

Thinking like a fossil

encounters with
Perdita Phillips'
problematica




FOSSIL


Perdita Phillips

LOST ROCKS


Survival in the balance




Thrombolites need fresh water to survive. Maintaining the current level of the ground water here is crucial for their survival.



Increasing nutrients in the ground water can result in an increase in algae that can smother the thrombolites.



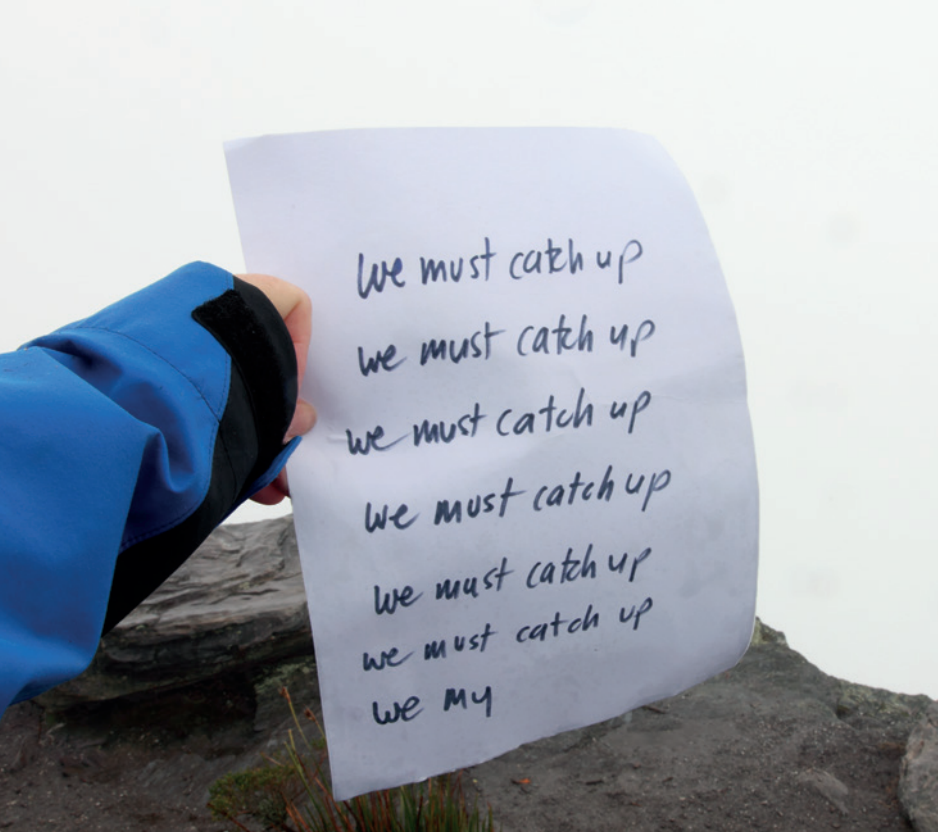
Think carefully before fertilising and watering your garden. The run-off can affect the survival of the plants and animals living in wetlands.



London and Noongar Boodja, May 2020

The works of Perdita Phillips are acts of tactical resistance, in de Certeau's sense of the "tactic", as a way of moving about which resists the strategies of institutions of power.¹ To encounter them as I write this now, in London, Covid-19 lockdown 2020, is to oddly remember Vincent Normand's writing about the museological institution as itself a site of quarantine²—a global apparatus laying out a 'state of isolation' as a restricted or 'silenced' field of attention, where an ordered projection of the world administrates its objects according to the laboratories of scientific modernity. Phillips' artistic propositions in fact perform some of the opposite traits of our textures of geological and environmental thinking, which historically has been forged by objects *not* in their right place: similar to Isidore of Seville's 7th century seashell fossils found on a mountain which, by dint of their trajectories *through* time and space, *re-formulated* time and space. The deep sea-bed of trilobites of the past, it turns out, can become translated into the mountain peaks of the future—and, vice versa.

