

EMBALMING AND EROSION IN ANDREW TESTA'S ALL THE OTHER THINGS

by Miles Rufelds

Every river bed that's dried up because too many barges have made off with too many thousands of tons of its sand lives on in the concrete monoliths of a runaway global construction industry, their disappearances substituted by more urban infrastructure, crafted to linger in perpetuity. Every calculated dump of perfluorinated chemicals that saturates, scorches, and eventually extinguishes a branch of fragile, finite ecology, carries with it the harrowing promise of persisting in our genes and bloodstreams for the imaginable future.

Being alive in the late 2010s means inhabiting an ordinary shot through with paradoxical anxieties such as these: knowledge that, just as quickly as the livable world is dismantling before our eyes, a new one — menacing, compromised, and irreversible — is being built from its parts, calcified in shape, to remain for all time. Ratios of disappearance and permanence are nothing new, and are in fact fundamental poles of any ecological balance, but in the long shadow still cast by the European Enlightenment (and its unholy spawn, the Industrial Revolution), their scales seem to have become morbidly misaligned.

Canadian artist Andrew Testa's recent series of book works, *All the Other Things*, captures both fronts of the elemental perplexity described above. Merging a familiar archival vocabulary with a kind of gothic absurdity, Testa's books weave unexpected paths between well-worn oppositions — material and digital, ephemeral and durable, protective and destructive. In an era defined by these previous terms' uncontrollable refraction into one another — and into every extant ecosystem, lifecycle, and social structure — these works offer a critical and compelling look at an intractably thorny predicament.

Testa speaks of *All the Other Things* with a language pitched between Transcendentalism and Situationism, balancing a closely held sensitivity to Canada's natural landscapes with an improvisational, psycho-subjective curiosity towards the world's power to surprise. The series has two entries so far: *Collected in Newfoundland (July 2016 – August 2017)* and *Collected in Kamloops (September – December 2017)*, each made up of traces captured during walks Testa has taken through the books' eponymous landscapes. Stones, shrubs, husks, and various biological fragments populate the pages, each one chosen for its ability to cut through the maximalist clutter of the forest floor.

While there is an undeniably sanguine character to Testa's language, *All the Other Things* carries a visibly somber, conflicted edge. The aesthetic, tonal, and procedural decisions that Testa makes in constructing these books betray a sensitivity for, and perhaps even a direct concern with the salvo of techno-environmental issues that opened this essay. As much as these works are intrigued and enchanted contemplations of nature, photography, and bookmaking, they are also troubled revisions of what taxonomy, classification, endurance, and archival memory mean in a compromised world. Testa makes consistent reference to the act of collecting and recording, and it's here that the series' core conflict appears: the tragic difficulty of wanting to secure some kind of durable impression of a natural world whose terminal erasure draws nearer each day, even if that impression partakes of the same systems that perpetuate this destruction.

Each two-page composition ranges in tone from quiet to fragile to grotesque, the latter instances standing out as the artist's cleverest and most violent uses of his printed format; what design theorist Johanna Drucker calls "the irrevocably physical fact of the [book's] gutter"¹ plays a crucial role in many of these images, bluntly suturing crab claw onto animal bone, or awkwardly connecting mismatched stems and flowers, like desperate, failed experiments.

Testa's use of flatbed scanners and Xerox prints lock these books in dialogue with notions of posterity and archive, both with respect to these disciplines' internal protocols, and to the "archive's" increasingly common metaphorical association with all things intentionally preserved². Captured and isolated on the scanning bed, the images in *All the Other Things* bear an oblique but unmistakable resemblance to the sort of taxonomical images one might find in a scientific textbook. While such associations are surely not reflections of Testa's sentiment his methodology actually concludes by returning the objects to the landscapes from which they came, an undeniably tender gesture — the images' odd stance of detached scientificity seem to menace over the pictured fragments, recalling Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's calamitously prescient warning that the post-Enlightenment order "stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them"³.

The clerical associations Testa invites by substituting the scanner for the camera are compounded by his occasional insertions of notes, scratched on lined paper,

¹ Johanna Drucker, *Graphic Devices: Narration and Navigation*. NARRATIVE: Vol. 16, No. 2, May 2008, pp 127

² Marlene Manoff, *Archive and Database as Metaphor: Theorizing the Historical Record*. Portal: Libraries and the Academy, Vol. 10, No. 4, October 2010, pp. 385

³ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford University Press, 2002. pp. 6

written like scientific itemizations or delirious keyword clusters, listing abstract verbs and nouns — “dropped, crow, flicker, magpie, heard” — stamped with date and location details. In one note, Testa seems to be detailing one of his excursions, but ends up producing something resembling a search protocol, riddled with “stop,” “wait,” and “pause” commands, and terminating with a “repeat”.

Then, in a perfectly contradictory move, he prints these images back out. As libraries and collections the world over voraciously scan their full inventories, Testa’s work reverses this movement, clinging to the printed text’s entropic character. Testa’s decision to physicalize these traces as books, archival volumes, rather than divided prints, consummates the logic outlined here. Faced with an engorged technocratic order intent on embalming the world’s “resources” in industry and data while simultaneously eroding the conditions of these “resources” existence, these books represent a plaintive bid to reverse the dominant polarities.

To shelter the natural world’s fragility; to open the digital world’s putative immortality to the same vicissitudes it’s imposed on the organic; to prefigure a difficult inverse to the present, where parking lots, greenhouse gasses, and surveillance dossiers disappear as clean water and hospitable land proliferate. Taking a sober view of the past and future, we might rightly conclude that such a situation is likely to recede only further into the territory of utopian fantasy, speculative aesthetics, and art. In Andrew Testa’s *All the Other Things*, I see a compelling blend of resignation and indignation to this fact, a position as commendable as it is relatable, necessary as it is inescapable.

Miles Rufelds is a multidisciplinary artist and writer based in Toronto. Working across a range of image-, object-, and text-based media, Rufelds’ research-based practice employs subtle or absurd artistic interventions to think through the late capitalist world’s towering perversity.

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