Collision. Voices of Water

Becky Vartabedian*

Abstract

This Collision discusses the cyanotypes produced by photographer Meghann Riepenhoff, in particular those in the Littoral Drift project; these cyanotypes are direct positive prints produced from the action of seawater washing over photo-sensitive paper placed at shorelines in the United States. I discuss these images and the cyanotype process Riepenhoff uses to produce these. I then discuss philosopher Fred Evans’s concept of “voice” and its contemporary extension to nonhuman others. Arguing that an intermediate aesthetic intervention would assist Evans’s affordance of voice to nonhuman others, I position Riepenhoff as a facilitator of the sounding of wind, water, salt, sand, and chemicals expressed in the cyanotype process. I conclude by linking the Littoral Drift series and Riepenhoff’s prospective position of facilitator to recent aesthetic and ontological meditations on the Anthropocene, that epoch of geologic time in which human activity is the primary shaping force on the earth; I situate Riepenhoff’s work in conversation with insights from Joanna Zylinska’s account of nonhuman photography and Jane Bennett’s vital materialism.

Keywords

Anthropocene, cyanotype, Fred Evans, photography, Meghann Riepenhoff, voice

Introduction

During summer 2018, the Denver Art Museum (Denver, Colorado, USA) had on display a photography exhibition titled New Territory: Landscape Photography Today. In her short introduction to the exhibition, curatorial assistant Kimberly Roberts explains that New Territory “explores the

* Department of Philosophy, Regis University (Regis College), Denver, Colorado, USA. rvartabe@regis.edu.
expanding boundaries of landscape photography by featuring the work of contemporary artists who are reconsidering how to make a photograph and who use the traditional subject to reflect on our relation with the landscape as well as our impact on it.” The “new territory” this exhibition explored concerns a range of photographic processes and their application to landscape, evident in the three entries Roberts highlights in her introduction: Chris McCaw’s large-format photographs of solar movement over long exposures to induce a process of solarization, whereby the sun burns—and burns through—the photo-sensitive paper; six photographs from Shimpei Takeda’s Trace series which use radioactive elements found in local soils following the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster to directly expose photographic negatives in a light-less process; and Meghann Riepenhoff’s cyanotypes printed by the movement of water over photosensitive paper. Roberts’s introduction highlights entries in which elements of the landscape itself are counted as collaborators with photographers and processes.

In this brief essay, I focus on Meghann Riepenhoff’s work, namely the Littoral Drift project from which the image included in the New Territory entry was selected. I discuss both the image and larger project, as well as the cyanotype process Riepenhoff uses to produce this work. I then discuss philosopher Fred Evans’s concept of voice and its contemporary extension to nonhuman others. I position Riepenhoff as a facilitator of the sounding of wind, water, salt, sand, and chemicals expressed in the cyanotype process, explaining the need for an intermediate aesthetics of voice to accomplish the ethical and political ends Evans’s account proposes. I conclude by linking the Littoral Drift series and Riepenhoff’s prospective position of facilitator to recent aesthetic and ontological meditations on the Anthropocene, that epoch of geological time in which human activity is the primary shaping force on the earth. I situate Riepenhoff’s work in conversation with insights from Joanna Zylinska’s account of nonhuman photography and Jane Bennett’s vital materialism.

Meghann Riepenhoff’s Littoral Drift Project

The Denver Art Museum’s New Territory exhibition included Meghann Riepenhoff’s triptych Littoral Drift #848 (Pleasant Beach Watershed, Bainbridge Island, WA, 12.05.17, Lapping Waves with Receding Tide and Splashes) (figure 1).

Each panel of the triptych measures five feet in height; the three panels together are nearly eleven feet wide. Roberts explains that to produce
these images, Riepenhoff stretches photographic paper “on the shoreline and lets waves crash over it, leaving their impression and initiating the chemical reaction that creates the image.”

The title of the triptych includes the location, the date of exposure, and a description of the water’s action to describe the motion captured in the image; the various layers apparent in Littoral Drift #848 trace the lapping, the splashing, and the slow movement of the tide over the period of exposure.

