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Nature in the Dark - Public Space for More-than-Human Encounters

Jan Brueggemeier

RMIT / LATROBE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

Drawing on the continuing work of the Nature in the Dark (NITD) project, an art collaboration and publicity campaign between the Centre for Creative Arts (La Trobe University) and the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA), this paper aims to explore some of the disciplinary crossovers between art, science and philosophy as encountered by this project and to think about their implications for an environmental ethics more generally. Showcasing animal life from Victoria, Australia, the NITD video series I and II invited international artists to create video works inspired by ecological habitat surveys from the Victorian National Parks land and water. Videos and photographs originally used to identify animals and population sizes are now creatively repurposed and presented to new audiences. NITD negotiate 'the distribution of the sensible' (Rancière), as they mark the domain of what is accessible to the public. This paper relates the discussion in the contemporary arts about the politics of aesthetics with the ethical conundrum of how we might care about something that is beyond our reach and we are not yet aware of, given our own perceptual blind spots. Drawing on a conversation between the philosopher Georgina Butterfield and myself as an artist and curator, this paper argues that we cannot justify setting arbitrary limits on our valuing, questioning or understanding of the non-human world, and as such it is a position both the philosopher and artist share. While it may be an ultimately unreachable goal, it is paradoxically an essential starting point for ecological ethics.

Keywords

ecological ethics, media arts, philosophy, making publics, transdisciplinary practice

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RMIT and La Trobe University

Abstract: Drawing on the continuing work of the Nature in the Dark (NITD) project, an art collaboration and publicity campaign between the Centre for Creative Arts (La Trobe University) and the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA), this paper aims to explore some of the disciplinary crossovers between art, science and philosophy as encountered by this project and to think about their implications for an environmental ethics more generally. Showcasing animal life from Victoria, Australia, the NITD video series I and II invited international artists to create video works inspired by ecological habitat surveys from the Victorian National Parks land and water. Videos and photographs originally used to identify animals and population sizes are now creatively repurposed and presented to new audiences. NITD negotiate ‘the distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière), as they mark the domain of what is accessible to the public. This paper relates the discussion in the contemporary arts about the politics of aesthetics with the ethical conundrum of how we might care about something that is beyond our reach and we are not yet aware of, given our own perceptual blind spots. Drawing on a conversation between the philosopher Georgina Butterfield and myself as an artist and curator, this paper argues that we cannot justify setting arbitrary limits on our valuing, questioning or understanding of the non-human world, and as such it is a position both the philosopher and artist share. While it may be an ultimately unreachable goal, it is paradoxically an essential starting point for ecological ethics.

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The art project ‘Nature in the Dark’ (NITD) evolved from a conversation over a garden fence in suburban Melbourne between myself and my neighbour, Matt Ruchel, the CEO of Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) in 2012. Matt introduced me to VNPA’s ‘Caught on Camera’ citizen-science project, which is part of VNPA’s *Nature Watch* program that uses video footage and still photography to study the long-term impact of wildfires on fauna in state forests and national parks of Victoria, Australia. NITD developed a public event format that facilitated the display of art works engaging with the visual survey material as well as providing a platform for broader discussions around animal sensory perception or nature conservation in Australia and the United States.

VNPA initiated its *Nature Watch* program after the Black Saturday fires in 2010 with a specific concern about the lack of field research justifying quotas for prescribed burnings for fuel reduction in Victoria. As we witnessed in the 2020 fires in Australia, the relationship between fire, the Australian bush, and human inhabitants is increasingly fraught (Ingamells 14-16).

The examples of NITD projects that I analyse in this article develop public imaginaries by re-purposing citizen-science survey footage to explore our broader cultural imagination of animals. I examine these through the lens of biosemiotics that is charged by aesthetic theory. Jacques Rancière’s concept of ‘communities of sense’ helps us to see how environmentally-disposed media arts discourses can contribute to the field of animal studies. Ultimately, NITD displays artworks in urban public spaces to complexify a sense of shared territories between humans and non-humans; I argue that they extend the common biological range of human perception. This highlights how media arts practice can probe our perceptual boundaries and help us critique whether these boundaries enact demarcation lines for our moral consideration.¹

1. Methodology

Rancière understands contemporary society to consist of different ‘communities of sense’ (‘Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics’). Society is defined by the most dominating community, which sets accordingly the demarcations of what is visible/invisible, audible/in audible and thinkable/unthinkable: ‘[t]he community of sense at work in that politics of aesthetics is a community based on both the connection and disconnection of sense and sense’

(‘Contemporary Art’ 39). The aestheticised activity of sensual experience and the identity politics of making sense of such cognitive and affective input is explored in his enquiry into the arts as ‘[t]he political act ... to save the heterogenous sensible that is the heart of the autonomy of art and its power of emancipation’ (‘Contemporary Art’ 39).

