I HAVE NEVER CONSIDERED
MY ENVIRONMENT AS
THE SPACE BETWEEN
WATERS

HOW TO ENACT
RITUALS TO PRACTI
MINDFULNESS AND
CULTURAL ENVIRON

The Conversation Air
Brook Street Swamp Water

Forever flowing, gifting, loving
connected

The Reply

I feed you with me.

I almost took a great video of a coot catching a worm... but when I pressed stop it was actually start and I had nothing.

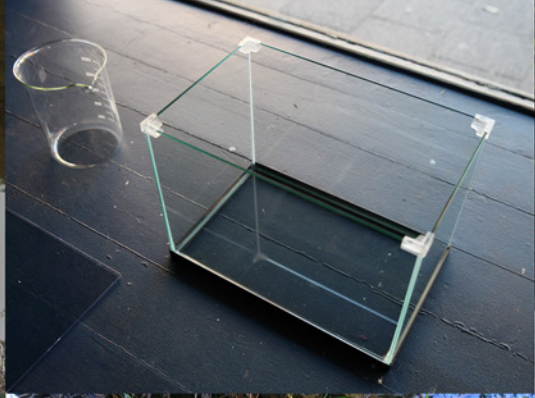
Hello wetland
Surrounded by the roar
of traffic. One frog
Bonks and honeyeaters
call. It's morning and
life keeps going on.
As a swamp I am hidden
behind a swathe of
trees. Sometimes sweat
people visit me but
the hedge of japanese
peppers are very dense
and hard to get through.
My waters are still and
quatty. Pollution gets
dumped in me
My Brother in hornsby
Bico Gardens is surrounded
by wedding pinot agriculture

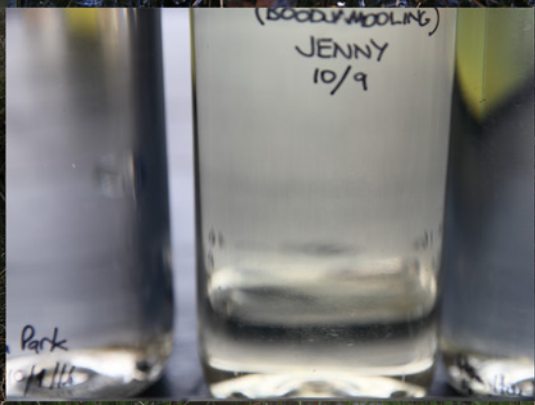
I carried their message
It was flirtatious.

to _____
Love and
Greetings
from _____

Southern Flettrism Island 2 (Near Kakadu)

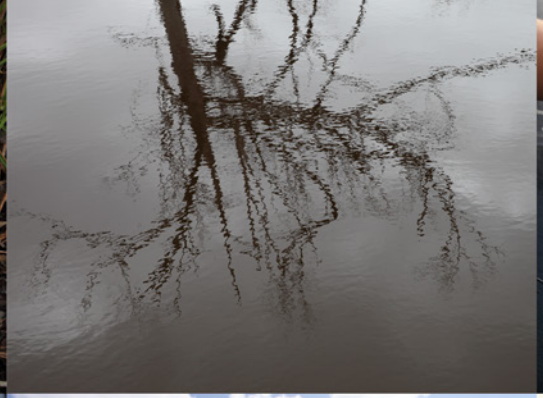
darkness and darkness.
Pied oyster catchers pass me by.
I am small and almost
forgotten.
I live in the shadow of my big sister




(BOODLY MOOLING)
JENNY
10/9
Park

Love and Greetings

Love and Greetings

carry me.


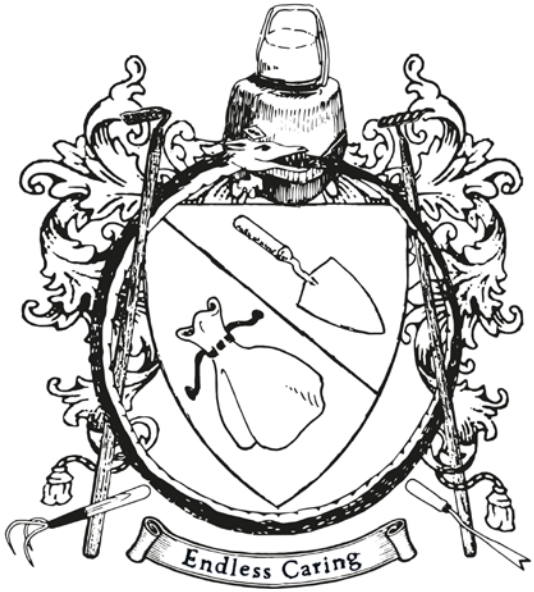
–ing

Two participatory art projects by Perdita Phillips

Spring, 2016. Perth is verdant. Perdita Phillips is seeking volunteers to assist with weeding Robertson Park wetland in a corner of an otherwise manicured inner-city park. Councils maintain public land, so why is Phillips inviting the public to participate in a group activity curiously titled ***Weed-ing***, and why this emphasis on ***–ing***?

In advance of the weeding workshop, Phillips requests volunteers to read ***Weeding Worriers***, a booklet she's compiled to explain what is a weed, why we'll be weeding this wetland, how to identify weeds, and how to effectively remove them. There's a lot to take on board. The term "worrier" (which I initially misread as "warrior") is contextualised on page two: "know what you are about to kill". I've never thought of myself as a killer before.

Weeding is deceptively simple. To know whether to kill (or not) requires knowledge generated by evaluating personal experiences and understanding gained and shared through the actions and experiences of our ancestors.



