



fathomless: artists converse with the more-than-human





Breathe in, breathe out. You breathe time and time's decay. Matter disposing of itself, still imprinted with its echo, the form it took, the shape of its energy for a little while.¹

- Jeanette Winterson

I pull out *GUT Symmetries* from my bookshelf, the yellowing pages now inhabited by microscopic spores. I was given this book in London in 1997, twenty-four years ago, a number I can count, but if I reach into the depths of my memory I find only fragments of this time. Only the decaying matter of this book connects now to then. Winterson's multiple narrators never find a Grand Unifying Theory (GUT) of things, nevertheless one character asks: "What is the separateness of things when the current that flows each to each is live?"² I sense a live current exerting agency between the video pieces in the programme *fathomless*; part of a cultural and ecological milieu where nothing is separate, including the more-than-human entities of these artists' scrutiny. The videos each emerge from careful observation of biota and abiota, resistant to quantification, skirting understanding.

The programme title suggests that artists can converse with the more-than-human; by this I mean conversational engagements outside of speech acts, yet involving some kind of to and fro. Each video reveals how artists create material dialogues, using sounds, lenses and other instruments of microscopy, sometimes human voices. This human=thing conversation is multidirectional rather than one way. I first heard of the 'more-than-human' turn in a workshop run by Sarah Whatmore, a British cultural geographer in 2007.³ Equally scientific researchers on the human microbiome and genome have long known at physiological level our bodies don't belong to a sovereign 'I'; we are awash with countless microorganisms and genetic material that make up the self.

1 Jeanette Winterson, *GUT Symmetries*. London: Granta Books, 1997, p. 212.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

3 Sarah Whatmore, "Materialist Returns: practising cultural geography in and for a more-than-human world." *Cultural Geographies*, 2006, 13: pp. 600-609. See also *More-than-Human Reader*. Rotterdam: Het Nieuwe Instituut, co-published with the General Ecology Project at the Serpentine Galleries and Manifesta Foundation. 2020.



The arts, the sciences and the Mātauranga Māori knowledge that encircles both these realms and more increasingly emphasize that beings and non-beings are our relations, our extended kin. Indigenous researchers, including Kim Tallbear, remind dominant voices in academia to recognize a continuum between matter, lifeforms and the immaterial realm.⁴ In reference to Anthropology's ontological turn towards things, cultural anthropologist Amiria Salmond writes:

Uncommon things [...] appear as material objects; as practices or concepts; as events, institutions or beliefs; as gifts, mana, traps, actants, spirits or individuals; or as structures, perspectives, networks, systems or scales. Some might not yet be named. Such things may be thought of as uncommon both in the sense of being unusual, unsettling, even virtually inconceivable, and in not being held in common by everyone, all the time.⁵

She finds that the comparative, relationally constituted approach of her discipline seeks uncommon things amongst typologies. Uncommon things command our attention, and evoke surprise, bewilderment and sometimes a questioning of deeply-held assumptions.⁶ Equally the arts and the 'hard' sciences draw our attention to close studies of what makes one thing different to another. Artists often reveal the uncommon in things we encounter every day, positioning the ordinary askew.

While making 'scum' water prints for *Suburban Water Bodies*, Xin Cheng was struck by how unusual it felt to stop and closely trace life forms in a local creek -- who does this? Normally only biologists, artists or young children. She sought out 'sewage-looking scum' in Te Auaunga Oakley Creek, in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, which were fed by "...slightly smelly concrete tunnels which channel storm water from who-knows-where."⁷ Yet the rich and wonder-full biodiversity of this suburban creek gives us an uncommon proximity to water insects. Xin began her immersion of papers in dirty puddles in Berlin in 2018 and has since honed her collection method. To make *Suburban Water Bodies* she dipped an uncoated piece of photographic paper into Te Auaunga waterway, and then magnified the marbling effect of the water's dirty surface by scanning the image. In this video we hover in a macro-viewing position, digitally sliding around a single image like an insect skating lightly over water. The GPS coordinates indicate the precise moment of her intervention in time and space.

