

Aesthetics of Contamination: Four Visual Approaches

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When I first read the conference title, I sat almost perplexed. Although I had never actively considered the phrase myself, it resonated strongly with a series of artworks I had realized over the past twenty years. Given that the works, which jumped to my mind, did not only span a wide time range but greatly varied with respect to medium and context as well, I began to wonder how each of them responded to the theme of aesthetics of contamination. From the different approaches I identified, I have singled out four that I consider particularly distinct. Moreover, these four approaches relate to moving image works, which commended themselves for presentation in a conference setting. Three of them have a clear connection to the ocean.

After briefly introducing the four visual approaches, I will illustrate them with four of my works. Still images are complemented by brief descriptions and QR codes leading to demo versions on Vimeo. In response to the conference panel *Art and Awareness*, of which my presentation was a part, I conclude with assessing the degree of my own awareness of the specific contamination at hand during the creation of each artwork presented and how it relates to its reception.

The approaches to aesthetically addressing contamination, which I have traced in the artworks presented here (and in some other works) are the following:¹

1. *Invasive Interventions*

What I conceive of as “invasive interventions” are works for which multiple artificial objects or structures are inserted into natural space (or representations thereof), where they function as an invasive species.

2. *Mining the Associative*

Works following this approach do not spell out ideas of contamination but induce them through associations in the viewer’s eye alone.

3. *Tracing Links Between Natural and Industrial*

This approach is based on tracing aesthetic, material, and/or conceptual parallels between natural and industrial structures or phenomena.

4. *Visualizing the Invisible Threat*

In this approach, visual mediums are employed for raising awareness of contexts bearing a threat of contamination that is invisible to the bare eye or every-day gaze.

¹ Approaches I found in other works include exposing visually appealing aspects of contamination or the aesthetic borrowing from processes and products of contamination for artistic inspiration and creation.

Four Moving Image Works, Four Approaches

In the following, I will illustrate the four approaches to the aesthetics of contamination described above with four moving image works. Of course, their capacity to illustrate the different approaches comes at no surprise, given that they were among the works that served to conceive those approaches.