I propose that studies on more-than-human life might involve Rancière’s concept of ‘communities of sense’ through a biosemiotics lens. Biosemiotics is accredited to Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944), who developed ‘Umweltforschung’ in the 1920s – a term introduced to describe research into the phenomenal worlds of organisms (von Uexküll, ‘The Theory of Meaning’). While putting less emphasis on the overarching qualities of ecologies, von Uexküll’s delineation of the worlds around animals as perceived by the animals defines an environment as relative to the perceiving living organisms. In *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, he provides the example of a tick. In order to find warm blood, this eyeless animal is able to find a launching spot from a leaf due its skin’s sensitivity to light. Once in a position, its launch is triggered by its sense of smell detecting the odour of butyric acid, which all mammals emit. Fortunate enough to land on something warm blooded, which it can detect via an organ sensible to temperature, its sense of touch then guides it to a suitable (or least hairy) surface to drill into in order to get to its sustenance. For von Uexküll, it is this interplay of perception and effect that produced each organism’s environment:

But then, one has discovered the gateway to the environments, for everything a subject perceives belongs to its perception world [Merkwelt], and everything it produces, to its effect world [Wirkwelt]. These two worlds, of perception and production of effects, form one closed unit, the environment. (*A Foray* 42)

The open net result of a perception equating to environment creates a level playing field for inter-species relationships, a relational exercise if you will, to present successful and failed communication across species. This biospherical situatedness steps back from more immediately pressing questions about sentience and moral judgment and their philosophical and ethical extensions into evolutionary biology. Alternatively, the term ‘biological semiosphere’ discloses sites of power that might not suggest that things are all equal (as with the level playing field). Following the lead of biosemiotics and becoming attuned to sensory perception within an

ecological context is in my view about building awareness of our own blind spots and acknowledging the presence of other life forms beyond the biological limitations of what we can perceive around us.

As I shall show, an art project like NITD becomes part of the ongoing process to renegotiate the boundaries of our ‘community of sense’ as humans. Thus, this piece of species writing – and the artwork – is anthropocentric, but knowingly so, ironically vibrating with the conflict of desire for both more-than-human connections and appropriate disconnections.

For Jesper Hoffmeyer, the biological semiosphere:

is a sphere like the atmosphere, hydrosphere, or biosphere. It permeates these spheres from the innermost to outermost reaches and consists of communication: sound, scent movement, colors, forms, electrical fields, various waves, chemical signals, touch, and so forth – in short, the signs of life. (*Biosemiotics* 5)

Hoffmeyer extends von Uexküll’s ideas of permeating and communicating into ‘signs of life’, which are exemplifications of a ‘pure relation whereby a receptive system orders its world’ (373). Such ordering follows from or is dependent upon existence as relational. Following Hoffmeyer’s development of von Uexküll, we might conceive some species as ‘relative being’, that is, the embodiment of receptive processing all the way down to the cellular level.

For Hoffmeyer, biosemiotics suggests that living systems should be studied as semiotic systems in their own right. In connecting art theory and biosemiotics in this article, I suggest that the examination of our sensory experience in art and our everyday life can fit into a biocentric perspective that might enable us to better stress ethical implications of our perception and its biological limitations. NITD was conceived in this light with the hope of helping the audience to be more conscious about being part of an eco-system.

Humanities scholar Peta Tait acknowledges biosemiotics’ potential to unify science and cultural analysis while stressing that human fixation with language over other modes of bodily communication equally contributes to the conception that we as humans are somehow separate from our environment: ‘Instead, humans have been limited by language which can make us blind

to the numerous forms of embodied communication between other species, and it is now urgent that this complexity be widely understood' (3). Tait's sentiment is a case in point for extending art theory via biosemiotics in a quest for defining biocentric forms of artistic practice.

2. From Fauna Survey Photography to Public Art

I found myself looking at some of VPNA's night-vision footage following the conversation with Matt Ruchel. What struck me from an artist's perspective was how the images showed no visual preference regarding the choice of subject or framing of the photographs. For me, this clearly distinguished these photographs from the staged works of a human photographer. The photos were only triggered by motion in the camera's view finder. In addition, the absence of a human person behind the lens of the camera showed the animals at ease; sometimes they came up close to or even ran over the camera completely. This lack of human authorship in the photographs (after having placed the cameras in the forest) renders them visually raw and, I think, aesthetically liberating (similar to Russian avant-garde filmmaker Dziga Vertov's notion of the Kino-Eye as a new type of a media-shaped semantic field). With the unique combination of these qualities, I could see an art project formulating.

While for the scientists and their fauna surveys it was all about the presence of animal species and its frequency, what struck me as an artist was the absence of human authorship and limited human agency within the production process and the actual imagery. To this extent, the available video technology then became a means for NITD to extend our human biological perception in a similar way that ultrasound gives us an impression of a bat's spatial perception or the heartbeat in the mother's womb. This intentional tactical repurposing of the camera also contradicts the original intentions of their manufacturers; these cameras are more commonly used for hunting. It was the tactical repurposing and the probing of the limits of our biological perception, combined with the facts of the largely nocturnal animal activities recorded and our being figuratively 'in the dark' about the environmental impacts of our land management practices, that led to the project title *Nature in the Dark*.

In the curatorial statement for the first iteration of the NITD artist videos, Maria Miranda and I described our experience viewing the source material:

Looking at the photos we felt there was something very intimate and unguarded about them, as if wildlife social-realism meets the aesthetic of surveillance and we were becoming voyeurs of another intelligence at work – one we hadn't encountered before. (Brueggemeier and Miranda 2012)

