

Ocean as Metaphor and Embodiment

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Abstract

In a climate of increasing political instability and social transformation, scholarly discourses have started to foreground the fluidity of form as essential for human and inter-species co-existence. There is a pervasiveness in contemporary society of what Zygmunt Bauman, in his analysis of “liquid,” software-based modernity, refers to as form immersed in and affected by conditions of uncertainty, insecurity, and unsafety. Many anthropologists and sociologists have argued that the efficacy of such a form is grounded in its state of emergence, that is, in the ways it both exceeds and is continuous with its constitutive parts. Artists expressing this contingent fluidity often draw our attention to the ocean as a site of emergence and creation. Today, much of this artistic reimagining of ocean life is executed digitally and dramatised by liquefying solid objects that morph into other, less familiar shapes. New environments are being generated, particularly by means of AI, that are freed from the burdens of the present. The association with the ocean’s currents frames the liquefaction of unmoored, drifting, and blurred entities as an opportunity for change and a metaphor for the world to come. Discussing the work of media artists such as Refik Anadol, this article situates the agency of artistic production within a broader shift towards the conditions of liquid modernity and suggests ways to confront aesthetically pleasing sensations with art that recognises the inequitable impacts of societal transformation. It argues for an ocean that is both metaphorical and embodied, liquid, and more than wet.

Keywords

artistic agency; AI; liquid modernity; media art; ocean art

1. Introduction

In *Echoes of the Earth: Living Archive* (2024), an immersive installation work and exhibition by media artist Refik Anadol, iridescent, wave-like structures incessantly move across all the surfaces of the exhibition space. They constantly collapse into each other, changing their shapes and colours and forming new organic entities that are reminiscent of raging ocean currents. As if out of control, pulverised liquids splash in all directions, triggering further dynamics and transforming the surroundings into ever-new ecologies (see Figure 1). Some of these AI-generated shapes are inspired by coral reefs (see Figure 2), others by the flora and fauna of rainforests. On show at London's Serpentine Gallery in the spring of 2024, *Echoes of the Earth: Living Archive* has received critical acclaim from peers, art critics, and the art community for its lavish production and innovative use of AI technology. It is just one of many recent digital art installations that use the ocean's potential for change as a setting to explore the liquification of form and its relationship to contemporary challenges for human and inter-species co-existence.

In this article, I will trace the different ways in which digital art has turned to the ocean as a site, metaphor, and embodiment in its engagement with current societal changes, in particular with the widespread feelings of instability, insecurity, and loss of control that have emerged in response to an ongoing fragmentation of social cohesion. A central reference point of these analyses will be Zygmunt Bauman's notion of a "liquid modernity," which he coined in the 1990s to examine the late modern state of unfinishedness, incompleteness, and underdetermination that has evolved into a pervasive condition affecting individuals around the world. In contrast to the stable ideological frameworks that once characterised the period of "solid" modernity and guided human social interaction, liquid modernity denotes a state in which everything we interact with becomes transient, replaceable, and subject to rapid transformation. Perfection has given way to permanent improvement; mutual engagement has been superseded by facile escape; trust and



Figure 1. Refik Anadol, *Echoes of the Earth: Living Archive*, installation shot (detail), Serpentine Gallery, London (2024).

commitment have succumbed to the need for flexibility and adaptability; and everlasting realities have disappeared in favour of a hopeless pursuit of infinite chances.

This is the backdrop against which contemporary art digs into the depths of oceans in search of clues that help us navigate the many crises linking humanity and the sea. From climate change and rising ocean levels to maritime pollution, coral degradation, and the global loss of marine biodiversity, there is an endless list of unsettling phenomena that connect ecological calamities with the ongoing erosion of fixed axioms, routines, and rules. In this diminishment of old certainties and the rise of more “liquid” connections, can art offer a place where more durable visions emerge, where new ideas can accommodate existing realities, and where an escape from disaster becomes possible? Or does contemporary art production merely serve to assuage such crises by using eye-catching aesthetics to advocate change as the new guiding principle? Does art on the ocean floor get to the bottom of the problems of existing geography, history, and reality, or does it distract from the complexities that characterise our present condition? These questions arise when we consider the aquatic world as a source of potential, as is increasingly happening in digital art.

2. From Conceptual Art to Contractual Art

When Zygmunt Bauman introduced the term “liquid modernity” in his eponymous book at the turn of the century, he did so as a way of characterising the loss of certainty and stability in contemporary life and the increasing prevalence of more fleeting social experiences (Bauman, 2000). Bauman considered “fluidity” and “liquidity” as useful metaphors for the conceptualisation of the nature of the present. Liquid connections differ from solid bonds in their transient character, their orientation towards opportunities, and their endless adaptability. Liquidity is associated with a higher degree of mobility. It signals lightness, inconsistency, and underdetermination. It is not difficult to see these attributes reflected in everyday life today. We encounter them in the form of precarious employment, political instability, shifting ideological agendas, and the ordeal of never-finished tasks. Such processes of liquefaction are pervasive and, importantly, entail a shift of responsibility from the macro to the micro-scale, from the system to the individual. Moreover, this shift means that increasingly individuals now have to deal with patterns of agency and interdependence as opposed to solid objects and configurations. As Bauman (2000, p. 7) has argued, the liquidising forces have moved from the system to society, from an all-determining framework to the finest pores of social interaction and cohabitation.

While Bauman’s analysis of liquid modernity certainly helps to elucidate the manifold demands and aesthetic seductions of liquefaction, the work of internationally renowned artists such as Liam Young, Ursula Biemann, and the Otolith Group situates these developments in oceanic environments fractured by the historical and material forces of planetary environmental crises, colonial extractivism, and cultural imperialism. Their depiction of contested oceanic environments highlights the uneven geographies and experiences that characterise these evolving spatio-temporal configurations. Moreover, these developments are also finding echoes in other cultural arenas dedicated to creating new experiences and reimagining familiar realities. At the nexus of art and technology, in particular, developments have occurred in recent years that engage with the various facets of liquefaction in strikingly different ways. Interdisciplinary approaches to digital worldbuilding facilitated by advanced technologies such as quantum computing, blockchain, and AI form one such arena.

