

# OF SCALES AND TIMES

PLANETARY FRICTION AT PLAY IN THE WORK OF  
SIMRYN GILL

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## ABSTRACT

This essay draws on the notions of scalability and friction elaborated by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing in the context of South East Asian plantations to consider two series of works “Vegetation” (1999–2016) and “Naga Doodles” (2017) created by artist Simryn Gill (Singapore, 1959). By outlining the material properties, processes, and media Gill uses, it offers a critique of economic standardisation, and accompanying hierarchies that mobilise anthropocentric beliefs and assumptions about time and space. Importantly, it suggests that Gill’s works invite ecological readings and warnings that are cosmological and concern the fate of this planet.

## KEYWORDS

Scale; Scalability; Friction; Plantation; Process; Sacred; Ecology.

Scale is the spatial dimensionality necessary for a particular kind of view, whether up close or from a distance, microscopic or planetary [...] Scale is not just a neutral frame for viewing the world; scale must be brought into being: proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have long endeavoured to restructure the idea of modernism, highlighting the plural temporal dimensions underpinning it rather than simply plotting a single, universal, and linear timeline. Such engagement with modernism globally has generated an unforeseen refusal of what anthropologist Anna Tsing calls *scalability*. For Tsing, scalability represents the property of a system to grow, maintain its original framework, and yet accommodate more stuff with minimum expenditure.<sup>2</sup> She defines this trick as the “precision nesting” of scales when applied to the realm of design: “the small is encompassed neatly by the large only when both are crafted for uniform expansion”.<sup>3</sup> Scalability operates across computers, in business, the “conquest” of nature, and, more generally, world-making and terra-formation processes.<sup>4</sup> In this compelling account, the plantation system, which Tsing calls “a machine for replication”, is *the* scalable project, one that historically predates, and possibly inspired the factory model and the universalisation of a particular modular interpretation of labour and time.<sup>5</sup>

To build on Tsing’s argument, plantation time is linear, developmental, and secular. It was made global during the second half of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the very design of the plantation was engineered with the specific purpose of remaking the world as a future asset. To achieve this end, all those vernacular worlds and cosmologies – times and spaces – that opposed plantation time and stood in the way of globalisation had to be *othered* and exterminated.

Tsing alerts us to the fact that modernisation requires that the transformative, that is, social properties of nature be eradicated to become the raw material for *techne*: the implementation of a human design on nature.<sup>6</sup> Human and more-than-human entanglements

<sup>1</sup>  
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction. An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton, NJ 2005, 58.

<sup>2</sup>  
Aarthi Vadde, Scalability, in: *Modernism/Modernity* 2/4, 2018, 1–2.

<sup>3</sup>  
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, On Non-Scalability. The Living World Is not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales, in: *Common Knowledge* 18/3, 2012, 505–524, here 507.

<sup>4</sup>  
Ibid., 505.

<sup>5</sup>  
Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, Earth Stalked by Man, in: *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 34/1, 2016, 2–16. Art historian Jill Casid calls the plantation “a hybrid agro-industrial landscape, a landscape machine”. See *Sowing Empire. Landscape and Colonization*, Minneapolis 2005, 44.

<sup>6</sup>  
Tsing, On Non-Scalability, 513.

must be removed for expansion, for growth to occur in the plantation. Under the logic of scalability, ecologies are violently reshaped. Félix Guattari named three: those of the environment, of social relations, and of human subjectivity.<sup>7</sup>

To visualise what Tsing might mean by the world-making properties of scalable design, let us consider a 3-D portable diorama of a rubber plantation developed ca. 1950 in Manchester (England), and exhibited for educational and promotional purposes [Fig. 1]. In this diorama, a miniaturised model of a rubber plantation displays two-dimensional cut-outs of indentured labourers, presumably of Tamil origin. A function of both space and time, the practice of shaping standards in direct relation to the activity they organise is illustrated through this diorama: the first labourer taps the bark of the tree with his knife, the second collects the milky latex (caoutchouc) in a bucket. The 3-D model also includes a real tapping knife, rubber seeds, two jars of rubber, and raw specimens of crepe rubber – coagulated latex rolled out and vulcanised into a crinkled sheet. The segregated stand-in workers are positioned carefully against the lime-coloured and perforated, gridded background, in perspectival arrangement. The model implies a sequential yet linear organisation of labour under the invisible but totalising servitude of indenture. Further, the model is self-contained, implying a loss of self in which “time penetrated the body and with it all meticulous controls of power”.<sup>8</sup> The movements of a labouring body in relation to the plant are designed to make possible the most efficient use of time (and space): “nothing must remain idle or useless, everything must be called to form the support of the act required.”<sup>9</sup> The portable diorama also includes a map of the planet illustrating the vast regions in which rubber plantations have been successfully implanted; a caption indents the image: rubber is successfully grown in Brazil, Nigeria, and the Belgian Congo [Fig. 2]. The diorama effectively packages the economy and ecology of manageable industrial production for the potential future global investor: from seed to packaged product.