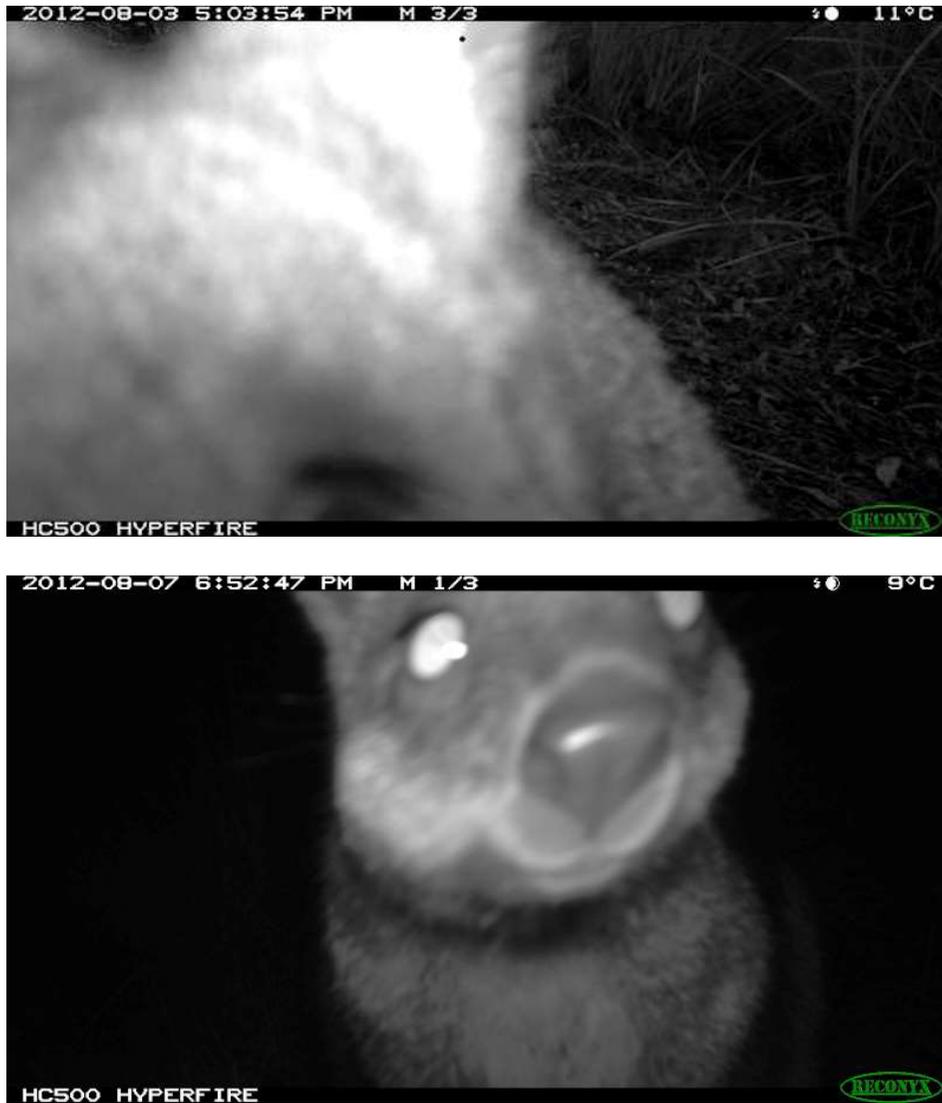
The absence of a human author deliberately framing the image is often responded to by the animals caught looking away from the camera 'into the dark' of the night. What we can observe in Figures 1 and 2 as foregrounding are two photographs of nocturnal animals that were surveyed by the VNPA's citizen science project utilizing motion-triggered night-vision cameras. The background consists of a screen made of paper bark onto which these 'raw' images from the fauna survey are being projected. In this case, these video projections took place in a gallery context in Bendigo, Victoria.





*Figures 1 and 2: Jan Brueggemeier,
NITD 1 digital projection on paper bark, Visual Arts Centre, Bendigo (2014);
species: Brush Tailed Possum, Central Victoria (fig. 1)
and Red Fox (*Vulpes Vulpes*), Central Victoria (fig. 2)*

Without this particular camera technology, we would not have encountered this kind of animal behaviour. Like ultrasound technology that allows us to hear and visualise frequencies beyond the human perceptual barrier of 20-20,000 Hertz, these cameras enabled us to witness the presence of these animals in a rather *unfiltered* way. This is because of the unobtrusive nature of the capturing process and the absence of any particular observer subject as such.



*Figures 3 and 4: VNPA NatureWatch, original survey footage (2012);
species: Wallaby, Central Victoria.*

In Figures 3 and 4 we witness the non-intentional framing of the survey photographs as the close proximity of the animals causes the camera lens to blur out. It is these aesthetic qualities that I describe as ‘unfiltered’ – knowing that they still are technologically mediated. This particular mediation allows for the witnessing of what Jacques Rancière might call an

emerging ‘community of sense’; or put differently: the reconfiguration of the common field of what is ‘see-able’ and sayable. This is where for Rancière (2009) the political and the aesthetic are intrinsically connected in the ongoing process of renegotiating the terms in which politics is staged and its subjects are determined.

Once the video works were completed, we organised to have them projected throughout ‘the busy day/night life cycle of Melbourne and its public spaces – our own city habitat’ (Brueggemeier and Miranda 2012) at various opportunities across the city.

Repurposing fauna survey photography artistically in order to project these artist videos back into urban public spaces was the first step. In combination, it creates a sense of ‘reterritorialising’ for the inhabitants of these different habitats (state forests and national parks in regional Victoria and urban public spaces). An opportunity for a shared encounter – however ‘ghostly’ this homage to our ecological neighbour may be.

3. Curating Nature in the Dark

Before deploying this combination of biosemiotics, aesthetics theory and media arts practice to look at a selection of NITD artist videos in more detail, I want to reflect on the curatorial process of the NITD project. This process revolved around the issue of mediating cross-species encounters while inscribing a human aesthetic on nocturnal animal activities to animate the principle of ‘[re]distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*) in public urban spaces. For Rancière, distribution of the sensible is a concept that brings power relations and their dissent into view, which in turn politicises the aesthetic experience; for us, the politics at stake here are no other than the boundaries of a community in which sense-experience takes place.

