



ISADORA VAUGHAN
GAIA NOT THE GODDESS

2 March 23 – June 2019







In *Gaia Not The Goddess*, Melbourne-based artist Isadora Vaughan continues her broader project of self-directed experimentation into material technologies, considering the basic physical and chemical properties of her materials, their histories, and the ways in which resources are processed to produce supplies for specific applications. Through the particular combination of elements in her installation at Heide, Vaughan reflects upon human-centred building activities via ideas from disparate branches of natural science—mycology, geology and biology—and in particular, animal architectures such as hives, nests and burrows.

For this exhibition, Vaughan has cultivated sculptures from mycelium, the fast-growing, thread-like root system of mushrooms. These forms crop up sporadically in the gallery, as though spawned after rainfall. Another element, made from a compound of hemp and lime, variously marketed as Hempcrete or Hemplime, hunkers down towards one edge of the space; dusty and crumbling, it recalls the irregular structure of a termite mound. Like mycelium, it is a bio-composite material lately featuring in debates around sustainability and the nascent industry of eco-development.¹

Other components in the installation include local materials: a large boulder of Mt Gambier limestone—like that used for McGlashan and Everist’s iconic Heide II—and beeswax from Heide’s colonies. The latter has been combined with wax from other locations to form a latticework that evokes the root and tunnel systems of disparate living forms. A bitumen floor-covering acts as a visual platform for these assorted sculptural components. As a residual product of the process of petroleum distillation, like mycelium and hemp, it inevitably signals debates around the depletion of fossil fuels and renewable alternatives.

Replicating the bulging mycelium forms, four segments of a ceramic sphere are splayed across the bitumen surface, with rock-like exoskeletons that belie their fragility as ceramics. A turquoise thermoplastic shell crouches against the opposing wall. Husk-like and squat, it serves as a hollowing echo of the heft of the hemp-lime form. Moving through the installation with the roughness of bitumen underfoot, a sense of these elements as simultaneously precarious and sturdy, permanent and transitory, is palpable.

Common physical properties and differences surface in encountering the work via various degrees of density and porousness, viscosity and fixedness. A tension between inside and outside is built up through forms that have expanded to fill from the inside out (through, for instance, mycelium growth or wax casting), and others that have been compressed from the exterior in (there are elements that serve as encasements, and works formed through compression, of hemp for example, or bitumen). The dynamic between above and below ground is everywhere apparent. A heady aroma of beeswax permeates the space forming syntheses with other smells: there are lingering traces of pitch, the musty odour of sawdust, the manifold scents of human animals.

Beyond these physical properties, materials also inevitably suggest meaning beyond themselves, and according to application, they present various poetic, theoretical, political, and innumerable other resonances. Vaughan is interested in the potential of her assemblages to offer constellations of associations and meanings in this way. Material is the concrete stuff of the world around us; it can be described, touched and enumerated or it can be understood abstractly as the subject *matter* that constitutes a creative work of art. Another sense entirely concerns the *materialistic* world of money and consumption. For Vaughan, all designations are simultaneously valid.





This process of accumulating meaning is akin to the way limestone forms through the accretion and calcification of shell and coral over millennia. The limestone included in *Gaia not the Goddess* is from the Gambier basin and dates back to the Oligocene era; at its oldest, it is 33 million years of age. But Vaughan's boulder also yields temporal associations that relate to our present epoch—sometimes designated the Anthropocene.² Its empty pockets gesture obliquely toward questions about how the environment is managed and monetised under capitalism.

Despite a close association with the built environment through its widespread use in road construction (where it is used as a binder along with aggregate to create asphalt concrete), bitumen too originates as dead, fossilised organisms. The petroleum from which it is most often derived is formed naturally, when vast quantities of zooplankton and algae are compressed and heated beneath layers of sedimentary rock. Sometimes bitumen also forms directly in natural deposits in this way. Following threads of material connection through the installation ties limestone to bitumen on this fundamental level; both were once-living organisms. This association extends to link bitumen and limestone to hemp and to mushrooms.

Once we begin to look, we notice that these threads proliferate. Patterns freely emerge to draw connections between materials, but they nevertheless slip easy categorisation. Each is a by-product of a living organism that has been instrumentalised for specific industrial applications; each is simultaneously organic and 'man-made'. In this way, Vaughan denies simple, binary categorisations about the material world as a deliberate strategy geared toward prioritising multiplicity, which is often associated with feminist and queer thinking. Oppositions such as nature/culture, subject/object, human/non-human, male/female are not universal or general, but

are symptomatic of an essentialism that flattens difference and facilitates the oppression of non-dominant and nonhuman bodies. Focusing instead on challenging anthropocentric understandings of the material world, theorists in the disciplines of contemporary ecofeminism, new materialism, queer ecologies and others, propose new ways of thinking about our relationship to the natural world amid current global conditions.

