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## Speculative Subjectivities: Essayistic Forms and Material Bodies

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree  
in Art and Visual Culture

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## Abstract

This practice-based research project focuses on selected contemporary moving image practices that work with strategies of experimental documentary, essayistic filmmaking, and site-specific installation. It focuses on the specific tactics employed by three artists, Dani ReStack, Rachel Rose and Diana Thater. The forms and strategies employed in these practices are analyzed through case studies of ReStack's *Draft 9* (2003), Rose's *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013), and Thater's *Delphine* (1999). The specific purpose of this research is to illuminate how these contemporary moving image practices describe subjective experience, in both single-channel and installation forms, to critically engage with anthropocentric and humanist notions of subjectivity and human exceptionalism. The research examines the use of essayistic strategies like voice-over and text-on-screen and the activation of the embodied and sensorial qualities of moving images, particularly in reference to how they have been analyzed in the context of phenomenological film theory by Vivian Sobchack, Jennifer M. Barker, and Laura U. Marks. These practices use the sensorial, affective, and embodied potential of moving images, and the tactics of moving image installation, to foreground the materiality of the body as the foundation of subjective experience. They also employ this materiality as a strategy for undermining boundaries and hierarchical relationships between human and nonhuman realms. This research, led by a practice-based perspective, creates an interdisciplinary dialogue between these contemporary practices and the theoretical frameworks of critical posthumanism, particularly new materialism. It specifically uses reconfigurations of subjectivity and humanness as they've been proposed by Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Patricia MacCormack, and Donna Haraway.

## Keywords

Essay film, phenomenological film theory, new materialism, installation art, moving image art, speculative subjectivity, practice-based research, human and non-human relations, contemporary art

## Summary for Lay Audience

This research takes an art practice perspective on selected contemporary moving image artists and specific artworks. It analyzes the way these artists use essayistic filmmaking and installation art to describe the artist's subjective experience with a focus on the body and senses. It looks at case studies of Dani ReStack's *Draft 9* (200), Rachel Rose's *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013), and Diana Thater's *Delphine* (1999). The focus of this research is to analyze how contemporary practices, through using specific strategies of essayistic filmmaking and installation, could think critically about historical notions of subjectivity and humanness.

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## Preface

I see my moving image practice as opening a space of experience from which I can refuse and resist systems and structures that reduce complexity and call for conformity. In the space it opens, I shed the labels of cultural, social, and political identities that have defined me without my consent. I also offer the moving images I make as spaces for others to be free from them. In this space of my practice, I disown and dismantle the parts of my lived experience that are damaging and alienating and shelter the complex and interesting parts I don't want to lose. Sustaining this space in which no rules apply is also a slow and intentional undoing of myself, a daily practice of encountering what I don't know and can't see.



## Introduction

The research in this dissertation has grown from the core concerns that have developed in my moving image practice in recent years.<sup>1</sup> As a practice-based project, this written research is fueled by my creative explorations, and it exists alongside the studio projects I have completed throughout my Ph.D. studies. In these moving image projects, I look to the strategies of essay film as means to engage critically with humanist notions of subjectivity and anthropocentric assumptions about human exceptionalism.<sup>2</sup> In my experimental practice, I create speculative investigations of subjective experience through an empirically grounded process. The medium of moving images is used to convey the questions, feelings, and affects I encounter in my lived experience. Throughout this writing, I elaborate on the different theoretical elements that have acted as catalysts and references for these creative inquiries.

My practice has employed methods of documentary film, and especially essayistic filmmaking practices, for many years. My interest in using them as creative tools originates from their potential to be used speculatively to reflect on subjective experience. In the essay form, moving images are used experimentally to visualize different facets of subjective experience: what it means to be a subject and how we as subjects relate to the world we experience. German avant-garde artist and filmmaker Hans Richter described the essay as a form of documentary film that, instead of being interested in objective reality, is invested in making the invisible world of imagination and thoughts visible. Because the essay form visualizes the processes of thinking and imagining, it can incorporate a limitless range of creative strategies and subject matter.<sup>3</sup> Essay films traditionally use specific tactics, most often a first-person voice-over and text-on-screen to establish a distinctly personal point of view.

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<sup>1</sup> The theorists whose writings I refer to use terms like film, cinema, video, and audiovisual media. I don't draw clear lines between film, video and installation in my practice and refer to it as moving image. I also approach the practices in the case studies as moving image. I return to this more later.

<sup>2</sup> When discussing the essay form in the context of existing theory, I use the terms film and filmmaking because this is how these practices are described by the various theorists that I will bring into this conversation.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Richter, "The Film Essay: A New Type of Documentary Film," *Essays on Essay Film*, edited by Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 91-92.

In my moving image practice, I frequently employ strategies like voice-over and text to create a personal and dialogical mode of address. I use this formal structure to reflect on and establish connections between images and sounds and to speak to the viewer in an intimate and conversational way. I develop this moving image work through a process of collecting and reworking a personal archive of images, both by filming on location and by collecting and appropriating material from a variety of existing sources. Important parts of this process are my frequent filming trips to locations, both close by and far away, in which I immerse myself, with camera in hand, in the sensorial observation of environments and the living beings within them. Essayistic filmmaking has always interested me because of its distinct approach to moving images, not as representations of either subjective or objective reality, but as the direct visualization of the complex and open-ended process of thinking and feeling my way through lived experience as a subject. In the context of essay film, moving images are not abstract thoughts or ideas translated into images, but they describe the very process of living from which those thoughts and ideas emerge.

While essayistic filmmaking, as an experimental form of documentary film, attempts to visualize experience from a subjective point of view, it is inherently committed to approaching the notion of subjectivity as an unstable and elusive concept that resists being defined in a fixed way.<sup>4</sup> They also frequently visualize experience through the eyes of a dislocated and fragmented subject who is deeply embedded in the chaos and uncertainty of who and what they are and where they belong. Within my practice, the notion of subjectivity operates as this continually shifting notion that can be imagined and performed but not contained. It can only be made tangible through the phantasmagoria of moving images and experienced in the traces it leaves in moving images as observations, movements, sensations, affects, and language.

This written dissertation specifically seeks to address the questions that have emerged in my practice as it has moved towards site-specific and multi-channel installation. This formal evolution is also inseparable from the theoretical questions I reflect on in my writing. Installation practices amplify the embodied aspects of subjective experience such

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<sup>4</sup> The word essay originates from the French word “essayer,” meaning “to try” or “to attempt.”

as senses, affect, and movement.<sup>5</sup> Because of these intrinsic qualities, they also have the potential to be employed in speculative investigations of subjective experience that seek to avoid perpetuating abstract notions of subjectivity that separate it from the material body. They can also offer methods for untethering the notion of subjectivity from the supposedly superior human attributes like language and self-reflexive thinking that are used to elevate humanness above its nonhuman others. While I consider essayistic strategies like voice-over and text-on-screen useful in creating a dialogical and personal mode of address, using installation tactics has enabled me to shift from prioritizing language and text towards an embodied focus on subjective experience. I work with installation forms because they foreground the body in all its senses as the foundation for subjective experience.

This formal evolution in my practice has been fueled by the tensions that have emerged between the essayistic strategies I use and their implicit connections to definitions of subjectivity that I would like to disown. These are notions of subjectivity and humanness inherited from humanism and part of the categories and systems of knowledge Giorgio Agamben describes as the “anthropological machine” of Western thought. Subjectivity, in the context of humanism, accounts for the conscious and self-regulating rational self that is exclusively and uniquely a human subject. It proposes an abstract consciousness separated from the material realm.<sup>6</sup> Located in the mind that is separate from the body, it gives human subjects an abstract and unified core that is connected to the universal essence of what it means to be human. This abstract and universal idea of consciousness, and the supposedly unique human abilities to think, reason, and use language have been, as Monica Cano Abadía writes, “the intellectual measure of humanity.”<sup>7</sup> Human beings who are seen as possessing these abilities are separated and elevated above the human and nonhuman others who fail to qualify as full subjects. Historically, to varying degrees, this has included everyone except white heterosexual men. Rosi Braidotti writes that within these systems,

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<sup>5</sup> While using a variety of materials and mediums, installation refers to artworks that configure them spatially and often site-specifically to create environments that the viewer physically enters rather than objects they observe from a distance.

<sup>6</sup> Epitomized by the Cartesian self, *Cogito ergo sum*, “I think therefore I am.”

<sup>7</sup> Mónica Cano Abadía, “New Materialisms: Re-Thinking Humanity Within an Interdisciplinary Framework,” *Intercultural Philosophy*, no.1 (May 2018): 170. <https://doi.org/10.11588/icp.2018.1.48071>.

the human and nonhuman others are viewed through the lens of negative difference and reduced to disposable bodies that are defined as less than human.<sup>8</sup>

Because the influence of these historical notions permeates the social, political, and cultural contexts that I grew up in, received my education in, and continue to exist in, my lived experience continues to be inflected by their impact in both conscious and unconscious ways. In working with forms of the essay film, especially because of their historical ties to the essay as a literary form, I have to reckon with some implicitly anthropocentric and humanist assumptions about subjectivity and humanness. Essay film theorist Laura Rascaroli also notes that traditional essayistic structure has ties to humanism and assumptions about the essence and unity of human experience.<sup>9</sup> While none of these forms and strategies can be reduced to illustrations of a philosophical notion of subjectivity, traditionally essay films foreground language and self-reflexive thinking. The use of spoken voice-over or text-on-screen also carries the historical baggage of being associated with rational reflection and conceptual thinking.<sup>10</sup> By constructing a subjective point of view primarily through spoken and written text, they emphasize thinking in and through language as the principal way we gain knowledge of our experience and can convey it to others. This can fail to account for the complexity of subjective experience: how it involves the body, senses, and affects and is produced through its endless entanglements with others, both human and nonhuman.

In the following writing, to create connections between the theoretical research I look to and the practice I'm rooted in, I navigate the terrain of contemporary moving image practices. I elaborate on how selected practices, in parallel with my own, operate within this same cross-section of formal and conceptual concerns. I approach the questions in my research through case studies that analyze Dani ReStack's *Draft 9* (2003), Rachel Rose's *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013), and Diana Thater's *Delphine* (1999). These practices resonate with my core interest in the material foundations of subjective

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<sup>8</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Laura Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* vol. 49, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 37. doi:10.1353/fm.0.0019.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.

experience and the material fragility of living bodies. They also offer this materiality and fragility of the body as a means of modelling subjective experience in a more complex, compassionate, and open-ended way, especially in relation to our nonhuman others.

These artists also approach their investigations of subjectivity in moving images through their empirical experience of being a subject; a thinking and feeling entity whose consciousness of self inseparably involves all aspects of experience, including the body, senses, language, feelings, affects, and memories. In these artworks, each artist shows subjective experience as a process, one that emerges in and through complex, fluctuating, and interdependent relationships with other living and inanimate entities. Instead of referring to a fixed, self-contained, and exclusively human subject, they describe subjectivity through a continuous process of interconnected relations and interactions. Through the specific strategies they use, they describe subjective experience in ways that significantly shifts the ground of the traditionally essayistic point of view from language and text-on-screen toward the body, senses, and affect. In these practices, thinking and imagination are also founded on the body.

The way these artists visualize subjective experience resonates with the frameworks of critical posthumanism and particularly new materialism.<sup>11</sup> In the context of new materialism, human beings, as much as all other living beings, are understood as fundamentally corporeal beings and subjectivity is also understood as inherently material. The shared material foundations of all living and nonliving entities bind human and nonhuman beings into equal and interdependent relationships with each other and the environments they are all embedded in. While I analyze the case studies in relation to these theoretical frameworks, this inquiry remains invested in the specificity of the artworks. In analyzing them, I focus on the formal and visual strategies the artists employ to activate relationships between images, sounds, words, and architectural spaces. Inseparable from these formal aspects is how they operate in relation to the viewer.

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<sup>11</sup> New materialism is the name given to a specific set of critical theories in the context of posthumanism. They are marked by their distinct focus on a materialist ontology as a method for undermining categorical differences between human and non-human realms. I will return to this later.

While the case study artworks make use of distinct tactics with specific aims, I approach these artworks and practices as experimental and empirical. An experimental practice, as I view it, is grounded in direct encounters with the world and is committed to letting questions unfold through an unpredictable process of artmaking. It requires responding to immediate experience and encountering the ideas that spring from it through an open-ended inquiry, embracing the uncertainty of where the process might lead or what might come out of it. The immersion into this kind of process produces artworks that can't be fully contained within a singular framework of thought. Because the artworks in this research are multifaceted, my critical engagement with them requires a balancing act where my interpretation and contextualization of the work needs to, at the same time, resist reducing the artworks to illustrations of theoretical concepts.

Theory in relation to an art practice rooted in observation and lived experience can offer abstract concepts that challenge the artist's habitual ways of being in the world. Engagement with critical theory unsettles assumptions and familiar ways of seeing and thinking. It also helps to create layers of complexity. Habitual thinking can become an obstacle for an art practice that seeks to see and think through experience in unexpected and often uncomfortable ways. Within this research, the role of theory is to act as these unsettling catalysts that force an art practice to find new and relevant ways to respond to the world around it. The theoretical frameworks I use also offer ways to build connections between art practices and the most relevant and difficult questions that emerge in our contemporary moment. These frameworks and art practices in conversation can affirm each other's importance as distinct ways of engaging critically with lived experience.

The dialogue that emerges in the particular intersection of theory and practice within this research aims to elaborate on difficult questions: How could subjectivity be described in ways that don't reinforce boundaries between human, nonhuman, and inanimate realms? How could it be described in a way that engenders a sense of interconnectedness between human and nonhuman realms and undermines hierarchical distinctions between them? While these are philosophical questions, they are also practical ones and relevant to contemporary moving image practices, particularly those that are engaged in describing subjective experience.

Elizabeth Grosz describes art as extracting new becomings “from the materiality of forces, sensations, or powers of affecting life.”<sup>12</sup> She writes that art has the most direct impact on the body because it resonates with us viscerally through intensities and affects. It vibrates in and through the body and is capable of connecting it to, and elaborating on, the forces we can’t otherwise perceive. She describes art as “the opening up of the universe to becoming-other.” Grosz also writes that rather than philosophy or art being able to elaborate on each other’s concepts, they exist alongside one another and share a rootedness in the chaos of the forces that impact us. They both have a capacity to “enlarge the universe by enabling its potential to be otherwise.” They create space within the chaos and make it possible for these forces to be framed, elaborated, thought, and felt.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 75.

<sup>13</sup> Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 23-24.

## Part 1: Context and Resources for Experimental Practices



## Hybrid Forms in Contemporary Moving Image Practices

The practices discussed in this dissertation, like contemporary moving image art generally, are characterized by the hybridization of different forms and conventions and their fluid relationship to contexts of presentation. These practices create moving image works that can be exhibited in film theatres, art galleries, online platforms, or as site-specific installations. The way in which moving image practices have migrated into the gallery context and expanded toward installation forms has also been widely theorized as part of an ongoing conversation.<sup>14</sup> While an in-depth analysis of the multitude of theories and terms that have been used to characterize these practices is not the topic of this present research, some discussions are relevant to how the contemporary moving image practices I write about employ existing forms and conventions in experimental and speculative ways.

Theoretical analyses of moving images in the gallery context, specifically those investigating the forms, conventions, and history of cinema, are instructive in understanding the complexity of this contemporary field. Such practices are often viewed through the way they oppose and dismantle cinema's traditional apparatus. Jihoon Kim describes this apparatus as the conventional view in which cinema is understood as a set of technical and ideological operations in which the viewer engages with the images from a static viewing position. They identify and become absorbed into the illusion of the images in a way that is associated with detachment from their physical body.<sup>15</sup> According to Catherine Fowler, while galleries have traditionally been spaces in which artists deconstruct and recontextualize these forms and conventions—often with critique, ambivalence, and even hostility—they are also spaces in which cinema and its uniqueness as an art form become protected and memorialized. Challenged by the ubiquitous presence of digital technologies that threaten to wipe out celluloid film and mass media like television, galleries become spaces in which cinema can be given a new life. Fowler

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<sup>14</sup> Some relevant contributions to this conversation: Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (2013), Maeve Connelly, *The Place of Artists' Cinema: Space, Site and Screen* (2009), Catherine Elwes, *Installation and the Moving Image* (2015), Jihoon Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-media Age* (2016), Gabrielle Jennings, *Abstract Video: The Moving Image in Contemporary Art* (2015).

<sup>15</sup> Jihoon Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital: Hybrid Moving Images in the Post-Media Age* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 252.

specifically notes that since the 1990s, rather than memorializing cinema as a lost art form, gallery films have often taken a distinctly introspective rather than a retrospective view.<sup>16</sup> Rather than viewing cinema as being lost, these practices approach it as being unfinished. Its new life in the gallery context emerges from our personal engagement with its influence and meaning, which continue to be alive in the present.<sup>17</sup>

Other theorists examine these contemporary moving image practices through their use of different forms and conventions in hybrid ways. Kim describes these artworks as “hybrid moving images,” artworks characterized by how they bring different conventions into interactions and transgress boundaries between film, video, and other forms of digital media. These “hybrid moving images” exist in the in-between spaces of existing forms of media and are produced through their interrelations. Their identity is determined through the way they transfer and appropriate other forms.<sup>18</sup> Erika Balsom uses her term “Othered Cinema” to describe how cinema’s formal unity, its traditional apparatus, has shattered into a multiplicity in which its different parts are free to mutate with other forms of media that were once foreign to it. Cinema’s elements appear in new configurations, which, like Kim’s “hybrid moving images,” also inhabit the space between cinema and other forms of media.<sup>19</sup> While the traditional boundaries between cinema and other forms of media are transgressed and blurred, Balsom emphasizes that these distinct forms don’t dissolve into one heterogeneous field in which they disappear. Tensions and differences between these different forms remain. Instead, “Othered Cinema” speaks to the way “cinema has become other than itself,” these new forms both differ and share characteristics with it. Importantly, this new “Othered Cinema” is not just one thing but many things, a heterogeneous field in which the ensembles of parts are not reducible to a self-identity.<sup>20</sup>

While film, video art, and installation art have very different histories and (initially) very different contexts for engaging with audiences, I don’t draw any clear lines between these

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<sup>16</sup> “Gallery Film” is Catherine Fowler’s term.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Fowler, “Remembering Cinema “Elsewhere”: Retrospection to Introspection in the Gallery Film,” *Cinema Journal*, vol 51, no. 2 (January 2012): 28. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2012.0008>.

<sup>18</sup> Kim, *Between Film, Video, and the Digital*, 3- 4.

<sup>19</sup> Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 14.

<sup>20</sup> Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, 16-17.

different mediums in my research. The continuing formal experimentation and expansion into new realms make most contemporary moving image practices impossible to categorize in any simple and consistent way. In the context of my practice and written research, I find the term “moving image” to be the most useful. Catherine Elwes writes that “moving image” emphasizes the blurring of conventional hierarchies between film, video, and installation. It also encompasses the way artists working with both film and video have expanded and reinvented the forms and conventions of art, cinema, and other audiovisual media. She also notes that the term “moving image” emphasizes movement.<sup>21</sup> Moving images, as Elwes also notes, are inherently designed to describe a sensation of movement. This is especially relevant in the context of moving image installation because physically moving within and around the work is often an integral part of the viewer’s engagement with it. This idea of movement resonates with my research in a multitude of ways. In the context of the essay film, subjective experience is traditionally described as an unstable and open-ended process that is continuously transformed through encounters with the world. Similarly, in the theoretical frameworks I use, subjectivity is described as a process that is in a continuous state of flux.

The practices included in my research also illustrate the interaction between essayistic forms and strategies and their potential permutations in the contemporary moving image context, particularly in moving image installations that are exhibited in gallery spaces. In moving through the case studies, I also transition from the more traditional context for essayistic practices, like film festivals and screenings, toward the space of the art gallery. Dani ReStack’s *Draft 9*, in relying on essayistic forms most directly, was exhibited mainly at experimental film festivals. Rachel Rose’s practice exists mainly in the gallery space as installations. *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, by directly employing essayistic strategies while being contextualized and exhibited as an installation, represents the in-between space in which essayistic forms and strategies, as they are traditionally theorized, are in the process of becoming something else. Diana Thater’s *Delphine*, as a site-responsive installation, offers a possible avenue for how moving images could describe and communicate subjective experience spatially. In relation to my own practice, the case studies are also

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<sup>21</sup> Catherine Elwes, *Installation and the Moving Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 5.

organized to reflect its evolution. In recent years, my work has evolved from the traditional strategies and forms of essay film towards an installation-based practice in which subjective experience is visualized and imagined in a fundamentally different way. How my core interests can be reinvented in the installation form remains as one of the open questions within my practice-based research.

### Essayistic Forms and Strategies

While my current practice, and the other practices in my research, can be primarily understood through this hybrid context I just described, I continue to be informed by some of the conceptual and formal aspects of essay film. I don't approach the practices in my research as explicitly essayistic and I'm not approaching essay film as a clearly defined genre. Instead, I'm interested in how some of the traditionally essayistic tactics and approaches, such as their distinct interest in visualizing subjective experience using a first-person point of view, can be employed to critically engage with notions of subjectivity and humanness. These case studies are selected and organized to reflect three unique perspectives on the intersection of these essayistic forms and strategies and the reconfigurations of subjectivity offered in the context of critical posthumanism. These artworks both rely on essayistic tactics and reinvent them to challenge boundaries between human and nonhuman realms of experience. I continue to use essayistic strategies in my own practice and use them in the context of this research to understand how they can be employed and reinvented with these specific aims.