Refik Anadol's work as a digital artist and entrepreneur and his rather abstract aesthetic compositions can be confronted in this context with Eduardo Kohn's view of poetry as "ethnography by other means" (Kohn, 2013, p. 2) or with what Zygmunt Bauman hints at in his comparison of poetry and history. Accentuating Derrida's fundamental insistence on the embodiedness of writing and the inscribability of the body, Bauman (2000, p. 203) argues that "poetry and history are two parallel currents...of the autopoiesis of human potentialities." Both history and poetry tend to disclose and create ever-new possibilities obstructed by the walls erected by prevailing ideological frameworks. They do so by piercing and demolishing the wall and shedding light not on what was hidden behind it but on things that have been part of the wall from the very beginning. This spatial metaphor aligns with Bifo Berardi's (2019) conceptualisation of poetry as a therapeutic apparatus, as a form of dealing with uncertainties that cannot be grasped in a way that would help one regain a sense of agency concerning one's own situation—as an excess of the given field of signification. Whether it is poetry that lights the "islands of visible forms in the dark sea of the invisible and marks the scattered spots of relevance in the formless mass of the insignificant" (Bauman, 2000, p. 207) or other forms of artistic expression, art is able to provide the clues to connections that not only typically elude our conscious attention but also sustain and propel the conditions of uncertainty we find ourselves immersed in today.

Immersion also plays a vital role in Refik Anadol's oeuvre, which ranges from site-specific, three-dimensional data sculptures and paintings to audio-visual live performances and expansive multi-media installations. At the heart of his practice is the manipulation of vast datasets, which are processed with machine-learning tools to transform existing entities and their relationships into new structures and textures. Gigantic screens that display colourful creatures flowing into one another, forming abstract patterns and constantly morphing shapes, appear in many of Anadol's works and are often interpreted as visualisations of unseen worlds and as the creation of artificial realities in response to disappearing nature. One critic has described his art practice as "a series of Borgesian software installations made from all the world's memories and data, writing and coding a form of optimistic science fiction that takes our universe as its subject matter" (Kissick, 2023, para. 7).

Charged with similarly grand gestures, *Unsupervised*, an installation piece 50 square metres in size that Anadol metaphorically refers to as a "machine hallucination," took over MoMA's Gund Lobby in November 2022. On view for more than 50 weeks, the work makes use of 200 years of art that MoMA has in its collection and includes more than 100,000 images and text materials in a machine-learning model, interpreting the museum archive and generating hundreds of richly coloured, ultra-high-resolution abstractions to be sold as non-fungible tokens (NFTs). The continuously undulating waves confronting visitors in MoMA's atrium transformed the unique collection of the museum into a swirling datascape ready to be consumed like ultra-processed food in a drive-through restaurant. Suggesting a grounded complexity within these dream-like image series, additional data was derived from weather conditions and (using surveillance technology) the flow of museum visitors and fed into the algorithm. *The New York Times* reported a six-figure sales value of some of Anadol's blockchain-based artworks, with part of their proceeds also serving to boost MoMA's faltering finances ("Even as NFTs," 2022). Unsurprisingly, *Unsupervised* has also become the first tokenised artwork in MoMA's renowned permanent collection, signalling a watershed moment in the history of NFT art at a time when museums are eager to reach out to new, tech-savvy audiences and new breeds of funders such as crypto-millionaires.

Anyone who finds a lengthy examination of the wealth of works in MoMA's permanent collection, with all their historical contingencies and contemporary connections, too laborious may enjoy the playful "lightness" of *Unsupervised*. Yet, the fluidity and lightness of these art-inspired images, along with their high-tech formalism and ignorance towards practices of cultural meaning-making that form the basis of museum archives, obfuscate the many dimensions that connect the work's cultural agency with technologies of surveillance, the control of human creativity, and the embellishment of abstract, disembodied data. Ben Davis (2023, para. 19) has argued that "it is because Anadol has created such a purely decorative, cheerleader-ish style of AI art that he received so much support along the way from the tech giants." His concern is that imagery generated in this way is stripped of social context and historical depth and expresses "nothing about anything in particular except for the machine's ability to do what it is doing" (Davis, 2023, para. 16). The question remains, however, whether this machine—or by extension the permeated "wall" previously referenced in relation to Bauman's concept of liquid modernity—operates outside of social, ideological, and historical contexts or rather forms a dispositif introduced into the art world with the help of AI and quantum computing to re-segment and re-signify the field of culture.

For Refik Anadol's *Unsupervised* installation, MoMA teamed up with Bitmark and their digital art wallet, Autonomy, to provide visitors with digital souvenirs on the second floor of the museum outside the Marron Atrium. Visitors were invited to scan a QR code displayed on a wall, download an app and receive a memento minted in limited editions of 5,000. As a result, free mementoes for 20,000 collectors, many of them probably new to blockchain technology, were minted on the Tezos blockchain throughout the course of the installation from November 2022 to October 2023. This memorable experience incentivised museum visitors to engage with a burgeoning culture of "digital collectables" at a world-leading art institution. However, this experience raises concerns. As one critic put it:

It is the cultural work that the spectacular AI is doing to normalise surveillance systems, to turn environmentally devastating computation into something pleasing and even soothing, and to actively participate in the refinement of technologies that can and certainly will be used by the military that is the problem. (Lossin, 2023, para. 8)

This list of problematic cultural interventions could easily be expanded by considering the technology-aided financialisation of art experiences, the manipulative regime of chance and control in the creation of new world-building archives, the dehistoricisation of human and inter-species relations, and the propagation of liquefaction as the supreme and all-pervasive parameter of social order.