The intention to place cameras in forests to take account what other species are out there and how they are impacted by our current fire management regime is obviously the most important step in challenging the ‘distribution of the sensible’ as theorised by Rancière. NITD added two more things to this. It extended the public forum for this kind imagery by displaying artist videos speaking to our cultural imaginary of animals in urban public spaces. Furthermore,

NITD managed to do so, as I am arguing in this article, by repurposing the citizen-science survey images from a number of State Forests and National Parks in Central Victoria that offer a glimpse into the lives of animals with their own agency – doing their thing in their way – to the human audiences engaging with NITD over the course of the project.

For NITD’s first artist video edition, we provided all participating artists with the same pool of photographs and video footage, in the manner that materials are given to scientists for research and population surveys.² Figures 3 and 4 are from the selected pool of ‘raw’ survey photographs that we sent out to the artists. For our first artist video edition we asked ten artists from a broad range of artistic disciplines, based in Australia and the US, to make video works interpreting these materials. Figure 5 shows a video still from the NITD 1 video *It’s Local Time* showing literally how the artist Renuka Rajiv inscribes their drawings onto the digital copy of the original survey photograph. For comparison we see in Figure 6 a still image from the same artist video projected at Federation Square in Melbourne. We followed the same project formula with our second artist video edition – with the only difference being that this time the ‘raw’ source material for the participating artists³ stemmed from underwater sites along the Victorian coastline. Figure 7 shows a NITD 2 video being projected at the National Aquarium, Baltimore, MD, USA, in 2015.



Figure 5: Renuka Rajiv, *Local Time*, video stills, 2012; species: Red Fox (*Vulpes Vulpes*), Central Victoria

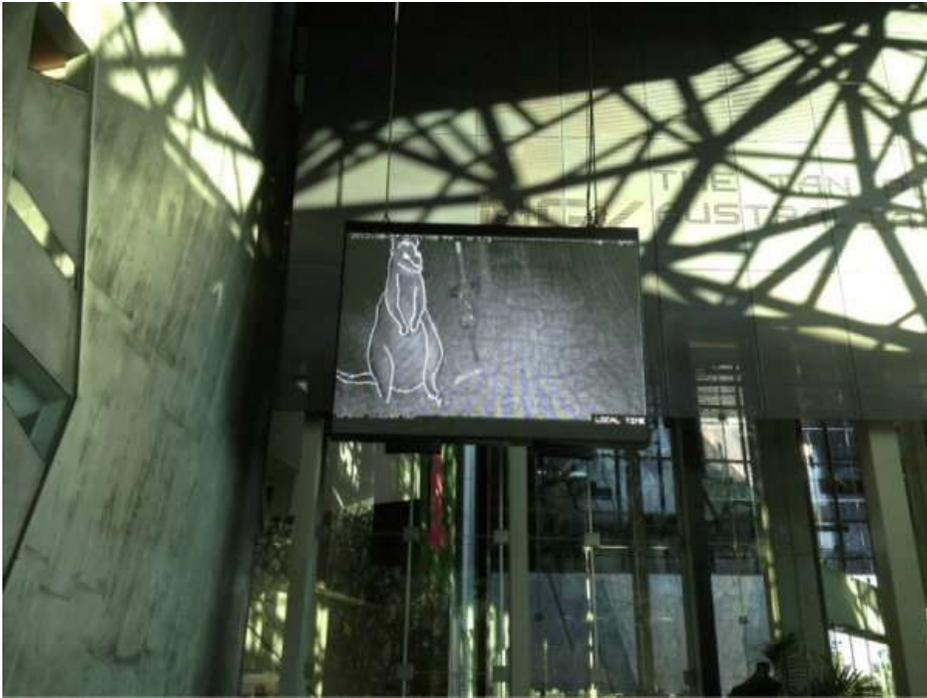


Figure 6: NITD 1, video projection in public space, Fed Square in Melbourne (2012);
species: Wallaby, Central Victoria



Figure 7: NITD 2, video projection in Baltimore, MD (2015);
species: Old Wife (*enoplosus armatus*), Victoria

It was our curatorial intention to create a 'ghostly' homage to our ecological neighbours, conjuring a temporary sense of shared territory. We elected to use the ephemeral quality of video projections (and sometimes public video screens) in urban public spaces. As the project grew, we went on to present these works in additional event formats to allow nature conservation advocates and land managers to voice their concerns regarding the original source material's scientific findings.⁴ Thus far, the project has generated two editions of artist videos using both forest and underwater imagery from land and marine national parks and state forests in Victoria, a number of gallery exhibitions and video interventions in public spaces, public panel discussions, and a symposium bringing together artists, conservationists and scientists presenting on animal sensory perception and nature conservation.⁵

