

A black and white photograph of a coral reef. The coral is dark and intricate, with many small, branching structures. The background is a lighter, hazy blue-grey. A large, white rectangular area covers the left half of the image, creating a high-contrast background for the text.

THE ENTITIES

SARAH CALLESEN + SHELLEY SIMPSON
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Our experience of the world around us is often mediated by technology, contributing to the idea that humans are separate from nature. In *The Entities*, artists Sarah Callesen and Shelley Simpson use visual and audio recordings to construct a ‘natural’ world, exploring relationships between human and non-human, natural and artificial, culture and nature. All recording is subjective, mediated by both humans and technologies used in the process. *The Entities* considers the role of each player within the communication system, where each offers its own affect.

Simpson has created photographs of forest floor worlds in the temperate bush of Rakiura, Stewart Island – an intense, remote environment mostly devoid of human activity. We generally perceive events that occur at human scale, not too big, not too small. We can extend our perceptual range using technology. Scale shifts, time slows. The images are presented as a two-channel video work scaled up to an immersive size. Subtle animation augments the imagery, bringing attention to the sense of process, of visibility, of observer and of mediation.

In response to the macro imagery, Callesen presents an accompanying sound piece that considers change in sound at a qualitative scale other than loudness. Echo and reverb are tropes often used in film to exaggerate the sound of small things. Natural history documentaries often apply imagined sounds to visual footage, particularly for small fauna such as insects, which are too minute to capture with existing technology. Designed sound in film, television and now virtual environments, continue to fabricate what humans imagine unheard phenomena to sound like. Callesen has used designed planet atmospheres and other constructed sounds sourced from stock libraries, as well as manipulated field recordings taken by both artists.

In contrast to digitally produced video and audio, an analogue slide machine opens conversation about past and present technologies used for generating and communicating content. The slides are drawings made by both artists, using ink, pen and scratches onto acetate. When magnified, these small abstract marks allude to expansive imagined lifeworld environments.

Multicolored and miles wide, an archipelago of detritus drifts across the ocean, a knotted, twisted assortment of polymer-based products congealed into a strange new spatial form. This is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, larger than Texas and comprised of an estimated 1.8 trillion pieces of microplastic. Buffered by the wind and circulating with the tides, this plastic island is a topography of artificiality, an ecosystem of the discarded, a landmass that is not land. In other words, the plastic patch is both entirely natural and completely synthetic. It perfectly exemplifies the notion of the Anthropocene, a new epoch suggested by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in which humankind has become the dominant natural force.¹ Whether through petroleum emissions, industrial scale agribusiness, the violent extractivism of fracking, or simply the millions of inhabitants crawling over its surface and carrying out their lives—building, clearing, consuming and discarding—humans have now written their activities indelibly into the geological record. Such is the new nature.

Emerging out of this condition, *The Entities* is a collaboration comprised of the macro-photography of Shelley Simpson set to a soundscape by Sarah Callesen. Simpson’s photographs are ambiguous images, alien landscapes. One photograph appears as coral-like forms, stitched with dotted holes; another image depicts a pitch black terrain with bony spikes jutting from below its surface; a third seems to splice together the scaled skin of an orange into a mushroom-like dome. These still images are brought to life—but via the entirely synthetic. Video effects ripple their surfaces, tugging at their pixels and softly glitching their edges. Aliveness emerges from ani-mation.

Callesen’s soundtrack responds to these images, sometimes synchronized to their animations, at other times seeming to expand or speculate upon these micro-worlds. Here too the natural is meshed with the artificial. Freshets of water and droplets of rain are made electronic, ping-ponging through echo filters and a four-channel audio setup. In one movement, sounds of dragonflies and drones seem to converge, forming a whirring legion, a buzzing mechano-insectoid mass. In another, sub-bass reverberates ominously through the room, throbbing sine tones that waver and wobble.

According to the exhibition text, nature documentaries were inspirational when developing *The Entities*. Productions like BBC’s Planet Earth zoom down to a colony of ants on a leaf or the lava vent of an undersea volcano. But their window on natural reality is in fact meticulously constructed. Often entire studio sets are built around animal subjects, painstakingly employing paint, vegetation and backdrops to emulate the natural habitat “so it looks and feels like a little slice of the wild.”² And the resulting footage can be visually incredible but acoustically disappointing. Sonic augmentation—or even pure speculation—is often necessary. Soundscapes are fabricated from whole cloth, matching the microscopic scale of macro-photography via the tools of audio engineering: pitch-shifts and overdubs, reverbs and delays. The representation of the natural is entirely infused with the medial and the technical.

