

Acts of Location: Rot or Renewal

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For my grandfather

*Unrealized Work*

There is an itch in my ear.  
not for scratch,  
for sound.

Of deep mycelium: networks  
pinging

You feel my weight, don't you? Speak of it to your limbs  
send me through spindly architecture.

Re-member.

How do the shadows smell?  
(of chilled chardonnay, wet dog.)

The writing that follows tends towards blur, suggesting something less rational.<sup>1</sup> A weaving of inquiries; including, but not limited to the following:

~~Nature, gender, and the failings of language~~<sup>2</sup>  
Silent-stones  
Fish  
Magic  
Minerals  
Space  
Measuring  
Sticky limbs  
Unrealized Work  
A glittery night sky, a sequined dress  
Bug jackets and blue flock  
Long acts of looking  
New configurations, washed up on a particular shore

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1 I look at objects as vague texts. This text, too, is but another object.

2 This critical topic is beyond the scope of my text but deeply informs my perspective. I am indebted to and suggest the following authors for a diverse perspective on the gendering nature and feminization of women: Donna Haraway, Carolyn Merchant, William Cronon.

**Silent-stones**

*On eating rocks and making geology*

*Fish in space, rocks in our heads*

*Balance, a magic act*

There is a magic, an education, found in stones.<sup>3</sup> Not just the geology of epochs—although that too, fascinates. I am thinking of another kind of knowledge, one both imagined and felt, calculated and scientific, silly and absurd and somehow still quite real.

To start with: a few incredible fish, birds, and sea creatures. And, a few strange rocks, including but not limited to gastroliths<sup>4</sup>, salt, Bezoars, otoliths, and gallstones.

Certain sea creatures (whales, seals, birds), lacking the necessary teeth for digestion, eat rocks. Eat, as in swallow—the rocks stay intact, stored as tools-turned-teeth, aiding in the digestion of food.

*I suppose I take my teeth for granted,*

*blessed bones.*

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3 This line is inspired by João Cabral de Melo Neto book of poems titled *Education by Stone*.

4 Gastrolith comes from the Greek γαστήρ (gastēr), meaning “stomach”, and λίθος (lithos), meaning “stone.”

Balance, too.

It has been theorized that some marine life consume (and store) rocks as a method of ballasting, weighing their bodies down in order to avoid rising too quickly to the surface.<sup>5</sup>

We too, eat rocks. Salt, it has been said, is the only rock we eat.<sup>6</sup>  
(I disagree, but only on a historical technicality.)

During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, there was a practice of medically prescribing, wearing, and swallowing Bezoar stones—fossilized minerals and salts formed around indigestible objects, created within and retrieved from animal stomachs. These highly prized “magical gut lozenges” were worth ten times their weight in gold.<sup>7</sup>

The magic? They protected you from poisoning, particularly arsenic, a threat common to the higher royal classes.

*(Not so silent, this stone. It scrapes  
and cuts, gaggles and chokes)*



Camel bezoar stones, possibly Algerian (1601-1800)

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5 Paleontologist Don Henderson disagrees with the buoyancy theory, positing instead that the gastroliths found in aquatic animals help stabilize their bodies, resulting in less side to side rolling.

6 Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (London: Vintage, 2003).

7 Maria Do Sameiro Barroso, Bezoar stones, magic, science and art. (Geological Society of London Special Publications, 2013), 193-207, 10.1144/SP375.11.

Bones. (So similar to stones, are they not, in fact, the same?)

What of our bones? These fossilized armatures, structures and supports? Internal architecture, site?<sup>8</sup>

This assemblage of matter, bolstered and trussed. How do we account for our brave, bold, mineral bones?

Soft-tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 5000 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden mineralization, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone. It is almost as if the mineral world that had served as a substratum for the emergence of biological creatures was reasserting itself.<sup>9</sup>

Mineral matter, mineral-material, is then, the active power—human beings appear as its product<sup>10</sup>. Mobilized, literally, put in motion by the work of mineralization.<sup>11</sup>

Like the sea creatures seeking buoyancy,  
balance,  
we too wrestle with our bodies in space.

*A little bit louder, these stone bones.*

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8 Material Feminists have pushed to rethink materiality, including the body. Donna Haraway asks, “How can we understand the human body as a particular site of perceptions of, and interactions with, the more-than-human world?”

9 Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone, 1997), 26.