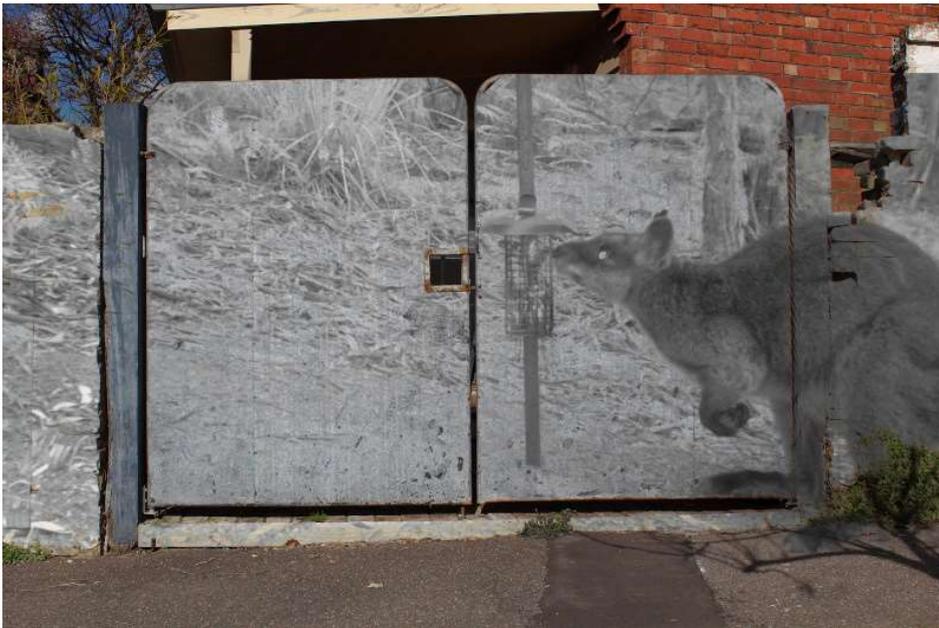
We started to look at how to conceptualise the political and the philosophical implications of the project as the NITD project efforts developed. When working closely with a membership-based environmental NGO like VNPA, there are many opportunities for art to support advocacy work. While visual illustration and additional media for campaigns are often the go-to for such projects, this has not been a focus for NITD. We observed that on an organisational level, NITD allowed VNPA to engage with diverse demographics within its membership base in an unusual way. Incorporated in 1952, VNPA is a volunteer organisation with a small professional team. A large proportion of its member base are retirees, who are either avid bushwalkers or very passionate about nature conservation. This older demographic is something VNPA shares with many other volunteer organisations. Moreover, it indicates that a large number of its member were involved in landmark events for the nature conservation movement in Victoria.

Such involvement entails advanced development of personal symbolism, which psychologists and sociologists consider as the provision for exciting scaffolding that can lead to imaginaries that entail connections between micro-scale events (animals moving through space at night) and macro-scale contexts (bushfires in Australia). From here we can develop stories and images that develop our environmental emotions and our ecological literacy (Bristow 311-326).

Being a community organisation, one of the key ingredients for the success of VNPA's conservation campaigns has been the scientific literacy of its members and staff and being able to communicate scientific knowledge to the community, politicians and media;⁶ such as the protection of the Little Desert in 1969 or the creation of the world-first system of Marine National Parks in 2002.⁷

4. The Art of Nature in the Dark

One of the dilemmas that NITD faced was that it intended to break at least some of the first layers of its own anthropocentric mould aiming to move from a solely human-centric to a more biocentric aesthetic – while still producing art works for exclusively human audiences.



*Figure 8: Tim Nohe, At the Wall of Anthropocene, video still (2012);
species: Wallaby, Central Victoria*

In the first edition of artist videos, Tim Nohe created *At the Wall of Anthropocene* (Figure 8⁸), a collage of slowly transitioning still images with an electronic music soundtrack. Nohe reinserts

the black and white survey imagery of the animals onto the colour photographs of the walls and fences of human dwellings and properties in Bendigo, a regional city in Victoria (and close to Wombat State Forest, one of sites of the VNPA's citizen science project *Caught on Camera*), and in Melbourne. By doing so he mirrors the transitory and ghost-like nature of the encounter. By projecting the mostly black and white survey images and backing onto the full colour imagery of fences, gates and walls of human dwellings in regional Victoria, the artistic rendering of the demarcation between these different 'semiotic bubbles' (Butterfield) could not be more obvious.

Describing an environment as the semiotic 'bubble' specific to each organism, von Uexküll explains that not only form but also meaning changes according to each environment:

The same flower stalk became four different objects in four different environments.

This can only be explained by the fact that all properties of things are nothing other than the perception signs imprinted upon them by the subject with which they enter into a relation. (197-201)

Although, as Hoffmeyer argues, all beings are relative beings and different species can have different relations (through their sensory experience) with the same flower stalk, this does not mean that the relationship between each species is reciprocal. One can literally hit a wall and that is exactly what Nohe's video shows us. Although the NITD videos remain within the realm of human audiences, the 'reterritorializing' these original fauna photographs via the processes of art making and video projection in urban public spaces provoked a disputed sense of 'shared territory' for the human observer. *At the Wall of Anthropocene* locates us as the viewer exactly at this the hard edge of our 'community of sense'. Facing this edge in order to overcome it is where, for Rancière, dissent is in the making. To us, the artwork is not about voicing dissent but pointing us to where we as the viewer may rise to the occasion and take the plunge.



*Figure 9: Siri Hayes, Foxtrot, video still (2012);
species: Red Fox (Vulpes Vulpes), Central Victoria*

Nohe's video is accompanied by Siri Hayes' video *Foxtrot*⁹ (Figure 9) in which she depicts mainly (but not exclusively) 'feral' animals like foxes and cats paced to the musical rhythm of a foxtrot dance. Like the style and pace of a music video for MTV, changing back and forth from black and white to coloured imagery, Hayes' piece is pointing to the connection between the human movement referenced (the foxtrot) and the distribution of 'feral' animals as affected by human migration patterns. Sifting through the hundreds to thousands of survey photos, we cannot help but develop a rough sense of who is and who is *less* out there. Although a human observer in the imagery repurposed for this view is only present via the camera itself, the viewer can still register human presence in another way in Hayes' video. Similar to the ghostly presence of the camera operator, a ghostly human presence can be observed in the surroundings of a modified environment. While humans' activities are providing the orchestration for the whole scene, Hayes' work is not about aestheticizing 'feral' animals in the Victorian bush, nor making a visual judgment. Hayes' video remains clearly within in a human aesthetic, the foxtrot being a social dance for humans. Using bodily movement as a means of expression, however, is something enjoyed across many other species, as zoologist Dr Richard Peters, from La Trobe University's Animal Behaviour Group,¹⁰ reminded us at the NITD symposium (Bendigo, Australia, 2014),

presenting some of his earlier research on the signalling behaviour of the Australian lizard through movement:

