

# UNLIKELY

## Editorial

by JAN HENDRIK BRÜGGEMEIER

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## Nature in the Dark – Communities of Sense and Ecological Imagination

JAN HENDRIK BRÜGGEMEIER

*Nature in the Dark* evolved from an over-the-garden-fence conversation between neighbours in Preston, Victoria, with Matt Ruchel, the CEO of Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA), on one side and me on the other. Matt introduced me to VNPA's citizens-science project *Caught on Camera (Nature Watch)* that used cameras to study the long-term impact of wild fires on fauna in Victorian national parks. The cameras were motion-triggered and most active at night set off by nocturnal animals. The results were predominantly black-and-white photographs. These night-vision shots showed no sign of any intention and preference in regard to the object of choice or the framing of the photographs, which clearly distinguished them from the staged work of a human photographer. The absence of a person behind the lens of the camera (in combination with some attractive bait) also allowed for more revealing behaviour on the part of the animals, allowing them to come as close as possible to the camera or even to run it over completely. To the curators, the raw and random nature of these photographs lacking direct human intention, felt aesthetically liberating. The combination of the 'natural' behaviour of the animals and the aesthetic of night-vision photography provided absolutely fascinating material for an art project.

49:30



NITD 1: source material from [Unlikely Journal](#) on [Vimeo](#).

## Project Rationale

In the curatorial statement for the first iteration of *Nature in the Dark* artists videos, Maria Miranda and I described our experience viewing the source material like this:

*Looking at the photos there is something incredibly intimate and unguarded about them. It's as if wildlife social-realism meets the monochromatic aesthetic of night vision surveillance and we are becoming voyeurs of another intelligence at work -- which we would not have encountered otherwise.* (Brüggemeier and Miranda 2012)

From there the formula for the project arose. We provided artists with the same photographs and video footage that would usually be used by scientists, and each artist re-worked and interpreted the original footage in their own way. The next step was to present these works in a context that also allowed conservationists from the VNPA and environmental scientists to voice their concerns based on the scientific findings that this material helped to uncover. So far the project has generated two editions of artists videos, a number of exhibitions and video interventions in public space, interdisciplinary panel discussions, a symposium involving an eclectic mix of artists, conservationists and scientists, and an US-American spin-off in collaboration with curator Marnie Benney and artist Tim Nohe in Baltimore.

## The Art of Nature in the Dark

Engaging artistically with VNPA's survey material evokes the question: for whom is the art of *Nature in the Dark*? Is it art for animals – conceptually interesting because of its problematisation of the definition of art as a subset of aesthetic experience? However, since we are animals and therefore, art is always for animals, could it be for nonhuman animals? Or are these video works “merely” cultural artefacts? Are we, as artists, in times of mass species extinction and the uncertainties of climate change making a collective attempt at exhausting the symbolism of loss – loss of the past, loss of species, loss of an ecological viable future? On one hand, it is for the eye of the beholder to interpret each of the works presented here according to their preferred conceptual and emotional reference system. On the other, I find that each artist with her or his unique approach engaging with the working material offers exercises in ‘universal consideration’ on their own terms. In Tim Nohe's video montage *At the Wall of the Anthropocene*, our ecological neighbours re-appear along the walls and fences of human dwellings and properties. In her video *Bunurong* Jenny Fraser chooses to work only with the photographic material from national parks that have kept their original indigenous names. Siri Hayes's *Foxtrot* animates a foxtrot danced by foxes amongst other co-dancer in Victorian forests – a feral extravaganza. Olaf Meyer traces in his video *Rhythm in the bay* the emotional expressiveness of fish. [Josephine Starrs and Leon Cmielewski](#), who used the provided photographs to create a playful animation of the ecological process of epicormic shoots. Among the scholarly contributions to *Nature in the Dark* there is [Adrian Dyer's](#) curious enquiry into the visual perception of bees and [Alex Harley's](#) work on the sense of empathy in the scientific work of Charles Darwin.

*Nature in the Dark* finds its virtual home at *Unlikely*. Beginning with the notion that although there are still different disciplinary frameworks, the common denominator is a shared concern for the environment we live in and our ecological “neighbours” with whom we share it. The line from Loren Eiseley's poem *Magic* served as an initial leitmotif for the work as it eloquently captures the spirit: “I love forms beyond my own and regret the borders between us” (Eiseley 1972). As the project continued on it's journey it became obvious – at least from the organisers' view – that the big elephant in the room of these merry transdisciplinary encounters, has been the articulation of an environmental ethics related to the project. Here *Nature in the Dark* as the project title refers to – put in the words of philosopher Georgina Butterfield –

*[w]hether we are concerned simply with understanding nature, or also with acting more ethically toward it, the more we learn about the non-human world, the more we are reminded how consistently we underestimate it.* (Butterfield 2016)

Delving into the rich history of both art, and ecological thought, we find that there have been numerous philosophical invitations to transgress beyond the thresholds of human

it can remind us that what we can see is not the whole world but our world.

## Communities of Sense: Art, Politics and Publics

Inescapably, if these investigations into non-human worlds, in whatever forms they take (narrative or non-narrative video works), form an ethical project, then they also form a political project. To borrow from the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière, our society exists of specific "communities of sense" and that there is an intrinsic connection between politics and aesthetics. For Rancière the public discourse or "visibility" in society is the political outcome constantly contested by the dissent of these different communities of sense. The dissent revolves around the dominant mode of society as one community of sense with its own aesthetic regime to reinforce the lived experience within it. This is contrasted to other communities of sense that are informed by different modes of visibility and intelligibility. For instance, a community could be equally framed by the heterogeneity of the aesthetic experience in artistic production or along more professional lines like the international community of climate scientists. According to Rancière the political becomes an "aesthetic activity" as it defines the boundaries of what is audible or visible in society and therefore accessible to public scrutiny. And hence the "distribution of the sensible" across these different collectives becomes a political issue and is equally driven by dissent and by policing one's own community zone. In equal measure, art and aesthetic experiences become political activities as they fuel the renegotiation of these disputed boundaries. It is important to stress that these communities are not necessarily stable and fixed identities but more like contingent configurations of the common or "temporary consensus zones" (Lovink 2002:271).

Art projects like *Nature in the Dark* may also serve as an invitation to imagine and experiment with these communities of sense with a more-than-human perspective. Alluding to the double meaning of the word 'sense' as in *sensation* and sense in *meaning*, a causal relationship between both meanings is suggested, but it also connotes that such aesthetic experiences shaped by art today may inform a politics of tomorrow. At least I would like to think so.

## Acknowledgments

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*NITD 2* was made possible through the support of Victoria National Parks Association's (VNPA) Reefwatch and Parks Victoria with special thanks to Steffan Howe and Mark Rodrigue. *NITD 2* features video footage and photographs from the Merry Marine Sanctuary, Bunurong Marine National Park, Flinders Pier, Point Addis Marine National Park, Merri Marine Sanctuary, Marengo Reefs Marine Sanctuary, Flinders Pier, Eagle Rock Marine Sanctuary, Corner Inlet Marine National Park, Churchill Island Marine National Park, Beware Reef Marine Sanctuary, Twelve Apostles Marine National Park, Arches Formations Port Campbell, Yaringa Marine National Park, in Victoria, Australia.

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## Footnote

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1. I have to thank to Gerogina Butterfield for highlighting this in our conversations about the *NITD* project. See also her article [Invisible Realities: Ethics, Meaning, And 'Universal Consideration' \(2016\)](#).↵



This journal is made in the traditional country of the Boonwurung and Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin nation. We pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise, respect, and learn from their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationship with country.

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