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The Climate Siren

Hanna Cormick's *The Mermaid*

Lara Stevens and Denise Varney



In January 2020, during Australia's devastating Black Summer of unprecedented bushfires, artist Hanna Cormick staged *The Mermaid*, a 20-minute performance as part of the Sydney Festival.¹ The location of the performance was an interior site within The Coal Loader Centre for Sustainability on the banks of Sydney Harbour. The performance begins with an arresting image: Cormick's pale, thin, muscular body is laid out on a low platform on the sandstone ground of the performance space. She is dressed in a spectacular mermaid costume—a purple-blue scaled tail, a matching bikini top, and a crown of shells attached to a full-face respirator connected to an oxygen tank. A wheelchair is parked behind her.

The Mermaid was simultaneously a work on disability and climate activism. It featured Cormick as the solo performer, creator, and director actuating an interwoven dramaturgy consisting of prerecorded, amplified voiceovers featuring the artist, live music, flashcard messages,

1. The Sydney Festival is a major arts festival that runs for three weeks each January.

and choreographed movement. Her spoken text was poetic and powerful in the way it linked her personal experience of illness and disability with a developed ecological consciousness. Quotes from Audre Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" (1978) and Paul B. Preciado's "Le courage d'être soi" (2014) positioned the performance along radical cultural lines, including the nonnormative body.

The performance begins with the sound of Cormick's labored breathing from inside the respirator, amplified over loudspeakers. On one side of the stage are two male performers/musicians/carers, Christopher Samuel Carroll and Lloyd Allison-Young. They are dressed in cheerful summer outfits and aviator sunglasses and hold electric guitars. An interpreter who signs for the deaf stands on the other side of the space.

The performance proceeds with a prerecorded voiceover of Cormick's sharply articulated, half-whispered tones accompanied by her slow and deliberate movements. The audience is aware from the program that she suffers from a series of autoimmune conditions that restrict her breathing and her movement. She is careful to avoid abrupt movements so as not to dislocate her bones. Recalling the early stages of her illness, she says via voiceover:

I wasn't listening to the tremors that were running through my cells, that were the same tremors running through the coral, the seabed, the roots, that we are not on the earth but of it. I didn't understand that my veins were as polluted as the rivers, my lungs full of plastic and petroleum, pesticides soaking into my fat like the soil and switching on dangerous genes. On the drive back from the hospital I saw the rocks peeking from the mountainside and I felt like I looked at the ancient face of the country, and I said, "Help me, I'm sick" and it replied, "Me too."

She rolls over onto her stomach as Carroll lifts her tail to help her land softly. The voiceover continues:

When my body started changing, I saw it as a betrayal. When I couldn't fix the things falling apart through sheer trying-hard-enough, I blamed myself. I dug into my body like a fossil fuel baron. It was there to serve me and never the other way around.

From this moment, Cormick connects her illnesses to the climate crisis—not only to the material damage to her body caused by human-induced pollution of the earth and its biosphere, but also

Figure 1. (previous page) Hanna Cormick, her wheelchair behind her, in The Mermaid—her fin flipped up, she wears a crown of shells and her respirator mask. The Coal Loader Centre for Sustainability, Sydney Harbour, 2020. (Photo by Daniel Boud)

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2. All quotes from *The Mermaid* are from the artist's recording of the performance that was made available to the authors.

to the mentality of limitless resource extraction: of the planet and the body as an endless source of energy. The performance goes on to critically link the themes of disability, climate change, and air pollution in a polemical and embodied commentary on the present and future of our species and the viability of our continued existence on the planet.

Summer 2019–2020, East Coast Australia

The Australian summer holidays, which run from Christmas until the end of January, are usually spent swimming, sunbathing, and surfing on Australia's spectacular coastline. But across many coastal regions such relaxing pastimes were quashed in the summer of 2019–2020 due to the most severe bushfires in Australia's recorded history (Hughes et al. 2020). In a number of coastal towns in New South Wales, residents fled to the beaches with children, pets, and blankets to escape the fires as homes and towns burned (Davidson 2020). Military vessels delivered food and medical supplies and evacuated people to safe areas.

