

Erika Balsom
**Shoreline
Movements**

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Wind tugging at my sleeve
feet sinking into sand
I stand at the edge where earth touches
ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times and places a violent clash.
– Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La
Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 1987¹

Achille Mbembe has proposed that we live in “a time of exit from democracy.” It is a time marked by a violent drive towards the creation of a “*world outside relation*,” a world that separates through walls and enclosures, denying planetary entanglements.² These cuts happen at scales that are both immense and intimate. They can occur even between those ostensibly on the same side. If there is an urgent need now to invent ways of opposing this thrust, how might certain forms of nonfiction cinema – an inherently relational form of image-making – provide a means of doing so? “Shoreline Movements,” a film program Grégory Castéra and I curated together for the 2020 Taipei Biennial, is one very small answer to this very large question.

For Mbembe, borders are “dead spaces of non-connection which deny the very idea of a shared humanity, of a planet, the only one we have, that we share together, and to which we are linked by the ephemerality of our common condition.”³ They are at once literal demarcations between nation-states and conceptual emblems of much more expansive and ubiquitous instances of enmity. The shoreline, too, is a border – but it is an unusual kind of border. Even if shorelines do in some instances function as those “dead spaces of non-connection” Mbembe shows to be a pernicious part of the necropolitical logic governing contemporary life, their fluidity and instability are suggestive of a different notion, one closer to the zone of contact that Gloria Anzaldúa elaborates in her pathbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. For Anzaldúa, the border is a place where dualistic thinking falls into crisis, where contradictions and ambiguity reign, where a plurality of voices clash and merge, where a single territory plays host to multiple, mutually implicated worlds. It is somewhere to learn from.

Whereas most borders enforce separation, the shoreline is a threshold marked by ceaseless negotiation. It is a site of arrivals and departures, of safe harbors and hostile intrusions. At once embedded in local traditions and subject to industrial development, it hosts encounters between different populations and environments, the terrestrial and the aquatic. In the case of marine shorelines, the intertidal zone

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Hu Tai-li, *Voices of Orchid Island*, 1993. Image courtesy of the artist.



Hu Tai-li, *Voices of Orchid Island*, 1993. Image courtesy of the artist.

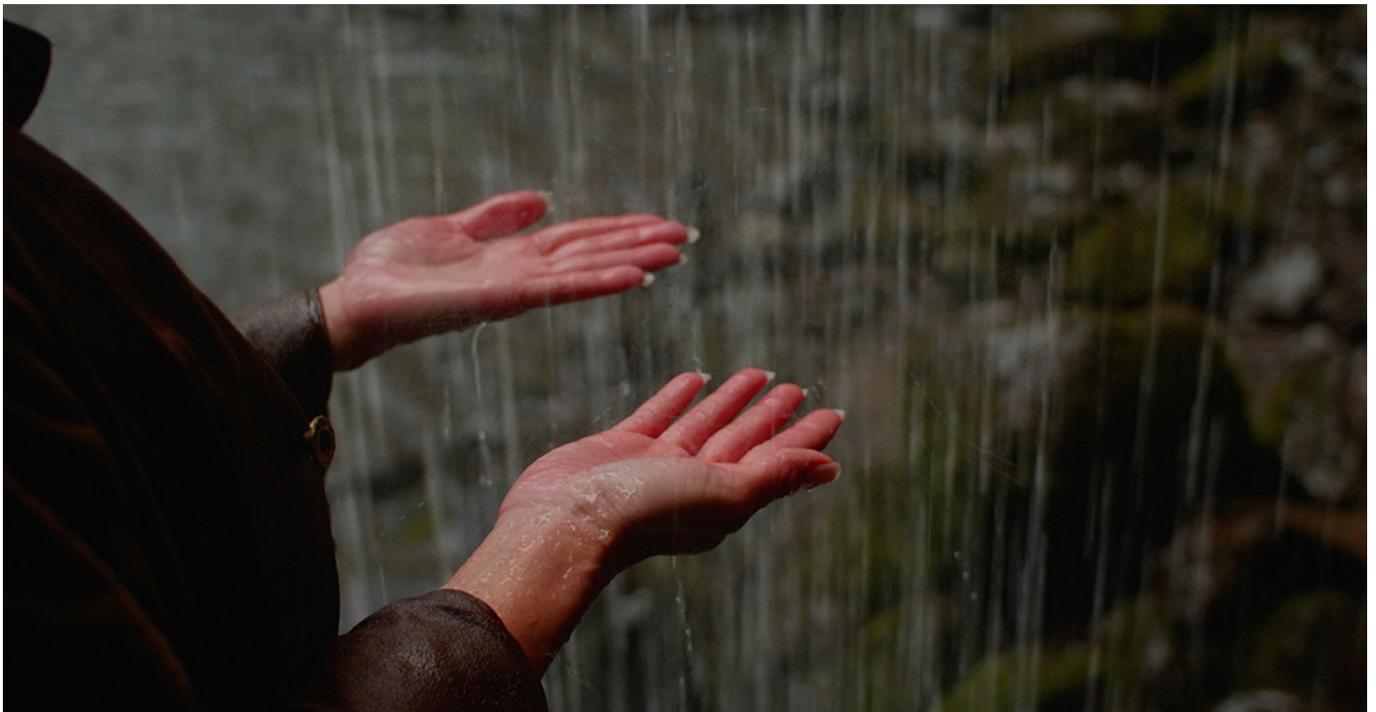
– exposed to the air at low tide and immersed in water at high tide – is an in-between realm of intermittent transformation, containing a high diversity of species that have found ways to survive together within the challenging flux of the ecosystem. As the planet heats up and water levels rise, the shoreline is among the places where our vulnerability to climate emergency is made most manifest.

