

Emilija Škarnulytė

Opening: August 30th, 2024, 6 – 9 pm
August 30th – September 28th, 2024
Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf

A darkened threshold transcends into a cinematic journey across displaced timescales—an immersive encounter with artist and filmmaker Emilija Škarnulytė coalesces the works *Æqualia* (2023) and *Aphotic Zone* (2022) in a unique cyclical dialogue. Forming an undulating odyssey through vortexing waters and cimmerian depths, time and space slows in a sensory-enveloping sympoietic vision, opening up what it means to be other, and more, than ourselves.

Engaged in a performative and lens-based practice, Škarnulytė creates at the intersection of liminal realms—between documentary and speculative fiction, the political and the poetic, sculpture and digital art, bodies and universes. Her interdisciplinary approach of artistic sense-making forms as submerged studies in world-making across stratified temporalities: employing careful orchestrations of space and scales, she expands and inverts filmic, perceptual and sonic dimensions alike. Human, more-than-human and camera bodies alike become future-archaeological tools to permeate the layers of deep time, articulating embodied aesthetic experiences and archaeological considerations of futurity. Her performativity of space and bodies—echoing the mutual implications of “knowing and being” conceived by feminist quantum physicist Karen Barad—deterritorializes and reminds that neither are truly as fixed as may be presumed.

*In so much as we are water, we are already alien. But we are aliens in order to be of the Earth.
We are always in the process of negotiating our next adaptation,
even if these possibilities are known only to our bodies.*

— Curator Kate Sutton on Emilija Škarnulytė, 2024

A post-human chimera—the titular *Æqualia*—manifests as a sublime, counter-mythological guide in the swirling vortexes of the *Encontro das Águas* (Meeting of Waters) in Brazil. Part-mermaid, part-river-dolphin, their rhythmic journey through the confluence to the birth of the Amazon allures transcorporeal articulations of being human that relinquish mastery in the flux and flow of our fluid worlds. Solimões’ milky white waters snake stubbornly with the heavy, black flow of the Rio Negro for six kilometres—a polychrome boundary visible from space—within their bodies, timescales flow: one originating in glacial melt, the other dark with the young decay of lowland rainforests, warm and hypoxic. The panoramic, aerial gaze softly draws closer as the confluence’s thermo-sedimentary choreography transposes into the dance of dolphins manifesting around the artist-now-chimeric figure—whose own body becomes a scale with which to measure, tracing fractal dimensions as they build and accelerate to become one in a cosmological vision blurring the boundaries between myth and reality.

The river basin is home to the pink Amazon River dolphins, locally known as *botos*, who are considered an indicator of this crucial and vulnerable waterway’s health. Within a year of completing the filming of the work, the river suffered excessive droughts, resulting in a mass die-off of the already endangered species. Evoking an intimate sense of evolutionary kinship, the entangled performance of the artist and *botos* reattunes the transhistorical human agent—separate from the world that *he* has transformed—to the milieu of manifold planetary and interplanetary relationships that underpin the intricate networks of life on Earth—our inherent permeability to them, our mutual susceptibility to each *other*.

The ocean is sound—is transmission, is cosmic. Water is both real and quantum.

The richest world of sound on Earth is hidden in the polyphonic chorus of the oceans. The light of the waterworlds, sound illuminates the depths for those who reside here. It is also a further perceptual dimension Škarnulytė sculpts with: echolocations dissolve into reverberations of a distant civilisation in a soundscape of hypnotic, sinuous notes the deeper descent draws. Oceans have been a key site for anthropological exploits throughout the evolution of humankind, equally functioning culturally as a physical simulacrum of the human unconscious. The waters Škarnulytė presents are no longer a signifier of boundlessness, human alienation nor self-reflexive emptiness: rather, she reveals how fluid oceanic relations force us to think differently, and how, like everything else within reach, humankind have made full-use of the ocean as just another 'standing-reserve' for the prowess of *techne*. Transcended into a *hyperobject* in the Mortonian sense, she eloquently *becomes-with* water to contemplate the bewildering circular relationship between reality and representation, materiality and the subconscious, immanence and memory—iconic as much as echoic.

In this suspended state of awareness, minuscule free-floating Coccolithophores and crystallised amber—the sun stone long mythologised to be the hardened tears of Baltic undine-goddess Jūratė—come into focus: *inhale, connect, exhale, reflect*. In the words of curator Barbara Casavecchia in *Dear Emilija: Three Letters across Remote Proximities* (2023): Bodies, no matter how large or minuscule, have been accumulating in the lowest strata of the oceans forever. They are part of water, as much as water constitutes the majority of our bodies. Do we see this? Can we think across scales and with them?

Interactions between myriad matters reveal as light is lost to futures' pasts—submersion deepens 4000 metres into *Aphotic Zone* (2022). Peering back from the future through perpetually dark waters, luminous sea jellies beam over choirs of fish, eerie alien architectures emerge from the ether and curious entanglements of human, machinic and more-than-human agencies materialise—shifting and scaling space as sonic ghosts of empires fallen sculpt the aural. In her seamless transitions between scientific documentary and advanced image-making technologies, Škarnulytė challenges traditional concepts of the former as simply a representation of indexical reality, articulating an allegorical framework of futurity that explores the limits of realism and contemplates the nature of (in)visible and speculative realities.

Like the hydrologic cycle itself, a continuous revolution of almost four billion years, there is no beginning nor end in the narritival ebbs and flows of Škarnulytė's solo presentation at Sies + Höke—only eternal transformation. Subtle and shapeshifting, in its symbolic allure Škarnulytė's immersive installation illuminates hidden human hubris and reframes narratives of human binaristic hyper-separation from the living world. Bodies, space, rivers and oceans at once *become-with* each other—manifesting a portal to allure new orientations for connection and sense-making outside the scales of our anthropocentric age.