how you have developed this craft as part of your art

practice?

**Phillips:** This is something that I am still learning and I am deeply indebted to the many people who have either inspired me or helped me out in this area. In order to set up situations where the more-than-human come to the fore you often have to go to less human-structured places to record. There is the flavour of exploration with pioneers in this field but if one looks deeper it is most often a solo activity. That's why being able to learn from others is so important to getting skilled at it.

Moreover, I've talked before about Matei Candea's (2010) contrasting of *interaction* with *inter-patience*: that sense of being in the world of animals where relations are built up after considerable habituation to the point where worlds can overlap – by mutually ignoring each other (2013). Other ways to achieve this are all the techniques that wildlife sound recordists use to blend themselves into situations or set up equipment and then move away. The "camouflage" here could be seen as deception, but it is also about decreasing one's position of privilege and force in the relationship between humans and nonhumans.

**Patchett:** Forgive me if I am wrong, but your largest and longest running art-research project utilising sound to date has been *The Sixth Shore* (2009-2013): a site-specific spatial sound installation for Lake Clifton. The work emerged from SymbioticA's research and residency project *Adaptation* which sought to encourage the engagement of artists with the field site of Lake Clifton (south of Perth, Australia) and its unique ecology, history, surrounds and community. Can you give some background on the residency, your experience during it and the inspiration for your work *The Sixth Shore* emerging from it?

**Phillips:** *SymbioticA* is an artist laboratory at The University of Western Australia primarily

concerned with tissue culture and laboratory-based art practices. This is the second project I did with SymbioticA and the first time they moved out of the lab and into the field. There were ten artist/groups involved, six of which were intimately involved with the site itself. Lake Clifton is a saline/hypersaline coastal lake, about 4000 years old, that has thrombolites or "living rocks" composed of microbial communities that excrete calcium compounds to build up mats, concretions and cones of material. On the east side of the lake are hobby farms, small grazing properties and turf farms. On the west side of the lake is Yalgorup National Park where large Tuart trees are dying because of an introduced *Phytophthora* fungus. The thrombolites are only there because of an influx of calcium rich but comparatively fresh water in a limited area, mostly on the east side of the lake. Groundwater extraction by humans and climate change are altering the water conditions and threatening the continuing existence of the thrombolites.

For a number of years I've been trying to conceptualise and apply ecosystem complexity in an artwork. Just taking the scientific knowledge system for the moment, in many cases humans might know the causes of a situation or even acknowledge that a situation might be the result of complex interactions, but then there is no resolution. This shows us that transdisciplinary is needed both to explain and to take action. And perhaps even to redefine the notion of 'solving' an issue. At the moment globally and often locally, we have environmental procrastination, so a lot more work needs to be done to overturn these ways of thinking. In the case of *The Sixth Shore*, the practicalities of this [involved]...developing a site-based project and giving a sense of the overlapping stories. I've worked with local people and the oral archives to add to the on-site sound recordings. The project involved developing the technology to create an invisible outdoor spatial soundscape that a participant walks here and there [in] listening to different sounds and stories that are present through the landscape. It's strongly directional: as you turn



**Perdita Phillips**

Testing out equipment (2011) documentation © Phillips

your head the sounds change. Bushes will be talking to you. Your sound experience will be unique based upon where you walk.

**Patchett:** I love the idea of bushes talking to participants...can you tell me how you go about achieving this in practice?

**Phillips:** This was achieved through a software system that receives and translates signals from a high-end GPS receiver and handles the hundreds of sound files. A digital compass has been integrated into a conventional set of headphones to generate the directional sound. Participants wear a backpack with a small computer and the GPS receiver and the headphones that allow the

**Patchett:** Walking seems to be both integral to your method for recording sound, but also for allowing an audience to performatively engage with your sound works...could you please reflect on the role walking plays in both the production and reception of works like *The Sixth Shore*?

**Phillips:** As you can see from what we have discussed here, walking is fundamental to my approach. It is a way of encountering and being in the world. It allows me to combine the factual with the fictional. Walking returns us to wonder, and here I again follow Ingold's reasoning: "In a world of becoming... even the ordinary, the mundane or the intuitive gives cause for astonishment – the kind of

astonishment that comes from treasuring every moment, as if, in that moment, we were encountering the world for the first time, sensing its pulse, marvelling at its beauty, and wondering how such a world is possible. Reanimating the western tradition of thought, I argue, means recovering the sense of astonishment banished from official science" (Ingold, 2011, p. 64). Walking on uneven ground, as I have argued elsewhere (Phillips, 2012), also teaches us not to give up. In these artworks, walking prompts me to find out about places as well as supplying me with methods of allowing others to share these experiences too.

