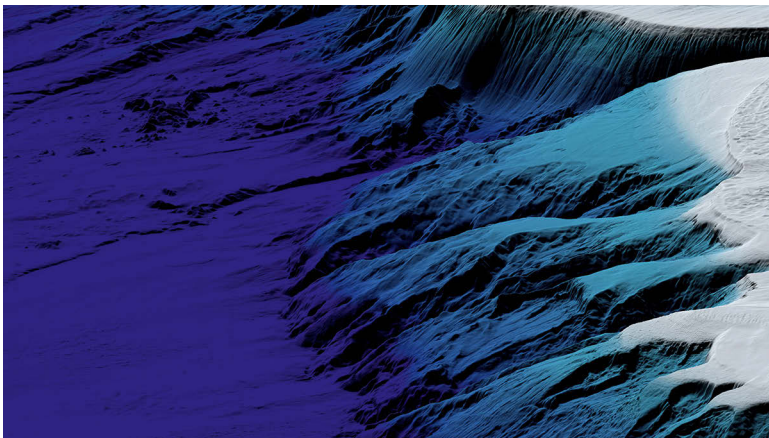


Acoustic ocean: annotated video script

Ursula Biemann

Biemann's pluralistic practice spans a range of media including experimental video, interview, text, photography, cartography and materials, which converge in highly formalised spatial installations. In her videos, the artist interweaves vast cinematic landscapes with documentary footage, SF poetry and academic findings to narrate a changing planetary reality. The artistic gesture of acoustic ocean is that of rewriting a script for inter-species relations and of a mind-body intra-active form of knowledge creation. It addresses the science of a marine landscape by showing the scientific interest in the images and sounds of an altered sense. Acoustic Ocean draws on a range of recent scientific insights in its foray into modes of marine-biological expressions, proposing an immersed image for the complex and fragile interactions between humans and nonhumans, knowledge and instruments in these multimedia landscapes.

Fig. 1 to 4: Ursula Biemann, *Acoustic Ocean*, annotated script, 2018



The submarine immensity of the Atlantic Ocean is a layered three-dimensional space where countless species interact with one another. Given the poor visibility in this penumbral liquid universe, the sonic dimension is the primary means of communication, navigation and survival. Formed by a difference in water density, the horizontal layers of the ocean allow for distinct sound frequencies to travel. In the mid-1940s, scientists discovered a deep sound channel where low-frequency sound travels great distances, the so-called SOFAR channel. To locate enemy submarines operating in the deep channel, arrays of hydrophones were placed on the North Atlantic seabed, connected by cables to listening posts on shore. The instruments also detected sounds whose sources were at first unknown, later found to be low-frequency blue and fin whale vocalisations. Their acoustic range extends across the ocean floor, emitting vast environments. For a long time, the submarine environment was thought to be a silent place until these spy technologies initiated a new understanding of the ocean as an acoustic and semiotic ecosphere.



The aquanaut lays her acoustic instruments out in the hydrosphere, intercepting the vocal signals marine beings are sending through. The hydrophones function as external organs, enabling her to deeply immerse herself in the aquatic habitat. There, she adjusts the frequencies to capture the dense sonic signature of entire ecosystems. Spreading her sensors out into the deep, she tunes into the transmissions of marine species. Going from attentive to immersive, her sensing discloses a sea full of intentions. For weeks she

has been scripting the seascape, seeding it with an auditory dimension that leaves space for a reply.

Although she is using Cold War technology, our aquanaut here has friendly intentions. She is a Sami marine biologist, a native of the insomniac territories of Northern Norway, equipped with all kinds of hydrophones, parabolic mics and instruments for acoustic reception, recording and mixing. She is spreading out her long sensors like outer organs, linking herself with the instruments and the organisms she examines. She merges with the environment and through her sensing techniques, reveals a sea full of intelligence. Her gestures activate humans' relationships with animals and other bio-forces. She is the NatureCulture figure, a mixture of an ethnic indigenous wearing a reindeer hood and a high tech scientist in a deep-sea diving suit.



You know, we have seen this for a long time now.

Even my Grandmother told us about it.

When she was young they suffered from hard winters.

A changing climate.

Rain falling when it wasn't expected.

In wintertime, the rain becomes ice on the snow.

And the reindeer cannot dig down to reach the lichen beneath.

