



ECOCENE

CAPPADOCIA JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES



Volume 3/Issue 2/December 2022

Ecocene Arts



Connective Tissue and Bacterial Echoes: Four Artists, a River, and an Artificial Agent

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Zinovieff, Freya, Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, Steve DiPaola, and prOphecy sun. 2022. "Connective Tissue and Bacterial Echoes: Four Artists, a River, and an Artificial Agent ." *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 3, no. 2 (December): 173–78. <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.87>.

Artwork/ Received: 19.10.2022 /Accepted: 09.11.2022

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Connective Tissue and Bacterial Echoes: Four Artists, a River, and an Artificial Agent

by Freya Zinovieff, Steve DiPaola, Gabriela Aceves Sepúlveda, and prOphecy sun



About the Artists

Since 2018, Freya Zinovieff, Gabriela Aceves-Sepúlveda, Steve DiPaola, and prOphecy sun have collaborated in the production of a series of artworks and research-creation projects that explore the creative uses of machine learning, both practically and theoretically. Informed by feminist methodologies, and combining their diverse backgrounds as scholars, cognitive scientists, and visual artists, they develop large-scale and immersive works using video, sound, performance, and computational creativity.

Connective Tissue and Bacterial Echoes: Four Artists, a River, and an Artificial Agent

*Freya Zinovieff, Gabriela Aceves-Sepúlveda, Steve DiPaola,
and prOphecy sun*

Blood, bile, intracellular fluid; a small ocean swallowed, a wild wetland in our gut; rivulets forsaken making their way from our insides to out, from watery womb to watery world: we are bodies of water. As such, we are not on the one hand embodied (with all of the cultural and metaphysical investments of this concept) while on the other hand primarily comprising water (with all of the attendant biological, chemical, and ecological implications). We are both of these things, inextricably and at once—made mostly of wet matter, but also aswim in the discursive flocculations of embodiment as an idea. We live at the site of exponential material meaning where embodiment meets water.

—Astrida Neimanis

Carbon bodies are nomads. Time moves through them, and eventually, the cells, fibers, and organs wilt, rot, and die, becoming fodder for something new. This perpetual recycling of physical matter excretes tendrils of smoke, dirt, dust, and spores. As bodies are buried, burnt, or sent into space, their traces and cellular legacies become absorbed in everything and exist everywhere all at once on this celestial body. In this way, human, vegetal, and more-than-human bodies become sustenance and cellular traces for generations.

Immersive Ecologies: Body as Border

Body as Border: Traces and Flows of Connection (2022) is an immersive, large-scale generative site-specific video projection that responds to notions of cellular traces and legacies (see Fig. 1–3).¹ The piece was commissioned by the Surrey Art Gallery and installed as the final artwork for their decade-long project, UrbanScreen. Located at the Chuck Bailey Recreation Center in Surrey B.C. Canada, the artwork was visible from sunset to midnight from February 10th to May 1st, 2022.^{2,3}