Visual signaling by lizards from the Iguanidae, Lacertidae and Agamidae families comprises colour (Stuart-Fox & Ord 2004) or motion-based cues (Ord & Martins 2006), and quite often a combination of the two... Complex movements often accompany brightly coloured patterns (Carpenter & Ferguson 1977; Cooper & Greenberg 1992; LeBas & Marshall 2000). Regardless of display type, motion signals are particularly useful as assessment is possible from a distance and potentially harmful physical confrontations can be avoided. (Ramos and Peters 303)

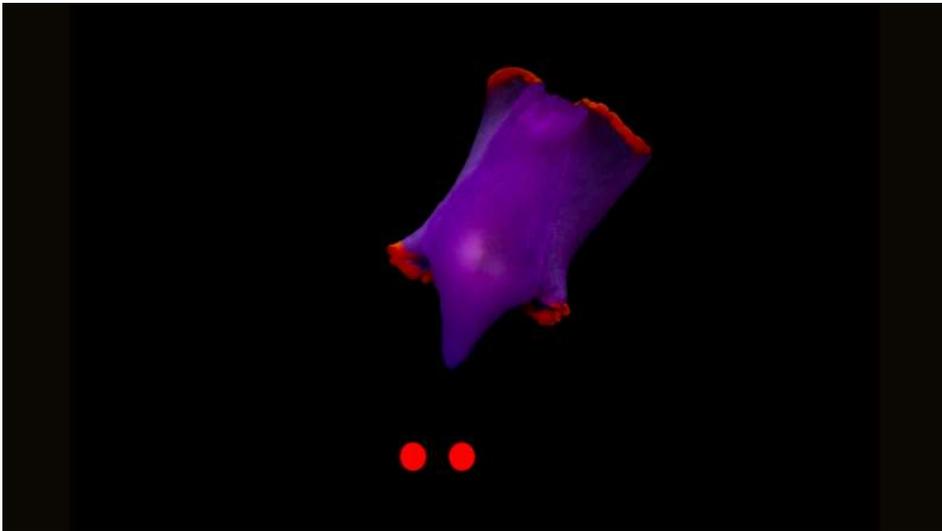


Figure 10: Jenny Fraser, *Bunurong*, video still (2015);
species: Sea Slug 'Batwing Slug' (*sagaminopteron ornatum*), Victoria

The second edition of *Nature in the Dark* repurposed underwater footage from a number of selected survey sites along the Victorian Coast – most of them being Marine National Parks. The video work *Bunurong* by Jenny Fraser (Figure 10¹¹) uses footage from the Marine National Park of the same name – the only one to maintain an Aboriginal name. The ongoing struggle for the decolonisation of Australia was taken to watery depths in which survey photographs lacked any penetration of natural light – unearthing rarely seen alien-like sea creatures in extremely vibrant

colours. Coming from a ‘fluid’ screen-based arts practice, Fraser writes in her artist statement about her fascination with the otherworldliness of the underwater life down there and its striking colours, which we do not often see (2015). This is something she associates with her understanding of an Aboriginal aesthetic, while being a modern-day custodian of screen culture communicating ‘old and new cultures across languages and other borders’ (Fraser). We are still witnessing a considered silencing of such aesthetic in the Australian vernacular, which makes it sometimes difficult to search out Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies and their relations with cross-species boundaries. In the academic space, the prevailing silence or underrepresentation of indigenous epistemologies has only recently been addressed by studies in multi-species ethnography and, for instance, in the academic literature by Deborah Bird Rose. The writer collective Morgan Brigg, Mary Graham and Lyndon Murphy note in *Toward the Dialogical Study of Politics: Hunting at the Fringes of Australian Political Science*, ‘Some of us have had elder Aboriginal family members and friends offer subtle, cryptic and incisive observations about European-Australians: “They are different to us”, and “They don’t think they’re animals”’ (Biggs et al. 427). Echoing Rancière’s notion of dissent within established communities of sense, the writer collective of Brigg et al. reminds us:

some progressive scholarship invests in Indigenous ‘experience’ or ‘stories’ – especially emotional experience – and identity as a way of tapping authentic Indigeneity. This move fulfils Settler needs for interactions and resources to grapple with the colonial relations that they find themselves in, but does little to advance a dialogical politics. (428)

The otherworldly aesthetic of Fraser’s video, even if it involves going so deep that no natural light can penetrate, is about relating outwards while grounding ourselves through the experience of relations with place and all its inhabiting species.



Figure 11: Olaf Meyer, *Rhythm in the bay*, video still (2015);
species: Victorian Scalyfin (*parma victoriae*), Victoria

Artist Olaf Meyer is aware of the politics of silence and has oriented his aesthetic to this space, in turn conjuring up a sensitivity open to voices that must come to the light. Meyer's *Rhythm in the Bay* (Figure 11¹²) visually traces the movement of fish to register any expressive behaviour that a human viewer could interpret as emotional. Meyer intentionally leaves this technological layer as a mediating aesthetic process of the encounter of the absent observer, including the acoustic noise created by the visual scanning of the imagery and the skipping back and forth in the soundtrack of his video. *Rhythm in the Bay* is atmospherically alert to the affects of grief and hope. Viewers are surrounded by the serene beauty of an underwater landscape that draws them into the most subtle signs of expression by the fish, which inscribe complex emotional registers of sadness, love and hate while inviting us to consider how species might exist together. This ties back to Fraser's work probing the aesthetic boundaries of a predominately Western epistemology and its dualism.