The reciprocal conversing, observing, collecting practices of the artist, ethnographer or scientist inevitably alter what we study, while at the same time being transformed ourselves. An eddy or perturbation of life's flow is created, the 'observer effect'. We peer at the many juvenile insects suspended alive or

4 Kim Tallbear, "Why Interspecies Thinking Needs Indigenous Standpoints." 2011. From the lecture series "The Human is More than Human." *Cultural Anthropologies*. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/why-interspecies-thinking-needs-indigenous-standpoints>

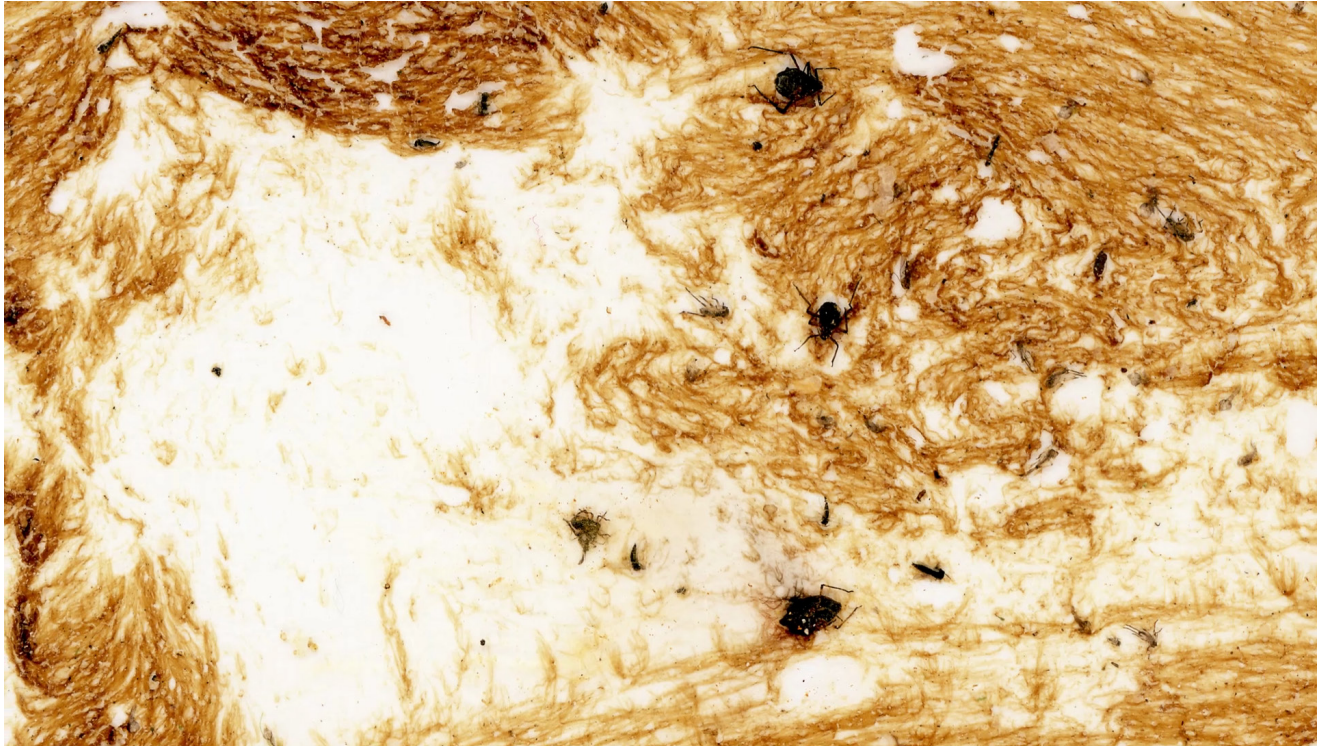
5 Amiria Salmond, 'Uncommon Things.' *Anthropologica*, Canadian Anthropology Society. Vol. 59, No. 2, 2017, p. 251.