3. Liquefaction Will not Save the Planet

If we turn our attention from the generated object to the machine, we see how much the heightened interest in the artistic creation of endlessly malleable dreamscapes and its harnessing of unsupervised conditions align closely with the aspirations of tech innovators, capital markets, investors, and international financial flows. The boom in NFTs prior to the crypto crisis in 2022, and the way in which NFTs have merged art and money into a single concept in such a short space of time, point to the momentum unleashed by the merger of AI technology, non-fungible tokens, and immersive art experiences. The fact that museums, art dealers, and private collectors alike entered this market so quickly can be explained not least by their search for new income streams and investment opportunities in a period of increased uncertainty caused by the

Covid-19 pandemic. Amidst this uncertainty, quantum computing, AI, and NFT art proved to be a “crucible for change,” serving younger generations who “embraced NFTs as a symbol of their own rising power in society” as well as propelling a “shadow banking system of alternative assets and hedged liquidity” (Small, 2024, pp. 9–10). Even after the entire crypto market collapsed in early 2022, the complex connections between the art market, banner artists, technology companies, and the financial world were able to remain intact and become normalised through continued investment in the underlying technologies.

When in May 2022 Christie’s auctioned Refik Anadol’s NFT *Living Architecture: Casa Batlló*, a work inspired by Antoni Gaudí’s Barcelona monument of the same name, the piece sold for an impressive 1,380,000 USD (Christie’s, 2022). One of the World Economic Forum’s Young Global Leaders Class of 2024 and recognised by *The Economist* as “the artist of the moment,” Anadol has since collaborated with a diverse array of companies, such as Rolls Royce, Turkish Airlines, Wimbledon Foundation, and Dior Parfums. He has also received support from wealth management firms such as Julius Bär, who commissioned the debut projection of Anadol’s *Glacier Dreams* on the façade of Singapore’s ArtScience Museum in June 2023, a work that the artist describes as an expression of “glaciers disappearing across the globe but in a way that brings hope, inspiration and joy to humanity” (Bank Julius Baer, 2023, para. 5). Technology companies such as Google, Microsoft, NVIDIA, Intel, and IBM have partnered with Anadol in the production of such elaborate installations and his work has provided the backdrop for numerous significant sites and events such as the 2023 Grammy Awards ceremony and the world’s largest programmable LED screen, *The Sphere* in Las Vegas. For the latter project, he collaborated with NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory to present *Machine Hallucinations: The Sphere* in 2023.

Known for works such as *Machine Hallucinations*, *Synthetic Dreams*, and *An Important Memory for Humanity*, Refik Anadol runs his own digital gallery featuring an impressive collection of meticulously priced NFT art with links to dedicated online marketplaces such as OpenSea (<https://nft.refikanadol.com>). Anadol’s ventures are marked by superlatives and impressive collaborations with the elites of the technology and financial worlds, creating a sense of sparkle and glamour that can overshadow the underlying causes of the environmental degradation addressed by works that reference the thawing of the poles, rising sea levels, and the loss of biodiversity. There is ample information about the data informing the algorithmic calculations, but no mention of the hidden environmental costs associated with quantum computing systems and the enormous energy consumption involved in the required cooling processes, let alone the resulting rise in greenhouse gas emissions and the depletion of non-renewable energy resources. The rhetoric surrounding Anadol’s installations is frequently studded with metaphors that shift the focus from the profit-driven exploitation of nature to its conservation and refinement in a virtual context. The man-made climate crisis and the multiple crises of the world’s oceans are mystified by claims about “advancing our planet and well-being,” setting a “new global standard for how we interact with and preserve our natural world,” and redefining our “homage to Earth’s irreplaceable ecosystems” (Refik Anadol, n.d.).

One of the artist’s most ambitious endeavours in this respect is *Dataland*, a digital museum and Web3 platform dedicated to AI art and data visualisation. The first initiative of this platform, *Large Nature Model*, is an open-source generative AI model trained on an extensive dataset of the natural environment that focuses entirely on creating AI-enhanced nature scenes. It promotes a kind of “digital environmentalism” that is based on the algorithmic modification of environmental data sourced by Refik Anadol Studio on-site or from the databases of institutions such as the Smithsonian Institute, ConellLab, London’s Natural History

Museum, and National Geographic. From fanciful, stunningly detailed landscapes to swirling, crashing waves, the model generates a range of nature-related imagery, sounds, and scents. It includes billions of images of coral reefs and rainforests that have been transformed into a succession of hyper-realistic depictions of environments and more abstract, brightly coloured organic shapes that continuously flow and evolve with the currents of the data ocean fed into the system. In this perpetual state of movement, mutation, and reconfiguration, nothing remains static. The dazzling, ever-changing visuals are accompanied by soft ambient music and a soundscape of flowing water, rustling leaves, and chirping birds to evoke the appeal of a powerful, immersive experience of nature. Since the *Large Nature Model* is a programme trained to eliminate all imperfections and smooth over all gaps in meaning, its allure largely stems from the creation of a sense of absolute harmony and perfection.

