

## CHAPTER 12

# Sensing Algae: On Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen's *Reclaiming Vision*

*Eirik Zeiner-Henriksen*

Master of Art History, University of Oslo

**Abstract:** This chapter explores questions of ontology and non-human life in the site-specific screening of Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen's film *Reclaiming Vision*, shown at the point where the river flows into the fjord in a recently developed area of downtown Oslo. By filming water samples through a microscope, the artists have magnified the rich, microbiotic life of the Aker River and the inner Oslo Fjord, making actants such as algae, bacteria and fungi visible to humans. The chapter claims that by presenting life from the position of the microorganisms in the water, *Reclaiming Vision* presents a radical and flat form of ontology that brings up important ethical and political perspectives that are vital for developing ways of living together with the non-humans that surround us.

**Keywords:** microorganisms, coexistence, film, object-oriented ontology, perception

## Introduction

An incoming train is approaching Oslo Central Station. The squealing sound of the brakes fills the surrounding area as it glides towards the platform. As the train comes to a full stop, a sigh of relief goes through the daily commuters who are ready to board the train and to be liberated

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from this week's duties at work in the city. *Chaetoceros decipiens*. A number of screensavers from the offices of EnterCard Norway—a supplier of credit cards and private loans—light up the windows of one of the nearby Oslo Barcode buildings, as they are left in standby mode for the weekend. *Prymnesium parvum*. Cars and buses are passing by, enjoying the asphalt of the newly constructed Dronning Eufemia Street. A motorcycle turns onto the bridge over the railway station and makes its presence heard. *Rhodomonas salina*. Under this bridge, amid all these high-rise buildings, construction sites and transportation facilities, the Aker River reveals itself. After floating through the city for about 10 kilometres, the river ends and merges with the Oslo Fjord here.

This was the place of the screening of Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen's film *Reclaiming Vision* on a warm evening in the late summer of 2018. The screening was organised by *The Munch Museum on the Move*, a temporary project connected to the Munch Museum's relocation from its old building at Tøyen to the new building close to the mouth of the Aker River [figure 1].



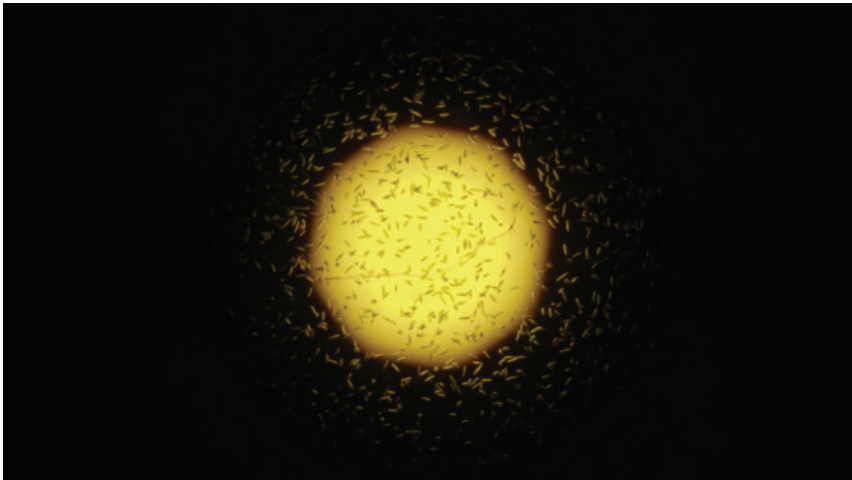
**Figure 1.** Installation image of *Reclaiming Vision* (2018) by Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen in Bjørvika, Oslo. Commissioned by The Munch Museum for Munchmuseet on the Move. Reproduced with permission of Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

## Narrating the *Rhodomonas*

Starring in Dijkman and Johannessen's 27-minute film are actors like *Alexandrium tamarense*, *Dinophysis norvegica*, *Eutreptiella braarudii*, *Rhizosolenia hebetata* and *Skeletonema costatum* [figure 2]. On the screen, these actors dance around in captivating movements, accompanied by a dramatic soundtrack consisting of string instruments and various backdrops in different colours, spaces and textures. All of the performers have different shapes and sizes, some being thin, tall and rod-shaped, while others are round or spiral-formed. Some of the actants in *Reclaiming Vision* have arms, legs or tails; others have something that looks like feelers or antennae.