Essay films are contextualized as an experimental branch of documentary filmmaking because they generally insist on sustaining a thread, however thin it might eventually become, to the artist's immediate observations and investigations of empirically experienced reality. While the definition of essay film remains elusive, they are generally understood as investigating the notion of subjectivity and its relationship to experience by employing the artist's first-person point of view. This structure is traditionally predicated on the presence of the first-person point of view either as voice-over or text-on-screen. As I mentioned in the introduction, because this subjective perspective is often predicated on the presence of a singular, self-reflexive, first-person voice that primarily relies on

language to describe subjective experience, these strategies have implicit ties to humanist notions of subjectivity, and they emphasize thinking in and through language. There is often a literal absence of the artist's body on-screen, their presence as a subject is only made clear through the dialogical relationship between language, images, and sound.

This dialogical structure is one of the defining characteristics of the essay film form, and it permeates its every dimension, extending from the artist's process of working with images, sounds, and language to the way they establish a relationship with the viewer. The viewer is often addressed directly and positioned as a participant in a conversation. This dialogical structure is also what complicates the essayistic subject and reveals a more complex organization. The subjective voice in essay films can't be understood as a simple illustration of an introspective and self-reflective subjectivity. This first-person mode of address is primarily a rhetorical and structural method, a performative voice used to establish a distinctly personal mode of address that engages the viewer directly and intimately. Laura Rascaroli notes that the dialogue is a strategy used to mobilize the viewer to participate in creating meaning and complexity.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, the nature of this dialogue is usually ambiguous. It is often not clear whether the dialogue is happening between the first-person voice and someone else, a real or imagined "you," or if the viewer is listening in on a self-reflective dialogue the first-person voice is having with themselves.

Alisa Lebow notes that rather than viewing these two subject positions as fixed, they are set up to describe the inherent paradox at the core of subjectivity. She notes that defining and representing a subject already implies the other, and no voice exists without the voices of others. According to Lebow, the idea that we can imagine ourselves at all is troubling because before we can even imagine ourselves as independent and autonomous beings, we are already subject to the will of others and to powers and forces that are not of our own making.<sup>23</sup> Most importantly, rather than making any claims about objective reality or knowledge, they construct and employ a first-person point of view that describes and reflects on subjective experience as an ongoing and unpredictable process in which both

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<sup>22</sup> Rascaroli, "The Essay Film: Problems, Definitions, Textual Commitments," 36.

<sup>23</sup> Alisa Lebow, *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary* (London: Wallflower Press, 2012), 4.

the subject and the world are defined through their open-endedness and unknowability. Timothy Corrigan writes that essayistic subjectivity is not the self-expression of a solid and contained subject projecting their interior self into an exterior world. Instead, the construction of an essayistic subjectivity demands “both loss of self and the rethinking and remaking of the self.”<sup>24</sup>

Corrigan describes essayistic moving image practices as those that “undo and redo film form, visual perspectives, public geographies, temporal organizations, and notions of truth and judgment within the complexity of experience.”<sup>25</sup> He also asserts that essay films resign from any notions of totality or permanency, they emphasize ephemerality rather than permanency.<sup>26</sup> As Rascaroli notes, the essay form can’t be generalized: it creates the conditions of its form each time and isn’t beholden to any pre-existing concepts or structures.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Theodor Adorno describes the essay form as “radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle.” According to Adorno, the essay is also a form that accentuates the partial against the total and is defined by its fragmentary character.<sup>28</sup>

The potential to challenge philosophical notions of subjectivity is inherently present in the conceptual strategies of the essay film form. Writers like Belinda Small have noted that because the essay form is open-ended and already performs a vision of the subject that is decentered and situated, it has the potential to be explored further, especially in the context of posthumanism. According to her, essayistic strategies can be used to complicate and rethink the notion of a fixed and self-contained subject and to reconfigure the status of the human.<sup>29</sup> Rascaroli writes that the distinct strategies of essay film, such as engagement

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<sup>24</sup> Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Rascaroli, “Afterword: The Idea of Essay Film,” *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia*, eds. Elizabeth A. Papazian and Caroline Eades (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2016), 301.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor Adorno, “The Essay as Form” *Essays on Essay Film*, eds. Nora M. Alter and Timothy Corrigan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 67.

<sup>29</sup> Belinda Small, “Rethinking the Human, Rethinking the Essay Film: The Ecocritical Work of The Pearl Button,” *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality and Technology*, eds. Julia Vassilieva and Deane Williams (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 144.

with the artist's everyday life and the use of a first-person point of view, remain open to being continually reinvented, appropriated, manipulated, and modified.<sup>30</sup>

### Embodied Subjectivity in Moving Images and Installation

The artworks in the case studies use many distinctly essayistic strategies but employ them to visualize subjective experience without assumptions that the subject is self-contained or exclusively human. They describe how all subjects, human and nonhuman, are inherently intertwined and produced within and through shared ecosystems with nonhuman beings.<sup>31</sup> They do this by foregrounding how their experiential and immediate encounters with the world involve the embodied dimensions of subjective experience—how they engage with the world in tactile, sensorial, affective, and spatial ways. Instead of prioritizing spoken voice-over or text-on-screen, they engage the viewer by drawing attention to the affective and sensorial impact of moving images and video editing. In the installation context, moving images generally engage the viewer by inviting them to experience and reflect on the images with a heightened awareness of their bodies' senses and movement, as well as the specific architectural space in which they are situated.

Theories of embodiment in the context of moving images can be understood as a dismantling of the idea that seeing involves only optical vision and that vision is somehow detached from the body and other senses. In a more embodied understanding, seeing is an experience that is inseparable from the materiality of the body, all other senses, as well as movement. In embodied experience, all these dimensions operate together with the cognitive operations of reflection and interpretation. The body and senses are also understood, not only as part of seeing but as the foundations for all mental and cognitive activities.<sup>32</sup> Anne Rutherford describes embodied perception in moving images as “more

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<sup>30</sup> Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 191.

<sup>31</sup> Katrin Pesch proposes this as the essay form's future challenge in her essay “Deborah Stratman's The Illinois Parables (2016): Intellectual Vagabond and Vagabond Matter,” *Beyond the Essay Film: Subjectivity, Textuality and Technology*, eds. Deane Williams and Julia Vassilieva (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002), 137.

<sup>32</sup> Patrícia Silveirinha and Castello Branco, “Editorial: Cinema, the Body and Embodiment,” *Cinema: Journal of Philosophy and the Moving Image*, eds. Patrícia Silveirinha and Castello Branco, No.3 (2012): 1. doi:10.34619/t6gp-a366.

akin to a millipede than to a camera or camera obscura—a thousand tentacles feeling their way through a space rather than a single lens taking it in view.<sup>33</sup> She also notes that moving image installations engage our embodied perception in even more complex ways because they construct spaces in which the viewing experience is “both material and energetic, tactile, kinaesthetic, imaginative and virtual all at the same time.”<sup>34</sup>

Phenomenological film theory is particularly useful in connecting the description of subjectivity as a materially embodied, non-hierarchical, and interconnected process with the specific qualities of the moving image medium.<sup>35</sup> In the context of phenomenological film theory, subjectivity is also described as materially embodied, sensorial, relational, and dialogical. In phenomenological film theory, the perspective on moving images is informed by the notion of phenomenological subjectivity, described as an embodied consciousness emerging from the mutual intertwining of bodies and spaces. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his late work *The Visible and Invisible*, describes these intertwined relationships as a *chiasm*, a crisscrossing and mutual becoming of bodies, beings, and things. Subjectivity is an intertwined and relational consciousness of self, our bodies and bodies of others, and the world they are immersed in. As Merleau-Ponty writes, everything is part of the same *flesh* of the world—the *flesh* which he describes as not matter, mind, or substance but rather a kind of basic “element” of Being.<sup>36</sup> Because everything is made of the same *flesh*, we can’t put boundaries or limits between ourselves and the world. Merleau-Ponty describes all living beings as beings of double belongingness: they are simultaneously objects, “things among things,” and subjects that see and touch things.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Anne Rutherford, “Cinema and Embodied Affect,” *Senses of Cinema*, Vol.25 (March 2003), [https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/embodied\\_affect/](https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/feature-articles/embodied_affect/).

<sup>34</sup> Anne Rutherford, “Moving image installation, the embodied spectator of cinema and Amar Kanwar: Learning from Intermediality,” *New Cinemas*, Vol.12, No.3 (September 2014): 235. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin.12.3.225\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ncin.12.3.225_1).

<sup>35</sup> The traditional focus of phenomenological film theory has been analogue film: the materiality of celluloid film images and the technologies for projecting them. In the context of my research, I don’t focus on the differences between analogue or digital materials or differences between video and film technologies. I use phenomenological film theory with the view that some of the qualities discussed in this context, specifically the ones I refer to, are not exclusive to analogue film but apply in different ways to all moving image materials and technologies.

<sup>36</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 140.

<sup>37</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 136-138.



Vivian Sobchack, perhaps the most influential of phenomenological film theorists, writes that “more than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience.”<sup>38</sup> She describes film as an experiential space that belongs to and can be occupied by multiple subjectivities simultaneously without clear boundaries between the film or the viewer.<sup>39</sup> They allow the viewer and the film “to imaginatively reside in each other, even as they are both discretely embodied and uniquely situated.”<sup>40</sup> Rather than distancing the experience from the immediate and sensorial moment, film is “an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood.” Films use modes of embodied experience directly in ways that provide grounds for other modes of signification like language. In doing so, they also make the primordial origins of language visible.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, visual anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall writes that moving images have a particular ability to connect to the moment when “meanings emerge from experience.” They can describe the moment when meaning is still inseparably bound with matter and feeling. He describes this as “the moment of knowledge at the birth of knowledge.” For MacDougall, some of the complexity of that moment gets lost once the meaning becomes abstracted in and by language.<sup>42</sup>

Jennifer M. Barker and Laura U. Marks expand this phenomenological analysis towards a close investigation of the sensorial and tactile qualities of moving images. Barker approaches the tactility of moving images by proposing that film’s tactility entails a fully and deeply embodied relationship between the film and the viewer. I would argue that this also applies to the artist’s relationship to the moving images they create. Barker describes touch, not just as skin-deep but experienced at the body’s surface, in its depths, and everywhere in between. She writes that film literally occupies our sphere and we come to

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<sup>38</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, 9.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 261. While Sobchack analyses the film experience mainly from the viewer’s perspective, I would include the artist’s subjectivity as part of this shared experience.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>42</sup> David MacDougall, *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

share its texture, its spatial orientation and rhythm, as well as its vitality.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Marks writes about the sensorial and haptic qualities of moving images in the context of multisensory media. Her definition of multisensory media includes film, video, and other audiovisual media. She describes haptic images as those that invite close bodily contact with them and aim to dissolve a distant and reflective viewing position. In Marks' haptic visuality, eyes themselves are understood as organs of touch.<sup>44</sup>

While phenomenological film theorists encounter these questions from a different lineage and perspective than new materialists, Patrícia Silveirinha and Castello Branco note that there are similarities between the phenomenological approach to embodiment and film and the materialist theories that focus on the corporeality of the body. According to Silveirinha and Branco, while having inherent differences, both approaches disengage from the dichotomies between mind and body and understand the body and senses as capable of creating meaning.<sup>45</sup> By employing both strategies of essayistic filmmaking and employing the embodied and sensorial potential of moving images, the artworks in the case studies visualize subjective experience in ways that resonate particularly well with the philosophical framework of critical posthumanism, especially new materialism.

#### Case Study Perspectives on Material Subjectivity

While I employ useful perspectives from both essay and phenomenological film theory, I bring the practices and artworks in the following case studies in conversation with the reconfigurations of subjectivity as they've been described primarily in the new materialist framework by Rosi Braidotti, Elizabeth Grosz, Patricia MacCormack, and Donna Haraway.<sup>46</sup> Within new materialism, the shared materiality of all human, nonhuman, and inanimate beings is emphasized to undermine categorical and hierarchical differences

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<sup>43</sup> Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>44</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2002), 2.

<sup>45</sup> Silveirinha and Branco, "Editorial: Cinema, the Body and Embodiment," 3.

<sup>46</sup> Braidotti, Grosz and MacCormack are feminist theorists and emphasize the subject as sexually differentiated, but neither this perspective nor feminist politics are addressed explicitly in any of the artworks. None of the artists frame their practice or intentions around this either. It is also not explicit in my practice. Therefore, I'm not emphasizing this perspective in my writing. Haraway, while often referred to in this context, defines herself as a "composist."

between them.<sup>47</sup> New materialists see all beings as made of matter, and all matter is considered as having inherent vitality, intelligence, and the ability to self-organize and sustain itself. Subjectivity is also understood as having these inherently material rather than transcendent origins. Humanness is understood as only one way of being among the vast realm of other living and non-living beings, all different yet equal. All beings, human and nonhuman, are also understood as connected and dependent on each other.<sup>48</sup>

Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin also note that new materialists are invested in “the morphology of change.”<sup>49</sup> Neither the subject nor its relations can be fixed in time because life is in a constant state of flux. Diana H. Coole describes the notion of subjectivity in this context as an open-ended series of capacities and potencies emerging within and through the complex interactions between both organic and social processes. She writes that within these interactions, there are no clear separations between sentient and non-sentient beings and material and spiritual realms.<sup>50</sup> Like the practices and artworks I describe in the case studies, the new materialist framework asserts that subjectivity, because it is both immanent and material, can’t be generalized. Subjectivity can only be described by accounting for the situated and particular ways all material bodies are embedded in environments and intermingled with other material bodies, both human and nonhuman.

In approaching the case studies, Dani ReStack’s *Draft 9* resonates most clearly with the essayistic lineage as it has been theorized in the past. It employs the strategies and themes of diary film, a distinctly essayistic form characterized by an especially immediate, personal, and open-ended engagement with a process that follows the rhythms and patterns of everyday life.<sup>51</sup> While she employs the diary form, ReStack brings forth a peculiar

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<sup>47</sup> New materialists build on the materialist ontology and ethics adopted from Spinoza’s philosophy. Because Spinoza refuses the duality between materiality and ideas and emphasizes the shared materiality of all things, it offers a structure in which subjectivity and humanness can also be described through material origins and relations that can’t be organized hierarchically.

<sup>48</sup> Jajati K. Pradhan, Seema Singh, "Living in Difficult Times: New Materialist Subjectivity and Becoming of Posthuman Life," *Trans-Humanities Journal* 8, no. 1 (2015): 103. [doi:10.1353/trh.2015.0004](https://doi.org/10.1353/trh.2015.0004).

<sup>49</sup> Rick Dolphijn, Iris van der Tuin, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (London, UK: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 93.

<sup>50</sup> Samantha Frost, Diana H. Coole, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>51</sup> Autobiographical self-portrait films, like diary films, are broadly considered as one of the many variations of essayistic filmmaking with some distinct characteristics.

reconfiguration of essayistic subjectivity in which the voice as spoken or written text is almost completely absent, replaced by the intensely tactile and intimate presence of the artist through moving images. Instead of voice-over or text, ReStack emphasizes her body and movement both behind and in front of the camera and focuses on the tactile contacts between herself and others. ReStack focuses on the visceral details of the bodies on-screen, and her tactile contacts with them on camera, without distinguishing or discriminating between human and nonhuman or living and nonliving bodies. Importantly, she uses juxtapositions in editing as a technique to amplify their sensorial impact on the viewer and to produce meaning. In doing so, she relies on the tactile and sensorial potential of moving images and their ability to establish fluid boundaries between subjectivities on- and off-screen.

By creating a heightened awareness of the materiality of bodies both on- and off-screen, and by describing all living and non-living beings as equally impacted by these shared forces of sensation, ReStack describes subjectivity and humanness as embedded in their interconnected relations with environments and undermines hierarchical separations between human and nonhuman beings. The way Elizabeth Grosz emphasizes the corporeality of the body, and the forces of sensation that bind all corporeal bodies in intertwined relations, is particularly useful in the context of *Draft 9*. Grosz describes her framework as an inversion in which the abstract ideas about the mind and subject's interiority are reconfigured by replacing them with the corporeality of the body.<sup>52</sup> She proposes that all facets of subjective experience, including its interiority, can be understood in terms of bodies, surfaces, and their material relations.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, ReStack centers the body, and its tactile contacts that produce sensation, as the primary ways subjective experience is both described and transmitted through moving images.

Grosz emphasizes the way all the facets of subjective experience are intertwined with the corporeal surfaces of the body. She describes the body as a threshold, a borderline concept that refuses binary pairs. It is neither and both, suspended and balanced between “the

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<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994), vii.

<sup>53</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 160.

private or the public, self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social, instinctive or learned, genetically or environmentally determined.”<sup>54</sup> Instead of collapsing the separation between mind and body entirely by claiming they are made of the same material substance, Grosz tries to establish a model in which they are neither distinct nor separate from each other but also not entirely the same. She describes their relationship as a Möbius strip in which one side, as it is turned and twisted, becomes the other side. Mind as one side of the Möbius strip drifts into the other side, which is the body. The relationship between mind and body is defined by this passing and drifting from one side to the other and vice versa.<sup>55</sup>

Rachel Rose’s *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* employs multiple essayistic strategies like voice-over, text-on-screen, and the appropriation of archival moving images and historical references. Its structure also resonates with the forms of essayistic travelogues and excursions.<sup>56</sup> Rose investigates the historical and contemporary discussions around technologically manipulated and sustained life and the increasingly blurred boundaries between human and nonhuman and the living and nonliving. She investigates these themes through her excursions into zoo environments and her encounters with the nonhuman animals confined in them. She also visits a cryogenics laboratory that develops technologies for preserving deceased human bodies and a robotics laboratory that develops artificial intelligence. All these sites are in-between spaces that both literally and figuratively complicate and threaten boundaries between human and nonhuman life and definitions of living and nonliving.

Rose’s voice-over and fragments of text-on-screen exist in a dialogical relationship with these locations and the different layers of collective and historical experience she reflects on through appropriated images. They describe subjective experience as a continually evolving process that is historically and socially constructed. While she relies on voice-over and text, *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* is distinct in how it employs a flow of feeling and affect to produce meaning. By affect, I refer to its definition as an experience of intensity

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>56</sup> Like diary films, travelogues and excursions are a similarly distinct form within the essay film.

that originates in the body.<sup>57</sup> Affect, in the context of Rose's work, can be understood as a force that moves in-between all bodies, both living and nonliving, as well as their environments, and undermines boundaries and separation between them. She uses moving images to show how affect, emerging in her body and experience, circulates and connects to the world outside of her.

The subjective experience visualized in *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* through Rose's engagements with locations and fragments of historical and scientific narratives—distinctly guided by the force of affect—embodies what Rosi Braidotti describes as nomadic subjectivity. Nomadic subjectivity is Braidotti's concept for reconfiguring the humanist notion of subjectivity. It emphasizes the material, embodied, and embedded foundations of subjective experience.<sup>58</sup> It also embodies its mobility, changeability, and transitory nature. Nomadic subjectivity doesn't presuppose a subject's unity or essence but is understood as a process that emerges in and through shifts and negotiations between different layers of power and desire. It is neither biological nor social but constituted through both willful choices and unconscious drives. Braidotti describes it as “the fictional choreography of many levels into one socially operational self.”<sup>59</sup> Instead of individualism, nomadic subjectivity is grounded in an understanding and appreciation of community and the interconnectedness between self and others.<sup>60</sup> For Braidotti, a nomadic way of thinking, rather than understood as an expression of the subject's interiority, is a way of establishing connections with the multiplicity of impersonal forces from which the subjectivity emerges from and is continually shaped.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect.” *M/C Journal*, Vol. 8, No.6 (2005).  
<https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2443>.

<sup>58</sup> Especially Grosz and Braidotti directly employ Deleuze and Guattari's description of life and thinking as a constant flow of decentred becoming that continually generates difference and multiplicity. Rather than thinking and perceiving the world through solid states of being, the process of becoming is a continually expanding force that produces relations. These relations are not hierarchical but thought of in decentered and fragmented ways. For example, Deleuze and Guattari describe the notion of becoming in the section “1770: Becoming-Intense, Becoming Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible,” and their notion of nomadic thinking in “1227: Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978).

<sup>59</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 22.

<sup>60</sup> Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 49–51.

<sup>61</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 70.

In my analysis of Diana Thater's *Delphine*, I focus on moving images in architecturally staged installations in which they are distributed, contextualized, and experienced spatially. In these forms, the relationship between moving images and the architectural space becomes an integral and amplified aspect of both their form and meaning. This applies to both the artist's perspective on the process of making them and the viewer's experience with the work.<sup>62</sup> While *Delphine* is connected to *Draft 9* and *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* through its core themes and questions, it also employs the artist's subjective experience and direct engagements with their environment as the starting point for the images she creates. Rather than analyzing *Delphine* directly through the lens of essayistic strategies, I approach it as a moving image installation in which some of the strategies are applied through a fundamentally installation-based approach.

