Anthropocenes
HUMAN, INHUMAN, POSTHUMAN

Buitendijk, T. (2023). Non-Human Agency, Surprise Interventions, and Marine Futures. A Commentary on the 'Whale's Tail' Metro Incident in Spijkenisse (NL). *Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman,* 4(1): 1. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/ahip.1360

RESEARCH

Non-Human Agency, Surprise Interventions, and Marine Futures. A Commentary on the 'Whale's Tail' Metro Incident in Spijkenisse (NL)[1]

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In November 2020, a sculpture of a whale's tail installed next to a metro station in Spijkenisse (NL) caught a derailed train falling from the overhead platform, preventing total catastrophe by saving the driver's life. In this article, I argue that the sculpture's unexpected intervention is emblematic of the entanglement between human beings and the natural and built environment in the Anthropocene and provides new insight into the independent agency of non- and more-than-human beings. In particular, the incident reveals the capacity of other-than-human entities, or assemblages of entities, to impact human lifeworlds by rewriting existing social and material relationships. By acting so decisively in a situation spun beyond human control, the artwork both saved the day and created a novel configuration of heterogeneous elements, the train-wreck-on-a-frame. Following the incident, I suggest that the autonomy of 'things' requires humanity to start cultivating an attitude of receptivity: to learn to listen to unexpected expressions of agency and follow their cues for the development of a more-than-human future. I review various interactions between human beings and the coastal and marine environment, demonstrating that other-than-humans already intervene in our lifeworlds more frequently than might be expected. Examples include newfound knowledge of ocean currents and gyres resulting from container spills and dumped plastics; the capacity of near- and offshore capital structures to act as nursery habitats; and demands for additional space by rivers and the sea itself. I conclude that surprise interventions by non- and more-than-human others can help shape future marine environments, benefiting all involved.

Keywords: Climate Change; Ecocriticism; Environmental Humanities; Marine Environments; Multispecies Society; New Materialism

Introduction

In the early hours of November 2, 2020, a metro shot through the stop barrier at its terminus in Spijkenisse, near the Port of Rotterdam in The Netherlands. Rather than falling some 30 feet into an ornamental pond located underneath the elevated station, the train descended onto a propitiously installed sculpture of a whale's tail, one of a pair that had been in place since 2002. The resulting situation was visually bizarre, mechanically complex, and most importantly, completely outside human control; it became a kind of impromptu celebration of the ability of immobile and non-sentient objects to have agency, or to act. Despite a lack of internal reinforcement in the upper section of the artwork (Solico n.d.), the polyester structure was able to hold the metro suspended in mid-air, allowing the driver to escape the vehicle unharmed. The train remained where it was, propped up by the giant tail, until it was carefully removed the next day with the aid of a large crane. As may be expected, the sculpture's timely intervention came much to the delight of its designing artist, residents, and the municipal council, with the latter even proposing to rename the installation: 'Saved by a Whale's Tail' (Boffey 2020). The story made headlines worldwide, prompting local enterprise to weigh in on the craze by developing a range of memorabilia to mark the event and promote the town **(Figure 1)**.

The incident in Spijkenisse constitutes an idiosyncratic snapshot of the whirlwind of agencies, disasters, hopes, salvations, and setbacks that make up the Anthropocene era, or what some have called the 'Age of Man' (Kolbert 2019; see also Mentz 2019). In contrast to the illusion of control that informs most human interactions with natural and built environments, it is impossible in this case for anyone (or anything) to take full credit for the unexpected outcome of the crash. The local council did not commission the artwork as a back-up stop barrier, and artist Maarten Struijs never set out to design a feature that could withstand a multi-tonne force. In fact, in an interview given after the incident Struijs expressed his great surprise

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Figure 1: Chopping board commemorating the November 2020 'Whale's Tail' incident.
(Photo by author. Design by WOOD YUBI 2020. Reproduced with permission of the designer).

at the fortitude of the sculpture: 'I am amazed that it is so strong. When plastic has stood for 20 years, you don't expect it to hold up a metro train' (Boffey 2020). The only thing that can be said for certain about that day is that different objects asserted their independent agency in surprising new ways, with and against each other, and without human say-so.

