

Polly Stanton

Undercurrents

(HD video, stereo sound,  
30m 45s, 2015)

(2015)

## Undercurrents

HDV video, stereo sound,  
30m 45s (2015)

Edition of 5

\$1000

## Stills

Archival inkjet print

60 x 40 cm

Edition of 5

\$700 unframed

\$1000 framed

(all prices inc. gst)



Essay

Bridget Crone

(2015)

Polly Stanton's single-screen video and sound work, *Undercurrents* begins with no image but the early morning sounds of birds and insects — sounds that very gradually appear in range of our hearing. This slow arrival of sound and then image produces an effect that is otherworldly, as if we are carefully tuning into something that we would not otherwise have access to and yet was there all along. Our position here is far from certain, as though we are looking onto a scene or a world in which we are both a part and apart. As the film continues and the dawning of sound further awakens us, we are greeted with two additional images — one, cosmological and the other, terrestrial: an image of the moon in a dusty blue sky cuts to the thick darkness of a mountain range that stands resolutely before us. It is these two images that bookend Stanton's project, suggesting, on the one hand, the vastness of a system that exceeds us in time and space, and, on the other, an intensely grounded world or ecology that is close to us. This sense of being situated within the landscape and, at the same time, being at a remove from it is a key aspect of Stanton's work, and provides a link to what the philosopher Timothy Morton has termed 'thinking at Earth magnitude'.<sup>1</sup>

Before continuing with this notion of 'thinking at Earth magnitude', it is important to acknowledge the manner in which Stanton engages with another conceptual process in her work — that of 'cinematic thinking'. Stanton's careful cinematography along with her resolute use of the single-screen screening format must

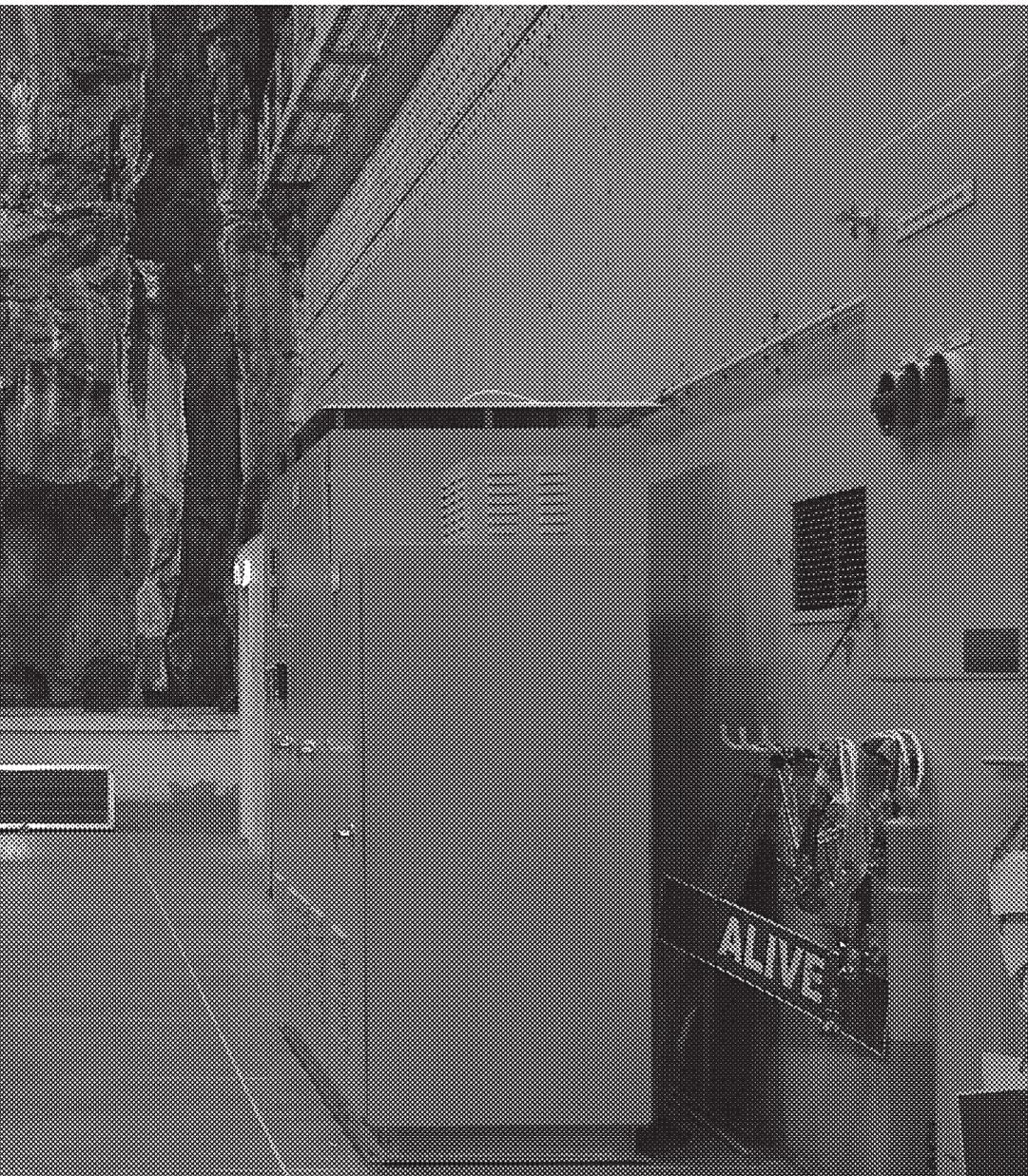
be recognised in contrast to the sometimes-gimmicky reliance upon multi-screen formats for presenting video within a gallery setting. In this way, Stanton's work aligns itself with the venerable tradition of artists' film and video that favours an attention to the image as both aesthetic material and visual effect — that is, as both crafted and observed. The work of American filmmaker, James Benning is exemplary in this regard for his observational films that interweave image and temporal duration such that one seems to produce the other as is seen in films such as *Landscape Suicide* (1987). What I mean here is highlighted by the rich space that Stanton establishes between the slow-moving observational intimacy of the image in her work and the accentuated soundscape. Thus sound and image combine to create a space that we, as audience, inhabit. Yet sound and image don't just fit together smoothly and it is this tension created by movements of slowing down, of dwelling in the image, and of the articulation or colouring of sound that creates this cinematic space. This is a space for thinking cinematically — for thinking of the operation of sound and image rather than its simple descriptive qualities. Thinking cinematically creates space through careful attention to the image and its affects rather than through an assemblage of screens,