Weeding requires physical endurance, mobility, and good eyesight. It requires an accumulation of direct experiences based on analysing, comparing, listening, sharing, assessing – familiarising the mind and body with nuances to determine desirable versus undesirable plant characteristics. Furthermore, weeding requires understanding the local landscape through the lens of temporality; the seasonal cycles of seedling to seed. Learning to weed also includes making mistakes. In ***Weed-ing***, the onus is clearly on volunteers to distinguish flora friend from flora foe. Can volunteers be trusted to kill the right plant? Is this the primary worry of this ***–ing*** project? In part, yes. But there's more.

Phillips is an interdisciplinary artist, environmental activist, and scholar, who incorporates geography, ecology, science, and community-based participatory actions into her work, so her reference to killing should be considered in a broader context. For instance, the extinctions we are witnessing in this new epoch, the Anthropocene, are not results of natural catastrophes: our collective greed is killing life and reshaping Earth's future in almost every possible way. Living in the Anthropocene is increasingly frightening and deadly and Phillips repeatedly poses the question: what can art do?

At Robertson Park wetland Phillips issues her crew with white t-shirts bearing a novel coat of arms comprising gardening tools framed by an ouroboros and the script "Endless Caring". I sense we're being conscripted, physically, emotionally, philosophically, into environmental stewardship. But as volunteers are we not already converted? Yes, but I think it's a question of degree. Is living sustainably even possible in Australia?

We weed all morning for the volunteer Claise Brook Catchment Group. I've never weeded in the company of others and I certainly have never before knowingly killed anything in a park. Knowledge of local cultural history and the ecology of this place is shared; we are weeding one of Perth's lost lakes in Wadjuk Noongar Boodjar (country). We learn that Robertson Park Wetland is manmade, occupying a fraction of the original string of wetlands across Perth now all but destroyed. I try to imagine pre-colonial Perth before the bitumen and the 'burbs.

For me, participating in Phillips' ***Weed-ing*** was akin to partaking in a living memorial; bonding people and place with the wetland's past and present, and provoking us to consider its future beyond our lifetimes. This micro manmade wetland is faint in diversity, but it's better than nothing and surely "out of little things big things grow". It seems that what Phillips is proposing is that we continue to make life and death decisions even though we live in compromised times.

On the heels of ***Weed-ing*** is ***Carry me, join me***. For this ***-ing*** project Phillips organised the collecting and carrying of water samples and individual air samples (miasmas) from twenty-two remnant wetlands and waterbodies in close proximity to Perth's CBD.

The twenty-three freshwater sites Phillips selected were once interconnected as parts of continuous ecosystems but are now geographically isolated from each other. They're small, sometimes difficult to locate, and occasionally fencing prohibits access. The sites are 'owned' and 'managed' by two local governments: Perth and Vincent. These surface expressions of groundwater once sustained millennia of life, including human. Now council signs warn against entering and wildlife struggles to survive.

Phillips directed volunteers to release their air sample at a different wetland/waterbody from where it was collected. What does this ***transference*** of air between these groundwater sources suggest? Go on, feel the wind flow through your hair. Air, even though we can't see it, is unique to Earth, it connects all animate and inanimate things.

In contrast to the relocated air samples, the water samples from each site were assembled centrally. Litre bottles of water were labelled and displayed, the range in colour and cloudiness most intriguing, while some of the remaining water from each source were pooled into a glass tank. Is this tank of hard-won hand-collected water a material reunion of a string of wetland streams, that once naturally followed above and below the topography of the land before entering the Swan River? Peering into the depths of this rejoining of sites I spot new growth, suspended like enlarged spidery networks of neurons. I'm not the artist but I helped make it – did we "play God"? Is ecology in art useful? Is art useful?

I caress the murky surface, reflecting on what once was and now is. To me the aquarium is a shrine, embodied with local place histories sourced from scattered ecologies. I am grateful for this work; it makes me feel, feel sad, it reminds me of the primary responsibility invested in being human – that we have to learn to share.

All webs of life, regardless of scale, have purpose, but sadly are seldom respected by governments who control land use. Progress in the guise of economic growth continues to be prioritised. Progress in Australia is associated with land clearing. Living systems are being flogged.

Compounding habitat loss is a collective short memory and each generation of people being born into less. For this reason Phillips' local ***-ing*** actions are a necessary counterpoint to the fact that most residents of Perth remain oblivious to Perth's former freshwater diversity (so valuable in a Mediterranean climate) or that its remnant bush vegetation is exceptionally unique and part of the Southwest's internationally lauded biodiversity hotspot. Perth is home to unique animals and plants endemic to only this part of the planet, and it is seriously under threat.

As I write, the gross mismanagement of metropolitan Perth remnant bush and wetlands continues. The Environmental Protection Authority ignores its own guidelines and policies. Although federally recognized as endangered, ***Banksia*** woodlands are being felled. Even the deeply cherished Beeliar Park and Wetlands, regarded as the Kings Park of south of the river[1], and highly sacred Whadjuk Noongar country, is being decimated just weeks before a state election. Nothing is sacred. Action is need.

Deliberately, however slowly, Phillips' projects such as ***–ing*** cultivate a sense of belonging and caring. ***–ing*** inspires awareness of natural networks and systems beneath our individual and collective ecological footprint. ***–ing*** interrogates what sustainability is by returning to the hard questions we face in entangled times. The ***–ing*** project is equally about actions, states, and occurrences — of perception and movement — of walking, wading, watching, wondering, weeding, worrying and wording: small collective actions of community-based caring amount to environmental stewardship.

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1 Perth is separated north from south by the Swan River (Derbarl Yerrigan). Kings Park is a 4.06 km^2 park north of the river overlooking the CBD.

www.perditaphillips.com/portfolio/ing-for-know-thy-neighbour