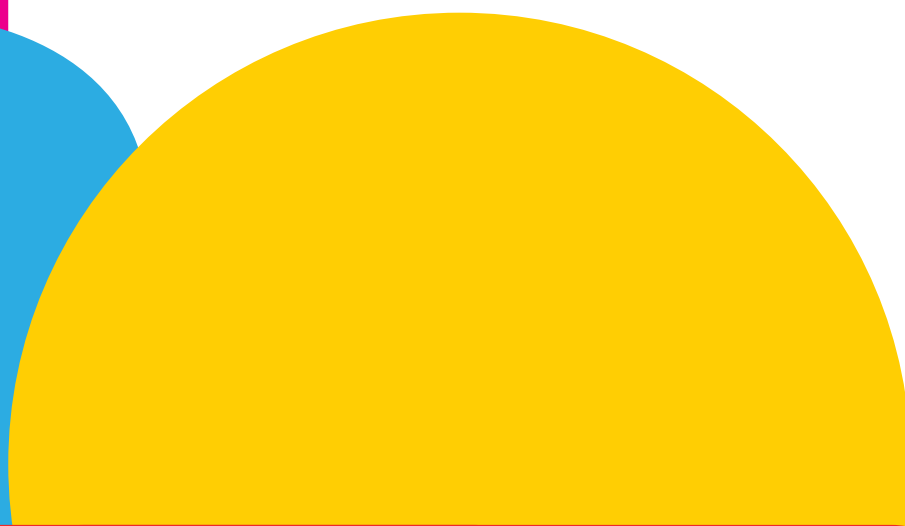


57.1 2021

Art + Australia

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MULTINATURALISM



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Issue 8

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Above:
Kuai Shen
takiRRRtaki, 2020
Still from HD video with piezoelectric vibration sensor
Courtesy of the artist

Left:
Kuai Shen
Entangled, 2019 (detail)
Digital photograph of inverted bivouac protruding from
its location inside a fallen tree
Courtesy of the artist

Below:
Kuai Shen
Compañía Nómada, 2019 (detail)
Digital photograph of evening raid of *tanya añangu* returning
to the bivouac, including two unidentified myrmecophiles
Courtesy of the artist



Turning Around and Upside Down: *Taki, Tiam* and the Nomadic Rhythms of Rain Ants

Kuai Shen



Kuai Shen
Encore, 2019
 Still from HD video with green laser of 532 nm wavelength
 Courtesy of the artist

The works illustrated here derive from an ongoing multispecies art project that follows nomadic ants across the Kichwa community of Sarayaku in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In Sarayaku, alternative political realities and knowledge-making practices for weaving relations with the forest challenge Western aesthetic conventions for sensing and relating to other social beings. Here, entities, places, materials and elements are entangled in the cosmology of *Kawsak Sacha*, the living forest. Encompassed within the *Kawsak Sacha*, life and death boundaries are interwoven through relations that move to the rhythms of a medium in formation.¹ In this sense, rhythm, as an idiom based on the Kichwa principles of *taki* and *tiam*, enables my performative practice with nomad ants and a different way of understanding their social forms.²

The Kichwa *taki* (rhythm/chant) and *tiam* (return/radical change) are principles of Indigenous aesthesis and social resistance in Sarayaku.³ *Taki* and *tiam* circulate through reciprocal activities of community-weaving and more-than-human relations with the rainforest: *minka*, the social coordination of physical labour in unison; *chakra*, the itinerant farm cultivation practices based on human–plant relations; *aguana*, the art of weaving baskets and making earthenware vessels from forest materials; *asuana*, the alcoholic fermentation process, via women’s buccal bacterial communities, to transform yucca into the life-giving *chicha*; and *kajana tushuna*, when people drink *chicha* in rotation and enter altered states while men drum in circles and women dance in imitation of the *Tayassu pecari* of the rainforest.