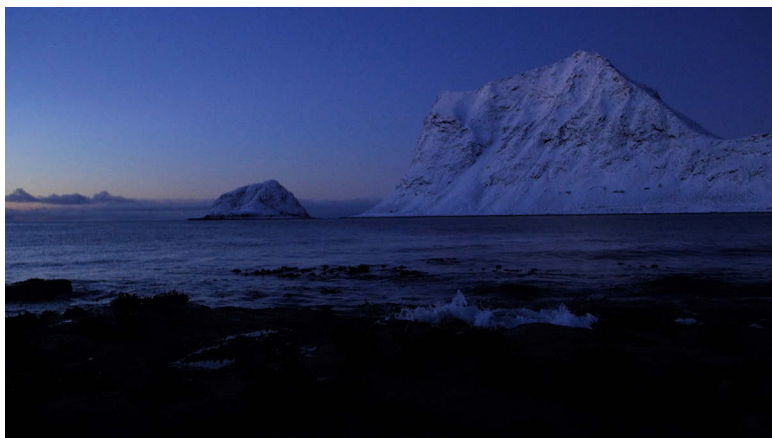
*And thus, before spring comes,
many reindeer starve to death.*

*The reindeer that makes it through the winter
is our guardian.*

And we are its guardian.

The reindeer is the livelihood of my people, all of us.

The video experiments with narrative forms as it explores the changes in the ocean and the atmosphere. The experimental nature of the form and delivery of their narration is in direct connection to the unimaginable scale of alterations that are in store for humanity and the highly speculative mode in which we can engage them at this stage. In search of a new language, one particularly urgent question has emerged: how to reframe the relationship between the artist-author and the nonhuman world.



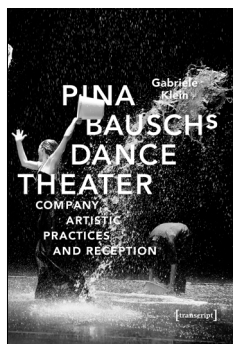
That night, a few whales gathered near the surface. Their enlarged memory-chambers contained images from near-extinction. They sent a canto of impermanence before diving back down into the deep. Some have re-learned to flourish in this murderous sea.

The mind has its own technologies.

With the voices of Blue Whale, Harbor Seal, Spotted Sea Trout, Sea Urchin, Silver Perch, Black Drum, Midshipman Fish, Right Whale, Fin Whale, Shrimp, Minke Whale, Haddock, Hawkins, Humpback Whale, Dolphin, Bowhead Whale.

There is a parallel between her scientific and my artistic, instruments of sensing and recording the nonhuman world. Rather than the posture of the author, the artist here takes up a sensitive position, listening for a reply. The artistic gesture is that of rewriting a script for inter-species relations and in doing so, *Acoustic Ocean* invokes the indigenous scientist and the artist as equally important explorers and mediators of the contemporary understanding of our planetary ecosystems.

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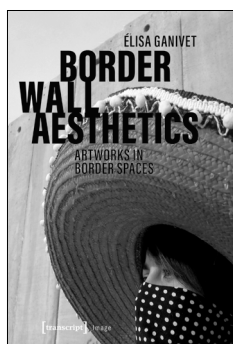
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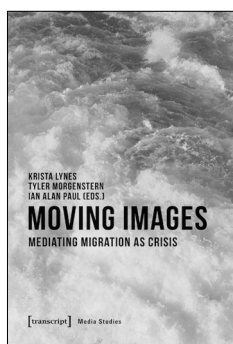
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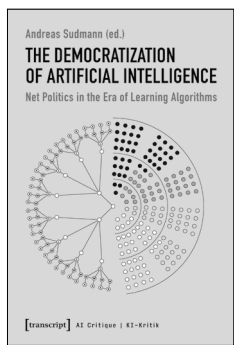
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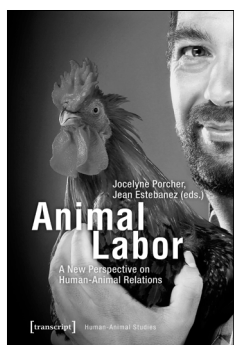
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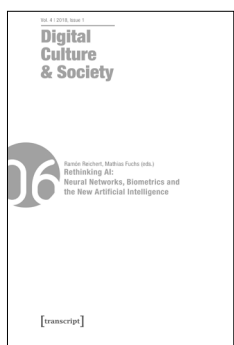
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