In his use of the *Large Nature Model* to create the opulent *Echoes of the Earth: Living Archive* at London's Serpentine Gallery in 2024 (see Figures 1 and 2), Anadol even included fragrant scents co-created with Bulgari to enhance the level of sensory stimulation and the experience of change (Banks, 2024). This introduction of artificially generated rainforest scents adds an additional dimension to the AI-driven vision of a constantly reimagined liquid nature. *Large Nature Model* cloaks Zygmunt Bauman's deep concern about liquid modernity's state of uncertainty in a compelling narrative suggesting that ubiquitous liquefaction could save the planet. In his critique of the seductive fluidity and lightness of modern being, Bauman (2000, p. 2) stresses that fluids "neither fix space nor bind time....Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture." This perspective allows us to view the *Large Nature Model* as an evolving archive capable of generating an almost unlimited number of descriptions crystallised into

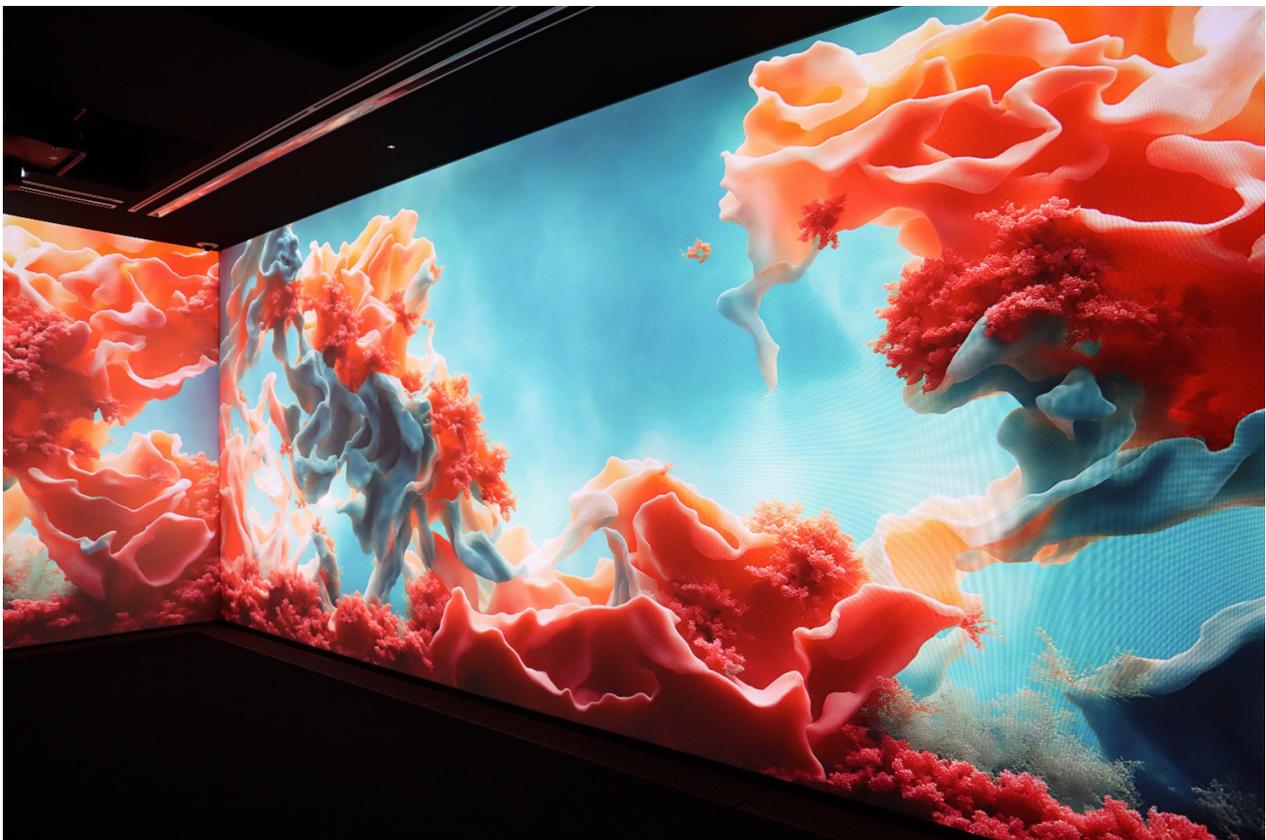


Figure 2. Refik Anadol, *Echoes of the Earth: Living Archive*, installation shot, Serpentine Gallery, London (2024).

marketable NFT art. Just as NFTs multiply the possibilities of creating “unique” works of art (tokenised and minted digital assets that contain unique identification codes), NFT snapshots—providing information about wallets holding NFTs from specific collections—further multiply the possibilities of financial speculation with NFT art. Similar to other instruments that quantify creative work, these snapshots serve as tools in digital environments to siphon off value from cultural or biological life for individual profit, regardless of whether the source material originates from art history, outer space, or marine nature.

4. More Than Wet: Emergence, Extension, and Excess

Shrouded by its alleged mission to explore AI’s possibilities for saving ocean and rainforest ecosystems, the *Large Nature Model* operates and intervenes in a vast, historically loaded archive of interconnected practices that carry social meanings. By capturing data on a wide range of terrestrial and marine species, cultural artefacts, natural landscapes, and weather phenomena, the model suggests it can generate not only impressively detailed representations of life but also uncover new relationships within the algorithmically crafted patterns, sequences, and clusters. However, the visual metaphors and acoustic allegories derived from the data fed into the AI modelling process remain completely detached from the socio-historical context of the respective locations. Cultural artefacts, for instance, embody particular social ideologies; uneven distributions of wealth contribute to pockets of enormous environmental pollution in disadvantaged regions; and ocean life is intertwined with the histories of colonial slave trade, illegalised migration, climate-fuelled displacement, and global capital flows. None of these webs of relatedness are present in the *Large Nature Model*. Oceans may seem to be endlessly malleable and ever-changing assemblages, but these confluences cannot erase the materiality of the sea beyond its liquid form—the concrete histories of ethnic struggles, political confrontations, and all the projects that have started to question the ideological frameworks driving environmental degradation and the inequitable distribution of resources.