Historically, processes of primitive accumulation concretised into the factory-like production model of the plantation. The plantation followed a reproducible expandable business growth model: exterminate local people and plants; bring in an exotic and isolated labour workforce; prepare the now-empty, unclaimed land; and grow alien crops for production. As several scholars have pointed out, the plantation represents a system engineered to create novel habitats in agricultural landscapes for profit with species compo-

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Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton, London/New Brunswick, NJ 2000, 68.

8

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, New York 1995, 152.

9

Ibid.



[Fig. 1]  
Diorama of a Rubber Plantation, Educational Box, ca. 1948, mixed media, 70 × 63 cm,  
MANCH 672575, Manchester Museum, Manchester.



[Fig. 2]

Diorama of a Rubber Plantation, Educational Box, ca. 1948, mixed media, 70 × 63 cm, MANCH 672575, Manchester Museum, Manchester.

sitions different from those in forests and farmlands. Typically, in the British colonial administrative model, involving large-scale plantations, centralised irrigation authorities, and other modernisation efforts, the concept of the environment, ecology, was linked to theories of political domination. It is useful to recall that the word *ecology* or *ökologie* was coined by German scientist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, the year before Marx's publication of *Das Kapital*. Haeckel drew on the same Greek root *oikos* for house or household, out of which had arisen the word 'economy' – the managing and administering of a household. For Haeckel ecology related to what Darwin in the *Origin of Species* (1859) had called the "economy of nature", the management of nature.<sup>10</sup> David Gilmartin writes that in the case of British colonial scientific and horticultural advocates, "the definition of the environment as a natural field to be dominated for productive use, and the definition of the British as a distinctive colonial ruling class over alien peoples, went hand in hand".<sup>11</sup> Yet plantations are formed in vernacular soils and histories, which tie them to the contingencies of encounters and the peculiarities of places and times – not all plantations are alike. With the production of universality, every-where-ness, and linear 'global' time we also have the emergence of non-reducible histories and temporalities through the violent slow process of what Tsing calls "friction". "Friction" is what you get through contact by rubbing two 'things', entities, or bodies together through "historical contingency, and unexpected conjuncture".<sup>12</sup>

Drawing on Tsing's notion of friction, this essay considers the work of artist Simryn Gill (Singapore, 1959) in relation to notions of scalability, process, and time. Through her work, Gill draws attention to the oversimplification imposed by humans on nature, making one aware of the vertiginous experience and processes of scale-making in the 'local' oil palm plantation estate located in the vicinity of Port Dickson (Malaysia). Oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), introduced to the tropical habitat of Malaysia only two generations ago, has emerged as a significant world-making cash crop, transforming landscapes irreversibly.<sup>13</sup> Gill engages with scale not simply as a metonymical reflection about the world, but rather, to respond to the standardised ecological system of the plantation and its enforced hierarchies that mobilise global beliefs and assumptions

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Haeckel's brand of social Darwinism, and emphasis on the purity of race, was eventually to exert influence in a tragic direction: national socialism and industrial-necropolitical scalable plans for purity in Europe. See John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology. Materialism and Nature*, New York 2000, 195.

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David Gilmartin, *Scientific Empire and Imperial Science. Colonialism and Irrigation Technology in the Indus Basin*, in: *Journal of Asian Studies* 53/4, 1994, 1127–1149, here 1127.

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Tsing, *On Non-Scalability*, 510.

13

Stephen Harris, *What Have Plants Ever Done for Us?*, Oxford 2015, 215–216.

about time and place. Through the use of photography and indexical (1:1) processes of record-making, her multiple series yield an experience of sheer duration in material terms, inviting an ecological and cosmological reading, if we take this latter term to mean discourse about the order of the cosmos and its ultimate and unknowable destiny.<sup>14</sup>

## I. Becoming Owl

'What a curious feeling!' said Alice, 'I must be shutting up like a telescope.'  
And so it was indeed: she was now only ten inches high, and her face brightened up at the thought that she was now the right size for going through the little door into that *lovely garden*.<sup>15</sup>

In a black-and-white photograph Simryn Gill hides in plain sight [Fig. 3]. Standing still in a clearing amidst the dense foliage, she holds up a diminutive house. She gives the impression of being stuck in it or unable to move or hiding behind the house. This combination of fear and play – of hiding in plain sight – returns us and Gill to a forgotten world of unexplored possibilities and limitless imagination. The monumental stilt house positioned before her solicits specific attention to her scale – Gill is dwarfed by the bird house.<sup>16</sup>