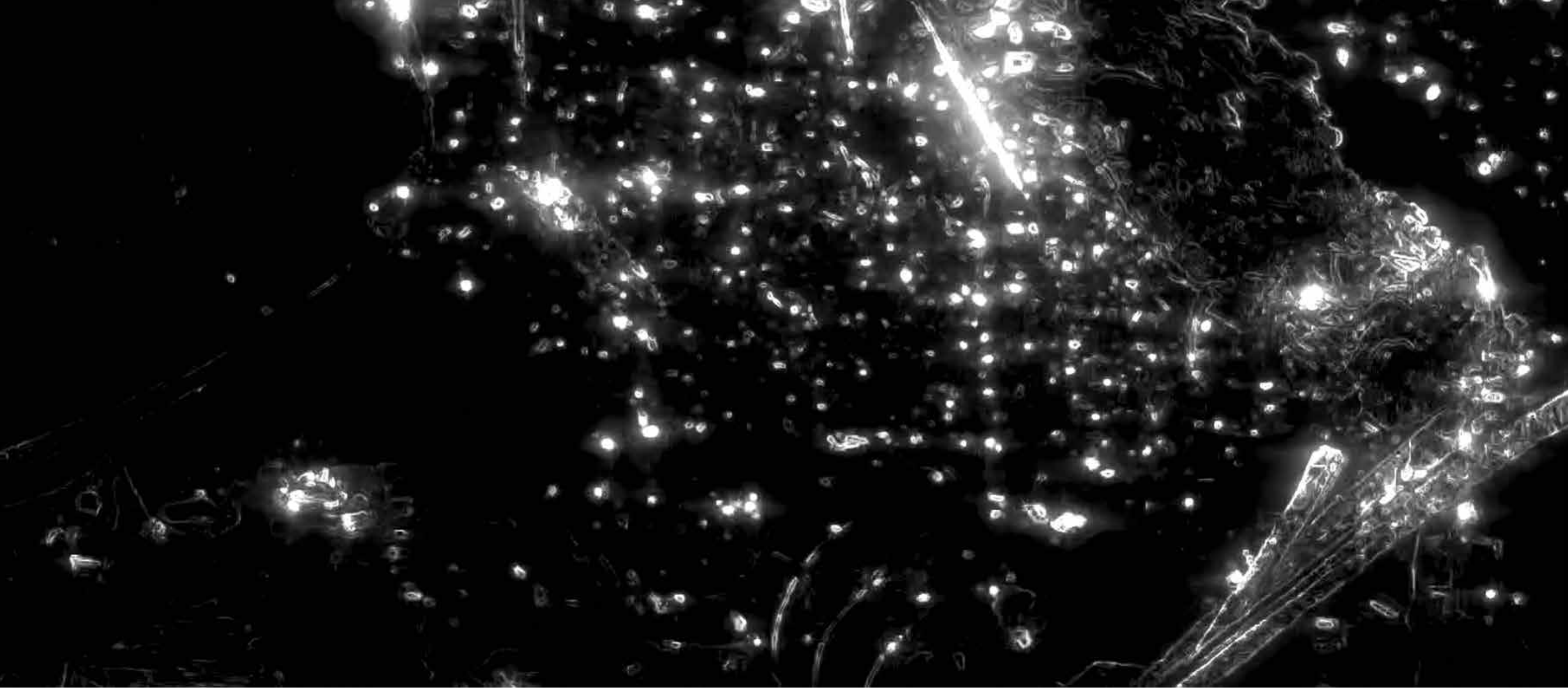
Rhythms emerge in Sarayaku from the resonance of social forms in movement and the migrations of nonhuman life forms, such as the ants known in Western science as *Eciton burchellii*. Commonly known as army ants, their reproductive social life has been rigorously divided between nomadic and stationary cycles, the ants subjected to organisation in colonies, with queens and soldiers raiding other insects.⁴ Fraught with colonial legacies, the scientific portrayal of these ants can be inverted through artistic mediations grounded in the *Kawsak Sacha* to torque and cut across systems of imposed knowledge. To this extent, rhythm becomes a mediation of action rather than an instrument of conduct.⁵

What happens when an idiom of rhythm based on *taki* and *tiam* is employed to analyse ant nomadism? Instead of foregrounding functional mechanisms of reproduction and competition, this approach understands ants as invertebrate communities that weave aesthetic relations with the rainforest. My artistic practice embraces this approach and is guided by *taki* and *tiam* to enact an onto-epistemological change of perception. A version of rhythm guided by Sarayaku’s aesthesis can overturn the Western definition of army ants and, instead of comparing these ants to armies, values them as harbingers of rain. *Tamya añangu*, or rain ants, become forest companions who carry messages of changing precipitations that matter for human life.⁶

In consonance with this, waves of ants moving across the forest tapestry perform in rhythm with the acoustic resonance of the rain. Cued by the rain, *tamya añangu* seek shelter and weave a living nest, known in scientific literature as a bivouac.⁷ When these ants bivouac, they become the space they inhabit using their bodies as materials in an intimate connection with the forest. This recursive event takes the spotlight in my practice of co-opting technologies for the artistic amplification of invertebrate movements.⁸ Piezoelectric sensors, computer vision, macro photography and laser-photocell arrays become tactical media to amplify the performative construction of one particular bivouac dwelling upside down inside a decomposing tree. In light of *taki* and *tiam*, bivouacs become social performances subject to other kinds of rhythms, stimulations and contagions—chemical, symbiotic, parasitical. Defying gravity and geometrical classifications, bivouacs are resilient yet viscous and fluid, eluding ‘the scientific cornerstone of exact reproducibility due to their continual variance over time’.⁹ A great diversity of invertebrate guests and parasites live among rain ants, such as staphylinid beetles and silverfish.¹⁰ They too become part of the bivouac, turning into disruptive/creative co-authors of this unique multispecies migrating ensemble.