**Patchett:** You have written that the basis of *The Sixth Shore* "aims to push the boundaries of what it means to go on a walk and think like an ecosystem." Can you elaborate on what you mean by this?

**Phillips:** When I talk about ecosystemic thinking, I'm arguing for an aesthetics of *thinking through* complex environmental problems. In part this is a question of where the outer reaches of our "self" is. If we reframe our boundaries (and I'm taking here both from the science of ecology and from relational and posthuman philosophy) might we then think like ecosystems? Could we reconfigure how we understand our place in the world, treasure diversity and be more flexible and responsive to change? I'm reminded here of Tim Ingold's insistence that the emphasis should be shifted from places to paths: to the sense of wayfaring being the fundamental mode of existence. What if you, the participant, get a feel for how your passage generates tides and flows of stories from both humans and the more-than-human?

**Patchett:** In *The Sixth Shore* sound-walk sonic landscapes of Lake Clifton are imagined and realised, including the sound worlds of a colony of thrombolites or "living Rocks" (Glasgow 2010).

I know it's difficult to put a sound-walk into words, but I wonder if it is possible for you to describe the work using its six refrains as a structure.

**Phillips:** So far two sound works have come out of *The Sixth Shore* project with the final work yet to be realised. *The Summer Flurries* (2011) was a sound walk outside the Science Gallery in Dublin, and *Cusp* (2012) is a gallery-based spatial sound installation. The final work (which will be called *The Sixth Shore*) uses the apparatus developed in the project and will be shown down at Lake Clifton. The project is about not just *picturing* the complex, but something more: I was down at Preston Beach near Lake Clifton watching the way that beach cusps form when water swirls up and down the beach in recognisable patterns – but ones that are never constant but always reforming and adjusting.

It soon became apparent that there were six different "shores" or refrains involved and these have broadly structured each of the artworks generated. Because of the different time scales of these shores there is a distinct sense of different rhythms being layered through spaces. The first shore is *thrombolitic time*. Whilst the thrombolites are not even as old as the lake, their functional heritage goes back to some of the earliest forms of life in the fossil record. In the scale of geological time this "stretches" Lake Clifton back as far as 3450 million years ago (e.g. Van Kranendonk, Philippot, Lepot, Bodorkos, & Pirajno, 2008). The cyanobacteria present in ancient stromatolites are a highly likely source of increased levels of oxygen in the atmosphere 2200 to 2400 million years ago (Holland, 2006). At scales beyond our senses, microbialites are a window onto the sublime. A hydrophone picks up nothing of the cellular complexity, so here I am working with imaginative sonification of the boundaries between living and non-living, distance and depth. Elsewhere I have written: "I envisage a spiral of tiny sounds like the descent into the geological past and tiny pinprick sounds like the multitudinous field of microbes beneath us with their sharp



**Perdita Phillips**

*Ecosystemic thinking* (2010) digital image of naturally coloured microbial communities (with additional ink on digital print) © Phillips