Riepenhoff’s work in the Littoral Drift series uses the cyanotype photographic process. The images depend on the creation of a direct positive print; there is no negative or camera involved, just Riepenhoff anchoring photosensitive paper coated in a solution of ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide to the shoreline, often using rocks or sticks to secure the paper. As the solution is exposed to the sunlight, the exposed iron salts in the solution reduce to Prussian blue. In Riepenhoff’s process the motion of water over the paper washes the exposed image and leaves traces of the water’s movement—including salt, chemicals in the water, and sand—on the image, effectively arresting the further development of the solution. In the Littoral Drift #848 triptych, the dark area at the very top of each panel consists of exposed solution that has not been washed and as such will continue to imprint over time; the dark blue section in the second third of the images describe the gentle movements of tide and water seeping onto the shore; and the blue and white parts at the bottom of each
panel account for the more dynamic motion, the *lapping* and *splashing* of the water on Bainbridge Island, Washington in December 2017.

Riepenhoff acknowledges the work of the nineteenth-century photographer and botanist Anna Atkins as significant for her own efforts. An influential early adopter of the cyanotype technique and instructed in the
process by its accidental discoverer Sir John Herschel, Atkins used the process to document species of plants, flowers, and algae. Atkins placed botanical specimens on photosensitive paper, exposed the paper to sunlight, and washed it with fresh water.

This particular specimen of the freshwater alga *Confervae* is immediately captured as a spindly white image against a blue field (see figure 2). In addition to her use of this novel process in her formidable catalogue of plant and algae studies, Atkins’s cyanotypes were “the very first published works to utilize a photographic system for scientific investigation and illustration.” It is perhaps easy to see why this process would be beneficial to scientific fieldwork. When she compared the cyanotype with botanical drawing, Atkins affirmed the former’s value for recording “objects as minute as many of the algae and *Confera*” her folios include, thus circumventing the “difficulty of making accurate drawings” of these intricate specimens. In a drawing, the work is the result of the artist’s or recorder’s eye; the output—however faithful—still undergoes a transformation “through” the eye of the one doing the drawing. In the procedure of directly transferring the alga to sensitized paper, the output expresses a number of collaborators: Atkins, responsible for selecting the specimen and placing it on the paper, but also the alga itself, the chemical composition of the photosensitive solution, the sun, and the fresh water used to fix the image against continued printing. Atkins did not have control over the process beyond following the steps needed to print the image; as Joshua Chuang points out, the results are “artifacts of a process that was probably more imperfect and less predictable than Atkins would have preferred.”

Related to this multiplicity of collaborators and their instability is the particularity of the image itself. Though it is scientifically useful to see the compendium of Atkins’s cyanotypes as exemplars of the species documented in William Halvey’s 1841 *Manual of British Algae*, it is also possible to see these as accounting for a given species of alga *at a particular moment, in a particular set of conditions* expressed in the image. Likewise, though Riepenhoff’s *Littoral Drift* series expresses a general process of “the action of wind-driven waves transporting sand and gravel” at various American shorelines, the individual images each bear out the particularity of the direct transfer process and the multiple collaborators converging in a limited time period to produce each image. Riepenhoff has also referred to these images as “fugitive cyanotypes,” indicating the instability and “transitory” nature of the initial images.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson says that to engage with the landscape is to recognize that “we are benefitting and sharing in the accumulated experience of others.” Though Jackson’s insight is limited to a notion of
landscape as a human-created space, the artifacts of which point to the humans, past and present, responsible for their creation, the multiple collaborators evident in Atkins’s and Riepenhoff’s cyanotypes indicate we are not the only occupants of the landscape, not the only ones expressing something. In the next section, I suggest that Fred Evans’s concept of “voice” allows for the affirmation of “accumulated experience” by extending the catalog of accumulated experience to include that of the nonhuman others captured especially in Riepenhoff’s project.

Landscape, Voice and Nonhuman Others

Fred Evans’s theory of voice follows from human participation in a community of diverse and multiple others, human and nonhuman alike. In “Unnatural Participation: Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, and Environmental Ethics,” Evans finds in Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze a shared insistence “that we refer to the inhabitants of nature as ‘voices,’ a term modeled on the human mode of expression.” In a human context, the voice communicates to and with others information about ourselves and the world; Evans describes the human voice as a practice, both in the sense of a regular standard of expression and in the sense of a routine or habit attuned over time with repetition and attention. The diverse voices of nonhuman others “articulate themselves in languages as different as the movements of quantum particles and the expressive gestures of whales and apes,” but these—like human voices—are at their core “expressive forces.”

