

# In Environments: The convergence and divergence of practice

TERESA CONNORS\* and ANDREW DENTON\*\*

\*International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, School of Music, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada

\*\*Auckland University of Technology, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142 New Zealand

Emails: divatproductions@gmail.com; adenton@aut.ac.nz

This article explores our audiovisual collaborative outputs and the methods employed to negotiate converging and diverging creative directions in the production of artistic works, in the context of philosophies that influence our thinking-making processes, as well the engagement with new modes of artistic practice. A key feature connecting our collaborations is site-specific field recordings of audio and visual materials. Our work has spanned Canada, the United States and New Zealand, producing a catalogue of works that are intrinsically linked to geographic and everyday phenomena. To support our discussion of the creative process, we critique one recent work, *Aspects of Trees* (2013, 2015), as a case study that synthesises concerns associated with collaboration, while also illustrating the recent sharp turn in our individual practices. The outcome is a reorientation of our thinking-making procedures, including ideas of subjective experiences of time, place and the agency of human and non-human bodies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

**Year:** 1997 (Summer)

**Location:** Vancouver British Columbia, Canada

**Inventory:** 1 x 1984 V8 Dodge van, 2 x Bolex 16mm film cameras, 1 x Sony hi-8 video camera and 1 x prototype Sony digital video camera, a cooler full of 16mm film stock (colour and black and white), 1 x Nagra sound recorder, 1 x Sony MiniDisk, 2 x Sennheiser shotgun microphones, 2 x wind socks, 1 x boom pole

The production of one of our early projects, *Motion Parallax: notes and compositions from the land* (Figure 1), a fixed-media audiovisual work created from material recorded over six weeks crossing the 7,000 kilometres of Canada, started with modest means and ambitious intent. The project was an attempt – *essay* – to experiment with creative practices aligned with historical Canadian landscape painters. In short, we set out to gather audiovisual material *en plein air*, with the idea of reworking the recorded sketches in post-production, using optical printing, editing and sound manipulation procedures. The work operates as a series of core samples of encounters in particular temporal and geographic locations.



**Figure 1.** The work *Motion Parallax* (1998) was the first large-scale multimedia collaboration between the authors and was created using field recordings captured on a cross-Canada trip from Tofino, British Columbia to Cape Spear, Newfoundland. This photo was taken on the last day of shooting on top of the Signal Hill historical site in St John's, Newfoundland.

People who knew us thought us quite mad to embark on such an ambitious project. And it was a difficult undertaking to bring to completion. Recently, we have described the work as a ‘beautifully naive endeavour’ (Denton 2009: vii; Connors 2015). The nascent methodological framework of *Motion Parallax*, however, marked the first of our projects to explore day-to-day encounters with the ‘stuff-of-the-world’.<sup>1</sup> At the time of production Connors, and by proxy Denton, were working in the milieu of the World Soundscape Project in Vancouver.<sup>2</sup> Our collaborative practice sprang, in part, from the context and process of making *Motion Parallax*, and through the practitioner community we were part of at that time. Since then our individual and collaborative creative-research have evolved to include live audiovisual concerts, essay films and non-linear audiovisual installation works.

<sup>1</sup>We borrow this turn of phrase from Chris Salter’s description of art works in which the agency and performative qualities of material (the stuff of the world) become co-constitutive components in the resulting artefact (Salter 2015: 40).

<sup>2</sup>Denton completed his undergrad film studies at Simon Fraser University while Connors studied electroacoustic composition with Barry Truax and Hildegard Westerkamp.

As practitioners we always start with the making processes but, over time, we have increasingly turned to theory as a multifaceted way to negotiate our individual and collaborative directions. It has become a shorthand way to communicate our thinking-through-making procedures in the field and in the studio processes that ensue. The common mediators – the environments we work in and the various thinkers we engage with – draw together connection points to work out from. The uncommon territories of interest that emerge from our conversations provoke interesting and rewarding frictions that move our practice into new pathways of making.

In this article, our collaborative and individual artistic practices are contextualised by discussing our creative impulses and the strands of critical and philosophical discourses that have activated the thinking through the making. Beyond technical considerations, this article draws forward other ways of knowing and being *in* artistic practice that provide the opportunity to see, hear and be *in* the world differently.

