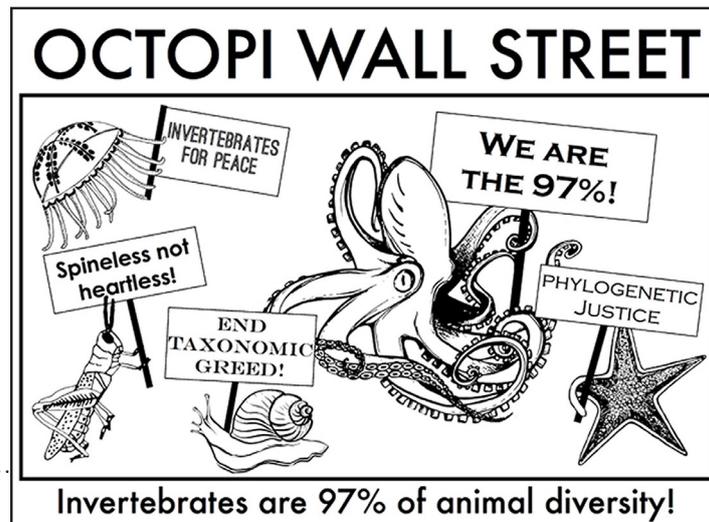


Reality is an active verb, and the nouns all seem to be gerunds with more appendages than an octopus. Through their reaching into each other, through their “prehensions” or graspings, beings constitute each other and themselves. Beings do not preexist their relations. “Prehensions” have consequences. The world is a knot in motion.¹

An exhibition—with Bianca Baldi, Sarah Browne, Anne Duk Hee Jordan, Tuomas A. Laitinen, Sophie Mallett, Jean Painlevé & Geneviève Hamon, and Sarah Ancelle Schönfeld—that carries a part of its brain outside of its body.



Brought to you by Oregon Institute of Marine Biology,
University of Oregon

Introduction

The exhibition *Honorary Vertebrate Club* addresses marine life and ecology in a time of unprecedented environmental change, the rapid depletion of life forms and loss of biodiversity. Focussing primarily on the octopus and other molluscan cephalopods, such as the squid, cuttlefish and the nautilus, the exhibition is centered around modes of survival and adaptation in aquatic climates where environmental backdrops have become increasingly unstable and subject to ecological breakdown, or have ceased to exist altogether. Introducing a number of templates and artistic practices concerned with marine life, the exhibition establishes analogies between human and non-human animals—the octopus often deemed as a radical form of otherness—in an aim to underline persistent anthropocentric tendencies and human exceptionalism. Instead of the human figure we follow the octopus as main protagonist: an inventive environmental engineer and expert tool-user with complex social behaviors, thriving together with the jellyfish in oceanic climates increasingly subject to man-made acidification, rising sea temperatures, and underwater colonialism through deep sea mining. What can we learn from the adaptive qualities of the octopus, its

shape-changing capacities and internet of brains? Can we develop “tentacular thinking” as a way of learning to “stay with the trouble,” rather than keeping to engage in acts of business as usual?

Context

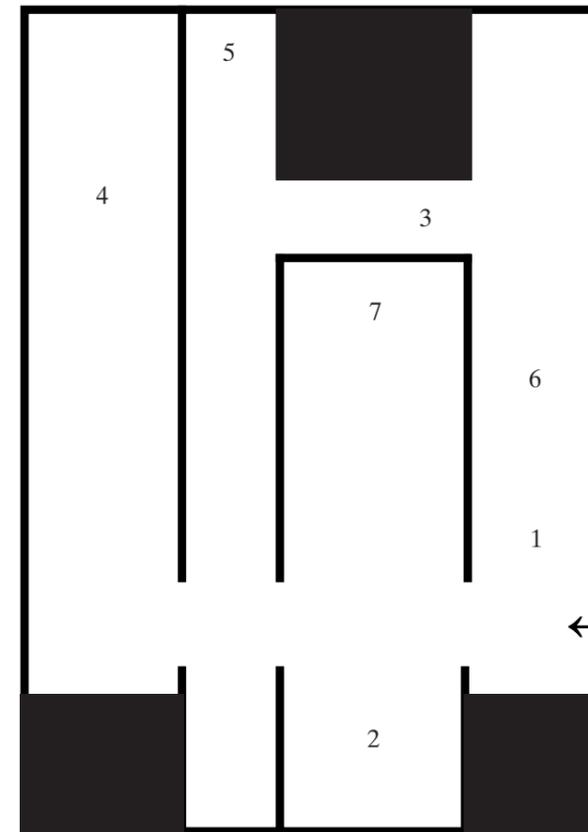
The exhibition title is derived from an animal cruelty legislation act that was passed in The United Kingdom in 1986, regarding cephalopods as honorary vertebrates—extending to them protections not normally afforded to invertebrates, such as the octopus. This act was implemented more broadly with an EU directive in 2010, treating the octopus as a vertebrate—commonly possessing a more complex nervous systems than invertebrates—for legal protection in animal testing, as based on scientific evidence of their ability to experience pain, suffering, distress and lasting harm. Apart from the well-intentioned aims to protect cephalopods, the overarching discussion of human exceptionalism and our tendency to endow the human figure with the capacity to be at the basis of a judgement or reconstruction remains striking. In other words still, how many times haven't humans dragged a non-human animal into its court—from the mimicry of the parrot, to the