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- 1 Michel de Certeau (2000). Walking the City. In G. Ward (ed.), **The Certeau Reader** (pp. 101-118). Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
 - 2 See Filipa Ramos et al. (2016). Theater, Garden, Bestiary: Filipa Ramos, Vincent Normand, and Tristan Garcia In Conversation. **Mousse Magazine**, 55.



we must catch up
we must catch up
we must catch up
we must catch up
we must catch up
we must catch up
we my

In place of certifiable, linear rock histories, Phillips' non-fictional performances of fossil-work dwell in fragile moments of memory, ecology, and community, both in the lithic form and in its printed encounters. Instead of the lofty summit of Bluff Knoll, which was tellingly first named in the colonial cartography as "Mount Rugged", Phillips' sculpture and participatory performance *We must catch up* (2017 onwards) invokes the slow art of the mountain's relationships. This work lives now as a two and a half metre high mountain facsimile standing in a field in southwest Western Australia, and is both an invitation and an activation point. The sculptural project is a composite of its past and future conversations, neighbourly encounters and enchained ecological agencies and forms of damage, including *Phytophthora cinnamomi* (the water mould responsible for Phytophthora Dieback disease in plant communities). Phillips' composition for the sharing of a mountain performance starts by debunking our trained imaginations of mountains. In its absurd scales—huge humans climbing a shrunken mountain of strange black papier-mâché—it seems to undermine the act of humans "summiting", with the attention instead given to the two empty chairs at the top, placed always ready for the next mountain Q&A without an audience. The mountain, in other words, takes us into its confidence. Meanwhile, its lack of detail—its contours of paper resembling layers of exfoliated rock, but all in a matching colour of black ash—means we



must use our imaginations to put the details back in, including the threat of local extinction for some plants found nowhere else in the world.³ Eerily, this black colour unintentionally and tragically matches the devastating Stirling Range fires of late 2019 to early 2020, two months after the completion of the artwork.

The artwork stands not merely as an archetypal peak but as an endangered ecosystem likeness that calls on our own presence and imagination; this is not our usual way of thinking mountains. Instead it offers something closer to the way we allow ourselves to imagine a coral reef, in this case standing upright and overland: permitting that greater sense of ecological sensitivity, jeopardy and collaboration (also truer to the peak's original names in Noon-gar, Bular Miial or Pualaar Miial, the many-faced hill, or place of many-eyes). The work is a recent outcome of Phillips' career-long experiments in forms of performative symbiosis and speculative fieldwork, disrupting the boundaries between what is manifest, and what is ignored or invisible, in any assimilated version of the world. She subverts the more familiar environmental artist's ramble, scramble, or ascent, with its Romantic history of musings from the field, gentlemen's gatherings, and geological primers in

3 Sarah Barrett & Colin J Yates (2014). Risks to a mountain summit ecosystem with endemic biota in southwestern Australia. **Austral Ecology**, 40. 423-432.

verse. Here, I'm indebted to Barrett-Lennard's writing⁴ about the ways in which Phillips' performances invoke and unsettle not just the figure of the surveyor, the scientist or field geologist, but also that of the land artists, such as Long and Fulton; rather than "Anthropos", man swallowed up by Man-the-master-category, we see in Phillips' work a whole theatre of different masks and personas jostling for position.

In Phillips' *Fossil (III)* (2019), we can trace the outlines of what has been described by Eileen Crist as the Anthropocene as 'a Promethean-self portrait' of mankind, via their/our certifiable signature now evident in the earth.⁵ However, in Phillips' booklet of thrombolites, pseudo-fossils and quorum sensing, these tracings explode out of any over-arching museological or scientific fidelity. She creates propositions which pull always toward the invisible outsides of any disciplined act of remembrance. Once we give up the geological metaphor of world-as-jigsaw—which itself takes an apocalyptic or eschatological tone, as if there is some final unchanging puzzle nearing completion—we see stranger forms of human and nonhuman temporality threading through

4 John Barrett-Lennard (2014). **Working it out along the way... fast|slow|complex**. Fremantle: Lethologica Press.

5 Eileen Crist (2013). On the Poverty of Our Nomenclature, **Environmental Humanities**. 3, 129-147.

Phillips' black and white portfolio of rocks and errors. She samples metaphors and logics of time, returning often to material contact surfaces, with their different forms of promise and limit. The version of the past which we bring with us into the future is dependent on not just an obsession with human autography—our mark on the Earth's stratigraphy, announced now to be legible to all future geologists we might imagine—but also on the shaping and breaking of museum Perspex, specimen lamination, the gum of photograph adhesives, and our own institutional and individual vanishing points of memory and empathy.