This is a project influential feminist and cultural theorist Donna Haraway calls 'worlding'. In reappraising our worldview, Haraway proposes we learn to '*stay with the trouble* of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth'.³ Such an idea demands the cultivation of our ability to think past inherited categories to consider and cooperate with the complex and intertwined histories of other life forms. For Haraway, human exceptionalism is no longer tenable and needs to give way to new, non-hierarchical partnerships of co-existence; she proposes we think of ourselves as 'beings in encounter' in 'thick co-presence' with other life-forms.⁴ Such a strategy promotes productive alternatives that signal the start of an 'ethics of sustainability'.⁵

In paying careful attention to the histories, uses and symbolic registers of her materials, as well as to the innumerable ways in which they converge and diverge, cross-contaminate and multiply, Vaughan asks us to question our relationship to the environment and extend our thinking about the limits of where the human subject ends in its encounter with the natural world.⁶

In her ethnographic treatise, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, American Anthropologist Anna Tsing proposes we look to the mushroom as a model for 'thinking through precarity'.⁷ This, she says, is the defining characteristic of contemporary life—from insecurity over the future of





our world, to instability and irregularity in our means of generating income.⁸ For Tsing, the mushroom allows us to reimagine the world from this position of indeterminacy; it is a sign of survival in the face of precarity. Mushrooms grow on the dead and decaying wood of fallen hardwood trees and occasionally, on conifers. For this reason, they proliferate in blighted surroundings, thriving in environments recently devastated by deforestation. Like the mushroom as metaphor, many of Vaughan's materials (particularly those associated with sustainable development) stand as propositions for survival in precarious times.

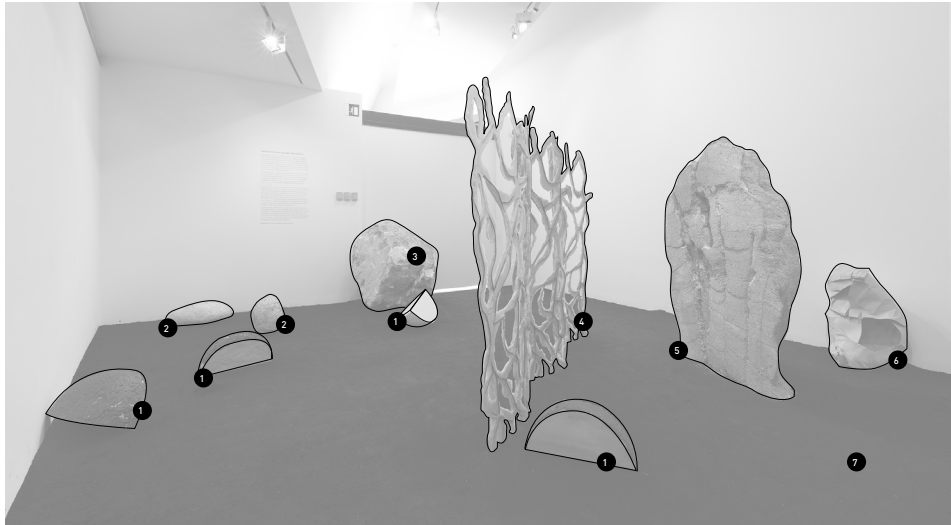
It is also significant to consider that mushrooms play an integral role in forest ecosystems through nutrient cycling and the symbiotic bonds some species form with the roots of host trees. In Tsing's extended metaphor, their 'entangled lifeways' are a sign of productive collaboration. Vaughan's assemblages and her installation at large can be thought of in these terms.

Haraway too speaks of 'multispecies assemblages' in her writings; of becoming attuned to the enmeshed lifecycles and unexpected combinations of species in nature. Rejecting the term Anthropocene, she speaks instead of the *Chthulucene*, named for the Greek *chthōn*, meaning earth and associated with ground-dwelling things, specifically, the deities of the underworld.⁹ Haraway's *Chthulucene* encompasses diverse life forms, abiotic elements and ancient forces (metaphorical and literal). The *Chthulucene* incorporates 'the diverse earth-wide tentacular powers and forces and collected things with names like Naga, Gaia, Tangaroa ... [it] entangles myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages—including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus'.¹⁰ Haraway's conception of the *Chthulucene* is 'an effort to exceed

all existing and even possible human forms of sense-making—as Earth itself does'.¹¹ Her use of language is reflexive; her own terminology leaves room for possibility.