Philosopher Brian Massumi called this the nature-culture continuum. As operations of capital strive to more intensively infiltrate into the natural through fields like biotechnologies, our previous categorical distinctions can no longer be maintained. “It becomes difficult”, Massumi asserted, to sustain any distinction between “artifact and thing, body and object.” Hard edges are blurred; easy delineations collapse. Things formerly on one side or the other must instead be “redistributed along the whole length... in various phases of separation and regrouping, and to different degrees of ‘purity.’”³ Donna Haraway termed this condition ‘naturecultures’, one which foregrounded the mutual codevelopment of species, each entraining the other. Whether through the technological other of the cyborg or the biological other of the companion species, “earth’s beings are prehensile, opportunistic, ready to yoke unlikely partners into something new, something symbiogenetic.”⁴

Media theorist Jussi Parikka extended these strains of thought most recently into ‘medianatures’, stressing the need to incorporate rather than abstract away complex interconnections, understanding our contemporary condition as one “messy, topological and processually entangled in worlds of so many layers from nature to society and to psyche.”⁵ Rather than a nostalgic retreat to some supposedly realm of

¹ Paul J Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” *Nature* 415, no. 6867 (2002): 23.

² BBC Earth, “Life in Miniature: Wildlife Macro Filming,” BBC Earth, April 29, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20160314-life-in-miniature-wildlife-macro-filming>.

untainted ‘nature’, this understanding would embrace hybridity—attempting to assemble, organize and visualize the entanglements of capital and code, labor and logistics that increasingly shape the everyday. Parikka notes Felix Guattari’s call to account for the “transversal entanglement of technological epistemologies and practices, aesthetic modes of knowledge, non-human ontologies, and awareness of political economy and exhaustive global capitalist production and consumption.”⁶ And rather than being constrained to physical and temporal human scales (years and decades, metres and feet), this understanding would expand to the scales of the biological and geological—microns and milliseconds, aeons and epochs. As Parikka questions, “what forms of aesthetics and ‘watching’ do we need to carve out in order to understand the other scales of ecology in which we are embedded... complex ecologies in which we co-live, and might also co-extinguish?”⁷

Such a challenge is not just one for science and engineering, philosophy and politics, but also for modes of aesthetic intervention and artistic practice. In this sense, the climate crisis is also a cultural crisis, urgently necessitating new ways of seeing, sounding, and experiencing. Using time-based images and spatially-based sound, Callesen and Simpson’s work responds to these theoretical propositions with practice, constructing an experience that foregrounds our new artificial nature. As the intensity of our anthropocentric intervention on the earth is slowly realised—and its devastating feedbacks felt through rising temperatures, wetter climates, and accelerated species extinction—the imperative to find sustainable practices that allow for the flourishing of both the human and non-human will only grow. Yet in the face of our new nature, any programme striving to cultivate and maintain such life—to be life-enhancing—must also incorporate a broader definition of life, one always-already technical and medial, cultural and political.

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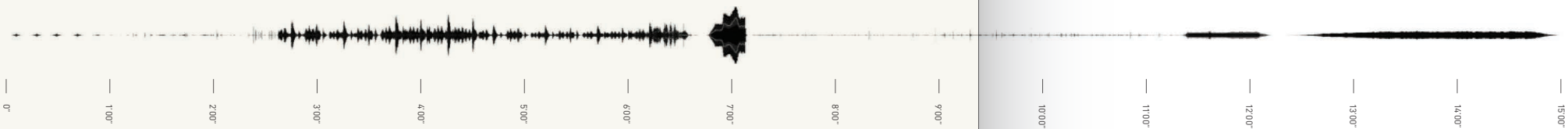
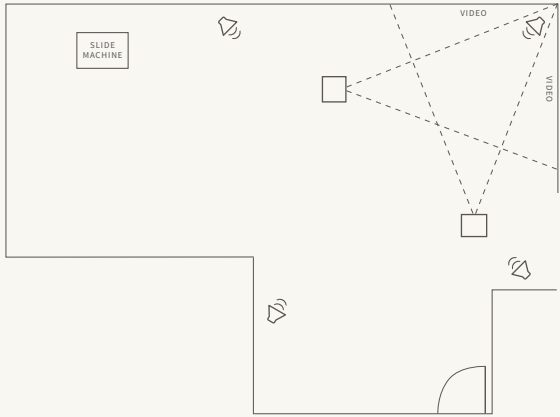
³ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 11.