## 2. SITUATING THE CURRENT PRACTICE: THINKING THE AFFECTIVE AND POLITICAL QUALITIES OF SOUND

### 2.1. The ‘theory of ambient poetics’

With dark ecology, we can explore all kinds of art forms as ecological: not just ones that are about lions and mountains ... The ecological thought includes negativity and irony, ugliness and horror. (Morton 2010: 17)

Timothy Morton’s ‘Dark Ecology’ project and his books *Ecology Without Nature* and *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology at the End of Time* have agitated some of the thinking behind the practices discussed in this article. Morton proposes a way of thinking and being (in which he considers thinking, in and of itself, an ecological event) that embraces ambiguity, uncertainty and the uncanniness of the entangled mesh. For Morton, ‘the mesh’ substitutes for words such as interdependence and interconnectedness (Morton 2010: 28). He is an advocate for art and music, stating that: ‘art forms have something to tell us about the environment, because they can make us question reality’ (Morton 2010: 8).

Similar to Christoph Cox’s (2011) materialist sonic philosophy, Morton’s ‘theory of ambient poetics’ establishes a means to read the materiality of ‘[ecomimetic] texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription’ (Morton 2007: 3). In so doing, Morton opens a pragmatic and critical tool for thinking about the use of sound and image by suggesting that: ‘Environmental art makes us aware of our ears, just as much as it makes us aware of the atmosphere’ (ibid.: 44). This ‘awareness’ is a way to

conjure up ‘a sense of a surrounding atmosphere or world’ (ibid.: 22). In the lexicon of sound art, soundscape and electroacoustic composition, atmospheric awareness has, to varying degrees, underpinned much creative research, including that of Alvin Lucier, Pauline Oliveros, Barry Truax, Damián Keller, Douglas Kahn and Agostino Di Scipio (to name just a few). However, Morton’s ‘theory of ambient poetics’ has incited subjective critique of our practice through thinking about the significance of and engagement in the chosen environments and the processes that inform the resulting audiovisual works. Morton’s use of *ambient* rather than *ambience* is carefully deployed, as noted by Seth Kim-Cohen to evoke: ‘an experience of nowness that does not imply singularity or consistency ... it is multiply multiple: every entity is already double – being and appearance – and ambience contains a proliferation of entities’ (Kim-Cohen 2016: 31).

Morton identifies the features of ambient poetics as: ‘*rendering*, the *medial*, the *timbral*, the *Aeolian*, *tone*, and the *re-mark*’ (Morton 2007: 34). Using terms and examples from various creative practices, Morton indicates the contribution new multimedia approaches have had in ‘acknowledg[ing] the role of the environmental’ (ibid.). Specific to *rendering*, Morton draws on Michel Chion’s interpretation of the term as that which conveys and expresses ‘the feelings associated with the situation’ (Chion 1994: 109), citing works by Luc Ferrari and Nam June Paik as examples (Morton 2007: 36). In reference to the *re-mark* – ‘that which differentiates between space [object] and place [subject]’ (ibid.: 47) – Morton notes Lucier’s *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1970) as a work that modulates between foreground and background (ibid.). More recent works such as Jacob Kirkegaard’s *AION* (2006) and Di Scipio’s *Modes of Interference* (2005–14) could equally fit within this concept.

Problematising the subjective and objective is one aim of the techniques applied in the making of *Aspects of Trees*. Morton’s notion of the *re-mark* as an exchange between objective/subjective, space/place and background/foreground proves potent consideration for achieving that aim. What is compelling is Morton’s identification of a flicker, when ‘a *re-mark* flips an “objective” image to a “subjective” one’ (Morton 2007: 49). It is perhaps helpful to visualise this ‘gestural’ moment, ‘echo’, or ‘fundamental property of ambience’ (ibid.: 48) as the falling dream experience, as there is something affective and evocative about a drift between states.

Imagine you are dreaming, watching yourself falling, but also feeling yourself falling; you flicker between the two states so quickly they blur into a vibrating sensation, and then you land, with a gasp of breath. Snap – you are awake – instantaneously in a different state. Your heart races with the memory of the dream. It is an acutely sensate moment and one

that sticks in the mind and body for a long time after you have woken up. Morton concludes that the remark illustrates the ‘brilliance of ambient rhetoric, [which] is to make it appear as if, for a fleeting second, there is something in between’ but, ‘however close we get to the (admittedly artificial) boundary between inside and outside (sound/noise, smell/scent, squiggle/letter), we won’t find anything in between’ (ibid.: 50). From the perspective of the creative practice discussed here, whether there is an in between or not is less interesting than the perceptual transaction that occurs during the drift between the inside and the outside. It is the strange, uncanny feeling Freud refers to, evocative of the sense of ‘helplessness’, that we ‘sometimes experience in certain dream states’ (Freud 1919: 144).

