

Solastalgia and its cure

Ann Finegan on a restorative role for art in re-finding the commons and our relationship to the land

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Above:
Jenny Brown
Hitchhiker's guide to the Symbiocene, 2016,
video installation, Articulate Project Space
Sydney.
Photo: Alex Wisser

Opposite, clockwise from top left:
Hayden Fowler
Second Nature II, 2008,
mounted chromogenic photograph, 2008.
Photo: Joy Lai

Hayden Fowler
Hunger (detail), 2007,
image from video, two-channel digital video;
black and white without sound

Hayden Fowler
Second Nature VI, 2008,
mounted chromogenic photograph.
Photo: Joy Lai

Solastalgia has come to signify distress caused by environmental damage. The term, originally coined by philosopher Glenn Albrecht, specifically addressed the condition of existential distress caused by the physical destruction of one's immediate environment. As the global extraction industries and the financial institutions that bankroll their reach increasingly dominate, with direct impacts on land, solastalgia is fast becoming a common contemporary condition associated with the loss of ground in our occupation of the planet and a general sense of helplessness.

In Jenny Brown's video, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Symbiocene* (2016), a woman's face is covered in what appears to be a serious stress rash. We never find out the "what?", but we do find out "why?". It turns out that she is desperately asking for medical assistance because the commons is disappearing. The forces of neoliberalism have left her disorientated and despairing as to how and where she can seek help. The pills in her medicine cabinet are failing her. There's no multinational

pharmacological solution. It's a common plight, darkly humorous, echoing the fate of vanished and affected communities struggling to survive. She's speaking in the present, inside her experience of solastalgia, seeking aid in multiple languages because her loss has been brought about by global geopolitical forces.

This bleak comedy expresses a panic for which there is no panacea within the capitalist machine. We're inside the death throes of the Anthropocene and it's a human-centred, human-dominated universe. As the object-oriented ontologists, amusingly nicknamed the OOOs, have argued, nature as an assemblage of productive forces could simply continue on without us, after we have brought about our own demise. Humans might take a fair few species with them, but there's a reasonable chance—as the study of aeons of geochemical and biochemical history have shown—that even after catastrophic global warming, a different set of chemically productive processes could still determine their own becoming.



Artists like Brown are increasingly responding to such tectonic shifts in thinking. In this context, the term “eco-arts” has been somewhat supplanted by a broader view, although much fine work with a focus on planetary repair continues to be produced under that banner. The drama of the end games of the Anthropocene are grander and suddenly, chillingly, more real.

Hayden Fowler’s video, *Hunger* (2007) depicts the cold marble grandeur of an architectural non-place, at once imposing and blank. There is no decoration, no markers. In the seamlessly smooth stepped floors and walls, verticals meet horizontals. It is as if the world has been extinguished: the natural environment snuffed out. Baby goats enter. Tails wagging, all cuteness, they locate an indiscernible set of teats and suckle one of the walls. In this science fiction future, the machines are keeping things going. People, plants and animals are out of their element, remnants of some past, set down like specimens, in a strange voided world. In *Second Nature* (2008) giant fans funnel in air as if there is no longer an outside. What we take for granted as an atmosphere has evidently been vanquished. The humans, plants and animals might still be alive but it is the end of the Anthropocene and they are but disconnected fragments of a lost ecosphere in a future museum.

In their different ways, Brown and Fowler are grappling with solastalgia. In this placeless future “place”, Fowler doesn’t weep. It’s as if his catatonic creatures are drained of all affect, struck dumb for lack of stimulus. His videos recall experiments in which animals raised

in isolation have only limited powers of response. As in Brown’s *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Symbiocene*, meaningful place as a nourishing environment has disappeared.

Brown, more directly political, makes a plea in the now for the lost home of the commons, as antidote to capitalism’s impending foreclosure. Her crying woman is longing for the place of belonging and nurture that guaranteed the health of community. *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Symbiocene* began with the innocence of vulgar taste, the heyday of a friendlier, goofier capitalism (whose loss is mourned in the desire for a good steak in *The Matrix*). Found footage from a 1970s Italian television studio, live to air, has the giant jaws of an earthmover delicately stripping clothes off a sophisticated woman. It’s a big joke. The blue-collar worker in his massive machine is usually strip-mining the earth, not a woman from a higher social class. Forty years on, the gag is no longer funny; we’re not the same blatantly sexist or classist society (social aspiration being one of capitalism’s tricks). Such footage would no longer pass the moderators. Today, given the global ravages of the extraction industry, the woman being stripped by the earthmover is mother earth. The crude joke has become a metonym for the destruction of place and that in turn has become destructive of us. This is what distresses the crying woman whose face is disfigured by stress. She just wants it all to get better, but doesn’t know what to do.