In *Delphine*, Thater creates a spatial schema that is based on her experience of swimming with and mimicking the movements of wild Bottlenose dolphins in their natural habitats. By using the architectural space of the gallery, she creates an immersive and spatially disorienting installation that tries to translate and transmit this sensorial and embodied experience to the viewer. By transforming the viewer's familiar ways of experiencing their bodies in relation to architectural space, Thater attempts to create an experience that transmits something about how she imagines Bottlenose dolphins move and sense themselves in space. She employs her experience, and the moving images she filmed of herself and a group of divers interacting with the dolphins, to create an installation space in which she sets out to represent the complexity of their experience.

By transforming the viewer's spatial experience, Thater also seeks to unsettle their habitual ways of relating to nonhuman animals and evoke criticality towards habitual and anthropocentric assumptions about the subjectivities of nonhuman animals. She constructs the installation as a contemplative space in which the viewer's engagement with the moving images of dolphins is framed as an equal encounter with them, challenging the anthropocentric inclination to measure their cognitive abilities and behaviour against

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<sup>62</sup> While the term *viewer* doesn't fully convey the embodied and sensorial way installations like *Delphine* engage the viewer, terms like *participant* and *embodied spectator* are not applicable either. While *viewer* is not a perfect term, especially in relation to *Delphine*, I use it throughout the case studies with the premise that viewing is an experience that involves the whole body.

human attributes and determine their value based on their perceived resemblance to us. While human-nonhuman relationships are elaborated on in each of the case studies, the ethical complexities of working with and representing nonhuman animals are especially pronounced in *Delphine*.

Patricia MacCormack describes ethics in the context of posthumanism as a system of relations directed toward life that is singular, connective, uniquely emergent, and not predictable. Instead of a normative system, ethics is defined as an ongoing, interactive, and mediative process in which relations and desires are continually negotiated and renegotiated.<sup>63</sup> She also notes that posthuman ethics especially privilege the lives and bodies of those who have been disregarded or oppressed in the context of humanist systems of knowledge and power.<sup>64</sup> Instead of abstract moral principles, the material bodies of both human and nonhuman beings are the site where ethical encounters are both established and negotiated. In this framework, like the notion of subjectivity, ethics are also determined and framed through the shared materiality of all beings. Because all material bodies, both human, nonhuman and even inanimate entities share the ability to both affect and be affected by others, ethics are established on a non-hierarchical foundation on which they are all considered equal.

All living beings are also viewed through their positive difference. They all share a desire to both preserve their unique way of being and to expand, multiply, and express themselves in their complexity. Any system or hierarchy that generalizes or restricts these inherent desires is unethical because no living being can be generalized, categorized, or reduced to sameness.<sup>65</sup> In the context of posthuman ethics, all living beings are seen as having irreducible value and should be allowed to preserve and express their complexity. Ethical encounters with others require an active refusal to reduce any beings into generalizations or fixed categories.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Patricia MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory* (New York; London: Routledge, 2012), 10.

<sup>64</sup> MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics*, 8.

<sup>65</sup> This framework is also built on Spinoza's philosophy and ethics.

<sup>66</sup> MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics*, 9-10.



*Delphine* also relies on the potential of speculative imagination as a strategy for rethinking interspecies relationships. Similarly, Donna Haraway emphasizes the value of speculative world-building: the imaginative efforts to describe different and better ways for human beings to co-exist with their nonhuman others. Haraway's rethinking of interspecies relationships emphasizes encounters and collaborations that are understood as situated, entangled, and worldly. She imagines a new figure of humanity that is founded on these interspecies collaborations and is neither totalizing nor generalizing but promises a radical specificity that is never settled and offers no closure.<sup>67</sup> Haraway describes these entangled processes of collaboration as "making kin," a process of mutual and interconnected becoming between human and nonhuman beings. It is a process of "learning to live and die well with each other, recognizing that all beings are part of the same earth."<sup>68</sup> She also emphasizes that human and nonhuman realms have never had any real boundaries because "we compose and decompose each other, in every scale and register of time."<sup>69</sup>

In the practices and artworks examined in the case study chapters, this posthuman framework for ethics is reflected especially through human-nonhuman relationships and the anthropocentric representations of nonhuman animals. In each of the artworks, the artists use this framework for ethics to reflect on and negotiate human-nonhuman relationships non-hierarchically and through their interconnectedness. They use the shared materiality of human and nonhuman bodies to unsettle the boundaries between them. This both undermines the privileged position of human subjects in relation to nonhuman beings and brings nonhuman animals, historically defined through their instrumental value, within the realm of these ethical negotiations as subjects with irreducible value.

While these practices and artworks focus on describing nonhuman animals as living beings and subjects worthy of ethical consideration, conceptually, they are also employed as beings that undermine definitions of human and the systems of knowledge built on human exceptionalism. Giorgio Agamben places the division between human and animal at the

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<sup>67</sup> Donna Haraway, "Ecce Homo, Ain't (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-humanist Landscape," *The Donna Haraway Reader*, (New York, Routledge, 2004), 48-49.

<sup>68</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 4.

<sup>69</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 97.

very heart of the “anthropological machine” that has created and maintained the privileged position of human.<sup>70</sup> According to him, the notion of human is the result of separating and excluding animality from its realm. Because humanness is created through this logic of exclusion and defined only through what it’s not, it is affirmed as an empty notion. This logic of exclusion only maintains and perpetuates its emptiness and animality continually threatens its inherent fragility and instability.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Grosz describes the animal as a reminder of the limits of human. She writes that the animal is “that from which the human tentatively and precariously emerges; the animal is that inhuman destination to which the human always tends. The animal surrounds the human at both ends: it is the origin and the end of humanity.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> I’m not defining Agamben as a posthumanist, but in this case his ideas resonate.

<sup>71</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*. trans. Kevin Attell, Stanford University Press, 2004), 37-38.

<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 12.

## Part 2: Case Studies

## *Draft 9* by Dani ReStack

Dani ReStack's single-channel video *Draft 9* (2003) opens with a bleak scene showing the artist's visibly dirty hands rustling through a plastic bag and pulling out the body of a dead crow. Her hands hold the bird's lifeless body close to the camera lens and carefully examine its shiny black feathers through the camera's eye. She proceeds to forcefully stroke the crow's limp body in a gesture that is a jarring collision of roughness and tenderness. Before the viewer can reconcile these conflicting sensations, ReStack cuts to the next scene in which she strokes an orange cat that purrs loudly and embraces this moment of connection and attention. After 10 seconds, just when the viewer is beginning to settle into the comfort of looking at the orange cat, ReStack abruptly returns to the dead crow.<sup>73</sup> In moving back and forth between these two scenes, ReStack's camera focuses on stroking as the repeating gesture that connects the two otherwise seemingly unrelated moments.

By using this gesture—the familiar and affectionate way we communicate with domesticated nonhuman animals like cats and dogs—to touch the dead body of a wild nonhuman animal, she unsettles the familiar and expected ways we would look at and treat nonhuman animals. As a contrast to the affectionate and joyful contact with the cat, the crow's body, which is rendered useless to us by death, is dug out from a garbage bag. Rather than showing affection only to the cat that pleases us in an inherently self-serving way, ReStack performs the same gesture towards a nonhuman animal whose dead body we would ordinarily treat as abject and even hazardous. Because it is also unable to respond to the gesture, it won't give us anything pleasurable in return. Touching the crow's dead body in this way is a small act of transgression that reveals the categories and hierarchies that underlie our habitual responses to nonhuman animals and the way we determine their value in relation to us.

Performative gestures like these are ReStack's way of describing our relationships to nonhuman animals beyond their instrumental value. She uses them to describe a way of

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<sup>73</sup> Dani ReStack, *Draft 9*, 2003, video, duration 28:00, sequence described is at 00:06-01:01, <https://vimeo.com/107931158>.

relating to them that considers their lives, and both their living and nonliving bodies, valuable for what and how they are. This is also where *Draft 9* aligns with Patricia MacCormack's description of posthuman ethics, grounded in a similarly non-hierarchical approach to the equal and non-instrumental value of all human and nonhuman bodies. By using moving images to establish equalizing parallels and connections between human and nonhuman beings, and even living and nonliving bodies, ReStack avoids creating categorical or hierarchical differences between them.

The juxtaposition between these first two scenes sets up the main tensions that ReStack works through in *Draft 9*. It also reveals the recurring editing strategies she employs. Instead of trying to create smooth transitions in which the sounds and images flow together seamlessly, she intentionally works with abrupt transitions that amplify the changes in atmosphere between different spaces and events. The bleakness of the scene in which she is handling the crow's dead body is amplified by the echoing background noise, dirty white surfaces, and cold lighting that evoke an industrial or institutional space. The scene with the orange cat exists in stark contrast to this: the lack of background noise, warm lighting, and soft carpet create an association with a small and intimate domestic space. The crow's body, in its quiet unresponsiveness, also contrasts the sounds of bodily pleasure that fill this space.

As she does with the stroking in these beginning scenes, she often combines contradictory and seemingly unrelated moments through a repeating gesture. She also connects scenes by finding surprising parallels and alignments between visual elements in them. For instance, in a later scene, an elderly woman sits in a cafeteria and pours milk into her coffee. From this moment, ReStack cuts to a scene in which a puppy is eagerly sucking on its mother's nipple for milk. From this nursing dog and the puppy, ReStack cuts to a scene of herself facing the camera. This scene is bizarrely cropped, leaving out her head and focusing on her chest. The shapes of her coat pockets suddenly create an association with the scars left on the body after a double mastectomy.<sup>74</sup> The associations and meanings that emerge from the juxtapositions between these scenes are created through Restack's careful use of

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<sup>74</sup> Restack, "*Draft 9*," at 02:17-02:50.

montage.<sup>75</sup> In this case, the scenes are connected through the chain of associations from the milk that is being poured into the woman's coffee, to the puppies who are drinking milk from their mother's nipples, and the image of ReStack's chest.

ReStack's editing technique carefully utilizes these connections that appear (most likely) serendipitously between the moments she has collected. In bringing these scenes in proximity, she finds evocative parallels between them. The structure of *Draft 9* relies on these chains of associative connections and juxtapositions that transform sensation from one image to the next. ReStack repeatedly connects pleasurable scenes, like passing moments of intimacy and joy between humans and nonhuman beings and unsettling scenes that depict the darker side of our co-existence as living beings, the connections between us that are violent, cruel, and abject. The unsettling juxtapositions, and the intense pace in which ReStack often transitions between these moments, require the viewer to negotiate the onslaught of conflicting sensations and feelings. Each scene amplifies other scenes in their proximity and each one evokes new associations through repetition.

*Draft 9* also has a distinct way of describing the artist's connections and interactions with both human and nonhuman others in ways that challenge and dissolve hierarchies and categorical differences between self and other as well as living and nonliving beings. This effect emerges from the way ReStack describes all these connections, whether they are between human beings, between human and nonhuman beings, or between nonhuman beings without human involvement as all part of the same fabric of connections. In one scene, she shows two people fighting in a street corner while two bystanders are observing and recording the fight.<sup>76</sup> From this, she cuts briefly to a scene with a refrigerator door and a small photo of Mao Zedong hanging from it, perhaps to create an association between the small-scale violence that occurs between two individuals and violence that can also permeate lives on a systemic societal scale. From these scenes, she cuts to two people lying

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<sup>75</sup> ReStack's uses editing as a technique to both create meaning and elicit and manipulate emotions. Montage as a technique has been analyzed in detail especially by theorists and filmmakers of early Soviet cinema like Sergei Eisenstein and Lev Kuleshov. See, for example *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, a classic collection of essays by Sergei Eisenstein, edited and translated by Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1949).

<sup>76</sup> Scenes like this seem either staged by ReStack or they are scenes that she accidentally stumbled on to and someone else might have staged. ReStack's images are removed from their original context so completely that it's often impossible to know how they were created.

on a living room floor embracing each other, evoking yet another kind of connection. After this brief respite, she cuts to a scene in which a cat is loudly chewing off the head of a small bird it has captured and killed.<sup>77</sup> By aligning and connecting these moments through their visual parallels and similarities, and by following their emotional and sensorial resonances, she describes all living beings as equally capable of similar behaviours. All beings are capable of nurture and care as well as violence, cruelty, and self-serving actions. All connections between living beings are also equally influenced by feelings like anger, joy, pain, and pleasure.

#### Autobiographical and Diaristic Strategies

In the context of the essayistic mode of filmmaking, *Draft 9* resonates particularly well with forms of essay film that Laura Rascaroli describes as cinematic self-portraiture. She considers diary films, notebook films, and travelogues as examples of these forms and considers them distinctly essayistic. Rascaroli's analysis of the diary form provides a particularly useful framework for *Draft 9*. She describes the diary form as “the quintessential work in progress, open and unstable, instantaneous and discontinuous in nature.” She writes that diaries are exempt from all rules and can contain anything: they freely mix the most mundane moments with the most significant, often without creating any hierarchy between them. They also tend to follow a systematic, repetitive, and habitual process that repeats every day in the same way. Rather than making plans, the diarist surrenders themselves to the unpredictability of everyday life.<sup>78</sup>

In videos like *Draft 9*, ReStack's process is grounded in the continuous recording of her daily life. Instead of planning or searching for specific scenes, the viewer gets the impression that *Draft 9* is constructed from moments and images the artist spontaneously finds and preserves in her personal archive. The structure of the video is the result of returning to and reworking this personal archive of footage that the artist has accumulated over time.<sup>79</sup> ReStack records her life in the immediate moment and, for the most part,

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<sup>77</sup> ReStack, “*Draft 9*,” at 13:24-13:58.

<sup>78</sup> Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 115-116.

<sup>79</sup> Dani Restack, “About,” on Artist's website, <https://danirestack.com/about>.

without altering the scenes themselves afterward, apart from editing them together with other scenes. Some scenes in *Draft 9* are staged and theatrical but even those moments feel like spontaneous ideas that emerge in the situation and become transformed into improvised performances for the camera.

According to Rascaroli, self-portrait films like diary films are characterized by their distinctly personal or autobiographical mode of address. The point of view presented in them becomes equated with the artist's subjective experience and the artist explicitly presents their point of view this way. Everything in the images becomes filtered through the artist's particular sensibility.<sup>80</sup> While *Draft 9* employs the diaristic form, ReStack describes her first-person point of view almost exclusively without spoken or written text. She constructs this point of view through her movement in front of and behind the camera and the way the camera responds to and follows both her movement and shifting attention. Visual anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall asserts that even when a speaking voice is absent, the artist's body is inscribed in every aspect of the camera's vision. The camera tracks the artist's presence behind the camera and guides the viewer's attention as much as a speaking voice would. The viewer also responds to the presence of the artist's body behind the camera as much as they respond to the visible bodies of subjects on screen. MacDougall describes this as a narrative created and guided by vision instead of language.<sup>81</sup>

One of the strategies ReStack uses to create this point of view is placing the camera, seemingly in an almost haphazard way, right next to her as if she's almost forgotten that it's recording. The camera observes and records her interactions with the subjects in front of the camera almost as an invisible companion or a surrogate for the artist's vision. Sometimes, it even seems that her subjects are either not aware of her camera recording or are so used to it that they don't pay attention to it. Her subjects are often interacting with her and the direction of their gaze and gestures place ReStack either behind or right next to the camera. Sound also plays an important role in these moments as the viewer clearly

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<sup>80</sup> Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 106.

<sup>81</sup> David MacDougall, *Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 50.



hears ReStack next to the camera. She can also often be seen and heard handling it. The spoken interactions with the subjects, and the disjointed fragments of conversation that occur off-camera, also create the impression that these are personal and intimate moments spontaneously encountered and recorded.

Another frequent strategy ReStack uses is recording herself partially in front of the camera, specifically in a way that reveals her presence behind it. In these moments, she often reaches from behind the camera to touch or interact with something in front of it. She will bring whatever she has encountered in front of the camera's lens to be closely examined and her hands stay on camera the whole time. Rather than just looking at things through the camera's lens, her way of seeing is almost always accompanied by touching. The camera rarely looks at subjects in front of it without showing tactile contact between them and the artist. Often, it is specifically focused on observing and recording them. As a result, the artist's experience becomes associated not with just her camera's point of view, but with her hands in front of the camera and the way they make sense of the world through touch. Similarly, ReStack also uses camera angles that show her torso partially in front of the camera, always reminding the viewer that the artist's engagement with the world she investigates involves her whole body and its physical contacts and interactions with the bodies of others.

Rascaroli notes that even when a personal point of view is explicit in self-portrait films, it is also complicated through strategies that undermine it and unsettle the boundaries between the artist's and the viewer's subject positions. She describes self-portrait films as private monologues that are investigating and reflecting on private moments and experiences. Instead of addressing the viewer directly, they position them as an onlooker. They are positioned as a kind of an invisible presence, looking through the eyes of the filmmaker at the filmmaker. She writes that diary films are distinct in constructing a peculiar mode of address in which the self is addressed as other.<sup>82</sup> While ReStack creates the first-person point of view that is explicitly hers by foregrounding her body, gestures,

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<sup>82</sup> Laura Rascaroli, "The Self-portrait Film: Michelangelo's Last Gaze," in *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, ed. Alisa Lebow (London: Wallflower Press, 2012), 60.

and touch in her interactions with others, she also frequently turns the camera on herself, becoming simultaneously both the subject and the object of its gaze.

In these moments, ReStack often reveals herself in vulnerable and private situations, like at the doctor's office during a medical examination. When she turns the camera on herself, she also uses a dark vignetting around the edges of the image, further amplifying the camera's point of view as an eye that is directed at her. By doing this, she places her own body among—and as equal to—all the other bodies she examines. She exposes her own body and makes it vulnerable to the camera's relentlessly transgressive gaze just as much as she exposes other bodies to it. By treating herself equally as an object of the camera's gaze, she also mediates and complicates some of the moments in *Draft 9* in which the camera's gaze can seem uncomfortably irreverent towards the bodies of others.

By distancing the camera from her point of view by turning it on herself is a strategy for equalizing this relationship between her own body and the bodies of the others she records. All bodies, including her own, are equally vulnerable to the camera's gaze. When ReStack turns the camera on herself, it can't be understood literally as an extension of her body or a tool she uses to look at others. Instead, it becomes a separate entity with a vision that can't be seamlessly equated with the artist's point of view. Its point of view is unstable, and it can move and occupy different subject positions and confuse the boundaries between them. While ReStack uses the camera to describe her experience as if it was an extension of her vision, movement and touch, she can also use it interchangeably to distance herself from its point of view and turn it into a distant observer of her life. The viewer's subject position shifts along with the camera's point of view. Sometimes, this position and the camera's point of view aligns almost seamlessly with ReStack's subjectivity. Other times, the viewer also occupies the position of a distant observer who has somehow accessed a view, almost through a secret pinhole, into these intimate moments.

The theme of mortality that permeates the scenes in *Draft 9* is also a distinct characteristic of the diary form. Rascaroli writes that by recording and memorializing the immediacy of the moment and preserving it in time, diaries speak to the inevitability of death.<sup>83</sup> In

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<sup>83</sup> Laura Rascaroli, "The Self-portrait Film," 63.

recording mundane moments and the slow and repetitive progression of daily life, they gradually record the artist's progression towards the end of their life. In the process, the camera also memorializes the lives of others. *Diary's* structure is inherently open-ended, unpredictable, continues indefinitely, and only comes to an end when the artist dies. The recorded moments, which in the moment can seem arbitrary and trivial, become invaluable as time passes and inevitably runs out. This ordinariness of everyday life gains its meaningfulness in the face of mortality.<sup>84</sup> In *Draft 9*, ReStack uses the diary form and the themes of mortality that are inherently inscribed in its structure to describe the experience of mortality, and its unrelenting power over material bodies, as something that permeates the lives of all living beings. Rather than an experience only human beings face and have to reconcile with, ReStack describes it as a presence that motivates the actions, desires, and fears of all living beings equally and in similar ways.

The equalizing gaze of ReStack's camera focuses on the marks of illness, ageing, and death that are left on both living and nonliving bodies. She gathers, observes, and records the material reminders of mortality, her own and the living beings around her. The dead bodies of roadkill, like the body of a black bear whose fur is being cleaned with a vacuum cleaner, or the dead baby possums still attached to their dead mother's pouch, are all observed with close attention and in excruciating detail. In one scene, she records a group of elderly ladies and a gentleman gathered for coffee. During this moment, the camera focuses on details like the wrinkled skin of a woman's hand or the tattooed identification number on a holocaust survivor's arm, hinting at the subtle undercurrents of personal and collective histories that remain as marks on our bodies.<sup>85</sup> By collecting and observing the details of the living and nonliving, and placing them in proximities, she constructs carefully edited sequences of scenes that map the movements, gestures, and surfaces that mark our bodies, both human and nonhuman, as flesh.

### Subjectivity as Sensation

Because *Draft 9* isn't employing the kind of first-person voice-over that essayistic self-portraits would traditionally rely on and is explicitly foregrounding the tactile potential of

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<sup>84</sup> Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 121.

<sup>85</sup> ReStack, "*Draft 9*," at 18:20-18:53.

moving images, analyzing its subjective point of view and relationship to the viewer requires an embodied and sensorial approach to moving images. In the absence of language as a structural scaffolding, *Draft 9* relies almost exclusively on moving images as a medium to transmit tactile, sensorial, and embodied experience and knowledge. ReStack's camera does this by going almost unbearably close to bodies, her own and others, to study them in visceral detail. The quality that characterizes almost all the scenes in *Draft 9* is the way they invite the viewer to be present to what the camera is looking. Each scene invites them to look at the details, textures, movements, and gestures that are present in the images.