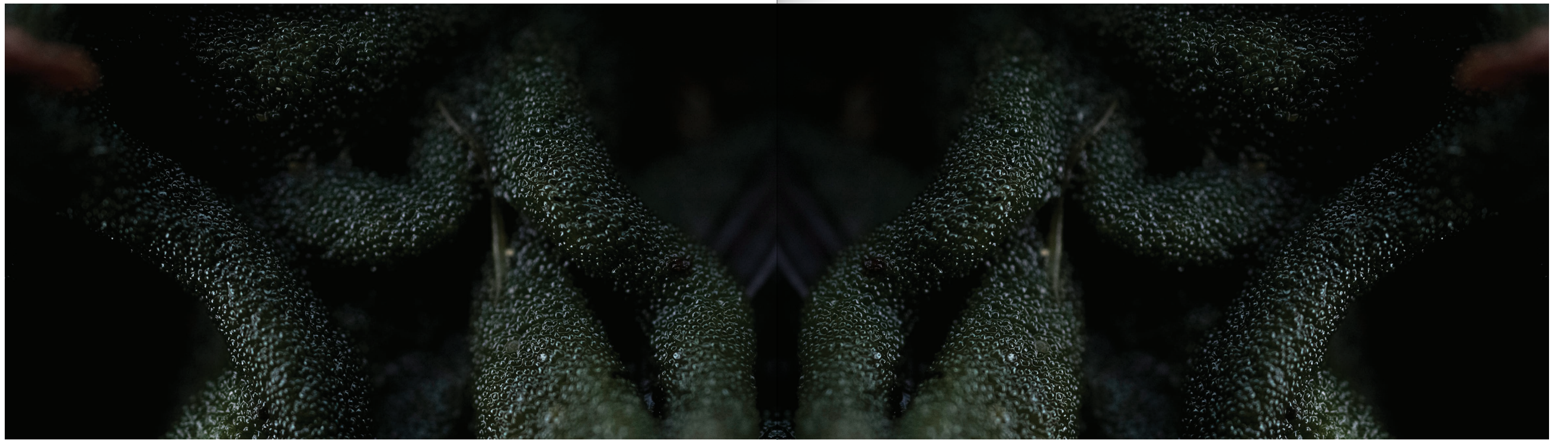
⁴ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 32.

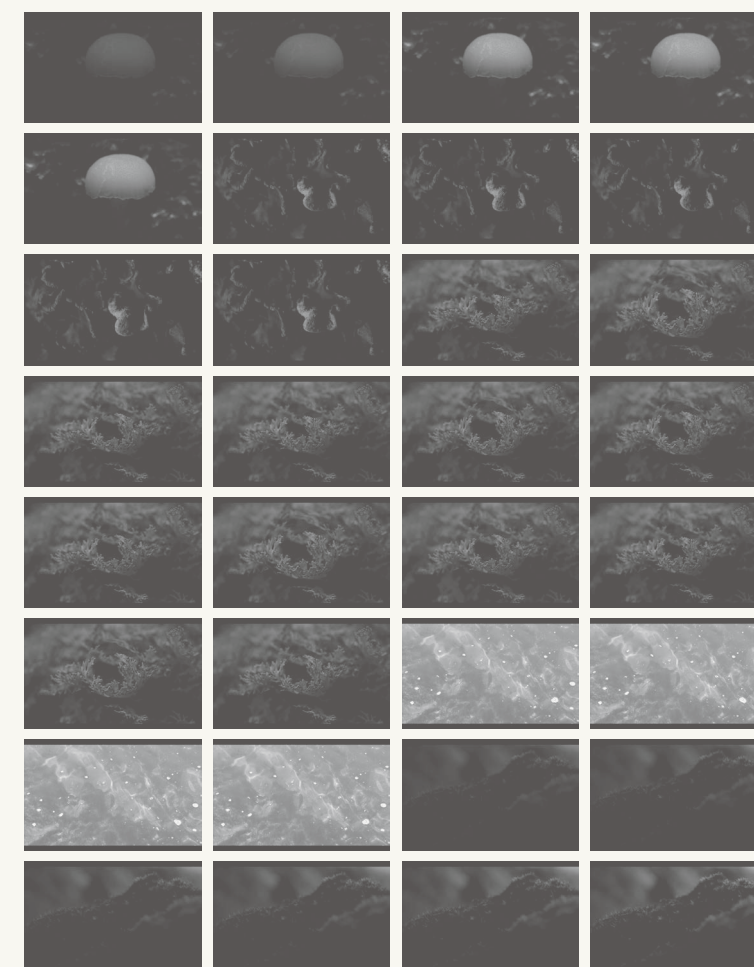
⁵ Jussi Parikka, “Introduction: The Materiality of Media and Waste,” in *Medianatures*, ed. Jussi Parikka (London: Open Humanities Press, 2011), http://www.livingbooksaboutlife.org/books/Electronic_waste/Introduction.