In relation to the calibrations of scaling Tsing writes that the art of conjuring “is supposed to call up a world more dreamlike and sweeter than anything that exists; magic rather than unsparing description calls capital”.<sup>17</sup> The photograph does involve a certain sleight of hand, perhaps even a form of conjuring. Gill is *kidding us*, not being straight with us, as she curves the line to throw into question our sense of scale – the comparison made between that constant – the human body – and the object in the foreground, the pole-mounted house. Part of a performative, ludic exercise, Gill worked hard to get this image right (one is tempted to use the word ‘precise’). She fabricated the model house, trespassed onto privately owned land, or possibly bribed someone, located with the aid of an assistant a suitable clearing in the oil palm plantation, and after

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For an account of the relationship between scale and loss in sculpture and photography see Rachel Wells, *The Scale at Which Loss Is Visible. Life-Size Hauntings in Contemporary Art*, in: Patrizia Piacentini (ed.), *(S)Proporzioni. Taglia e Scala tra Testo e Immagini*, Milan 2021, 135–150.

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Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, London 1865, 11. Emphasis added.

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From the series “Vegetation” (1999–2016), the photograph is printed in the pocket-sized book *Becoming Palm* (2018), co-authored with Michael Taussig. *Becoming Palm* was prompted by a lecture delivered by Taussig titled ‘A Test Case: The Palm Plantation as Violence and Art’ in 2016, Centre for Contemporary Art, Singapore, in which he addressed the African Palm in the context of northern Colombia where it is known as a ‘paramilitary crop’.

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Tsing, *Friction*, 58–59.





[Fig. 3]

Simryn Gill, Vegetation, from "Vegetation", 1999–2016, gelatin silver print, 26.5 × 26.5 cm, Sydney, Artist's Collection © Simryn Gill.

much hustle and bustle, adjusting and rehearsal, produced a series of carefully orchestrated photographs with her Hasselblad camera. The ultimate product of this exchange, the photographic image, offers the viewer an incongruent expectation of scale: a hapless and shrunken Alice in a dubious wonderland. This rearrangement of Gill and the house could be said to operate within the purview of the miniature, broadly defined by Susan Stewart as “an experience of interiority” in opposition to the “gigantic” viewed as a projection towards the outside.<sup>18</sup> In this well-known account, the reduction of scale at work in the miniature frames the viewing encounter as a specific act of possession. Stewart links the enclosure of the human and the rearrangement of nature to a Victorian desire to domesticate and re-form nature within cultural categories; the process is often acquisitive.<sup>19</sup> Miniature time does not in this account “attach itself to lived historical time” but rather, to the space and time of the metaphor which in turn makes “everyday life absolutely anterior, and exterior to itself”.<sup>20</sup> The compression of scale effected by the miniature distorts everyday time and quotidian space, and finds its “use value” transformed into the infinite time of the dream-world, of reverie and child’s play. The chief property of the miniature is to produce a time that is different, and transcend the change and flux of lived reality; the unfolding of time is linked to nostalgia, to childhood, and manipulative experiences.<sup>21</sup> Stewart posits a phenomenological correlation between the experience of scale and that of duration, and furthermore, notes that “the reduction in scale which the miniature presents skews the time and space relations of the everyday lifeworld”.<sup>22</sup>

It might be possible to let Gill’s photograph enchant us further and do a different kind of work.<sup>23</sup> The photograph functions as make-believe theatre prop weathering into something real. “The pretend world of conceit envisages a fairy tale way of rethinking ontology, meaning the nature of Being, meaning the nature of nature”, writes Michael Taussig.<sup>24</sup> Included in Gill’s book *Becoming Palm*, co-authored with Taussig in 2018, the photograph is part of

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Susan Stewart, *On Longing. Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Baltimore 1993, 68–69.

19

Ibid.

20

Ibid., 65.

21

Ibid.

22

Ibid.

23

Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Time of Democracy*, Durham, NC 2021, 224.

24

Simryn Gill and Michael Taussig, *Becoming Palm*, Berlin 2018, 45.

the book's broader corpus of black-and-white images. The little book is conceived in the form of a pilgrimage to the enchanting site of the oil palm monoculture; it shuttles between home and shrine, profane and sacred, official and unofficial voices. It also involves playful forms of writing, parodic lists, drawings, doodling, spoof indexes, and jokes, all of which de-familiarise and interrogate *objective* ethnographic methods of field observation, classification, and taxonomic description. Photographs of decaying monuments litter the pages, and speak of their transient and contingent status, connecting separate realms of different temporal and spatial orders: termite mounds, monuments to awe-inspiring animals, the ravaged billiard table of a plantation estate owner discarded from a British Army officer's mess hall – “a shrine to domination over the land”.<sup>25</sup> The objects are recast as miniaturised decomposing forms, ravaged by tropical storms: a tour, or pilgrimage, of the monuments of the plantation.