“Shoreline Movements” approaches the threshold between land and water as a material environment and as a provocative metaphor for the uncertainties and conflicts of worldly existence. The shoreline – a figure of proximity, division, and never-ending motion – becomes a means of thinking through the difficulties of surviving together in an age when it seems as if, to borrow Martin Guinand and Bruno Latour’s provocative title for the 2020 Taipei Biennial, “You and I Don’t Live on the Same Planet” – when in fact we do and we must. By attending to the shifting frontier of the shoreline and the organisms that inhabit it, we can learn to think ecologically, which means understanding the fluid relations that exist between a vast array of agents, to the point that presumed separations between them are put into question. Sometimes these relations are harmonious, but they can equally be characterized by discord and violence; the shoreline is where seemingly irreconcilable worlds confront one another in negotiations without end.

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Across eighteen films and videos made between 1944 and 2020, with the vast majority produced within the last five years, “Shoreline Movements” explores how artists and filmmakers have addressed the manifold encounters that take place in the littoral zone, broaching issues of environmental crisis, indigeneity, coloniality, and community.⁴ Presented within a space designed by Daniel Steegmann Mangrané, across six cycles that come and go like the tides, these works search for ways to render sensible the world’s particularity and complexity, embracing filmic and verbal language as nontransparent mediators that aid in this task. Through a wide range of strategies – from observation and the interview, to speculative docu-fiction and the essay form – they confront the difficulty and the desirability of building a shared world when deep divisions and power asymmetries everywhere prevail. In the aftermath of harm and loss, they imagine possibilities of repair and resurgence.

Fundamental to “Shoreline Movements” is the conviction that the moving image possesses the capacity to gather people, in real and imagined ways, around an object of shared concern: reality itself. To care for reality is not to assert the goodness or adequacy of the world that exists; on the contrary, it is to see that the building of a new world is imperative. The common world is a future horizon, an ongoing project; as Hannah Arendt affirms, it must be



Sky Hopinka, *matni: towards the ocean, towards the shore*, 2020. Images courtesy of the artist.