The events also cast the whale – as individual, species, and a mirror image for humanity (Hoare 2011) – in a completely new light, especially in port and coastal settings. In the usual course of events, the appearance of marine megafauna in busy shipping lanes and other nearshore environments has a negative impact on human (industrial) activity, which may have to be put on hold until the animal leaves or its corpse is removed. Several times over the last few decades, shipping was disrupted in Rotterdam and nearby ports after dead whales were discovered on the bow of inbound cargo vessels (Trouw Redactie 2013; Binnenlandredactie AD 2019). Meanwhile, Dutch national protocol stipulates that beached whales, both dead and alive, require round-the-clock monitoring until they can be refloated or removed. Not only do they carry pathogens that could pose a public health risk, there are also concerns that an unmonitored whale carcass may be subject to looting of the jaw, teeth, and (if present) ambergris (DG Natuur, Visserij en Landelijk Gebied 2020: 5, 20). Therefore, as a rule of thumb lost and stranded whales are considered a major disturbance to the status quo rather than a welcome addition to the already complex coastal landscape. They also constitute a grim reminder of the potential harm to cetaceans caused by human activity in the marine biosphere, for example military exercises, offshore construction, shipping, fishing, and plastic pollution (Wright et al. 2011; Unger et al. 2016)

Though it is hardly unique in highlighting the lack of human control over non-humans (for example plants, animals, objects) and more-than-humans (complex systems and phenomena), the 'Whale's Tail' metro crash is almost blatant about this reality. The incident carries a certain shock value, inviting us to think more deeply about our contemporary relationship with the marine environment, among other things calling into the question the often-assumed link between agency and sentience or intent. In the article that follows, I will argue that the Spijkenisse crash effectively drives the artificial division between separate spheres of 'Nature' and 'Culture' (signalled by among others philosopher Bruno Latour and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty) to an extreme, by inverting the vector of agency. Here we find an artificial and immobile, but at the same time very real and active whale coming to human aid in the midst of urban-industrial chaos, rather than found dead on the bow of a passing ship. Many further parallels exist, making the incident a useful instrument for querying different agencies and interactions across a range of historical and contemporary marine settings.

Beyond Human Agency

Latour observes that contemporary society operates on the assumption of 'two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other' (1993: 10–11). What happens in the middle, in the space between these categories, is preferably left unsaid. For example, independently acting objects are considered problematic, as they possess agencies that ought to be exclusive to human individuals. Similarly, those who point out the place of humanity as mere species-among-species are guilty of resisting the forces of modernity, which have set homo sapiens apart from everyone (or everything) else once and for all (Latour 1993: 10–11, 37ff). As Graham Harman explains in his appraisal of Latour's early body of work, it is in this space of apparent contradictions that the French philosopher makes his most significant contribution to the study

of contemporary society, and perhaps even to the field of metaphysics as a whole (2009: 99ff). According to Latour, '[t]here are not two mutually isolated zones called "world" and "human" that need to be bridged by some magical leap' (Harman 2009: 57); instead, they occupy one and the same ontological domain (Latour 1993: 2–3, 10–12, 94–96; Harman 2009: 57–58). Society is firmly rooted in the natural world; meanwhile, the non-human environment consists of entities that act on, react to, and change one another, meaning they are social just like their human counterparts (Latour 1993: 109ff). The world as a whole contains nothing but *actors*, with no further categorical difference between those that are human and those that are not.[2] Given this lack of distinction between human beings and the world around them, Latour concludes that the modernity project has failed (1993: 46–47). A complete reorientation is needed on the human place in the world: it is time for us to come 'down to Earth' and begin to engage with the beings and phenomena that surround us on a daily basis (Latour 1993; 2018). For much the same reason, Chakrabarty has argued that the distinction between human and environmental or geological history is a false one, a conceptual mistake that has been made painfully obvious by the ongoing climate catastrophe (2009: 201–207). He agrees with Latour that it is time for a new kind of (historical) narrative, in which humans and non-humans inscribe themselves with equal force on local, national, and planetary courses of events.