What exactly is the scale of Gill in the photograph? What of this optical stunt? To dispel the magic at work, put things into secular proportion, and get a grip or perspective on the photograph, let me give you the facts (and spoil it all): the image displays a 10-metre-high nesting box, a designed modular unit of controlled expansion engineered by plantation owners in Malaysia to house wild barn owls. To put it straight: breeding grounds for flighty cash-sacks.<sup>26</sup> Domestication of this wild bird, which Gill refers to as “the king of wild workers” in the Malay tropical forest habitat, is one of the last effective *natural* measures introduced by plantation owners to tackle the pervasive, costly, and large-scale pests affecting the sites: rats.<sup>27</sup> Rats feed on the shiny, thick, fleshy, and oil-rich coat protecting the seed of the palm. Since the introduction of thousands of these domestic infrastructures (Gill playfully calls them “bird hotels”), owl populations have radically increased, yielding magical, economic benefits in the plantation: oil palm fruit harvests have soared. The size and shape of these hand-made, double-chambered boxes equipped with a resting perch at the entrance hole recall those of the Victorian dollhouse. The barn owl has been naturalised, assigned a home in the colony, and is a beneficiary of a ‘job’; a valued productive member in the managed, and highly competitive, ecology of the plantation. Gill, who has no apparent role in the plantation, appears to stake a small claim to a home for herself from within the photographic frame.

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Ibid., 23.

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Ecologist John Howes, Technical Programme Director at Wild Asia, states that “by mid-1994 it was estimated that there were 9,000 owl nest boxes erected in Malaysian agricultural lands (1,300 in paddy fields and the remainder in oil palm estates)”. He estimates that with average occupancy rates of around 40% (but up to 80% in oil palm habitats), most of the Malaysian Barn Owl population is now nest-box dependent. I am grateful to John for sharing this information with me in an email exchange.

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Gill and Taussig, *Becoming Palm*, 17.

The plantation represents the most economically efficient ecological system (or managed household), one that, as Bruno Latour put it, is obsessed with the future, and organised by this temporal idea as a “path to progress”. This condition separates beings from life, and prevents each from “thinking, imagining, and noticing relations”.<sup>28</sup> Gill, however, puts humour into the picture, alerting one to the issue of making-habitat, of belonging, and of living, in the plantation.

Of the process of making photographs, Gill has said that it “is about becoming porous to a situation”.<sup>29</sup> In relation to this specific photograph, she writes that it was an attempt to “invite the spirit of the barn owl into the little house”, which could also mean, to become a portal, a gateway, and in this process, to disappear her own self.<sup>30</sup> Becoming-shrine, becoming-owl, Gill turns into a kind of comical assemblage, part-human, part-thing. She draws attention to the sovereign status enjoyed by owls in the plantation and treats the newly erected bird houses as utilitarian temples of modern development. This staging solicits the recovery of older, perhaps defunct shrines, built by indentured labourers working at the plantations to ward off danger and seek the protection of the gods from lurking animal predators. Gill writes: “people had to find their own ways to be in these new places – to know how to read the terrain, how to speak to the local spirits. They brought their own gods and found new ones lurking in the folds of the land; they built small shrines where they made offerings to appease the gods.”<sup>31</sup>

Indenture came to replace slavery after 1833 as the primary method of supply and maintenance of labour on the West Indies sugar plantations, and was extended from there to newly developing monocultures of rubber in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) and Malaysia (Malay Peninsula).<sup>32</sup> Botanists from Kew Gardens (London) engineered the scalable system of indenture in Malaysia; the latter typically involved Tamil labourers imported from Ceylon to husband rubber plants. In the case of Gill, whose family business was actively involved in the motorised transportation of rubber goods to and from the town of Port Dickson (south of Kuala Lumpur on the Malacca Strait, one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes), plantations were a familiar site; in her time, as she states, “they’ve never not

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Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Anna Tsing, and Niels Bubandt, *Anthropologists Are Talking – About Capitalism, Ecology, and Apocalypse*, in: *Ethnos* 83/3, 2018, 587–606, here 590.

29

Gill quoted by Kajri Jain, *Pause*, in: *Here Art Grows on Trees* (exh. cat. Venice, Australian Pavilion), ed. by Catherine de Zegher, Venice 2013, 169.

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Gill and Taussig, *Becoming Palm*, 17.

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*Ibid.*, 18.

32

Ashley Dawson, *Extinction. A Radical History*, New York/London 2016, 48.

been there”.<sup>33</sup> These newly built bird houses are homes for protective gods “for a different class of worshippers”: the managerial class of plantation owners.<sup>34</sup> It is possible then to treat this photograph as a playful commentary about the novel forms of home-making and idol-worship enshrined by scalability, and further, of the shrinking role of the human within it. This model of worship, Gill seems to suggest, is perfectly compatible, indeed utterly necessary to the totalising expansion of the frictionless and world-making, wonder-cash crop: palm oil.

