

‘Because you think of yourself as totally integrated in bios and you’ve forgotten that you totally rely on other life forms’

In conversation with Ursula Biemann and Timothy Morton

¹ Ursula Biemann and Timothy Morton contributed to the panel *Dark Ecologies* as part of the lecture series *Hybrid Ecologies*. The panel took place on 3 November 2016 at the Academy of Fine Arts Munich.

² See Timothy Morton’s contribution to this volume, p. 98.

Susanne Witzgall [sw] Your talks¹ showed some interesting parallels in your involvements with our changing ecological reality. Both of you, for example, argued against the sharp distinction between the artificial and the natural, and highlighted the inextricable entanglements between humans, non-humans, artificial and biological components, their interconnectedness, making clear demarcations impossible. And you both also alluded to the withdrawing of entities, of things, either because they are invisible and widely distributed all over the world or because they contradict themselves. But what I find especially remarkable – having your video works *Subatlantic* in mind, Ursula – is that both of you emphasize the exploration of the current and future human attunement to ecological reality. You were both talking about the psychic condition of the human. Tim, you for instance talked about depression when faced with ecological reality, and of finding sweetness inside this depression.² Why is this attunement to ecological reality so crucial for you?

Timothy Morton [TM] You know this is why art is really, really good, isn’t it? We’ve only just – ‘we’ meaning human beings, in particular white Western ones – started dreaming the Anthropocene. So far, the ecological information delivery mode has been in the form of something like a PTSD dream. When you open the newspaper (I can hardly do it, because it’s so traumatizing), it’s not only the content but the way it is delivered. You go ‘5’, ‘200 000’, ‘40%’, ‘3.2’, ‘x, y’ ... everyday there’s another set of numbers like that. The way we talk to ourselves

about ecological reality is like having a PTSD dream. It's like being a post-traumatic-stress-disordered person who has a dream. This dream is like a recurring nightmare and the point of this nightmare is to install yourself just before the horrible things happen, so that you don't have to be frightened in that very traumatised way, so that you can actually kind of anticipate it. Now the problem is that this is exactly wrong. It's not even about this scientific data, it's about the aesthetics as well, because what it's kind of saying is that the disaster hasn't happened yet. Can't we just admit that it has already happened? There's so much relief from that. It's a little bit like these horror movies where the character figures out that he or she is already dead. It's an incredibly relief that you don't have to worry about dying anymore because you are already dead. And since you're already dead you can get on with things and figure out how to exist. That's also true ontologically in the same way: since I'm already haunted by some sort of weird spectral version of my self, I already don't count as 'alive' as opposed to 'not alive', or 'conscious' as opposed to 'not conscious', or even down to the point of 'existing' as opposed to 'not existing'. So I can sort of relax ...

I personally believe that human beings are not like Pac-Man. In the Western philosophy space we have been turning ourselves into these negation monsters for a couple of hundred years. They go through the world biting everything, eating everything, swallowing everything. I don't think that at all. I think we are actually highly capable of being sensitive, comedian-like-beings who can attune to all kind of things, and what we actually really need is a new kind of theory of action, in particular revolutionary action, that doesn't produce such a sharp dichotomy between passive and active. Actually, when you quantize it down to the bits that comprise an action, you find that those bits are actually appreciation. Aesthetic appreciation is how action actually works. There's no difference between appreciating something and doing something. That's because the causal dimension is exactly the aesthetic one. It's not underneath like some mechanism turning away. It's in front. So your job is to directly mess with cause and effect. Let's mess with it in a way that isn't this kind of traumatizing data delivery mode that we're kind of stuck in with associated religious overtones like apocalypse.