The smoke from the fires discharged between 650 million and 1.2 billion tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, reaching the major cities of Sydney, Canberra, and Melbourne, where residents were ordered to stay indoors. Hospitals were inundated with people suffering from acute asthma and other respiratory emergencies, with 80% of Australia's population affected (Hughes et al. 2020). An estimated 445 people died from the immediate effects of the smoke alone (Wahlquist 2020). More than three billion animals were killed or displaced (WWF-Australia 2020). While Australia has always been prone to bushfires, scientists emphasize that climate change is responsible for the worsening severity of catastrophic natural disasters (Hughes et al. 2020; CSIRO 2020; Parsons and Goldman 2020; UNAA 2019).

Black Summer made Australians acutely aware that human respiratory health and survival is dependent on the quality of the air we breathe. These interconnections were all too apparent to Cormick. Once an accomplished dancer, circus acrobat, and physical theatre performer, in 2014, at the age of 29, she became severely ill with what doctors described as a “trifecta” of rare genetic conditions: Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, mast cell activation syndrome, and postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome. These conditions made her bones, internal organs, and veins prone to dislocation as well as severely allergic to pollutants in the air—smoke, perfumes, food particles, etc. Following a major escalation of symptoms in 2014, she stopped performing and was forced into self-isolation in a sealed room. If she ventured into public she relied on a wheelchair and required an elastomeric full face respirator—a large breathing apparatus and oxygen tank.

During her time alone she succumbed to feelings of shame and confusion about her changing body as well as fear for her safety. Over time she engaged in online environmental advocacy and grew increasingly politicized around disability activism (Cormick 2021). As she came to accept her disability, she returned to visiting public galleries, museums, and outdoor spaces aided by her wheelchair and respirator. On several of these occasions, including while visiting the exhibition *Hyper Real* at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra in 2016, members of the public mistook her for an artwork (Cormick 2021). It dawned on Cormick that her unfamiliar appearance was impacting the able-bodied public's perceptions of reality. She began to see her body and the apparatuses on which she now relied for survival as sculptural, the human-machine assemblage as a work of art. As a performance artist she recognized the value of shocking people out of their habitual perceptions of how different bodies interact with public spaces and resources. This realization was a catalyst for her decision to perform again, this time working with the complex new parameters of her altered body (Cormick 2021). *The Mermaid* emerges from this period of reflection and signifies her return to performance.

The Coal Loader

In January 2020, the smoke from the fires along the New South Wales coast made Sydney and Canberra among the most highly polluted cities in the world (Remeikis 2020). The risk to Cormick's health was



Figure 2. A former coal loader facility with two tunnel entrances and a flight of stairs to access the rooftop abuts Sydney Harbour. People gather outside the facility next to rusted scaffolding of the former loading dock. The Coal Loader Centre for Sustainability on Sydney Harbour, 2020. (Photo by Daniel Boud)

higher than it had ever been and the toll on her body after the performances was extreme.³ Cormick had intended to perform *The Mermaid* outdoors at The Coal Loader Centre for Sustainability (The Coal Loader) on Sydney Harbour. Opened in 2011, the Coal Loader is a multipurpose public space used for a wide range of community, arts, and sustainability programs. Originally the lands of the Cammeraygal people, in the early 1920s the area was turned into an industrial site, operating as a coal storage depot for bulk carriers. The depot was decommissioned in the 1990s and then radically overhauled for

environmental projects (North Sydney Council 2021). Due to the hazardous outdoor air quality, it was one of the Coal Loader's former coal storage tunnels that, ironically, offered respite from the smoke-polluted air. As a further safety measure the three-day run of performances was rescheduled for a single day. Audience members were invited to rebook for one of three timeslots—5:00, 6:00, or 7:00 p.m. on Saturday 18 January 2020, with audience size not capped. This rescheduling had the unforeseen effect of tripling or quadrupling expected audience numbers for some of the shows.⁴ The shift to an unventilated, crowded, interior space led to what Cormick describes (with understatement) as performing under conditions of “partially calculated risk” (Cormick 2021).