In short, what is lacking in so many blockbuster AI interpretations of oceanic nature is a recognition of the sea as a space of politics, one that reshapes prevailing narratives of land, sea, history, and territory not on a purely metaphorical level, but with a sense of embodiment and material presence. As Steinberg and Peters (2015, p. 261), state:

Thinking from the ocean as a means toward unearthing a material perspective that acknowledges the volumes within which territory is practised: a world of fluidities where place is forever in formation and where power is simultaneously projected on, through, in, and about space.

Steinberg and Peters’ citation casts significant doubt on the relevance and meaning of repeated claims that the *Large Nature Model*’s data is ethically sourced, its computational model open to all, and its machine hallucination a vital contribution to preserving the culture of Indigenous people. Such statements and the media reports about Refik Anadol Studio’s work that is filled with them, play skilfully on the claviature of the art market, which eagerly applauds the sensory experience conveyed by media artists who touch the rainforest, listen to the sound of jaguars, live with snakes and birds, and immerse themselves in “untamed” nature—just for a while before heading back to the studio. These performative gestures towards embodied sensations are not simply about demonstrating harmony with the forces of nature. They are also meant to give an account of the artist’s mastery of all the challenges posed by the “liquid” materiality of a changing world. Reports about access achieved to the inaccessible, as well as the hunt for ever-new superlatives and

the control over a growing mega-archive of global environmental data, are thus important ingredients of the fascination that emanates from Anadol's work and lubricates the NFT art market. They create space for an AI-generated ocean whose logics and means of production are obscured, while stark images and striking visual metaphors of data distract from the ocean's embodied realities beyond liquidity.

Returning to Eduardo Kohn's view of poetry as "ethnography by other means" and following his understanding of anthropology as an ontological endeavour, one might say that the many components typically associated with the ocean's liquid materiality cannot be meaningfully grasped in terms of their separate formal trajectories, as they "are caught up, constrained by, and forced to harness a shared form that partially exceeds them" (Kohn, 2013, p. 165). For Kohn, their emergence is characterised by the "appearance of unprecedented relational properties which are not reducible to any of the more basic component parts that give rise to them" (Kohn, 2013, p. 166). The emergent ontologies of oceans created by artists with the use of advanced digital technology can thus be conceived of as the manifestation of relational properties enabling fleeting arrangements of human technology, marine species, ocean currents, sea level rise, and many other elements contributing to and emanating from the ocean. Such emergent ontologies are to a certain degree detached from the processes from which they arise (technology development labs, marine evolution, water density, etc.) as much as they are connected to the materialities that are accessed and incorporated into complex assemblages. Artists experimenting with sophisticated digital tools have seized the opportunities arising at this disjuncture/continuity nexus in very different ways.

Liam Young, a filmmaker, designer, and producer whose work has been shown at art institutions such as the Venice Biennale, the New York Metropolitan Museum, and M Plus Hong Kong, is well-known for his breath-taking visualisations of imaginary futures. His research spans fiction and documentary in an attempt to critically and speculatively engage with topical issues involving city-making, labour, colonisation, and the environment. Young's (2023) *The Great Endeavor*, for instance, a cinematic planetary-scale design fiction developed in response to the ongoing climate emergency, highlights the critical role of oceans for renewable energy infrastructures. This para-fictional worldbuilding project includes motion graphics and visual effects at a scale that makes saving the world by geo-engineering the entire planet on land and at sea seem uncannily within reach. In the film, carbon dioxide is removed from the atmosphere and transformed into a liquified gas that is pumped deep beneath the ocean floor. Young's spell-binding imagery depicts how this fictional project involves a mobilisation of labour, resources, and means of production that is unique in scope and how gigantic infrastructures being built in the sea and on land engage the ocean as a volume penetrated by material-semiotic interventions in all its depths and layers.

Operating across many different registers, *The Great Endeavor* demonstrates how the physical act of reengineering the ocean, the collective human effort involved in it, and the decarbonisation of the planet are all as relevant to understanding the emerging oceanic assemblage as the decolonisation of the atmosphere and the imaginary ocean of impending disaster. Metaphor and matter are constantly intertwined and inextricably linked to the possibilities and fictions that extend beyond the current reality of impending environmental catastrophe. Acknowledging the interconnectedness of material and symbolic operations, Young provides a poignant example of the current lack of such thinking when arguing that architects developing fancy building envelopes for the tech industry's corporate headquarters are "just set-dressing the waiting rooms, distracting us with expressive displays while the machines programme our planet, hidden behind windowless walls and anonymous forms" (Young, 2019, p. 13). By contrast, the emergent forms in

Young's work expose the dynamic entanglement of physical processes and human experiences, environmental narratives, and oceanic inscriptions on bodies.

5. Bodies at Sea/Bodies of Water

The body at sea is both concrete and abstract insofar as the body's expressivity extends into an incorporeal realm of potential. Bodies are shaped by the material forces of currents, waves, and winds, as well as by various human and non-human interactions, and can give rise to the formation of new socio-linguistic assemblages. In his interventions in art and architecture discourse, Brian Massumi, among many others, has repeatedly drawn attention to this "liminal realm of emergence, where half-actualised actions and expressions arise like waves on a sea" (Massumi, 1995, p. 92). Today, the question is increasingly being asked as to whether insisting on the ocean's liquid materiality, motion, and temporality is "sufficient in light of the ways in which the ocean exceeds its material liquidity, and its felt wetness" (Peters & Steinberg, 2019, p. 294). Peters and Steinberg argue for a "more-than-wet ontology" and have begun to challenge concepts that *either* understand artistic marine research only as an engagement with language and symbolic meaning *or* favour a way of thinking of and beyond ocean spaces that is blind to the different experiences of bodies immersed in "flow," "liquidity," and "wetness." Peters and Steinberg (2019, p. 304) suggest that:

By relying on our understanding of the ocean in all its complexity to connect the biological, the material, the environmental and the atmospheric, we nourish an imagination that destabilises not just our fantasies of stable, place-based land but also the counter-fantasy of a repetitive, rhythmic, dynamically liquid ocean of flows.