The film's actors are algae, bacteria, fungi and other microorganisms that in fact originate in the very water that runs between the viewer and the huge screen. Together with scientists from the Department of Biosciences at the University of Oslo, Dijkman and Johannessen filmed water samples collected from the Aker River and the nearby Oslo Fjord through a microscope and created a cinematic narrative.

While sharing some aesthetic similarities to nature and wildlife documentaries, *Reclaiming Vision* uses elements of fiction in the portrayal



**Figure 2.** Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen. (2018). *Reclaiming Vision* [Still from film]. Commissioned by The Munch Museum for Munchmuseet on the Move. Reproduced with permission of Marjolijn Dijkman and Toril Johannessen. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

of the microorganisms. At the start of the film, the microorganisms float around on the screen seemingly acting on their own, fascinating us with their shapes and movements. Later, it becomes clear that the microorganisms are not purely observed in their habitat in a documentary manner. They are in the alien territory of Petri dishes—in a lab—observed outside their natural ecosystem and domesticated through experiments. The latter part of the film reveals the source of the microorganisms' vital movements: pipettes make the algae and bacteria dance around as the lab tools suck the microbes towards them or disperse them away.

The experimental nature of the project resembles the scientific research that is usually conducted in these laboratories. Artistic exploration of scientific experiments is a clear tendency in Norwegian contemporary art, and in *Reclaiming Vision* the scientific research is extended by focusing on the more visual aspects of these practices.

Towards the end of the film, the microbes are found in a cinematic space, a dramatic scenery where the texture of the water is more opaque. Thick, foreign fluids are flowing in, as if a nearby octopus had just been escaping a predator. However, these fluids are not part of the water sample from the Aker River. Ink, oil, pigments and microplastics are injected into the water by Dijkman and Johannessen. These are materials that alter the microorganisms' natural ecosystem. Played out in front of the camera, microbiological life encounters human interaction—as has been happening for as long as there have been humans in the area. The injections mirror human activity, such as the historical leaking of dyes from the clothing industry up the Aker River and, more recently, oil spills in the Oslo Fjord.

By bringing the microorganisms into a dramatised narrative, the artists point to how humans orchestrate the natural environment both deliberately and unintentionally. Dijkman and Johannessen portray current and historical processes in which human impact on the aquatic life is presented in a poetic and imaginative manner, compressed within a short time span. When the environment of the microbes is slightly changed, the effects are profound. In *Reclaiming Vision*, microplastics and oils dramatically change the conditions of algae and bacteria in a way that is perceivable to a human audience.

## Decentering the Human

The fictional aspects of the film are a strategy to speculate on the life of the entities in the water which we cannot fully perceive or understand. Through the algae and bacteria, the foreign and unknown are magnified for us to marvel at, develop empathy for and gain an understanding of. *Reclaiming Vision* is a collaborative performance by human and non-human actants, where the microorganisms are left to unfold in a way not completely controllable for the artists. Dijkman and Johannessen set the boundaries of the space that the microbes are allowed to move within and they are in various ways conditioning their activities, but the properties of the algae and bacteria are reacting to the artists' input in particular ways. By being highly site-specific, connecting the microbiotic life in the Aker River to the newly restored area of Bjørvika, *Reclaiming Vision* interferes in the actual and ongoing situation of urban development and our relationship to the other beings around us.