Phillips' work unmakes and unmaskes these operations. In place of what has been called 'the golden spike'—the exact pin-pointing of a representative marker layer or precise signal showing when the Anthropocene began⁶—she shows that the metaphors of fossils and sites are changed by the acknowledgement of their own mutability and the interpenetration of "our" activity with the fossil record. The forms of interleaving in the book itself, with new annotations and slices into its mediated texts and transfers, show that this mess we're in includes a textured temporality of the present, and a confounded record of the past and fu-

6 Meera Subramanian (2019). Humans versus Earth: the quest to define the Anthropocene: Researchers are hunting for nuclear debris, mercury pollution and other fingerprints of humanity that could designate a new geological epoch. **Nature**, 572, 168-170.

ture. The soil profile is a stack of changed and changing horizons which 'destabilize the straightforward, secular assumption that pasts and presents have futures, that things just keep on going'⁷. Phillips' interventionist text is akin to this subject matter—playing on, but never completing, the strategies of the history of printed "marvels" which have gone before, and the correspondences of books, geology, cabinets, catalogues, the memory theatre and the memory Ark. Her fragmentation of the museum is nothing like the kind of sterilised, scopic mastery which Vincent Normand described. Instead, it tracks strange movements, including the idea of the 'visited' site and the 'unvisited' site, as well as the trajectories of the fossils themselves. She relays the ironies of the Tennant Collection being set adrift again on its way to what was to become the self-governing colony of Western Australia, with the mounting cards of these minerals 'untethered and water-washed'. Even the titling of *Fossil (III)* refers us to absent others, or some figurative numbering system, key or index.

This little book is just the most recent stage of Phillips' work in the fields of ecological performance and imaginative co-habitation. The soundscapes of *The Sixth Shore Project* (2012), the

7 see p. 502 in Stef Craps et al. (2018). Memory studies and the Anthropocene: A roundtable. **Memory Studies**, Vol 11.4, 498-515.

GEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA - FOSSIL COLLECTION
SPECIMEN No. F. 11174 collector W. Daleney, J. E. Nield
GENUS *Pachymatic cylindrical structures*
SPECIES
LOCALITY 0.5 km. north-east of Gurdelle, 800 m. above sea level
FORMATION Jullabarra Formation, Bangemall Group
GEOLOGICAL AGE 31-1 b.y. Permian DABOI



This is not a fossil





We
who
are
first of
all things.

We
who are
endless.

We
who are
multilingual.

We
who
survive.

All hail to ☉,
bestower of life

looped silvery videos of *Anticipatory Terrain (Capricious Dreams)* (2017), the eaten-away desert sand dune termite archive of *Tender Leavings* (2016) and the wetland hand sculptures of *Tactile Response Gloves* (2016)—each of these pieces is a cumulative part of an ongoing guidebook to movement through our shared living space with nonhuman others. That guidebook is necessarily not completist, but a guidebook always in process—a perpetual questioning about the living arrangements of co-species survival, testing out what imaginative tools this may need as much as its scientific expectations. The uncanniness of such a guide, which one experiences with every participation in Phillips’ artworks, is that it is as much about what is *not* there as what *is*—a consequence of the human and nonhuman histories by which ecologies are constantly made and unmade. Several of the artefacts in *Fossil (III)* can be seen to perform what Penny Edmonds has described as a key element of the Australian Anthropocene—the pseudo-specimen, which exists as an ‘uncanny rupture’ or even a supernatural fossil: an existence which is neither entirely valid nor entirely invalid, but which does not fit into the self-legitimizing cavalcade of facts and geological markers.⁸

8 Penelope Edmonds (2018). The Bunyip as Uncanny Rupture: Fabulous Animals, Innocuous Quadrupeds and the Australian Anthropocene. **Australian Humanities Review** 63, 80-98.