Questioning the exclusive emphasis on material factors as a prerequisite for insightful accounts of contemporary co-existence, Sara Ahmed (2008, p. 36) has warned that "in claiming to return to matter, we might be losing sight of how matter matters in different ways" for different people over time. What more-than-wetness brings to the table in this regard is a view of, with, and beyond the ocean that encourages us to rethink our engagement with the world not just in terms of unrestricted flexibility and boundless potential but also concerning the experiences and challenges of different bodies—how material phenomena and conditions are "lived, felt and internalised in the bodies of those experiencing them" (Peters & Steinberg, 2019, p. 297).

Similar to how Liam Young considers the ocean as both metaphor and embodiment of social and environmental crises in his para-fictional films, a growing number of artists have recently embraced the shape-shifting potential of computer-animated worlds to build an understanding of the ocean as a more-than-wet space. Bassam Issa Al-Sabah's (2022) *I am Error* (see Figure 3), for instance, revolves around queering the military ethos of video-game masculinity by immersing the body in a sea of "open bindings" (Ingold, 2022). In this artist's work, these bindings enmesh human experiences with a variety of physical processes, biological productivity, and other life forms that merge into the body and threaten its distinct properties. Computer-generated images show the floating body featured in this animation in constant flux, opening to the outside, blending into its surroundings, and converging with flowers and tentacular ocean creatures. The work's vision of transformation casts imperfections, disruptions, glitches, and decay as a form of resistance against traditional norms and structures. It draws on an understanding of oceanic excess, with bodies immersed in the sea exhibiting more than their typical shape and the space of the ocean itself also

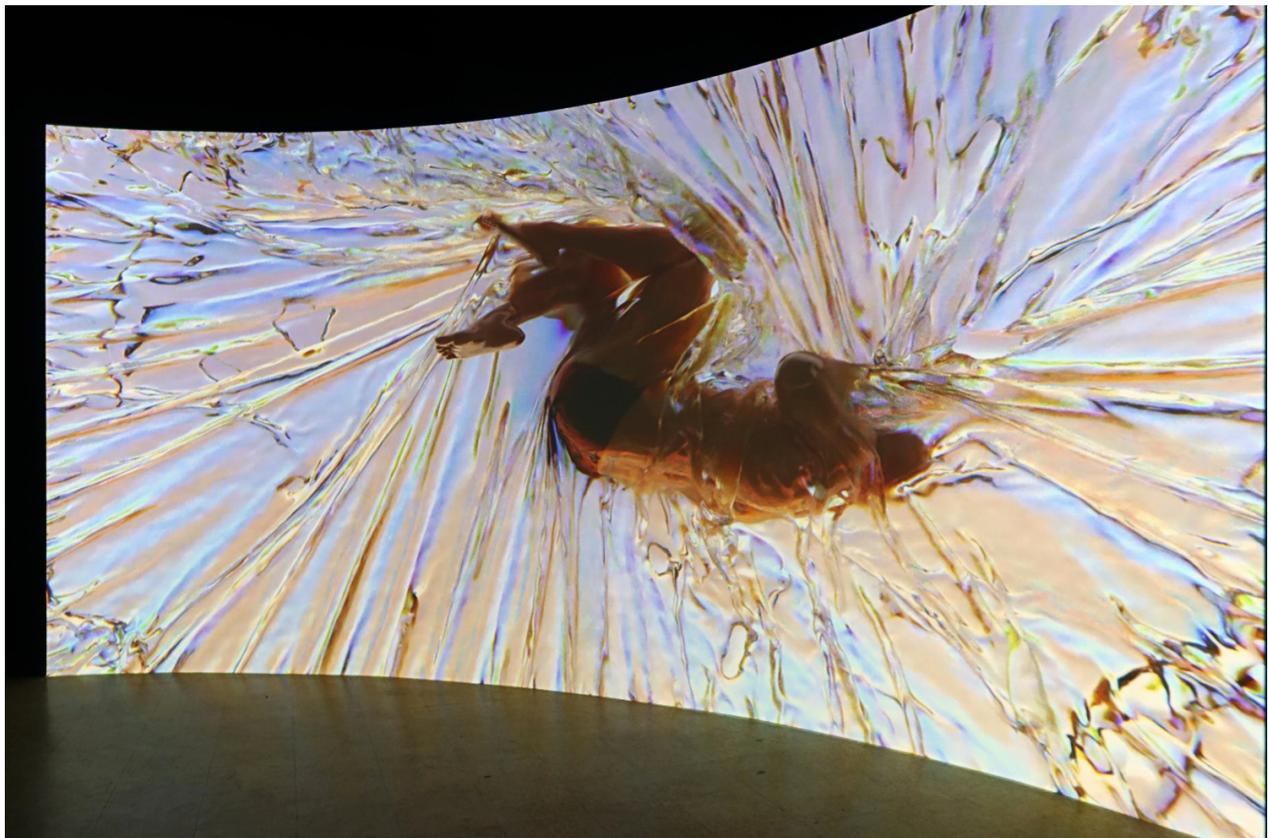


Figure 3. Bassam Issa Al-Sabah, *I am Error*, installation shot, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill (2022).

always beyond itself—beyond the confines of a sealed entity, exceeding itself and its liquidity, becoming embodied, “internalising itself within the subjects that constitute the marine environment” (Peters & Steinberg, 2019, p. 298). As Peters and Steinberg put it (2019, pp. 297–298):

This materiality of the ocean in excess meshes together with human life in such a way that embodied experience transcends liquid, “wet” engagement. The ocean’s materiality is sensed through a concatenation of smell, sound, sight, and taste as well as touch, exceeding the unidimensional physical property of wetness.