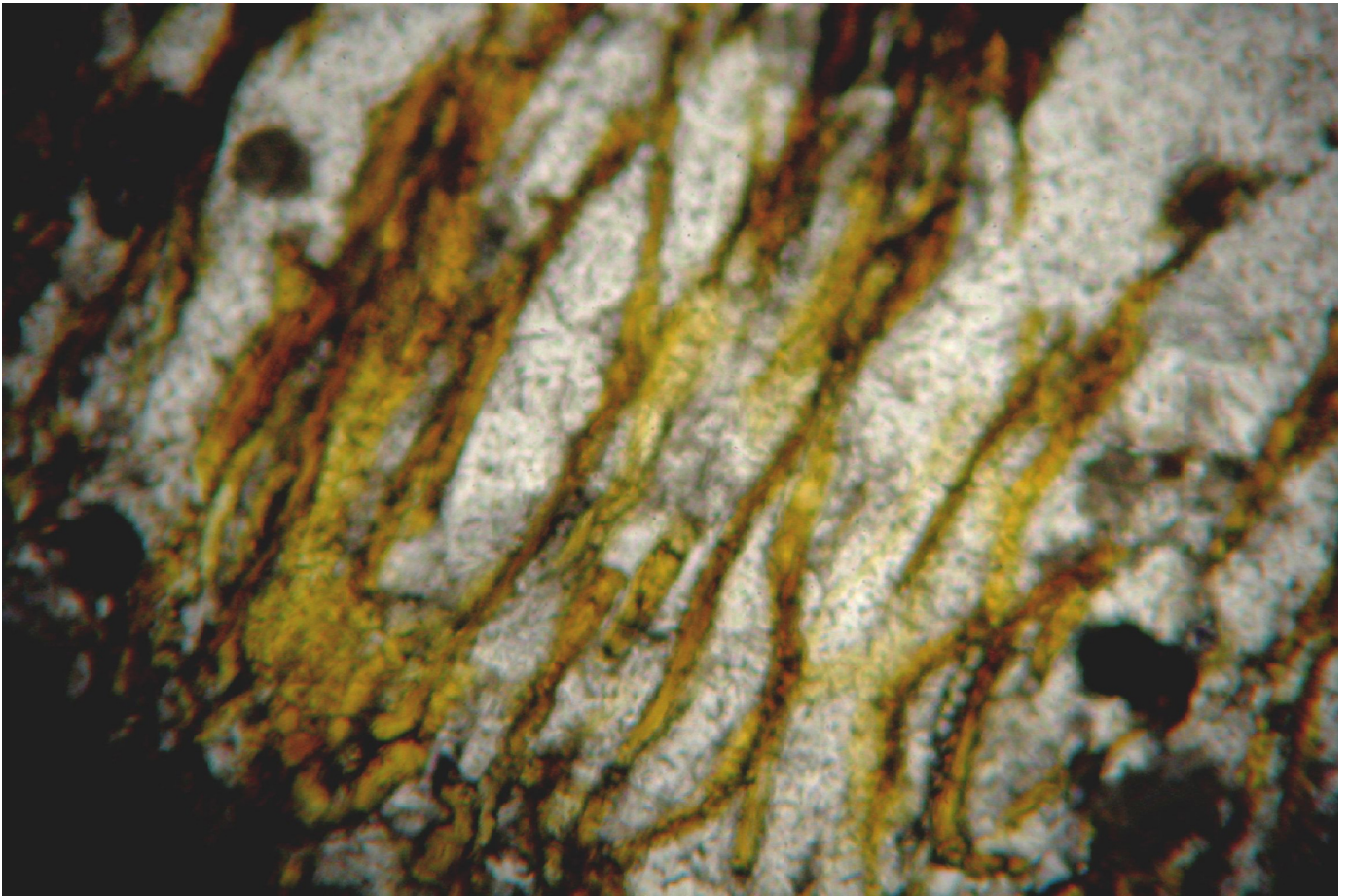
aragonite grains, oxygen burps and hydrogen sulphide farts" (2010, p. 3).

The wider context of Lake Clifton leads us to *shifting shores*: the Pleistocene/Holocene history of lake formation and seashore changes. Here it is the sense of sands accreting into dunes and then limestone ridges and the procession of multiple shorelines advancing and eroding that gives a rhythm to the piece. There are interviews with geologists and groundwater hydrologists. Additionally, borehole or seismic data will be converted into strings of sound across a woodland clearing.

Of course, Indigenous Cultures have lived on the coastal plains long before the time of Lake Clifton and experienced these changing shorelines. The third shoreline is the *cultivated landscapes* of [the] Noongar people. Stories of sea level changes are reflected in oral histories and the Nyitting

(Dreaming). Local groups have a living culture that has retained much and is actively reviving knowledge and cultural patterns. It's particularly important that the historical silences in this area that are the legacy of colonialism are tackled. The fourth shore, *a time of clearing*, from the mid 1800s to now, is a very different wave of development. Using oral histories and re-enacted scenes, these shores of *The Sixth Shore* project feature human voices from interviews, oral history and site recordings.