Taki and *tiam* enable a performative non-verbal language for approaching aesthetic co-constituting relations that pulsate across social worlds. These relations, unfolding from the bivouac and the extensive migrations of *tamya añangu*, contribute to the rhythms of *Kawsak Sacha*, enacting what Mignolo and Vazquez term decolonial aesthesis: a re-evaluation of perceptual forms and relational practices that have been ‘made invisible by the colonial matrix of power and the westernised imposition of the notion of beauty’.¹¹ In this vein, Sarayaku’s aesthesis is attentive to the world beyond humans. It is entangled in knowledge-making practices attuned to rhythmic diffraction patterns in motion across Amazonian worlds.¹² Through forms of community-weaving, different social movements dominate one another at different intervals, turning around and upside down, between day and night, and between sunrays and rainfall.¹³

1. Tim Ingold, ‘Earth, Sky, Wind, and Weather’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 13, issue s1, 2007, pp. S19–S38; Eben Kirksey, *Emergent Ecologies*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 2015.
2. Antonia Carcelén-Estrada, ‘Weaving Abya-Yala: The Decolonial Aesthetics of Indigenous Resistance’, *New Diversities Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2017, pp. 103–17.
3. Examples include the historical sociopolitical resistance of the people of Sarayaku marching to demand territorial rights in 1992, and the gargantuan century-long social Indigenous movement in Ecuador, whose collective rhythms exert resistance against colonialism, land dispossession and extractivism.
4. T.C. Schneirla, R.Z. Brown and F.C. Brown, ‘The Bivouac or Temporary Nest as an Adaptive Factor in Certain Terrestrial Species of Army Ants’, *Ecological Monographs*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1954, pp. 269–96.
5. Dominique Lestel, ‘Toward an Ethnography of Animal Worlds’, *Angelaki*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2014, pp. 75–89.
6. The community of Sarayaku welcomed my research, taught me rapport and shared with me through collective syncopation the stories of *tamya añangu*. See Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2013.
7. Bert Hölldobler and E.O. Wilson, *The Ants*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, pp. 573–78.
8. Kuai Shen Auson, ‘Tactical Ant Media: Amplifying the Invertebrate Aesthetics of Ants Using Transversality as an Artistic Process’, *Society & Animals*, vol. 27, no. 7, 2019, pp. 678–96.
9. Chris Salter appreciates Hans Diebner’s research into dynamic systems as indeterminate non-repeatable performances, and I in turn take up their work to exemplify that outside the human regime, turbulent flows like those created by ants manifest different scales and rhythms over time. Work cited: Chris Salter, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2010, p. xxx. See also Hans H. Diebner et al., *Performative Science and Beyond: Involving the Process in Research*, Springer, Vienna and New York, 2006, link.springer.com/book/10.1007/3-211-38211-9#toc; accessed 9 June 2020.
10. Carl W. Rettenmeyer, dir., *Army Ant Guests: Associates of Eciton burchellii*, youtu.be/x7e7QvgpkNc, 2009; accessed 7 June 2020.
11. Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez, ‘Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings’, *Social Text Journal*, 15 July 2013, socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings; accessed 9 June 2020.
12. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 2007, pp. 86–91.
13. I enact transversality according to the classic definition by Cooper and Meyer: ‘rhythm may be defined as the way in which one or more unaccented beats are grouped in relation to an accented one’. See Grosvenor Cooper and Leonard B. Meyer, *The Rhythmic Structure of Music*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1960, p. 6.



Kuai Shen
Inverted Bivouac, 2019 (detail)
Still from HD video using edge
detection in computer vision with
OpenCV
Courtesy of the artist

This issue is born out of forest fires and deforestation. It is born out of extraction and despoliation, which ravage landscapes and people, including unique and irreplaceable lifeways, languages and cultures. This issue is born out of anger and despair for irretrievable losses, including plant and animal relations we will never see again. This issue is dedicated to the three billion animals that lost their lives on this continent in the summer of 2019–20, losses subsequently eclipsed by a virus spiralling out of control in the anthroposphere. But this issue is also born out of fierce love and an undying spirit of joy, as we celebrate the indescribable beauty that still lives on this planet, and fight for its ‘ongoingness’, its ‘survivance’.

ISBN 978-0-6485474-3-3



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