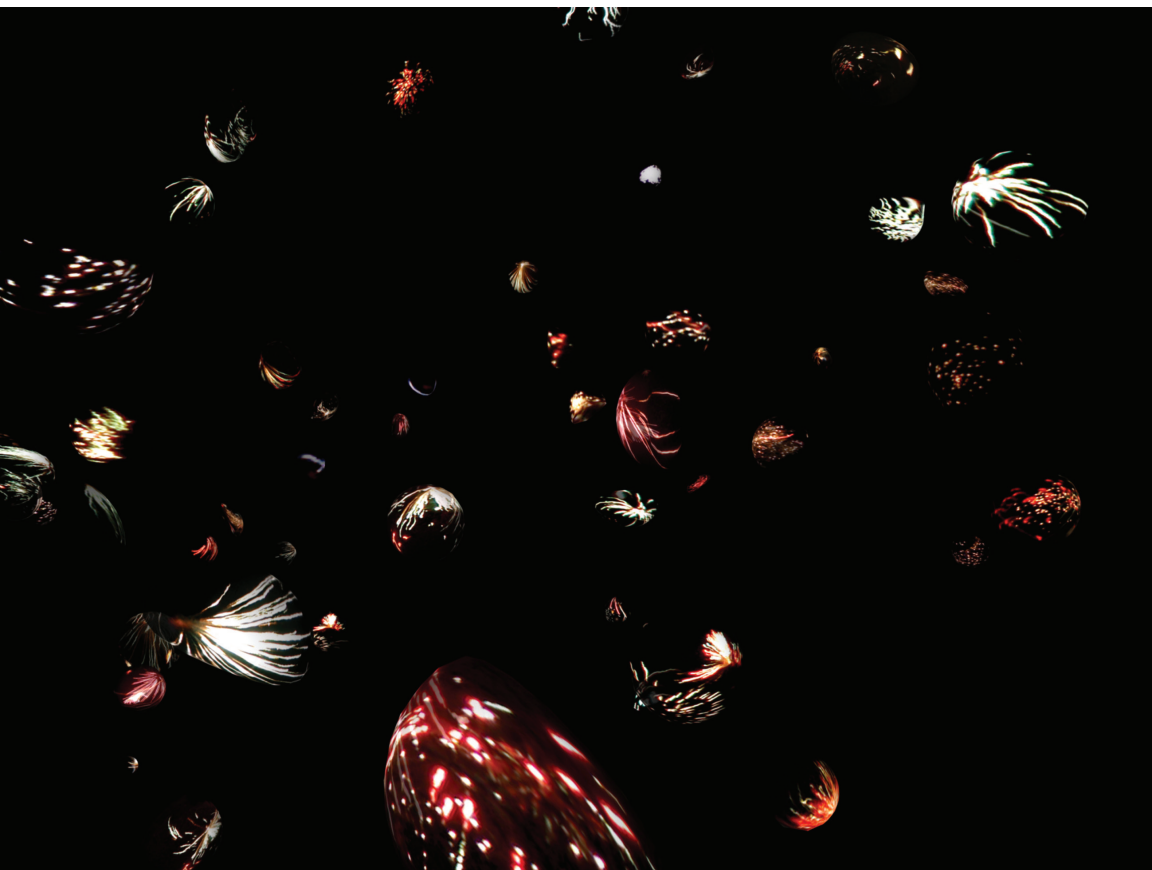
jellyfire

3D Animation, 4:57 min, 4:3, SD, stereo, Germany 2007
sound by weltAusstellung

For this 3D animation, I digitally inserted a plethora of glowing objects into the virtual space of the application. Floating in the void, these structures appear to invade what, in its darkness and apparent vastness, reminds us of outer space or the deep sea. In reference to these associations and the origin of the light textures, the title is a compound of “jellyfish” and “fireworks.”



vimeo.com/17098115



blackberg

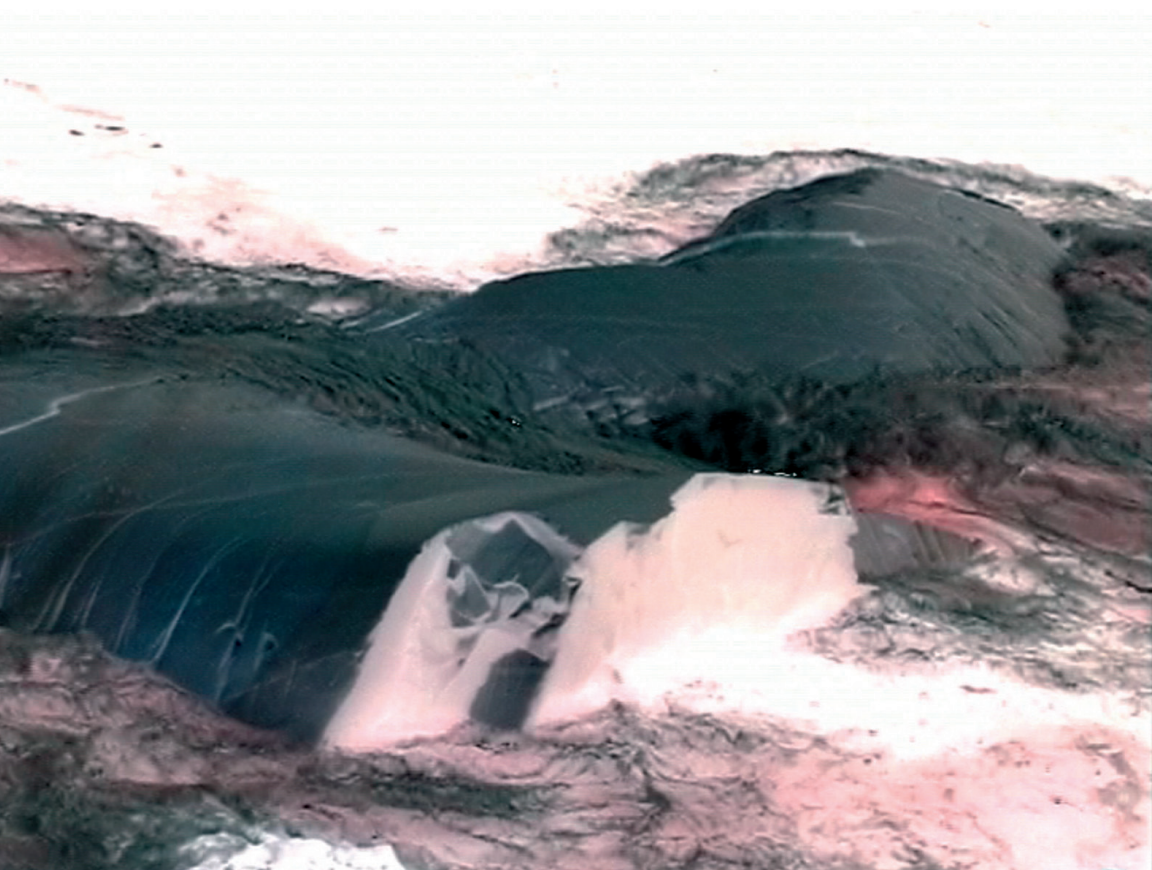
video, 2:12 min, 4:3, SD, stereo, Newfoundland 2007

Created during my first visit to Newfoundland for an artist residency at the Pouch Cove Foundation, *blackberg* is also my first video work.