1. Timothy Morton, 'Earth Thoughts at Human Magnitude' in *The Geologic Imagination* (Amsterdam: Sonic Acts, 2015), 164.

Morton notes that the term 'earth magnitude' was first coined by Douglas Kahn, Professor at the National Institute for Experimental Arts, UNSW.



Fig.1 McKay Creek Hydroelectric Power Station (36°51'31"S 147°14'03"E)



for example.

The observational quality of Stanton (and famously, Benning's) work and her approach to the cinematic returns us to Morton's notion of 'thinking at Earth magnitude'. Morton describes this as a 'loop-form' — a looping between thinking relative to both the specificity and the vastness of nature.<sup>2</sup> We see this played out most simply in the combined sense of being there and being apart that is effected by Stanton's work. We also see this in the imagery and the composition of *Undercurrents* in which the incursion of the human is estranged, such that the imposing structures of the Keiwa Hydroelectric Scheme (Fig.1) have seemingly gone feral, becoming a kind of prosthesis that has become naturalised into the environment that it once invaded. Human workers are diminished by its sheer size and magnitude, relegated to the role of caretaker of this vast scheme. A shift of power has been affected here such that the human subject (architect of wonder and of devastation) is not so much overwhelmed as disregarded (or side-lined), for Stanton's observation is of a natural world that seems indifferent to us. Thus Stanton does not avoid showing human actors nor does she disavow their presence but rather she highlights the insignificance of these tiny figures and their futile actions against the powerful continuous sound of water in movement, or the inky blackness of the image of open water with which *Undercurrents* both begins and ends.

