

**Working it
out along the
way...**



fast/slow/complex exhibition Spectrum
Project Space Edith Cowan University
19 February to 1 March 2013

There is no easy entry into this exhibition or to the art work of Perdita Phillips. One must set out at one's own pace, picking a way over the obstacles encountered, negotiating or improvising passage and rhythm as one goes along. This is a journey for a wayfarer 'following a path of life' and seeking 'a way through: not to reach a specific destination or terminus but to keep going... Along the way, events [will] take place, observations are made, and life unfolds.'¹ The passage through *fast/slow/complex* is one without end in sight. All is constantly turning—viewers enter the exhibition through a cyclone, groups of objects slowly spin, an artist-bowerbird has been at work relentlessly rearranging a collection of discards, and the cycle between use, waste and improvised re-use is everywhere evident. Phillips' project can be considered as an attempt to see out from the quiet eye of the cyclone, and to grasp a series

¹ Tim Ingold (2010). Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 16, Issue Supplement, May, S126.



of complex, interconnected and turbulent relationships—between nature and culture, use and non-use, growth and collapse, past and future. The entrance to this exhibition passes through a whirlwind of empty envelopes, which once held concealed messages, but which now are sucked up into the sky, and past an accompanying collage of accumulated fragments of drawings, texts, illustrations and notes, *The Secret Cyclone Plan* (2013). The plan reveals no map but rather a hoard of notes and diagrams, no end point but a sketch towards a vision of chaos. Beyond lies a portal through a wall of recycled cardboard boxes, leading to a field of carefully, deliberately deployed waste.

The artist trained initially in environmental science and many of her previous projects have been centred in non-urban and distant settings in the north of Western Australia, in areas she knew when mapping their environment. Her excursions to walk the country there, as part of her PhD studies (2003-2006), exploring the area of walking and fieldwork in art, and as art, and subsequently in interacting with bowerbirds at the Broome Bird Observatory (2007-08), involved both reflection and a kind of voiceless conversation with a nonhuman world. Phillips drew on a scientific tradition of fieldwork and focused observations made while walking, moving deliberately on foot, to see and record the environment as it existed prior to contemporary human intervention.

The work of other walking artists, from Richard Long and Hamish Fulton through to Francis Alÿs and Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, has informed Phillips' non-urban walks. Unlike Long, however she leaves no mark of her passage, no worn pathway or monument erected along the journey and, unlike Cardiff and Miller, she creates no narrative recording to allow others to follow the same passage. She does not walk into the cyclone, as Alÿs throws himself into small tornados, but traces the social and other dimensions of objects found in her passage. She walked, not to leave the residue of 'a line made by walking'², rather to build a perceptual and sometimes meditative map of these environments and their nonhuman inhabitants and as a step in making a light-handed art that drew from these experiences of wonder. She found a wildness there which could be characterised as 'flexible, fluid and experimental'—though this wildness was not something only found in remote spaces, but which could also be alive within us, 'as close as sweat and not just as far as the hills'³.

These walks were non-urban and without witness, though elements have been preserved on film or video. The documentation in the *fast/slow/complex* exhibition records these earlier acts of

looking and intense investigation, and traces her movement through the landscape. Her film and videos vary between recording a first person perspective of her walks, what is seen before her (or, in the case of *herethere (leftrigh)* (2006) what is before the cameras strapped to her feet), and a static camera recording her movement. In the longest video, *herethere (abovebelow)* (2006) Phillips repeatedly traverses a small, steep hillside. Clad in a scientist's white lab coat, she clambers up the rocks, moves over the top and then clambers down, only to climb up once again. She finds a new route each time—the activity is repetitive yet varying enough to suggest that she is not making a path as such. Each climb is its own improvised journey, just as each day is unique however much there may be an overall pattern. Her walks were solitary and self-conscious, alone and aware of the distance between oneself and the other world. Walking in the bush became a way of entering into an immersive relationship with the world, laying a trace, like Ariadne trailing her thread behind her: a line—as physical imprints on the ground and interior—as a trail of thoughts and observations.



² The title of Richard Long's famous walk of 1967.

³ Perdita Phillips (2006). *fieldwork/fieldwalking: art, sauntering and science in the walking-country*, unpublished PhD thesis, Edith Cowan University, p. 114.