Our ability to hear these voices, according to Evans, depends on our recognition of our participation with humans and nonhumans alike in a “multivoiced body,” a “unity composed of difference” knit together with notions of solidarity, being situated with and among others; heterogeneity, a recognition of diversity among these others; and fecundity, an affirmation of becoming that Evans describes as the “the production of new forms of difference.” In “Unnatural Participation,” the other with whom Evans finds himself situated is the Jacksville Esker, an ancient glacial deposit of sand and gravel in northwestern Pennsylvania being eyed by local gravel companies as a rich deposit of profit. Evans suggests that a recognition of solidarity with this nonhuman other is one condition for developing an ethical and political framework that establishes limits on human activity, and especially activity that reads nonhuman others as a mere cache of resources to be used for human purposes.
Developing a sensitivity to these voices, Evans explains, opens us to the possibility that “these other voices resound within our own and can interrupt all the discourses we have about them.” This interruption is fortuitous, since “this demand for audibility on their part can bring about new ways of ‘hearing’ these nonhuman voices, of speaking about them and trying to determine an ethical manner of relating to them.” I am deeply sympathetic to Evans’s ends, but I suspect that some of us may need more help when it comes to hearing these voices—in other words, something additional may be useful in revealing the possibilities for solidarity and heterogeneity at the heart of Evans’s proposal. In the following section, I suggest that an *intermediate aesthetics of voice*, one in which the voices of nonhuman others are facilitated or brought to resonance in artistic and other forms of aesthetic collaboration, may be one such aid.

**Voice and Facilitation**

To respond to voices sounded by nonhuman others depends on a capacity for humans to observe these expressive forces in the first place. This attunement would benefit from the efforts of human participants working to *facilitate* the expression of nonhuman voices in their appropriate mode, while using a recognizable human framework to do so. An intermediate aesthetics of voice acknowledges Evans’s “suspicion that we cannot eliminate reference to ourselves” while providing an opening for the sounding of voices—whether human or nonhuman—in a given community. In order to *hear* the voice, we must first be able to *see* its capacity to sound.

The tension between seeing the capacity of a voice to sound and the attendant possibilities of hearing that voice is engaged in the expressions of water, sand, salt, paper, and chemicals (photographic or otherwise) that Meghann Riepenhoff chronicles in her *Littoral Drift* series. Riepenhoff describes these photographs as “the most literal picture of the landscape I could make,” and cites the oceans and waterways themselves as her collaborators in this process. Indeed, these photographs present a material accounting of the limit Evans identifies in the human interaction with nonhuman others, an appropriate “stop” on the extension of our agency and capacities. This geologic process of littoral drift is itself, according to Riepenhoff, “the very edge of where we can exist,” and as such effectively marks an edge at which water and the detritus it is ferrying to shore become the primary conduits of expression beyond that limit.

Riepenhoff explains that the images in the *Littoral Drift* series “are never wholly processed; they will continue to change over time in response to
the environments they encounter.”18 Photographically, these images are not subject to any post-printing fixer, and as direct positive prints the exposure continues in exhibition and collection. In the philosophical terms I have drawn from Evans’s work, the images in the *Littoral Drift* series continue to speak in the language of the materials involved in their development. Because the images are left unfixed, Jessica Zack explains, “the residual seawater can form salt crystals on chemically-treated paper,” thus causing the Prussian blue solution to remain “subtly reactive to ambient light.”19 In the exhibition of the series at SF Camerawork in San Francisco, California in 2016, Riepenhoff’s images would routinely slough sand, salt, and other sediments from the image onto the gallery floor.

Emphasizing the process for producing a cyanotype indicates another way in which Riepenhoff acts as facilitator of water’s voice; the direct-positive print technique minimizes gaps between object, exposure, and final image, and in doing so engages what Evans describes as a “dialogic interplay,” in which the “being” of an image or aesthetic object “is its becoming.”20 To emphasize dialogue as a process by which an image’s becoming is accomplished is, in the broader context of Evans’s work, the opportunity for the voices engaged by the production of the image or aesthetic object to continue to sound, for both its content and meaning to evolve and to implicate human others in its continued resonances. In other words, a “dialogic interplay” holds between the image, its particular content registered at the moment of exposure, the surface of the photosensitive paper and its chemical layer, Riepenhoff and her gestures, the resonances of the images in gallery and museum settings, and viewers—like me—compelled by them. The becoming of any of the images in the series, then, is understood as the continuing co-sounding of each of these elements.