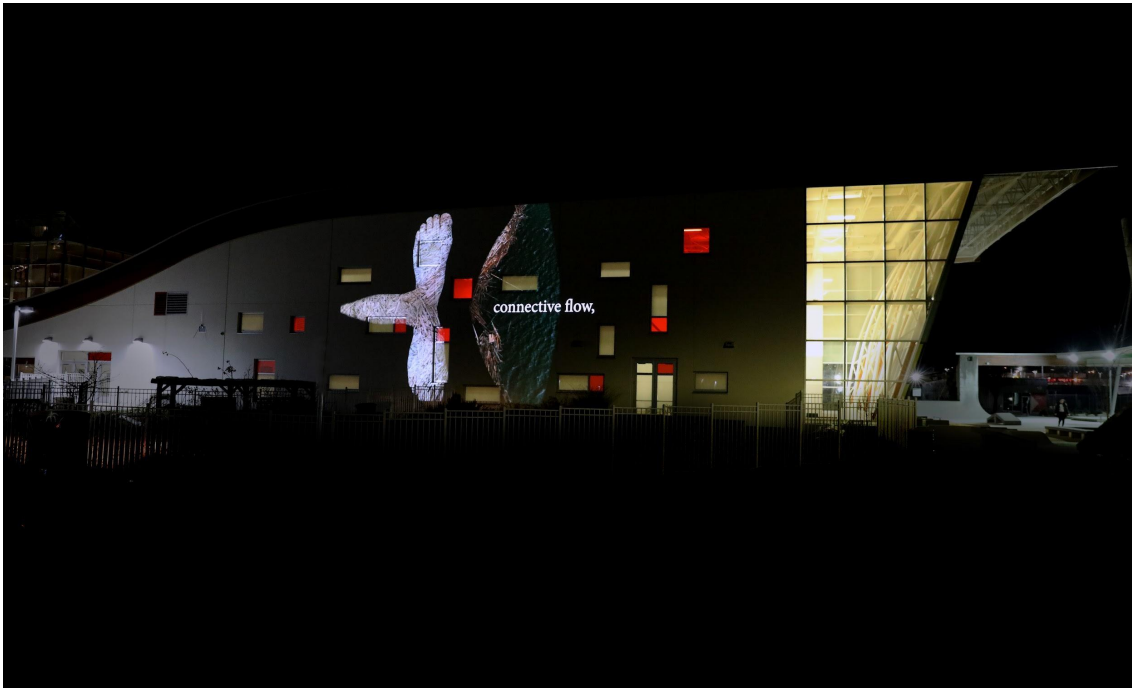


Figure 1. Zinoveiff, Freya, Aceves-Sepúlveda, Gabriela, DiPaola, Steve, sun, prOphecy. *Body as Border: Traces of Flow and Connection*, 2022. Installation view, Surrey UrbanScreen. Gabriela Aceves-Sepúlveda photo.

The artwork is a collaborative effort between the artists, the Fraser River, and custom-built computational systems. Developed in response to the global COVID-19 crisis and the ways that human bodies occupy bordered spaces, the research reflects on the ways that the virus has colonized countless human bodies across the world. Under pandemic conditions, human bodies are objects of state and bio-capitalist interest, where the macrocosm of global geopolitics and the smallest of all microbes intervenes and entwines with one another. In this way, the body has become both a statistic and a borderland space for the meeting of macro and microorganisms.

Building an imaginary, in which viruses have the ability to travel through countless entities, we draw attention to the ways that water is also a substance that can move through us. Water thus is an agential carrier which forms part of the constantly in-motion system that sustains us all. It carries memories of the carbon life and death forms it has washed through, simultaneously imprinting their records and washing them away anew.

Through developing these ideas about the ways that substances trace histories through humans and all other carbon bodies, the artwork was made in tandem with the ebbs and flows of the Fraser River, or Stolo as it's called by its traditional custodians.⁴

The river weaves through S'olh Temexw, the traditional territory of the Stó:lō people, and the cities of the Fraser Valley, out to New Westminster, Surrey, Richmond, and Delta, out to the Salish Sea (the Georgia Strait). We imagined the waters of the Stó:lō river as physical and metaphorical substances of connection between these local histories and our current global crisis—teasing out connections between the movements of those early settlers and our histories of migration to the region, which are entangled and complicit with colonial and settler histories, and the ongoing violence against the First peoples of Canada.

