

Aesthetics of more-than-human worlds in the art of Sonia Levy

Multispecies Entanglements and Implications for Ecology

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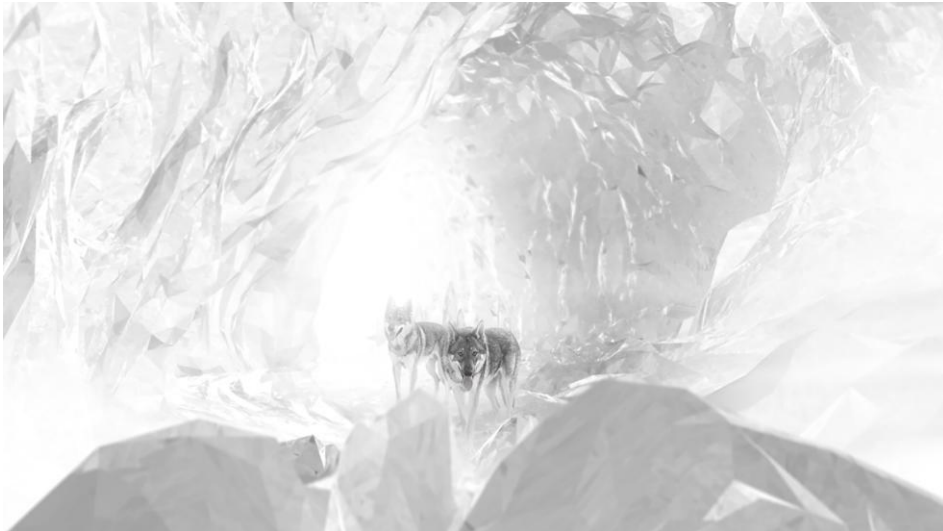
More-than-Human Worlds: A NatureCulture Blog Series

Whether it is the nightly activities of urban foxes ([Vulpine Domesticity, 2010-2013](#)), a humpback whale telling the story of how it moves about ([I Roam, 2015](#)), or wolves attending to their 'crystal palace' ([Pole, 2008](#)), Sonia Levy's artistic work places encounters between non-humans and humans at its centre. That is, her work is always implicitly or explicitly imaginatively vibrating between realities—some more scientific and some more fictional, sometimes seemingly departing in human imaginaries and at other times, and importantly, in more-than-human worldings.



Vulpine Domesticity, 2010-13, image by Sonia Levy

Paying attention to ‘worlding’, as Anna Tsing writes in “Worlding the Matsutake Diaspora,” can be a tool for asking “how informants as well as analysts imagine the relationality of worlds that are self-consciously unfamiliar—whether across cultures and continents or across kinds of beings and forms of data” (Tsing 2010: 50). This blog-entry suggests, that attention to worldings at aesthetic registers can cultivate experiences of seemingly separate, incommensurable or non-existing worlds as well. Taking inspiration from Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic philosophy, artworks operate at aesthetic registers when moments of experience are cultivated for sensing and knowing by other means, and beyond the confines of institutional sanction (be it state, science or museum) of what counts as worlds and ways of knowing them (Rancière 2006b). As such, it is a notion of aesthetics that goes beyond the ‘merely’ beautiful and extends to a broader realm of sensations. Understood this way, Levy’s work might be best approached as aesthetic explorations into more-than-human worldings: purposefully cultivating aesthetic experiences of slippage between the worlds of humans and non-humans.



Pole, 2008, image by Sonia Levy

In this entry, I will primarily focus on one of Levy’s video pieces, [*I Roam*](#), in which we encounter and swim alongside a humpback whale. This work captures the above-mentioned aspects of her general practice in a particularly poignant way. The video piece is simple and yet, it presents us with a plethora of friction-filled encounters spanning time, space, and not least, entities acting with and against each other. It raises questions regarding the way we ‘know’, the way we acquire knowledges of non-humans, and which knowledges come to count across various dimensions of experience. In the terms of Rancière, Levy cultivates spaces where we can and do slide between scales of reality and sensibilities of worldings (Tsing

2010; Jensen 2018: 53). First, however, I will briefly sketch the work of Rancière in order to develop an adequate notion of aesthetics capable of holding such oscillations between worlds and knowledge forms as an aesthetic premise.