In comparison to the deep time of the Earth, humans have been on the planet for a relatively short period. Yet we have affected the planet to such a degree that our presence has become a geological force, leaving traces of ourselves not only in cities, but also in geological layers, in the atmosphere, in the oceans and in the most remote places some still think of as nature. Considering the failures of the anthropocentric organisation of the planet, causing ruthless over-exploitation of natural resources to the point of catastrophe, another world view—a new ethics—seems to be a way forward.

The work echoes movements in contemporary philosophy grappling with a radical restructuring of how we understand other species, things and the human; in particular, the direction in philosophy called object-oriented ontology. Although object-oriented ontology is a heterogeneous framework of thinking, a common trait is to challenge anthropocentric hierarchies of existence, by introducing a so-called flat ontology,<sup>1</sup> insisting that all things equally exist (Bogost, 2012, p. 11). As a result, this direction in philosophy acknowledges that every single entity

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1 The term 'Flat ontology' originates from Manuel De Landa, see his *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*.

in the universe possesses a particular perspective and agency, and that the multiplicities of experiences of the world and its countless relations cannot fully be understood by human cognition (Bryant, 2011, pp. 18–19).

*Reclaiming Vision* expands our perception by changing the perspective to beings other than humans. The film opens up the importance of the algae and bacteria in the water so that we can develop empathy for them. Dijkman and Johannessen show that these indiscernible beings indeed are here, we share the planet with them, and they have properties that are of essential importance to us. How do these living beings react to foreign substances entering their world? Do they become dizzy or perplexed by the microplastics? By entering into this aquatic world, the human is seen from another perspective, and it becomes evident that our activities have serious negative effects on other beings.

## Approaching the Imperceptible

Dijkman and Johannessen present a different way to think about cities and urban development on a local scale, but also of how to understand other species and our role on a global scale. Most animals have been actively driven out of the areas where humans have settled and constructed cities. They are considered to be found in the countryside and in ‘nature’, but cities are actual ecosystems full of animals that have found their ways of living here, like insects, rodents, birds, and fish, even though they are far from prioritised in these urban areas. The same applies to micro-organisms—that are everywhere—and even make up large parts of our bodies. When watching *Reclaiming Vision* by the Aker River, I felt pulled out of my habitual mode of thinking, where everything is measured on my own, human-centred terms. I was mesmerised by the algae and bacteria, and I became a little more aware of the existence of the beings around us.

According to Dijkman, every second breath we take is produced by algae in the oceans (Tampere, 2018, p. 10). Yet the microbiological life of the water typically only enters our consciousness when it poses a threat to humans, such as the summer of 2018’s higher-than-normal sea temperatures provoking an outbreak of the vibrio virus that infected some

open wounds and oysters. Even in the microscopic existence displayed by the microscope, the human is still present, but we are dethroned from our privileged position. Recognising the limitations of the human eye and cognition in approaching our all-too-neglected, coexisting species, Dijkman and Johannessen offer a glimpse of their situation in a very fertile attempt to do them justice.

Human vision is not only constructed by interpreting the world through our eyes, but it is also built up by ways of seeing, of culturally learned conventions of how to see the world and how to think about seeing. *Reclaiming Vision* presents a form of vision that differs from the one dominated by politics, economy and ideology, and steers the priority of the visual system towards also including other beings. The climate crisis forces us to see and think differently, as its slowly accelerated effects are only partially available to us, predominantly through a few, dramatic events. Our human capacities limit us, both temporally and visually, to experience the crisis through the rare glimpses that we can perceive of its consequences. In Dijkman and Johannessen's work, the usually undetectable and neglected microorganisms in the water are brought to our attention. To watch the film is a transformative experience, where the captivating movements, narrative and soundtrack give a perceptual revelation of the world's chaotic nature. I am moved, not just visually, but I have also acquired a new sense of belonging in the world. I am reminded that our surroundings are largely ruled by contingency and the interconnected actions of all the entities on the planet, in processes that we might be part of, but that always have consequences that operate outside of our sensory apparatus.