The title of Vaughan's installation references the Mother Earth goddess of Greek mythology as well as the Gaia hypothesis, a scientific theory which proposes that Earth is a complex, *interconnected whole* encompassing all living forms and non-living systems (mechanisms like nutrient cycling, climate), which self-regulates to preserve the conditions for life.¹² Gaia is produced by the 'actions and interactions of many diverse biological free agents and aspects of their abiotic world'; life forms are tasked with refining, through aeons of evolutionary adaptation and innovation, their own circumstances for survival, utilising the 'very environment into which they fold themselves'.¹³

Like the Gaia hypothesis, Vaughan's installation and its component parts can themselves be thought of as ecosystems or *entanglements*. But like these other conceptions, rather than offering definitive answers, Vaughan thinks through matter to consider the ways we 'produce, reproduce and consume our material environment',¹⁴ as a mode of 'staying with' the complex and thorny question of the environment under late capitalism.



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| 1. ceramic paper clay and vitrified crushed rock | 4. unrefined beeswax and steel, vegan pig's ear |
| 2. mycelium | 5. hemp and lime |
| 3. Mt. Gambier limestone, glazed ceramic, epoxy | 6. thermoplastic |
| | 7. bitumen |

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ISADORA VAUGHAN: GAIA NOT THE GODDESS

Isadora Vaughan's 'Gaia Not the Goddess' is a site-specific installation that explores the relationship between the earth and the divine. The work consists of several large, natural rock specimens of various shapes and colors, including a large, light-colored rock on the right, a dark, angular rock on the left, and several smaller, smooth, light-colored rocks in the center. The rocks are arranged on a black floor, which contrasts sharply with their natural textures and colors. A white, angular object, possibly a piece of stone or a sculpture, is placed next to the large rock on the right. The installation is set in a minimalist gallery space with white walls and a high ceiling. A green exit sign is visible on the wall, and a wall-mounted text panel provides information about the work. The ceiling features recessed lighting, and a large window on the right looks out onto a bright outdoor area.



NOTES

- 1 This compound of hemp and lime is lighter, more flexible, and a better insulator than traditional concrete and significantly, is carbon negative—converting more CO² over the life of the material than is produced in construction.
- 2 Relating to or denoting the current geological age, so named for the impact of human activity on climate and the environment. The prefix anthropo- is taken from the Greek *anthropos*, meaning human.
- 3 Author's emphasis added. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2016, p. 2.
- 4 Working from Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's influential texts, *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), a number of thinkers in this area conceive of the contemporary subject as 'multiple', 'becoming' and in a constant state of transformation through its encounters with otherness.
- 5 Rosi Braidotti, 'Bio-power and Necro-politics', *Springerin, Hefte fur Gegenwartskunst*, 13, no. 2, 2007, pp. 21–23.
- 6 Rosi Braidotti and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Borrowed Energy: Timotheus Vermeulen talks to philosopher Rosi Braidotti about the pitfalls of speculative realism', *Frieze: Contemporary Art and Culture*, 165, 2014, p. 132.
- 7 Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2015, p. 20.
- 8 This extends to encompass globally distributed factors including climate change and destruction, extinction and resource exploitation as well as the influences of late capitalism, displacement and migration.
- 9 Haraway considers the Anthropocene more a 'boundary event than an epoch' and situates our 'present moment of destructiveness within a longer, radically more-than-human, story', Thom van Dooren, 'Temporal promiscuities in the Chthulucene: A reflection on Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2018, pp. 91–92.
- 10 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, p. 160.
- 11 Thom Van Dooren, 'Temporal promiscuities in the Chthulucene: A reflection on Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*', p. 93.
- 12 The Gaia hypothesis is a scientific principle first proposed by British chemist James Lovelock in collaboration with microbiologist Lynn Margulis in 1974. It has subsequently been discussed as 'simultaneously a hypothesis, a testable theory, a summary of highly specific facts, a worldview, and a philosophy of nature all mixed together ... Gaia might be the name of a shift in understanding how to approach many phenomena previously lumped together in the notion of nature'. Bruno Latour and Timothy M. Lenton, 'Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia Is So Hard to Understand', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2019, p. 660.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2010, p. 3

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ART + CLIMATE = CHANGE 2019 is a socially engaged festival of climate change related arts and ideas featuring curated exhibitions and theatre works alongside a series of keynote lectures, events and public forums featuring local and international guests.

Heide Museum of Modern Art acknowledges the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, the traditional owners of the land upon which Heide stands, paying respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

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