Ursula Biemann [UB] Attunement is the most benign and optimistic of possible developments we can come up with right now when facing climate change and the speed required for our own mutation, if we are to survive as a species. I like to imagine possible sensorial attunements, such as seeing and breathing underwater, or introducing new legal guidelines like the manual for interspecies communication, which hints to a changed relationship to the living world, as I do in *Subatlantic* (fig. 1–6). Obviously, when it comes to global warming, what is needed now is not more statistics or more data, although this is what we are getting a lot. My modest contribution as an artist is to find narratives and images, to create cinematic worlds that can address a collective imaginary, rather than merely the rational mind. This is what

is at stake, basically, the ability to mutate and imagine ourselves anew. The massive changes that are coming our way are occurring infinitely faster than evolution. So the crucial question now is what's going to happen to our senses, how can we adapt to, or even anticipate the impacts of future transformations? Aesthetics that are capable of reaching the imaginary will be essential, and these often court the fictional. Strangely, it's the current eco-crisis that is producing the need to create fictions about the most material dimension of our living conditions, if not our very ability to survive. How does it affect our senses, but also, just as importantly, our thoughts? I treat thoughts as material units. Or let's say that in these video narratives thoughts materialize. They reconfigure our engagement with the changing ecology they merge with frozen methane, become part of weather events, unhinge new maritime cohabitations. They are out there in the landscape, physical and performative. They speak of a world in which the human-earth relationship is fragile, complicated, poetic and intensely physical. Some of the text passages in *Subatlantic* are scientific in nature, but they are interspersed with scraps of 'irrational' episodes.³ They slam the breaks on the logical, smooth flow of understanding. At the same time they open synapsis in the brain to allow for new ecological connections between our perception and the living environment.

³ For instance: 'In the Arctic Sea, the dense salty water drops to the deep-ocean floor and then flows back to tropical regions,' and 'underwater passages accumulate impersonal intelligence.' Ursula Biemann, *Subatlantic*, video essay, single-channel HD video, 11 minutes, 2015, min. 3:50–4:16.

