



# CORAL

Something Rich  
and Strange

Edited by  
Marion Endt-Jones

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Cover: Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka, Glass model of *Corallium rubrum*, 1879. Photo: Stuart Humphreys.  
Courtesy Australian Museum – AMS582/MA00777.

Halftitle page: Figure 1: Sea fan (*Gorgonia albicans*), Manchester Museum, Zoology collection. Photo: Paul Cliff.

Title page: Illustration of Great Barrier Reef corals, in William Saville-Kent, *The Great Barrier Reef of Australia: Its Products and Potentialities* (London: W.H. Allen, 1893), colour plate VIII, detail.

  
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Figure 78: Institute for Figuring's *Crochet Coral Reef* project, 2005–present. Photo © The IFF.

## 27 The Institute for Figuring's *Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef* (2005–present)

Marion Endt-Jones

Threading together different strands of coral's history as symbol of metamorphosis, collective architectural superstructure, store of history and memory, and icon of climate change, the Los Angeles-based Institute for Figuring's *Hyperbolic Crochet Coral Reef* (CCR) seems to illustrate the feminist biologist Donna Haraway's observation that things are '[never] purely themselves', but rather 'compound...made up of combinations of other things coordinated to magnify power, to make something happen, to engage the world, to risk fleshy acts of interpretation.'<sup>1</sup>

A community-based project initiated in 2005 by the Institute's co-directors, the Australian twin sisters Margaret and Christine Wertheim, the CCR reconfigures itself anew – like self-regenerating coral polyps – each time it is exhibited nationally and internationally in scientific institutions or art galleries.<sup>2</sup> Mirroring 'the lively practices of connection and communicative commerce' characteristic of marine

invertebrates,<sup>3</sup> the CCR emerges as a collaborative effort crossing the boundaries between several fields and disciplines – a weaving together, or layering, of hyperbolic, non-Euclidian geometry; feminine handicrafts; art; community activism; feminism; marine biology; and environmentalist concerns.

It also highlights the consequences of globalization, termed 'oceanization' by anthropologist Stefan Helmreich in order to prompt 'a reorientation toward the seas as a translocally connecting substance.'<sup>4</sup> Sub-sections of the CCR like the *Bleached* and *Toxic Reefs* draw attention to the effects of pollution and global warming brought about by Western consumer culture. Corals crafted from yarn and plastic become hybrid, post-evolutionary species pointing to the so-called Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a vast agglomeration of plastic waste in the Northeast Pacific Ocean caused by a confluence of currents. Although the toxic gyre is in reality

Figure 79: Institute For Figuring's *Crochet Coral Reef* project, 2005–present. Margaret Wertheim with the Foehr Satellite Reef, Germany. Photo © The IFF.

- 1 Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 250.
- 2 The CCR was on display at the Hayward Gallery, London; the Science Gallery, Dublin; the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, Washington, and other venues. Licensed satellite reefs started by host institutions and local communities exist in cities all over the world.

- 3 Donna Haraway, 'Foreword', in Gary A. Olsen and Elizabeth Hirsh (eds), *Women Writing Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. xi–xiii here p. xi.
- 4 Stefan Helmreich, 'Nature/Culture/Seawater', *American Anthropologist*, 113.1 (2011), pp. 132–44, here p. 137.



Figure 80: Institute for Figuring's *Crochet Coral Reef* project, 2005–present. Jellyfish made from plastic bin liners by Margaret Wertheim. Photo © The IFF.

difficult to measure, because most of the debris consists of decomposed microplastics, it is often described as covering twice the size of Texas. In an alarming 'binge and purge' cycle, the ocean regurgitates the cast-off commodities of shortsighted mass consumption. Plastics present a lethal danger to a variety of marine organisms: images of strangled sea turtles or disintegrating albatrosses, whose remains reveal more swallowed bottle caps than bones and feathers, are dramatic examples of the damaging effects of plastic pollution. Moreover, microplastics, which are invisible to the naked eye, accumulate in the food chain – from zooplankton through to humans.

The collaborative actions involved in crafting the CCR, which mimic the collective architectural effort of the coral polyps and the



Figure 81: Institute for Figuring's Crochet Coral Reef project, 2005–present. Plastic anemones made from New York Times plastic wrappers by Clare O'Callaghan. Photo © The IFF.

multiplicity of relationships between reef dwellers, also seem to provide a remedy for what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called 'liquid modernity' – the notion of a rapidly changing, globalized culture that unmoors people from the grounds of politics.<sup>5</sup> Activating *oceanophilia* (a twist on Edward O. Wilson's concept of *biophilia* often used to indicate a deep, innate connection of humans with the sea) and coral's synthesizing qualities, the creators of the CCR propose a communal, cross-disciplinary, environmentalist-activist venture that counters 'the falling apart of effective agencies of collective action.'<sup>6</sup>

5 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).

6 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, p. 14.

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