It is within the context of this argument, on the collapse of the false dichotomy between 'Nature' and 'Culture' (Latour 1993: 99–100), that the events in early November 2020 take on their greatest significance. The metro system in which the sculpture intervened is part of the transportation network surrounding the Port of Rotterdam, a hyperorganised space that is normally understood to be fully subject to human control. By asserting its autonomy so decisively in this particular environment, the non-human, non-sentient, and generally immobile 'Whale's Tail' sculpture has issued strong proof that agency is evenly distributed across a wide range of actors, be they human, animal, object, phenomenon, or something else. This point is almost comically emphasised by the complete *lack of influence* of human parties, such as the driver of the train, the council, and the artist on the derailment or the sequence of events that followed in its wake. The vector of agency has been inverted, and the sculpture leads the way in shaping a unique and altogether new configuration of human/non-human relationships, the train-wreck-on-a-frame. In this setting, non-human autonomy is the norm rather than the exception.

Latour argues that it is necessary for human beings to come to terms with their position as one-of-many in the enormous totality of interactorial relationships, rather than pretending to be the focal (or only) point of the configuration (2018: 86). The lifeworlds in which humans find themselves embedded are messy, competitive, at times dangerous, and above all unpredictable (Latour 2018: 87). Others, like Ian Hodder and Donna Haraway, suggest that the situation of entanglement is even more complex, resembling more of an enmeshment or entrapment of humans in relationships with animals, plants, and 'things' (Hodder 2012: 93–94; Haraway 2016: 10–13, 51ff). As Hodder puts it, things push and pull humans into a variety of material configurations, often leading to complex relationships of dependence that are hard to abandon, and that can be 'thing-led' in the sense that objects have a tendency to fit particular uses and environments more readily than others (2012: 8, 13, 112, 113ff). This links in with Jane Bennett's use of the term 'Thing-Power', to designate the surprising ability of non-human elements to rewrite existing social and material relations (2010: 6). Also relevant here is Haraway's idea of cyborgism, and the related concept of prosthesis, used to refer to situations in which humans become involved with non-human objects and phenomena (both material and immaterial) to the extent that they begin to constitute extensions of their own body (2006: 117ff). Most of the time, neither human nor object exercises full control over the relationship (Haraway 2006: 119).

Using this lens, one can come to understand the Rotterdam metro system as a more-than-human configuration of heterogeneous, co-dependent elements: drivers, passengers, carriages, tracks, safety systems, timetables, and more. In the Spijkenisse incident, these prosthetic extensions (a transportation network allowing people to move from A to B) are suddenly reshuffled. The whale's tail is introduced as a player of note, and existing relationships between entities are (temporarily) annulled in favour of a new reality. Stacy Alaimo further complicates matters by revealing that in these and other situations, it is often no longer clear who we are (or who I am) in relation to the other, as it is impossible to determine where one entity ends and the next begins (2016: 111–112). As Haraway observes, all this means that everyone – and everything – must engage in 'risky' cohabitations and collaborations (2016: 10–13). Latour agrees; the new reality requires ongoing negotiation between actors as they carve out space for themselves in the world (2017: 255ff). For human beings, this means that it is vital that they learn to listen to the other-than-human (Alaimo 2011: 283) and credit their initiative(s) in the process of building future societies.

Thing-Assemblages, Possibility, and Receptivity

At this stage, we are speaking less of individual things than of configurations of things: plural or grouped non- and more-than-human agencies. Indeed, Bennett remarks that '[w]hile the smallest or simplest body or bit may indeed express a vital impetus … an actant never really acts alone. Its efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces' (2010: 21). Much like human beings, non- and more-than-human entities are '*associative* or (one could even say) *social* bodies, in the sense that each is, by its very nature as a body, continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies' (Bennett 2010: 21; emphasis in original). This linked or assembled identity of things (together constituting an 'assemblage') enhances the capacity for expression of individual elements (Bennett 2010: 22–23). To illustrate this argument, Bennett provides the

example of the largest blackout ever recorded in North America, in August 2003, which constituted a temporary rearrangement of people-nature-power relationships at an almost continental scale (2010: 24–28). It is unlikely that an individual actor or event (say, a falling tree striking nearby power lines) could have triggered such a large outage. Moreover, even if the blackout had been caused by a single entity, its impact was still entirely due to the fact that the North American electricity network is a mega-assemblage, comprising countless power stations, wires, coal, water, electricity, atoms, workers, and other things (Bennett 2010: 225). Here, as in many other cases, a greater total number of involved parties leads to a more significant disruption to the status quo, with the power of aggregation itself elevating the contribution to change of each participant actor. This is not to say that the spatial or temporal specificity or the size of a given assemblage – the blackout, say, or the incident in Spijkenisse – precludes the possibility for individual 'things' to express themselves. Rather, we find that agency never unfolds in isolation, and that things always affect other things when they act.[3]