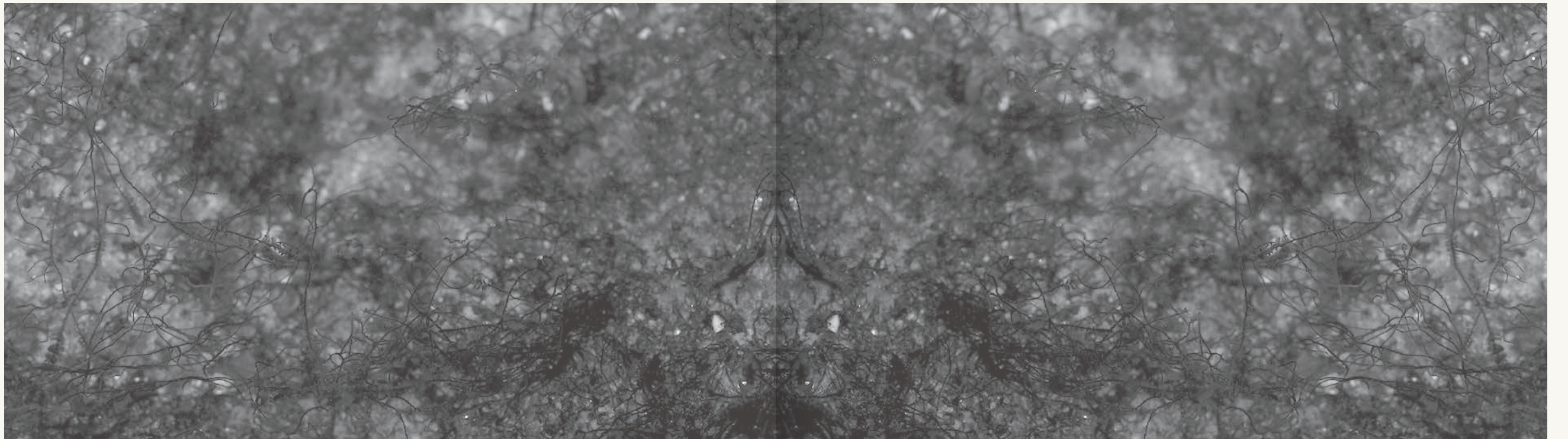
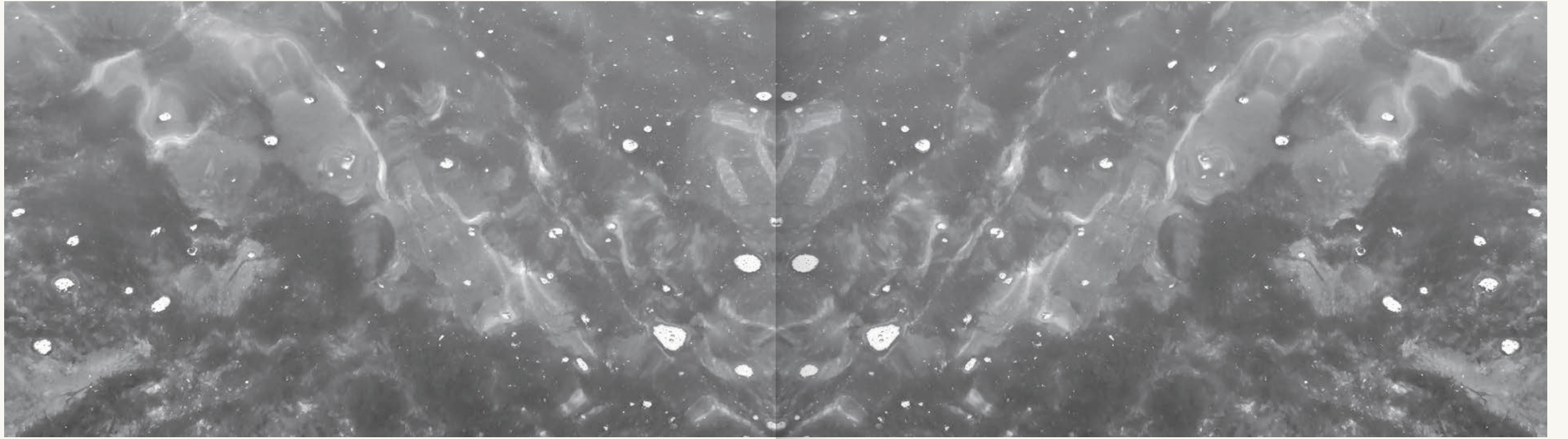
⁶ Jussi Parikka, “Insects and Canaries: Medianatures and Aesthetics of the Invisible,” *Angelaki* 18, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 107–19.