Another line of investigation – and one which is mostly at a seasonal scale – is the annual wader migrations and the population of endangered hooded plovers that are integral to Lake Clifton. This shore is called *bird migration and hooded plovers*. Rafts of waders frequent shelter at the lake and in later summer black swans congregate in sizeable numbers. Along with ambient sound



Cyanobacteria in a Lake Clifton thrombolite. Image courtesy of K. Grey, Geological Survey of Western Australia © K. Grey

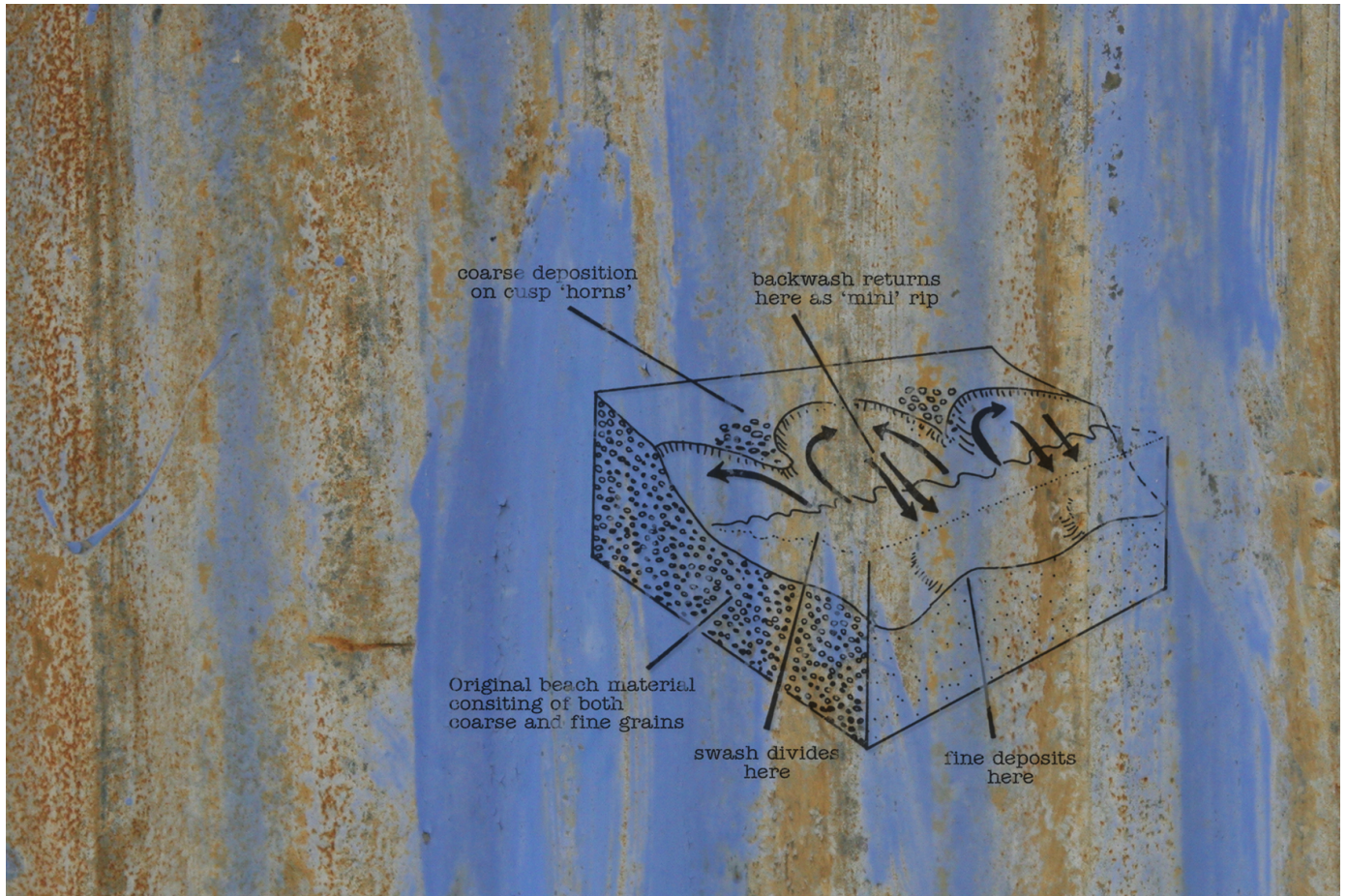
recordings, my efforts in recording the birds of the lake and its surroundings are an attempt to give voice to more than human worlds.

The last shore, that of *futures*, attempts to bring the different potentials of Lake Clifton together. Of course there are many uncertainties here. The contrasting rhythms of the preceding shores all contribute to a complex arrangement. In 2010 I coordinated *Unruly ecologies: biodiversity and art*, a three day symposium for SymbioticA that brought together many of the human participants, including those representing nonhuman others. The sonic structures in this part of *The Sixth Shore* are as yet not fully resolved since they represent the very complexity that I set out to explore.