As welcome as these results are, however, I like to think that there are further philosophical and political consequences to the art practice of NITD that go beyond, for instance, the illustration of scientific knowledge. Taking scientific survey photographs captured by motion-triggered night vision cameras that offer a glimpse into the lives of animals with their own agency, and rendering these into art works by inscribing a human aesthetic onto them,

becomes an exercise in critical sensibility. This includes the conjuring of a shared sense of territory by using media technology to ‘reterritorialise’ urban public space in a more-than-human way. While probing the demarcation lines of human perception, we start questioning how these ‘perceptual’ boundaries implicate the limitations of our ethical consideration. It is in this way that NITD contributes to the reconfiguration of the common field of what is see-able and sayable of an emerging ‘community of sense’ and the terms in which politics is staged, its subjects determined.

5. Extending Communities of Sense: Biosemiotics and the Politics of Aesthetics

Combining some of the concepts of biosemiotics and art theory into the reading of the selected artworks as well as the curatorial process of NITD – while being conscious of anthropocentric orientation of the artworks serving a human audience – I now want to expand on some of the theoretical implications of extending Rancière’s ‘communities of sense’ with biosemiotics within the context of a contemporary arts practice, particularly when this practice involves an art/science collaboration.

While remaining within a Western scientific paradigm, the theory of biosemiotics stresses the communicative dimension of any sensory experience (human or non-human) by highlighting the concept of a ‘relative being’ (Hoffmeyer, ‘God and the World of Signs’), which is not exclusive to the human species. By concentrating more on its communicative qualities or ‘semiotic freedom’, as Hoffmeyer calls it, a more level playing field is implied from a cross-species perspective. In the same breath, I feel that the scientific discussion of biosemiotics can benefit from some of the art theory discourse about the politics of aesthetics. In the same vein as VNPA’s science communication campaigns, NITD explores our cultural imagination of animals as part of the human experience of relating to the multi-species ‘Umwelt’.

Reading Rancière’s ‘communities of sense’ through a biosemiotic lens allows us to locate his critical theory within a scientific ecological context while at the same time extending his argument for the political dimension of aesthetic behaviour beyond its exclusively human perspective as the artworks above exemplify.

Rancière points to the double meaning of ‘sense’ and the connection between the aestheticised activity of sensual experience and the identity politics of making sense of such input. The dissent among different ‘communities of sense’ over ‘the distribution of the sensible’ is another issue he identifies as a central contributor to his understanding of the political being inherent in the aesthetic (and vice versa). However, one would also need to stress that each community of sense is not a fixed and coherent entity but evolving and re-forming within.

Revisiting some of NITD’s event related visual collateral, like event flyers (figs. 12 and 14) or the gallery view of the Bendigo exhibition in 2014 (fig. 13), we do become aware of these different pairs of eyes piercing through the dark and another presence than our own, which we otherwise may not have been aware of. Conjuring a sense of shared territory, I am arguing that NITD did create public spaces for aesthetic dissent from the current mode ‘distribution of the sensible’ in a more biocentric manner than is often discerned in arts practices of the public space.

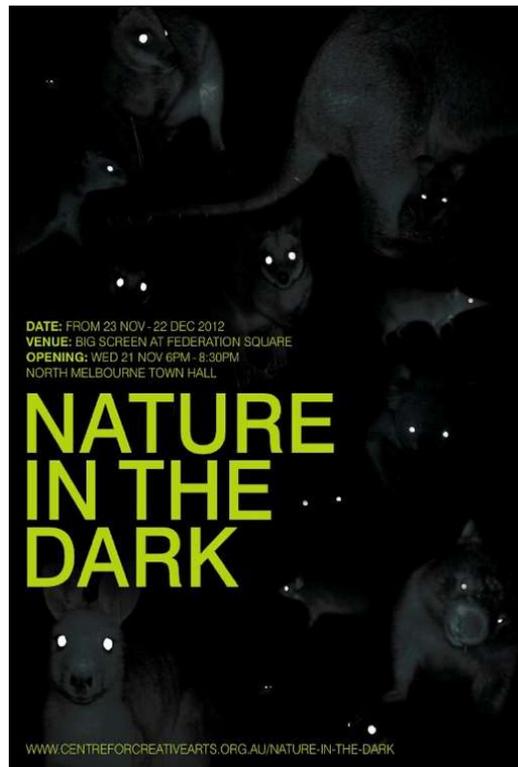


Figure 12: NITD1, flyer, project launch at North Melbourne Townhall (2012)



Figure 13: NITD1, exhibition view, Visual Arts Centre in Bendigo (2014)



Figure 14: NITD in Baltimore, flyer, curated by Marnie Benney (2015);
species: Jellyfish, Victoria

Conclusions

This paper has discussed the art projects of NITD in relation to philosophical concept of Jacques Rancière's community of sense ('Contemporary Art and the Politics of Aesthetics'), a very relevant contribution to recent contemporary arts discourse. Although the concept of 'communities of sense' only plays a minor role in Rancière's theoretical work, I consider it a helpful tool for discussing the ethical and political implications of art projects like NITD.