“Ecomimesis” resists the uncanny, in its effort to present an original, pristine nature not “infected” with the consciousness, the mentality, or the desire of the perceiver, unless it is deemed to be “natural” (Morton 2007: 68). His reading of this type of work has been helpful during the making process, certainly not as a frame to hang the practice on, but one to reflect upon, push up against or mess around with. There is no bullet-pointed list of ambient poetic features taped to the side of the microphone, camera or above the computer to refer to during the field recordings, edits or mixes, to tick off as applied or not applied. Rather, he proposes questions on how to break through the ambience and rupture the skin of perception to see and hear the world as a complexity of interwoven vibrations.

## 2.2. Being *in* environment

Attunement to the interwoven vibrations – the drift between the inside and outside (the flicker) – takes time. According to Jane Bennett, it requires: ‘a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body’ (Bennett 2010: xiv). The agency of such forces is relational. While the authors’ field recordings often begin in a matter-of-fact process of dealing with equipment (making sure all batteries are charged etc.), both these functional aspects and the experienced environmental influences become operative agents in the collection of materials. Bennett’s discourse on thing-power articulates this state of context-based making by giving agency to the energetic vitality intrinsic to matter, and the active, earthy and complex entanglements of human and non-human encounters (ibid.: 3). ‘Earthy bodies, of various but always finite durations, affect and are affected by one another. And they form noisy systems or temporary working assemblages that are, as much as any individuated thing, loci of effectivity and allure’ (Bennett 2015: 233). The contexts of being *in* these environments – including their history and present condition, our history and desires, the tools of capture and ‘other nested

and overlapping matrices’ – are entangled (Kim-Cohen 2016: 59). Being *in* an environment, as such, is a process of emergence.

Accordingly, once time is taken to absorb the location in an experiential way, what unfolds is a thinking-feeling process akin to Brian Massumi’s notion of perception: ‘a thinking of perception in perception, in the immediacy of its occurrence, as it is felt – a thinking-feeling, in visual [and sound] form’ (Massumi 2011: 44). Truax succinctly draws attention to this process as one of ‘a deeply understood relation to the context of the work, whether a place, a culture or a story’ (Truax 2015: 109). In this mode of attention, the need to categorise is exchanged for an experimentation process that suspends any preconfigured formation. In this manner the interplay between environment, materials and entities is dynamic and transformative. In practice, then, the tools and methods used to capture the audiovisual material are in accord with the sensations of being *in* the environment.

## 2.3. The ‘politics of aesthetics’

Our site-based methods of practice have evolved through lived experiences and technological developments in the recording devices we use. Presently these devices include high-speed and high-definition cinematography, super-telephoto lenses, time-lapse cinematography, microscopic audio recording devices such as contact and hydrophone microphones, plus ambisonic field recording microphones. These tools reveal unexpected patterns, movements and connections in the image and sound that speak to the complexity of being *in* these environments. What emerges, in making visible or audible that which would not otherwise be perceived, has a political dimension that Jacques Rancière theorises in his text: *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. He says:

Within any given framework, artists are those whose strategies aim to change the frames, speeds and scales according to which we perceive the visible, and combine it with a specific invisible element and a specific meaning. Such strategies are intended to make the invisible visible or to question the self-evidence of the visible; to rupture given relations between things and meanings and, inversely, to invent novel relationships between things and meanings that were previously unrelated. (Rancière 2010: 141)

These methods of capture align with Rancière’s notion of a ‘politics of aesthetics’ as emerging when the invisible is made visible and the unheard can be heard, but which operate ‘under the conditions prescribed by an original disjunction. It produces effects, but it does so on the basis of an original effect that implies the suspension of any direct cause-effect relationship’ (ibid.: 142). One point that needs to be stressed is that *Aspects of Trees* is not intended to be didactic or

highly politicised. It is proposed that politics emerges from the subjective encounter with the world held in the material and is guided by the thematic frame that locates it; thus it is emergent and not polemic. In this way, Rancière is enlisted into the process of thinking through the political inside an artwork or practice. His approach allows for a subtlety of purpose which side-steps a need to lock down a position, while at the same time acknowledging that there is a political dimension in the subject itself that is further teased out by the aesthetic ruptures in the fabric of the audiovisual material: ‘the aesthetic “political” forbid(s) any strategy of “politicization of art”’ (Rancière 2008).

