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Nonorganic Life: Encounters between Frequency and Virtuality in Antarctica

1. LIFE

The BwO howls: 'They've made me an organism! They've wrongfully folded me! They've stolen my body (Deleuze and Guattari 1996, 159).

This paper is not about Antarctica at all. In many imaginaries Antarctica exists as a virtualized yet real utopia. It is a place known through material productions that oscillate between the fictional and the scientific. The discovery of the Don Juan Pond lead scientists towards life formed by brine-derived nitrates (a kind of molecular self-organization by non-carbon sources) and onwards to the possibility of life on Mars. If it is autonomous, can reproduce and evolve, it must be life, mustn't it? Amidst complex computational models, nonorganic matter is not static; it changes and tying it to either nature or culture is impossible. Antarctica is such an object of study. To approach it we create an organism that can be sliced, imaged, recorded and folded. We steal its body so that it may open our eyes to other worlds. Likewise, in art's engagements with Antarctica, something else is formed. DJ Spooky captured the resonant frequencies of ice in *Terra Nova: Sinfonia Antarctica* (2008). In *The Journey that Wasn't* (2005) Pierre Huyghe lured a mythical creature to reveal itself to a sound beacon placed on an ice flow in apparently uncharted territory. Andrea Polli's *Sonic Antarctica* (2008) shows data to be always incomplete as field recordings and audifications are placed alongside interviews with climate scientists. The human inhabitants and their tools mark something specific about the media ecology that is Antarctica. These works suggest that our fascination with Antarctica derives from a need to distinguish differences between unstable materials, objects and behaviors – the spaces between contain evidence of life.

2. ECOLOGY

They discovered that there was another world on this planet, where the cloudy sky produced a milky green light that reflected off an icy ground, uniformly illuminating the air around them as if the landscape were glowing in the dark. It was a landscape without matter, only light (Huyghe 2005).

A second definition of nonorganic life extends to ecological systems subject to flows of energy that include nonorganic matter (DeLanda 1992, 133). Antarctica holds an ecological intensity that heralds a terrifying shift in the relations of nature to technology. Within its reality we map the very movement of the earth's climate. Phil Dadson records soundscapes, finding strange human inhabitants amplifying echo walls and polar winds playing pylons like a giant Aeolian harp. Dadson's Antarctica is not passive. Every element of *Polar Projects* (2003) is a functioning part of the Antarctic ecology, including pragmatic man-made additions. Ronnie van Hout recounts the emergence of an Antarctic horror in *the thing* (2009). There is nothing sublime about this figure dressed in all-weather gear and held within a secure containment room. Van Hout reminds us that Antarctica is an assemblage of nonorganic life mapped and traced by human use of media.

Guattari extended definitions of ecology to include human subjectivity and social concerns. DeLanda turns this toward a geological ethics (2002, 153). Morton argues that aesthetics play a crucial role in understanding the need for a dark ecology – an ecology without nature (2007, 2). In each of these definitions ecology is born from dissonance, including wider tensions of different material forces be these human, spatial or cultural. Antarctica is certainly formed from dissonance. Reframing Antarctica involves the recording of discrete states that adhere to the moment between science and fiction; and that engage complex mixtures of geological, biological, social and linguistic constructions.

3. MATTER

A given material may solidify in alternative ways (as ice or snowflake, as crystal or glass (DeLanda 2000, 16).

What is it that gave us the image of Antarctica as a pure white world, an inhuman and technologically free territory, inhabited by penguins? To address the problematic narrative of Antipodean magic and mystery we need to question the real fictions generated by technology. Joyce Campbell's *Last Light* (2006) employs anachronistic photographic techniques to chart looming contemporary phenomena that will have enormous and uncharted effects on our collective future. It is an engagement with the interchange of matter. The ice speaks. Antarctica remains geographically distant, silent, and yet visually close.

There is a metabolic process whereby Antarctica coordinates matter, energy and information. It formed from molecules that not only maintain the earth's balance, but filter and reflect back larger possibilities, longer histories. Reading the ice melt is a bit like consulting the oracle, the ice contains distributed knowledge of place, time, history and heat. As sound travels across and through the frozen environment frequency becomes a tool with which the great white expanse can be mapped. Dadson, Spooky and Polli make visible the magic of sonic forces to construct spaces for mountainous encounters. Campbell, van Hout and Huyghe seek a visible engagement with intangible spaces made real. All these artists travelled to Antarctica. Their works reflect a nonorganic environment disturbed and somehow remade by technologies of sonification, visualisation and exploration – science fiction as real as life on Mars.

References

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