Another example of world-building digital art positing an ontology that acknowledges the character of the ocean as a more-than-wet space is Gabriel Massan’s (2023) *Third World: The Bottom Dimension*, an experimental video game, exhibition and web3 project. This project aims to explore the Black Brazilian experience as it intersects with the impacts of colonialism and environmental extractivism. The video game offers audiences the opportunity to immerse themselves not only in a world populated by humanoid creatures, eerie monsters, and energy crystals but also in the logics and mechanics of a game that experiments with unconventional forms of storytelling, decentred experiences, and intentional absence of navigational tools. Experiencing this digital world through the lenses of decoloniality, queerness, and multi-species co-existence, viewers incrementally learn to navigate its temptations and challenges, as every intervention in the ecosystem elicits a particular range of consequences. The glimmering lagoons of this simulated world are intrinsically connected to all kinds of water creatures, sculptures bordering on animate

form, and strange objects that blur the boundaries between the known and the unknown. There is a quality to these environments that evokes Timothy Morton's (2013) "hyperobjects," a term coined to articulate the interobjective bonds and non-local extensions that are at the heart of ecological dilemmas such as rising sea levels and warming oceans, phenomena that are massively distributed in time and space and defy simplistic imaging. In their use of the term "hypersea," Mark and Dianna McMenamain have described a similar excess of oceanic wetness linked to the "sea" and formed by life on land via the physical connections between animals, plants and fungi through which fluid circulates (M. McMenamain and D. McMenamain, 1996). Rendering the terrestrial world as an extension of oceanic wetness, their proposition acknowledges the deep entanglement of physical processes, material compositions, and human experiences. It offers a more holistic view of the environment, "a perspective that recognises volume, matter and emergence" (Steinberg & Peters, 2015, p. 248), yet also reflects the different encounters with fluid matter and the ways in which these processes resonate with the bodies of those who experience them.

Within contemporary art production, this inextricable concurrence of embodiment and the wet matter is particularly evident in works that highlight, in Astrida Neimanis' (2017, pp. 3–4) words, an "understanding of embodiment as both a politics of location, where one's specific situatedness is acknowledged, and as simultaneously partaking in a hydrocommons of wet relations." This watery character of embodiment is prevalent, for instance, in Ursula Biemann's video installations *Subatlantic* (2015) and *Acoustic Ocean* (2018, see Figure 4). Both works feature fictional female scientists exploring North Atlantic marine ecologies, adapting and expanding their own range of sensorial instruments as they interact with water, ocean plants, and sea creatures, as well as the respective natural and cultural histories of this remote region. Water, as

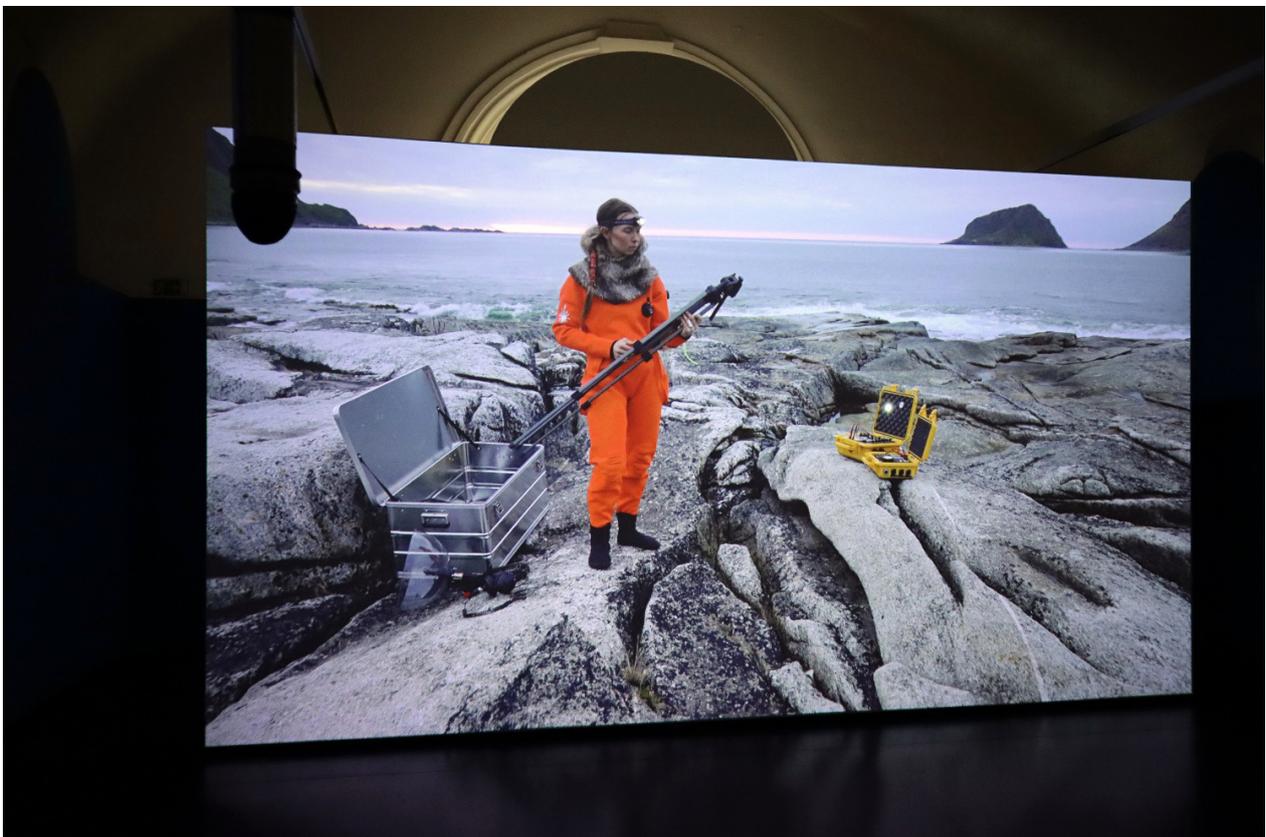


Figure 4. Ursula Biemann, *Acoustic Ocean*, installation shot, MQ Freiraum, Vienna (2024).