For example, an overworked image of a forest is in itself not enough to draw an inference to the stratified layers of meaning that bubble under the surface of this image. The sound and accompanying images it is placed alongside work towards an overall milieu, with its interweaving pathways of thoughts and experiences of forests in entropy spilling out to the viewer in such a way that the encounter is affective and physiological. In the embodied moments of connection in *Aspects of Trees* there emerge contemplations on loss, which is the emotional manifestation of the affect experienced. The politics of the work resides in the complex, subjective responses to the work, which is why we have referred to it as a type of eulogy. In short, the approach resists a factual didactic mode in favour of a more poetic register to evoke physiological and emotional responses and not to directly incite action.

### 3. ASPECTS OF TREES

**Year:** 2012 (Summer)

**Location:** Williams Lake, British Columbia, Canada

**Inventory:** 1 x Casio EX-FH 20 slow motion consumer camera, 1 x Canon 5D MkII with intervalometer, 1 x Vinten Tripod, 2 x GoPro2, 1 x Zoom H4n, 2 x Rode NTG2 shotgun mics, 2 x wind socks, 5 x Piezo contact mics, 1 x boompole, 1 x copy of Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature*

Denton’s initial encounter with Morton’s work intersected with the original production phase of *Aspects of Trees* (Figure 2). The subject of this work is the escalating pine beetle epidemic that has decimated forests on the west coast of North America. This devastation has an obviously human aspect. Western Canadian reforestation practices during the latter half of the twentieth century involved monoculture, which has resulted in pine-tree-only forests at higher elevations across the province. The combination of these mono-species plantations and the increasing average winter temperatures has cultivated an environment in which the beetle can flourish. Currently, over 20 million hectares of British Columbia’s forests have been

destroyed (Brinkman 2012: 6). It is a jolting reminder of the complexity and fragility of ecology under stress.

This work is the result of a two-year field recording process, initiated by Denton, that comprises video footage and stills from the infected forests, as well as audio captured inside and on the surface of pine trees.<sup>3</sup> We both worked in reforestation in British Columbia before, during and after the epidemic; we have subjective multilayered emotional and physical experiences embedded through concentrated encounters with this particular landscape. Because of our shared tacit knowledge, a reflective practice emerged during the collection and postproduction process that resulted in three iterations of the work: a multiscreen live concert with cello and laptop (*Okta: NZ 2013, Toronto Electroacoustic Symposium 2013*), an audiovisual installation (*Balance/Unbalance: Australia 2013*) and a single-channel fixed media version (*New Zealand Film Festival 2015, Jihlava International Documentary Festival 2015*).

The first iteration of *Aspects of Trees* was a live improvisation with multiscreen projections, cellist and laptop performer. These 30-minute performances took place in New Zealand with cellist Charlotte Ketel,<sup>4</sup> and in Toronto, Canada with Anna Bourne, with Connors playing the laptop instrument in both cases. Constructed with Cycling ’74’s Max software, the ‘tree instrument’ (Figure 3) amalgamates a variety of compositional and computational processes for improvisation. The initial artistic inquiry for this instrument began when we located the ‘points of failure’ in the recorded video caused by Rolling Shutter – a distortion that can occur when the scanlines of the moving image are exposed at different times. These images appealed to the cultivated ‘musician’s eye’ of Connors (trained opera singer) as resembling graphical scores. Accordingly, image sonification was employed as a compositional device on extracted stills from these ‘points of failure’ (Figures 4 and 5). Using the ‘Image Synth’ functionality in the program MetaSynth, these images were translated into sonic motifs in conjunction with a sampler instrument containing the sound of beetle activity captured inside an infested tree. In this manner a relationship between material and process was maintained that, according to Jean-Marc Pelletier, is important for ‘perceptually meaningful’ image-to-sound sonification (Pelletier 2009: 208).

Using these initial experiments, this ‘composed instrument’ (Dudas 2010: 29) would come to include sonification of still and moving images, an eight-part canonic system based on the numerical ratios taken from tree growth, live granulation and transposition,

<sup>3</sup>David Dunn ([www.acousticecology.org/dunn/solit.html](http://www.acousticecology.org/dunn/solit.html)) and Felix Wilson ([www.felixwilson.com](http://www.felixwilson.com)) provided additional field recordings of internal and external tree sounds.

<sup>4</sup>Link to live version of *Aspects of Trees* with Ketel and Connors: [www.divatproductions.com/aoft.html](http://www.divatproductions.com/aoft.html).





Figure 2. Aspects of Trees.