Ultimately the six types or strands of sound will be woven together by the wayfarer traversing the space. The reason why it remains incomplete is that I am still unhappy

with how far I've got on conveying an affective experience. I'm saving up the money to modify the equipment and do more fieldwork to complete it soon. I also feel like I haven't cracked it yet as an artwork because there is something unaccountable that I can't quite lay my finger on. Perhaps it is a question of resonances and unsaid things. Perhaps I have bitten off more than I can chew – or perhaps just more work is needed!

**Patchett:** David Matless has argued that considering the sonic landscape of a particular area, like you do in *The Sixth Shore*, "shows how the contested valuation of that landscape works in significant part through sonic judgement, with the aesthetic, ecological and social enfolded through sonic geography" (Matless 2005: 763).



**Perdita Phillips**  
*Cusp* (2012) digital image © Phillips

Could you firstly comment on how the work itself explores contested valuations of Lake Clifton through sonic geographical understanding?

And secondly, I wonder if you could also reflect upon your own 'sonic judgements' when composing and presenting the sound work?

**Phillips:** These are interesting questions. In the project I've tried to give space for differing points of view, but also redress some of the imbalances about who gets to speak. The final shore brings these together. In comparing the Norfolk Broads to an Australian National Park, there are similar and even stricter restrictions on "loud" and "unnatural" sonic activities, particularly since National Parks are set apart as a specific land tenure type (and do not encompass surrounding land uses). The history of Lake Clifton is that

activities such as duck shooting no longer take place (it's banned State-wide) and that fishing or boats of any sort are also banned at the lake. Passive recreation is encouraged but access points are limited. Nature enthusiasts deplore the illegal trail bike riding. The sonic geographies are patterned with judgements on good and bad sounds.

The second question is more difficult as I have perhaps more affinities with recent reworkings in political ecology: by its nature *The Sixth Shore* is not a research project that stops with reporting on these patterns of contestations. It goes further in that my positioning is part of the work and the way in which I address my failings as an agent is as much part of the project's mesh. It is through access to poetics, wonder or other alternative strategies that this slippy calcium-rich mud of politics is negotiated. Maybe a thought here is to consider Jean-Luc Nancy's meditations

on listening as *entendre* and *écouter*, where the latter implies the openness of uncertainty, negotiation and exposure (Nancy, 2007).

Patchett: On Sonic Dialect. You have written that *The Sixth Shore* addresses “the diverse narratives that surround the Lake, directly responding to the area and engaging with the local community through oral history recordings and interviews”. Referring to Matless’ work again, he has written that the notion of a “sonic dialect” might give wider purchase on the currencies of located sound, “the ways in which a defined area is held to possess a particular voice, designated or expressed by human and non-human sound” (Matless 2005: 750).

Following this, could Lake Clifton be considered to possess a particular “voice” or “sonic dialect” [and, if so, how did you aim to capture and present this “voice” through the sound walk]?

Phillips: When I started this project in 2009 it struck me that there are no postcards of the lake, the national park or local towns. Of course there are issues of market size and fading popularity of postcards that apply here. It is partly the difficulty of representing a “minor” landscape with its surrounding bushland of “bland” greens and supposedly drab constituents. But this “silence” is also part [of] a legacy of colonialism and the evolution of Australian culture’s sense(s) of belonging – a lack of perception of the depth of subtle histories, or a lack of attunement to fine-grained ecological differences. Is there a specificity associated with the voice of this place? It is primarily through the increased interest in the thrombolites that Lake Clifton has become unique and differentiated from the wider regional setting. So, if thrombolites are without sound, is there a sonic dialect for this place? I would like to think that a dialect is in the making through increased interest in environmental issues in the area (and in a modest way, through *The Sixth Shore* project).

Patchett: You have sometimes used the term “soundscape” to describe the sound work produced for *The Sixth Shore*, however, Tim Ingold in “Against Soundscape” argues that the soundscape concept objectifies sound, rather than treating it as experiential, and that this has been enabled by technologies of recording and playback which end up regarding sound at an aesthetic and conceptual remove. In sympathetic contrast to Ingold, Stefan Helmreich has argued that the soundscape concept “is shadowed by an acoustemology of space as given and listener as both apart from the world *and* immersed in it” (Helmreich 2010: 10).

I wonder if you could comment on the “ways of listening and moving” encouraged by *The Sixth Shore* and the possible (productive) tensions between immersion and remove at play during the sound walk at the site of Lake Clifton through your use of technologies of recording and playback?