Laura U. Marks describes moving images like the ones in *Draft 9* as haptic images. They are images that invite a bodily contact with them and resist the viewer's and the artist's separateness from the image.<sup>86</sup> Marks writes that haptic visuality, unlike optical visuality which engages the viewer in a distant and reflective way, draws from all our senses and is a way of seeing that involves the whole body. Instead of identification with a figure, it emphasizes the way moving images can engage senses like hearing and touching along with vision. Haptic looking is more invested in discerning texture than comprehending form—it “tends to rest on the surface of the object rather than to plunge into depth.”<sup>87</sup> In haptic visuality, the physical presence of the other on-screen for what they are and how they are is equally as important as the mental operations of symbolization that engage with the abstract meanings that might be extracted from it. Instead of an object to look at or an illusion to be absorbed in, haptic images invite an interaction that recognizes that embodied and haptic ways of seeing are also intelligent and offer different ways of knowing.<sup>88</sup>

ReStack creates these haptic images by intentionally using such technical faults as focusing mistakes, harsh and uneven exposures (either overexposure or underexposure), and the movement of the camera to draw attention to the surface of the image. This amplifies the sensorial impact of the images and simultaneously keeps the viewer aware that they are looking first at an image. The camera also records sounds in visceral detail, creating an

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<sup>86</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2002), 13.

<sup>87</sup> Marks, *Touch*, 8.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

additional layer of sensorial information that amplifies the sensorial force of the images. The dead possum lying on the side of the road is made even more visceral because of the brightness of the sun that overexposes the image and the sound of swarming flies surrounding its decaying body. Similarly, ReStack uses awkward and strange camera angles that remind the viewer of the presence of the camera and that the images they see are mediated and altered by it. The camera is also able to go jarringly close to its subjects, transgressing physical, personal, and social boundaries in often uncomfortable ways and going closer to details than a human eye could or would.

While the intense closeness and intimacy can draw the viewer's attention and engage their senses, it also has an alienating and distancing effect. ReStack's camera has an uncomfortable tendency to expose bodies and reveal vulnerabilities. The artist's use of montage technique amplifies these conflicting sensations and emotions, frequently throwing the viewer from a comfortable experience into an encounter with an abject and even violent image. By amplifying these tensions, ReStack also keeps the viewer aware of how their sensations are intentionally being interfered with. She uses these tensions to create awareness of how our emotional and sensorial responses inform the hierarchies we create. In turn, these hierarchies have also conditioned us to respond in certain ways to the bodies we see on-screen.

According to Marks, haptic visibility also tends to create a kind of vacillating relationship between the viewer and the image, a dynamic movement between closeness and distance. She writes that all ways of seeing involve this kind of dialogical back and forth between distance and closeness: we need both haptic seeing to fully experience others and the distance enabled by optical seeing to reflect on our experience.<sup>89</sup> As she notes, vision is also the sense that enables us to distinguish the distances between ourselves and others in ways that tactile senses cannot. Because of this, vision also separates and alienates our body from the bodies of others. This alienation is necessary for us to function, understand

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 17.

and reflect on our experience.<sup>90</sup> It also enables us to negotiate our boundaries and relationships with others, recognizing the other's difference and irreducible value.

The way Restack emphasizes the tactile and sensorial relationships between herself and others is intertwined with the way she describes her subjective experience in embodied, interconnected, and porous ways. The artist's subjective experience is described through her interactions and contacts with the bodies on-screen and as well as the viewer's embodied experience off-screen. Jennifer M. Barker describes the way film, in creating a tactile and material contact with the viewer, creates a liminal space of in-betweenness in which both the viewer and the film emerge as "co-constituted, individualized but related, embodied entities."<sup>91</sup> Our bodies become enmeshed with the liminal space of the film in ways that challenge our separateness from the bodies and experiences of others.<sup>92</sup> Barker writes that while this contact begins on the surface of bodies, it comes to involve them in a much deeper way. The film becomes a shared space in which we experience not only surfaces, but also the movements, tensions, and internal rhythms of the bodies we see both on-and off-screen.<sup>93</sup>

Writing from a phenomenological perspective, Vivian Sobchack also describes the film experience as a space in which on-screen and off-screen bodies become intermingled through what she describes as "reversibility of perception." Rather than merely looking at images on screen, our bodies enact this reversibility, undermining the notion that on-screen and off-screen spaces are mutually exclusive subject positions. We feel what we see and hear on the screen and our experience extends into the moving image space. She also writes that all bodies both on-screen and off-screen participate in creating the subjective experience that is described on film.<sup>94</sup> The bodies that participate in the film experience can simultaneously inhabit the images but be materially embodied and located off-screen. They can operate both literally and figuratively and are uniquely cinematic bodies that

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<sup>90</sup> Laura U. Marks, *Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 132.

<sup>91</sup> Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>92</sup> Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 19.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>94</sup> Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 66.

Sobchack calls *cinesthetic subjects*. She describes them as bodies that “subvert their own fixity from within, commingling flesh and consciousness, reversing the human and technological sensorium, so that meaning, and where it is made, does not have a discrete origin in either spectators’ bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction.”<sup>95</sup> Because of this peculiar commingling, the subjective experience on film can’t be fully equated with either the artist’s or the viewer’s experience.

Because *Draft 9* relies on embodied and sensorial perception, it can be intimately personal in its point of view while simultaneously describing subjectivity that is so embedded and intertwined in its relations that it becomes as much the subjectivity of others. ReStack actively resists the position of a reflective and distant subjectivity that gazes at the world as a separate and singular being. It almost feels like her camera is attempting to find a connection powerful enough to dissipate the distance between herself and her images. As Chris Stults notes in his essay “The Multitude of Visible Things,” ReStack’s videos “are not the triumph of an all-seeing subjectivity but rather an effort to reduce the barrier between her and the rest of the world, whether human, animal or inanimate.”<sup>96</sup> ReStack uses her intensely intimate way of engaging with her subjects on the screen to breach these distances and to describe her own subject position only as one part of the interconnected and embedded relationships that always involve both human and nonhuman others. In one particularly poignant moment, she shows herself lying on the floor and facing a dead bear, positioning her own body as the bear’s mirror image.<sup>97</sup>

This blurring of boundaries happens through the amplification and transmission of sensation between ReStack, the subjects in her images, and the viewer off-screen. Elizabeth Grosz describes sensation as the zone of indeterminacy between subject and object, a midway between them. Sensation also marks the point at which one can convert into the other.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, Marks writes that senses connect us to experience that exists between intimate and communal and between shared and private. They engage with the in-

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<sup>95</sup> Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 67.

<sup>96</sup> Chris Stults, “The Multitude of Visible Things: The Videos of Dani Leventhal,” *Cinema Scope*, Issue 47 (July 2011), 21.

<sup>97</sup> ReStack, “*Draft 9*,” at 01:48-01:56.

<sup>98</sup> Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 76.

betweenness of experience that can be codified and experience that resists being reduced to systems.<sup>99</sup> Embodied and sensorial perception also acknowledges that the perceiver is inseparable from the perceived and that knowledge is always grounded in localized experience.<sup>100</sup> For Grosz, art is specifically the medium for transforming materiality into sensations that impact bodies directly, not by representation, but through the body's internal forces, cells, and organs.<sup>101</sup> Art makes these sensations come alive in a way that pulls living beings into its sensorial realm and involves them in a shared and tethered process of becoming. It binds subjects and objects within the shared space of sensation and allows for the difference and incommensurability between subject and object to be open.<sup>102</sup>

Because senses insist on the materiality of all bodies and the particularity of knowledge and experience, sensorial knowledge can also unsettle the categories of self and other and human and nonhuman. In *Draft 9*, the material and fragile bodies the camera focuses on become the site where the separation and hierarchy between bodies, both human and nonhuman and living and nonliving, is challenged through the forces of sensation. All bodies exist equally in the constantly transforming and expanding field of sensorial connections. In this web of relations, each thing and each being connects to others through their shared materiality.

*Draft 9* repeatedly circles back to an image of a dead deer being skinned and disembowelled. Through each return to this image, the deer gradually unravels, its insides emptied, and its body slowly transformed into shapeless flesh. Because of its repetition, the image starts to gather force as a metaphor for the core themes of *Draft 9*: the unravelling of boundaries between self and other, the fragile and ambivalent coexistence of all living beings, and the recognition that all material bodies are equally haunted and marked by their mortality.

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<sup>99</sup> Laura U. Marks, "Thinking Multisensory Culture," *Paragraph*, Vol 31, Issue 21, (July 2008): 133.

<sup>100</sup> Marks, "Thinking Multisensory Culture," 128.

<sup>101</sup> Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 73.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.



## *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* by Rachel Rose

Rachel Rose's single-channel video *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013) is a staggeringly varied assemblage of images, sounds, music, and fragments of both text-on-screen and voice-over. It is constructed through a layering of both original footage shot by Rose in multiple locations and both moving and still images she appropriated from a variety of sources. Rose creates complex layers and juxtapositions between images and uses overlays of voice-over, sound, and text-on-screen. She brings these seemingly unrelated elements in connections that create meaning through associations and affect. In her artist statement for the video, Rose describes *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* as an investigation into the experience of being neither living nor non-living, existing in a state that she describes as "life of suspended living." She writes that in the current moment, when the boundaries between living and non-living bodies have become increasingly blurry, "life can be extended, our ecology manipulated, our emotions can become our technologies."<sup>103</sup> In the video, Rose navigates the experience of being a self in a world full of technologies and environments that are invested in perpetuating the appearance of living rather than asking what living in a meaningful way might entail.

Unlike ReStack, who investigates her subjective experience through a diaristic approach focused on the events and details of her everyday life, Rose reflects on her personal experiences of apathy and alienation through research into cryogenics, artificial intelligence, zoo environments, and the nonhuman animals that live in them. All the technologies and spaces she investigates are—in different ways—invested in manipulating and sustaining life artificially. They also reduce the lives of living beings to the bare biological functioning of their bodies. They are spaces and technologies that complicate the definitions of living and nonliving and destabilize the boundaries between human and nonhuman realms. While ReStack's *Draft 9* destabilizes these boundaries through the sensorial force of tactile contacts between bodies, *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* focuses on the

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<sup>103</sup> Rachel Rose, artist statement on an online blog, posted on April 2, 2014, <https://www.we-find-wildness.com/2014/04/rachel-rose/>.

way these boundaries collapse when all bodies, both human and nonhuman, are equally manipulated artificially.

### Essayistic Strategies

Rose reflects on her subjective experience by trying to understand how technologies like cryogenics and artificial intelligence, and the artificiality of environments like zoos, perpetuate feelings of alienation and numbness. She reflects on how they shape, not only her own life, but how they impact the lives of all living beings, both human and nonhuman. To understand the historical and scientific undercurrents of the contemporary moment from which those feelings spring from, she also researches and appropriates scientific and historical references, both as images and text. The fragments of text she uses are borrowed from historical and scientific writings on technologically manipulated life. By doing this, she employs the formal and conceptual strategies of found footage film. Michael Zryd describes found footage as a metahistorical form focused on critically investigating historical narratives.<sup>104</sup> Zryd writes that all film images are malleable, and their meaning and significance are dependent on their context as much as their actual content. When they are recontextualized, the discourses that created their initial meaning can be both foregrounded and critiqued.<sup>105</sup> In writing about archival film practices, Catherine Russell notes that the moving image practices of compilation, appropriation, and collage often come together in the essay film form.<sup>106</sup> Russell writes that in these practices, “the image bank in its fundamental contingency and instability becomes a means by which history can speak back to the present.” The images that are materially part of history are mobilized in its rewriting and reconstruction.<sup>107</sup>

Within the first few minutes of the video, Rose weaves in fragments of appropriated images from multiple sources, including screen captures, animations, segments of news

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<sup>104</sup> Michael Zryd, “Found Footage Film as Discursive Metahistory: Craig Baldwin’s Tribulation 99,” *The Moving Image*, Vol.3, No.2, (Fall 2003): 42. doi:10.1353/mov.2003.0039. Accessed September 20, 2021. While the term “found footage film,” refers exclusively to the appropriation of existing images sources, it shares a close affiliation with essayistic practices. Essayistic practices often rely on archival material and the appropriation of images from a variety of different sources.

<sup>105</sup> Zryd, “Found Footage Film as Discursive Metahistory,” 48.

<sup>106</sup> Catherine Russell, *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 24. Catherine Russell’s term to describe these practices is “archiveology.”

<sup>107</sup> Russell, *Archiveology*, 50.

coverage, and brief glimpses of historical landscape paintings. The opening scene shows a helicopter falling and crashing onto an airport tarmac, sending a group of men—engineers or technicians wearing yellow vests—running in different directions to escape its impact.<sup>108</sup> This scene, completely removed from its original context and all the related facts, is recontextualized as what can be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the audacity and grandiosity with which humanity often pursues technical innovation, often recklessly and self-destructively. It specifically evokes the way technology is used to alter and undo the limitations of our biology and physiology; for example, by giving us the artificial ability to fly. By using an appropriated scene like this as the opening for the video, Rose introduces *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* as an investigation into the shared and preserved repository of images that contains our fragmented yet collectively shared histories. This scene offers a glimpse into the long history of scientific and technological innovation, and the underlying belief in the superiority of human capabilities that often fuel them.

Right after the helicopter crash scene, Rose moves to a sequence of overlaid images and text. She shows jellyfish floating in a tank of water infused with blue light. The imagery of the jellyfish is overlaid with a screenshot of the “media offline” error message that video editors receive when their editing software fails to connect to the media source they are trying to edit.<sup>109</sup> This acts to highlight the video itself as a technologically constructed and mediated environment, one in which the collective and historical narratives may be both disassembled and reassembled. Perhaps its literal message of disconnect also reinforces the association between technology and failure introduced with the opening scene. Rose also overlays other fragments of text on this footage. In these text fragments, she quotes lines from Margaret Lock’s article “Death in Technological Time: Locating the End of Meaningful Life.”<sup>110</sup> Lock’s article discusses the difficulty of determining a meaningful end to life when death can be endlessly manipulated and deferred through technology. By using references like this, Rose connects her personal experience, and the associative

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<sup>108</sup> Rachel Rose, *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, 2013, video, duration 10:20, sequence described is at 00:01-00:04, <https://vimeo.com/408843137>.

<sup>109</sup> Rose, “*Sitting Feeding Sleeping*,” at 00:05-00:37.

<sup>110</sup> Margaret Lock’s article is available online: Margaret Lock, 1996. “Death in Technological Time: Locating the End of Meaningful Life.” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, Vol 10, No 4 (1996), 575–600. <https://doi.org/10.1525/maq.1996.10.4.02a00110>.

images she implements, to specific historical and scientific debates. Through these connections, she can infuse the otherwise free-floating images, like the crashing helicopter and the floating jellyfish, with a more concrete context and meaning.

Throughout the video, Rose also uses other essayistic strategies like a first-person voice-over. This voice is a melancholic, disjointed, and fragmented whisper. It is occasionally processed to be slightly distorted, making it sound mechanical and detached. She brings the appropriated images, text fragments from scientific literature, and her interviews with scientists, into a dialogue with this intimate and personal voice-over. While this voice-over stays the same through the video, the text fragments bring in multiple other voices from scientists and historians. The voice-over and text-on-screen are also frequently overlapping, creating a plurality of voices within the video. Each voice elaborates on different layers of the experience Rose is reflecting on. In one scene, the text-on-screen is a fragment from an interview in which a scientist describes the process of cell regeneration. Rose overlays this with images of robots in a laboratory and zoo animals walking in their cages.<sup>111</sup> This juxtaposition between the text and imagery evokes the chasm that can exist between life as the bare biological functioning of bodies and life as an experience that also entails needs, desires, and a sense of purpose.

Rose's voice-over, the text fragments, and the imagery collide and connect in constantly fluctuating ways, without any element being privileged over another. Mauro Resmini describes this distinctly essayistic process of connecting text and imagery as interweaving. He describes it as a structure made of divergences, detours, and excursions. More than being an illustration or an expression of the artist's predetermined intention, the process of interweaving is better understood as a textual effort, a process of searching and building connections and alignments between fragments.<sup>112</sup> Because the images and texts are appropriated from existing sources or created in the moment by reacting to observations, they can't fit into a predetermined structure. The process of interweaving relies on recognizing and employing the potential meanings that can emerge from their proximities

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<sup>111</sup> Rose, "*Sitting Feeding Sleeping*," at 03:11-03:24.

<sup>112</sup> Mauro Resmini, "What Does It Mean Today to Be a Communist? Nanni Moretti's *Palombella rossa* and *La cosa* as Essay Films," in *Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia*, eds. Elizabeth A. Papazian and Caroline Eades (London, New York: Wallflower Press, 2016), 201-202.

and relations, often in unpredictable ways. Resmini notes that because this kind of structure is created from fragments, it can't have a unitary origin or identity. The fragments are unruly and won't surrender to structural unity. They can be connected and aligned through their tensions and parallels but not hierarchically. Because of this, they remain somewhat autonomous even in their final constellation. Resmini describes the identity of this structure as the plurality of difference. The relationship between its distinct elements, rather than cacophony, is better described as a polyphony that arises from dissonances and contrasts.<sup>113</sup>

#### Spaces of In-betweenness

*Sitting Feeding Sleeping* is structured around Rose's footage from two research laboratories and multiple zoos. She uses her footage from these actual locations as an armature that she builds on and brings other elements into. By staying connected to these initial strategies of documentary practices, she also navigates the ambiguous territory between fact and fiction that the essay form characteristically occupies. Using spaces and locations to frame and ground a scattered and dislocated subjective experience is also a characteristically essayistic strategy. Timothy Corrigan writes that since essayistic subjectivity is defined by its continuous process of investigating and transforming itself, it often relies on experiential encounters with spaces and locations to reshape and test itself against.<sup>114</sup> These essayistic excursions through spaces are a strategy for performing a kind of outing of an interior self. Corrigan writes that in the process of reflecting on these spaces, the essayistic voice also thinks through the self as an externalized and spatialized environment. In this relationship, the separation between the subject and the spaces around them collapses. The spaces affect and transform the subject, and, in turn, the subject recognizes and tries to understand their experience through the spaces they move through. In the process of trying to inhabit and communicate these spaces, the essayistic subject becomes dislocated and drifting.<sup>115</sup> As Corrigan writes:

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<sup>113</sup> Resmini, "What Does It Mean Today to Be a Communist?" 203-204.

<sup>114</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 104-106.

<sup>115</sup> Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 112.

On these essayistic excursions, places and spaces then become empty and redundant streets, unsettled and unsettling frontiers, vacant and inhuman deserts, dense and impenetrable jungles, fragile and breakable surfaces, twisted and consuming mazes, and interstellar and alien voids. All of these create spatial puzzles and demand continual effort for the essayistic explorer to try to think through and out of these geographies, geographies that at the same time frustrate those efforts to map and locate a self in them.<sup>116</sup>

By moving through and in between these spaces, and by anchoring the images, sounds and voice-over in them, Rose grounds and situates her subjective experience in spaces that are concrete and exist in the present. They are actual spaces within her cultural, social, and political environment. These locations provide the formal and conceptual scaffolding that allows Rose to investigate the different layers of her dislocated and fragmented experience while remaining firmly located. At the same time, Rose also viewed these environments as sculptural objects in themselves, artificially constructed forms that can evoke feelings of isolation and alienation.<sup>117</sup> She filmed in a robotics perception laboratory in San Diego where scientists were in the process of creating a robotic baby. It was being engineered to recognize and respond to human emotions expressed through facial expressions. Essentially, the scientists were in the process of constructing a non-living being that can act and “feel” like a human being would. Rose also filmed in a cryogenics laboratory in Arizona where scientists preserve recently deceased bodies to potentially be able to bring them back to life sometime in the future. Through this process, these deceased people can wait, frozen in time, for science to come up with a way to bring the dead back to life.

Zoos are the primary spatial settings that repeat throughout the video and the two research laboratories exist as spaces parallel to them. Rose creates this relationship by frequently moving back and forth between them through editing. She also uses the interviews she conducted with scientists as text-on-screen. These interviews often overlap with footage from all three locations, making it difficult to distinguish which space the text was originally referring to. While speaking to the theme of *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* in distinct ways, these three spaces are all manufactured environments in which life is manipulated and sustained artificially. They also speak to a fundamentally human-centric way of

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>117</sup> Rachel Rose, “Alchemic Filmmaking: Artist Rachel Rose,” Youtube video, 53:13, posted by Nasher Sculpture Center, December 6th, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfE9rOi\\_AjM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfE9rOi_AjM).

perceiving the world, perpetuating the belief in our endless capabilities to manipulate and dominate biological life. At the same time, they are all spaces that—through their mere existence and function—complicate, aggravate, and muddle the boundaries between human, nonhuman, and inanimate bodies. In one sequence, Rose juxtaposes a detailed description of the cryogenic process with a close-up image of a robotic baby’s plastic skin. The text right after this image explains in detail how removing water from the body’s tissues, and replacing it with antifreeze compounds, slows the process of cell decay from a few days to a thousand years.<sup>118</sup> By juxtaposing these images and text, she evokes the question of what kind of body can be defined as a living body and/or a human body? If our tissues are filled with anti-freeze and our body doesn’t decay, are we still more alive and more human than the robotic baby?