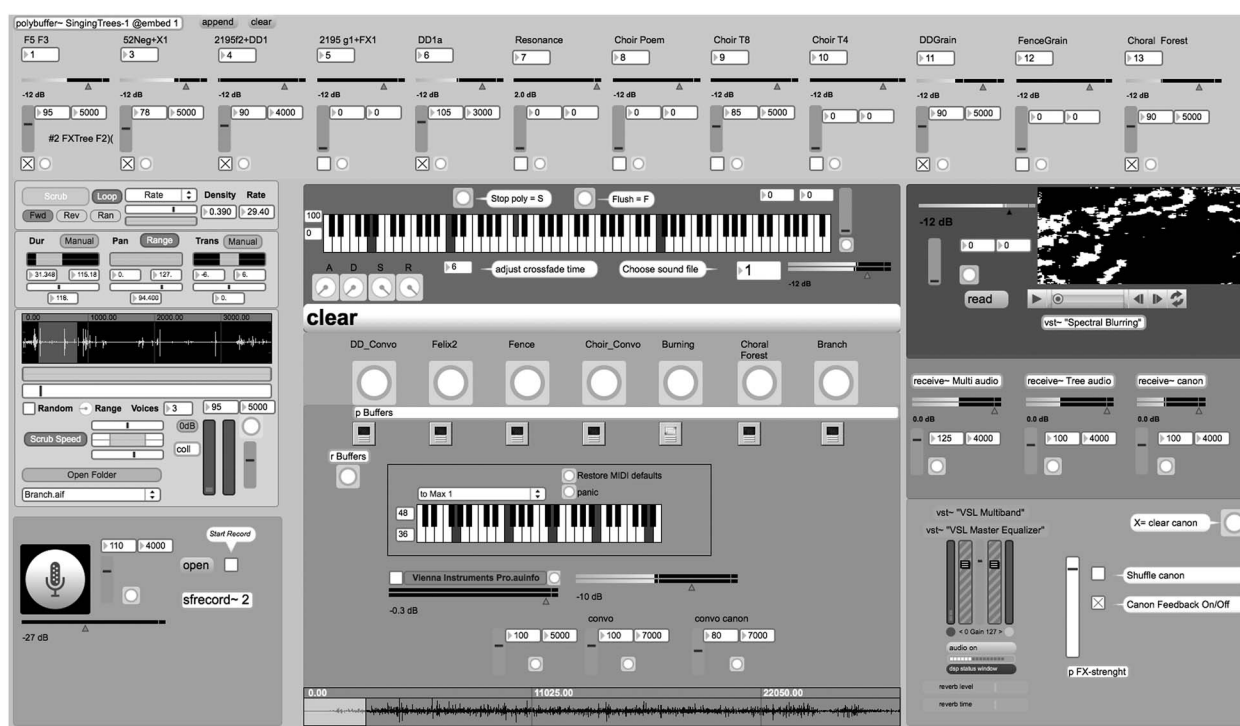


Figure 3. The 'tree instrument'.

and live convolution of improvised cello with field recordings (Connors 2013: 22–6). As a compositional method, convolution<sup>5</sup> has been an important device in previous sonic works by Connors. There is a poetic conversation between the sonic materials chosen and, in some ways, this is similar to painting in that sound colours blend to create new sonic tones. Using the *HissTools* Max external *multiconvolute~*, the patch is constructed so the laptop performer can choose between seven impulses convolved with a live feed from the cello. These impulses include the microscopic

internal and external audio samples of the pine trees. Additional components of this instrument include Alexander Refsum Jensenius's *Jamoma motion* module and Ben Carey's *scrub granulator*.

The 'hyperimprovisational' condition (Dean 2003: xxiii) between visual projections, cellist and laptop performer fostered the recursive potentials between subject, material and the agency of improvisation in a manner of 'affective entanglement' (Myers and Dumit 2011: 249). Donna Haraway defines this relationship of recursive activities as 'complex amalgams of technical-social-cultural-material-semiotic actions and objects' (Haraway 2014). In this instance, the recursive activities resisted factual modes of representation in

<sup>5</sup>See Roads (2001: 209–34) and Truax (n.d.) for a technical account of convolution.



Figure 4. Points of failure.