## II. Rubbing It In – “Naga Doodles” (2017)

Positing the plantation as an enchanted enclosure, Gill also directs her attention to beings that have perished in the making of scalable projects. Her series “Naga Doodles” (2017) offers a series of ink rubbings displaying the literal imprint of snake roadkill in about a 50-mile radius of Port Dickson. Gill found and collected the carcasses whilst driving to and from the plantation, the escapee animals having moved beyond the physical boundary lines of the oil palm estate. Fugitives from the enclosure, the snakes precipitate their own demise. Gill hints at the fact that doubt underscores how scale is constructed and experienced. She observes the impact of plantation ecosystems on these animal species: “Many of these snakes if not most run through plantations. The variety and ecology of snakes has been deeply affected by the plantations, some gaining favour, and others being decimated, their habitats and sustenance gone. Roads cut through their habitats; and it is mostly males as they need to find new mating grounds upon maturing hence the dangerous road and highway crossings.”<sup>35</sup> In the oil palm plantation snakes are sometimes put to work and released by humans in the estates to keep down rats but they do not rank as high as the barn owl in the man-made food chain system. Snakes typically abhor domestication, they *hide*, and do not benefit from the protection of domestic infrastructures in the plantation. For this reason, they have found themselves “on the wrong side of the divide; untameable freewheeling creatures who had no functional purpose within the scheme of things”.<sup>36</sup> Or one could say, they are beings that have no use or purpose in the scaled production of the palm oil commodity. In her influential account of friction, Tsing singles out tarmac – the road – as exemplifying how this very process both impedes and

<sup>33</sup>

Gill and Taussig, *Becoming Palm*, 7.

<sup>34</sup>

*Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup>

Gill in conversation with the author, email correspondence, September 2019.

<sup>36</sup>

Gill and Taussig, *Becoming Palm*, 12.

facilitates human locomotion through motorisation. Roads generate pathways that accelerate movement and make it smoother, more efficient, yet they also “limit where we go. The ease of travel they facilitate is also a structure of confinement.”<sup>37</sup> Both a micro and a macro study, Tsing’s account of friction is largely concerned with the violent impact of the cash crop of rubber in Indonesia, ranging from theft of the plant to the savagery of European conquest, to the frenzy of botanical competition, chemical adaptation, industrial tyres, and the crushing of rubber workers’ unions. Friction “reveals the grip of encounter” between particulars, breaking down the abstract universal (development) into the concrete specificity. “Friction shows us where the rubber meets the road.”<sup>38</sup> Whilst Tsing’s musings on friction do not ponder the ghastly effects of motorisation on animal species, Gill adopts a process that involves this phenomenon to reveal quite literally its effects. In so doing, she ‘rubs’ natural history against ethnographic attentiveness – products of modern projects – to offer starting points for curious and playful engagement.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, she invites a querying of the issue of form (and scale) that pulls in the direction of metaphysics: a set of questions that leads to decisions on how to order and give form to the chaos of existence.

Gill, who describes herself primarily as a maker and keeper of records, has long engaged with indexical, record-making processes that yield complete renditions of objects [Fig. 4]. To produce “Naga Doodles”, she scraped the squashed animal bodies from the tarmac, one at a time, covered each carcass with ink and superimposed sheets of paper, which she then rubbed through an up-and-down or circular repeated movement. She then slowly removed the paper without looking (blindly) to release the image. The result of this lengthy, sticky, and somewhat gruesome process is a graphic rubbing displaying a textured print made up of flattened membranes, snagging tissue, and ribbons of soft, delicate scales with occasional blotches of guts, excreta, and blood.

In relation to this time-consuming technique, Gill sets up a contrast with the reducible and scale-making properties of the medium of photography. She writes: “In direct print-making techniques such as ink rubbing, the medium itself also provides the index of scale, of course, but this is not the case with photography.”<sup>40</sup> Rubbing is the name given to the technique of creating hand-made impressions from presumably whole objects without the interpolation of a

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Tsing, Friction, 6.

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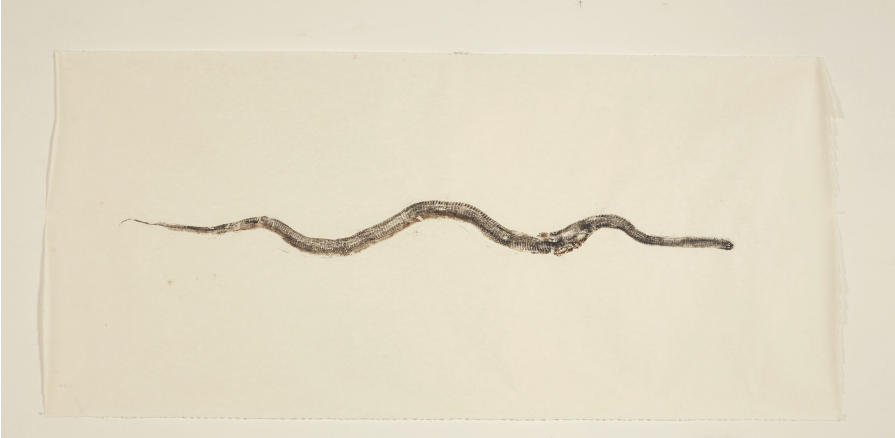
Ibid.