As the familiar sounds and movements of the trains, cars and motorcycles continue to echo between the high-rise buildings, the sub-aquatic perspectives offered by the film have changed how I perceive the area that I find myself in. The river flowing through the area now stands out as potent and full of life. I imagine how the *Prymnesium parvum* and the other microorganisms are living their lives in the water, and I recognise that they are a part of this constructed landscape that now appears less exclusively human than first assumed. Steel, concrete, algae, engines, microplastics, screensavers, grass, water, bacteria, people, corporations,

pollution, brakes and wheels. The sensory experience of *Reclaiming Vision* has unveiled to me how non-human actants are constantly developing around me. The film has shown the unique power that artworks can have in altering our state of mind by creating new ways of being-in-the-world. For the moment, *Chaetoceros decipiens* feels as familiar as the cars and trains on the motorway and as distant as EnterCard Norway.

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# Creative Fungus: On Fredrik Vørslev's *Mildew Paintings*

Vera Maria Gjermundsen

Bachelor of Art History, University of Oslo

**Abstract:** Fredrik Vørslev's *Mildew Paintings* cannot be defined as paintings in the conventional sense. They are the result of mildew growth developing over the course of a year on canvases stored inside humid plastic tubes. As such, their exact nature eludes us, not being straight-forward painterly objects, nor simple pieces of fungus-eaten material. This chapter aims to define the *Mildew Paintings*' hybrid identity through the theories of interspecies entanglements of anthropologist Anna Tsing and Gilles Clément's approach to what he refers to as the third landscape in urban gardening. The paintings are regarded as the result of a new-found collaboration between human and non-human processes, pushing the artist into the background while introducing other creative entities, leaving us to question our hegemonic role as this world's sole active designers.

**Keywords:** third landscape, interspecies entanglements, abstract painting, Anna Tsing, Gilles Clément

## Introduction

At some point in 2012, artist Fredrik Vørslev found himself quite dissatisfied with the priming operation carried out on some of his canvases. Having tried to alter the initial appearance of the priming in various ways and still failing to achieve his desired result, Vørslev decided to roll up the canvases in plastic tubes and simply place them outside. The canvases were then left there, forgotten by him and the world, for twelve months. These were the canvases that would later become known as Fredrik

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Vørslev's *Mildew Paintings* (2013). The works consist of a series of primed canvases upon which mildew (the pale, mould-like filaments that develop on the surface of damp organic material) has given life to its own visual expression, by covering the canvas in shapes and patterns of cloudy hues as a result of the spreading of fungus in the humid climate of the storage tubes. These accidental and autonomous processes by the 'hands' of the fungi were given aesthetic and artistic value by the artist only at the end of their spontaneous creation. Vørslev recovered the canvases, removed them from the tubes and—as the fungus that had developed was particularly poisonous—he treated them with fungicide to stop the decaying process. Not having directly sprung out of the artist's initial intention, strictly speaking, nor having developed through the trace-making activity of the artist's hand—actually barely relying on a gesture of his of any kind—the works leave us questioning their exact nature as artistic objects. Despite their seemingly painterly appearance, they seem to linger in a definitional limbo, as they subtly slip away from standard painting categories. The lack of a solid ground to stand on in order to regard these works as conventional paintings has led to the works being given other kinds of definitions over time, such as the one given by Peter J. Amdam, who referred to them as Vørslev's 'painterly non-project' (Amdam, 2013). Rather than being paintings, what they can more accurately be described as is, indeed, a series of unprompted collaborative processes between human and non-human actors, humans and fungi, converging only at the end in a seemingly painterly form.

## Interspecies Entanglements

Upon the organic material of the human-made canvases and inside the synthetic material of the plastic storage tubes, the fungus thrives undisturbed. As a year-long process of intertwined human and non-human elements, it is tempting to see the works as the perfect visual representation of interspecies entanglements, such as the ones between fungus and humans that have been brought to our recent attention by the anthropologist Anna Tsing (Tsing, 2015). In her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Tsing takes her cue from the Matsutake mushroom—a Japanese