Bauman contends, may not fix space and bind time, but these works demonstrate how it extends embodiment in time. It facilitates the becoming of other bodies. In *Acoustic Ocean* the responsiveness and care of a Sami biologist-diver for her environment demonstrate that “as bodies of water we are *both* different *and* in common” (Neimanis, 2017, p. 4).

Similarly, the subaquatic speculative space in the Otolith Group's *Hydra Decapita* (2010) and their more recent *A Sphere of Water Orbiting a Star* (2023) links historical atrocities of colonial exploitation and the transatlantic slave trade with speculative archives that engage with the repressed fear of a wet planet. Weaving together fiction and non-fictional counterparts, these works create an ocean of excess, one that extends the boundaries imposed by geography and provides space for exploring different kinds of embodiment, a space “where healing, understanding, and empowerment is possible” (Kruglyak, 2023, para. 8). The same can be said of John Akomfrah's three-channel video installation *Vertigo Sea* (2015), which brings together multiple narratives that depict the ocean as a site of linkages that are at once material, cultural, and historical: images of black bodies in the hold of slave ships are juxtaposed with scenes of whale and polar bear hunting, refugees adrift in the ocean, and the Zong Massacre of slaves in 1781. What emerges from these speculations and juxtapositions are bodies of water that insist on being both in common and fundamentally different from each other. They relate to a shared history of watery environments as much as they are at odds with all its conventions, logics, and instruments.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have looked at contemporary art production to outline some of the ways in which digital technology's pursuit of constant improvement, unlimited adaptability, and marketable superlatives, in particular at the frontiers opened up by AI and NFT art, complicate the recognition of bodies of water as both porously interconnected and specifically situated. Plugged into the global circuits of finance capitalism, advanced technology can often stand in the way of engaging with the more-than-wet character of oceans, with conditions of wetness that are experienced differently by the bodies immersed in them. I have argued that questions of encounter, agency, and excess need to be dealt with in an attempt to truly acknowledge the multiple ways in which oceanic bodies are connected to life off sea. By engaging with complexities beyond the ocean's geographic boundaries and placing dense webs of material-discursive ocean phenomena centre stage, works of art can reveal new human and non-human dimensions that add complexity and specificity to our experience of water, thereby enhancing our understanding of what lies outside of the conventional boundaries of oceanic knowledge.

An important aspect of such contributions is their insistence on an understanding of the body as lived. This insistence on bodily experience and encounter, on the more-than-human embodiment, and flows of significance, is currently being confronted with the neoliberal abstraction of transcorporeality (a term I use to register the significance of human/non-human entanglements and the fluidity between material and theoretical bodies), with the expanding scope of digital liquification and with financialised control over access to processes of transformation. As shown in the discussion of Refik Anadol's work, contemporary art may sometimes be utilised to constrain, manipulate, and aestheticise the lived experience of wateriness—one's own as much as that of other bodies of water—but it can also experiment with how fluidity, wetness, and watery liminality are an expression of ontological relations that shy away from inherited ideas of mastery. Following Neimanis (2017, p. 145), intimacy is not mastery and the way in which

we intimately relate to the watery conditions we are part of is therefore always beyond a full sense of finality and control. In place of the colonisation of other bodies of water and ourselves, contemporary art that engagingly explores more-than-wet bodies of water takes up Michael Taussig's (2020) call for a mastery of non-mastery and the possibility of mutuality that his proposition entails.

Such artistic endeavours offer an encouraging response to Bauman's analysis of liquid modernity and its devastating effects on human and non-human entities. They do not merely challenge the uncritical glorification of liquefaction but also draw our attention to the instrumental role of liquidity in profit-driven extractive operations and their disastrous consequences for people, communities, species, and environments. Similarly, Steinberg and Peters' notion of more-than-wet ontologies does not dismiss Bauman's general assumptions about how liquidity has evolved into a central tenet of today's neoliberal governmentality but contends that its operational logics cannot be fully grasped without an awareness of how the phantasma of boundless liquification often serves as a smokescreen to hide the elastic regime of porosity and the equally elastic application of material constraints—the permissions given to particular bodies and denied to others. The complexities of forced migration and the legacies of colonialism, extractive capitalism, and ecological disintegration are based on divisions between bodies, as much as they benefit from the dissolution of boundaries that threaten the flows of capitalist desire. Contemporary art can open up ways to navigate this contested landscape of oceanic futures by pointing to the more-than-wet character of their material and semiotic fabric.

However, the quest for more-than-wet ontologies has been challenged by the ubiquitous use of AI, machine learning, and big data, perpetually reconfiguring the frameworks of thinking about and beyond ocean spaces. More than ever, the inherent limitations of AI and NFT art—representational, environmental, legal, and ethical concerns—and its reductive depictions of transcorporeal relations make evident how much a critical artistic attunement “to the differences of bodies that together world our planetary hydrocommons” (Neimanis, 2017, p. 62) is needed to do justice to the plurality of differences and linkages on our more-than-wet planet. Recognising that the ocean is not only what we make it (Linton, 2010) but that the ocean also makes us, artistic production focused on the meshwork of human life and the ocean in excess has begun to explore what it means to be immersed in the waters we are constantly becoming. With that mutuality in mind, there is perhaps nothing more truly artistic than developing forms of careful attunement to liquidity that are in synch with hyperseas yet to come, and to do so on the level of both physicality and experience, metaphor, and embodiment.

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