In her influential essay published in 1985, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” Donna Haraway describes the figure of a cyborg, a hybrid being that is part machine and part organism. Cyborgs are beings that occupy a space of in-betweenness because they are neither human nor nonhuman, female nor male, living nor nonliving. Conceptually, they collapse these categories and dichotomies. According to Haraway, because of the technologies we have developed, “we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism.”<sup>119</sup> In words that resonate particularly well with the existential conundrum of *Sitting, Feeding, Sleeping*, Haraway writes that “our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.”<sup>120</sup> For Haraway, the cyborg is also a political force that undermines the categories that confine our identities based on gender and race and separates us from the nonhuman realm. It is a figure that both offers freedom from these definitions and creates space for rethinking what it means to be a subject and a human. As Haraway notes, the cyborg offers both the confusion that comes with losing boundaries and leaves us with the responsibility and freedom to reconstruct them.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Rose, “*Sitting Feeding Sleeping*,” at 03:39-03:55.

<sup>119</sup> Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,” *Donna Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 8.

<sup>120</sup> Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” 11.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

The fictional figure of the cyborg in Haraway's writing, and the actual robotic baby and the cryogenically preserved human body in *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, all collapse the categories between human and nonhuman and living and non-living. They open space for rethinking what being alive and being human could and should mean. In *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, Rose's feelings toward these figures seem ambivalent. Because they are profoundly fragmented and unstable, beings that can take on and embody attributes that we use to identify ourselves as human beings, their presence unsettles not only the philosophical notions of what humanness is but also our lived experience which has been deeply shaped by those notions. It's difficult to discern what is left of our understanding of ourselves as humans when the abilities we tend to ascribe our particularity to—like empathy and self-awareness—can be manufactured and replicated by creating a robot using inanimate material and electricity. Similarly, experiencing life as meaningful, purposeful and unique is inseparable from the assumption that the death and decay of our material bodies are inevitable. Cryogenically processed bodies, by refusing the inevitability of death and disappearance, undermine the only certainty we have had to build a solid foundation on. *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* seems to grapple with the confusion and uncertainty that the collapse of these foundations can cause, and the numbness and cynicism that can emerge in their absence. These sentiments are captured in Rose's laconic voice-over toward the end of the video when she says: "you were born to consume oxygen, walk around, grow some bone, and die—all as a mechanism to redeposit your bone back into the mineral sucking ground. All you are is means to mutate material."<sup>122</sup>

Throughout the video, Rose overlays descriptions of the robotic baby and the cryogenically processed body with images of zoo animals. By doing this, she also contextualizes zoo animals as existing in an ambiguous state of in-betweenness both literally and conceptually. By being confined to a life in an artificial environment, they might be biologically living beings but without the agency to pursue and fill their needs. Conceptually, nonhuman animals are also living beings that unsettle and threaten the category of human. Giorgio Agamben writes that Western philosophical tradition has typically defined the human as a conjunction of things like body and soul and nature and

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<sup>122</sup> Rose, "*Sitting Feeding Sleeping*," at 09:21-09:40.



culture, resulting in a divided and fractured figure of human. For Agamben, this figure is created through the separation of human and animal. The definition of humanness is only created and maintained through a logic of exclusion that describes humanness through what it's not. At its core, humanness is marked by the lack and emptiness that humanity itself has produced by keeping animality outside of itself as something abject.<sup>123</sup> According to Agamben, what needs to be thought about is the incongruity of these elements, the emptiness that exists in between dichotomies.<sup>124</sup>

Zoos are artificial and constructed spaces that perpetuate a fundamentally human-centric point of view. They amplify the separation of humans from nonhuman animals and the animality they represent. According to Randy Malamud, zoos are complicit in what he describes as the hegemony of Western industrial cultural dominance.<sup>125</sup> They perpetuate the hierarchical relationship between human and nonhuman animals by placing the human as the owner and steward of the natural world, as separate from it and in control of it. More insidiously, they also position humans as its guardian and protector. In this hierarchical separation, the value of nonhuman animals is contingent on their usefulness and ability to fulfill human needs. In the process, Zoos remove nonhuman animals from their habitats and the complex ecosystems in which they are embedded. They are made into commodities that can be easily consumed for entertainment and usually under the pretense of education and conservation. Malamud describes the zoo experience as “voyeuristic, imperialistic, inauthentic, and steeped in the ethos of consumer culture.”<sup>126</sup> The lives of nonhuman animals, instead of being about their needs, are turned into a human-centric representations that serve us. In the process, because their broader needs are not met, their life becomes reduced to a kind of endless tedium. To amplify the alienation and artificiality of the lives of zoo animals, Rose often focuses specifically on the constructed spaces of the zoo, the way the animals are framed and enclosed by them. She also shows how these constructed spaces are designed to present their lives as entertainment for the visitors.

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<sup>123</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, 38.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>125</sup> Randy Malamud, *An Introduction to Animals in Visual Culture* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 118.

<sup>126</sup> Malamud, “*Animals in Visual Culture*,” 115-116.

One could easily argue that by filming in zoos and using these images of captive nonhuman animals in yet another context, Rose participates in further commodifying their lives. While she observes and comments on the deprived, tedious, and painful lives of these nonhuman subjects, she also participates in the culture and economy that maintains their suffering and uses it for artistic gain, reducing their lives to yet another image. Malamud points out that any representation of nonhuman animals in visual culture is inherently biased and self-serving. These representations that place nonhuman animals in cultural frames inherently fail because they can only be created by removing the nonhuman animal from its original context. Any image of them within our human-centric structures is reductive and fails to account for the complexity of their lives and the way they are embedded in local ecosystems. For Malamud, the only way to approach the creation of these representations is to acknowledge that they are incomplete. One should always ask whether they do more good than harm.<sup>127</sup> One troubling aspect of *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* is that Rose doesn't seem to problematize or distinguish between the research laboratories which—at least in these cases—don't involve involuntarily confined living beings and the zoos that exploit lives on nonhuman animals. By treating the cryogenically preserved bodies, robotic babies, and nonhuman animals merely as mirrors of the experience she tries to describe, the video seems to gloss over the actual suffering of these nonhuman animals. Instead of just a poignant image, the apathy, alienation, and pain that permeates their lives might be the most authentic aspect of the otherwise artificial zoo environment.

For Rose, in both zoos and laboratories, the experience of being alive emerges as alienated, isolated and artificially sustained. She describes these spaces as “prosthetics for understanding deathfulness—being alive, feeling dead.” Rose uses “deathfulness” as a word to describe an experiential state of “vacant abstraction” that manifests as depression, boredom and numbness.<sup>128</sup> In one scene, a polar bear living in the Bronx Zoo is seen sleeping on the icy and snowy ground in its enclosure. Rather than showing any interest or reaction to the snow, the bear lays on the ground in a state of apathy, half sleeping. Its only

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>128</sup> Rachel Rose, “Rachel Rose: Sitting Feeding Sleeping”, interview with Ruba Katrib, *VDrome*, 2013, <https://www.vdrome.org/rachel-rose-sitting-feeding-sleeping>.

source of entertainment is a yellow plastic jug.<sup>129</sup> This polar bear, as Rose describes, was so used to being surrounded by this artificial environment and plastic toys that it had “absorbed the zoo's flatness into himself, adapted himself as that abstraction.”<sup>130</sup>

### Nomadic Subjectivity and Affect

Rose views her works as heightened experiential spaces in which she can be more conscious and sensitive to feelings and meanings. By editing moving images together, she can create more transparent expressions of her experience.<sup>131</sup> Rose describes herself as a “tiny sensor,” saying that her creative process stems from the recognition of a particular feeling or a moment, such as fear or unease, within her experience.<sup>132</sup> The catalyst for *Sitting, Feeding, Sleeping* was the artist’s feeling of being stagnant, depressed and alienated from her own life. This sensation felt like she was somehow dead in a body that was alive and moving through the world without a sense of meaning or purpose. Rather than conscious thoughts that she can articulate in language, these feelings are felt primarily in her body. Instead of trying to translate these initial feelings into abstract ideas or concepts, she searches for locations and images that resonate with them.

While feelings, emotions and affects are difficult to distinguish in the context of *Sitting, Feeding Sleeping*—and the way Rose herself describes her experience and process—affect is useful in describing and understanding her method. Affect as an autonomous and bodily sensation, while often intertwined with feelings and emotions, is distinctly different from them. Eric Shouse explains the difference by describing feelings as autobiographical and personal, sensations that we have defined in relation to our previous experience. Emotions, on the other hand, are social. They are feelings we project and display in socially conditioned ways. Affect, unlike feeling and emotion, is a pre-personal experience of intensity of which we are not yet consciously aware.<sup>133</sup> Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg locate affect in the intensities that arise in the in-betweenness of bodies, in their

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<sup>129</sup> Rose, “*Sitting Feeding Sleeping*,” at 04:48-05:33.

<sup>130</sup> Rose, Interview with Ruba Katrib.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Rachel Rose, “Between Living and Non-Living,” Interview with Mikkel Rosengaard, Youtube video, 16:37, posted by Louisiana Channel on December 12, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/305954066>.

<sup>133</sup> Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect.” *M/C Journal*, Vol. 8, No.6 (2005). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2443>.

capacities to act and be acted upon, whether they are human, nonhuman or inanimate. Affect can be understood as a force that exists beneath and alongside conscious knowing and language. It also acts directly and viscerally in and on the body. According to Seigworth and Gregg, affect “marks a body's belonging to a world of encounters” and can also be defined as the force of those encounters.<sup>134</sup>

By focusing on the flow and force of affect, Rose both recognizes and employs the resonances that emerge between her experience and the laboratory and zoo environments she explores. She follows and absorbs herself in their flow and recognizes it in the bodies and spaces around her. She uses the recognition of affect to connect her experience to the environments like laboratories and zoos, and the bodies of human-like robots and nonhuman animals. She then tries to regenerate the affects that emerge from these spaces, and the bodies within them, through moving images and transmit her encounter of them to the viewer. Because affects are pre-personal and autonomous bodily intensities that flow through and in-between bodies and spaces, the viewer also becomes absorbed in the flow of affect that Rose recognized and actualized in the making of the work. In watching *Sitting, Feeding, Sleeping*, the viewer becomes absorbed in the details that Rose felt a connection with. These affects are encountered in the lethargic movements of the zoo animals that make them seem like they are suspended in space and time and living in slow motion. Images like fish eerily floating in their water tank over a layer of sand, as if they are floating aimlessly in the cold emptiness of outer space, rely on the force of affect to produce meaning.<sup>135</sup>

Theresa Brennan writes in her book, *The Transmission of Affect*, that because affects are transmitted between bodies in unconscious ways, they show us that our energies are not self-contained. They reveal to us that there is no strict distinction between the individual and their environment.<sup>136</sup> All bodies and environments, even inanimate entities like laboratories and robotic dummies, can transmit affect. According to Brennan, because affects can't be contained within boundaries, they also undermine dichotomies between

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<sup>134</sup> Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1-2.

<sup>135</sup> Rose, “*Sitting Feeding Sleeping*,” at 07:25-07:49.

<sup>136</sup> Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5-6.

self and other and individual and environment, as well as any oppositions between the biological and social realms of experience.<sup>137</sup> According to Elizabeth Grosz, because affects move through and in-between all bodies and environments, they also undermine the separation between human and nonhuman realms. For Grosz, affects are how the human can overcome and become other than itself. She describes affects as “zones of proximity between the human and those animal and microscopic/cosmic becomings the human can pass through.”<sup>138</sup>

While relying on the recognition of affect to create connections between her experience and the spaces, images and sounds she creates, Rose doesn't remain within the realm of the personal and intimate experience. Rather than describing her subjective experience as internal and self-contained, her work attempts to describe it as a shared and continually evolving process that is historically and socially constructed. The subjective voice that is employed in *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* doesn't create a singular and fixed point of view but uses a subjective perspective that is disjointed, decentered, and continuously changing. Rosi Braidotti has developed her notion of nomadic subjectivity to describe subjectivity as a constant process of becoming that is never a fixed state of being. It is a materially embodied and affective process that consists of flows, variations, and in-between states. These processes of becoming are not based on a centralized and stable self, but rather assume a subjectivity that is dynamic, layered, and non-unitary. She describes these becomings as compositions and locations that are constructed in and through encounters with others.<sup>139</sup> Braidotti's nomadic subjectivity is a socially mediated process that always exists in relationships with others and is negotiated within social structures that are multilayered. It is understood as both external and intertwined with the in-depth structures of our embodied and embedded selves.<sup>140</sup>

The nomadic subject is materially embodied, and the body is understood, not as a natural or biological entity, but as the interplay of forces, both social and symbolic, and as a

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<sup>137</sup> Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, 7.

<sup>138</sup> Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 77.

<sup>139</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 118.

<sup>140</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Braidotti* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 4.

surface of intensities.<sup>141</sup> Because the subject is materially embodied, it also remains situated and singular. Through this embodied and situated position, it can both receive and organize the forces it is immersed in and produced through. It can hold and sustain the flows of affects and information without being fully dissolved or dispersed by them. The subject stays receptive to the processes of becoming but refuses to be contained, always occupying states of in-betweenness. Braidotti describes nomadic becoming as a process of “emptying out the self,” an opening outward towards encounters and connections with others and the affects and information that flows through experience. In this process of becoming, the subject selects, filters, incorporates, and plays with the forces that fuel their positive transformation. Becoming is an ongoing and fluctuating process that creates complexity and is never completed.<sup>142</sup> She describes nomadic thinking, rather than being grounded in the rational mind that is separate from the body, also as affect. This emphasis on affectivity “marks a pre-discursive moment in which one thinks without thinking about it, a phase in which thinking is just like breathing.”<sup>143</sup>

By moving through these artificial environments and juxtaposing them with historical and scientific references, Rose sets out to describe how her feelings and experiences connect and resonate with places and times outside herself. She describes her process as a method for deepening and expanding the scope of her feelings and connecting her present experience with events of the past.<sup>144</sup> For example, she creates a connection like this in one of the scenes she filmed in a zoo. Her camera floats through spaces with dimly lit terrariums while her voice-over describes—in grisly detail—the short film *Electrocuting an Elephant*, produced by inventor Thomas A. Edison in 1903.<sup>145</sup> By creating visual connections like this, she constructs a kind of a rhizomatic mapping of the cultural and historical narratives that have shaped her experience. These connections also help to illuminate the complexities of the spaces she investigates, such as the long history of our exploitation and abuse of nonhuman animals for the purposes of both science and entertainment. They can also illuminate the underlying fabric of values, like the

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<sup>141</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 21-22.

<sup>142</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006), 145.

<sup>143</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 125.

<sup>144</sup> Rachel Rose, Interview with Mikkel Rosengaard.

<sup>145</sup> Rose, “*Sitting Feeding Sleeping*,” at 04:03-04:48.

unquestioned belief in the importance of scientific and technological innovation that is used to justify these abuses.

Rose's process resembles Braidotti's nomadic and cartographic method of creating *figurations*, which Braidotti describes as "materialistic mappings of situated, embedded, and embodied positions."<sup>146</sup> They create situated and specific subject positions that both understand the subject as non-unitary and multilayered and describe the ways in which the subject is embedded in and emerging from its historical, social, political, and cultural relations. They also describe the power relations from which these subject positions emerge. Braidotti describes them as living maps that, instead of metaphors, are "transformative accounts of the self" that can potentially identify ways in which those power relations can also be resisted.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory*, 13.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

## *Delphine* by Diana Thater

By stepping into Diana Thater's installation *Delphine* (1999) at LACMA in Los Angeles, the viewer is immediately bathed in artificial coloured light, a soft dissolve from hues of orange to magenta.<sup>148</sup> It immediately draws one's attention to the gallery space, revealing its physical shapes and boundaries, while transforming it into an immersive environment. By enveloping all the material surfaces of the space with this coloured light, Thater creates a continuum between the architecture and the projected moving images on the walls, ceiling, and floor. The light comes from a separate source but becomes enmeshed with the projected light of the video that creates the moving images. As a result, the boundaries between the frames of the images and the physical space around them become difficult to distinguish. The light also engulfs the viewer, covering the surfaces of their body and making them literally and metaphorically part of the artwork. They, among the inanimate surfaces of the space, also become a projection surface. Thater also collapses the distance between the viewer and the artwork by allowing the viewer's shadows to interfere with the projections. Rather than contemplating the artwork from a distance, she wants the viewer to look through it and with it.<sup>149</sup>

The four large projections take over the walls, ceiling, and floor of the gallery. They curve, bend, and spread based on the physical shapes of the space. By projecting the images onto the varying planes of the architecture, their rectangular frames are transformed from two-dimensional surfaces to three-dimensional objects. The orange and magenta colours that fill the gallery are complementary colours to the blue and green colours of the projected images. The four projectors are in full view, placed on the floor and hanging from the ceiling at different heights. Some interfere directly with the images. This strategy is rooted in Thater's interest in structuralist film: by revealing and even foregrounding the apparatus that produces the phantasmagoria of moving images, she prevents the viewer from being fully absorbed into the illusion they create. *Delphine* also requires the viewer to engage

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<sup>148</sup> "Walkthrough of 'Diana Thater: Sympathetic Imagination', LACMA, Los Angeles CA, 2015-2016," Youtube video, 16:44, posted by Hauser & Wirth on February 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPDgzUOcnBY&t=296s>

<sup>149</sup> "MCA Talk: Diana Thater," Youtube video, 53:14, posted by Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago on January 3, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqjJz\\_-KoH0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqjJz_-KoH0).



with the projected images as an active and embodied participant, to move through the space and view multiple projections simultaneously. Because there is not just one perspective from which they can fully absorb the work, the viewer's encounter with the moving images is both decentered and fragmented.

The projections depict a pod of wild dolphins swimming in the Caribbean Ocean while divers with cameras swim amongst them, following and filming their movements and interactions. The dolphins are swirling and surging in different directions, sometimes ignoring and other times playfully engaging with the divers and their cameras. The constellation of projections forms an arc above the viewer, creating an impression that the dolphins and divers are spinning above, around and under them. The movement of the dolphins and the orientation of the projections produce an experience of spatial disorientation designed to disrupt the viewer's familiar ways of looking at moving images. The images of the swirling and spinning movements of the dolphins and divers surround the viewer and ask them to gaze up and down, follow and experience their way of moving in space. This also reminds them that dolphins, unlike terrestrial beings, experience space not only horizontally and vertically but also in depth.

A wall of 9 monitors is placed on the opposite side of the gallery, facing the projections. Each monitor is one piece of a puzzle that together depicts a NASA image of the burning sun. For dolphins, the sun is a point of orientation and a magnet they are drawn to. Because dolphins are warm-blooded but live in the ocean, their survival depends on their ability to locate and swim toward it for warmth. The monitor wall, as a heavy sculptural object, also feels like a physical reminder of gravity. It creates a contrast to the projections that evoke a sense of weightlessness. Like the sun is for dolphins, the monitor wall is also a point of orientation for the viewer in this otherwise disorienting space.

#### Embodied and Spatial Subjectivity

Thater's moving image practice exists in an integral manner with the gallery context as site-specific installations. She uses moving images almost as a sculptural material that she shapes based on the specific architectural features of the space. The materials and technologies she uses are also chosen based on the way they separate and delineate spaces

and capture qualities like texture and light. For example, in *Delphine*, the footage filmed close to the surface, usually looking downward towards the depths, is film. The footage filmed deep beneath the surface, with the camera looking up towards the light, is video. Because her installations are site-specific, the spatial characteristics of the specific venue determine and often remake the form and scale of the work each time it is exhibited. Versions of the same installation at different venues tend to be significantly altered. *Delphine*, which was originally made in 1999, has been installed multiple times over the years in various configurations. My description of *Delphine* is based on the way it was presented in the context of Thater's extensive mid-career retrospective *Sympathetic Imagination* at the LACMA venue as well as the documentation in the comprehensive catalogue published as part of the exhibition.<sup>150</sup>

In *The Sympathetic Imagination*, the whole venue was designed as if it was one expansive installation. The boundaries between each artwork were undulating and often indiscernible, each element entangled with others. Upon entering each individual installation space, the view from the entrance revealed another doorway and a view to the next space. The video projections and coloured lights in the individual installation spaces bled into their adjacent spaces as if unable to be contained by the architecture. Christine Ross describes the way moving images can permeate and transform architectural spaces as their spreadability.<sup>151</sup> According to Ross, moving images can be circulated spatially and they can “spread through space and spread space.” Through this ability to spread in the gallery and even beyond it, they have an abstracting effect on the architectural space and can make its “unperceivable intensities manifest.” As a result, the gallery space is transformed from a space into a situation.<sup>152</sup> It becomes an environment of vitality in which moving images become malleable, permeable, and interactive.<sup>153</sup> In *Sympathetic Imagination*, Thater

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<sup>150</sup> *Sympathetic Imagination* was installed at LACMA in Los Angeles between November 22, 2015-April 17, 2016. The exhibition was later installed at MCA in Chicago between October 20, 2016 – January 8, 2017. See the exhibition catalogue: *Diana Thater: Sympathetic Imagination*, edited by Lynne Cooke, Lisa Gabrielle Mark, and Christine Y. Kim (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2016).