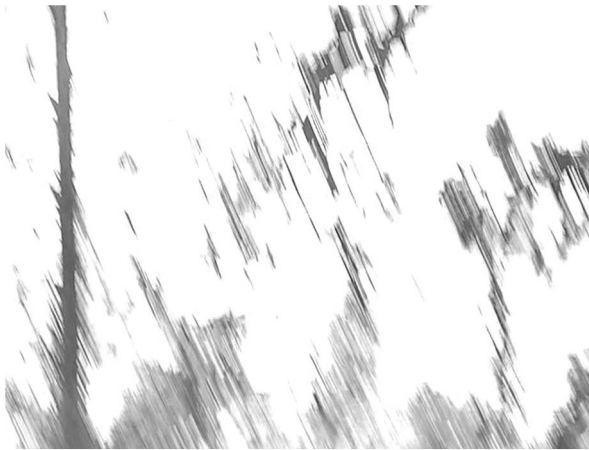


Figure 5. Points of failure.

favour of an expressive register, seeking to evoke a heightened audience experience of a dying forest. The work is an attempt, in the practice, to accentuate the tension between a realist representation of pine beetle-infected dying forests of North America, against what is not seen and heard.

The second iteration of *Aspects of Trees* was configured as a multi-projection surround sound installation. Sonic materials recorded during the live improvisations were used to layer a 30-minute looping sequence, the trajectory of which moves, uncannily, from known to unknown, or rather, from concrete to abstract and back again. Toward the final stages of this iteration, additional studio improvisations were recorded using the 'tree instrument', forming a cumulative database that in turn folds back into the final installation system.

Observations made during this iteration underpin the fundamental shift in both authors' creative-research. For Connors the shift in practice involved a move away from fixed-media formats to exploring non-linear and generative systems within an

audiovisual installation platform. Denton's attention was directed towards a line of inquiry that located the making alongside politico-aesthetic contemplations around material affect within a fixed-media format. As such, the methods, pathways and techniques employed in the authors' subsequent collaborations diverged. The final iteration of *Aspects of Trees* – a 15-minute fixed-media film primarily using location field recording sounds – marks this point of divergence.

#### 4. DIVERGENCE

The shift in our mode of artist practice has influenced the possible ways in which our subsequent collaborations are assembled. Of interest here are the different tendencies activated to extract the lure of the subject through the material (non-linear/fixed-media) and the means by which we operated in these processes. On reflection, our collaborations have at times been naively ambitious, which has positioned us artistically in new territories, where the 'possibility of something to happen' is cultivated. From a philosophical perspective, this touches on Stuart Kauffman's notion of 'the adjacent possible' – that within the components of any given moment, many untapped possibilities are available:

The strange and beautiful truth about the adjacent possible is that its boundaries grow as you explore those boundaries. Each new combination ushers new combinations into the adjacent possible. (Johnson 2010: 31)

Within the divergence of practices, embracing the 'potentially possible' is the key to how the authors have forged ahead as collaborators. Accumulated tacit knowledge from a working relationship lasting 25 years is, in and of itself, an 'ecology of practice' (Stengers 2005). Stengers explains that 'an ecology of practice is a tool for thinking through what is happening, and ... a tool is never neutral' (ibid.: 185). For her there is much to be drawn from the process of passing the tool from one to another; each gesture is differentiated by the aims of the users and the relationships that ensue from this exchange and the situation in which it occurs. In our case the situation is the different environments that affect us, and the exchange patterns that build up during the making processes. In the context of a collaborative process, the subjective and objective are not opposites; they move in a relational field that mobilises and transforms the work. This platform of thought aligns with Thom van Dooren who advocates 'everything is connected to something, which is connected to something else' (van Dooren 2014: 109). Rather than the holistic ecological philosophy of 'everything is connected to everything', van Dooren purposes that 'the specificity and proximity of connections matter – *who we are bound up with and in what way*' (ibid.).

#### 4.1. The shifts in practice

For Connors the move towards non-linear audiovisual installations was motivated by curiosity to explore a more dynamic aesthetic. As the installation platform provides a space where the constraints of beginnings, middles and ends can be eliminated, works have been constructed that incorporate environmental data gleaned from the respective environments. Of interest here is the method of redistributing creative processes to the agential potentials of the material resources that, in effect, operate as co-creative components. Human activity is thus placed into a larger environmental context by intersecting with forces greater than those of human design. For Connors, the move towards non-linear systems began to redeploy the relationship between experiential encounters and the resulting creative artefacts.

Human and non-human agency are thus explored as an emergent paradigm of expression. Recent discourses emerging in the arts, humanities and social sciences, generally referred to as the ‘non-human turn’, have contributed to the making-thinking behind Connors’s non-linear artistic explorations. The non-human turn, in broad terms, can refer to ‘climate change, drought, and famine; to biotechnology, intellectual property, and privacy; to genocide, terrorism, and war’ (Grusin 2015: vii). Bennett describes these discourses as an attempt ‘to find new techniques, in speech and art and mood, to disclose the participation of nonhumans in “our” world’ (Bennett 2015: 224–5). Morton suggests that these discourses have particular relevance to ‘exit modernity – which the current ecological emergency seems to be demanding’ (Morton 2013b: 80). From the position of creative research, attentiveness to these emerging discourses provides an opportunity to ask new questions from the core of artistic practice, the result of which affords a ‘contextual knowledge and involvement’ (Truax 2015: 18) that considers the response and response-ability of creative practice.