In *Fossil (III)* we encounter both the pathos and the promise of dispersed fragments. The rubble of the text is a kind of ekphrasis—in Phillips' stories and readings of the grain of photographs, engravings, legends and watermarks, as well as the science of quorum sensing. We encounter these as portals—uneasy spaces and species of reading, such as microbialites, which 'embody the idea of a mineral/vegetable thing that crosses the boundary between the living and the non-living worlds.' The minute choral voices of the text—as when Phillips lyrically excavates the perspective of a single bacterium in a living thrombolite, shared with 'ten trillion comrades'—constantly compare forms of graven and ephemeral writing, from re-printed frontispieces and pages from Darwin on the transmutation of species and the Chain of Life, to the careful hand-writing of science, to loopy asemic and invented pictorial codes for the chemicals of 'multispecies consensus'.

Every page of this book is about the science of missing parts—such as the crystalline textures of the stromatolite specimen, with its 'in-between-layers (as) empty bubbles of negative space', its 'black marker track lines that provide the right-way-round for joining the boulder up together again', and the internal structure visible in the sliced section which 'gives an indication of just how much of the boulder is not there'. Phillips arranges negative spaces as speculative entities which speak to truer chal-

lenges than any imagination of the world-as-a-jigsaw that could ever be joined up together again. Her stromatolite performs the non-unifying modes of earlier science—the idea of ‘the Challenge of the Seashell’,⁹ in which the development of experimental nuclear units of writing (*pensées*, essays, *minuzie*) met the incompletable fragment of reality—the fossil as a question mark, or mode of knowledge-in-forma-tion, which is both self-formative and other-formative—the fragments of a seashell as something which requires the imagination to ‘think further’ about reality. Phillips’ debris of micro specimens incline us also to amplify this challenge of the seashell via an Anthropocene which must be thought of with dissolving scales and entities in mind, as Stacy Alaimo’s ‘Your Shell on Acid’ has sharply observed.¹⁰

Perhaps most resonant for me in this political moment is the fact that *Fossil (III)* is, also, finally a deliberate play on the family album of photographs. This, however, is the larger album for the larger family of our kinship on Earth. The true poverty of our language of the Anthropocene, as Crist wrote, is that defining a geological age by “our” now legible impact—naming an era after

9 Giancarlo Maiorino (1990). **The Cornucopian Mind and the Baroque Unity of the Arts**. University Park: Pennsylvania State p. 83.

10 Stacy Alaimo (2017). Your shell on acid: material immersion, Anthropocene dissolves. In Grusin R., (ed.) **Anthropocene Feminism**. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

ourselves—relies entirely on the constructed identity of an “us”. There is no such thing as “us”; in fact, it may even be argued that there being such a thing as one person is a flawed premise. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs writes radically, in relation to the failure of our scientific language to describe the collectivity of coral without naturalising problematic ideas of the colonial, falling back on far less inter-generational ideas of the colony or the polyp:

And what about us, living on the same matter, with multiple hungers and resources that we pretend are not shared (...) the idea of our own individuality lies and kills, the way we are all realizing too late (like as soon as some-one we love dies of cancer) that neither we nor they were as individual as we had been taught to think.¹¹

Phillips’ work resists any such homogenizing impulse of the self-as-gargantuan-species-“I”, or of human-enterprise-as-the-narrator-from-the-summit-of-history, with her artistic proposals as well as this hand-held book following instead crossed traces of personhood, bacteriumhood, and their multi-scalar memory practices. Flitting through Phillips’ book and works is a real person—who exists in the company of all the ways in which being

11 Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2019). Being ocean as praxis: depth humanisms and dark sciences. *Qui Parle* 28(2), 335-352.