Relocation of *The Mermaid* to the tunnels that once stored coal meant that the backdrop was not Sydney Harbour as intended but the sand-colored surfaces of the indoor space. As a consequence, the mermaid figure was further displaced from its mythical aquatic habitat while the performer was rendered more vulnerable indoors. Cormick's performed vulnerability as a mermaid, a fish out of water, was not only symbolic but had real life consequences, including the danger of respiratory failure.

The last-minute shift to an interior site complicated the spatial and performative interactions of the show, drastically changing the performer-spectator relationship. In the first instance, the changed location of the performance required special consideration of the spectators' individual needs and how they might be affected by the indoor setting. The potential impact on spectators with a disability was added as a warning on the Sydney Festival website:

ALLERGEN WARNING: This performance contains allergens coconut oil and beeswax. Patrons with airborne sensitivities are advised to take caution. (Sydney Festival 2020)

However, some ticket holders may not have read the fine print. Then, on the day of the performance, taking Cormick's health into account, a sign was posted at the entrance to the performance space that read: “If you are wearing perfume, cologne, deodorant, or makeup, please move to the back of the space” (Cormick 2020). Many saw the sign and sat at the back. Next, prior to the start of the performance, spectators were asked not to hide food in their bags. Some spectators were surprised and confronted by this request. As blogger Kate Maguire-Rosier notes in a review:

3. It took Cormick several months to recover from the performance in her sealed room in Canberra (Cormick 2021).
4. One performance had up to as many as 80 spectators.

Did I “hide” my food? How do they know? Will this cause a problem? Should I “declare” it? I get resentful at the accusatory tone. Then I feel ashamed at feeling resentful. Has Cormick sensed that I have brought food in? The sinking feeling nestles in. [...] I finally manage to reconcile my act with the safe knowledge that the show’s organisers could have opted to warn its audience in advance not to wear perfume, makeup or hair product, or bring food to the show. Fresh out of the shower merely an hour earlier, I was sporting all three (in addition to the bag full of “hidden” food). (Rosier 2020)

Rosier’s comments demonstrate the confusion and embarrassment for some spectators around the protocols of attending the performance. Why didn’t the organizers forewarn the audience? One of the unforeseen consequences was that the front-of-house messaging implicated the spectators, positioning them as unwitting, ignorant, and dangerous agents of pollution—a message that would have arguably been less impactful if delivered to each spectator beforehand, in private. The late warnings about perfume and food were not intended to take the spectators by surprise, but rather were a product of the last-minute change of venue. The bush-fires, the air quality, and the warnings all contributed to an atmosphere that was fraught with uncertainty, even before the performance began. These were/are the conditions of performance in an ecological crisis.

The rapid relocation from outside to inside also showed that the Sydney Festival lacked an emergency response plan to an environmental crisis on the scale of Black Summer. This crisis suggested that the performing arts will be increasingly imbricated in the wider framework of environmental catastrophes as foreseen for other industries by emergency workers, health professionals, and climate scientists (Zosky et al. 2021; Climate Council 2020).

On the other hand, “offending the audience” (in this case by exposing their polluting selves) has become a common feature of immersive theatre since Peter Handke’s 1966 play titled as such. But *The Mermaid* was different in the sense that nothing was inflicted on the audience, except, perhaps, feelings of shame and guilt for unintentionally harming the artist. Indeed, Cormick predicted that she would likely suffer seizures during the performances and so stationed a medical team around the performance space, armed with EpiPens. Therein lay a powerful and terrifying element of the performance, a serious dramaturgical choice, and an occupational health and safety nightmare.