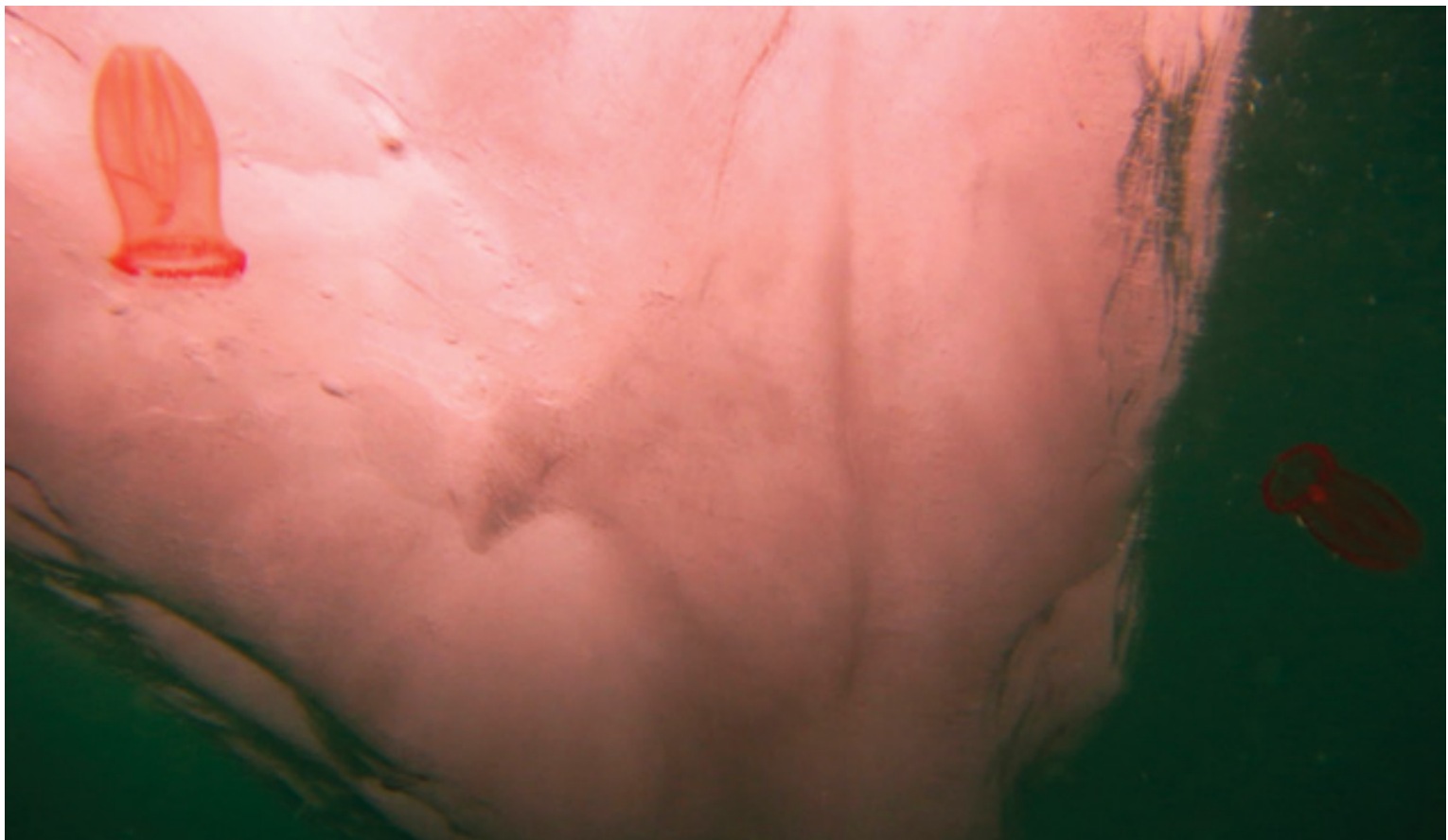
TM Do you know, Ursula, why I so love what you did about efficiency? I think that's really important. Like data dumping on ourselves, we also tell ourselves that we have to become much more efficient, more sustainable. But what are we actually sustaining? I realized that in the end the efficiency mode is actually all about oil. Even if you stop using the oil, you still might be acting politically in efficiency mode, in oil mode. It's efficiency mode because oil is a precious toxic resource. So you have to get into this efficiency mode to use it. I just ran through this experiment myself. In Texas there are a lot of wind farms, and I got my house entirely powered by wind. For the first couple of days I was feeling all efficient and holy, like a very good boy. Then suddenly I realized, what this actually means is I could have a disco in every room of my house with decks and DJs and strobe lights, and full of people just partying, and I would affect far far less life forms. So what is that about? It's about creating and enhancing pleasure modes, not just for me, but for these other life forms, because it's like allowing them to exist. You know, dying is totally inconvenient from a pleasure point of view, one might say. I feel the ecological future is about enhancing and creating new forms of pleasure. That's another aspect to which art contributes.

SW Let's stick to the arts. Ursula, can you explain a little more about how the current concept of ecology affected your works in terms of form and content?

UB For one, it made me think about cinematic or videographic ecology, which views the world as consisting of all kinds of relational processes and encounters that produce and reproduce the world anew in every moment. I see my videos as part of the slow and laborious

Fig. 1–6 (following pages)
Ursula Biemann, *Subatlantic*, 2015, videostills, 2015, 11:24 min, HD video, colour, stereo, 16:9 format.





project of putting the world together somehow. They generate an aesthetic ecosystem, often planetary in scale. In this sense they are geomorphic; they contribute to a process of forming worlds. In my mind they are distinctly non-representational. So you see, I have a deep interest in ecology as a way of thinking of how the living world is composed, how it interacts and interdepends. Each video tends to draw on a particular model of how we can imagine this organization. In *Egyptian Chemistry* (2012) I got super interested in chemistry as an organizing system through which to explore the ecologies of the Nile. It became a voyage into molecular structures: the river as an accumulation of organic materials or as a hydraulic model, where water interacts with mathematics. Again, the material elements coexist with mental ones, but not in a simplistic cause-effect explanation. The High Dam, water particles, the politics of land usage, fertilizers and peasants are all brought into signifying a sustainable symbiosis. The Nile has always been at once technological, natural and social; it's a hybrid configuration that I would call ecological. In the end *Egyptian Chemistry* is an artwork in the sense that it provides an aesthetic exploration of the order of things per se, rather than a specific (political) order in favour of another one. For my part I start to mingle with that order the moment I take a Nile water sample, as well as when I press the record button on my camera. These two instances are intimately linked.