language of dolphins and the jazzsongs of whales—claiming that its being could be deemed intelligent, insofar as we consider ourselves the standard measure of intelligence.

Searching for new relational templates and approaches in “interagentivity” between humans and non-humans, the exhibition advocates a loosening of thought from the constraints of human phenomenality, as structures of being do not necessarily correspond with structures of lived experience.² This resonates with the octopus’s bodily morphology and intelligence: of the octopus’s half a billion neurons—six times the number in a mouse—it is the only animal that has a segment of its brain located in its eight arms. *Without a central nervous system, each arm “thinks” as well as “senses” the surrounding world with total autonomy, and yet, each arm is part of the animal.*³ To further consider these decentralized actors forming a congruent whole it is relevant to cite philosopher Donna Haraway’s notion of “tentacular thinking”: *The tentacular are not disembodied figures; they are cnidarians, spiders, fingery beings like humans and raccoons, squid, jellyfish, neural extravaganzas, fibrous entities, flagellated beings, myofibril braids, matted and felted microbial and fungal tangles, probing creepers, swelling roots, reaching and climbing tendrilled ones. The tentacular are also nets and networks, it critters, in and out of clouds. Tentacularity is about life lived along lines—and such a wealth of lines—not at points, not in spheres. ‘The inhabitants of the world, creatures of all kinds, human and non-human, are wayfarers’; generations are like ‘a series of interlaced trails.’*⁴

For the exhibition *Honorary Vertebrate Club* we understand “tentacular thinking” as a mode of raising decentralized perception, as an expansive and generative practice of fragmentary knowledge production that unmakes self-organizing units and ties them together as part of collectives seeking for the possibilities of life in capitalist ruins. As cephalopod and jellyfish populations are proliferating in response to a changing climate, we may as well reach out to make kin with the aquatic overlords, engage in acts of learning through empathic non-understanding, towards devising ways of living together on a damaged planet.

Floor Plan



1 – BIANCA BALDI

Bianca Baldi plays out *Versipellis* (2018)—a phenomenon that is read as both the adaptive quality to change one’s skin and the photographic skin itself. She links it to the cultural practice of “passing”—understood as assuming a different racial identity in order to escape the discriminatory limitations imposed by a dominant classification in distinguished racial groups.

In *Versipellis*, the literary trope of the “tragic mulatta” is restaged. Female characters from this literary genre are joined in conversation by Sepia, the cuttlefish. These creatures have chromatophores which have an adaptive quality that literally allows them to change their skin colour. This element of the work acts as a metaphor for how the body becomes an image, and the colour is “worn” on the skin surface in the social construction of race.

Versipellis is a performance work by Bianca Baldi. The date of the performance will be announced soon via our newsletter and social media.

2 – SARAH BROWNE

The central protagonist of *Report to an Academy* (2016) is a lecturer who has transformed herself from a human into an octopus. The film is an adaptation of the Kafka short story of the same title, exploring the pressures of the contemporary academic environment as a neoliberal

workplace—including distortions of language that impact the body. Where in Kafka’s story, an ape delivers an address to a gathering on his transition into human life, joining human community by acquiring speech, the octopus who features in Browne’s adaptation describes her choice to surrender spoken language in search of other forms of articulacy and agency. Searching for a “way out” of her “Kafkaesque” environment, where language can be a slippery, dangerous or even violent force, she delivers her report with a machine voice (this is the Scottish-accented “Fiona,” who is installed with Mac OSX).

3 – ANNE DUK HEE JORDAN

Ziggy and the Starfish (2016) looks at sexuality from the perspective of marine life. Hydrospheric climate change is the deciding factor in the changing sexuality of ocean inhabitants. The visualization of the sex life of sea slugs, octopuses and starfish, amongst others, and their vibrant and seductive performative play, draws the human spectator in an intimate and hallucinatory sexual world.