In the last of the three scheduled public performances, Cormick suffered three seizures.⁵ While her body succumbed to uncontrolled tremors, the musicians played incongruous surf-pop music as if to reassure everybody. Yet, we saw before us a body that was overwhelmed by toxins and misfiring neurons, overloading Cormick’s biological systems. During these immune responses, Carroll held up large flash cards explaining what was happening to the artist: how much pain she was in and that it was caused by contaminated air. Two of the flash cards read, provocatively:

THE VOLATILE ORGANIC COMPOUNDS IN PERSONAL CARE AND HOUSEHOLD
CLEANING PRODUCTS ACCOUNT FOR NEARLY HALF OF ALL CITY AIR
POLLUTION
MORE THAN CARS

Here a spray of deodorant in the spectator’s armpits stands in for the mass discharge of toxic chemicals released daily into the atmosphere. In staging actual rather than performed medical emergencies and evoking heightened senses of alarm and empathy, *The Mermaid* asked spectators

5. Reflecting on the performance, Cormick now believes her medical team should have stopped the show because the event almost tipped her body into shock. Instead, the team vacillated between the ethos of “the show must go on” and rising fears for the artist’s health. Cormick admitted to having a similar performance ethos and pushed through the pain, compounding the severity of her offstage condition with long-term ramifications for her health and mobility (Cormick 2021).

to seriously reexamine the impact of our ordinary everyday polluting lifestyles.⁶ The lasting image of the Mermaid in the Coal Loader, living with a cluster of rare medical syndromes, was a body in extremis, marking the limits of endurance for living beings on an increasingly unlivable planet.

Performance Art and Risk in a Climate Emergency

Building on the history of performance art, particularly feminist performance art from the 1960s onwards, *The Mermaid* is a work that heightens the levels of risk, precarity, self-harm, and audience reaction. In *Cut Piece* (1964), Yoko Ono invited spectators to take up a pair of scissors and use them on her clothing as she sat passively. In *Le Lait Chaud* (1972), Gina Pane sliced into her back with a razor blade and then into her cheek while horrified spectators looked on. In *Rhythm 0* (1974), Marina Abramović surrendered her body to spectators providing them with 72 objects including a loaded gun. These historic performances exposed the body's vulnerability and mortality, challenging spectators to test the limits of their capacity to endure or condone the suffering of others. *The Mermaid* too holds the audience hostage to the thrall of the danger the work poses to the performer.⁷ In Cormick's case, the risk to the performer stems from the danger of exposure to chemicals passively worn by the audience rather than from their deliberate actions. This represents a significant shift in feminist performance art, suggesting that the artist is less interested in drawing out the danger of individual audience actions/choices in the moment and more concerned with exposing the danger of unconscious collective and cumulative human action on the planet.

Cormick positions herself as art object, suffering body, and activist. The performance asks the spectator to make an ethical choice about their future participation in the pollution economy in light of what they learn from *The Mermaid*. The difference between the pioneering feminist performance artists and Cormick is the difference between the able and disabled body. The artists cited as the historical examples assumed the performance space itself was safe and took for granted that there is a steady supply of safe levels of clean air to breathe. Against this history, *The Mermaid* is a profoundly provocative reconsideration of performance art predicated on risk from a disability and climate perspective.

This perspective alters how we might think about the spectators' participation in the performance event. Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008) has described the "transformative power" of Abramović's early works, which implicated spectators in the performance, challenging them to break with the traditional role of passive viewer. As active participants, some audience members were violent, sadistic, and menacing, inflicting injury on the vulnerable performing body, while others intervened to protect the artist; this was also the case for performances by Ono and Pane (see Renzi 2013:124; Rhee 2005:110; Fischer-Lichte 2008:12, 15). In *The Mermaid*, spectators passively contribute to the harm endured by the performer, triggering a dangerous autoimmune response in her body. The accumulated effects of unacknowledged pollutants such as deodorants and cleaning products together with the bushfire smoke with its record-breaking levels of particulate matter, act as agents that make things (such as seizures) happen (see for example Bennett 2010:9; Latour 2005:50). In this performance, however, the ethical choice for spectators is not about choosing to act or not to

6. Cormick is not alone in connecting her disabilities to the damaged state of the environment. Nor is she the first contemporary performance artist to make political use of the disabled human-nonhuman figuration. Her human-fish recalls the iconic elephant-headed Ganesh in a double-breasted business suit in Back to Back Theatre's *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich* (2011). One of the world's foremost disability theatre companies, this Australian ensemble presented the human-animal hybrid to critique able-bodied prejudice as well as broader cultural, historical, and political issues.

