

Abiotic perspectives?

ROB KETTELS

Curtin University, Perth/Boorloo, Western Australia

Fig. 1 Rob Kettels, *Explaining humans to the oldest matter on Earth*, 2020. Two hundred and fifty survey pins, each with a handwritten caricature of the tropes that help build the idea of human exceptionalism in the 'geologic' of the Anthropocene. *In situ*, on ancient metaconglomerate rock known to contain the oldest recorded terrestrial material on Earth, located in the Jack Hills range, Wajarri Yamaji Country, Western Australia, 2020. Photo © Rob Kettels





Fig. 2 The salt ground of Wilkinkarra/Lake Mackay, Pintupi Country, Western Desert, Western Australia, covered in grey algae that has a symbiotic relationship with a salt-dependent bacterium classified as a halophile (Stan-Lotter). Photo © Rob Kettels

Introduction

I want to begin with an image of the vast ephemeral salt lake called Wilkinkarra/Lake Mackay, sitting in Pintupi Country in the remote Western Desert of Western Australia (Figure 2). This was a key site for my early research into ways to reimagine abiotic perspectives—to work with a ‘geologic’ using creative methods of site responsive artworks. I document these explorations of place as a means to explore my attempts and struggles to unpack complexities in the colonial settler spatiotemporal imaginary of the environment in the Anthropocene. My art practice is informed by the concept of uncritical “White Geology” identified by inhuman geographer Kathryn Yusoff. In particular, the Eurocentric sociohistorical entanglements that help maintain a hierarchical outlook regarding the perception of abiotic matter.

An important element in my work incorporates varying degrees of parody and self-deprecating humour—which aims to deflate the tropes of White Geology that persist in my own and a broader Eurocentric geological imaginary.



Fig. 3 Rob Kettels, *Abiotica* 2019, the installation of mining exploration drill chips of crushed rock, clay, sand, mineral ores. This was my first attempt to consider geophysical materials collected from discarded geological drill sites as a potential art material. Quarter Gallery, Perth. Photo © Rob Kettels

Pilgrimage to the oldest terrestrial material found on Earth

In September 2020, following my introduction to this approach at *Ngā Tūtaki – Encounter/s* in Aotearoa, whereby I presented my initial creative enquiries using inorganic material (Figure 3), I completed three experimental site responsive artworks on a field trip to the Jack Hills in Wajarri Yamaji country, in the Murchison district of Western Australia. The Jack Hills are some nine-hundred kilometres by road from Perth in a very remote and arid area. As a playful symbol to mark my “secular pilgrimage” (Dubisch 131) to this site of global significance, I had a t-shirt printed that summarised my ideas and motivation for the journey north.

On the t-shirt I had a zircon crystal printed, yet it was not any old zircon crystal—it was an image of the oldest terrestrial mineral found on Earth by geologists (Figure 4). This particular zircon has been dated to be $4.404 \pm$ billion years old (Figure 5), and is believed to have formed from the cooling of molten magma that formed the protocrust of the ‘young’ Earth in the Hadean Eon (Cavosie et al.). The tiny crystal was discovered by a group of Curtin University geologists in the pebbly metaconglomerate rocks of Erawondoo Hill (located in the Jack Hills), and the zircon in question came from a specific outcrop of rocks named W74 (Figure 4), (Cavosie et al.; Spaggiari et al.). My intent behind this ‘pilgrimage’ was to seek out W74, and create artworks in the presence of the oldest recorded material on Earth.



Fig. 4 Wearing the zircon t-shirt at W74, Erawondoo Hill, Jack Hills in Wajarri Yamaji country, Western Australia. Photo © Larissa Lösch

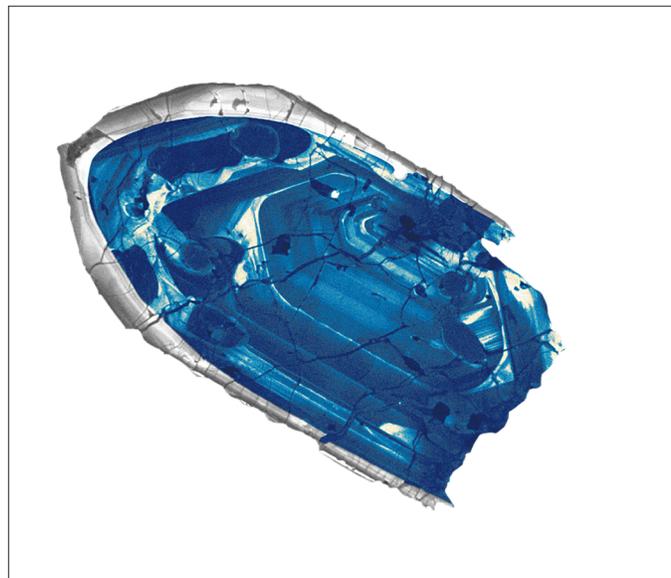


Fig. 5 The Hadean Eon zircon crystal found in metaconglomerate rocks at W74, dated to be $4.404 \pm$ billion years old. Image source: Cavosie et al.