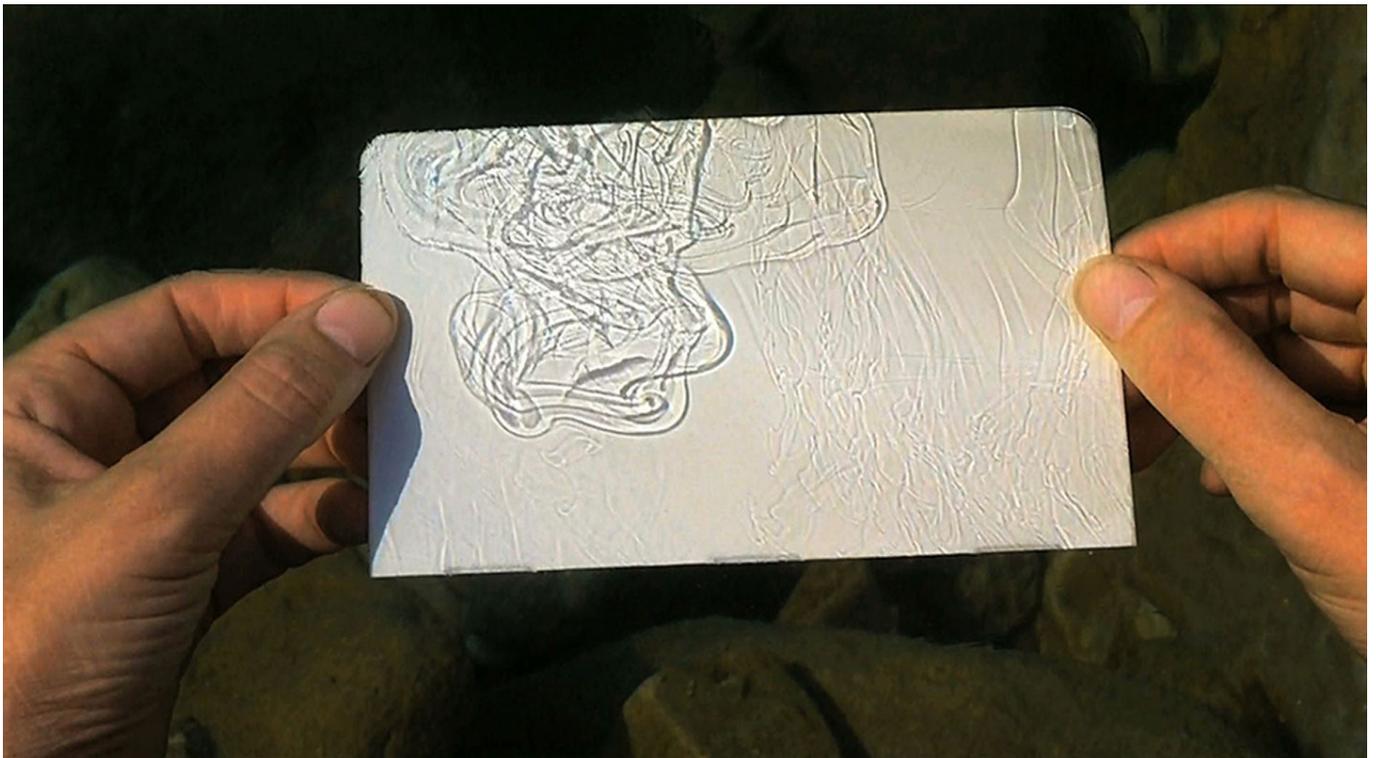
continually constructed through the meeting of different perspectives.⁵ To care for reality is not to shore up consensus, to buy into the fiction of immediacy, nor to trust in any one utterance as an absolute and authentic truth. It is, rather, to submit to a constant questioning of one's own viewpoint, to refuse the pervasive impulse to reduce and simplify, to remain attuned to the protean rather than comfortable in the pre-given. Borrowing another phrase from Guinand and Latour's conceptualization of the 2020 Taipei Biennial, it is to venture that the moving image harbors the possibility to stage "new diplomatic encounters" by presenting visions of a world that exists beyond any one individual, but of which we are all a part.

When the notion of the encounter is discussed in relation to nonfiction cinema, it most often refers to the relationship between a filmmaker and their subjects. It is in this context, for instance, that Fatimah Tobing Rony explains that traditional ethnography foregoes producing a "historical account of an encounter" to instead espouse the ideal of the anthropologist as "all-knowing insider and as scrupulously objective observer."⁶ Similarly, Trinh T. Minh-ha defines the encounter as "showing how I can see you, how you can see me and how we are both being perceived," noting that this rarely occurs in what

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she calls, tongue fully in cheek, "good, serious film[s] about the Other."⁷ The history of nonfiction filmmaking is replete with encounters denied, full of extractive approaches devoid of diplomacy. Nor are such things fully consigned to the past: the reflexive gestures dear to many filmmakers today are hardly enough to make the problems Rony and Trinh underline suddenly disappear. The intricate and mobile circuits of power, exploitation, and self-fashioning that exist between maker and subject remain an enduring concern, even as many filmmakers foreground the ongoing search for ethical ways forward.