Connors’s exploration of materials is done in part through the development of specially designed computational systems. These systems vary in construction and are intrinsically linked to the collected data of audio field recordings, moving images and photos as well as meteorological and environmental data from respective environments. The techniques include computer-vision processes, data sonification, live convolution and improvisation as a means to construct the non-linear audiovisual installations. Data sonification has been enlisted in a variety of ways as a co-creative apparatus. This includes transcoding environmental data (numbers) into triggering agents on audio volume controls, audio delay units and audio effects units and using them to construct algorithms to run the overall architecture of the non-linear installations. What

emerges does so in an iterative manner, which affords an open-ended interaction within the ‘ecology of practice’ (Stengers 2005). This has come to involve the recording of live musical improvisations in response to the developed system. This has become a critical component of Connors’s practice, which is within the iterative developments of these systems from the material gathered; an acoustic musician is then invited into the process to improvise on the material. Recordings have taken place in live multimedia concert improvisations, studio settings and the respective environments. What this provides is a cumulative database that in turn folds back into the final audiovisual installation systems. As such, Connors’s concept of *Audiovisual Installation as Ecological Performativity* has developed alongside the iterative creative practice.<sup>6</sup>

While Connors was lured to a non-linear paradigm of expression, Denton’s approach resulted in experimentation with formal constraints on the collection and final distribution of the recorded materials. Morton’s writing around the ‘strangeness’ of the world highlighted some unintentional paradoxes between the intention behind *Aspects of Trees* and its first two iterations. Initial edits tended to overwork the visual and aural material into what he found to be meaningless abstractions. The abstracted aesthetic elements distracted attention away from the inherent politics of the recorded subject. The subsequent material constraints placed on approaches for collecting the media is a deliberate resistance to Morton’s description of ‘ambient poetics’ found in ecomimetic artworks. Also nagging in the background was Andrey Tarkovsky’s observation that ‘naturalistically recorded facts are in themselves utterly inadequate to the creation of a cinematic image. The image in cinema is based on the ability to present as an observation one’s own perception of an object’ (Tarkovsky 1986: 107). Working towards an aesthetic that responds to the strangeness of the world without losing contact with it became vital for drawing out affective rather than abstracted or representational encounters with the subject. Morton’s ecocritique activated new experimentations with the visual and sound elements and crucially led to a reshoot, and subsequent re-edit, of key elements in *Aspects of Trees*, as well as a significant rethink of the next direction of Denton’s creative practice. The material restraints included use of hand-held slow motion cinematography, formal linear camera movement (horizontal and vertical) with wide-angle lenses, a resistance to classical montage through extended shot duration, and a scaling back of post-production effects.

This approach represented a radical turn in Denton’s practice, which was increasingly steeped in an existential sadness that was manifesting as changes in his making

<sup>6</sup>This is the title of an earlier paper by Connors (2015), which situates this concept in a historical context of agency and performativity.



procedures as a method of working through the complexities spooling out from the ecological subject. Morton's reflections on art, contemplation, melancholy, intimacy, the uncanny and his account of the 'mesh' and the 'strange stranger' have considerations, ethics and politics that align with the positions framed in this article. Morton reflects: 'Nature as such appears when we lose it, and it's known as loss. Along with the disorientation of the modern world goes an ineffable sadness' (Morton 2010: 134). Denton's position of practice enlisted Rancière's notion of a 'politics of aesthetics' (that which makes the invisible visible and the inaudible heard), and Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's account of the autistic versus *neurotypical* experiences of the world, as incitements for thinking about how, through the material, the work might recalibrate audiences' sensate experiences of the subject (Manning and Massumi 2014: 12).

## 5. THE SALTON SEA

**Year:** 2015 (Summer)

**Location:** Bombay Beach, Salton Sea, California, USA

**Inventory:** 1 x Sony FS700 HD Camera, 1 x Canon 800mm lens, 1 x Canon 17mm lens, 1 x Vinten Tripod, 1 x Zoom H4n, 1 x Tascam DR-680MKII portable multichannel recorder, 4 x Rode NTG2 shotgun mics, 4 x wind socks, 8 x Piezo contact mics, 2 x boom poles, 1 x Hydrophone mic

The Salton Sea can be read as a metaphor for the ecological emergency we find ourselves in. Formed from a geographical rupture, then populated by humans and their need to extract materials, leisure and property for their own gratification, the highly salinised and toxic waterway bounces back a glaring reflection that evokes a ghostly future narrative, which is chillingly prescient through the stench of rotting fish carcasses and silty air that cakes your nostrils as you breathe. It is a site that has lured us in and taken us over. Being *in* this environment, we lose our appetite for food and can only sustain ourselves for a few hours under its intense influence before we have to leave, drained and hung-over by it.