This current project however brings things home, and is based in urban environments and everyday life—in her particular home environment but also in the social and material space of contemporary human societies. The thread through *fast/slow/complex* is an urban walk but more particularly it is within familiar, quotidian territory. Earlier walks had some similarity to those of Richard Long or Hamish Fulton: like theirs, hers were walks undertaken in a particular territory and geography outside of, and exceptional to, normal life. This 2013 walk, *Walking the Wasteland to the Point*, from the back blocks of White Gum Valley, through a series of suburban streets, past her home in East Fremantle and down to the river at Niergarup (Preston Point, or the place of the pelicans) is marked not by singularity but familiarity, within urban space but even more within the domain of everyday life. It begins alongside an area of open waste land where the remediation needed to return the contaminated ground to some form of usefulness has left the space in limbo, appearing as simply abandoned and empty land. The former coastal scrub is beginning to colonise and reassert its presence, and the area is in fact on the verge of redevelopment as a new area of medium density housing. It then leads, as Phillips traces in her delicate profile drawing, *Transect: Fremantle Bunkering Service, fly dumping, crow feathers, navy pipes* (2013), through the 19th century streets and along the shoreline of the Swan River.

Her Fremantle walk, unlike her earlier walks in remote isolation, was shared with others as a guided, social experience, with a commentary by the artist and reflection and discussion among participants as they walked together. It is a walk that would welcome sharing, that one might take with a dog or on a summer evening with a partner or children, wending through twisting spaces of industrial and residential history, finding fragments of the pre-colonial natural environment as well as evidence of patterns of colonial settlement and growth, and spilling out onto the great recreational waterway that runs through the middle of metropolitan Perth. It was a journey along which social relations could be “paced out along the grounds.”⁴

In this urban passage the walk traversed an environment and a social history, with waste and refuse lying all along it. It starts by land that has been laid waste and ends on a shore littered with detritus cast off passing boats or washed down from the surrounding land. On her walk Phillips has collected hundreds of bits of anonymous rubbish: champagne corks, pieces of old rope, lost key-rings, various single thongs, fish-shaped soy sauce bottles for sushi, crushed plastic bottles and drink cans, pieces of plywood and driftwood, children’s misplaced and much missed sand

4 Tim Ingold & Jo Lee Vergunst (2008). Introduction, in *Ways of Walking// Ethnography and Practice on Foot*. Aldershot: Ashgate.





shovels, a well-chewed Frisbee unclaimed by its dog and miscellaneous bits of metal, plastic and wood. All are part of the endless stream of waste generated, used and abandoned by the residents of a large city. The flesh of this project is this waste and the larger proto-waste of contemporary life, the accumulation of stuff that builds up to suffocate and overwhelm. The objects she has collected, preserved and arranged in *Waste Land* (2013), just inside her gateway arch of cardboard boxes (much like the bower leading to the bowerbird's collection) is the litter she has gathered on her Fremantle walks. This is the rubbish that lies forsaken under our feet, needing to be gathered up, moved elsewhere, out of sight and even better out of mind.

The hoarded objects laid out nearby in *32 things to be done* (2013) are the stuff that gets collected and preserved for possible future use—that are not, to certain eyes, quite waste but which teeter on its border. There is a heap of old toothpaste tubes; a pile of 850 boab nuts; a group of scientific specimen jars; stacks of old natural history guides; an ancient encyclopaedia of world art; the empty Kodak film boxes from the photographs taken while working on her doctorate; dust swept up from the gallery floor and more. Here, too, Phillips has been a bowerbird, preserving, archiving and arranging anonymous junk of no apparent value, laying it out for others to puzzle over. We can see they once had purpose

and use value, but now that would seem to have been lost. These are objects which when deprived 'of their function within a living totality of meaning... dwell in an inter-space between nature and culture, between life and death, leading a ghost-like existence, belonging neither to nature nor to culture, appearing as something akin to the monstrosity of natural freaks, like a cow with two heads and three legs.'⁵ They sit or lie in a reluctant, nebulous zone, souvenirs of a past but with a very uncertain future.

In connecting the waste of discarded objects and spaces and the sheer stuff that accumulates at the edges of everyday life, Phillips points to the continuum of waste, and its relationships with both use and time. There is waste that is great and terrible—the polluted air of cities, the radioactive products of war and industry, and the sheer mountains that need to be jettisoned along contemporary capital's race into an ever new future. Yet there is also horror in a quotidian and quieter scale of waste (and wastefulness). Things accumulate all too often at the interstices of everyday life, in the back of the cupboard; in the pile of mail on the table in the hallway; cast off alongside the daily route between home and work; or as the myriad objects we acquire that were only ever intended as ephemera, designed to become waste from their very inception.