39

Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (eds.), *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, Minneapolis 2017, 7.

40

Simryn Gill in: *Simryn Gill. The Opening Up of the World* (exh. cat. Lund, Lundskonsthall), ed. by Anders Kreuger, Lund 2017, 76–77.



[Fig. 4]  
Simryn Gill, "Naga Doodles" 31/3 (Malayan Racer, *Coelognathus flavolineatus*), 2017, frottage, ink on paper, 96 × 130 cm, Sydney, Artist's Collection © Simryn Gill.

maker; it is a process with a long history, and involves codifications or complete mappings of rough surfaces produced through haptic rather than visual contact (one has to remove the fingers to see what one's touching). The result of this process is indexical and entails a more accurate rendition of what French painter Yves Klein, in relation to his anthropometric paintings, called a pure phenomenology of the traces of the immediate.<sup>41</sup> This element of chance, or automatism, did not go unnoticed by the Surrealists; Max Ernst called this form of direct printing "frottage" – a word he himself coined. For Ernst, the action of frottage transformed base matter – floorboards, leaves, or twine – into revelatory images: an *histoire naturelle*. Yet for Ernst, the active intervention of the artist was required – the author as artist turns the formless world into a recognisable form by rubbing passively and generating chance-like images. Gill, by contrast, withholds active intervention, and draws attention to both the process – the rubbing – and the thing itself as an index of measures: 1:1.

In the mid-nineteenth century, rubbings became a popular archaeological or palaeontological technique, far more suited to scientific documentation than photography; such technique could capture the most ancient but also the least visible, intimate traces of an object [Fig. 5]. Direct-printing method was also applied by nineteenth-century amateur botanists to convey a more accurate rendition of a plant specimen and its venation. In the specific case of flora, particularly ferns, it is related by the English botanist John Gough of Kendal, that, having become totally blind from small pox when two years old, he "so cultivated his other senses as to recognise by touch, smell, or taste, almost every plant within twenty miles of his native place".<sup>42</sup> Hence, it was believed that a good nature-print would convey to the eye the same class of positive impressions as those which were conveyed to the mind of Gough by other organs.<sup>43</sup>

Nature printing thus constituted an improvement upon old methods of relaying graphic information about botanical (and sometimes animal) specimens, in as much as it represented not only general form with absolute accuracy, but also surface, veins, and other minutiae of superficial structure by which plants are known irrespective of the hidden details of their internal organisation. But nature printing had its defects as well as its advantages: formed through pressure and friction, it could only represent what lay upon the surface, and not the whole even of that. As is well known, botanical classification held a privileged place in the historical begin-

<sup>41</sup>

Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein*, Berlin 1994, 171–191.