So she continues to plead in multiple languages, on behalf of the globe’s distressed communities. She speaks badly from an assortment of tourist “How to Speak” books as if

things might get better if she found the right tongue. This, in itself, is a scathing comment on the supposed benefits of globalisation. But in respect of what’s lost, Brown doesn’t have to name a particular site. Take your pick from the environmental disasters of global corporations in recent years: the village submerged in the river of sludge following the collapse of the Bento Rodrigues iron ore tailings dam (BHP, Brazil, 2016), the towns made radioactive by the Fukushima nuclear meltdown (Tepco, Japan, 2011), the massive Shenzhen landside of a waste dump (Petrochina, China, 2015) and the multiple losses of habitat caused by the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (BP, USA, 2010). It’s serious when the *Wall Street Journal* proclaims the headline: “Engineers say Brazilian disaster shows world-wide danger from Hoover Dam-size earthen structures holding ‘tailings’ waste”¹. Capitalism’s supersized structures are putting the planet at risk.

Brown’s work is not to be confused with disaster porn. As in some far-distant planet or time, hope is still possible, as signalled in her title, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Symbiocene*, a direct reference to Glenn Albrecht’s philosophy:

“(H)umans are now living within a period of the Earth’s history appropriately named ‘The Anthropocene’ (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). The name is derived from the observed human influence and indeed dominance of all climatic, biophysical and evolutionary processes occurring at a planetary scale. The issue is not simply climate change (as bad as that is) it is the whole Capitalist development paradigm that is at the dark heart of mal-development; that

From top:

Jenny Brown

Caroline Jones as the Mudgee Guardian reads headlines about Wollar's neighbouring Wilpinjong Mine. Bylong Valley Protection Association's Craig Shaw walks behind her for the performance-based installation *Solastalgia*, 2015, Clandulla.

Cementa15 Contemporary Arts Festival.

Photo: Alex Wisser

Bev Smiles from the Wollar Progress Association wraps up the performance with information on forthcoming local anti-Peabody protest events surrounded by Wollar locals and some of the performing books for **Jenny Brown** *Solastalgia*, 2015, performance-based installation, Clandulla.

Cementa15 Contemporary Arts Festival.

Photo: Alex Wisser



is, development that undermines and destroys the very foundations of all life on Earth. (Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene.)”²

As antidote or cure, he proposes that the next era in human history should be named the Symbiocene, from the Greek word, *symbiosis* (or companionship), in affirmation of respect for the interconnectedness of life and all living things.

While directly acknowledging Albrecht, Brown's practice could be said to extend further into the alternative economy movement of econo-socialists Gerda Roelvink and J.K. Gibson-Graham, who champion the interdependence of the human and non-human world, and give a voice to the commons that extends beyond the human. For example, in the Ecuadorian Constitution, the commons is necessary to "protect connection with the more-than-human

world" and should no longer regarded as property but as a "rights-bearing-entity" with a voice.³

Brown, in her plea for the commons, is extending her art practice into the realms of governance, social equity, justice and also economics, territories currently under-represented in contemporary art. The cure for solastalgia lies in reconnecting or recreating the community of the commons. As in Roelvink's performative econo-socialism, the "what's wrong" with the Neoliberalist economics is addressed through local agency, rather than an old-style Leftist overthrow of the state which replaces one totalitarian regime with another.

Solastalgia, Brown's performance-based work for Cementa15, directly engaged the local community of Wollar, a small rural village ravaged by a series of expansions of Peabody's Wilpinjong

open-cut coal mine. Inspired by Ray Bradbury's dystopic novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, Brown choreographed the Wollar community to perform as "living books" in reference to the famous scene in Bradbury's novel, in which political refugees, hiding in abandoned train carriages in a pine forest, walk around committing banned texts to memory in order to preserve them from destruction by the autocratic state. Staging the performance at her Clandulla train carriage home, which is also nestled in a stand of pines, Brown's setting directly recalled that of Bradbury's novel. While the Wollar community read extracts from Thoreau, Arendt, Bourdieu and the local press in protest of the mine and New South Wales state government policies, windows of the train carriage were illuminated by scenes of the "talking books" from Francois Truffaut's 1966 film of



Fahrenheit 451. Additionally, Brown mashed excerpts from Bradbury's original text with analysis of the Irish Potato Famine to add an economic crisis to the social and political vacuum Bradbury described.