More-than-human knowledges and the politics of aesthetics

At the foundation of his political philosophy Jacques Rancière has formulated an extensive aesthetic philosophy. In his work, aesthetic experience is at the centre of the premises for redistributing and democratising the 'sensible'¹. That is forwarding sensations as our ways of knowing the world—and as such, our capabilities for politically articulating common 'matters of concern'—to put it in Bruno Latour's famous formulation (Latour 2004: 232; Latour 2005: 4–5). As Rancière states in *The Politics of Aesthetics*: "There is thus an 'aesthetics' at the core of politics [...] [Aesthetics] is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak [...]" (Rancière 2006a: 13). In the kind of aesthetic experience Rancière formulates, new forms of knowledge can then arise when they push at what are considered the legitimate places and stakes of politics, opening crevices in hierarchical and policed ways of knowing social (and material) reality. Drawing on this notion of aesthetics, I suggest, that it is with and in aesthetics, that spaces can be imagined, and from where we can begin to grapple with more-than-human worlds and modes of knowledge production. Aesthetic registers like Levy's, which are actively attuned to more-than-humans in imaginative ways, may help articulate more-than-humans as political: as worlds to see, listen and attend to. Not as *Nature* 'out there' but reimagined (by sensational redistribution) as slipping and always partially connected to worlds already broadly known and acknowledged in policing institutions and 'realpolitik'.

While common understandings of art and aesthetics usually place art and aesthetics under a rubric of 'adding up' to each other, this is far from the case in the contemporary history of art theory.² This is especially so when it comes to questions regarding art's political potential. Art can be political *or* aesthetic as popular theories have it, but it can't be both. The 'sheen' of the beautiful, in short, prevents all political potential. Building off such discussions, Rancière's work has been attracting a fair amount of interest, in an effort to rehabilitate aesthetics as important to grasp the breadth of political life. As many have noted, Rancière's work offers a way of out a problematic (and artificial) division between aesthetics and 'political reality' (cf. Bishop 2012: 37–40; Papastergiadis 2014: 7). To him, aesthetics is not simply about 'the beautiful', detached from the real, nor is he

merely saying that what we thought was 'only beautiful' is really a political reality. Rather, Rancière is delinking the aesthetic from a meagre notion of 'the beautiful' and argues that in so far as something is aesthetic it is also always political and vice-versa. For something to be political means it is operating on the premises of aesthetics: as that which redistributes our senses and the sensible as such (Rancière 2010). His work is extensive, so I will only sketch those points central to pinpointing the relevance of his particular notion of aesthetics for exploring more-than-human worlds.

As noted above, regarding the aesthetics and poetics of knowledge, Rancière argues that aesthetics is also always political, insofar as the given scenario of aesthetic experience is redistributing the sensible—that is, that cracks are opened to claim otherwise policed spheres of sensibility (Rancière 2006). Aesthetics and the 'promise of politics' are then not mutually exclusive, but rather, he argues artworks are only aesthetic insofar as they address and make way for autonomous experiences, not policed or limited to societal hierarchies. It is this particular aspect of Rancière's aesthetic philosophy that holds potential in articulating the more-than-human worlds that we encounter in the work of Levy in terms of aesthetics. As a concept of aesthetics that does not limit and police experience according to social divisions, I suggest that it may offer similar advantages for reimagining species divisions. Following Rancière, artworks capable of cultivating aesthetic experience can enter into many social, scientific and political worlds because they are not prefigured or regulated by common consensus on what counts as 'social reality' and 'the real world'. It is within this matrix that I will finally turn to the work of Sonia Levy to explore how this might look: which arts are needed for an aesthetics of more-than-human worlds and in what way can they be known?

Encounters with the Non-Human or, The Whale

In the video *I Roam*, we (the viewers) encounter a whale that tells us a story of its habits, its mode of living, while we can see from the perspective of its back as it moves through the ocean. The story is only told via subtitles, the moving images, and accompanied by the rippling sounds of being immersed in water:

I roam through every ocean, generally preferring to feed and perform my uncouth gambols near extensive coasts, or about the shores of islands, in all latitudes between the equator and the frozen oceans, both north and south. I am irregular in my movements, seldom going a straight course for any considerable distance ; at one time moving from the mast-head ; at other times *singly*, seeming as much at home as if I were surrounded by hundreds of my kind ; performing at will the

varied actions of “breaching,” “rolling,” “finning,” “lobtailing,” or “scooping”; or, on a calm, sunny day, perhaps lying motionless on the molten-looking surface, as though life were extinct (Levy 2015).

As the whale tells us this story, we are immersed in the murky water with it. We see how it ventures up and down: from the depths of the ocean to the surface of the water where we are treated to a glimpse of the blue sky and clouds floating above, only to quickly return to the ocean and its emerald green hues. As seen in the video, I imagine an elegant and fascinating creature somewhat carefree and untroubled by the kind of worries that might provoke highly streamlined and directed behaviour. At first, we are invited to imagine a story coming directly from the whale, and as such, the narrative appears confident as though the story is almost coming from a place of equilibrium. However, this is not exactly the case.