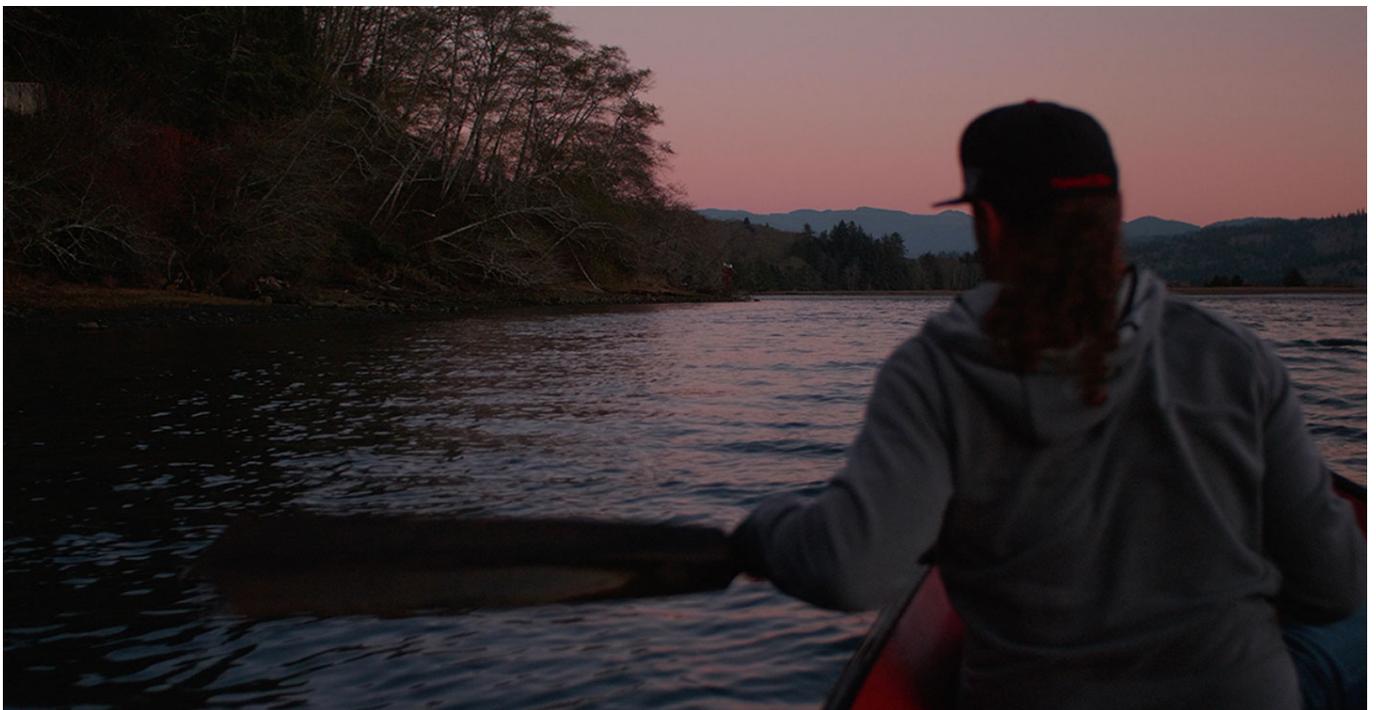
The films of "Shoreline Movements" formulate strategies that oppose and, in some cases, explicitly interrogate the denial of the encounter proper to certain strains of the ethnographic tradition. Sitting on the beach with a small group of people who live on Orchid Island, just forty-five nautical miles from Taiwan, Hu Tai-li opens her film, *Voices of Orchid Island* (1993), with a question that immediately establishes her central concern with what it means to make an image of the other. She asks, "How do you feel about co-operating in this film?" To her query, one man responds that the more anthropologists engage with the island's indigenous Yami (Tao) community, the more harm they do. Ever aware of this danger, Hu's film is marked by its subtle