Staged at sunset, with the windows illuminated as night fell, political urgency was enhanced by spectacle. The talking books also mingled with the crowd, who were treated to a barbecue of organic wines and meats, donated by Wollar's butcher and winery, to highlight the point that mining should not be destroying productive agricultural land: "Food Bowl Not

Coal Hole." Very much in line with Gibson and Roelvink's principles of econo-sociality, Brown provided a platform in which diverse elements could come together: a commons of community, performance, politics, protest, food, wine, cinema, literature, art, economics, media and history in order to give voice to the non-human world of the land and water that was at risk. The event reflected the interconnectedness of what Albrecht calls the community of life, and was an example of the Symbiocene in action.

But, overwhelmingly, in spite of the positive bonding between locals and the visiting arts community, there

was a pervasive air of mourning. The community was evidently in deep distress as they performed in defense of the destruction of their valley, in a collective experience of solastalgia. The event was thus part consolation, partly therapeutic, and also an occasion for a small rural village to demonstrate the effects of globalised mal-development to the broader urban arts community.

In many respects, Brown's *Solastalgia* resonates with Hayden Fowler's anthropocentric works. There's a shared concern of environmental loss and of interconnection between people, flora, fauna, and geophysical places. Indeed, one of Fowler's installations is titled, *Anthropocene* (2011), with Fowler performing as an impassive lone survivor on a futuristic life pod after an implied apocalyptic event. On a platform raised on stilts, the immaculate white sphere of his man-cave nestles amid the small crop of grasses apparently sustaining his life. Again, there are no markers to a geophysical "where". Like Kevin Costner's *Waterworld*, this is survival in a "non-place" after the waters rise.

Your Death (2015) best expresses Fowler's demonstration of affect towards the non-human world, foregrounding his distress over the extinction of New Zealand birds. His inspiration could be textbook Latour, after the influential French philosopher who repackaged the touchy feely empathy of the hippie ecologists in a much respected theory of learning through affect: "to have a body is to learn to be affected, meaning 'effectuated', moved, put into motion by other entities, human or non-human".⁴

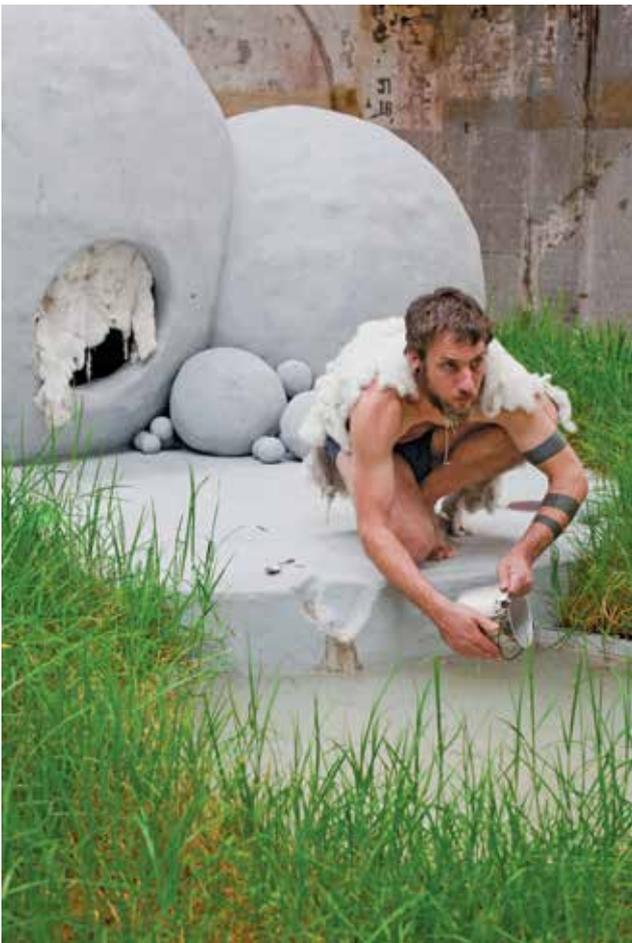


Opposite:
Hayden Fowler
Your Death VI, 2015,
C-type photographic print.
Photo: Joy Lai