In December 2015 we found ourselves back at this location (Denton's fourth and Connors's second visit) recording two separate projects, an essay film thematically attuned to the effects of oil on our planet, *Crude*,<sup>7</sup> and a non-linear audiovisual installation, *Piano at the End of a Poisoned Stream*. Each work has different aims but converging approaches to the



Figure 6. Piano found at the Salton Sea.

material affect that vibrates from this site and that, in turn, influences the thinking-making processes.

Signs of the human and non-human now litter Bombay Beach, which has been described as 'the most depressing place in California' (Riggs 2010). Each time we have visited this location, it takes considerable time to adjust to its shocking strangeness. Then, after a time, we record the material. The visual and sonic elements form a dialectic that directs the lens and the microphone with increasing fluidity as the locale seeps into our pores and minds. A hypnotic, transfixed state is induced by the numerous objects scattered along the toxic shoreline: rusty metal shards sticking out of the ground; wooden refuse from dilapidated buildings; sections of concrete slab; plastic bags entangled and flapping in dead bushes; and a lone broken piano (Figure 6). Morton describes these objects as being the result of hyperobjects: 'agents or objects so massively distributed in time and space as to transcend localization, such as the biosphere, global warming, or the sum of all the whirring machinery of capitalism' (Morton 2013a: 2). Being present *in* an environment with these signs is, as Morton describes, 'a shifting, ambiguous stage set ... The appearance of things, the indexical signs on the seashore, is the *past* of a hyperobject ... Its causal traces float in front of it, in the realm of appearance' (ibid.: 90). We are drawn to this location for our own subjective reasons but, as collaborators *in* the environment, are aware that the other is *in* this temporal shifting, ambiguous stage and that each is *in* process – one that provides material for our mutual and exclusive project ambitions.

Connors becomes transfixed by the indexical signs strewn along the shoreline. Using contact microphones, she records the sonic textures and tones by tapping, plucking and playing these objects. Equally striking is the sound resounding at the water's edge. Primarily comprised of crushed fish and bird bones, the sonic quality activated by wave and human footsteps has a sharp, percussive, high-pitched resonance, which is captured using a hydrophone microphone. Denton finds himself drawn to the monotonous

<sup>7</sup>The film 'works from the position that another tactic for progressing discourses around anthropogenic climate and geological change might be poetic or affective modes of cinematic inquiry' (Denton 2016).





**Figure 7.** Train in the shimmer.

visual awe of a seemingly endless convoy of cattle trains that shimmer in the desert heat, on their journey from Mexico to the abattoirs of Southern California (Figure 7). The trains intermittently emit a mournful aural yaw with each warning call of their horns. He captures this shimmer using a super-telephoto lens and high-speed, high-definition cinematography. Overhead a contrail cuts a slice into the dark blue sky, setting a mournful visual refrain over the displaced seabirds flying over a dying inland sea. Each of these elements is collected to form an extended visual milieu, which will later be woven together on a bed of sound, designed to extract the uncanny uneasiness of the location for the essay film *Crude*.

Here are the moments of connection and separation in the convergent and divergent methods of practice. The creative research nexus, as such, attends to the frailty, vulnerability and performative substance of time and place. Morton surmises ‘to be located “in” space or “in” time is already to have been caught in a web of relations’ (Morton 2013b: 21). From a sonic arts perspective, Kim-Cohen suggests that: ‘Every work of art is a response to the conditions within which it is produced and received ... the assumptions and problems inherent to its time and place’ (Kim-Cohen 2016: 7). Or, perhaps, by choosing to engage with the negativity, irony and ugliness of these environments – Morton’s dark ecology – the capacity to recalibrate the world through our practice is opened by drawing out the evocative and emotional that, in turn, provides the opportunity to see, hear and be *in* the world differently. The artwork becomes an apparatus of change:

Thus the art in the time of hyperobjects explores the uncanniness of beings, the uniqueness of beings, the irony and interrelationships between beings, and the ironic secondariness of the intermeshing between beings. (Morton 2011)

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