Like the discussion about the legal rights of the environment, such intellectual endeavours have proven to be successful exercises in initiating and practicing a mental shift, bridging the separation between nature and culture. To me, Rancière's theoretical concept of 'communities of sense' goes further than the general notion of postmodernism, in which, art theorist Clement Greenberg summarised, 'every ethnic group or bonding or community of taste or belief will write and rewrite its own fragment of history, and probably in many conflicting versions' (qtd in Bonshek 32).

To my mind, the main argument in some of the recent art theoretical discussion around Rancière's theories is that the aesthetic and political are not to be separated and that aesthetic experience informs all our forms of life and activities. The relationship between aesthetics and politics is a subject of ongoing discussion in contemporary arts criticism; however, my focus has been to consider arts practices that stage public dissent, not only in relation to a key aspect to Rancière's conceptualisation of communities of sense in connection with interests of animal and environmental studies.

One aspect I wanted to highlight in this article was that this approach to the NITD project also highlights the potential of the artistic use of technology as a means for probing our biological perceptual boundaries. I see this probing as iterative and only provisional; our intention to use the ephemeral quality of video projections in urban public spaces was to create a 'ghostly' homage to our ecological neighbours, re-territorialising a shared territory. From here, we hope other artists and critics will continue to explore the political and ethical implications that lie in arts practices and experiment with diverse forms of environmental subjectivities. However, as NITD collaborator and philosopher Butterfield stresses, we can never entirely escape our own 'bubbles' of subjective experience – just as we can never really understand what it is to be an albatross, zooplankton, a coral reef, or an ocean. While it is an impossibly

paradoxical journey, it is one we must nonetheless undertake, for the limits of our ethical responsibility do not end at the limit of our epistemological capacities or sensory experience. Rather, for Butterfield, this is precisely where they begin.

Using the lens of biosemiotics, Butterfield emphasises that we only recognise (whether this is conscious or unconscious recognition) what is meaningful or significant to *us*. Although each non-human organism's perceptual 'bubble' is perceptually distinct, they are not causally distinct – our bubbles are entangled. When it comes to ethics, Butterfield reminds us that this means that there can be no clear boundaries between what matters and what we can ignore. Even the most inclusive theories tend to consider only those elements of the world that are significant, or meaningful for us, and as such, still elide the unavoidable problem for ethics: the outsider that we simply have no means to identify with. The other we consider utterly meaningless, and thus, morally irrelevant. The other we do not even notice is there. It is here that a biosemiotic perspective gives new relevance to Rancière's communities of sense within the discussion of environmental subjectivities, and lends itself as ethical benchmark for art projects like NITD. For Butterfield, 'universal consideration' may be an ultimately unreachable goal, but paradoxically, it is an essential starting point.¹³ Thus she reminds us:

Acting on this basis also means becoming more comfortable with the implications of complexity; especially entanglement and uncertainty. It is also important to keep in mind that in the midst of the sixth great extinction event, the journeys into other perceptual world are far from idyllic; destruction, pollution, suffering and death abound. Today, our impetus is not only to understand the non-human world but to protect it – to help it to survive. (*Invisible Realities*)

With protection in mind, my short journey into the political ramifications of the aesthetics and methods of contemporary media art projects, as instanced by NITD, offers fertile ground for ongoing animal studies scholarship. Firstly, it seems important to channel resources into understanding how sensitivity to the biosphere can foster aesthetic experimentations that stimulate the experience of emerging more-than-human communities of sense. Secondly, the conversation between arts practice and science can help scholars to clarify successful re-negotiations of our perceptual demarcation lines, which in turn suggest ways to understand human exclusion criteria for moral consideration. In the final analysis, art projects like NITD are

important to inspire public discussion on biocentricism from within our human-centric semiotic worlds of meaning.

Notes

- ¹ This longstanding concern of European philosophy was brought into relief for environmentalists by NITD project collaborator and philosopher Georgina Butterfield <http://unlikely.net.au/nature-in-the-dark/invisible-realities>
- ² Nature in the Dark 1 artists: Tim Nohe, Siri Hayes, Josephine Starrs & Leon Cmielewski, Angie Black, Liz Dunn, Steve Turpie, Jan Hendrik Brüggemeier & Scott Lewis & Renuka Rajiv.
- ³ Nature in the Dark 2 artists: Jenny Fraser, Radiance (Rose Staff), Olaf Meyer, Kim Munro, Michael Carmody, Hugh Davies & Jan Hendrik Brüggemeier.
- ⁴ VNPA's Nature Conservation Review 2014 can be found here: <http://unlikely.net.au/nature-in-the-dark/vnpa-report>
- ⁵ You can find an overview of the symposium at: <http://unlikely.net.au/nature-in-the-dark/nature-in-the-dark-conference>
- ⁶ While subscribed to the scientific approach to nature conservation, VNPA has engaged with a number of art projects since.
- ⁷ For more on these landmark events in Victoria's environmental history see the VNPA podcast at: <https://vnpa.org.au/publication-category/podcasts/>
- ⁸ Nohe's video can be found at: <http://unlikely.net.au/nature-in-the-dark/nitd1-nohe>
- ⁹ Hayes' video can be found at: <http://unlikely.net.au/nature-in-the-dark/fox-trot>
- ¹⁰ You can find the Animal Behaviour Group online at: <http://www.abg.eriophora.com.au>.
- ¹¹ Fraser's video is available at: <http://unlikely.net.au/nature-in-the-dark/bunurong>
- ¹² You can find Meyer's video at: <http://unlikely.net.au/nature-in-the-dark/rhythm-in-the-bay>
- ¹³ NITD project archive / Unlikely – Journal for Creative Arts, 2016, Georgina Butterfield <http://unlikely.net.au/nature-in-the-dark/invisible-realities>

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