Left from top:
Hayden Fowler
Your Death V, 2015,
C-type photographic print.
Photo: Joy Lai

Hayden Fowler
Your Death II, 2015,
C-type photographic print.
Photo: Jonas Friedrich





Clockwise from top:
Downstream from the Clarence Colliery owned by Centennial Coal, the Wollangambe River is part of the World Heritage Area.
Photo: David Haines, Haines Hinterding archive

Aleshia Lonsdale
Disambiguation (detail), 2015.
© Aleshia Lonsdale/Licensed by Viscopy, 2016

Hayden Fowler
Anthropocene, 2011,
mixed-media installation

Inside the work, in which Fowler surrenders his body to a tattooist, a hypostatised hysteria manifests as calm, masking his evident distress. His behaviour could be termed solastalgic as he transforms his body into a living roosting place, if not for the birds themselves, but the images that have survived them. Over a number of exhibitions the tattoos have progressed: Huia. birds onto his back (2007), a massive Whēkau (Laughing Owl), or swooping owl across his chest (2014), and most recently the South Island Kōkako (2015). Performed initially in the same architecturally blank set as *Second Nature*, in a white geodesic dome, Fowler is again installing himself in the disconnected world of non-place. Nothing, it seems, remains to connect the birds to the “Island of Birds” as explorers described New Zealand around the time of Captain Cook. A third of the bird population has been lost. Bizarrely, a Maori feather cape hangs disconnectedly on a stand.

Working from nineteenth-century water colours, taxidermy specimens and old black and white photographs —records which preserve the birds’ images, but which themselves are disconnected from the places of the birds’ natural habitat—Fowler can only bring them back to a certain “liveness” through the extraordinary empathy of offering them a “place” on his body, as if by tattooing their images onto his flesh they can regain a vicarious life. It’s the closest he can get to their revivification and the interconnectedness he longs for.

The world over, indigenous communities are striving to preserve the antidotes to colonialist and late-capitalist destruction: where

possible, maintaining the knowledge reservoirs of deep connection to place and the interconnectedness of all things, living and non-living. We’ve never existed on our own without the sky, the land, the water, the plants and animals that sustain us. The earth itself is part of what Jean-Luc Nancy has termed “beings-in-common”. Indigenous Australian artist, Aleshia Lonsdale, maintains this interconnectedness in *Disambiguation* (2015), a giant earth painting of concentric rings laid on the land of her people, the Wiradjuri. The very fabric of the work is composed of country. History unfolds from the inner circle as she tracks the evolution of country from the Dreaming through the arrival of the colonialists to the most recent devastations of open-cut coal mining. Ironically, the magnificent vista her work overlooked was similar to landscapes recently blown apart by Big Coal’s large-scale detonations.

Like Jenny Brown’s *Solastalgia*, Lonsdale mourns the environmental destruction of Big Coal, in a way that underscores connection to country. Inside her rings of molded earth she has placed symbols and totems: at the centre, those of her people; then cones of wheat for the colonialists; and, finally, overlays of larger mounds of coal in the outermost ring. The title, *Disambiguation*, makes the point that there’s nothing ambiguous here. With undeniable literalness, she is laying out the history of country. The spiritual dangers and impacts are serious: mining’s destruction of sacred places disrupts ceremony, and, without ceremony, performed in the proper way, at significant sites in the landscape, according to indigenous law, the sustaining

relationships between people, sky and country cannot be maintained.

Empathy for the land as a non-human entity is also expressed in the art practice of Joyce Hinterding and David Haines. Theirs is a close set of interconnections. Avid walkers, climbers, canoeists and canyoners, they are also geologists and lapidarians, who have explored deep into Wollemi, Newnes and the mountains. They have traced the formations of the rocks and the river systems, with Hinterding recently exhibiting sound recordings of the resonant iron cores of the giant stone pagodas of Wollemi at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Australia. The pagodas are natural antennas. They could be described as new materialists, working with the ontology of the natural environment in the sense of Jean-Luc Nancy’s “beings-in-common”, mentioned above. In terms of affect, their response to the environment has much in common with Indigenous care for country. Much of their work elucidates ways of belonging, or “being with”, whether it is a cinema-scale image of Haines represented as a tiny dot on a cliff-face in honeyed sunshine, or their virtual journeys in interactive worlds created through their lived experience of geophysical phenomena. Down to the details of molecular vibrations and the atomisation of volatile chemicals in swamp or ozone-infused perfumes, a series of affects inform their practices, both solo and collaborative.