7. Acts of bodily harm were not exclusively performed by feminist performance artists. With different motivations, a number of self-harm works were also pioneered by men including Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971), in which an assistant shot him in the left arm; Ron Athey's *Human Printing Press* (1994), in which he cut a performer who was HIV-positive live onstage; Franko B's *I Miss You* (2003), in which he performed bloodletting as he walked down a catwalk (see Honigman 2014; Gormley 2015). In Australia, performances predicated on self-harm were pioneered by avantgarde artists including Mike Parr, whose disability often figures prominently in his highly political works; and Stelarc, who is famous for suspending his body mid-air with hooks through his flesh (see Scheer 2009; Smith 2005).



Figure 3. *The mermaid's crown of shells lies in pieces.* Hanna Cormick, *The Mermaid, the Coal Loader* Centre for Sustainability, Sydney Harbour, 2020. (Photo by Daniel Boud)

act (or to act with care) to protect Cormick, as in the performances by Ono or Abramović. Rather, the piece asks us as spectators to reckon with the violence we are already partially responsible for imposing upon Cormick's susceptible body and, by extension, the earth. Mid-20th-century feminist performance art foregrounded the body to reveal the personal as political. Artists reasoned that society's structural inequality, sexism, and misogyny were already inflicting an unacknowledged and persistent violence against women's bodies. These artists' extreme and risky acts were a manifestation of violence materialized and displayed. But the circumstances in which *The Mermaid* was performed revealed the personal as planetary, biospheric, geologic, and existential.

The Air We Share

The World Health Organization states that 99% of people today live in places where the air is substandard (WHO 2022). Even prior to Covid-19, mortality from respiratory diseases was rising: asthma, lung cancer, emphysema. As pulmonologist Michael J. Stephen notes: "The atmosphere is a communal space, and lungs are an extension of it" (2021:92). He explains that the lungs are only a single cell thick at the point where they connect to the bloodstream via the capillaries (19), meaning that very little separates our insides from the particulates in the air. "The air is indeed collective, with us often unaware of unseen and unseeable threats" (96). Such a view of the lungs' relation to the world affirms the new materialist debunking of the idea of the human body as a discrete, sealed vessel (see Alaimo 2016:1; Bennett 2010:ix; Haraway 2008:32). The body is actually porous, interconnected, and performs a constant balancing act as it exchanges materials with the environment in which it is immersed and enmeshed.

As a stage object, Cormick's respiratory mask signifies that her lungs are the most elementary and vulnerable part of her body, but her voiceover explains that pathogens and allergens can also seep into a body through porous skin and ears. As spectators walked into the performance space, escaping the acrid, eye-stinging smoky air outside, the extreme bushfire season made it difficult to ignore the impact of polluted air on everyone's health. Rather than believing that Cormick's



Figure 4. A mermaid lies onstage, gesturing to the ceiling with one hand. From left: Christopher Samuel Carroll, actor; interpreter for the deaf; Hanna Cormick in *The Mermaid at the Coal Loader Centre for Sustainability*, Sydney Harbour, 2020. (Photo by Daniel Boud)

of thousands of dead, colorless fish floating on the surface of the Murray-Darling, Australia's largest river system (Jackson and Head 2020:44). The Murray-Darling Basin is one of Australia's most significant and politically contested sources of water as it provides irrigation for the food bowl of the country (Simons 2020:4). The fish kills were caused by neocolonial irrigation practices that led to the overgrowth of blue-green algae and loss of oxygen (45). Over that summer there were three mass fish kill events in the Lower Murray-Darling. The politics of the basin are highly complex but the image of the dead fish crystallized for many Australians the nation's shameful record of species extinction. Spectators, watching Cormick's immobile, fishy body on the ground, were hushed as if at a funeral for yet another victim of climate change.