4 – TUOMAS A. LAITINEN

Since 2016 one strand of Tuomas A. Laitinen’s artistic practice has touched upon the research into cognition and consciousness in other-than-human minds, focussing on octopuses in particular. This endeavour is emerging through different material agencies: glass objects made for octopuses, multiple video and audio works, and a series of glyphs—made both as a graphic font and as glass objects—derived from research on octopus arm movements. *Haemocyanin* (2019) is a video installation documenting an octopus interacting with these glass objects. In this series—intended to suggest ways of discovering alternative forms of communication—Laitinen is also exploring the power structures attendant to the formation of knowledge when researching other lifeforms. The works are approaching the question of knowing as a porous and layered entanglement: a place where matter and language can coexist without divisions to binaries.

5 – SOPHIE MALLET

Our Gelatinous Past (2018) is a speculative docufiction where jellyfish are cast as the protagonists of a new era in geopolitics. Global warming has disrupted ocean currents and their dependent trade routes, simultaneously halting extractivist relationships and enabling epic blooms of our gelatinous overlords. The work suggests a new global order (that we are not capable of creating) from the perspective of the jellyfish; this is their own documentary about what led to the demise of our civilization, and the rise of theirs.

6 – JEAN PAINLEVÉ & GENEVIÈVE HAMON

Jean Painlevé's (1902-1989) films model an engaged form of biological and zoological cinema of increasing philosophical and political significance, particularly for its contributions to the project of *unthinking anthropocentrism*, an endeavour whose timeliness has only increased in the era of accelerated ecological precariousness.⁵

In their collaborative work, Jean Painlevé and Geneviève Hamon looked toward animal worlds for alternative ways to think about anthropocentrism. Through their use of alternative imaging technologies, Painlevé and Hamon produced films where animals act upon spectators, reconfiguring spectatorship, producing a breach in the old stories of human domination and animal victimization. Their films are not simply documents of these organisms, but rather accounts of human, animal, and apparatus encounters—not just as mediums and instruments, but as active presences. *The Love Life of the Octopus* [*Les Amours de la Pieuvre*] (1967) reaches out to the spectator with eight arms, inviting the spectator to take seriously the materiality of the image and the unfamiliarity of octopus biology. *The Love Life of the Octopus*, witnessed in title alone, is an erotic narrative that is contiguous. The octopus, the spectator, the camera, the lens, the filmmakers are conjugated in the refracted space—each is wet, and continues to soak, with the encounter of the others.⁶

7 – SARAH ANCELLE SCHÖNFELD

In the near future it will be necessary to be linguistically prepared for communication with extraterrestrials. *Alien Linguistic Lab* (2018) has been developed as a workshop and educational program, where one is invited to decode messages from extraterrestrials and to broaden one's understanding of language itself. The octopus—as recently demonstrated by the scientific community—is the closest living creature to an alien here on Earth because of its unexplainably distant DNA sequence. Linguini di sepia, which are tinted with the ink of cephalopods, are carrying alien information. The ink commonly excreted by cephalopods, normally understood as a chemical alarm for signaling encroaching predators, is actually a cloud of encoded linguistic messages. Linguini is derived from “Lingua” (Latin for language), which makes it a perfect linguistic unit. The method is simple: Taking a single al dente linguini di sepia noodle and throwing it onto a white wall. The resulting shape of this gesture is then decoded using “Google Translate” language recognition function. By repeating this protocol, the audience generates an oracle. The transmitted messages of self-alienation are then interpreted, discussed, and absorbed.

HONORARY VERTEBRATE CLUB

7 September – 3 November 2019

Bianca Baldi
Sarah Browne
Anne Duk Hee Jordan
Tuomas A. Laitinen
Sophie Mallett
Jean Painlevé & Geneviève Hamon
Sarah Ancelle Schönfeld

Curated by: Julia Geerlings,
Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk
Text: Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk
Translation: Kelly-ann van Steveninck
Graphic design: Sabo Day
Production: Yana van Eekert
Audiovisual support: Clement Georgescu

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Opening hours:
Friday, Saturday and Sunday, from 13.00–18.00.

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- 1 Donna J. Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto – Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 6.
- 2 Anthropologist Tim Ingold has coined the term “interagency,” which he uses to highlight the constitutive quality of the “dwelt-in world” of hunter-gatherers. Here, human beings engage intimately with one another as well as with non-human components in the environment. Ingold prefers to speak of “interagency” rather than of “intersubjectivity,” as we should not infer that every agent, with practical conscience, is subjectively determined, thoughtful and intellectual, with discursive, narrative awareness, as we commonly believe adult humans to be.
- 3 Chus Martinez, *The Octopus in Love*, e-flux journal 55 (May 2014): 1.
- 4 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble – Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 32.
- 5 James Cahill, *Zoological Surrealism – The Nonhuman Cinema of Jean Painlevé* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 25.
- 6 Eva S. Hayward, *Enfolded Vision – Refracting The Love Life of the Octopus*, *Octopus* 1 (Fall 2005): 40–44.