

Geological pit stops: Kate Hill and Isadora Vaughan

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9:44 PM In 2018, two-and-a-half years after the last population census and the closure of Copley’s coal mine, the town, together with neighbouring Leigh Creek, were on the verge of becoming ghost towns.^[6] Suffering the very real effects of a post-mining boom, the people of Copley and Leigh Creek now face their next challenge: the controversial exploration of in-situ gasification (ISG), a contentious prospect since similar coal seam gasification resulted in the biggest known pollution event in Queensland’s history.^[7] **9:15 PM** In a move out of step with the depleting realities of heavy mining practices, Lucas Ihlein performs restorative justice on the largely utilitarian composite of sand, rock and clay that we know as dirt. In context to the recent large-scale work *Absorption* by Asad Raza presented by Kaldor Public Art Projects in Sydney, Ihlein returns dirt to its nutrient-rich life force as soil, by way of exegetically exhuming the stuff through an introduced equilibrium of organic matter consisting of leaves, roots and animal droppings and remains.^[8]



Kate Hill *After (third iteration)*, 2017 Eltham clay, Victorian Alpine clay, Brunswick clay, dropsheet. Shown as part of *Of everything that disappears there remains a trace* curated by Lauren Ravi, Honeymoon Suite, 2017. Photo: Kate Hill

9:50 PM In simpatico with Ihlein, Hill and Vaughan's artistic methodologies encapsulate processes of handling the raw matter of place, in order to arrive at various material, somatic and parabolic entanglements with it. During this and other durational interventions, Hill and Vaughan invest in a myriad of activities with and alongside unearthed matter, including but not limited to: conversing, reading, eating (shitting?), fondling, laughing, digging, burning, singing, praising. The complex ravel through which Hill and Vaughan reconstitute actual and symbolic dirt (taken here as the raw material of our life's stage in broader terms), exist on a wide spectrum of implication. On the one hand we find their entanglements with dirt and soil to be implicit with affects of exploitation, malady and dis-ease. Take for example the immersive conditions of infestation and infection present in Vaughan's 2019 Gertrude Glasshouse exhibition *Bilirubin Bezoar*. In it the gallery floor assumed that of a troubled telluric or anatomical skin, saturated with the unsettling light cast by an industrial plastic orange drop-sheet eerily evocative of bushfire-induced skies. On the other hand (not inseparable), we see the artists' collaborative relations with dirt and soil—particularly evident across the breadth of Hill's solo practice—hefty with an abundance of gestures of resuscitation and reparation in the inherent *being-with* that is temporal handling, ritualising and often returning matter to its place.

9:39 AM *mine slide dams | bunds | mula bunda[sic] | hindi | pelvic floor*
| yogi — fluid retention ——— scat — things that SINK + FLOAT^[9]

3:00 PM After gaining access to Hill and Vaughan’s extensive resource list, I’m prompted to recall a fleeting visit to artist Clare Pentecost’s *soil-erg* installation at Kassel’s Ottoneum (museum of natural history) as part of dOCUMENTA13. In *soil-erg* Pentecost proposed an alternative, democratic seed and soil currency through the representation of serial discs and ingot forms meant to “trouble modernist abstraction with use-value”, where she offers the *soil-erg* as a sustainable alternative to the petro-dollar.^[10] **12:40 PM** I consider the ways that Hill and Vaughan’s geological pit stop in Copley represents a breaking down of energy wielded by humans for human use-value in the form of the automobile. Where they were made to trade in their own petro-dollars for walking credits, the occurrence of what psychologist Robert Levine refers to as “event time”—“the transpiring of an activity according to a spontaneous schedule more akin to the event itself”—changed the course of their residency programming from a prior scheduling on “clock time”.^[11]

9:18 AM “Lost again [...] Mud road. Stopped car. Time is rhythm: the insect rhythm of a warm humid night, brain ripple, breathing, the drum in my temple—these are our faithful timekeepers.”^[12] So begins Vladimir Nabokov’s words, employed by Stuart Elden in introducing French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s theory of rhythmanalysis. In his explicit dealings with rhythm (first developed in the 1980s), Lefebvre was concerned with taking the rhythms of everyday life and turning them into a new field of analysis and knowledge.^[13] As Elden remarks, for Lefebvre rhythm was “inseparable from understandings of time, in particular repetition.”^[14] The body under capitalism—that is, the “mechanical repetition of the cycles of capitalist production [...] imposed over our circadian rhythms”^[15]—was also a central tenet of Lefebvre’s work in rhythmanalysis. He considered the body a “metronome” in the analytic mode of observing and metabolising various *arrhythmias* (conflicts or dissonances between or among two or more rhythms) with the aim of achieving various states of *eurhythmia* (constructive interactions between or among two or more rhythms, such as occurs in healthy creatures). While the task of the rhythmanalyst is not understood as ameliorative per se, Lefebvre’s stress on the necessity for bodies to “listen in order to grasp the natural or

produced ensembles”^[16] of a particular time and place, supports the necessity for durational and iterative artistic practices in staying with the arrhythmia of our current troubled times.