A Mermaid Onstage

Tracy C. Davis explains that the mermaid has ancient origins in Greco-Roman culture, which holds that "merfolk" reside in oceans, waterways, rivers, lakes, springs, and wells (2019:257). These beings later populated the visual arts, theatre, and film, both classical and popular. Merfolk are not human but take a human-like form (257). Davis notes that around 600 BCE, Homer gives us the perilously alluring siren, "a human-bird chimera," while Ovid's nymphs emerge from the burning wood of the Trojan fleet: "The timber softens into flesh, and blood" taking "a female face" (258). From here the feminization of the mermaid endures. "She" took her current form—a "fluke-tail and scaly lower body [that] melds harmoniously with a woman's upper torso"—during the Baroque period (259).

Discussing the theatrical presentations of merfolk, Davis notes that in the 19th century mermaids played major roles in ballets and operas (260). This presented challenges for how human dancers and singers in mermaid costumes with fins instead of feet could move across the stage floor. What Davis calls the "embodiment problem" does not of course apply to Cormick, whose lower body, while encased in a long fin, has a seemingly weightless mobility in a wheelchair. Here she can play her disabilities as a dramaturgical advantage, staging herself as a glamorous, dangerous, and endangered mermaid while focusing on other embodiment problems to do with the air we breathe.

Cormick's audiences would be most familiar with the popular culture mermaid Ariel from the 1989 Disney adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* (1837). Ariel has an enthralling voice and adorable face; she is enchantingly disobedient towards her father, breaking the rules of her marine kingdom, which require a strict separation between humans and merfolk. Even earlier is the Hollywood romantic comedy *Splash* (1984) starring Daryl Hannah. Cormick's mermaid is in the tradition of the alluring, dangerous, and other-worldly creature, while also referencing the frighteningly grotesque aspects of this mythical figure as a reminder of human mortality.

illnesses are individualized, rare, and exceptional, under the conditions of Black Summer it became clear that the climate emergency is here and we are all already at risk—any act of polluting the atmospheric commons is an act of self-poisoning, without exception.

The image of Cormick's limp, fish-like body underlined this point by evoking another recent climate event haunting the Australian public imaginary. During the summer of 2018/19, harrowing photographs appeared on the front pages of major newspapers, showing hundreds

By representing her body as split into three parts—a fish tail, a human torso, and a cyborgian head supported by a mechanical breathing apparatus—Cormick parses the Cartesian mind/body split in a new and provocative way. If the head is the site of the rational mind, dependence on breathing equipment calls into question its supposedly dominant independent authority.

The creation of a mermaid who relies on a wheelchair and oxygen tank conveys the ecological-sustainability critique that underpins the work: that able-bodied human production of carbon and other chemical emissions is threatening the ecology of all living things and the sustainability of the biosphere. The artist's ill body becomes a metonym for the sickness of the earth and a portent for the future survival of human and nonhuman species. This warning was not as futuristic as it might have seemed at the time. Two months later, humans across the globe were forced to wear masks and isolate in their homes (in a less extreme way than Cormick) in response to the spread of Covid-19.

Victorious in Weakness

In 2016, Carl Lavery argued that theatre should eschew didacticism, what he terms “strong meaning” or “strong performance” (2016:230, 233), in favor of what he calls “weak theatre.” By “weak theatre” Lavery means performances that invite dialogue rather than being closed in their conclusions (230). Lavery argues that what theatre can most powerfully *do* is to highlight:

the physical presence and fragility of the performer whose body cannot help but show its mortality, its necessary entanglement in both “nature” and “culture”; the explicitly “networked” quality of the stage, in which the human being is always part of a larger assemblage of objects, technologies, and processes. (231)

Lavery concludes that an ecological theatre's greatest strength is in fact its weakness, “its own failure to act” without falling into nihilism or despondency (232), a humility that stands in contrast to the hubris that has led to the climate crisis.