5 Slavoj Žižek (2008). Nature and its Discontents, *SubStance*, 117, 37(3) 63.



Waste is the burden of the past left to the future. In its essence waste consists of things, places and artefacts which once, in the past, had use, purpose, meaning and value—which made sense—but now do not. They are excess, even excrescence, purposeless yet persistent. The waste that chokes our lives—and increasingly as we get both richer and remain determined to ignore the effects of our own actions—comes from a concentration on present utility at the expense of any consideration beyond immediate need. At every level, from the litter alongside the daily stroll, the urgent need to transform poisoned waste ground into something else, and in all pervasive, careless accumulation it provides visible evidence of an ethics that recognises no sense of the temporal—beyond the instant of current moment—and no responsibility beyond the immediate self. To live this way, as has become threateningly obvious, and as Phillips’ art reminds us, is to court catastrophe.

To look beyond this burden and out from the cyclone’s eye is to recognise that past, present and future are tied in a complex knot, with the future ‘causally produced by our acts in the past, while the way we act is determined by our anticipation of the future and our reaction to this anticipation.’⁶ In considering the

⁶ Slavoj Žižek (2008). Nature and its Discontents, *SubStance*, 117, 37(3), p. 68, citing an argument of Jean-Pierre Dupuy’s, in *Pour un catastrophisme éclairé*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2002.





ecosystem of which we are part it needs to be recognised that imbalance, heterogeneity and change are constants. The rhythm of Phillips' walk is not invariant—the body and the feet must adjust to the ground traversed, and the arrhythmic or contrapuntal, the overlapping cacophony of fragments, needs to be acknowledged as one picks a way through.⁷ To escape the looming apocalypse it may be necessary, as Jean-Pierre Dupuy has suggested, that we 'accept that, at the level of possibilities, our future is doomed, the catastrophe will take place, it is our destiny—and, then, on the background of this acceptance, we should mobilize ourselves to perform the act that will change destiny itself by inserting a new possibility into the past.'⁸

The move that Perdita Phillips has made in *fast/slow/complex* is not just one from remote spaces to familiar, personal territories but from the solitary to the social. In moving from the non-urban territory of earlier projects into the urban space of city life Phillips is not making a move from nature to culture—and she actively rejects a strict dichotomy between them, emphasising instead a boundary space of great potential which at its best is resilient, changeable and alive. Her move is away from binary relationships,

7 See Phillips' (2012). Walk 'til you run out of water, *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 17(4), 97-109.

8 Žižek, op. cit.

including one in which nature is defined in contrast to the human and urban, and nature as having the qualities of goodness and innocence lacking in our urban environments.⁹ It is in cities and similar human centres that the threats of environmental collapse and degradation can be most clearly seen. It is here and in the spaces of the everyday, not just those of dramatic disaster, that Phillips suggests humans need to confront the risks and dangers we have made for ourselves and our planet. We must embrace a paradox: accept fate and act, in our present, to change the past of our future.

The cyclone that lies at the entrance to the future Perdita Phillips foresees is a chaotic force that sucks everything up into the storm, that destroys, recycles and reorients all that lies before it. To enter into the cyclone is to accept and acknowledge fragmentation, and to both see the burden of our acts and to envision a future of possibility. One must step lightly, moving at a pace that is deliberate if still uneven, contingent but resilient, working it out along the way.

9 Phillips discusses this point as raised by ecologist Tim Low in her PhD thesis, p. 107.



Page 2: *The Secret Cyclone* installation of accumulated blue envelopes and motor (detail, 2013). Page 4: *The Secret Cyclone Plan* mixed media studio drawing (2013). Page 7: *Herethere (abovebelow)* (still from video, 2006). Pages 8 and 11: Details from research/performative walk *Walking the Wasteland to the Point* (2013). Pages 12, 13 and 23: *Waste Land* installation of found objects, motors (overview and details, 2013). Pages 19 and 20: close-ups of *The Secret Cyclone Plan*. Pages 14 and 17: *32 things to be done* mixed media installation of collected objects (overview and detail, 2013).

Photographs on pages 2, 4, 14, 20 taken by Tony Nathan and page 19 artwork photographed by John Barrett-Lennard. All other photographs © Perdita Phillips.

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John Barrett-Lennard (2014). *Working it out along the way... fast/slow/complex*. Fremantle: Lethologica Press. ISBN 978-0-9758334-6-9



Department of
**Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries**

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