<sup>151</sup> Ross writes about this in reference to another installation artist Pierre Huyghe.

<sup>152</sup> Christine Ross, “Spreadability of Video,” in *Abstract Video: The Moving Image in Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015), 177-178.

<sup>153</sup> Ross, “Spreadability of Video,” 182.

activated the exhibition venue as if it was an organic environment in which each artwork existed as part of a larger ecosystem.

The exhibition included multiple installations in which Thater's theme was the spatial experience of nonhuman animals and the way they are conscious of themselves and their environments. *Delphine* is a speculative investigation into the spatial experience of Bottlenose dolphins. Dolphins, through their capacity to see twice—through retinal vision and simultaneously through sonar imaging—experience space drastically differently than humans. They are, in a way, existing in two spaces and can experience two environments simultaneously: one that is immediately present to them and the other that is far in the distance. This double vision that creates an ability to see and experience multiple spaces at once becomes a multilayered metaphor. It proposes a model for consciousness and subjectivity that is multiple rather than singular. It also speaks to the relationship between human vision and the technologically enabled vision of the camera that can alter and expand human capabilities to see.

In *Delphine*, the projections that surround the viewer from every direction, and the cameras that follow and mimic the movement of the dolphins, create a decentered and disorienting spatial experience that resembles the sense of weightlessness and boundless space one would experience when swimming in the ocean. The experience of *Delphine* is meant to unsettle the viewer's familiar ways of experiencing their bodies in space and their habitual ways of looking at moving images in a gallery. Because it foregrounds the way installations can heighten the bodily and spatial experience of the viewer, it relies on what Claire Bishop describes as the phenomenological model of the viewing subject.<sup>154</sup> Phenomenology understands subjectivity as consciousness that emerges from the mutual intertwining of bodies and spaces and subject and object are seen as not separate entities but mutually dependent. The phenomenological model of the viewing subject in installation art emphasizes embodied perception and understands vision as involving the whole body.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), 10.

<sup>155</sup> Bishop, *Installation Art*, 50.

The hypnotic movements and the seductive visual beauty of the images invite the viewer to become lulled in the experience. At the same time, the heightened awareness of the physical architecture, the way it contains and shapes the projected images, is a constant reminder of the unbreachable distance between the realm of the images and the physical space the viewer is in. *Delphine* suspends the viewer's spatial experience between these two perceptual realms. Catherine Elwes writes that moving image installations often embody the viewer's ability to entertain two spaces and perceptual realities simultaneously and they both dissolve and reiterate the physical space the viewer is in.<sup>156</sup> Elwes describes the experience of moving image installations as "perceptual journeying," writing that as we physically move through the installation, our cognitive faculties as well as emotions travel with us and move from one perceptual realm to the other, confusing the experiential boundaries between them.<sup>157</sup> In *Delphine*, the double vision of the dolphins, their ability to entertain to realities simultaneously, also becomes a metaphor for the perceptual experience viewers have when engaging with moving image installations.

The strategies that Thater uses to construct this speculative spatial schema connect her to both ReStack's and Rose's practices and experimental documentary and first-person filmmaking practices in general. Both ReStack and Rose work from their direct encounters and observations of environments. Rose's practice also employs installation strategies and she exhibits her work primarily in the art gallery context. In *Delphine*, Thater uses the documentary footage of wild Bottlenose dolphins she encountered, interacted with and filmed in their natural habitats. *Delphine* can be understood as a spatial model that describes this embodied and sensorial experience she had swimming with and mimicking the movements of the dolphins. While Thater worked with a group of divers who also provided her with footage, the ability to translate this experience into an installation experience required the artist's direct embodied knowledge of what the experience felt like. In the essayistic form, this immediate encounter would traditionally be reflected on and described through the dialogical relationship between language and text. To create *Delphine*, Thater immersed herself in the spaces and environments of wild dolphins and

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<sup>156</sup> Catherine Elwes, *Installation and the Moving Image* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 13.

<sup>157</sup> Elwes, *Installation and the Moving Image*, 99.

reflected on the experience through her body, senses, movements, and gestures. While this interaction can't be defined as a dialogue in any traditional sense, it created a reflective relationship between Thater, the dolphins, and their environment in ways that transformed Thater's subjective experience. In the absence of language as a shared mode of communication and interpretation, this transformation and knowledge became inscribed directly on Thater's body and her sense of space. Because the cameras were moved in ways that reflected the movements and gestures of Thater and the other divers, the experience also became inscribed in the moving images themselves.

Thater structures the viewer's encounter with *Delphine* in a way that evokes questions regarding the nature of consciousness and subjectivity. By unsettling her own sense of movement and spatial orientation by immersing herself in the spatial experience of the dolphins, she also tries to imagine the consciousness of nonhuman animals. This speculative experiment is intended to reveal and complicate the anthropocentric assumptions about nonhuman animals that lead us to inscribe them with cognitive abilities and value by comparing them to our own. By describing them through their difference and complexity, she effectively undoes the hierarchical categories that privilege human capabilities over the sensorial and cognitive abilities of nonhuman animals. Because of this, Thater's installation practice is also a conceptual and philosophical project. According to Bishop, installation art is inherently intertwined with philosophical questions regarding subjectivity and subjective experience and is often concerned with reconfiguring them both formally and conceptually. She notes that the emergence of installation art coincides with poststructuralist theories that criticize the humanist notion of subjectivity which presupposes a rational, centred, and self-contained subject. Instead, subjectivity is described as decentred, dislocated, and multiple. It is also determined by environments and social, political, and cultural structures.<sup>158</sup>

These questions are present in the core strategies that installation art traditionally relies on. Installations activate spaces in a way that heightens the viewer's senses and engages them in an immediate and embodied way. The hierarchical and static perspective model that

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<sup>158</sup> Bishop, *Installation Art*, 6.

places the viewer as the center becomes undone through the creation of multiple perspectives that decenter and physically activate the viewer in relation to the artwork. Bishop also notes that installation art often engages with two notions of the subject simultaneously. On the one hand, they create an encounter for the literal viewer who walks in and experiences the work. On the other hand, installations engage with the philosophical model of the subject that emerges from the way the work structures its encounter with the viewer.<sup>159</sup> Thater describes her practice as an attempt to create a speculative spatial model for relating to other species that we can't verbally communicate with. Instead of words, our embodied and spatial experience—the ability to feel and imagine other ways of being through our bodies—offers an avenue for communication and empathy that doesn't prioritize speech and language as we understand them.<sup>160</sup>

#### Encounters with Nonhuman Space

The making of *Delphine* combined Thater's extensive research into the physiology, behaviour, and environment of Bottlenose dolphins with her direct engagement with the wild dolphins in their natural habitat. She wanted to engage with the dolphins in their environments and on their terms, with as little human intervention as possible. In contrast to *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, in which Rachel Rose filmed in zoos, Thater also worked with zoo animals early in her career but later abandoned this practice completely. For her, the inherently anthropomorphizing structure of the zoo environment, and the commodification of nonhuman animals in these spaces, wasn't ethically viable. By engaging with nonhuman animals like dolphins in their original contexts, Thater's practice tries to avoid exploiting and reducing the lives of nonhuman animals to anthropocentric representations that serve and fulfill human needs and are often produced at the cost of their wellbeing and needs.

Because the process of making installations like *Delphine* is not just speculative but requires Thater to engage directly with the environments and behaviours of nonhuman animals, she inevitably encounters the ethical dilemma that arises from her human intervention in these environments, including the use of nonhuman animals for artistic

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>160</sup> "Diana Thater: Delphine," Youtube video, 4:25, posted by Art21 on October 21, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cR8hHg06ooY&t=6s>.

gain. In *Posthuman Ethics*, Patricia MacCormack asserts that the only ethical way to engage with nonhuman animals is by leaving them alone, ceasing to interact with them or involve them with our world in any way. As she writes, animals don't need us or require anything to do with us. Their encounters with us rarely if ever benefit them. The dependency of some nonhuman animals on us is either the result of domestication or the destruction of their habitats through human actions. MacCormack describes our relationship with nonhuman animals as parasitic and exploitative.<sup>161</sup> She also notes that the animal only exists as a human concept, there is no other animal except human ideas of animality. At the same time, while attempting to preserve nonhumans from further human intervention or destruction, we need to find ways to bear witness to and acknowledge the damage we have already done and work to repair it.<sup>162</sup>

By engaging with nonhuman animals and creating representations of them, Thater's practice navigates this problematic territory fraught with potentially irreconcilable ethical conflicts. The distance she maintains between the actual human and nonhuman spaces, as well as the intention to avoid disrupting the habitats and lives of nonhuman animals, speaks to her intention to not involve the nonhuman animals in the human world. At the same time, she engages with nonhuman animals as a catalyst for rethinking our assumptions about subjectivity and humanness. Her installations are spaces for contemplating notions of humanness and imagining a more empathetic and ethically sustainable way of co-existing with the nonhuman world.

Perhaps as a strategy for navigating and reconciling this conflict, Thater's practice closely intersects with her animal rights activism. This is never explicit in her installation practice as she separates her two roles as an artist and as an activist. Because she creates installations as spaces for imagination and contemplation, she intentionally suspends explicit political judgements and refuses to be didactic. In creating *Delphine*, she worked with activists from the Dolphin Project, a dolphin anti-captivity organization. While that collaboration resulted in *Delphine*, she also created an explicitly activist

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<sup>161</sup> Patricia MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory* (Abingdon, UK: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 66-67.

<sup>162</sup> MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics*, 69.

documentary *Welcome to Taiji* (2004) which addresses the capture and slaughter of dolphins in Japan. Instead of using the dolphins for artistic gain without consequences or responsibility, engaging in direct activism is Thater's way of giving back, attempting to find a way to make the relationship more reciprocal and mutually beneficial, or at least doing less or no harm. The potential problem is that instead of addressing the ambivalent and perhaps ethically irredeemable relationship between art and the representation of nonhuman animals in her practice, Thater's strategy evades the question by resorting to a strategy that is external to it but can be used—perhaps too conveniently—to justify it.

*Delphine* can also be criticized for the anthropocentrism that is implicit in its emphasis on the complexity of nonhuman animals. Matthew Calarco criticizes what he describes as the identity-based approach to undoing categories between human and nonhuman animals for being insidiously anthropocentric. This approach is focused on expanding the notion of subjectivity to include nonhuman animals and it uses this perceived subjectivity as the basis for granting them legal rights and non-instrumental value.<sup>163</sup> Because this approach usually resorts to identifying similarities between human and nonhuman animals, it tends to prioritize and value nonhumans that demonstrate humanlike traits like complex social behaviours, self-awareness, learning abilities and communication that resembles human language.<sup>164</sup> Dolphins, because of their close familial structures and social behaviours, as well as traits that we interpret as intelligence, empathy and self-awareness, are particularly easy for us to identify and empathize with. Our anthropomorphizing representations of them are also among the most positive. By focusing on their complex cognitive abilities, Thater doesn't acknowledge or question the implicitly anthropocentric perspective that deems nonhuman animals interesting and worthy of our attention depending on how complex their experience seems to us.

While these problematic tensions remain in Thater's practice, I would argue that instead of claiming to gain knowledge or understanding of the experiences of nonhuman animals, installations like *Delphine* emphasize the consciousness and subjectivity of nonhuman

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<sup>163</sup> Matthew Calarco, "Thinking Through Animals: Identity, Difference, Indistinction," *The New Centennial Review*, Vol 11, No.2 (Fall 2011): 42-43.

<sup>164</sup> Calarco, "Thinking Through Animals," 46.



animals as radically different and beyond our capacities to understand; we can only try to imagine their experience. In her practice, the lives and experiences of nonhuman animals are recognized as inherently unknowable and inaccessible to us. By trying to convey the complexity and uniqueness of the cognitive capacities of nonhuman animals, Thater's intention has less to do with anthropomorphizing them and more to do with asserting the positive difference between human and nonhuman experience. Rather than only one way of being a subject, the "human" way, there is an expansive realm of different ways of being, ways that are beyond human capacities and understanding. According to Calarco, instead of collapsing the human and nonhuman experience into sameness to undo the categories and hierarchies between them, affirming the positive value of difference and emphasizing the complexity and multiplicity that emerges from it, can undercut the hierarchies without homogenizing either humans or nonhuman animals.<sup>165</sup>

Through the altered spatial experiences Thater constructs in her installations, she tries to nudge the viewer to imagine the consciousness of nonhuman animals in ways that don't reduce their complexity. In *Delphine*, through her research and direct engagement with dolphins, she creates a speculative and imaginative spatial schema of what their physical experience could be like. Swimming with the dolphins and mimicking their movements provided an embodied and sensorial experience—a shift in her own embodied and sensorial perception—that the installation space could then be modelled on. By feeling these sensations first in her own body, and by capturing the movement in the images, she could then try to transfer and translate them into a sensorial experience in the gallery space. Potentially, through this translation of embodied knowledge into an installation form, something about the original experience could be transmitted to the viewer.

Within the gallery space, Thater works exclusively with the human experience of space and the constructed environments that are part of the institutional, cultural, political, and social systems built by humans for humans. The environment of the dolphins, while the viewer can engage with it through moving images, is framed as distant and separate from the human realm. The strategies Thater uses, like the coloured light that illuminates the

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 50.

gallery and the placement of the projectors in full view, amplify the distance between the nonhuman space and the constructed institutional and cultural space of the gallery. These strategies heighten the viewer's awareness of themselves as a viewing subject that occupies these constructed spaces and remind them that they are inherently constrained by their (human) context and perspective. As Lynne Cooke notes in her essay, Thater's encounters with the nonhuman realm are "predicated on an unbridgeable gulf between the viewer and the site."<sup>166</sup>

Rather than proposing a description or understanding of nonhuman ways of being, Thater's speculative and imaginative installations are designed to question and destabilize the scope of human knowledge and the notion of what it means to be human. MacCormack writes that finding a shared language between humans and nonhumans that could cut across their differences is impossible and all our encounters and interactions with nonhuman animals, even the ones that we interpret as reciprocal, are always limited to our thinking of that encounter. They are always interpreted through our language and cognitive capacities and are based on our limitations and needs. This makes all interactions with nonhuman animals exclusively human experiences that can't tell us anything about the nonhuman world.<sup>167</sup> She also writes that because we have no way of gaining knowledge or understanding of the experiences of nonhuman animals, we can and should only focus on undoing the destructive notion of humanness and repairing the damage it has inflicted on the nonhuman world. Only by undoing the privileged notion of humanness can there be any hope for better future encounters and co-existence with the nonhuman world.<sup>168</sup>

Installations like *Delphine* that both immerses the viewer and simultaneously heightens their awareness of themselves as active and ethically accountable subjects, are intended to be spaces that can transform embodied and sensorial experience and, as a result, potentially transform the viewer's thinking. Because Thater seeks to create installations that engage the viewer's imagination and invite open-ended contemplation, she intentionally suspends any explicit statements and refuses to be didactic. By shifting and disrupting the viewer's

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<sup>166</sup> Lynne Cooke, "Diana Thater: On Location," *Parkett*, no.56 (1999), 180.

<sup>167</sup> MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics*, 58.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

familiar ways of being and thinking, her installations try to act as catalysts for openness and alterity. MacCormack writes that alterity and openness are essential to ethical encounters, as they invite us to relinquish “reliance on pre-existent signifiers to become lost in the flows of affectivity.” As she notes, experiencing the alterity of the other is a catalyst for alterity of self.<sup>169</sup> According to MacCormack, ethical encounters “allow the other to be without finitude,” they preserve the essence of the other by refusing to claim knowledge of it. These encounters require being present and sustaining the kind of passivity in which one stays open to unknowability. This passivity is an intentional state of apprehension that refuses judgements and is an ethically active way of being. It is the state of letting the other be what and how they are. By expanding the viewer’s experience towards unfamiliar ways of being, Thater creates awareness that the scope of their knowledge and understanding is always limited and dependent on their perspective.

Donna Haraway writes that speculative fabulation that attempts to find new ways of describing interspecies relationships is crucial to finding ways out of the destructive homogenizing and universalizing structures that have defined our relationship to the nonhuman world. Speculative thinking reimagines our nonhuman relationships without succumbing to either despair or nostalgia. Instead, they are directed towards new ways of co-existing that are affirmative and focused on recuperation.<sup>170</sup> This speculative fabulation, as Haraway writes, works by adding not subtracting; worlds become enlarged and richer, and possibilities that didn’t exist before are made tangible.<sup>171</sup> This all contributes to reinventing the conditions for multispecies relationships and co-existence. To imagine and create new models for our co-existence with nonhuman animals, Thater constructs encounters in which nonhuman animals become seen as unknowable and irreducible, as beings that Donna Haraway describes as “creatures of imagined possibility.”<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>170</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 10.

<sup>171</sup> Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 128.

<sup>172</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 4.

## Conclusion

The practices in this research can be understood in the context of what Erika Balsom describes as “Othered Cinema,” a heterogeneous field of moving images in which they mutate with forms and contexts that might have previously been foreign to them. *Draft 9*, *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* and *Delphine*, in employing strategies of essayistic filmmaking and installation in distinct ways, exemplify the “otherness” of these contemporary forms. While the practices of Dani ReStack, Rachel Rose and Diana Thater are invested in formal experimentation, they are driven by ethical and critical engagement. The artists use the medium of moving images to respond to difficult questions encountered through their explorations into the shared world we live in. Since that world is in constant flux, impactful engagement with it requires constant vigilance to how art can and should respond to it. These artists’ experimental practices combine and modify specific forms and tactics to speak to what is most urgent in the present moment. They use moving images to think critically what it means to be a subject and a human being. In doing so, their practices participate directly in making the world a more nuanced and complicated place. How subjectivity is understood and described has an impact on actual living beings, both human and nonhuman.

In beginning with *Draft 9*, I focused on the material surfaces of the body and the tactile exchanges of sensation between bodies of human and nonhuman and living and nonliving beings. ReStack amplifies the force of these sensations through her editing in which she creates juxtapositions that have a visceral impact on the viewer. While employing editing, she also uses her camera to focus on the tactility of her contacts with the subjects on screen. The material qualities of her images, their surface, lighting, and sound make them feel tactile in themselves. By amplifying these inherently sensorial and embodied qualities of moving images, theorized especially by phenomenological film theorists, she creates a heightened awareness of the interconnectedness of all the bodies both on- and off-screen. She employs these strategies to describe how all living and nonliving beings, equally bound by these forces of sensation, are interconnected and interdependent.

Rachel Rose, in *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, draws the focus from this surface of the body towards the spaces and environments she is embedded in. Rose uses moving images to recognize and transmit the flows of affect that circulate between human and nonhuman bodies and between bodies and spaces. She amplifies these forces to describe how her subjective experience is produced—and can be critically reflected on—through the environments she investigates. In my analysis of *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, I drew from theorists like Teresa Brennan who describes affect as the pre-personal force of intensity that emerges in the encounters between bodies and spaces. Because it flows through our bodies without conscious control and before we are aware of it, it can be used to challenge the notions that our bodies and subjectivities are self-contained and separate from others. In the spaces Rose investigates, her experience becomes intertwined with the experiences of human and nonhuman beings within them, all equally impacted by these same forces. She also follows these flows of affect to visualize the undercurrents of shared cultural and scientific narratives that influence the present and impact the experiences of both herself and others.

*Delphine*, like *Draft 9* and *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, is also informed by the artist's embodied experience. While *Delphine* is based on Thater's encounter with Bottlenose dolphins in their ocean environment, her experience becomes reflected on through the site responsive tactics of installation. The gallery space becomes the spatial scaffolding that enables her to reactivate the sensorial experience she felt in her body. The architectural space of the gallery, and the installation strategies she uses, also enable her to construct a speculative yet physically tangible model of how she imagines the subjective experience of the dolphins she encountered. Because the speculative model becomes transformed into a physical space, it allows the viewers to enter it and imagine in their bodies what it might be like to be other than human. Because moving images in architecturally responsive installation forms are inherently focused on how the images impact the body, they offer potential for imagining subjective experience beyond human attributes like our spoken and written language. Because sensation, affect, gesture, and movement are shared ways of communicating across human and nonhuman realms, they can be employed to imagine the subjectivities of nonhuman animals and find new ways of relating to them. In *Delphine*, they are used to create encounters with nonhuman animals that divert the

anthropocentric focus on how much their language and cognitive abilities resemble humans. By focusing on the shared aspects of subjective experience, Thater tries to avoid the assumptions that prevent us from seeing and appreciating the complexity of their experience.

In their respective practices, ReStack, Rose and Thater describe the materiality of the body, and its sensorial and affective connections to the world around it, as their point of departure for visualizing subjective experience through moving images. In all these artworks, and the theoretical frameworks I draw from, the body doesn't exist as a self-contained entity that separates the subject from the world around it. Instead, its materiality is what makes us part of the world; it connects us to other human and nonhuman bodies and binds us to our environments. Because the materiality of the body connects us to the human and nonhuman others, these artworks also employ its potential to negotiate the ethics of those relationships. Like the framework for ethics in new materialism, they use the shared materiality of all living bodies, their equal ability to affect and be affected by others, as the foundation for considering the bodies, lives, and subjectivities of nonhuman animals without hierarchical distinctions between us and them. The strategies these artists use are employed to imagine how subjectivity and humanness could be described in more compassionate and open-ended ways, acknowledging their dependence on ecosystems, and affirming the irreducible value of the nonhuman others we live with.