The work is mining the associative, as it does not directly expose or visualize the contamination of our oceans. Related associations are evoked merely by inverting the colour scheme of the original footage. As a result, the ice and the snow white surge turn into an enigmatic object and viscous fluid, respectively, which appear to rock and flow in slow motion.



vimeo.com/17115707



transient

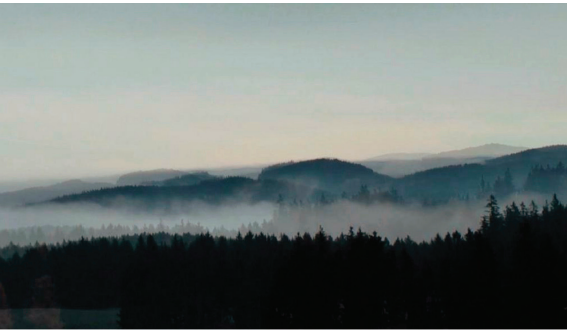
video, 5:15 min, 16:9, HD, stereo, Austria 2009

The work approaches contamination by tracing visual and material links between the emissions of the chimneys belonging to the north Austrian steel industry on the one hand and clouds or fog over the region's forests and mountain ridges, which were plentiful during my stay there in autumn, on the other. Besides similar aesthetics, the natural phenomena and the bulk of the emissions share the same substance: water vapour.

The video was created during an artist residency at the Salzamt in Linz upon Danube and supported by the EU European Capital of Culture program.



vimeo.com/17287231



Fedje

video, 3:33 min, 16:9, HD, stereo, Norway 2012
sound by Uli Kürner

Fedje is the name of an island off the Norwegian coast northwest of Bergen. The work visualizes an invisible threat of contamination at the ocean's floor by following a series of dilapidated concrete structures of a German World War Two military base from the main road to the shoreline of the otherwise idyllic island. Four kilometres off the coast, the remains of U-864 lie aground, carrying 67 tons of mercury in rusty iron containers.



vimeo.com/54549609

The video was created at USF Verftet Bergen and supported by the Norwegian-German Willy-Brandt-Foundation.



Art and Awareness

In direct response to the panel title *Art and Awareness*, I also reflected on my mindset during the creation of the moving image works I would show. This was when I realized that they do not only differ in their approaches to the aesthetics of contamination but were moreover created with different degrees of awareness of the specific forms of contamination at hand and different degrees of intentionality to expose them. Furthermore, I found that these degrees have increased with the works' dates of creation, which I had also chosen as the order of their presentation.

jellyfire was originally a playful intervention in virtual space, revelling in the creation and insertion of alien yet aesthetically appealing structures into space. To me, it only began to resonate with ideas of contamination when representations of viruses with a similar aesthetic became ubiquitous during the Covid 19 pandemic.

blackberg became a work about the contamination of our oceans virtually by coincidence. Still new to the medium, I was testing video effects when I was captivated by the power of mere colour inversion to induce associations with heavy pollution. Awareness and intentionality only came into play when I decided to publicize the video in this colour-inverted version.

transient has been intentional in comparing and linking natural and industrial phenomena from the beginning. Revelling in parallel aesthetics and materiality, however, it keeps a distance from the contamination presented and leaves the interpretation of environmental implications to the viewer.

Fedje, at last, is the product of my full awareness of, and distress about, the ocean's contamination with mercury and the intention to expose the lingering threat it represents for all life in the region.

Given my greatly varying awareness and intention during the creation of these works, and taking the vivid feedback I have received for each of them into account, I suggest that their individual strength for engaging the viewer in the context of contamination at hand is widely independent of my original stance. Generalizing from this observation, I would like to conclude by launching the hypothesis that the potential of an artwork to raise awareness for a topic or an issue is not necessarily proportional to, or conditional on, the awareness and intentionality at play in its creation.

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