*Undercurrents* is a beautiful and haunting film — a delicate elegy to the natural world and to a failed hu-

man endeavour (the Keiwa Hydroelectric Scheme remains incomplete). Yet it would be a mistake to consider *Undercurrents* as an heir to a Romantic landscape tradition because the sense of awe, with which we see the powerful force of water, for example, or the slow movement of mist enveloping a tree, is not pictured as a backdrop to a narrative of (human) heroic endeavour. And nor should *Undercurrents* be considered through notions of place or place-making, which may conventionally greet artwork that has a focus upon the observation of land as *Undercurrents* does. Instead, Stanton's work engages with Morton's 'thinking at Earth magnitude' through its careful and quiet observational qualities, and its openness to the world around it — qualities that are summarised by Morton as a 'weird openness to things, disengaged from cataloguing and classifying beings.'<sup>3</sup> Thinking in this way is to be porous to the world, to observing or tuning into an ecological world that no longer has us at its centre (but upon which we have had profound effect). It is a world in which the certainty of the 'for us' (which philosophers have termed 'correlationism') is disavowed.

In 2014, scientists from across the world attended a summit to debate the Anthropocene — that is, the question of whether a new geological age can be determined, one in which humans have had a profound,

2. Timothy Morton, 'Earth Thoughts at Human Magnitude', 164.

3. Timothy Morton, 'Earth Thoughts at Human Magnitude', 165.

4. <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/oct/16/-sp-scientists-gather-talks-rename-human-age-anthropocene-holocene>

deep and irrevocable effect.<sup>4</sup> Following this and further discussions, it seems not so much of a question ‘if’ as ‘when’. At which point do we date the beginning of the Anthropocene as we head towards our own obsolescence and possible extinction? At which point did we begin to have an effect that goes deep into the geological strata of the Earth? As Dipesh Chakabarty states ‘human beings now exert a geophysical force’.<sup>5</sup> Like Morton’s ‘thinking at Earth magnitude’, Chakabarty speaks of ‘perspectival thinking’ and of ‘mood perspective’ as a means to remain open to a form of thought that ‘precedes politics’ in order to ‘help us to see what is truly shared in the climate crisis.’<sup>6</sup> Yet what seems the most powerful lesson to take away from the discussion of the Anthropocene as it extends into philosophy and into art, is the looping that is so evident in Stanton’s *Undercurrents*. This is a loop that takes in the wonderment of a vast natural ecology to which have been blinded by our human-centredness, recognising it as connected into our own lives but also separate — a world not just for us.

(2015)

5. ‘Moods of the Anthropocene’ Interview with Dipesh Chakabarty by Liesbeth Koot, in *The Geologic Imagination* (Amsterdam: Sonic Acts, 2015), 101.

6. ‘Moods of the Anthropocene’ Interview with Dipesh Chakabarty by Liesbeth Koot, 103.

Polly Stanton (b.1976)

Polly Stanton is an audio-visual artist and researcher. Her work investigates how cinematic forms document, reflect and shape human experiences of place and environment.

In addition to her art practice she has worked professionally in the film industry in post-production sound and lectures in moving image art and sound.

Recent selected exhibitions include Moving Pictures, Expanding Space (Careof Gallery, Italy 2014) Melbourne Now (NGV 2013) Darkness OnThe Edge of Town (Perth Centre for Photography 2013) One After Another (Kings ARI, 2013) and Imagined Spaces (Bristol Biennial, UK 2012). She has partaken in numerous residencies both in Australia and overseas and was the recipient of the Australia Council for the Arts' ArtStart grant (2012) and the Helsinki International Studio Residency (2016).

Bridget Crone is an independent curator with a particular interest in moving image and performance practices. She is Lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, The University of London.

The Kiewa Hydroelectric scheme has remained hidden under the Australian Alps for 78 years since its inception. Below the mountainside it has continued to funnel the snowmelt and divert waterways into churning, underground turbines and through long steel pipes that carve a bright cylindrical path through alpine forest. This confluence of industry and the natural world strikes both a visual and aural moment of contrast—a juncture of environment and human endeavour that exists largely unseen and unheard.

*Undercurrents* is a moving image and sound work that traces the pathway of water as it travels through the distinct sites of the scheme, creating an audio-visual mapping that documents changes of place and time over a 12 hour day—from the first moments of the dawn ice-melt, to the last stages of dusk as the current is halted by the dark water of Junction Dam. Shifting and observational, the work presents a cinematic gesture of landscape that is at once ephemeral and stark.

*Undercurrents* was created during a supported residency at The Bogong Centre for Sound Culture.

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