TM Ecological awareness means being aware of lots of different scales. There's no top scale anymore – the human scale is just one scale among zillions of scales. Because of this, aesthetic experience always has this slightly weird kind of penumbra of something slightly too strange or disgusting to you from your anthropocentrically scaled point of view. There are other sorts of things happening in that. I loved what the elder in the Amazon said, whom you interviewed for your work *Forest Law* (2014): 'The forest is a forest of beings.' That's actually very profound. What he's saying is that there are so many more entities in this forest. The forest is one, but it contains more than one, to say the least. From a certain point of view, that's like art. A work of art is one, but it contains all this different weird pleasure modes: a fly could land on it and use it as a landing pad, for example. That's a pleasure mode of the art as well as a human being looking at it. It has this incredible kind of Pandora's Box quality, a potential infinity, which is wonderful disturbing to anthropocentrism – a potential infinity of scales and enjoyment modes that could come pouring out of it.

UB Yes. What it's also saying is that the forest is a living community of thinking and sensing beings, some visible, others not. It's an intense bio-semiotic universe. In *Forest Law* I got totally involved in the cosmology of the indigenous people, which somehow runs parallel to our aesthetic practice of cosmo-forming. Tim, I wanted to ask you: does this moment in *Subatlantic* – which addresses the phase transitions between the melted and the solid, between the virtual and the material world – does this resonate somehow with your idea of the shimmering and vibrating of things?

TM Absolutely. A very good analogy of what a thing is, is a liquid. You can't grasp it. There's always something slipping away when you try to hold it.

UB But it's both; it's not only liquid.

TM All analogies have their limitations. When you hear the word 'object', you normally think of something static. That's the funny thing about my ideas of objects – they vibrate all by themselves without being pushed. And so actually any phase of transition going from any state to another state involves these little quantum jumps across an impossible gap. It's called the forbidden zone: Isn't that beautiful? When an electron jumps from one orbit to another orbit it goes across the zone called the forbidden zone, or the forbidden gap.

SW Furthermore the American physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad writes about interplays between particles and the void with reference to Richard Feynman, one of the most important authors of quantum field theory. An electron, for example, could suddenly emit a photon and absorb it again in the very next moment. In the words of Karen Barad, the 'electron [...] exchanges a virtual photon with itself' and interacts 'with the virtual particles of the void'. In this way 'it is an ongoing play of in/determinancy'.⁴

UB To take up what you just said, Tim, about there being something always slipping away when you try to hold it. What I find interesting in Barad's writing is when she talks about instrumental measurement, which produces determinate values for the measured quantity and leaves the complementary quantities indeterminate. This other half is suspended from materializing; it slips away into invisibility. We are constantly producing a world, but half of it remains invisible. This helps us to understand why it's really difficult to access things. Graham Harman argued in an interview in *Egyptian Chemistry*⁵ that alluding to things in a more vague and ambiguous way might actually get closer to what the things themselves are. What in science they call measurement, we call framing in film. That's our way of determining qualities, defining at the same time what remains hidden. I suppose there's a strong parallel between how science and video art engage with material reality.

Audience 1 I have a question for Tim relating to aesthetics: could you expand a little more on your concept of play and its ambiguity – specifically how it relates to Kant's idea of free play, which defines the reflective aesthetics in the judgment of taste?⁶

TM If you think about it, the aesthetic experience according to Kant is like a telepathic mind melt between something that's supposedly a person unconscious (this thing here) and something that is supposedly not conscious (like a work of art). Why doesn't Kant put it that way? In order for his theory to work there has to be a tiny little bit of what

⁴ Karen Barad, 'On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am (v.1.1.)', in Susanne Witzgall, Kerstin Stakemeier (eds.), *Power of Material / Politics of Materiality*, (Zurich, Berlin: diaphanes, 2014), p. 158 and 159–160.