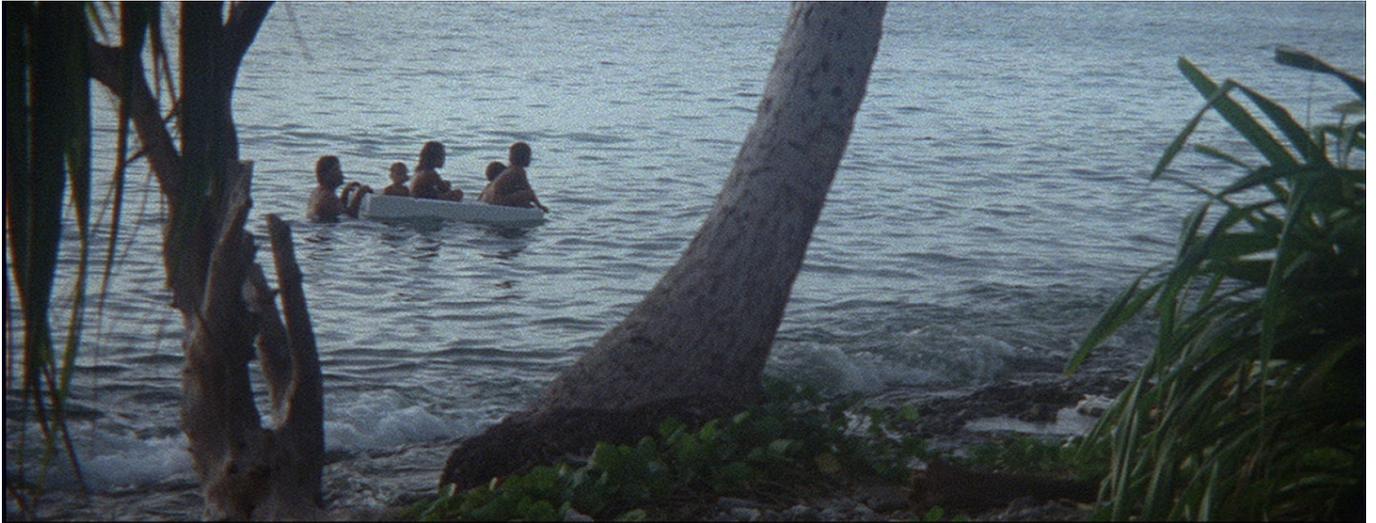
Edith Dekyndt, *Dead Sea Drawings (Part 1)*, 2010. Images courtesy of the artist, Kadist Collection, and Galerie Greta Meert.



Peggy Ahwesh, *The Blackest Sea*, 2016. Images courtesy of the artist.



Sky Hopinka, *matni: towards the ocean, towards the shore*, 2020. Images courtesy of the artist.



Ben Rivers, *Slow Action*, 2011. Images courtesy of the artist and LUX, London.



Tsuchimoto Noriaki, *The Shiranui Sea*, 1975. Images courtesy of Seirinsha.

confrontation with the violence that lurks within the ethnographic enterprise, reflecting on the relationship between photography and power, the colonial desire for authenticity, and the border between insider and outsider. In *Lagos Island* (2012), Karimah Ashadu registers a similar concern by very different means, using what she calls a “camera wheel mechanism” to craft a visually disorienting rendering of migrant settlements on the shore. As the rolling apparatus passes temporary dwellings that are soon to be torn down by the municipal authorities, it screeches and cracks, never ceasing to draw attention to its situated gaze, its embeddedness in a terrain subject to constant change.

The notion of the encounter in cinema can also be thought in terms of the conflicts and congresses a film represents. It will come as no surprise that images of littoral landscapes abound across “Shoreline Movements.” Yet beyond being located at the meeting of land and water, many of these works chart thresholds where worlds collide on shared territory, capturing unwieldy realities marked by division and struggle. The moving image can make visible the complex tangle of relations that exist within a given situation, limning the meetings – be they violent, caring, transformative, or otherwise – that occur between diverse agents who live alongside one another. If Guinard and Latour use the phrase “you and I don’t live on the same planet” to encapsulate a contemporary situation in which different parties have profoundly divergent conceptions of their relationships to the material conditions of existence – so much so as to constitute a state of radical separation – then “Shoreline Movements” reminds us that such problems of cohabitation are of no recent vintage. Works by Patricio Guzmán, Sky Hopinka, and Carlos Motta manifest a concern with the history of settler colonialism and the persistence of indigenous cultures, recalling that declarations of universalism have always been disguised provincialisms and insisting on the enduring need to reckon with the violence that inheres in the totalizing project of modernity. Hopinka’s *matni: towards the ocean, towards the shore* (2020) is spoken predominantly in Chinuk Wawa, a nearly extinct pidgin trade language that the artist, who belongs to the Ho-Chunk Nation, learned when he was in his twenties. Interweaving intimate conversations with a lyrical rendering of the land and water of the Columbia River Basin, Hopinka explores the world-making capacities of verbal and cinematic language, affirming cinema as a vehicle for the invention of indigenous futures.