8:49 PM *Track. Fenceline. Crystals. Viewpoint.* A sequence of handwritten words in red biro are scrawled and anchored on either side of a roughly sketched circle on an equally provisional hand drawn map of Copley. *Ridge. Power Sub Station. Indian Chief. Cemetery. Old Copley Dams. Copley Caravan Park. Copley Pub.* On either side of “ridge” are additional notes that I make out to be: *5 scratches | 950 mil. | “snowball earth” | bacterial earth.*^[17] **8:35 PM** Flicking through provided documentation of their trip I come across various time/space decompressions—what Lefebvre might consider to be “*bundles, bouquets, garlands of rhythms*”:^[18] rock samples showing smatterings of green and red mineral traces; a shard of dripping ice held up in the blazing sun (a potential ode to the Snowball Earth theory that postulates the earth may have been, at one point, entirely locked in ice, based on findings of glacial rock deposits found in the Flinders Ranges^[19]); cadaver-like closeups of what I interpret to be a sand-encrusted pelt of found plastic but which, I learn, is an object that Vaughan has made out of locally-sourced rice-paper; the iterative trimmings of citrus peel, a repeated collaborative form revealing the visible signs of time on the consumption of matter as metastable, and not exploitative, fuel; the resonances between clay-ways and highways in the intricate networking of information on the ground and in the mind; and what Hill explains to me as mussel-like forms, made out of unfired clay as if slippery mnemonic devices connecting the finding of a fossilised mussel in Copley with the finding of mussels in a childhood river.



Kate Hill *Wall* (detail), 2019 clay, sand, straw, wood. Shown as part of *Argillaceous Relations* curated by Hannah Presley and Debbie Pryor, Mr Kitly, 2019. Photo: Kate Hill

12:52 PM Tied to their research into bunds made from the overburden of earth dug out of mine sites, I see the positive aggregate of a gritty sand made from the negative spaces inside their network of clay-ways. One of these mounds rests atop a piece of paper scrawled with notes, like a paper weight, or the struggle for earthly matter to pin our collective consciousness to itself—to bring us down to ground level, where Hill and Vaughan also work. I think of the Indian sand farmers who are killed in their sleep, of enduring turf wars over the world's increasingly most-scarce and highly relied-upon resource. I think about the sand in the concrete of our carparks, driveways and homes; to how Hill and Vaughan have been mindful in avoiding the human proclivity for fixity in choosing to not fire or otherwise keep, but instead recycle the clays and sands used in this work. I think about the sand that falls, deftly, back and forth, from top to bottom, inside the glass clutches of an hourglass, also made of sand. I learn that sand passes through seven generations in order to arrive at its eventual state; that sand is the result of rocks rubbing up against one another, the result of friction, which is to say, tension.

2:15 PM There is a well-known saying: “to bury one’s head in the sand.” While the phrase originates in a common mistaken belief that ostriches bury their heads in the sand when frightened so as to avoid being seen, the work of artists such as Hill and Vaughan remind us that we need to spend more time buried in the chthonic regions of time and space because we are frightened and in order to be seen. Rather than following the hope-induced futurisms of supine governments projecting upwards beyond our smoke-choked sky—towards an alternative planetary home that on bad days we cannot even see—we should be heading the initiatives of mycelia (and with it, artists and scientists) who are doing the important work in forming endless rhythms of repair at the core of our earthly foundations. As Lefebvre remarks, in times of crisis “a group must designate itself as an *innovator* or *producer of meaning* [...] in practice and in *culture*.” Further, “the rhythm analyst has to reach [such] a rhythm without putting [herself] in a pathological situation, and without putting that which [she] observes there either.”^[20]

8:40 PM Lefebvre’s prioritising of presence as innately central to the analysis of rhythms in time, strikes a chord with how both Haraway urges us to stay here, with the trouble, and in how Stephen Jenkinson calls for grief as discernment, and not hope as future-oriented, as what we need to proceed with *now*, in light of the urgency of our times.^[21] **4:40**

PM Where Hill and Vaughan’s work can be seen as an articulation of various forms of grief, they enable us to visualise how slow and small-scaled ritual matterings might look in forming a quotidian response to such large-scale climatic devastation. For this reason, and in their ability to stay with the trouble and the tensions that arise in their work (and collaboratively so), Hill and Vaughan’s work is characteristic of what Pentecost considers the artist to be: “someone who consents to learn in public, interrogating knowledge itself in the cultural space where values are contested.”^[22]

References:

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4. ♪“Remediating the Leigh Creek coal mine”, *MESA Journal* 85, pp. 41–45
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6. †Marco Balsamo, “Leigh Creek and Copley in ruins”, The Transcontinental Port Augusta: <https://www.transcontinental.com.au/story/5259819/leigh-creek-and-copley-in-ruins/>
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18. †Lefebvre, *ibid.*, p. 20
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20. †Lefebvre, *ibid.*, pp. 14–21
21. †Stephen Jenkinson, *Orphan Wisdom: On Grief and Climate Change*, Soundcloud, 2014: <https://soundcloud.com/orphan-wisdom/orphan-wisdom-stephen-jenkinson-on-grief-and-climate-change>
22. †Pentecost, *ibid.*

The use of timestamps in the writing of this text forms part of an ongoing temporal methodology, first developed for a commission by Artspace Aotearoa in responding to themes of gentrification and queer futurity. Where the micro-delineations of 24-hour clock time are divorced from broader contextual referents, Western conceptions of time as linear subvert to open up to broader appreciations of time, space and rhythm as cyclical.

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Isadora Vaughan works primarily with sculpture and installation. In 2020 she is participating in a group exhibition, *Overlapping Magisteria*, the second edition of the Macfarlane Commissions to be held at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art.

<https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4823/geological-pit-stops-kate-hill-and-isadora-vaughan/>