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## Part 3: Moving Image Projects

## I left parts of myself everywhere (Solo Exhibition)

Artlab Gallery

London, Ontario

November 25<sup>th</sup> – December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021

*I left parts of myself everywhere* was a solo exhibition at the Artlab Gallery at Western University. The gallery space is one large open space with very high ceilings. Because of its large scale and lack of smaller contained spaces within it, I approached the exhibition as one installation environment. Each individual installation, while being its own work, existed as intermingled with the others through an open layout. The sound in the exhibition was a subtly distorted forest soundscape that filled the whole space and connected to each installation in different ways. I imagined the exhibition space as a nocturnal environment that was assembled from disjointed fragments of different locations and ecologies. The exhibition consisted of 7 different installations. A large 3-part video, *ex vivo*, took over the middle area of the gallery with its three large screens. Surrounding *ex vivo*, each corner of the gallery had an individual work. I also used the back wall of the gallery for a video projection and included an installation in the gallery's storage room. The space was dark and immersive, the only light in the space came from the video projections themselves.

Exhibition Statement

*I left parts of myself everywhere*\* transforms the gallery into a moving image environment. The interconnected installations speak to the experience of dislocation and fractured relationship to body, language, and place. They trace the deep yet precarious connections that emerge between human and nonhuman bodies and ecosystems; connections that are constantly both found and severed. The exhibition maps an experiential space that is both permeated with vitality and haunted by personal and ecological loss.

\*The exhibition title is borrowed from the poem "St. Thomas Aquinas" by Serbian American poet Charles Simic.

Exhibition documentation video:

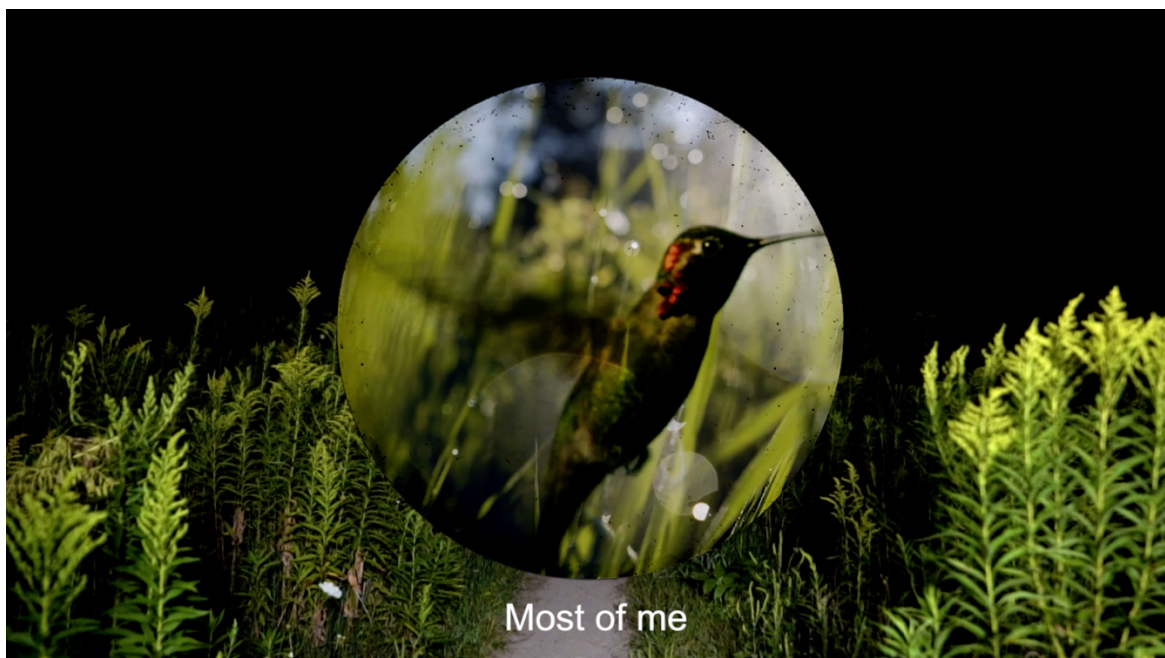
Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/658148990/db14913baf>



Installation view of *I left parts of myself everywhere*, Artlab Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman



Installation view of *I left parts of myself everywhere*, Artlab Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.



Video still from *ex vivo* (part 2), 2021.

*ex vivo*

3-part video

18 min, loop

2021

When the viewer first entered the gallery, they encountered this 3-part video installed as a large triptych and projected on three floating 140-inch screens. The videos were visible from both front and back of the screens and the screens were placed slightly apart, at different distances from the entrance. This invited the viewer to walk around and between them and view the videos from different sides. I envisioned *ex vivo* as a panorama that the visitor is first surrounded by when they enter the gallery. Each part of the video, consisting of various sources of both original and appropriated imagery and text-on-screen, is constructed around footage of a nocturnal walk along an overgrown path. This footage repeats in each part of the video, as if the viewer was pulled into three directions at once. While each part of *ex vivo* operates individually, they also come together as a whole, like distinct chapters within a book. In this triptych form presented in the exhibition, the individual parts looped individually, not synced with each other. As each video was its

own loop, the timings of the different parts in relation to the others were continually shifting, creating new image and text-on-screen alignments and associations each time. When watched from a distance all at once, the text fragments also started to create disjointed sentences across the three screens. This disjointedness was amplified by inverted sentences of Finnish that appeared briefly and could only be read from the back of the screen. The parts also had repeating and parallel visual elements that connected them together. The video projected on the back wall of the gallery, above these projection screens, was titled *there is nowhere else to go*. While I titled this projection as its own piece, I also considered it an integral part of this triptych. The projection depicted briefly appearing and disappearing ink drops that resembled brief glimmers of light, evocative of a night sky.

Video links to individual parts of *ex vivo*:

Part 1: <https://vimeo.com/658230529/be027554c4>

Part 2: <https://vimeo.com/658231045/47858090cc>

Part 3: <https://vimeo.com/658231442/00af1e6f29>



Installation view of *ex vivo*, Artlab Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.





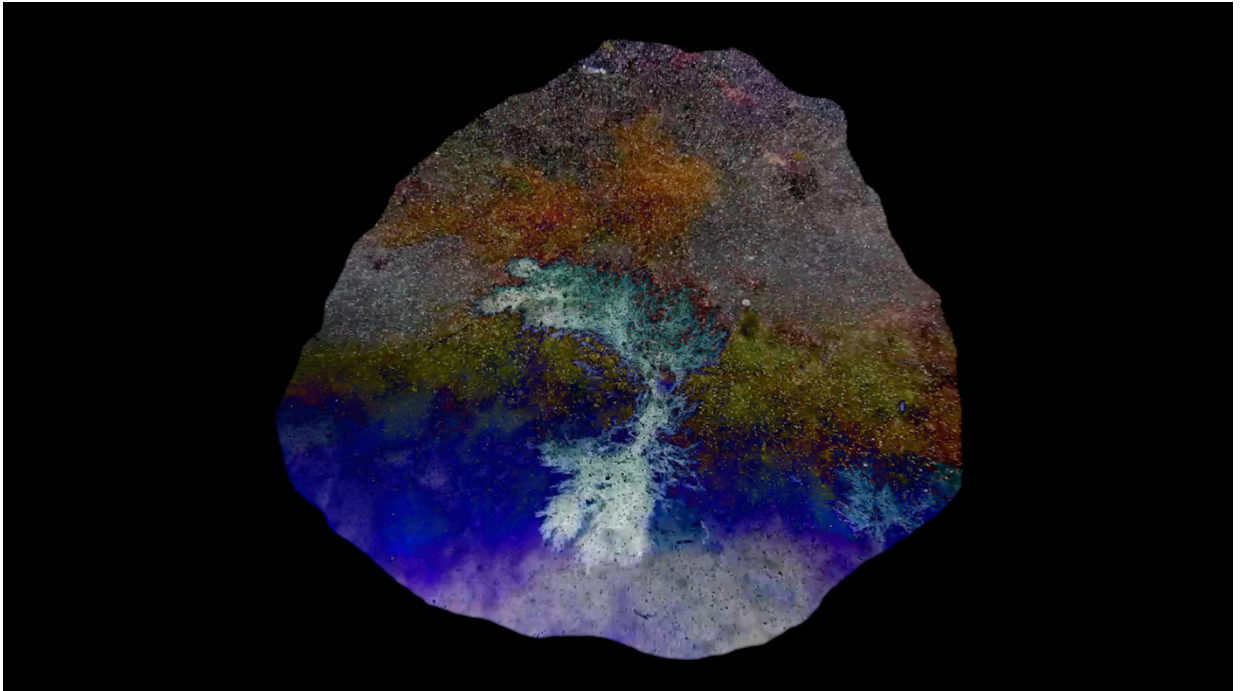
Installation view of *it took a long time to get back here*, Artlab Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.

*it took a long time to get back here*

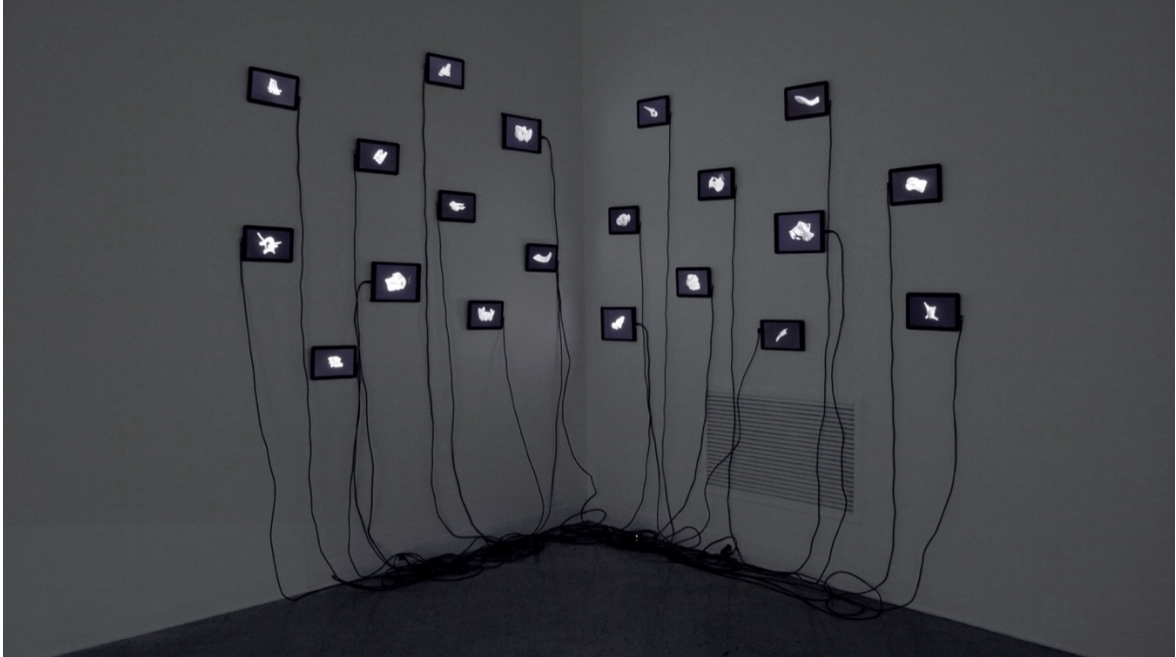
Video installation

2021

In *it took a long time to get back here*, I used 3 small video projectors that were mounted on microphone stands. They created three floor projections, each one an organic shape with tethered and slightly morphing edges. They were evocative of holes on the gallery's concrete floor, creating a portal into another environment. I distorted their original colours to make them vibrant, colourful, and otherworldly. The videos were made from underwater footage of tidal pools, shot from the bottom of the pool looking up towards the sky.



Video still from *it took a long time to get back here*, 2021.



Installation view of *we belonged to each other*, Artlab Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.

*we belonged to each other*

Video installation

2021

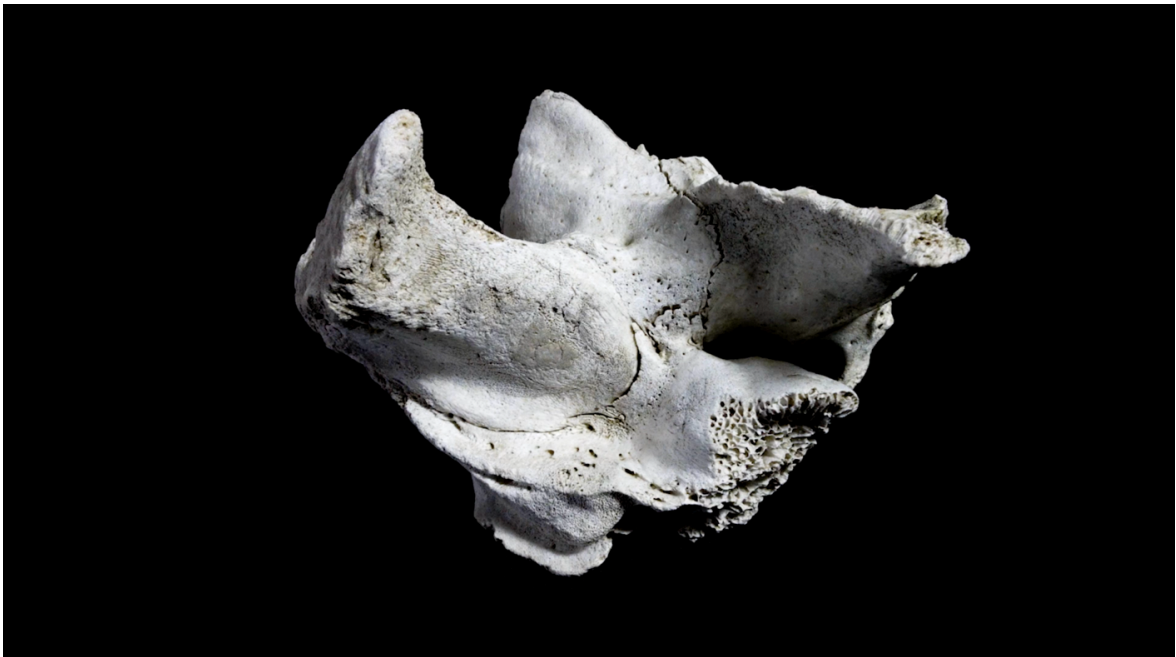
In *we belonged to each other*, I mounted 20 tablets on a wall to create a constellation of videos. This installation took over one of the corners of the gallery space. Each video depicted a unique bone fragment slowly rotating against a black background. Each one was also rotating at slightly different speed. When looked at from a distance, the videos seemed completely still. When the viewer walked closer to the screens, they were surrounded by floating bones and their movements became noticeable. The power cords hanging from the tablets were left as a visible element in the installation, creating a messy bundle on the floor. When the viewer first entered the gallery, this installation was hidden behind the projection screens and would only reveal itself once the viewer walked past *ex vivo*.

Video detail:

Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/658153869/2f2d31a241>



Installation view of *we belonged to each other*, Artlab Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.



Video still from *we belonged to each other*, 2021.



Installation view of *I was an ocean once*, Artlab Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.

*I was an ocean once*

Video installation

2021

*I was an ocean once* was hidden in the storage room of the gallery, only becoming visible when the viewer wandered towards the back of the gallery space and saw a small storage room door open. In this installation, I used an arrangement of gallery plinths as projection surfaces. The video projected onto them was underwater ocean footage, filmed close to the shore during high winds when the waves were particularly aggressive. The footage tried to capture the rhythm of the waves, as well as the movement of plants and other organic matter as they were being tossed back and forth with the waves. I created the installation by mapping the projections onto the plinths. Each one also had the same footage projected slightly differently, breaking the ocean environment into multiple interacting fragments.



Installation view of *I knew you 66 million years ago*. Artlab Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.

*I knew you 66 million years ago*

Video

10 min, loop

2021

In *I knew you 66 million years ago*, a large monitor was placed vertically leaning against a corner. The video depicted a black background with a smoke-like formation of ink and sand falling slowly downwards from the top of the screen. As it fell, it gradually revealed a partial shape of an ammonite fossil. The formation first fell downward and eventually changed its direction and started to slowly retreat. At various moments throughout the video, a short text appeared at the bottom of the screen, one word at a time.

Video detail:

Vimeo link <https://vimeo.com/658232662/e4229fe1b1>



Video still from *I knew you 66 million years ago*, 2021.



Installation view of *I couldn't tell us apart*, Artlab Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.

*I couldn't tell us apart*

Video

4min, loop

2021

The video *I couldn't tell us apart* was looped on a small monitor that lay on the floor. The 4-minute loop combined long sequences of static video noise, creating an impression that the monitor might be broken, as if it was tossed on the floor and left there. Between the sequences of static video, a black and white video appears. The footage depicts a pack of coyotes wandering across a field at night and stumbling onto the camera. The video is the result of the coyotes playing with the camera, tossing it around on the ground and capturing a sequence of swirling ghostly images.

Video detail:

<https://vimeo.com/658232565/daac2c55fb>





Video still from *I couldn't tell us apart*, 2021.

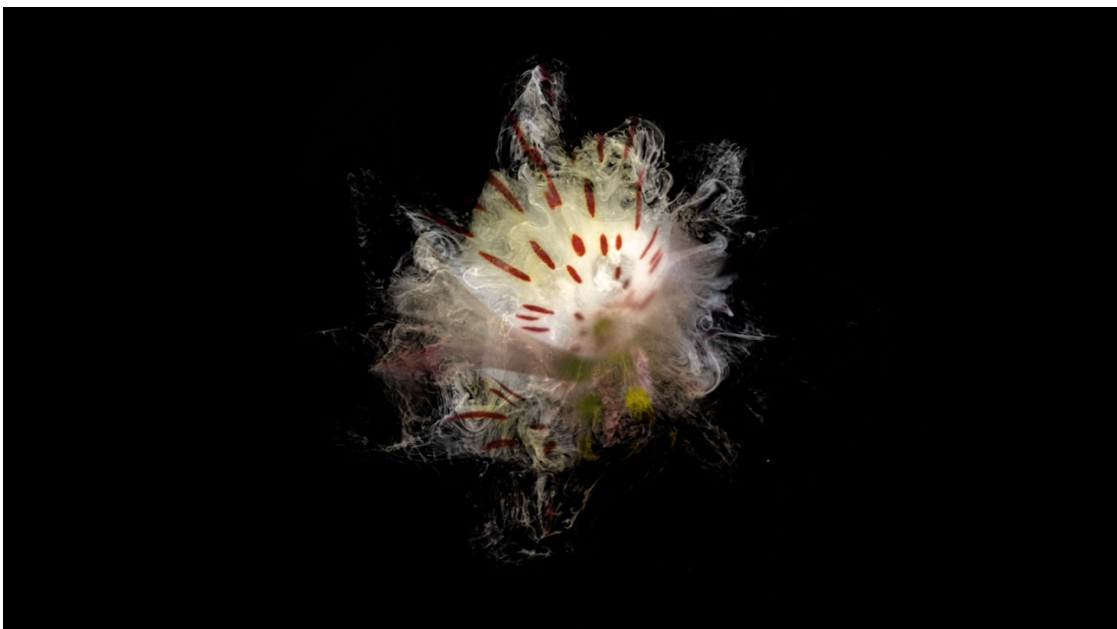
## Written on the Earth (Group Exhibition)

McIntosh Gallery

London, Ontario

March 4 – April 17, 2021

*Written on the Earth* was a group exhibition at Western University's McIntosh Gallery curated by Helen Gregory and coordinated by Patrick Mahon. The exhibition was the culmination of a two-year collaborative research project in which I and 5 other artists—Hannah Claus, Patrick Mahon, Ellen Moffat, Joel Ong, and Matthew Trueman—worked with the Northern Tornadoes Project, a research group at Western's engineering department. This research/art project was intended to create an opportunity for interdisciplinary dialogue across fields of art and scientific research. As part of the project, we gained access to research and data collected by the Northern Tornadoes Project and were able to respond to this material through our practices. While we used this research material and data as the starting point for our individual practice-based projects, the exhibition and the individual artworks were open-ended investigations into larger themes, primarily questions around climate change and human impact on ecosystems.



Video still from *Fugitive Lives*, 2021.



Installation view of *Fugitive Lives*, McIntosh Gallery, 2021.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.

### *Fugitive Lives*

Video installation

2021

*Fugitive Lives* was a multi-channel video installation exhibited in the context of *Written on the Earth* at McIntosh Gallery. The seven monitors took over the floor of the smaller gallery space. Each one was a video loop, depicting a slowly morphing ink “puddle” appearing against a black background. As it spread, the ink gradually revealed surfaces, textures, and colours of organic elements like rocks, bones, and flower pedals. In creating these visuals, as well as choosing the title for the installation, I took inspiration from still life paintings. Each monitor was connected to an arrangement of sprawling cables on the floor. The cables branched into multiple directions, creating a root-like structure. These cables connected each individual monitor to the larger arrangement and the whole installation was powered by a single outlet. The gallery was dimly lit to create an immersive and nocturnal environment.