Site responsive durational performance

My first artwork was a durational performance where I stood in place on Erawondoo Hill for a single rotation of the Earth—or, twenty-four hours. Before undertaking the project, I thought this act would serve as a pun on the notion of human exceptionalism when a human body [*mine, a white male one*] was contrasted with Hadean Eon zircons. Yet the reality of the experience was not funny. Instead, it was hard—and surprisingly rewarding. I stood facing an outcrop of metaconglomerate rock for a total of twenty-eight hours in the end, because my first attempt failed at the four-hour mark. Two things happened: a LED lamp malfunctioned during the night, ruining the time-lapse video I was making, and the overnight temperature dropped to an unbearable 6°C in the single layer of the zircon t-shirt. On my second and successful attempt, I lit a fire which illuminated the night scene for the time-lapse and also kept me warm (Figure 6). Pilgrimage theorist Jill Dubisch writes that “hardship and suffering” conventionally play an important role in “the pilgrim’s journey” (117). Standing still for twenty-four hours is extremely arduous, as I found out, and I relied on all my senses to fulfil that challenge. I now believe that what qualifies my undertaking as a pilgrimage—in Dubisch’s framing—is that the area’s rocks came to represent a form of sanctity to me. Eventually, and through the solitude and stillness, I came to value the rocks as good companions as the hours passed. Furthermore, Erawondoo Hill is a site of pilgrimage for geologists and astrobiologists who come from around the world to conduct research into the formation of early Earth.



Fig. 6 Still images taken during a twenty-four-hour durational performance and time-lapse video overlooking the Jack Hills, Wajarri Yamaji Country, Western Australia in 2020. Erawondoo Hill in the Jack Hills is the home location of the oldest known Hadean Eon zircon crystals found on Earth (shown in Fig. 5). Photo © Rob Kettels

Responding to ancient lithic material as an artist

The experience provided a counter balance from the classical Eurocentric conceptualisation of the environment—moving towards an ecology of interconnectedness. Instead of “distributing all living beings, animal [mineral] or vegetable, into a hierarchy of collective units” (Lovejoy 228), the sheer antiquity of the lithic material found on Erawondoo Hill levels any inherent hierarchy that orders the environment based on sentience. At times during the 24 hours, I felt very connected with the celestial, whereby the sun cast shadows across the land and stars rotated around the South Celestial Pole.

While this work, at its simplest, might be about scales of time and endurance in an embodied performance, I realise that it also sheds light on a number of things that I am thinking through as a contemporary artist. For example, the work brings up questions concerning the historical role the white male body plays within Eurocentric concepts of ‘nature’. My intended parody and caricature of the masculine tropes, ‘mastery and control over ‘nature’” and the ‘abiotic as a mere resource’ are evident in the symbolism of the Hi-Vis workwear trousers—a style commonly used in mining—worn during the performance (Figure 6). My self-persiflage [a kind of self-mockery] is aimed to undermine or reveal, creating a tension between parody and sincerity. Heike Munder says “[humour] contains a good dose of self-criticism, which by means of protest and subversion, aims at destabilising the status quo” (212). Although I finally achieved the 24 hours without moving, the initial grandiose and perhaps absurd masculine gesture ultimately ends in failure; both because of the malfunctioning technology and the pain my body endured. The work by extension can be read as a broader metaphor to explore the failure of certain tropes—in the Anthropocene—that were once considered ‘certainties’ within normative western discourse (Jullien; Simpson).

My attempts to untangle the complexities regarding how I imagine myself in relation to the Earth is made all the more pronounced by way of recognising the performance and subsequent artworks was also undertaken on unceded First Nations land and that a completely different way of relating to the environment has existed here for millennia. My intention in engaging with site responsive artworks is to navigate the surrounding area in a respectful and culturally appropriate way. The artworks discussed in this paper were undertaken on First Nations lands including those of the Pintupi and Wajarri Yamaji people. Through a variety of avenues, written and verbal, I gained permission from the respective Nations to access land with the intention of undertaking site responsive artworks. I offer my heartfelt gratitude to the First Nations people who I met and were generous in allowing me to enter their Country, even when my plans must have sounded strange.