10 Jane Bennett provides a compelling account of actants and operators, highlighting the agency of matter in *Vibrant Matter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). 9-13.

11 *Ibid.*, 26-27





Film still from Otobong Nkanga's *Diaoptasia* (2015)

“We are walking, talking minerals.”  
-Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky



Freshwater crayfish gastroliths

### Crayfish, Space Fish, Balancing Rocks

Freshwater crayfish (precious molters and sculptors.) These frequent shedders exit their exoskeletons in moments of growth, but not before making a sculpture, a beloved disk, of calcium carbonate. A delicate round stone, formed as a reserve—a vitamin.

There is a vulnerability as this process occurs, an exterior lost, an armor discarded. Floppy, exhausted, fragile. Save for their gastrolith, that lovely storage sculpture of calcium carbonate, ready to be tapped into in order to speed up their process of reforming a tough shell.<sup>12</sup>

There are stones in our heads, tiny little weights residing in our ears—dictating balance, speed, movement, all in the name of keeping us upright.

*These otoliths feel familiar, a ballast of sorts?*

Fish too, in keeping with most vertebrates, have these calcium carbonate deposits. Like most human science, we understand the workings of otoliths by tests performed on bodies not our own.

In 1974, two fingerlings and 50 fertile eggs of the mummichog minnow were flown to Skylab in order to see how they (and their otolith organ) fared in a zero gravity situation.<sup>13</sup>

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12 Andrew Hosie, “Why Freshwater Crayfish Don’t Need Milk for Healthy Bones,” Western Australian Museum Website, accessed February 11, 2019.

13 NASA, “Experiment Information,” accessed March 09, 2019, <https://lsda.jsc.nasa.gov/Experiment/exper/428>.

The NASA record is as follows:

Mission: Skylab3                      Launch/Start Date: 07/28/1973  
Duration: 59.5 days                      Landing/End Date 09/25/1973

3 days in orbit: Fingerlings were observed to be swimming in an odd, circular pattern. The fish looped sideways, keeping their backs to the light. Loops of small radius alternated frequently with loops of larger radius. The fish swam in left loops about as much as they swam in right loops.

19 days in orbit: The eggs started hatching after 19 days, with the majority of them doing so during the fifth and sixth weeks of the mission, approximately 2 weeks after the control eggs on Earth hatched. Visual orientation was immediate upon hatching; the young fish kept their backs toward the light as their Earth-hatched cousins also did. However, they also exhibited the abnormal swimming in tight circles only when the bag aquarium was shaken.

This looping swimming decreased slowly in orbit until a normal pattern of swimming prevailed.

21 days in orbit:  
The two fingerlings appeared to have adapted to weightlessness, but they would still loop when their plastic aquarium was shaken.

*I want a new calibration, this otolith of mine.  
Orient me  
towards*

*the stars, a new gravity.*<sup>14</sup>

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14 “We are stardust—made of atoms cooked inside of stars through a process of nuclear fusion—all the while, a brilliance “brighter than a thousand suns” resides inside the nucleus of an atom. The largest of space-time-matter measures, the smallest of space-time-matter measures: each contained inside the other, each threaded through the other. A strange topology.” Karen Barad, p. 218



Otolith removal from a Red Snapper. Much like tree rings, otoliths reveal periods of growth and have been historically used to measure age and environmental conditions. Image from Louisiana Conservationist, 2016.



Dendronchronology: The science of dating based on counting growth rings in trees. A cross section of a ponderosa pine fire scar showing several dated fire events Image from Chris Schnepf, University of Idaho, Image Number 1171013.