Phillips: There are no doubt differences between artworks that use direct listening (to nonhuman worlds) or high fidelity recordings of places and ones that move further away from the “natural” sounds into more complex compositions that change nonhuman source materials and add in other sound elements. Ingold himself makes a distinction between a visual culture that is only about seeing via artwork and that of seeing with the body; and that “ears, just like the eyes, are organs of observation, not instruments of playback” (Ingold, 2011, p. 137). For him the study of sound should primarily be about the immediacy of experience in the world and artworks using recordings of sounds when played back should be seen as being “aural,” in the sense that they are “*played back* within an environment (such as a darkened room) in which we are otherwise deprived of sensory stimulus” (pp. 136-137, emphasis in original).

It should be noted that many artists



**Perdita Phillips**

*Waste Land* (2013) digital image © Phillips

(including myself) are interested in investigating the immersive nature of the perception of *the participant*. But some phonographers are still critical of artists that clean up sound files or apply filters, implying that the authenticity of the recording is dependent on its absolute faithfulness to the original event. This is an issue of naturalism and representation, but it is also one of the unevenness of who is being represented. Recording the sounds of more-than-human others creates a power relationship, but one that isn't substantially different from those who choose to *represent* others via, say, the technology of canvas and oils. Any such representation is problematic if it *isn't* reflexive about its entangled relationship with more-than-human others – or claims to have a *transparent* association with others. Reframing my relationship from representative (standing-in-for) to convivial conduit was an

important consideration.

As you have said, despite Ingold's objection to the term soundscape, his conception is not actually that different from many who use the term today and who are operating from an immersive paradigm (something that for me is so appealing in Ingold's work). According to Ingold, the *Cusp* (2013) sound installation would be *aural* as it was made for a gallery situation. In this work the sounds of waves lapping a shore were spatialised through an arrangement of twelve speakers in a 5 metre square area. Audiences could walk through the piece and hear the way that sounds travelled around in lines, or experience them as enveloping fields of sound.

In contrast the final *Sixth Shore* work will only be enacted on site at the Lake. No visual artistic interventions into the landscape will form part of it, rather the work attempts to

create dissonance in the participant by the juxtaposition of sensory worlds. An important element of the work is the *leakage of sound* from the site into the perception of the wayfarer (through the headphones) and the stronger influence of what is *seen* at the site on what is *imagined* from the artwork's sound. What I am highlighting here is that these sensory overlaps are essential to the work. Nonetheless, I would be the first to admit that my work here still has inherent difficulties, as I am interested in acting as a conduit for more-than-human others at the same time as I do think it is useful to *transform* sounds and use generic sound effects to create stronger narratives about Lake Clifton (and hence, not create a truly naturalistic artwork).

**Patchett:** Another work emerging from the Adaptation research and residency project was the work *The Summer Flurries*, presented at Visceral: the living art experiment, a SymbioticA Exhibition at the Science Gallery Dublin (Jan-Feb 2011). "The Summer Flurries" was proposed as a GPS spatial sound walking project presenting "a landscape of droughts, dry lakes and wildfires from Lake Clifton in Western Australia, imagined as Dublin's antipodean alter ego." Unfortunately I didn't get to experience the work but the catalogue stated that "participants experience the meshing of two very different locations" and that the piece "aims to create linkages at different scales across human and nonhuman worlds."

Can you elaborate on this explanation of the work please – e.g. was the work commissioned and created specifically for the show, and how did it take shape?

**Phillips:** *The Summer Flurries* (2011) ran into initial technical difficulties when we got there, but the essence of the final work remained the same. It fits somewhere in between the other works, in that the sounds of one place (and the imaginary world it generates) are

interdigitated with another place. My objective was to use this dissonance between two places creatively. The audience took a walk through the grounds of Trinity College listening to a tapestry of sounds of Lake Clifton before ending up hearing the progress of a fire through a landscape. Radio emergency bulletins about a severe fire east of Lake Clifton were followed by the evocation of a landscape recovering from disaster. In my PhD I had worked with the ideas of Don Ihde (1976) to think through what it might mean to create artworks about one (*living*) place in *another place*. In *The Summer Flurries* the former might be stronger aurally and the latter might be stronger visually, but there is always overlap and none of our senses work in isolation.