Once the images in the *Littoral Drift* series are installed in a gallery or museum exhibition, Riepenhoff continues to facilitate their communication in the *Continua* project. She re-photographs the original images in the series to account for their ongoing transformations in relation to the environments they appear in, and to account for the continuing interactions of the photographed and photographic materials themselves; these transformations are not always immediately visible to the museum-goer or gallery attendee, since these shifts are slow and subtle. The *Continua* project uses more standard photographic techniques to document these changes, but the resulting photographs take the process of change and transformation occurring in the original image as their object.21 Here, the dialogic interplay Riepenhoff facilitates is that of images with their secondary material surroundings, with light, air, humidity, and other elements of the image’s re-presentation in different locations.
Conclusion

The preceding discussion of facilitation provides an important—and necessary—link in establishing the expressive forces of nonhuman others in ways humans might access. That is, in Evans’s environmental ethics, the argument that it depends on our recognition of an identity with nonhuman others needs a means of access to this identification beyond the individual’s presence with and in nature. I have suggested that Riepenhoff’s collaboration with nonhuman others in the *Littoral Drift* series—and similar photographic collaborations with nonhuman others—provides this access.

This function of facilitation bridges Evans’s work with insights concerning the creative contribution of photography and our understanding of the world. In Joanna Zylinska’s reflections on “nonhuman vision,” she argues that “all photography bears a nonhuman trace,” and that this nonhuman trace must be affirmed, since “it is precisely in its nonhuman aspect that photography’s creative, or world-making side can be recognized.”

A traditional, anthropocentric reading of her work suggests that the images Riepenhoff produces are artifacts directing us to her agency, valorizing her work and insight, and relegating the content as an effect of the human effort behind the process. Zylinska’s interest is to show that the work of photography is by necessity inclusive of the participation of nonhuman others; the mechanism of the camera, light, paper, and digitization are each as fundamental in the work of creating images as the human photographer is. Moreover, Zylinska’s insistence that photography is the work of *world-making* overlaps with the creative principle of fecundity in Evans’s work. Riepenhoff’s collaboration reveals the expressive forces of natural and chemical elements, turning our attention to others in the form of *sun*, *earth*, and *water*, and allowing these elements to sound into our own ways of life and suggesting the possibility of expanding our worlds to include the voices we are now able to hear.

Finally, this broadened range of voice overlaps with Jane Bennett’s recognition of the role anthropomorphizing plays in her vital materialism, noting that

an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances—sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure. We at first may see only a world in our image, but what appears next is a swarm of “talented” and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self).
Bennett affirms here a sense in which both vision and voice expand, first on account of our re-positioning ourselves connected with nonhuman others, and second attributing a qualitative difference to each of these voices. The “talented” swarm of vibrant materialities she identifies here are transferrable to the litany of participants in the creation of and persistence of the collaborative cyanotypes Meghann Riepenhoff facilitates; the qualitative difference emerges in the possibility that humans see and hear these materialities anew, as claiming a place in the ethical and political considerations needed to transform the world. These considerations are at the heart of Evans’s engagement with the Jacksville Esker, the engagement that founds his claims of voices spoken by nonhuman others; I suggest that a facilitator brings these possibilities to bear in more direct ways and to a broader human community.

The “Remnants” section of the New Territory exhibition, in which Riepenhoff’s cyanotypes appeared, suggested to viewers that “landscapes bear mute witness” to that which they record. However, the attention I’ve given here to Fred Evans’s theory of voice and the collaboration among humans and nonhuman others evident in the Littoral Drift cyanotypes suggest that the landscape and its elements are not at all mute; Meghann Riepenhoff’s Littoral Drift #848 ensures that the voices of water are seen and heard.

Author’s Note

I would like to thank Meghann Riepenhoff and Neal Flynn of the Yossi Milo Gallery in New York City for providing the rights to reproduce Riepenhoff’s image here. Kimberly Roberts, photography curatorial assistant at the Denver Art Museum, offered details about the New Territory exhibition and Littoral Drift #848’s installation. Likewise, I’d like to thank the two anonymous reviewers from Evental Aesthetics for their helpful feedback on and questions about this essay; my appreciation also extends to Fred Evans, Eric Fretz, and Andrew Vartabedian for reading earlier drafts.
Notes


5 James, 151–52; James explains that the credit for this accomplishment is frequently—and erroneously—credited to Talbot’s Pencil of Nature, which appeared between 1844 and 1846. Atkins’s early folios predate this collection by a year.


11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 142. See also Evans’s The Multivoiced Body: Society and Communication in the Age of Diversity (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

13 Ibid., 148.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.


17 Ibid.


References