The sudden revision of human/thing or thing/thing relationships cannot be foreseen, nor explained after the fact. Long after the August 2003 blackout, uncertainty remains over the original cause, cascading effects, and sudden conclusion of the event (Bennett 2010: 24–28). Similarly, the incident in Spijkenisse raised more questions than answers. What caused the train to derail? Why did the safety systems fail? And how could mere polyester hold up a multi-tonne vehicle? However, it is clear that both things and assemblages of things exist in a constant state of possibility beyond our control, even if they were initially brought together by human action. Anna L. Tsing and her collaborators at the *Feral Atlas* project at Stanford University refer to this transition, from human enablement towards independent and uncontrollable agency, as things going 'feral' (2021). Like the Spijkenisse incident, which involved the Rotterdam metro system, the process often involves things piggy-backing on human infrastructure. Examples of feral entities provided by Tsing et al. include invasive plant species spreading via water, road, and air transportation networks; farmed animals (including fish) escaping their pens and mixing with wild populations; and diseases finding new hosts using colonial trading routes (2021). Many of these situations are dire, but none of them are entirely unexpected, especially in the Anthropocene era. Indeed, Haraway, Latour, and others signal that interactions with feral entities, and more generally sudden expressions of agency by diverse things and assemblages, are an inevitable part of the collaborations and delineations that all inhabitants of the planet must engage in (cf. Latour 2018: 94–95).

The new, constant state of possibility – i.e., the fact that expressions of agency by things and/or assemblages can occur at any point in the future – invites the question of human receptivity. Though we are unable to predict what other actions and reactions will issue from the world around us, we can cultivate an attitude of hopeful expectation and renewed commitment to a more-than-human way of life. In this regard, the interventions generated by non- and more-than-human entities and assemblages are instructive. Some pave the way for collaborations that benefit all involved parties; others reiterate our lack of control over a given course of events, or remind us of the destructive impact of past and present human behaviours on the environment. After all, feral entities and assemblages were once set in motion by our own attempts at (re)shaping the planet, or they instrumentalise the capital structures we have put in place to expedite economic development: the ultimate responsibility for their destructive impacts is ours. These exercises in admitting, encountering, listening, and imitating are precisely the type of risky behaviour championed by Donna Haraway, and resemble a kind of communal composting, fermenting, or mucking (she explains this as being '*cum panis*, with bread, at table together – not "posthuman" but "com-post"', 2016: 11; emphasis in original). The idea of composting reflects a more distributed approach to agency, in which different actors meet at odd times in unexpected places, and where wayward behaviours ensure that every participant changes in the encounter (cf. Haraway 2016: 4). Rather than one actor being in charge, the process reflects the 'more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together' (Haraway 2016: 10). In other words, it is a way of collectively exploring possible futures without anyone (or anything) knowing in advance what that will entail.

Surprise Interventions

The incident in Spijkenisse provides new insights into the power of non- and more-than-human things and assemblages to reshape human lifeworlds and can be used as a powerful lens through which to (re)view both contemporary and historical interactions between society and the marine environment. Doing so reveals that the non- and more-than-human intervene (and have intervened) more frequently in the configuration of marine realities than one might expect, and with surprising results. For example, some of the most detailed knowledge of ocean currents to date stems from non-human expressions of agency. Notably, the May 1990 spill of a shipment of 80,000 Nike sneakers in the North Pacific Ocean, followed by the January 1992 loss of 28,800 rubber bath toys (known as the 'Friendly Floatees') in the same part of the world allowed curious scientists to accurately map a large number of surface currents using the times and locations of arrival of the sneakers and toys on various shorelines around the world (Ebbesmeyer and Scigliano 2010; Hohn 2012). Similarly, the first significant proof of the global impact of marine plastic pollution was the discovery, by Captain Charles Moore, of a congregation of plastics of all shapes and sizes in the middle of an ocean gyre: the so-called 'Great Pacific Garbage Patch'. It was only because of the collaborative agencies of different phenomena (ocean currents, pH levels, weather systems) and objects (everyday objects breaking down into plastics) in a large marine assemblage that humans became aware of the scale of the problem (Moore 2012; see also Alaimo 2016:

135ff). These non- and more-than-human contributions to the body of marine scientific knowledge can be contrasted with the things we do not know, and which remain hidden in the unassailable depths of the sea. As Pratt et al. remark in an essay on what it means to 'fathom', the world's seas and oceans will always be a 'habitat we do not inhabit … [as we] can visit the sea only temporarily' (2020: 174). Moreover, for our brief glimpses of the submarine world we are entirely dependent on (prosthetic) aids: boats, wetsuits, snorkels, oxygen tanks, and measuring devices (Pratt et al. 2020: 174). The result of these dependencies is a kind of 'knowing *with*' and '*[learning]-with*' non- and more-than-human others (Pratt et al. 2020: 175; emphasis in original), providing us with knowledge about an environment they (or their peers) may already be very familiar with.

Even brief glimpses of the submarine world can be sufficient to glean new insights from the entities that inhabit it. For example, marine flora and fauna have generated creative end-of-life solutions for a variety of capital structures occupying near- and offshore environments. Dive surveys of so-called ship graveyards, working and decommissioned oil rigs, and wind turbines have revealed that many of these installations have come to serve as the artificial foundation for new reefs, effectively creating a shelter for numerous marine species (Jørgensen 2012). In response, various regulators have begun to ask companies to leave parts of ships, rigs, and turbines in situ to benefit existing and future marine societies (Ounanian, van Tatenhove, and Ramírez-Monsalve 2020: 218). There is also criticism of such 'rigs-to-reefs' conversions, with some arguing that resulting artificial habitats do not act as a catalyst for ecosystems flourishing as much as they are a biological magnet or 'aggregation device', depleting surrounding areas of hosts of species by presenting a more attractive new home (cf. Ounanian, van Tatenhove, and Ramírez-Monsalve 2020: 212). Furthermore, it has been suggested that rigs-to-reefs projects loosen the legislative reins on corporate environmental responsibility, and that the savings associated with leaving capital structures in place – rather than hauling them to shore – constitute a hand-out to oil companies (Ounanian, van Tatenhove, and Ramírez-Monsalve 2020: 218–219). Yet, the value of deepwater artificial habitat creation has been proven in a number of independent reviews (Jørgensen 2012: 57–58). This means that reluctance to consider rigs-to-reefs conversion, including in the majority of European waters (cf. Jørgensen 2012), is not necessarily driven by scientific consensus on its ecosystem impact but by an inability to consider previously unthought-of options. It is precisely in these scenarios that humanity can practice an attitude of receptivity and follow in the footsteps of other-than-human entities, rather than attempt to independently keep pace with, or even dictate, the rapidly changing character of contemporary marine environments.

Successful instances of human listening to non- and more-than-human entities and assemblages can be found in the national and regional environmental management policies of a number of countries. For example, coastal and river realignment programmes in both the Netherlands and the United Kingdom have taken an explicitly receptive turn over the last few decades. Between 2006 and 2015, Rijkswaterstaat (the Dutch Office for Water Management) carried out its programme 'Ruimte voor de Rivier' ('Room for the River'), which overturned a longstanding tradition of strict river (and riverbank) management and replaced it by a strategy of listening to the water. This was done in the wake of several near-catastrophic high-water events, including in 1995, when 250,000 people and one million animals were temporarily evacuated for fear of widespread flooding (Wolbers et al. 2018: 17). It quickly became clear that future disasters could only be avoided by conceding more space to the river (Wolbers et al. 2018: 17). For this reason, a series of infrastructural interventions was carried out at key points in the system, removing bends and other constrictions to allow water to flow unimpeded once again (Rijkswaterstaat n.d.). Similarly, new flood mitigation measures installed near Medmerry in Sussex, England in 2013 offer soft over hard protection by creating a floodplain of more than 400 acres in size. This benefits human communities by offering greater security against marine climate change, while also generating new economic and tourist opportunities, and supporting saltmarsh and mudflat habitats for migrating birds and other coastal species (Guardian Press Association 2013). The project now serves as an inspiration for other, much-needed coastal protection works in the United Kingdom (Guardian Press Association 2013). In each of these two cases, engineers consulted the needs and preferences of local (human) residents as well as those of the other entities using a particular space and developed solutions that rendered benefit across the board. In the end, the most equitable outcome for all involved parties was for society to take an almost literal step back, and to allow various assemblages of non-human actors (water, reeds, fish, birds, sand, and more) to fill the vacated space. The way this transpired makes these interventions exemplary of a peaceful (re)negotiation process, in which human and non-human territories are staked anew to ensure successful long-term cohabitation (cf. Latour 2017: 255ff).