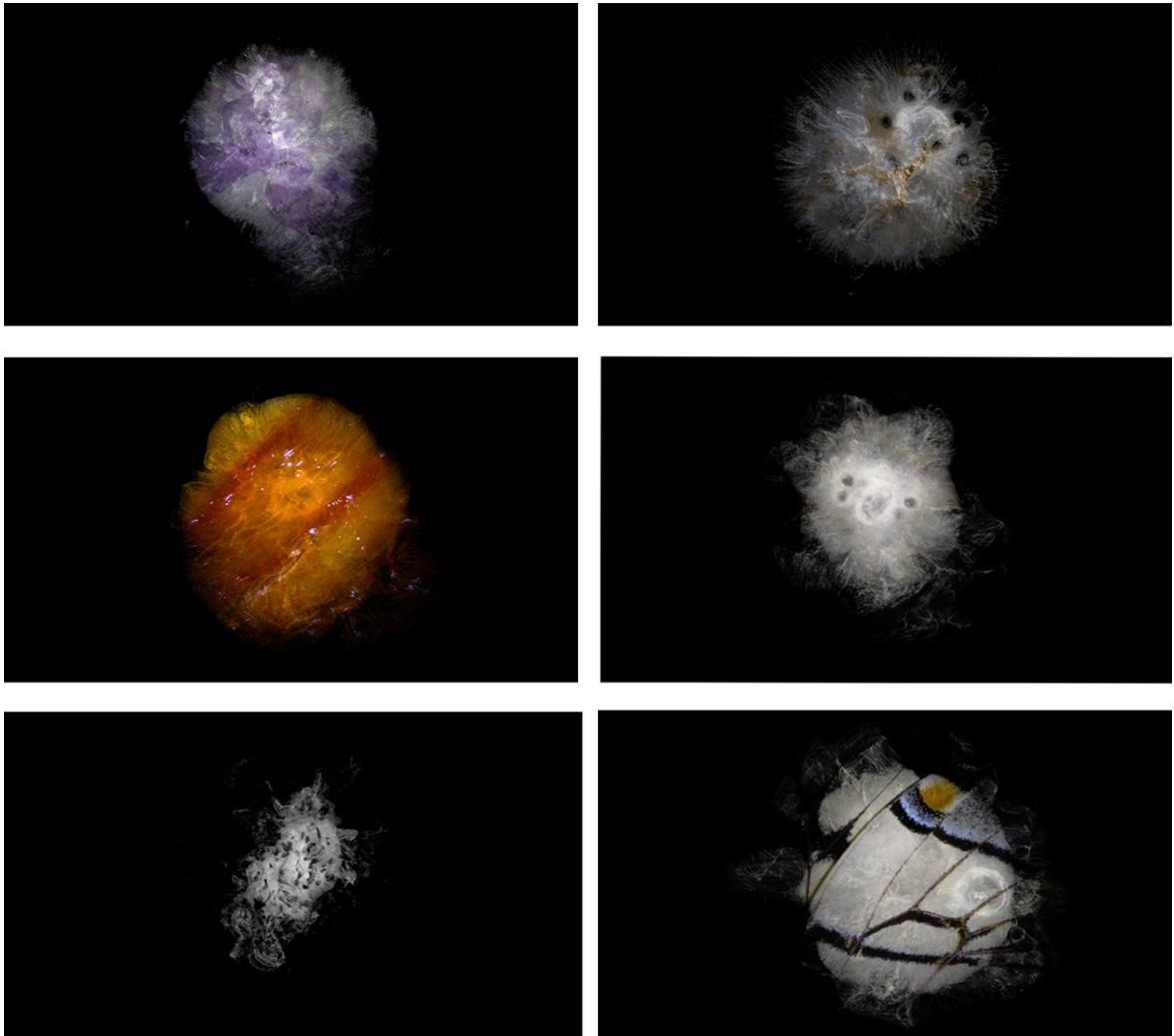
*Fugitive Lifes* shared the gallery space with Ellen Moffat's sound installation *when crickets hesitate*. Ellen's speakers, also connected through a web of audio cables, were intermingled with my monitors. Ellen's installation created the sound environment for the space. While we knew beforehand that we would be sharing the space, our installations were created separately. We approached their encounter as an open-ended experiment and didn't know how they would interact with each other until the day we installed them in the space. These two installations ended up becoming closely intermingled, creating an almost seamless installation environment in which the sounds and imagery created unexpected connections.

Video documentation of *Fugitive Lifes / when crickets hesitate* at McIntosh Gallery:

Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/532685961>

Video detail:

Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/658155466/3b567f227d>



Video stills from *Fugitive Lifes*, 2021.

## Invisiotomy (Video)

Single-channel video

8 min

2020

*Invisiotomy* is a single-channel video created entirely from infrared wildlife camera footage. It is constructed from footage I filmed using my wildlife cameras in multiple locations and footage I appropriated from multiple sources. I imagined the structure of the video as a live stream, a virtual broadcast that could connect to and move between different locations without limitations of time and space. I thought of the camera, in the absence of a person behind it, as a disembodied eye. The author of the image is a kind of invisible presence or a visible absence. *Invisiotomy* also uses extensive layering of imagery and text-on-screen. I created animations with anatomical images and surgical videos and overlaid them with the nocturnal scenes of wildlife.

*Invisiotomy*:

Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/292692889>



Video still from *Invisiotomy*, 8 min, 2020.

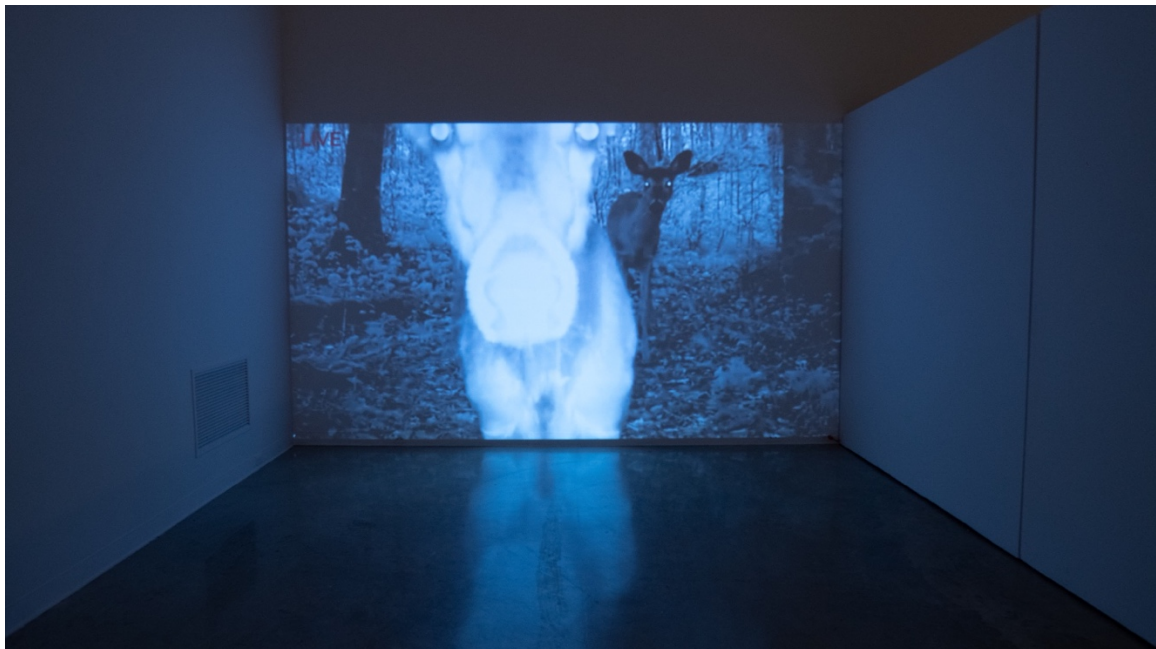
## suppose they are all put together (Group Exhibition)

Artlab Gallery

London, Ontario

January 9 – January 23, 2020

In this group exhibition, I joined artists Aryen Hoekstra, Ellen Moffat, Ashley Snook, and Michelle Wilson. While we all worked with different mediums and materials, the exhibition was built on our shared interest in experimental and speculative practices. I used movable walls to create a screening space for *Invisiotomy*. This area was as dimly lit as possible with the limitations brought on by the shared space. Because *Invisiotomy* operates as a single-channel video with a linear structure, and I had to work with the limitations of the space, I presented it in a screening setting with chairs laid out for viewers. I also included sound for the video, but the soundscape of *Invisiotomy* mixed with sounds from other installations in the exhibition. In addition to *Invisiotomy*, I included a video titled *Refuge #1* on a small monitor with headphones. It was mounted on a wall right outside the screening area.



Installation view of *Invisiotomy*, Artlab Gallery, 2020.



Installation view of *suppose they are all put together*, Artlab Gallery, 2020.





Video still from *Refuge #1*, 2020.

*Refuge #1*

Single-channel video

5min 44sec

2020 (ongoing series)

*Refuge #1* was included in *suppose they are all put together* and it is part of an ongoing project. The videos in this series respond to an abandoned orchard in the Coves in London, Ontario. The video depicts a landscape slowly disappearing into the distance.

*Refuge #1:*

Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/385160857>

## Texturings (Performance with Ellen Moffat)

*in attendance* performance series

Forest City Gallery

July 28, 2018

Excerpt from *Texturings* statement:

*“Video projections of the natural micro-environment extend over the gallery walls, floor and ceiling creating a fluctuating, tactile and layered yet ambiguous impression of an undefined, nameless space. Sound is generated through direct manipulation of materials and actions producing tonal, percussive and sonic textures. Together, sound and image construct an embodied, primordial, intimate and sensorial environment of natural and constructed elements.”*

*Texturings* was a video/sound performance in collaboration with sound artist Ellen Moffat. In the 30-minute performance, I created a two-channel video projection that was projected alongside Ellen’s live sound performance. I projected these videos onto the walls, ceiling, and floor and used them to create an immersive environment in which the videos responded to the architectural elements of the gallery. Ellen had set up her sound equipment in the middle of the floor at one end of the gallery and she was immersed in the video projections during her sound performance. Because the video images were spread around the space, the viewer also became immersed in them. Throughout the performance, I kept the other projector in motion, maneuvering it so that the images would become distorted and shaped based on the shapes of the walls and ceilings. The two video projections would also overlap with each other in changing ways. *Texturings* was presented as part of Forest City Gallery’s *in attendance* performance series. We had also performed an earlier iteration at Satellite Project Space on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

*Texturings* performance documentation from Forest City Gallery:

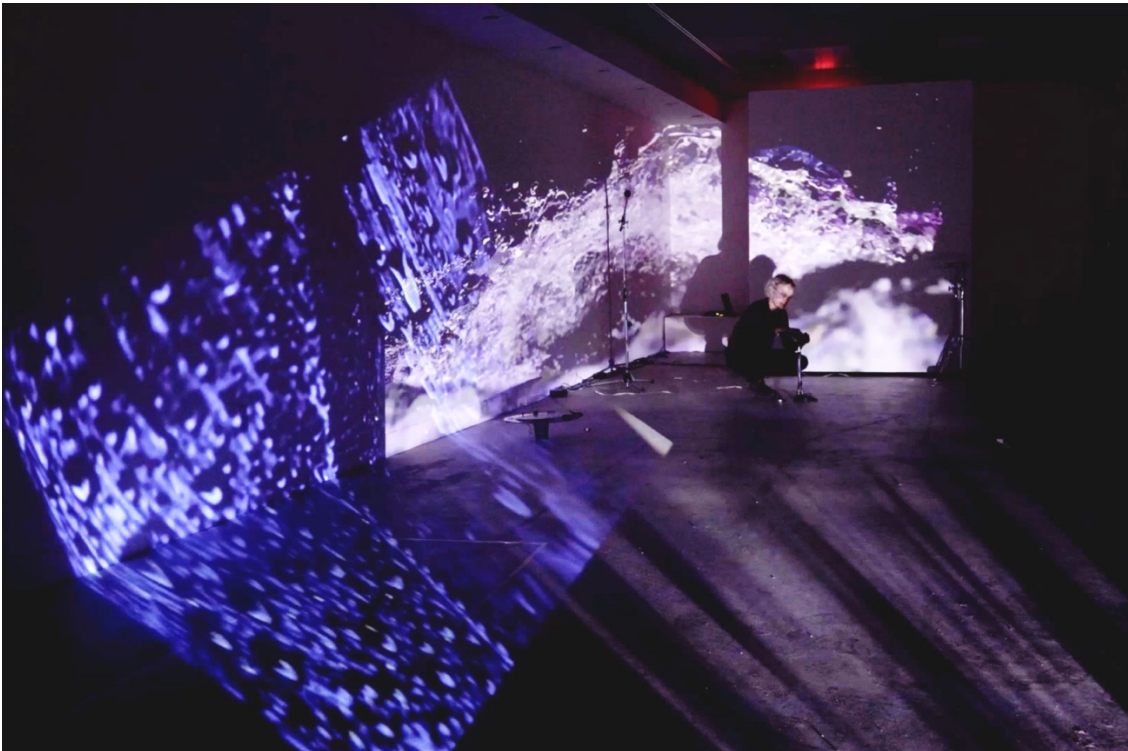
Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/289562436>



*Texturings* performance at Forest City Gallery, July 28, 2018.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman



*Texturings* performance at Forest City Gallery, July 28, 2018.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman.



*Texturings* performance at Satellite Project Space, March 13th, 2018.  
Image credit: Matthew Trueman

**EEVA SIIVONEN**

**Websites:** [www.eevaleenasiiivonen.com](http://www.eevaleenasiiivonen.com) / [www.vimeo.com/eevasiiivonen](http://www.vimeo.com/eevasiiivonen)

**Education:**

- 2017-** **Ph.D. in Art and Visual Culture (Candidate)**, Western University, London, ON, Canada
- 2016** **MFA in Video Art**, Syracuse University, College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse, NY
- 2015** **MFA in Documentary Film**, Aalto University, School of Art, Design and Architecture, Helsinki, Finland
- 2011** **BFA in Documentary Film**, Aalto University, School of Art, Design and Architecture, Helsinki, Finland
- 2013-2014** **MFA studies in Time-Space Related Arts**, Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, Finland
- 2013** **Exchange Semester**, Bezalel Academy of Art and Design, Jerusalem, Israel
- 2005-2007** **BA studies in Comparative Literature and Aesthetics**, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland
- 2004-2005** **Creative Writing**, Orivesi Institute, Orivesi, Finland

**Awards and Artist Residencies:**

- 2021** **Artist in Residency Fellowship**, Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, Taos, NM
- 2020** **Global Opportunities Award**, Arts and Humanities Student Council, University of Western Ontario
- 2020** **Graduate Thesis Research Award**, Western University, London, ON
- 2019** **Artist in Residency Fellowship**, Goetemann Artist Residency, Gloucester, MA
- 2017** **Provost's Entrance Scholarship**, Western University, London, ON
- 2017** **Artist in Residency Fellowship**, Terra Summer Residency, Terra Foundation for American Art, Giverny, France
- 2017** **Jury's Citation Award**, Black Maria Film Festival
- 2016** **Artist in Residency Fellowship (9 months)**, Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY
- 2016** **Special Award**, AVIFF 2016 & Angel Orensanz Foundation
- 2016** **Creative Opportunity Grant**, Syracuse University
- 2015** **Artist in Residency Fellowship**, I-Park Foundation, East Haddam, CT
- 2015** **Artist in Residency Fellowship**, Fjuk Art Centre, Husavik, Iceland
- 2015** **Finlandia Foundation Scholarship**
- 2014** **Graduate Tuition Scholarship**, Syracuse University
- 2014** **Fulbright Scholarship**
- 2013** **Erasmus Scholarship**, Aalto University
- 2011** **Grant for Media Art**, AVEK (Center for Audio Visual Media)
- 2010** **Graduate Student Scholarship**, Aalto University

**Selected Exhibitions and Events:**

- 2021 **Online Project** with Ellen Moffat, *-And-*, curated by Christof Migone.
- 2021 **Solo Exhibition**, *I left parts of myself everywhere*, Artlab Gallery, London, ON
- 2021 **Group Exhibition**, *Written on the Earth*, McIntosh Gallery, London, ON
- 2020 **Group Exhibition**, *suppose they are all put together*, Artlab Gallery, London, ON
- 2019 **Group Exhibition**, *Please—Don't Take This Lightly*, Artlab Gallery, London ON
- 2018 **Performance**, *Texturings*, collaboration with Ellen Moffat, Forest City Gallery, London, ON
- 2018 **Performance**, *Texturings*, collaboration with Ellen Moffat, Satellite Project Space, London, ON
- 2017 **Group Exhibition**, *Night Swim*, Random Access Gallery, Syracuse, NY
- 2017 **Two Person Exhibition**, *Brianna Miller/Eeva Siivonen*, Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY
- 2016 **Group Exhibition**, *Visions*, Nunnery Gallery, London, UK
- 2016 **Solo Exhibition**, *Black River*, Schweinfurth Art Center, Auburn, NY
- 2016 **Group Exhibition**, *None the Wiser: MFA 2016*, Rogue Space, NYC
- 2016 **Group Exhibition**, *Cloudlands*, Spark Art Space, Syracuse, NY
- 2016 **Group Exhibition**, *None the Wiser*, SU Art Gallery, Syracuse, NY
- 2015 **Group Exhibition**, *SATELLITES at the Franklin*, curated by Third Object and MCA in Chicago, Chicago, IL
- 2015 **Group Exhibition** *Were The Eye Not Sunlike*, ACRE TV, Fernway Gallery and MCA in Chicago, curated by Third Object, Chicago, IL

**Selected Film Festivals and Screenings:**

- 2021 **Dobra International Experimental Film Festival**, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- 2021 **AVIFF Cannes Art Film Festival**, Cannes, France
- 2020 **Transient Visions Festival of the Moving Image**, Spool Contemporary Art Space, Johnson City, NY
- 2020 **Barcelona International Short Film and Video Festival**, Barcelona, Spain
- 2020 **Crossroads**, San Francisco Cinematheque, San Francisco, CA
- 2019 **Bideodromo International Experimental Film and Video Art Festival**, Bilbao, Spain
- 2017 **Short Time Long Distance Film and Video Art Festival**, Helsinki, Finland
- 2017 **Tuulikki Pietilä Retrospective**, Tuulikki Pietilä portrait film *Post Scriptum* (2014, with Anssi Pulkkinen) was screened as part of the exhibition, Ateneum Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, Finland
- 2017 **2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Rear**, Chicago, IL
- 2017 **Black Maria Film Festival**, 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Tour
- 2016 **Critical Edge Film Festival**, Tallahassee, FL
- 2016 **aCinema**, Woodland Pattern Book Center, Milwaukee, WI
- 2016 **AE Art House Film Festival**, Minneapolis, MN ((**Nominated for Creative Vision Award**))
- 2016 **MUX: Asheville Video Art Festival**, Asheville, NC
- 2016 **AVIFF Cannes Art Film Festival**, Cannes, France

**2015** Hammerbrook Film Fest, Hamburg, Germany  
**2015** AE Art House Film Festival,  
**2014** International Short Film Festival, Helsinki, Finland  
**2013** International Nature Film Festival, Savonlinna, Finland  
**2013** Docpoint - Documentary Film Festival, Helsinki, Finland  
**2011** Montreal Underground Film Festival, Montreal, Canada  
**2010** Aubagne International Film Festival, Aubagne, France  
**2010** Gvik International Student Film Festival, Moscow, Russia  
**2010** Union Docs: Finnish Documentary Spotlight, New York, NY  
**2010** Film Palace Fest International Short Film Festival, Balchik, Bulgaria  
**2010** Reikäreuna Film Festival, Orivesi, Finland  
**2010** Audiovisual Poetry Festival, Tarp, Lithuania  
**2010** Music Laboratory Network, Vilnius Planetarium, Vilnius, Lithuania  
**2009** Lens Politica Film Festival, Helsinki, Finland

#### Teaching Experience:

**2021** Teaching Assistant, 1605 Advanced Visual Arts Foundation, Western University  
**2021** Teaching Assistant, 1020 Foundations of Visual Art, Western University  
**2020** Teaching Assistant, 4605 Practicum, Western University  
**2019** Teaching Assistant, 4605 Practicum, Western University  
**2019** Teaching Assistant, 2222B Sculpture, Installation & Performance  
**2018** Visiting Artist/Mentor, *Please-Do Not Take This Lightly*, collaborative research project and exhibition, Artlab Gallery, London, ON  
**2018** Teaching Assistant, 2282A Honours Studio Seminar, Western University  
**2018** Teaching Assistant, 1020 Foundations of Visual Art, Western University  
**2017** Teaching Assistant, 1020 Foundations of Visual Art, Western University  
**2017** Community Arts Education Instructor, Intro to Creative Video Production, Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY  
**2016** Community Arts Education Instructor, Intro to Creative Video Production, Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY  
**Teaching Assistant (independent instructor)**, Video Sketchbook 1 & 2, Syracuse University  
**2015** Teaching Assistant (independent instructor), Video Sketchbook 2, Syracuse University  
**Teaching Assistant**, Advanced Art Video, Syracuse University  
**Instructional Associate**, Transmedia Colloquium, Syracuse University  
**Instructional Associate**, Monitoring a Post-Production Lab, Syracuse University  
**2014** Instructional Associate, Transmedia Colloquium, Syracuse University  
**Instructional Associate**, Monitoring a Post-Production Lab, Syracuse University