Additionally, because I began as a visual artist, making these pieces involves acts of double transformation. As I sound record and walk in and around Lake Clifton, I *see* patterns and arrangements, too. Combined with the science and societal discourse about Lake Clifton, they are transformed visually so that I can comprehend wider conceptual patterns. These all influence how the sound is composed into sound structures, rhythms, movements and spatial distributions that I can use in the artworks. What I am searching for is conceptual "interference" that will create both a deeper engagement and dis/re-orientations for the audience. In his work Jean-Luc Nancy has mused on the concept of resonance. Working with Nancy's theories, art historian Jennifer Walden talks about "a more pervasive sense of all the senses resonating, reverberating against each other, if we can but listen as well as look" (Jennifer Walden in *The Courtauld Institute of Art*, 2013).

**Patchett:** You have been described as being interested in "words, sounds and birds." I'm curious about how these interests combine in your recent collaborations with poets for book projects like *Birdlife*?

**Phillips:** Here I am talking about something ecosystemic in the sense of creating artforms



**Perdita Phillips**

*Rainbow Bee-eater rising from Waste Land* (2013) documentation of site specific investigations © Phillips

that encourage *linkages* between diverse artworks, artists and audiences. In this case there were four writers involved along with my images and drawings. All our practices are quite different so we used the broad theme of birds to mesh the piece together and to allow us to explore in book form the relationship between humans and nonhumans. We wanted a book that couldn't be labelled as just poetry with visuals and we spent a lot of time making sure the images did not illustrate the text – or vice versa – that the connections between image and text created convivial tensions.

**Patchett:** Finally can you tell me about your new work fast|slow|complex...

**Phillips:** This is a project based around my local neighbourhood. It's been quite different because I've been rethinking this time where

liveliness might sit: I've been dealing with energy and wastes as well as plants and animals. In my daily life I walk down to the Swan River from my house, but if I go in the opposite direction I end up in an area of waste land. I also looked at my own consumption patterns and the dominance of "stuff" in my life and the broader possibility of recovery after disaster. In anticipation of the gallery-based exhibition titled fast|slow|complex, I organised a performative walk: *Walking the Waste Land to the Point* that connected the industrial landscapes to my house and thence to Niergarup (Preston Point) or the place of pelicans. As part of this we did a listening drift past energy substations and the former Fremantle Bunkering site. In the past I have seen Rainbow Bee-eaters attempting to dig nests into the now-remediated site's sandy soils. Soon a green housing subdivision will be

built on this ground. I wonder what the Rainbow Bee-eaters will think next time they arrive from their northern migrations.

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Contemporary artist Perdita Phillips works in various media -- from site-specific environmental projects to walking, book art, installation and sound art. Her work explores the gathering of living and nonliving interests which will shape the coming environmental futures. Her sound works are part of the touring exhibition *Adaptation* (2012) and *Visceral: The Living Art Experiment* (2011, Science Gallery, Dublin). Book collaborations include *A simple rain* (with Vivienne Glance, 2012) and *birdlife* (with Nandi Chinna, Michael Farrell, Graeme Miles, and Nyanda Smith, 2011). 2013 exhibitions include *fast/slow/complex* (solo), Spectrum Project Space, Edith Cowan University and *Art in a Time of Climatological Catastrophe*, China Brotsky Gallery, San Francisco. She has recently completed a project about penguins for the *Novel Ecologies* exhibition (The Cross Art Projects, Sydney, 2013) and participated in the Finnish Society of Bioart's workshop *Field\_Notes – Deep Time*. [www.perditaphillips.com](http://www.perditaphillips.com)

Merle Patchett's research broadly investigates interactions between people and the material world and the ways in which these interactions are imagined and practiced in science, art and everyday life. Her longest-running research project to date has focused on critically examining the craft worlds and knowledge-practices of taxidermists, past and present, and their material culture of animal remains in order to re-think and re-present matter(s) of life and death and histories of human-animal relation. Merle has published on this research widely and has been a co-curator of taxidermy-art exhibitions at the Hunterian Museum, Glasgow (e.g. [www.blueantelope.info](http://www.blueantelope.info)) and the Royal Alberta Museum, Edmonton ([www.fashioningfeathers.com](http://www.fashioningfeathers.com)). Merle is a Lecturer in Human Geography at the School of Geographical Sciences, University of Bristol and is currently preparing to publish a monograph entitled *The Taxidermist's Apprentice: On the Craft of Taxidermy and Histories of Human-Animal Relation*.