Survey pins

After completing the durational performance, I set about installing two assemblages using two-hundred and fifty multicoloured survey pin tags bought at a geology supplies warehouse (Figures 1, 7 and 8). The pins are routinely used in the WA mining industry to mark out subdivisions of ground—as markers of ‘territory’. Usually there is a corresponding location or coordinate written on each pin; however, in this case, I sat in the Jack Hills camp and wrote out 250 phrases, statements or quotes devised during the durational performance, which I thought signify the imagined exceptionalism of ‘humanity’ in the contemporary settler culture I exist within. For example, I wrote: *we see UFOs, we have the periodic table, we have books on animals, we have biology, we have geology, we breed dogs, we have taxonomy, we have the stock market, we use toilet paper, we have Darwinism, we believe in hell, we have geological epochs, we have Andy Warhol, we have $E=mc^2$, we killed off the Dodo, we think we are our identity*. The “homogenised ‘we’” (Yusoff 57), is the problematic in this artwork—as it sarcastically refers to the privileged neoliberal/patriarchal/western/high modernist totality that I am questioning. When bundled all together—in front of the oldest known material in the world—the chosen words and tropes that set this universalised humanity apart from the totality of ‘nature’ sounded unconvincing, even absurd.



Fig. 7 Two hundred and fifty survey pins, each with a handwritten caricature to foreground the tropes that help build the idea of human exceptionalism in the ‘geologic’ of the Anthropocene (detail). Photo © Rob Kettels

Beyond my intent for the text on the pins, the interplay of colour, on the stark plateau of rocks, made an elegant combination. There is a sense of playfulness in the bold hues juxtaposed with the muted tones of the surrounding area. The pins moved with the breeze and the colours oscillated in the space. Although there was the criticality of the inscribed messages, the work also functions as an expression of my affection for the site—producing an expanded reading. Once the pins were removed, there was no indication that the installation was ever there.



Fig. 8 The first installation of survey pins, each with a handwritten phrase chosen to flag the folly of human exceptionalism in the geologic of the Anthropocene. *In situ*, on Proterozoic banded iron formation (BIF) rock. The BIF was formed through microbial life and mineral processes that created sedimentary structure *as well as* producing oxygen (Bakke 49). Photo © Rob Kettels

Flagging tape

My final artwork created at Jack Hills comprised a circle of fifty survey pickets embellished with colourful flagging tape (Figure 9). Once again, these pickets are used in the mining industry to claim and govern land, and flagging tape is usually used to visually highlight an important feature. (Breaking the rules to explain a joke, my use of the flagging tape becomes a ‘red-flag’ to draw attention to a problem). Notably, there still are small fragments of the original flagging tape—placed by the first geologists—on the tree living next to W74. Both the survey pin and flagging tape series of installations engage an intentional humour, whereby the excessive number of pins, tape and pickets is obviously exaggerated, producing a pastiche of how the mining industry deploys these symbols to indicate the subjugation of land. It blends both my subtle humour and sorrow concerning Eurocentric environmental perception and governance in the Anthropocene.



Fig. 9 A colourful intervention of space, fifty survey pickets, each with a ribbon of flagging tape. Jack Hills, Western Australia, 2020. Photo © Rob Kettels

Conclusion

The field trip to Jack Hills started out as a ‘pilgrimage’ to encounter the world’s oldest known matter and to create experimental site responsive artworks. Seemingly simple gestures like standing still for 24 hours with rocks, or hammering in pickets raises a variety of questions, some of which have complex sociohistorical origins such as First Nations sovereignty and Eurocentric masculine perceptions of the environment. Some of the questions these artworks raise were planned, yet my process allows for unintended meanings to emerge. The metanarrative intersecting all the artworks, is an exploration of tropes that were once considered ‘certainties’ in both my own and the classical Eurocentric imaginary of geology. My methodology involves parody and a self-deprecating style of humour to reveal and debase those selected tropes. Beyond the critical investigations, there was also a powerful personal connection made with the site—developed during the durational performance. This experience enabled a witnessing of land and celestial sky for a single rotation of Earth, underscoring my small yet contiguous part within time and space.

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