Cormick has learned to live with weakness in a way that challenges centuries of able-bodied philosophy and dramaturgy. At one point in the performance she says:

I do not need to be strong, or brave, or courageous. I can be glorious without permission. I can be victorious in my weakness and my fear. I am the voice of the voiceless. I am the face of the invisible. I am the low-lying islands we are drowning. I am the sick air, sick ocean, contaminated water, earth. I am the damage we have done to the earth [...] I am the canary in the coal mine [...] I am not a fighter. I am the battleground.

By relinquishing the sovereign self, aligning the “I” with the nonhuman and rejecting a dangerous self-harming anthropocentrism, the mermaid embodies an imagined, more highly evolved human condition that valorizes the necessary state of weakness. She shows how this can be enabling and life-giving. Yet relinquishing power comes at great cost. Cormick's mortality sits center stage, precariously balancing the entanglement between “nature” and “culture,” consciousness and seizure, the will to act and the effort to stay alive. Performance asked her to mine her body once more for the energy to perform, and part way through the performance her body refused its call. Unconscious and immobile, Cormick's body lay on the ground for nearly 10 minutes in one performance. This stoppage was a moment of “weak theatre” in Lavery's sense, exposing the “performer whose body cannot help but show its mortality” and inviting spectators to reflect on the complex entanglements of the stage and the world.

For all that, Cormick still includes didactic moments and dramaturgical techniques in the performance, such as the use of flash cards displayed during the seizures that she expects to occur. These “strong” moments address spectators' ignorance about the lived experience of illness and disability. Yet, Cormick also manipulates the “autopoietic feedback loops” (Fischer-Lichte 2008:39) between the audience and herself, disrupting the possibility of the cathartic satisfaction of pity or empathy. The accumulating effect of her performance is that she turns her weakness into a strength while showing the precarity of the human species in a climate-changing world. There is a penultimate



Figure 5. A mermaid (Hanna Cormick) wearing a respirator mask lies supine on a small stage in a disused coal loader. (Left) Christopher Samuel Carroll holds a placard: “The artist is having a seizure”; (right) guitarist Lloyd Allison-Young stands on a separate platform. A screen that captions the words of the show remains illuminated: “their own death.” The Mermaid at The Coal Loader Centre for Sustainability, Sydney Harbour, 2020. (Photo by Daniel Boud)

moment when she pities those in the room who do not suffer from illness and disability because they cannot admit their weakness in the face of present and future harm:

I wish for you that you invent another mode of use for your bodies. It is because I love you that I desire you weak and despicable. “Because it is through fragility that the revolution operates.”⁸

Cormick argues that a weakened or abject state is desirable for us all because only then will we lack the power to keep the global extractive economies in motion. She suggests that the present-day macho or able-bodied culture and politics with its economic “health” or “strength” measured by its growth needs to be counteracted by revolutionary forces that acknowledge and even celebrate human fragility.

Cormick makes it clear that she did not seek disability, that she pushed against it for years, fighting “like a fossil fuel baron” for the energy that had previously run her body, making it mobile and powerful. She now reflects that, before becoming disabled, she only knew how to make art “in an extractivist manner,” harnessing her body as if it were a limitless resource. In her words: “I was treating my body like fossil fuel companies treat the planet,” encouraged by the broader culture of the performing arts, which she describes as a “toxically ableist industry” (Cormick 2021). She now appears onstage in an advanced state of bodily harm but with a consciousness that is heightened by years of enforced stillness and slowness and the deep thought and reflection that accompanies such modes of existence. This embodied insight has given her the authority to ask audiences to rethink their relationship to their able and disabled bodies in a spirit of restoration or care for self and the natural world.

8. Here Cormick quotes from and translates Paul B. Preciado’s essay “Le courage d’être soi,” though she did not verbally attribute the found text in the live performance. For the full essay see Preciado (2014).

We are asked if we can reduce energy consumption and output for the sake of a longer, healthier life. Restoration is the simple antonym for the extractivist, production-obsessed economy. The mermaid onstage connects with her past as one of Homer's sirens to warn and attract others to turn away from fossil fuel, oil, and gas and to embrace survival. In other words, it is only when we as a species recognize that attempts to make nature yield to human desires have failed that we might start living as if we are part of nature rather than above it and survive the climate emergency.

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