Fossa

Dendroica

una delle specie più comuni
in Italia. È un uccello di
piccola taglia, con un corpo
robusto e un becco forte.
Il suo habitat preferito è
il bosco, dove si nutre di
insetti e frutta. È un
uccello molto attivo e
curioso, che si muove
facilmente sui rami degli
alberi. La sua voce è
caratterizzata da una
serie di note ripetitive.
In alcune regioni, è
considerato un uccello
comune, mentre in altre
è più raro. La sua
popolazione è in
costante crescita, grazie
alla protezione offerta
dalla legge. È un
specie molto apprezzata
per la sua bellezza e
la sua personalità.

a person might affect the objects of memory and the scales of remembrance. She changes to direct address to recall narrative fragments: re-encountering the same specimen at variant ages (her own), as a child deciphering it from a car window, and as an adult artist not at first recognising it from her childhood: 'It was when I realised it was the same rocky protuberance pictured inside that I had gone past as a child that a certain affinity was born', then, later: 'At some point as I grew up I stopped looking out the car window for my ungainly friend'.

In *Fossil (III)*, the art of remembering is marked as always the flip side of the coin of the art of forgetting. Once we take on board the failure of "us", or even objective rock science, as a transcendent or ethical principle of memory, this creates double jeopardies of elimination by which 'the Earth's forgetting projects itself into humanity's future, where the forgetting itself will be forgotten for as long as the Earth can be disciplined into remaining a workable and safe human stage'.¹² In Phillips' jagged book of memorials, we discover that forgetting is not just about aporia and fragmentation, since we in fact ultimately find a more uncomfortable and dangerous truth: that bigger forms of forgetting are entirely disciplined and trained. Every institution and strategy of memory—whether enlisting the discipline of the voice, the museum, the

12 Crist, op. cit.

lapidary, even the land artist—is also a disciplined, institutionalised forgetting. The human can lose and find itself in these acts of memory, the affixing of certain interpretative strategies to the world(s), and the relegation of others. Finally, therefore, I find that Perdita Phillips’ multi-media conceptual practice, of relationships, tactile performances and speculative Q&As, plays always with *tactics* which resist our culturally deliberate *strategies* for ignoring the world, and for jettisoning symbiosis by rendering it imperceptible or ephemeral.

Against the modern apparatus of our pedagogies, these shifting non-human scales can reveal more quotidian forms of destruction—but also, glimpses of collaboration and maintenance, in a world where any form of recovery will be as much about the tininess of chemical re-composition as it is about conventional scales of disaster and future modelling. The importance of the ‘arts of emergence’, the ‘arts of repair’, an ‘art of maintenance’, or even just the art of living on a damaged planet¹³ is often that which escapes our notice, but relies on the radical creative importance of ‘conversational drift’.¹⁴ Perdita Phillips’ diverse performances,

13 As per Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing et al. (eds.). (2017). **Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene**. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

14 On the ‘art of emergence’, and particularly Helen Mayer Harrison’s and Newton Harrison’s idea of ‘conversational drift’, see James Brady (ed.). (2016). **Elemental: An Arts and Ecology Reader**. Manchester: Cornerhouse Press.


concepts, and annotations—whether through termites, minerals, eclogues or speaking/listening situations—ask questions without any of the ‘black marker-track lines’ by which the final answer can be put back together the right way round.

Like: ‘What do we do about this weirdness?’¹⁵

But also—what is the best ethical work of care, creativity, and conversation by which we might continue to ask the difficult questions of how to carry each other into the future?

And—where, in other words, are our pedagogies for healing?

¹⁵ This was one of the suggested questions incorporated in **We must catch up**.



Witness

Don't stay silent

Actively care

Page 2 and 19: *Fossil (III)* limited edition book at Lake Clifton. Page 5: *We must catch up*, Bular Miial (Bluff Knoll). Page 6: *We must catch up* at The Farm, Margaret River. Page 11: This is not a fossil, GSWA, Welshpool. Page 12: Thrombolites at Lake Clifton. Page 14: from page 27 of *Fossil (III)*. Page 23: Banksia Grove 'live the life you want', 2019.

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Perdita Phillips (2019). *Fossil (III)* Hobart: A Published Event. Available from www.apublishedevent.net/projects/lost-rocks/editions/fossil-ii-phillips-p

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Amy Cutler (2020). *Thinking like a fossil: Encounters with Perdita Phillips' problematica*. Fremantle: Lethologica Press. ISBN 978-0-9758334-9-0



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