6 Salmond, *Op. Cit.*, p. 252.

7 Eleanor Cooper and Xin Cheng *Our Suburban Water Bodies*, a self-published

catalogue, part of the project *Interspecies Kinship*, supported by CNZ, 2020. Also a personal conversation with Xin Cheng, 29th October, 2021.

dead at the brief moment of the paper's immersion. Several were identified by iNaturalist, a 'citizen science' App, as damselflies, water treaders and false lizard bark-lice. Their short lives were disrupted by this momentary encounter, yet, Xin tells me, a few insects clambered off the paper. Many more insects proliferate in the creek feeding tuna (eels), birds and even kōkopu (fish), and this work foregrounds the effort to restore the mauri of this despoiled creek.⁸



Xin Cheng, *Suburban Water Bodies* (2021)

Conversing takes place in Alicia Frankovich's *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!* between the imagined voice of the body and distant planets beyond our solar system. A fathom is a measurement from a time of untainted ocean depths, unlike the assisted jiggle of bacteria found in this video sequence or in Xin Cheng's frothing chemical scum. The video is made up of thousands of stills of microbiota in water kefir, a probiotic drink, produced with Microscopy Australia, Advanced Imaging Precinct, at Australian National University. A voice-interior, rather than a voice-over (Nadia Bekkers) speaks along with the uneasy chords of Igor Kłaczyński's sound score. The microscope instruments are normally silent, yet in this video the voice and washes of sound accompany our voyage deep into microbiome and the far reaches of the cosmos:

I grow you / Inside / Outside

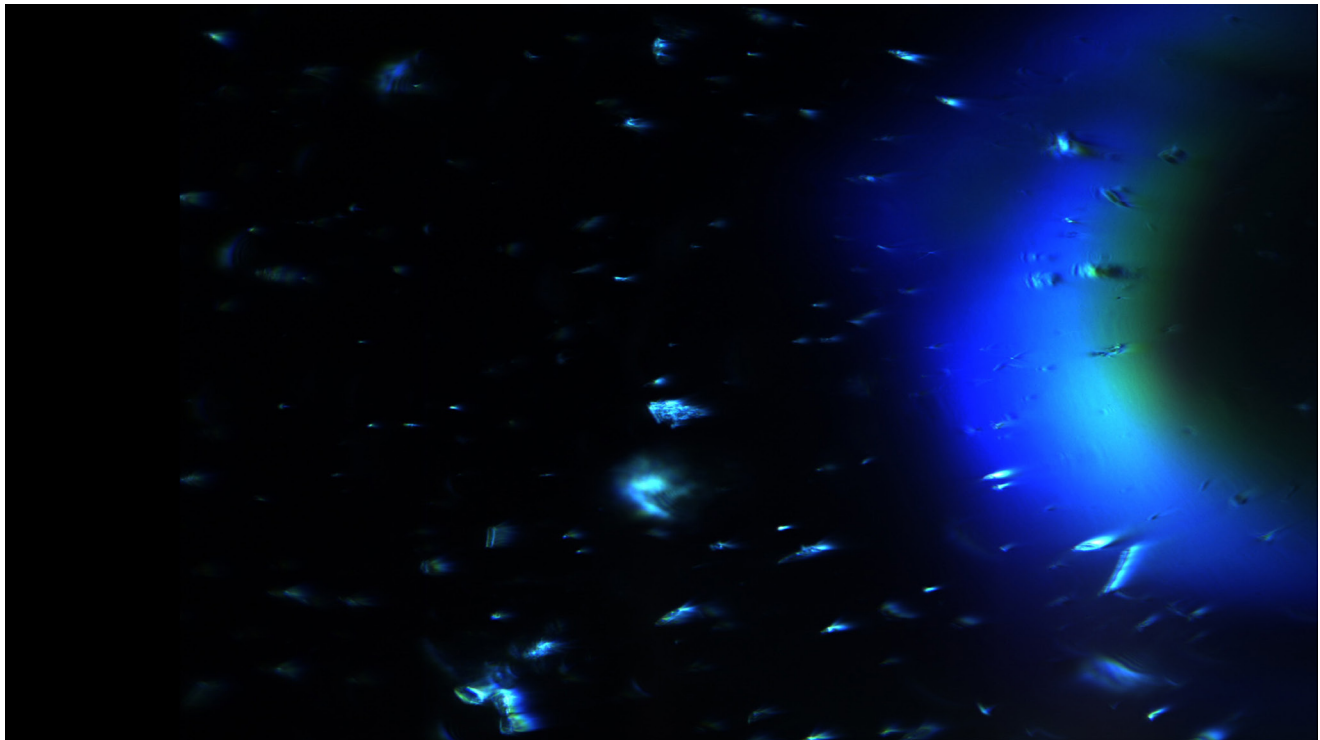
⁸ Eleanor Cooper and Xin Cheng's exhibition *Our Suburban Water Bodies*, at Te Tuhi Gallery raised funds for Friends of Oakley Creek, the group dedicated to restoring this urban

waterway. Mauri is a complex Mātauranga Māori concept, loosely translating as life-force, possessed by all things human and non-human, in this case referring to the health and vitality of the creek.