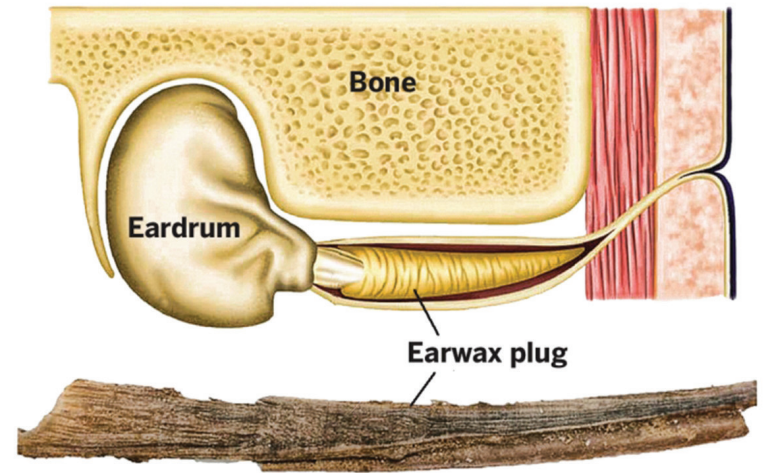
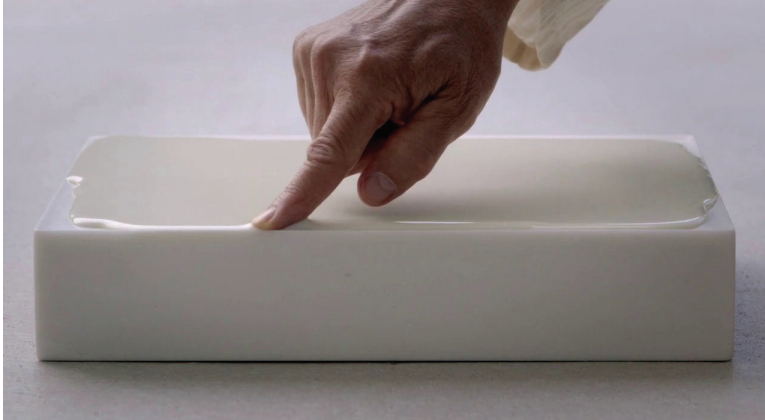


Diagram of blue whale earplug from Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA, 2013. Each new layer of a whale's earwax plug wraps around the previous one, changes in color indicate a complex picture of the species' lived experience (entwined with the activities of humans and other species).<sup>15</sup> The practice of examining the whale's earplug is not unlike the study of tree rings.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Streitmatter-Tran and Vi Le take up this case in "The Cerumen Strata: From Figures to Configurations." They note the necessary attendance towards asking questions about the practice of historical periodization. This is significant for the Anthropocene, where humans have defined themselves as "the epoch-maker of our own human geological time."





Wolfgang Laib, *Milkstone* (1978), Carrara marble and milk



Wolfgang Laib, *Pollen from Hazelnut* (2013)

The world is going to pieces and people like [Ansel] Adams and [Edward] Weston are photographing rocks!”

-Henri Cartier-Bresson<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This quote represents a common state of mind. One of indignation towards art that works in the realm of the organic, implying, of course, that the organic is unworthy. Simultaneously, it implores art to engage with humans--an endeavor much mightier and more valuable. Underlying all of this is a hierarchical (and Cartesian) notion that inert matter (it, things) is less than the living (beings, us). Jane Bennett connects this to Jacques Ranciere’s “partition of the sensible.”

The other “silent-stones,” a description likely blasphemous to any who has had these body stones.

Quiet buildups of excessive consumption or unlucky genetics, they accumulate

stratify  
solidify

Mini landscapes, sedimentation—migratory bits—piercing through the corridors of the body in a fashion I can only imagine is anything but silent.

How beautiful these body-made stones. Creamy, cholesterol yellow. Smooth and ruffled, dimpled and dotted. Unique geologies, masses of human matter, condensed into a very fast epoch? Eon? Era?<sup>17</sup>

How do we measure the time of geology formed in the body?<sup>18</sup>

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17 Time is a central concern for the Anthropocene. As Smailbegović notes, “Many of the temporalities that are relevant for developing a politics of time in the Anthropocene—such as minute and incrementally accumulating processes of change, or the long duration of geological time, or even the temporal rhythms relevant to particular non-humans—may not be directly available to the human sensorium.”

18 Karen Barad notes that “Time is unstable, continually leaking away from itself,” in “Troubling time/s and ecologies of nothingness: re-turning, re-membling, and facing the incalculable,” *New Formations*, no. 92 (Autumn 2017): 63.



Human body stones

My grandfather had an unconventional way of measuring the weather, or rather, of making measurements as a form of forecasting. After, before, or during a storm, we would watch the sky, eager for spots of blue (always wanting to be outside, he and I.)

“When there is enough blue to sew a sailor a pair of pants, the rain is done.”

This puzzled me then, and still now.