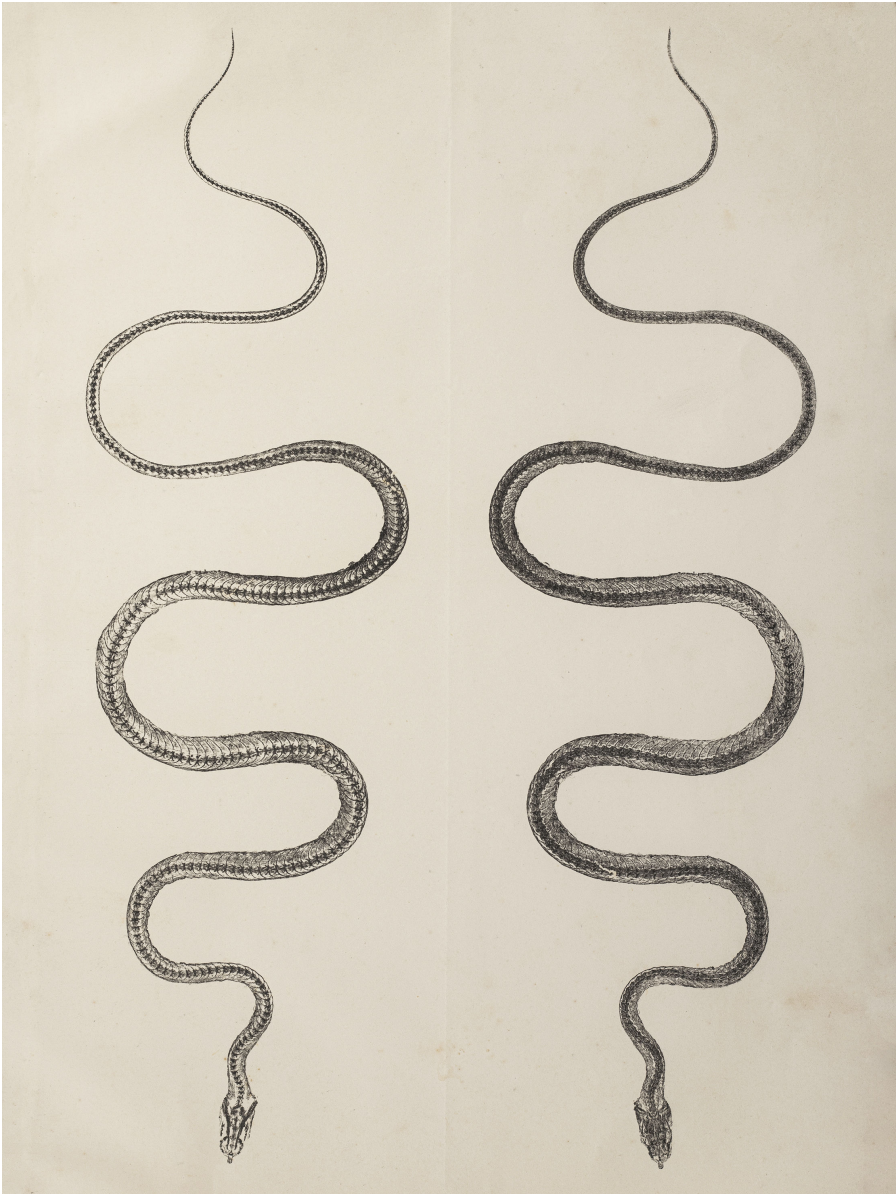
<sup>42</sup>

Thomas Moore, *The Ferns of Great Britain and Ireland, Nature-Printed by Henry Bradbury, 1855–1856*, ed. by John Lindley, London 1855, n.p.

<sup>43</sup>

Ibid.





[Fig. 5]

Henry Smith, Snake, 1857, ink on paper, 51 × 34 cm, Madras, in: *Specimens of Nature Printing from Unprepared Plants*, Madras 1857, plate 100, FF582.4 (084.1) SMI, Linnean Society of London © Linnean Society of London.



[Fig. 6]

John Betteridge Stair, Coconut, 1843, ink on paper, 80 × 53 cm, Upolu, Samoa, in: John Betteridge Stair, Impressions of Tropical Foliage, & co., Printed from Natural Specimens Collected in Upolu, Samoa 1843, np, MS 659A/B, Linnean Society of London © Linnean Society of London.

nings of modern scientific knowledge [Fig. 6]. Artists and scientists became embroiled in the quest to scale-make the planet, and universalise the study of nature to create a singular, objective, and globalised knowledge.<sup>44</sup> In the realm of botany, nascent image-making technologies were an important catalyst for the transformation of hidden “mysteries into fact”, and the evolution of consciousness.<sup>45</sup> Only when observations of particular specimens were compatible and collapsible across generalised scales could they be properly incorporated into a universal logic. In this respect, nature-printing technologies encapsulated a moment when a greater desire for objectivity – or truth to nature – emerged.<sup>46</sup> To be objective was to aspire to knowledge that bore no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgement, wishing or striving.<sup>47</sup> Objectivity became equated with blind sight, to the act of seeing with no interference, interpretation, or intelligence. More recently, Georges Didi-Hubermann has echoed these ideas in relation to the rubbings produced by artist Giuseppe Penone, suggesting that this technique can release the image as either “a brief time-period (the passage of animals) or long time-periods (geological formations) that have become hardened and compressed like charcoal [...] An imprint of time, a fossil.”<sup>48</sup>

Of this nineteenth-century, obsolete process, Gill has said that she enjoys the fact that the object, the plant, the animal she rubs dictates the way of making: “it is *non-negotiable*”, it is what it is, which also means not scalable or at least, not reducible or collapsible to any agreed abstract measurement determined by human interest or utility.<sup>49</sup> The technique of rubbing itself requires a certain removal of agency on the part of the maker; it is a record in which abstract measurement demands nothing from what is measured and can relate indifferently to rats, men, trees, or a rolling marble. Here, the property of being non-negotiable might also mean not open to discussion or modification in the sense that the object picked and placed under scrutiny precludes anthropomorphic, subjective decisions pertaining to form, composition, and hierarchy. Gill removes her conscious self and becomes a medium or vector for friction; in the process she submits images as records that mess and confound

44

Tsing, *Friction*, 88–89.

45

Ibid., 88.

46

Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*, Princeton, NJ 2007, 17.

47

Ibid.

48

Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Being a Skull. Place, Contact, Thought, Sculpture*, Minneapolis 2015, 63.

