

Yolande Harris: Aesthetics of Intensity

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Shifting, undulating, trembling, these shadows that appear as darkness full of light and that flutter across the walls already announce a deeper shift: are we to see the shadows for what they truly are, video projections of gradations of light and their agitated movements? Or rather, as events experienced one afternoon by the artist in the Pacific Northwest as she watched the sunlight cascade through the trees?

Shifts in time and space, and undulations in daily perception, are active elements within the work of artist Yolande Harris, brought forward through her deep curiosity for the world. A gap or fissure seems to appear, to break in – between seeing and believing, between material fact and poetical imagining, and between the near and the far, along with the ineffable and animate threads that may also connect and therefore disrupt such dichotomies. The gap, and the threads that traverse and link, and which invite us to enter their subsequent web of associations and slippages, disorienting layers and close-ups, and from which new perspectives are generated.

Yolande Harris' works of audio and video situate us within this unsettled condition, and they act to prolong and deepen the rich relational nexus that ultimately captures us. Or, that lurk just on the surface, as a suggestive poetics. The shadows recorded on that single afternoon are not only a play of light and dark, but rather, they lead us into an intensity of felt energies: from the human eye to the wall of the gallery, shadow and light captured in the rainforests of the Pacific Northwest, agitated and flustered by gusts of wind, and relocated to the Woodbury Art Museum in Utah, thrust us into a dynamic weave of force and feeling. Harris is an artist sensitive to the world around her, and her works are full of thought and affective stirring, conjoining questions of human-animal relations, environmental sustainability, and technology with that of an embodied knowing and experience.

Becoming-Animal

The projection I'm referring to here is a work by Harris titled *Light Entering My Room*, which was featured in her exhibition *Listening to the Distance* presented at Woodbury Art Museum, Utah Valley University. The video piece was part of an ensemble of works distributed throughout the gallery, each relating to different found phenomena and experiences of "natural" events, from the casting of shadows and the flickering of sunlight to underwater audio recordings and video recordings of animal life.

Relationships to animals and animal habitats appear as a strong thread throughout Harris' works. She continually draws our attention to animal life by watching and listening, recording and amplifying winged creatures and underwater bodies. In her exhibition, such an approach is featured primarily through two works, *Whale Walk* and *Eagle/Eyrie*. Yet Harris is no straightforward ethnographer, nor does she aim for documentary capture only. In "*Whale Walk*" we are invited to listen to a series of audio recordings the artist collected from scientific collaborators at the University of Washington. Presented through headphones and a portable audio player, visitors are invited to walk through the gallery space, letting the sounds of Humpback whales envelope them in their watery, deep murmuring. These sounds are at once distant from our earthly territory, our terrestrial senses, while they in turn immerse us within their sudden proximity: the immensity of the sounds – the great depth and dimension of their sonority – are brought right up against our skin, delivering all this depth and resonance into our listening.

Such are the concerns that also lead writer David Abram to express a profound astonishment in the face of natural force, of animals and the creaturely, and all the delicate and enormous movements embedded within natural habitats. His phenomenological texts veer between critical analysis and poetic wonder, leading us to the edge of human reason-

ableness, and the touch of the marvelous – quite literally, a writing that shudders with admiration for the wisdom of the animal. Abram honors the animal, in particular, as a wondrous and vital figure, a type of body of knowledge from which human understanding may find guidance, as well as humility.

Abram's interest in animals and animal habitats is given parallel expression in Harris' *Whale Walk*, as well as *Eagle*, a video that shows us bald eagles nesting in their North American habitat. Moving between a close up of a single bird outward to a grouping of two, the work locates us as a distant viewer; we observe the winged creatures, following their activities, their movements and gathering. Yet such distance, as in *Whale Walk*, brings us closer as well – following the captivating presence of this bird of prey, as well as this landscape, the work creates a type of focus, acting as a meditation that invites us to linger within a space of sensing, of being and relating. The video includes an audio recording taken from an entirely different setting, that of the deep sea. Consisting of recordings of a robotic sea-glider as it moves through the ocean recording the environment, which in this case sounds forth as a mysterious ambience of electronic textures, the audio dislocates us, enmeshing what we see within an auditive energy. Such a combination – of the aerial figure of the eagle and the deep underwater acoustics – creates a jarring, hypnotic and strangely serene experience.

Accompanying the video-audio work, the artist has additionally produced a set of five photographic prints. These are larger stills taken from the video, which zoom in on particular details of the eagles. From feathery patterns to hazy color fields, the prints bring us directly against this winged figure; we are immersed in this sudden expanse, which collapses that sense of the near and the far, turning distance and otherness into an aesthetic of slow suspended perception.

Shifting Borders

The shifts in perception embedded in Harris' works lead us into a rather ambiguous field where figure and ground are no longer clearly fixed. In fact, as we move up close, immersed in creaturely sound, or pull back, to wonder at the sudden movements around, the limits of subject and object are equally diffused, remixed. Harris creates a world of animate forms, while drawing upon the vibrancy around her, which equally draws us away, to occupy a zone of becoming.

Mississippi Tornado, a work also appearing within her Listening to the Distance exhibition, is a piece consisting of an audio recording and a wall drawing, both of which refer us to the greater relation between territory and landscape, and the shifting borders between the two. Recorded one evening in Memphis by the artist, the audio captures the sounds of an air raid signal (originating from the second world war) used to warn of impending tornados in the area. In conjunction with this recording, which is presented through headphones in the gallery space, the artist produced a wall drawing depicting the current route of the Mississippi river along with the state border between Arkansas and Mississippi. While the original border was defined by the route of the river, the changes in its pathway have shifted the river away from the state border, creating a tension between what the artist calls "the fluid power of the natural border and the stubborn power of the political border." These two lines are thus intertwined, looping the natural, earthly flow of the river with the rigid state territory, and figuring a simple yet compelling dialogue.

The Wind, the Sea, and Aesthetics of Intensity

Borders and distances, documentary capture and sensorial captivation, creatures and beings, the work of Yolande Harris hovers around these territories of concern, bringing into conversation the pleasures found in perceiving and being part of earthly events, and the questioning as to what might such events impart or enable. The artist seems driven by an interest in synthesizing the affective knowledge gained from the senses and the processes of mediation that empower and extend our acts of sensing. In her research and writings, Harris describes her interests and strategies through the key term “techno-intuition,” which, as she says, “encourages the combination of different ways of knowing, through both technological artifact and intuitive response.”

Her work, *Pink Noise*, installed as a floor projection, gives expression to these overarching concerns, bringing us directly into a zone of immersive and mesmerizing light and sound. Consisting of a video recording of sunlight flickering on the sea, along with audio of underwater recordings captured at the same site and played over headphones hanging above the projection, *Pink Noise*, as in the artist’s *Light Entering My Room*, captures the play of light as a type of found phenomena, while also amplifying the intensity of sensorial experience – of letting such phenomenal appearances delight as well as confound. In this regard, Yolande Harris navigates through an array of daily events, confronting these highly sensuous temporalities, and constructing from them an art of immersion, where noises, reflections, shadows and deep sonorities incite a generative reorientation.

David Abram, *Becoming Animal, an Earthly Cosmology*, New York: Vintage Books, 2010.

In conversation with the artist, 2015.

Yolande Harris, ‘Scorescapes: On Sound, Environment and Sonic Consciousness’, doctoral thesis, (University of Leiden, 2011), 116.