⁵ *Egyptian Chemistry*, 2012, part 3, 'Ecologies and Metachemistry', 20 min. 9:30–14:40.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, (New York: Cambridge, 2000).

was called animal magnetism. He was fascinated by Mesmer. The last 200 years of Western philosophy has mostly been guys going: 'I'm not Yoda. I'm not Yoda. Everything I'm saying is not *Star Wars*.' Because the Force might be this animal magnetism. It's created by life; it surrounds and penetrates us; it enables you to cause things to move, telepathically, without mechanical touching and pushing. And that's exactly the aesthetic experiment: It's the feeling of being moved by something that might not even be in the room; you might not even have been to visit it, still you get kind of moved. One thing that's going on there is a really strong sense of what play could be. It's not just this 'Oh look, we've hit the play level. We've been machinating around with our machinery and causality, and now we can have a break, or now we're doing it so well that this playful thing is happening.' It's more the other way around: it's more like the playful thing is part of the deep structure of how cause and effect actually works.

Audience 2 Tim, could you elaborate a little bit more on your concept of pleasure? I'm wondering whether you know about the happiness of fish?

TM I'm currently writing a book for Verso called *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-human People*. In this book I ask if you can develop Marxist-related theory to include non-human beings. I would say yes, of course you can – but you're not going to like it, Hegelian Marxists. What I'm trying to argue is that solidarity is like a super default noise that the biosphere is making. It's like the ground level of how it feels. And pleasure in this case would be exactly what Marx says it is – but nobody noticed it, because they all equated it with light mechanical labour, which is the abstracted version. Pleasure is what it's like when you bite into a peach and you let the juice come down. I can't know exactly what a fish pleasure mode is, but I'm not completely shut off from 'fishiness'. In a certain way I don't really know what *my* pleasure mode is; I can't be really sure that I'm completely and utterly human. I really loved when Ursula said that the world is full of holes, because I'm trying to argue this. I'm trying to say you can absolutely relate to a fish, like maybe twenty percent, but it's better than zero. You don't have to be a hundred percent knowing or zero percent knowing; you can have this kind of approximate model way of understanding.

We've been telling ourselves that we can't possibly know what it's like to be x. In particular we have been saying: 'You can't talk about non-Western stuff because that is appropriating other cultures and you can't know what those are.' The paradox is when you say that you have already measured them, because you've put them in a frame where you've said: 'Look we've measured these two and we find them to be different.' However, because this world is full of holes, you can't totally relate. I'm basically writing a very soppy hippy book about the fact that we can absolutely get along with each other and realize that we are part of a species. That doesn't mean we're white-bread patriarchy underneath. We're just the concept of mankind so far. Being human



⁷ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia, 2016), pp. 161–162.

means being a little bit non-human too. In order to be Tim, Tim has to have all this non-Tim DNA in his bacterial microbiome otherwise he is going to die. There's so much more of this DNA than there's Tim-DNA. Tim is a hole but there's so much more in that hole than there is of Tim in order for Tim to be Tim. There's some of that stuff, some of that fish pleasure that I can log onto because the fish is one, but the pleasure modes are many, many, and I can have them too.

Marietta Kesting What I found most thought-provoking in your work, Tim, was something you didn't mention today, but which I read in one of your texts: that we should look at radioactive waste, and kind of embrace it, for example, keep it in a church, or somewhere within our society instead of burying it under the soil.⁷ A similar idea appears in your video *Forest Law*, Ursula, where the polluted soil is sampled. Maybe you can comment a little bit more on this idea of taking the toxins out of the earth and exposing them again?

UB That's the only way we can see it, right? That's the problem with so many toxic materials – they are shoved into places out of sight so we're used to not see them. But we are running out of such sites. *Forest Law* points to the massive contamination of Amazonian forest lands in Ecuador caused by the oil-extraction industry. The forensic activist in the video plays an important role in mediating and making the toxic sludge speak to us. But he isn't the main subject, the toxic earth is. He's just a facilitator who is activating it, making it expressive. The contaminated soil is no longer a deplorable background; it has moved to the fore, as subject. The forensic activist in *Forest Law* is actually someone who works for a chemistry lab in Quito analysing soil samples. He's providing evidence for the court, but he's also an activist. When journalists want to document the ecological disaster, he takes them to the sites and does this performance. So he's a chemist and a performer. This double figure was really ideal for the project.