If we could listen, we might find that we are always engaged in symbiotic conversing inside ourselves at a cellular level, reversing the exterior perspective of the Enlightenment. Science now connects astrophysics and our body's pathology. In a healthy human body the remnant elements of star supernovas, and pathogenic and symbiotic microbiota, including fungi and parasites, coexist peacefully. Kefir drinks, if fed with lemon, sugar and dried fruit each day encourage the balance of the human microbiome. But this relationship is precarious, there are tipping points between these impossibly small and uncountable things, and even to wish for 'good' health is to occupy a solely human frame. From a colonizing parasite's perspective, the body is host, and even the Covid-19 virus wants us alive and meeting new hosts, rather than immobile and dead. Philosopher-biologist Donna Haraway's well-known provocation 'We have never been human' draws attention to this microbial theatre of activity. Human genomes can only be found in 10% of our cells, "...the other 90%", she writes, "are filled with the genomes of bacteria, protists, fungi at play in the symphony necessary to my being alive at all."⁹ The voice-interior of *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!* continues:

These are the planets that we do not know/
This is inside of me/
Things that I take, I swallow/
These are currently orbiting with us



Alicia Frankovich, *Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics!* (2018)



Too far away to imagine, the title suggests the orb-form nudged by bejewelled jelly-spears is an exoplanet, orbiting beyond our solar system. Most circle other stars, but free-floating exoplanets, or rogue planets, orbit the galaxy's very centre and are untethered to any star. "What is it that you contain?", Jeanette Winterson writes, "The dead, time, light patterns of millennia opening in your gut."¹⁰ Future balances of star dust and microbiota may not favour our bodies as the Holocene era has.

Timescales of the Anthropocene likewise underscore Open Spatial Workshop's *Anthropocite* project. In video form the artists speculate on how a lava-bomb fused with human detritus might come into existence. They also propose the new rock type, the 'anthropocite,' based on research and conversations with geologists and materials engineers at Monash University and at Museum Victoria.¹¹ The single-shot, macro-lens video features a tainted haul of water from Port Phillip Bay, Naarm Melbourne, swirling with protozoan cells and sifted with flurries of plastic and concrete dusts. A matter-of-fact voice-over (Barbara Campbell) narrates the rock's emergence from the remnants of a Geosciences building; a traversal of immense geological displacements over millennia. After one hundred years, in the first stage of the building's demise, the earth begins to reclaim the building. The voice narrates:

organic matter collects on the roof of the Geosciences building, fouling gutters and composting to form a layer of soil.

Next, seeds dropped by birds germinate and force their roots through crevices on the building façade. This diachronic imagining brings meteorological and climatic forces to bear on the human-made structure. In another one thousand years, the voice continues, fires caused by lightning turn all the wooden structure to charcoal and the steel rusts to form iron oxides. Concrete collapses and plastic elements break down under the solar UV light. Another ten thousand years on, we hear:

...the building structure has been reduced to rubble. All steel reinforcing has been converted into iron oxides and washed away leaving cavities in the concrete. Aluminium window frames, while initially protected by their coating of oxide, have also corroded to form aluminium oxides. Much of the copper, originally electrical wiring and plumbing has corroded to form copper carbonate. Fungus and moulds have converted all remaining wood and fibre to inorganic minerals.

¹⁰ Jeanette Winterson, *Op Cit.*, p. 218.

¹¹ Advisors on *Anthropocite* include Dr Andrew Tomkins, James Driscoll and Julie Boyce, geologists and researchers in the School of Earth, Atmosphere and Environment at Monash

University, Professor Nick Birbilis, head of the Department of Materials Engineering at Monash University and Dermot Henry, Deputy Director, Sciences, Division of Research and Collections at Museums Victoria. The object 'anthropocite' is incorporated into the Monash Earth Sciences Garden on the Clayton campus. <https://osw.com.au/Anthropocite-2015>.