I continue using it as a measurement, changing my mind each time, rendering the pants for a variety of sized sailors.<sup>19</sup>



*Objects that hope*

*avored foolishness  
convinced fictions*

*a bite so blue  
it sticks in the throat*

*there I would rather be, holding tight your fantasy.*

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<sup>19</sup> Karen Barad provides insight on measurements, “Measurements are agential practices, which are not simply revelatory but performative: they help constitute and are a constitutive part of what is being measured [...] Measurements are world-making: matter and meaning do not preexist, but rather are co-constituted via measurement intra-actions.” What is the Measure of Nothingness? Infinity, Virtuality, Justice (Germany: documenta (2012), 6.



**Sticky Limbs**  
*hosts and ruins*  
*so much real estate*

There is this natural cathedral, a wondrous site we visited last summer. The Crowley Columns, a name so disappointing I shudder to type it. Nestled along the shores edge (brackish and briny, the water too, disappoints) stand tall hundreds of carved columns. Carved is not quite right, seemingly implicating the human hand, desire, fixity.

*Let me try again.*

Pillars of crust, delineating negative space—caverns of cool, dark air. The slapping of the sickly green water sparkles and shines, illuminating the coved ceiling with flashes. It feels ruinous, remarkable. Ancient, unknown. Each armature of sand (is it sand? ash?) seems barely sustainable, together they hold the land's edge.

This site, this space. It is land, it is body, skin and shell. I think of those shells (oyster?) piling up in the coastal towns of the Pacific Northwest. I had never seen such a site, having lived in the mountains most of my life. Heaps and trash-like piles<sup>20</sup> of shells—precious body architectures, their interiors long consumed.<sup>21</sup> How strange to see such a vivid trace of taste. I imagine a similar scenario, piles of hides, feathers, feet. Were we to see such remnants of our mouths desires, would our mouths still water?

*I lose my appetite easily. As a child, the visceral quality of cow in my*

*mouth made me cry.*

*I could only think of their eyes, sweet and long-lashed.*

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20 The technical term is mound or midden.

21 This brings in the important topic of the “Umwelt” a term by Jakob von Uexküll that seeks to define our human selves as biological organisms first, as merely one type among many, thus allowing for a more open and curious relationship.



Crowley Columns, California. September 2018



Shell mound on the Oregon Coast

## Let the strata show



Jen Vaughn, *B* (2019)

I am concerned loosely with geology, the fissures and fractures,  
emptying out, filling up  
living  
dead  
future matter.

The embedded time and locality of a place, a surface. The trace.  
The interruptions, continuations, negations, pockets.  
Sculptures, topos—formed of heat, debris, air, gas, liquid.

### *Rising-cracking-fleeing.*

The body, too, is implicated. Through experience, conceptualization,  
hubris, language, consumption. Some good, mostly bad. I cringe at  
my existence—knowing, that as an object, a thing, I have a strange  
agency, capable of limited love but large destruction. With this body  
comes culture, that catch-all category, a topos (place) and a trópos  
(trope), knitted through with human formulations, constructions,  
deconstructions, problems, gaps.<sup>22</sup>

The boundary and borders, of skin, of understanding. All that I  
attempt to see, to know, likely only reflects not an external truth, but  
an internal reflection.

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22 One might mention this as the epoch many call the Anthropocene. I will refrain from reifying one scientific standardization, but agree with Donna Haraway that we need “a word to highlight the urgency of human impact on this planet, such that the effects of our species are literally written into the rocks.”



Jen Vaughn, *A Tipping* (2019) and detail of *Maybe Landscape, Maybe Host* (2019)

This clash is present within me, resonating and writhing.

All that has past, and all that might come—weighing on the contemporary moment. One marked by precarity, anxiety, possibility. For many, the darkness is the heaviest beat. Division, destruction, extinction, exhaustion. So much noise. I too, sense the strain, the precipice. Much is said of the ‘tipping point’, this abstract location (is it a point? a cliff? a road collapsed?) indicating the point at which the presence of humans is too much, placing us and the life that surrounds at a state of irreversible decline.

I imagine this point, this *tipping*.

It is sharp, slippery,  
somehow both a climb and a descent.



The monstrosity and scale of climate change is unfathomable, a void so large my brain cannot grapple with it.<sup>23</sup> How do I locate myself in a time of crisis? As a body-object-thing, I carry with me a deep sense of responsibility and care for the spaces and beings around me. The present is a moving target, shaped by a complicated history of capitalism, growth, consumption, separation, ideology, technology. There are many ways to approach the contemporary moment: philosophy, ecology, science, geology, religion, aesthetics, history. The academy offers many valuable forms of research, often driving inquiry as a stake through a stack of disciplines.