TM The biosphere is a symbiotic biosphere. I call it the symbiotic real. Symbiosis is an uneasy relationship between at least two beings, or between a being and itself in a funny way. In the word 'host' is the Latin word for *friend* and also the Latin word for *enemy*. If you have too much of a certain symbiont and it's going to harm you there's this kind of weird way in which there's an uneasy relationship. Once you figure that out, it's called having ecological awareness. Once you see a little bit of that you might have the impulse to get it off you, because you think of yourself as totally integrated in bios and you've forgotten that you totally rely on other life forms just to stand up. That's kind of like what human beings have been doing with nuclear waste. They've been pretending that they didn't even make it. They've been trying to hide it underneath whatever that is, Norway, Yucca Mountain or Finland. But it's like when you flush the toilet – it doesn't go away, it doesn't go into this strange mystical different dimension, it goes to the wastewater treatment plant. And now, since you know that there's no 'away', you have planetarian awareness. The same is true for air conditioning:

the idea that you are pushing the toxic air somewhere else doesn't work on that scale, because you're just moving it around on the planet. Once you figured that out, that on that scale there's no 'away', you might as well start treating things that way, too. You might as well start realizing that everything is already inside social space, which means that social space isn't fundamentally human. How do you want to treat these nuclear materials? Do you want to pretend that they don't exist? Which is going to cause them to leach into the ground water and all sorts of things, or do you need to actually have them front and centre in your life? Over time I've been deeply intrigued and slightly involved in this nuclear guardianship movement, which is like an idea that nuclear waste should be stored above ground in monitored retrievable storage. This means something really intense: it means that for at least another 24,000 years (that's the half life of plutonium) we have to look after this stuff for the sake of ourselves and other life forms. I can imagine a situation where in the middle of a town square in the future there could be a very very nicely shielded glass sphere containing a very tiny amount of all the plutonium we make. It might even be a really interesting art practice to make a personal cover saying: 'In the future there will be plutonium stored here above ground.'

⁸ See Timothy Morton's contribution to this volume, pp. 98.

UB There are projects speculating about ways of speaking and signing to a future humanity about places, which have loads of atomic waste deposits underground. Smudge Studio in New York did *Repository: A Typological Guide to America's Ephemeral Nuclear Infrastructure* (2012) and other projects marking nuclear deep time. But you suggest to keep it all above ground.

TM That's the idea. Instead of hiding it and then having to make a warning sign you don't hide it at all. So you don't have to make a warning sign because you have incorporated it into your culture. You don't have to warn people because it's already there – in some kind of visible way.

Maria Muhle You said before that we need a revolutionary theory that gets rid of the opposition or dualism between the active and the passive. I can follow this point very well in regard to the active side, because it's so easily integrated in any efficiency mode or sustainability or what I would call the biopolitical paradigm of ecology. I was wondering about the passive part, however. Doesn't this relate to the darkness, the depression and the melancholy you mentioned?⁸

TM We are super scared of what passivity could mean. When you say 'objectified' or 'object' your mind goes quickly through the worst thing that could happen to you, which is to be turned into an object. We got this idea that only subjects get to act and everything else gets either to be totally inert or it has to behave. Following Karl Marx, human beings can imagine things, so even the worst of architects is better than the best of bees. Bees are just executing an algorithm like robots, but humans are imagining scenarios, projecting

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 1.283–284 (chapter 7).

¹⁰ ‘String Pulling Bees Provide Insight into Spread of Culture’, *Science Daily*, 4 October 4 2016, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2016/10/161004141432.htm> (accessed 7.11.2017).

them into the future.⁹ You can run an experiment, however, that shows you that bees can pull little strings.¹⁰ These little bumblebees can teach each other to do it. The point is: passive never means inert. Passive always means kind of quaveringly quasi-alive. And so, as opposed to passivity, I prefer to call it *stillness*: it’s like music, which is really about listening. If you’re playing music with someone, you’re actually listening to that person. You’re going along with something.