A second cluster of colliding worlds pertains to land use and environmental damage,

as communities respond to corporate and state initiatives that risk, or have already resulted in, the despoilment of their health and home. Hu Tai-li and Johan van der Keuken capture antinuclear protests as they happen, while Beatriz Santiago Muñoz and Tsuchimoto Noriaki film in the wake of slow violence, working in areas – Vieques, Puerto Rico, and Minamata, Japan, respectively – where significant portions of the population suffer from illnesses caused by pollution. In 1965, Tsuchimoto initiated what would become a decades-long practice of chronicling the sociopolitical, environmental, legal, and medical dimensions of mercury poisoning in and around Minamata Bay. Across some seventeen films, he documented how methylmercury in the wastewater of a chemical factory owned by the Chisso Corporation decimated marine life and caused severe neurological problems and fatalities in those who ate the contaminated seafood. Already, Chisso and the local inhabitants did not live on the same planet. Made after Chisso was found guilty of corporate negligence in 1973, *The Shiranui Sea* explores how daily life went on in the area. Tsuchimoto shows human and nonhuman life to be mutually interdependent, both vulnerable to harm and resilient in its aftermath.

There is the encounter between filmmaker and world, and there are the worldly encounters a film can capture. The notion of the diplomatic encounter as Guinard and Latour formulate it seems, however, most embodied by a third register: the confrontation between audience and world that occurs through the mediating interface of a film. This would be an encounter with encounters, a relationship to reality shepherded by the actions and attitudes of the filmmaker and film machine. Near the end of *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Latour proclaims the need today to “generate alternative descriptions”: “For there to be a world order,” he insists, “there first needs to be a world made more or less shareable by this attempt to take stock.”⁸ The films of “Shoreline Movements” suggest diverse ways the moving image can take up this task, engaging in acts of taking stock that are partial, in the double sense of being both incomplete and situated, but which nonetheless offer a provisional basis for negotiation by making the world sharable. A film like *The Shiranui Sea* functions in a manner akin to the metaphorical table Arendt uses to describe the mediating things that relate and separate those who share a world, clearing time to convene over an object of common concern, serving as a forum for the assembly and articulation of multiple perspectives, both within the film and in front of the screen.⁹

Tsuchimoto famously said, “Film is a work

of living beings,” suggesting an ecological and relational understanding of his medium, encompassing the activities of the director, all of those who appear within the film, and the audiences it will confront. It is a conception of cinema distant from the notion of a film as an enclosed fiction or as the product of an auteur; at the same time, Tsuchimoto never disavows his responsibility for the film’s construction, engaging with the community over a prolonged period and taking care to inscribe his position in relation to them within it. As scholar Aaron Gerow has explained, Tsuchimoto’s statement means

not only that the subject of cinema is living things and their environment, but also that film is defined by the work of living beings – a work that is fundamentally ethical and involves constant self-reflection on how cinema, the filmmaker, and viewers define and position themselves in the environment and how they can relate to other living beings.¹⁰

The Shiranui Sea is a convocation, one that did not end when the film was completed, but which extends through its life in the world, as viewers come to position themselves in relation to the complex ecology the film unfolds and consider

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that the world it depicts is the world they too inhabit. Encountering the film, the viewer enters into a relationship with multiple agents – the filmmaker, the film apparatus, all those who are represented within it, human and otherwise – and ventures the possibility of transformation through this contact, as their sense of reality is pruned open and perhaps reframed. As the work of living beings, documentaries are not just constative utterances, attesting to the past, but performative utterances with the capacity to change the reality they describe, as audiences come to understand themselves in relation to a commons and thereby potentially inhabit the world in altered ways. It is in this sense that the encounter between world and viewer that takes place through the medium of the moving image is a true encounter – an exchange, a negotiation – and not simply a monodirectional address.