Open Spatial Workshop (Terri Bird, Bianca Hester, Scott Mitchell), *Anthropocite* (2015)

The grand edifices of the construction industry, now leading energy consumers of fossil fuels, fall to geological forces along with the follies of academia. The earth continues without us. With the building largely disintegrated, the voice goes on, loose particulate matter of concrete, plastics, metal oxides, ceramics and glass fragments are washed down Dandenong Creek toward Port Phillip Bay. Finally, after one million years:

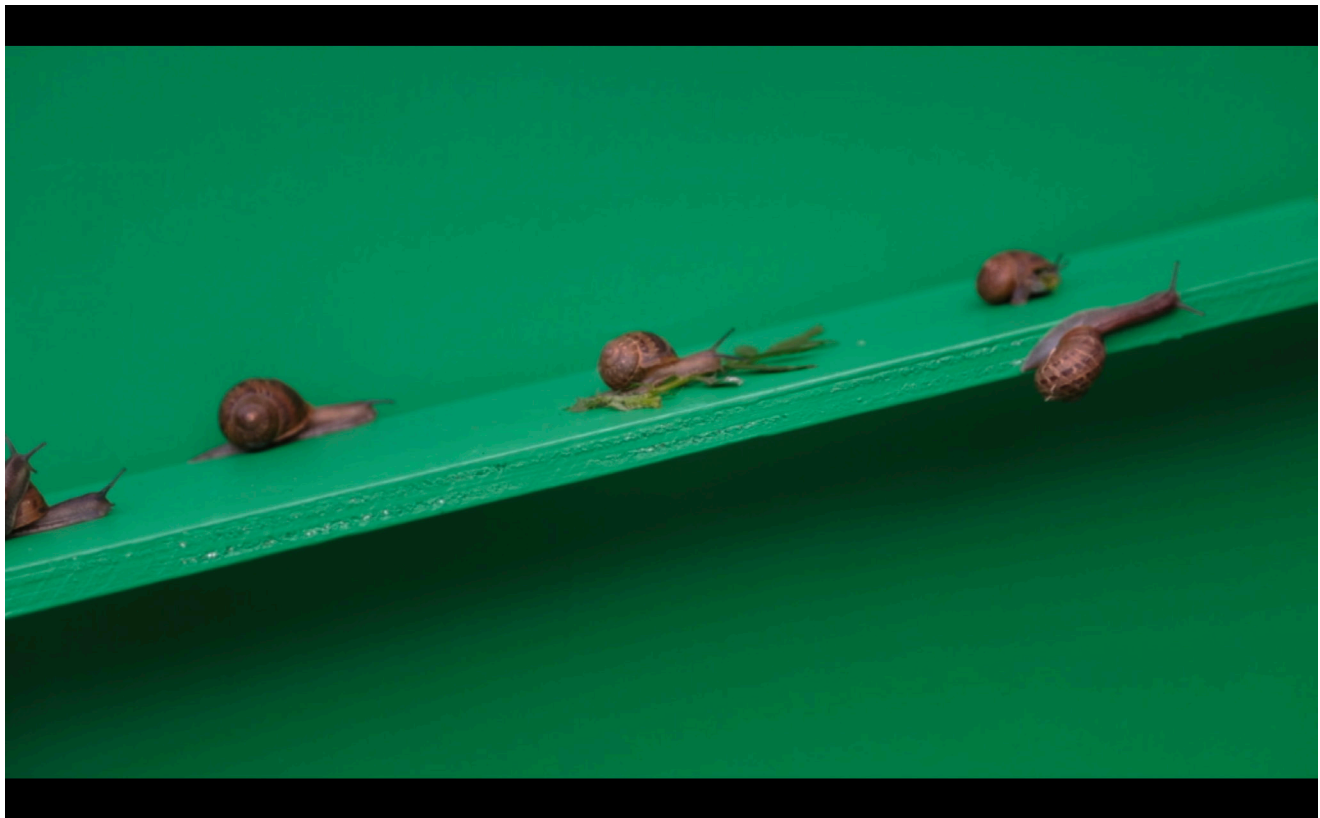
... As volcanos form, fragments of surrounding 'country rock', including vestiges of the Geosciences building are carried in the magma flow. These are ejected in the form of lava bombs, their outer magma surface cooling as they fall to earth where they split to reveal their sedimentary core.