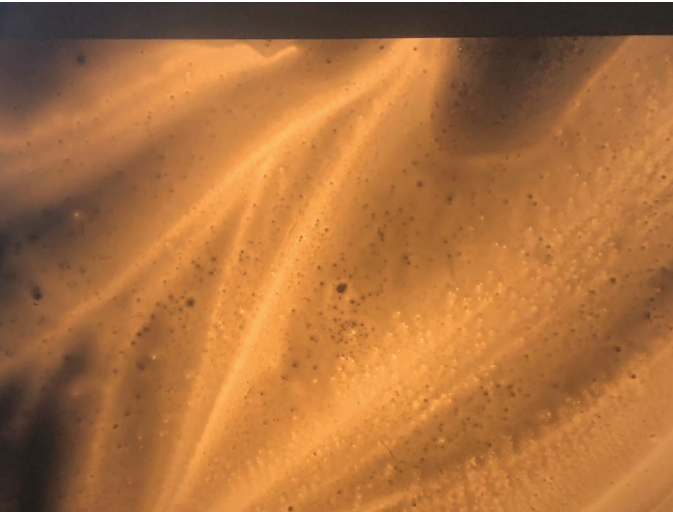
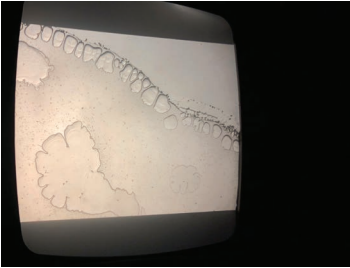
⁷ Parikka, “Insects and Canaries,” 111.