A transmedial, sensorial, and interdisciplinary approach begins to get at the heart of the matter—one of entanglements.



Chris Jordan, *Camel Gastrolith* (2016)

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23 “The next few years are probably the most important in our history. It’s not only the magnitude of change, it’s the pace at which it changes.” Debra Roberts, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Working Group II, October 2018.

## New Configurations

*long acts of looking  
advocate of intimacy*



Jen Vaughn, *Advocate* (2019)

It is difficult to predict the role of art in the entangled moment.<sup>24</sup> Like other disciplines, it offers a specific method of understanding, a way of asking questions, wrestling with scale, negotiating with self, practicing speculation. Art requires, at its core, the unknown.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps, in this unknown, we can attune ourselves to think expansively, experience deeply, and tap into an understanding of location/place/objecthood in order to incite intimacy, possibility, and hope for the future.<sup>26</sup>

I return, time and time again, to the possibility of sensory understanding as a means of knowledge and generator of empathy. My studio practice exists as laboratory, a space of material investigation and research. It is necessarily slow, bound by long acts of looking and influences from the outside. The external influencers (vanilla scented trees, strenuous hikes and bikes, wiggling worms and dusty eyes) are equally visceral, personal, and generative.

The entanglement of these spaces clarifies my work—making personal the theoretical.

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<sup>24</sup> “To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as a part of their entangled intra-relating [...] time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.” *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), i.

<sup>25</sup> Art, as aesthesis, refers to sensory perception—a way to think *and* feel.

<sup>26</sup> And by hope, I do not mean salvation for the human species. Rather, a making of space for future imaginaries, one in which another being might thrive. Personally, I’m rooting for mycelium.



Jen Vaughn, *Maybe Landscape, Maybe Host* (2019)





Jen Vaughn, *Mouth of Water* (2018)

“Arts of noticing are considered archaic  
because they are unable to scale up.”

-Anna Tsing  
*Some Problems with Scale*



What can be gained from these long acts?

A desire to be an object,  
*a thing among many things.*<sup>27</sup>



Jen Vaughn, *Rub My Skin Against the Regularity of Your Habits* (2017)



Jen Vaughn, *Provisional Spaces* (2018)

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27 This idea is beautifully articulated by Hito Steyerl in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012), 50.

**A Particular Shore**  
*jetsam and flotsam*  
*a reclamation of sorts*  
*space of exchange*

The studio, a space of object-things<sup>28</sup>, both made and found, is one particular shore. The realm of negotiation, attempts towards fixity (how futile, indeed) and the constant negotiation of locating myself as one object among many.

Materials hold a wealth of information. They are pierced through with the human history of industrialization, entwined with the markings of complex histories.

*Salt, charcoal, urea, steel.*  
*Glass, plastic, mycellium, trash.*  
*Mold, aluminum, rust, water, a TV screen.*  
*Rocks, crystals, cans, bottles, insulation, bugs.*

Liquid Crystal Display, or, just a television? Keeper of moving images and visual narratives, I see past this and wonder at the ability of liquid crystals to dance and play, forming the moving media we are accustomed to seeing.

We forget our media, too, is but a crystal.

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28 “Objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template... Things, on the other hand, ... [signal] the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine can looks back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny and feels the need for what Foucault calls ‘a metaphysics of the object, or, more exactly, a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up toward our superficial knowledge,” W.J.T Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*, 156-157.



Jen Vaughn, *System of Durables* (2018)

*Look long, look soft*

There is no proper divide, no way to untangle the boundaries of natural and artificial. I celebrate and mourn the tangles, using specific material combinations to challenge the cultural boundaries constructed between the organic and inorganic. My curation of object-things, sculptures, and videos poses questions towards locating possibility in the objects of late capitalism while evoking cognizance towards material bodies and system relationships.

The act of placing familiar materials in new relationships is intended to amplify, not transform.

It is a rejection of cynicism and invitation to return to direct, sensory experiences that question our concept of place and collective destiny.

It is a space of exchange,  
poetic remains,  
residue and reclamation.

A new real estate  
*(other than our own.)*



Jen Vaughn, *So Much Real Estate* (2019)

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“There are still songs to sing beyond mankind.”  
-Paul Celan