If we compare humanity's fate to this built structure we cast into the depth of the 'world without us' imagined by Quentin Meillassoux and the speculative realists.¹² Open Spatial Workshop not only imagine, they also manufacture a lava bomb à la anthropos, the 'anthropocite', a layered sedimentary rock with a shell of volcanic magma. Even as we face Endtimes the story of *Anthropocite* is not melancholic. We need to get real about our ecocidal trajectory, and the more-than-human multitudes we bring down with us.

12 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. London and New York: Continuum, 2008, p. 7.



While Open Spatial Workshop conjure a new rock form, Lucy Meyle's *Snail Ramp Demonstration Video* is a purpose-built structure for encountering the more-than-human. To the dull noise of suburban traffic and the peep of backyard garden birds an unruly squad of snails move incrementally up a green ramp. They are cosmopolitan, common garden snails *Cornu aspersum*, native to the balmy Mediterranean region. In scientific terms they are an anthropochorous species; aliens transported to Aotearoa by humans, either deliberately or inadvertently. In absurd moments they over-reach and fail; a snail dangles precariously off a stem on the ramp and I find myself enmeshed in the snail's fate, as they cling on with apparent calm.



Lucy Meyle, *Snail Ramp Demonstration Video* (2018)

Over a full two minutes in the final shot, a snail solos a graceful, serpentine stage-exit through a large snail-shaped hole in the ramp. Endemic snails such as Pūpūharakeke and Kauri snails lack the settler snails' easy adaptability to human-altered environments and a warmer climate. Our anthropochorous visitors are tragically in competition with the slow evolution rates of the descendants of Gondwanaland. I have conflicted feelings over these uninvited guests to Aotearoa. This extraordinary study of commonplace leads me to the human colonizers who have flourished, reproduced and made a mess of things on a much grander scale, and none of this the fault of the snail.

If Lucy's garden presents the world in microcosm, in the opening section of Sorawit Songsataya and Antonia Barnett McIntosh's *Offspring of Rain* we sense the pressure on our squeezed and tormented earth at a planetary scale. A squashy earth-globe bounces up and down as if struck by the brash strum of an inner mechanism. The video shifts between live action land and weather-scapes glimpsed through the vertical view of a mobile phone, and animated imaginings, where translucent forms metamorphosize in four dimensions. My notes, written while listening and watching *Offspring of Rain*, read like a dream sequence, but this is an aural dream accompanied by Antonia's 'sonic postcard' combining instruments, house-hold and city textures and rhythms of the everyday.¹³



...two animated hands hold a shimmering fragment of ice; this partial object morphs from a snow dome to a rubbery starfish, a diamond to a kayak, a snowflake textured by glacial ice. The notes tinker upwards off-scale. A clear river flows fast over rocks; animated raindrops fall on powerlines along a main highway; the rain algorithm changes to a swirling mass of droplets, or particles, rain becomes countless atoms. Disney stars shine over massive pylons while travelling along an alpine road; scritch-scratching sounds beneath the clouds, sunlight and crystalline bursts of animated shimmer; a snow algorithm produces a flurry in a clear sky, raindrops again. An extreme close-up of heavy frost-coated grasses; a hovering sound, buzzing and pulsing. A real hand filmed through a thin layer of frozen ice touching it gently. Blades of a wind farm pulse, sucking, breathy noises...

I sometimes can't tell what is 'real' and what is animated in *Offspring of Rain*, just as the sounds are only partly identifiable. Digital devices invite us to think of media as environmental, and it is increasingly difficult to uncouple artificial life-forms from natural ones, as John Durham Peters suggests.¹⁴ The saturated agricultural, industrial and technical video-scape is made with the intimate pocket device of iPhone 7, and a drone camera in several sequences.¹⁵ There are no whole human bodies in this work, or in this programme for that matter, only hands, touching, querying and sending digital message-postcards. In this queering of nature, and the genre of 'man-alone' road-trip through remote waterscapes, a non-binary view reveals all things as weather-like, in aleatory flux.