Films pry open our understandings of reality through their deployment of form. Different as they are from one another, the films of “Shoreline Movements” are united in a commitment to challenging the dominant frameworks through which reality tends to be presented to view. Their experiments with form constitute a question of aesthetics, not in the sense of “aestheticizing” reality – sometimes wrongly conceived as a cosmetic addition or beautifying corruption – but rather as *aisthesis*: an investment in probing the



Zhou Tao, *The Worldly Cave*, 2017. Images courtesy of the Artist and Vitamin Creative Space.

modalities of perception and sensation by which we come into contact with the mess of the world. In her *Dead Sea Drawings (Part 1)* (2010), Edith Dekyndt holds a small sheet of blank paper under the surface of the saltwater, registering the ephemeral refractions of light caused by the mineral content present within it. This apparently simple gesture reveals that what might have been presumed to be a clear emptiness in fact contains a fullness capable of creating elaborate yet delicate undulations. It is an aquatic allegory of the generative possibilities of mediation, one that captures the desire found throughout the program to navigate around the Scylla of transparency and the Charybdis of instrumental explanation, both of which have historically formed an important part – but certainly not the entirety – of the documentary tradition. Rather than strive towards comprehensiveness and clarity, these films amplify the gaps, uncertainties, stray details, and bewilderments of reality, recruiting cinematic form to render them sensible and available for collective consideration.

In this coming together – between film and viewer, and between viewers – there are possibilities of concordance but also friction and disorientation; not for nothing does the etymology of the word “encounter” contain within it the adversarial *contra*. In making sharable descriptions of reality, these diplomatic encounters can reconnect their viewers to a sense of a world held in common, to a feeling of membership in an expansive political community – one that refuses all myths of origin and instead forever returns to, in Mbembe’s words, its “permanent opening onto the sea.”¹¹

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1
Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 23.

and Ogawa Shinsuke, ed. Stoffel Debuysere and Elias Grootaers (Sabzian, Courtisane, and CINEMATEK, 2019), 95.

2
Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019), 9 and 40. Emphasis in original.

11
Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 15.

3
Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 99.

4
The cycles of “Shoreline Movements” are as follows:
Movement 1 (November 16–December 6, 2020): Beatriz Santiago Muñoz, *Black Beach / Forces / The Dead / Camp*, 2016; Tsuchimoto Noriaki, *The Shiranui Sea (Shiranuikai)*, 1975; Karimah Ashadu, *Lagos Island*, 2012.
Movement 2 (December 7–27, 2020): Thao Nguyen Phan, *Becoming Alluvium*, 2019; Sky Hopinka, *matni: towards the ocean, towards the shore*, 2020; Maya Deren, *At Land*, 1944.
Movement 3 (December 28, 2020–January 17, 2021): Edith Dekyndt, *Dead Sea Drawings (Part 1)*, 2010; Joshua Bonnetta, *The Two Sights*, 2019; Rebecca Meyers, *blue mantle*, 2010.
Movement 4 (January 18–February 7, 2021): Carlos Motta, *Nefandus*, 2013; Hu Tai-li, *Voices of Orchid Island*, 1993; Patricio Guzmán, *The Pearl Button (El botón de nácar)*, 2015.
Movement 5 (February 8–21, 2021): Jessica Sarah Rinland, *Y Berá – Bright Waters*, 2016; Ben Rivers, *Slow Action*, 2011; Johan van der Keuken, *Flat Jungle (De platte jungle)*, 1978. Movement 6 (February 22–March 14, 2021): Peggy Ahwesh, *The Blackest Sea*, 2016; Francisco Rodriguez, *A Moon Made of Iron (Una luna de hierro)*, 2017; Zhou Tao, *The Worldly Cave*, 2017. For more info, including program notes, see <http://www.council.art/inquiries/1522/shoreline-movements>.

5
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (1958; University of Chicago Press, 1998), 52–58.

6
Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Duke University Press, 1996), 118.

7
Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 1991), 66.

8
Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Polity, 2018), 94 and 98. Emphasis in original.

9
Arendt, *Human Condition*, 52.

10
Aaron Gerow, “Tsuchimoto and Environment in Documentary Film,” in *Of Sea and Soil: The Cinema of Tsuchimoto Noriako*

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