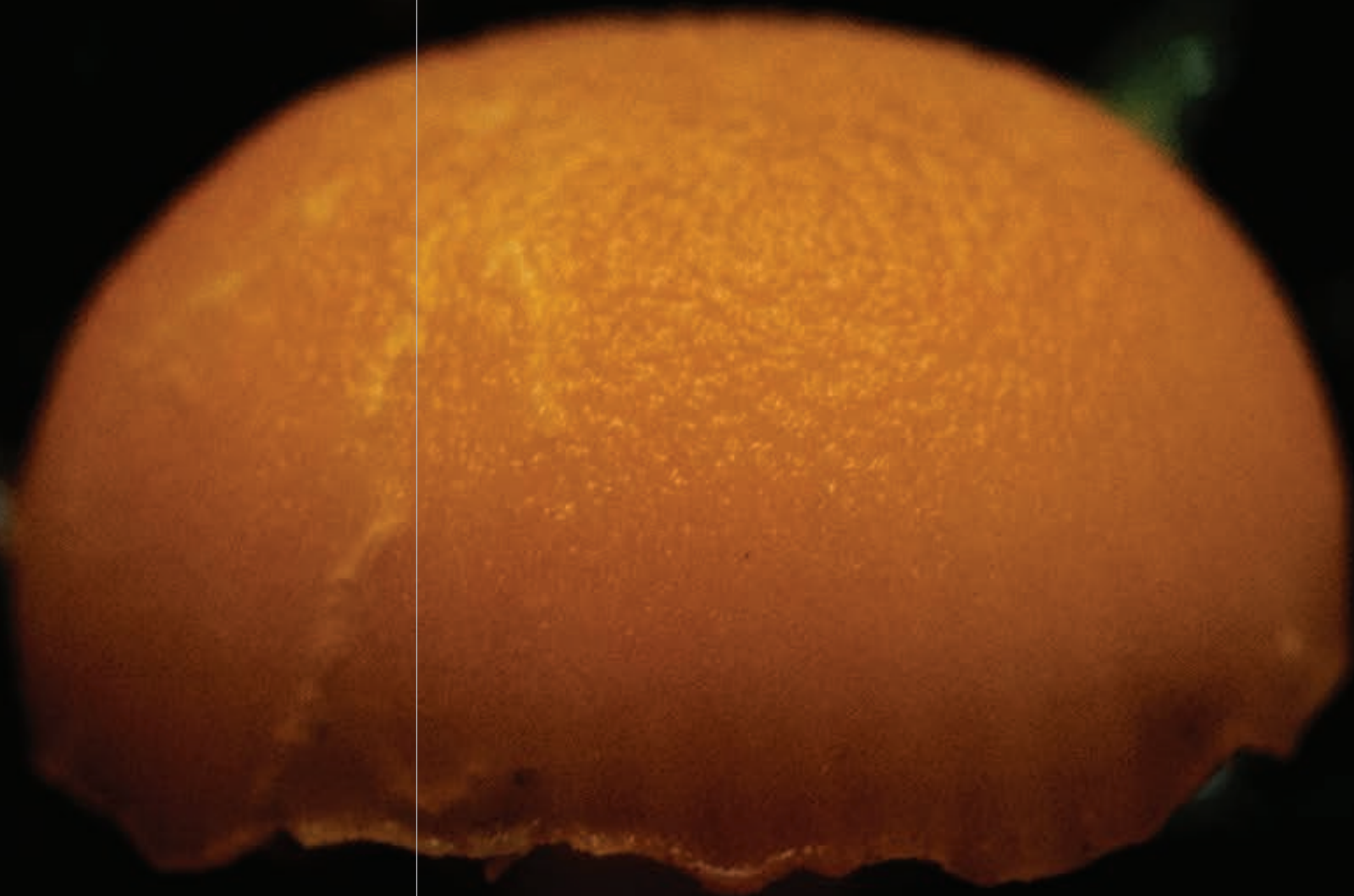














Shelley Simpson's multi-disciplinary art practice is concerned with exploring the porous boundaries between the binary concepts of nature/culture and human/non-human. She works with materials that reference ecology and materialism, with specific attention given to agency, affect, labour, transformation, cooperation and symbiosis. Her recent projects explore extractive mining practices as a vehicle for examining wider issues. She is the recipient of a Wild Creations grant from CNZ and DOC for 2018 which funded a project based on 19th century tin mining in Stewart Island. Shelley received an MFA (First class honours) from Elam in 2016. In September 2017 she attended the course *Posthuman Ethics in the Anthropocene*, with Prof. Rosi Braidotti at Utrecht University, The Netherlands.

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Sarah Callesen holds a Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Arts (with distinction) and a Bachelor of Design. Her practice explores a relationship with technology, particularly the mediation of perceptual experience. She works predominantly in the mediums of drawing and sound. Her work has been exhibited as a Merit Award winner in the 2018 Parkin Drawing Prize, as well as a finalist in the 2016, 2015 prize exhibitions. A finalist in the Molly Morpeth Canaday Award (2017), and in the Wallace Art Awards winners and finalists travelling exhibition (2015). The artist had a site specific work in the 2018 Auckland Art Fair 'Projects' exhibition, the group show 'I Understand If You Are Busy' at RM gallery (2018), and group shows at the George Fraser and Projectspace galleries, Elam School of Fine Arts (2017, 2016).

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<https://soundcloud.com/sarahcallesen/the-entities>