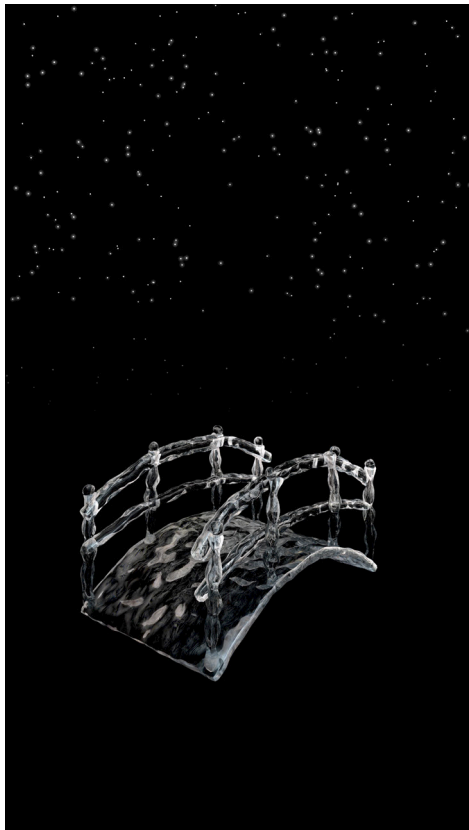
13 Antonia Barnett McIntosh describes the composition as a 'sonic postcard' which she made while away from Aotearoa in the Northern hemisphere. She writes, "I recorded myself 'playing' objects as musical instruments, as well as just whatever was around when I hit record... finding textures and rhythms from the everyday." She created; "a feeling of a time and a place and a certain sonic quality" that correlates to the images and also stands on its own as an audio work. Personal email, 2nd November 2021.

14 Peters, John Durham. *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. p. 3.

15 When asked why they used the iPhone as camera, Sorawit Songsataya replied: "...partly because of its status as an intimate object. Not only that they contain our most

private information but also attach to bodies; in pockets, hands, and in bed. And I think I was trying to make 'landscape' or 'nature' feel personal. I thought the portrait format could help heighten this sense of personhood. And the verticality of the format plays into this up-down, cyclical dynamic of rainfalls, precipitation and evaporation." Personal email, 5th November, 2021.

With delicacy *Offspring of Rain* converses with the water cycle and our grandiose attempts to harness the wind and weather, including the site of Meridian Energy's West Wind Farm in Mākara, Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington. Powerlines punctuate the landscape, trucking the wind's energy to our homes. Such meteorological forces have a long history as artists' collaborators. Artists, in turn, question anthropocentric solutionism while figuring out new patterns of care.¹⁶ Eschew fossil fuels we must, with meteorological energy-generators in their place, as our turbulent relationship with atmosphere continues. There is an uncertain resilience in the final image of a liquescent footbridge, artificially glowing, shimmering in the darkness.



Sorawit Songsataya and Antonia Barnett McIntosh, *Offspring of Rain* (2019)

Plays of sunlight and shadow, Te Pō, the dark, and Te Rā-kura, the red Summer sun, are also co-performers in Rachel Shearer's Super 8 film *I am an Open Window*. This work was made in response to the cine-poems and writing of Joanna Margaret Paul. The environmental films of Joanna Margaret Paul, or 'domestic portraiture,' are suffused by sunlight, yet silent, while light billows in a synaesthetic flood of sound in Rachel's video.¹⁷ The low sound surges along a homely hallway of yellow-red light, as if behind closed eyelids, or from

16 Janine Randerson, *Weather as Medium: Toward A Meteorological Art*. Boston: MIT Press, 2018.

17 Solomon Nagler and Mark Williams curated *Through a different lens – film work by Joanna Margaret Paul*. A CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand Screening

programme, supported by CNZ, 2015. Poetry excerpts in Rachel's film are from an untitled poem in *Like Love Poems: Selected Poems by Joanna Margaret Paul*. Ed. Bernadette Hall. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2006.

deep in the long night before our existence. The dusty film cells jerk and flicker energetically; we see ourselves seeing as each frame envelops the next in this optical trick. Motes of dust are illuminated in sunlight. Text appears:

light pours ceaselessly outside

Outdoors in the garden, Te Rā-kura burns above a scrap of cloud in a blue sky that turns pinky-rust then tinges grey. Electrified strings and orchestral cello, pitch-shifted and mixed with 'real' field sound recordings swell and wain like diurnal cycles. The written words:

spun whorls of lilac mist like turret shell



Rachel Shearer, *I am an Open Window* (2015)

Back again in the yellow-greenish hallway we are suspended in a transcendental-euphoric bell sound that oscillates for a long, long time as the room changes colour when the camera's aperture adjusts itself. Finally the aperture closes as clouds pass across Te Rā-kura, darkening the hallway enough to reveal a slit of green garden through the window of the room at the end of the house.