I Roam, 2015, image by Sonia Levy

The work is dense with encounters between whales, humans, and things, both historically and in the present. For example, as we watch the video, we see through *something*. Our experience is mediated from start to finish and the camera we see through is a bio-logging device used by marine biologists to “collect data [on] the animal’s behaviour” (Levy n.d.). For some time, Levy has been collaborating with the Húsavík Research Center on Marine Mammals in Iceland and the device was created so that “[d]ata-loggers can provide [access to an] animal’s world we have never seen before” (UTBLS: Bio-Logging Science, The University of Tokyo n.d.). With the rather banal realisation that our encounter is technologically mediated our experience is displaced twice. (1) We see through a camera attached to the

back of a whale, highlighting that what we see comes as much from humans as it does from the whale. (2) And the footage is created to record its movements for the mode human knowledge-production par excellence; scientific data collection. In *I Roam*, the first-‘person’ story coming from the whale would almost have us believe that we are swimming alongside it—even holding on to it—while *it is narrating* the experience. But we are in fact seeing through a device primarily created for human knowledge production and explanations of animal behaviour, not ‘fanciful’ whale tales.

But the experience is displaced once again. The wording of the story, as the whale slowly recounts it, seems eerie and Levy’s text on the work confirms this experience: the whale is being ‘ventriloquized’ through the script of Charles Melville Scammon. Scammon was a famous naturalist and whaling captain in the 19th century, and the author of the book *The Marine Mammals of the Northwestern Coast of North America; Together with an Account of the American Whale-Fishery* (Scammon 1874). The story that the whale is telling us is actually a slight reformulation of the first sentence of chapter III “The Humpback Whale”. But coming from Scammon, a whale hunter, the ‘voice’ and story is significantly different.

Scammon’s book is considered a pioneering piece in terms of knowledge of north-western marine mammals and it is comprised of detailed accounts of 24 whale species, seven species of seal, as well as six chapters on the early American whale-fishery industry. In the profession of whaling, Scammon is regarded as one of the most successful captains of the period, the man who pioneered the hunt for California grey whales—a practice that would drive them close to extinction. In the book, he himself connects these two accomplishments (famous naturalist and successful whaler) and suggests that owing to his capacity as a whaling captain, he is particularly well suited to describe marine mammals. Those “practically engaged in the business of whaling” simply had better opportunities for studying the habits of the animals than their land-bound counterparts (Scammon 1874: 11).

As such, for every careful description of whales in Scammon’s book is an equally careful account of how you hunt them. For every detailed drawing of the species’ there is an evenly detailed representation of harpoons and tools for ‘cutting-in’ to the whales (Scammon 1874: 47, 231). The only difference in the text coming from Scammon and the whale in *I Roam*, is that Scammon does not write in the first person of ‘I’ and ‘my’ but in the third person of ‘it’ and ‘the humpback whale’. And whereas the descriptions of the whales’ movements seemed free and uninhibited coming from the whale, they appear damning and troublesome coming from

Scammon. As such, the two modes of experience overlap in *I Roam*, and the viewer is forced to ask when and what kinds of knowledge(s) come from the world of scientific humans and when and what kinds of knowledge(s) comes from the world humpback whales?

Scammon's descriptions, drawings and measurements might well be the cetological predecessors of the bio-logging devices marine biologists now use to get closer to an understanding of the worlds of whales. This haunting history is subtly hinted at in Levy's artwork. Once we unfold these layers of the work, a certain vibration among diverse ways of knowing the whale as a non-human other start to come into play. What we are hearing and seeing shifts again. The world and history of the humpback whale, as we are now aware, is not its own but drenched in multivalent encounters, and Levy's simple but thick work, gently slides between the entangled worlds of whales, whalers, naturalists, scientists, artist, the aquatic environment itself and most likely many other actors. All are, like the camera, attached to our humpback whale frolicking off the coast of Iceland.

As such, setting up experiential spaces of vibrating and sliding between many and assumed incommensurate worlds, a key feature of Levy's work emerges in the blurring of both sides of the assumed division: the speculative turn that is palpable and the scientific turn that is *fabulating*. Here place is displaced, it becomes a space in-between indiscernible worlds and ways of knowing them. Perhaps such artworks, ones that insist on being in-between, can then also be important knowledge producing practices in terms of engaging more-than-human worlds, not despite but *because* of their aesthetic qualities. Set up as continuous and self-conscious slippages between worlds, Levy's work opens a 'dissensual' aesthetic space that vibrates into existence. As a mode of aesthetics aligned with the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, Levy and others insist that stories and speculative affinities between worlds can be a way to begin exploring more-than-human connections beyond policed ontologies and epistemological fixtures.

Notes

¹The word 'sensible' in the work of Jacques Rancière, comes from French and does not carry the English meaning of 'rationality'. The 'distribution of the sensible' is "[...] the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it" (Rancière 2006a: 12). A key point in Rancière's work is aesthetics' capability for *redistributing* the sensible, thus disrupting the system of what counts as "self-evident facts of sense perception". This is also the political potential of aesthetics.

²It is a discussion that has been going since the early twentieth century as the avant-gardes radically overturned assumed separations between 'art and life' (Bürger 2010: 696).

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