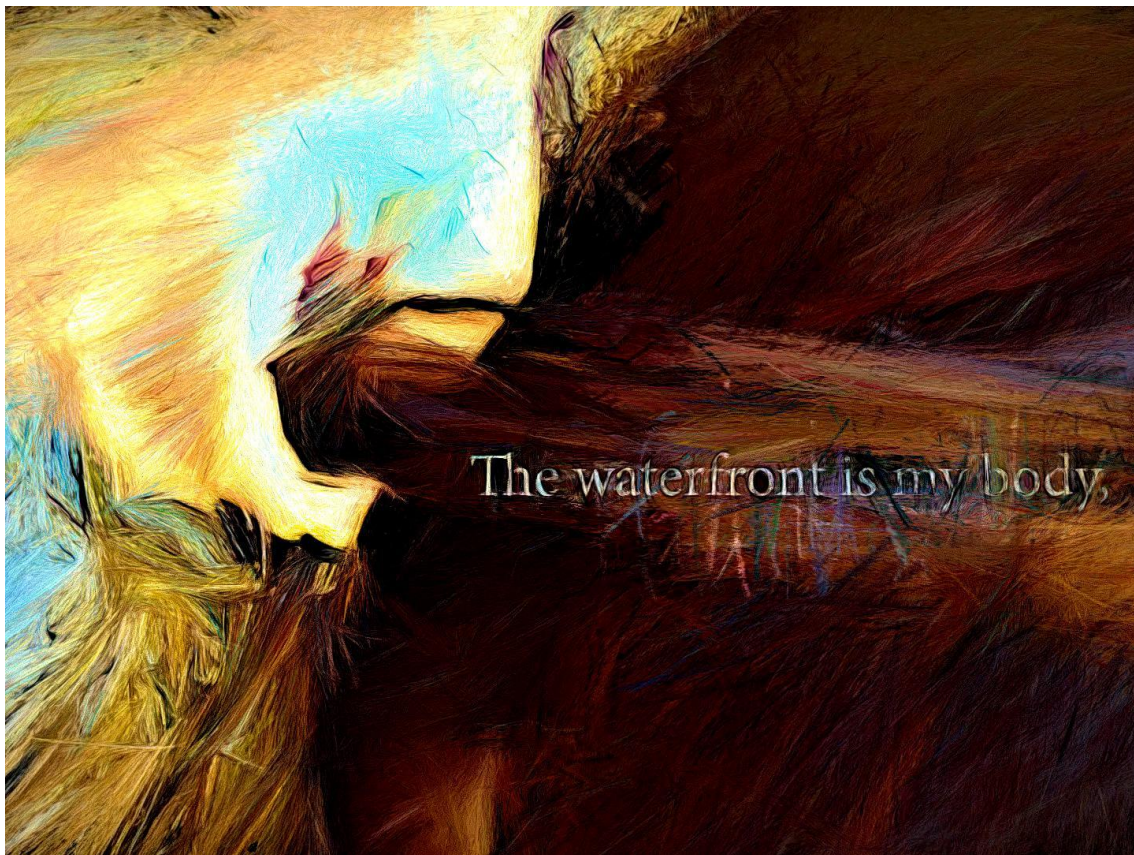


Figure 2. Zinoveiff, Freya, Aceves-Sepúlveda, Gabriela, DiPaola, Steve, sun, prOphecy. *Body as Border: Traces of Flow and Connection*, 2022. Video still.

Visual and Sonic Archival Processes

Over 3 months, in turbulent rainy, snowy, and calm conditions, we gathered visual and sonic data sources from around the Fraser River region. Using an array of different microphones and recording devices, we collected imprints of the water as it moved across pebbles and mud, gathering logs and parts of our own submerged bodies such as fingers and toes. As well as working with the water to sound its traces, we also collected organic microsamples from the river in order to generate bacteria in petri dishes, as a way to

explore further the multiplicity of worlds inhabited by and within the river. Practices of field recording and water growing were accompanied by the gathering of visual footage, again using a selection of different digital recording technologies.

This archival footage, sonic, visual, and bacterial impressions were then mixed with existing images and videos from our personal collections to create the foundational video composition for the next project stage. Highlighting the agential interplay between the computational and the biological, the foundational video composition was used as source footage for DiPaola's custom-built generative AI tools. In tandem, we wrote keywords and short poetic sentences and gave these to the generative system, which used them alongside existing digital images and texts to generate new poetic stanzas and abstractions. We incorporated the stanzas into the sound and final video composition. The original soundscore was broadcast through UrbanScreen's outdoor speaker system and dedicated FM radio.



Figure 3. Zinoveiff, Freya, Aceves-Sepúlveda, Gabriela, DiPaola, Steve, sun, prOphecy. *Body as Border: Traces of Flow and Connection*, 2022. Video still.

Future Propositions

This research speculates about possible futures in which algorithms demarcate the boundaries between the biological and the digital.⁵ By building on the methodology and tools used on earlier projects, we employ AI-built poetic stanzas, sonic decay, and narrative iteration to explore the ways that COVID-19 highlights our connections, whilst also requiring of us varying degrees of isolation. In the aftermath of these relations between together and aloneness, we foreground the bacterial, the microbial, and countless communities of non-human life forms that each carbon body hosts. Through these lenses, the body as a multispecies animal resonates in relationship to machine-learning processes and the ways that acts of care might generate discussions about kinship with non-human others.⁶

Notes

¹ See the work: <https://vimeo.com/680254022>

² *Body as Border* (2022) was the final piece to be shown at the Surrey Art Gallery's offsite venue. UrbanScreen ran from 2010 to 2022 and showcased digital and interactive pieces after dark on the Chuck Bailey Recreation Centre's west wall (UrbanScreen, Website).

³ Other notable artists featured at UrbanScreen include Sonny Assu, Julie Andreyev, and Simon Lysander Overstall, and Paul Wong, to name a few. See UrbanScreen website at <https://www.surrey.ca/arts-culture/surrey-art-gallery/digital-art/urbanscreen>

⁴ The river was one of the first sites that British settlers colonized in the mid-1800s.

⁵ Informed by media archeology (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011), and feminist materialist approaches to media and ecologies of production (Ahmed, 2006; de la Bellasca, 2018; Mondloch, 2018; Braidotti, 2016; Haraway, 2016) our artwork explores the porous boundaries between humans and non-humans through custom-built AI tools, performance, soundcores, bio-art, and video.

⁶ See *Mitochondrial Crossings* (2021) at <https://feralfeminisms.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/3-FF-ISSUE10-sun-2.pdf>

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