Michel Serres muses in *The Parasite*: “We are buried in ourselves; we send signals, gestures and sounds indefinitely and uselessly. No one listens to anyone else.” Of knowledge systems, he suggests that the scientist, politician and theoretician pretend to understand our world; “We must admit that this ark is full only of shadows and that only untranslatable noise comes of it.”¹⁸ Yet, even he finds rare and improbable moments of accord that produce ‘new songs.’ In the video works collected here, small intimations of such accords in acts of listening, giving and receiving messages are found, however imperfect our human tools of conversation may be.

Artists find instruments to mediate the ontological gap between things, us, the things that are us -- and others at the same time. We are thoroughly remade as we remake the planet. The video pieces in *fathomless* deal with the uncommon in the common, impenetrable realms, vastness, the immeasurable. Yet we carry on undeterred with our sometimes absurd conversation-starters with the more-than-human. Amiria Salmond suggests that approaching our labour relationally implies a certain ‘optimistic creativity.’ In both the sciences and the humanities, as citizens and non-citizens, we devise “new ways to address the problems of the Anthropocene, of global warming, even the prospect of our own demise.”¹⁹

Right now, many decisions made on our behalf seem unfathomable. Despite all we know and all we have measured, ecological negligence prevails amongst multi-national and State power-holders. Yet these artworks suggest that acute looking and listening to phenomena of-the-world creates apertures, if not to shared understanding, then at least to a place where we might begin. By plunging into the hidden scale of things, trace elements of supernovas glimmer in bodily interiors. Through slow, intimate studies of settler snails and survivalist water-beings, an ‘anthropocite’ rock, a starfish-ice form, or motes of dust bathing in the warm light of our closest star, artists converse with beings and non-beings inside and beyond ourselves.



18 Michel Serres, *The Parasite*. London, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1980] 2007, p. 121-122.

19 Salmond, *Op. Cit.*, p. 253.

Acknowledgements

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<http://beyond-human-scales.net>

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Colophon

This essay uses the typefaces Dauphine for the body text; Dauphine Dings for the page Ńs; Daubenton for the FOOTNOTE NUMBERS; and Goudy Bookletter 1911 for the footnote text, **block quotes**, and *work titles*.

The design of the essay is by Lucy Meyle / co-text.info



List of works

Suburban Water Bodies (2021)

Xin Cheng

2 minutes, 37 seconds

Digital video, silent

Technical Realisation: Adam Ben-Dror

The image was originally created as part of the project

Interspecies Kinship, supported by Creative NZ, Toi Aotearoa, 2020.

Exoplanets: Probiotics Probiotics! (2018)

Alicia Frankovich

8 minutes, 9 seconds

Digital video, sound

Sound Composition: Igor Kłaczyński

Voice: Nadia Bekkers

Produced with Microscopy Australia, Advanced Imaging Precinct,
Australian National University, 2018.

Anthropocite (2015)

Open Spatial Workshop (Terri Bird, Bianca Hester, Scott Mitchell)

7 minutes, 27 seconds

Digital Video, sound

Camera: Sophie Takach

Voice: Barbara Campbell

With the support of the School of Earth, Atmosphere and
Environment, Monash University, and Museums Victoria.

Commissioned by Monash University Public Art Commission, with
the support of the Faculty of Science, 2015.

Snail Ramp Demonstration Video (2018)

Lucy Meyle

10 minutes

Digital video, sound

Demonstrators: various garden snails

Offspring of Rain (2019)

Sorawit Songsataya and Antonia-Barnett McIntosh

10 minutes

Digital video, sound

Camera: Sorawit Songsataya

Sound composition: Antonia-Barnett McIntosh

With support from an Enjoy gallery residency 2019 and Lilburn
House/NZSM composer residency 2018-19.

I am an Open Window (2015)

Rachel Shearer

7 minutes

Camera and Sound composition: Rachel Shearer

Super8 Processing: Reversal Films

Extracts from an untitled poem by Joanna Margaret Paul from *Like
Love Poems: Selected Poems by Joanna Margaret Paul*, 2006.

Commissioned by CIRCUIT Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New
Zealand as part of the programme *Six artists respond to the poetry
of Joanna Margaret Paul*, 2015.