Hinterding has listened in on the atmospheric vibrations of “natural radio” in the far south of Tasmania’s Bruny Island, while Haines’s most recent specialisations include high-end spectral photography of

the sun. It's almost as if they want to occupy spaces in the interior of matter, in an attenuated relationship of "beings-in-common", in a universe of vibrations and frequencies. As sound artists, they regularly perform with organic and inorganic matter, using arrays of microphones, amplifiers and computers to sample the sonic qualities of things-in-the-world, including rocks and other geophysical materials.

They've also taken on the darker energies unleashed in the Anthropocene, a tree comes down in a forest and sets off a domino effect that brings the whole forest down (*Born to be Wild: Silver Hill*, 2004). There's an inference of mysterious microbiological infection. In *Purple Rain* (2005), electromagnetic transmissions coincide with the repeated triggering of avalanches, while, in *The Levitation Grounds* (2000), carcasses of dead trees mysteriously rise and float, their trunks in parallel with the ground. There is a world of subtle ecological disturbance, alluding to escaped experiments and the shadow worlds of biophysics and biotech.

In their diverse engagements, these contemporary art practitioners engage with the ecosphere in ways that support and extend the reparative environmental practices of the 1970s and 1980s. Agnes Denes was "assuming responsibilities for our

fellow human beings" when she grew a field of wheat on landfill in Battery Park in downtown New York (1982) as an act of ecological restoration and social consciousness. Joseph Beuys likewise planted 7,000 oaks in Kassel for Documenta (1982). Mel Chin used plants as hyper-accumulators of heavy metals to detoxify contaminated soil as a transformative sculpture project (1991). An exemplary and admirable directness characterised these ecologically remediative arts practices: something in the environment is broken so you set about to fix it.

Solastalgic arts practitioners, by contrast, inhabit a world that is convoluted and indirect, with daunting intermeshings of vast geopolitical scale. It's not just ecology or the health of the planet that has to be dealt with, but matters of equity, markets, governance, transparency, finance, freedom of information, patenting rights and withdrawal of rights. It's no accident the condition of solastalgia has emerged in the period of late capitalism, coincident with the destructions associated with the word Anthropocene. For contemporary artists concerned with our relationship to all things land, community, the commons, the sharing of resources and knowledge, in short, the respectful interconnectedness of "beings-in-common" between human and non-human, offers the best chance for transformative cure.

__1 Paul Kiernan, Wall Street Journal, 5 April 2016: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/brazils-samarco-disaster-mining-dams-grow-to-colossal-heights-and-so-do-the-risks-1459782411> __2 Glenn Albrecht, 'Exiting the Anthropocene and Entering the Symbiocene': <https://glennaalbrecht.wordpress.com/2015/12/17/exiting-the-anthropocene-and-entering-the-symbiocene-via-sumbiocracy-symbiomimicry-and-sumbiophilia/> __3 J.K. Gibson-Graham and Gerda Roelvink, 'An economic ethics for the Anthropocene', *Antipode*, vol. 41, 2010 __4 Bruno Latour, 'How To Talk About the Body', *Body and Society* 10, p. 205: <http://bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/77-BODY-NORMATIVE-BS-GB.pdf>.



Ann Finegan is an educator and writer. She is also a co-director and curator of Cementa17 Contemporary Arts Festival, Kandos, NSW, 6–9 April 2017. Participating artists, Joyce Hinterding and David Haines, will exhibit a work on Wollangambe Creek.

Gerda Roelvink will be speaking at Futurelands, Kandos, on 12 November 2016, as part of Cementa Festival's annual program.
www.cementa.com.au

Clockwise from top:
An unnamed canyon in the Wollemi National Park.
Photo David Haines, Haines Hinterding archive

Photo: David Haines, Haines Hinterding archive

Joyce Hinterding
Monotone Rectilinear, 2016,
installation view Nam June Paik Art Centre, Korea.
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Licensed by Viscopy, 2016.
Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery