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Who Speaks for the Oceans?

Andrea K. Scott – October 3rd, 2022



Art work by Ursula Biemann / Courtesy the artist / VDB / Mishkin Gallery

Few people are better qualified to answer the question “**Who Speaks for the Oceans?**” than David Gruber, a marine biologist and whale whisperer who founded Project *ceti*—the Cetacean Translation Initiative. Gruber is also a distinguished professor at Baruch College, where, during the past three years, he joined a cohort of students, artists, curators, and faculty to respond to that question of environmental empathy with a polyphonic exhibition, installed at the college’s Mishkin Gallery through Dec. 9. (Alaina Claire Feldman, the gallery’s visionary director, was his key collaborator.) Among the art works on view are a new trio of incantatory drawings by the category-defying legend Joan Jonas; a beguiling, Vodou-based sequined tapestry, made circa 2000 by the Haitian textile adept Myrlande Constant; and plans for a subaquatic “Dolphin Embassy,” proposed, in 1968, by the intrepid collective Ant Farm. Some of the most persuasive material here is documentary, notably Roger Payne’s scientific field recordings turned best-selling album, “Songs of the Humpback Whale,” which raised so much awareness about nonhuman consciousness after its release, in 1970, that it helped to ban commercial whaling in the U.S. The Swiss artist Ursula Biemann’s mesmerizing eco-futurist video “Acoustic Ocean” (pictured above), from 2018, stars the Sami singer and climate activist Sofia Jannok as an Arctic aquanaut working in Payne’s wake, making psycho-sonic contact with an unseen pod of sibylline whales.