49

Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 17.

the perceived binaries between “culture and nature, psychic interior and corporeal exterior, voluntarism and determinism, self and environment”.<sup>50</sup>

### III. Conclusion

A limbless animal, the snake’s lack of external organs dislocates not only the representation of animal organisms, but further, challenges the very organisation of human thinking and motion in space and time. (The ancient Greeks called its enigmatic movement “pneumatic”.<sup>51</sup>) The snake is propelled by the friction produced by its own scales, and ability to redistribute its weight when slithering along flat surfaces. Its movement arrested and enchanted the attention of European historians – particularly that of Aby Warburg and Johann Joachim Winckelmann.<sup>52</sup> The title “Naga Doodles” does not allude to these illustrious European historians (or histories) but rather invokes other mythical, sacred, and zoological realms. *Naga* means dragon in Malay. The *Nāga* is the Sanskrit and Pali word for a god, or awesome snake, specifically, the king cobra that appears in the Indian religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.<sup>53</sup> Typically, in Indian legend, *Nagas* are serpents that *take the form of a human*. Jorge Luis Borges, in his account of *Imaginary Beings*, offers a series of mythical and felicitous encounters between man and this elusive animal. He recounts the story of the Buddha meditating under a fig tree, chastised by the wind and rain. The *Naga* out of pity wraps itself around him in a sevenfold embrace and opens over him its seven heads to form a makeshift umbrella. Only then, in the grip of encounter, “the Buddha converts him to the faith”.<sup>54</sup> A case of nature turning into culture, of nature becoming an artificial refuge, or a kind of shelter for man through contact and entanglement.<sup>55</sup> In his account, Borges also reminds the reader of another story relating to the sacred serpent in which the cloudlike reptile takes refuge deep underground in a palace. He writes: “Believers in the Greater Vehicle tell that the Buddha preached one law to mankind

<sup>50</sup>

Kajri Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar. The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*, Durham, NC 2007, 318.

<sup>51</sup>

Spyros Papapetros, *On the Animation of the Inorganic. Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life*, Chicago 2012, 71.

<sup>52</sup>

In his description of the *Laocoon* Winckelmann entangled snakes with the origins of Western art history and European architectural history.

<sup>53</sup>

Gill, *The Opening Up of the World*, 76–77.

<sup>54</sup>

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, trans. by Margarita Guerrero, London 1970, 165.

<sup>55</sup>

Ibid.

and another to the gods, and that this latter – the secret law – was kept in the heavens and palaces of the serpents who revealed it centuries later to the monk Nagarjuna.”<sup>56</sup> Yet the most relevant myth about the *Naga* is the one set down by the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien in the early fifteenth century: a story that involves an experience of things that exceed human sensorial apprehension and are therefore unmeasurable (trans-human). The story is also about competing and incommensurable scales. It goes:

King Asoka came to a lake near whose edge stood a lofty pagoda. He thought of pulling it down in order to raise a higher one. A Brahman let him into the tower and once inside told him: My human form is an illusion. I am really a Naga, a dragon. My sins condemn me to inhabit this frightful body, but I obey the law preached by the Buddha and hope to work my redemption. You may pull down this shrine if you believe you can build a better one.<sup>57</sup>

In the story the *Naga* shows the king the vessels of the altar. We are told that the alarmed king (who later embraced Buddhism) left the pagoda standing for it was unlike anything “made by the hands of men”.<sup>58</sup> Gill’s invocation of this prosaic and mythological creature gestures to the realm of the sacred in which “scale” – and by extension, the modernity attached to “scalability” – escapes human grasp, and opens to dimensions that are metaphysical, incommunicable, and immeasurable (Kant would call this terrifying realm that of *the sublime*). In conclusion, it is worth recalling the essay *Science as a Vocation* – published a century ago – in which Max Weber submitted that “the fate of our times is characterised, above all, by the disenchantment of the world”, a phenomenon he attributed to the intellectualisation and rationalisation produced by modern forms of social organisation.<sup>59</sup> By *disenchantment* Weber referred to the vanishing of the sacred from the world – one could also say the globalisation of scalability. Silvia Federici interprets Weber’s warning in a more political sense; she believes that this cautionary message indicts those humans who fail to recognise the existence of a time and space other than capitalist development.<sup>60</sup> Gill’s playful engagement with the notion of scale in her photographic per-

56

Ibid.

57

Ibid., 165–166.

58

Ibid., 166.

59

Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, New York 2019, 188–189.

60

Ibid.



[Fig. 7]

Exhibition View, Simryn Gill, "Naga Doodles", 2017, frottage, ink on paper, dimensions variable, in the exhibition *Soft Tissue* (16 January – 2 March 2019), Mumbai, Jhaveri Contemporary, Courtesy: Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai; photograph: Mohammed Chiba.

performances (“Vegetation”, 1999–2016) put pressure on established anthropocentric beliefs and assumptions about time and space as scalable entities. Her use of friction in the creation of the series (“Naga Doodles”, 2017), gives visual form to the resistance one body encounters when moving over another in time and space; each yielded image thus offers a formal and material critique of the very notion of scalability. Ultimately “Naga Doodles” unfolds durationally, soliciting discussions about measure and the unmeasurable at the interface of art, science, and the sacred [Fig. 7].

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