The turn towards a greater appreciation of non-human autonomy can also be recognised in the growing global 'Rights of Nature' movement, which seeks to designate individual or interconnected ecosystems (including rivers, forests, seas, and oceans) as entities with legal rights, in much the same way as corporations, foundations, and states are already treated. The idea is that an independent legal status for non-human entities and assemblages will provide them with better protection than current environmental legislation can achieve (Burgers and Den Outer 2021: 6ff). Notably, in many instances the Rights of Nature movement departs from Western anthropocentrism and instead follows Indigenous cultures in recognising the outstanding ability of non- and more-than-humans to determine their own futures, quite irrespective of human involvement (cf. Gutmann 2021). Therefore, in many ways the pursuit of legal protection for these entities has been a means to a greater end: to allow the other-than-human to expand on its own agency. In a coastal and marine context, this kind of work is being

carried out by, among others, the Embassy of the North Sea. This Dutch organisation has set itself the goal of achieving legal status for its namesake by the year 2030, based on a Latourian framework for political autonomy and cross-species collaboration known as the 'Parliament of Things' (see Latour 1993; 2017; Embassy of the North Sea; Burgers, Meijer, and Nowak 2020).

The benefits of legal status must always be balanced against the capacity and freedom of expression of the species and ecosystems receiving protection. Transforming something into a legal entity can have a suppressive impact on its ability to speak for itself, especially if human beings assume the role of designated spokesperson without properly listening to other-than-human inputs. The risk is that non- and more-than-human needs and preferences are misunderstood and consequently misrepresented (cf. Meijer 2017: 101–102), or that anthropocentric (i.e., human-centred) agendas once again take precedence over those that might benefit other critters, but this time under the guise of environmental protection. For similar reasons, the term 'environmental personhood' has been criticised for its implication that non- and more-than-humans should become *more human* in order to qualify for protection in court, an assumption that undercuts the turn away from anthropocentrism for which the Rights of Nature movement has been celebrated (Reeves and Peters 2021). As it stands, the notion of judicial and political representation for non- and more-than-human others remains open to contestation, with many different authors and organisations exploring the conditions for equitable cross-species and cross-phenomenal engagement (Latour 1993: 142–145; 2017: 255ff; Stengers 2011; Meijer 2017). However, the often audacious character of many expressions of non- and more-than-human agency suggests that 'Nature' may already be perfectly capable of communicating its needs and preferences, and that it can and will do so both within and without existing legal and political frameworks and modes of representation.[4]

Conclusion. Curiosity and the Future

The November 2020 Spijkenisse metro incident constitutes an outstanding example of a non-human expression of agency, made all the more evident by the complete lack of human control over the near-catastrophic series of events. The train crash and subsequent intervention by the sculpture signify how accidents, contradictions, and mistakes open up new ways for humans, non-humans, and more-than-humans to share life on a damaged planet. This shift in perspective subverts a brazen understanding of the Anthropocene as the era in which humanity (finally) seizes power over the planet and invalidates the assumption of total control that underpins such fantasies (cf. Hamilton 2013; Morton 2016). It also helps avoid an inclination towards resignation, in which all hope for a better future is abandoned due to the considerable damage already inflicted on the planet's ecosystems by human industrial activity. Rather, incidents such as the one in Spijkenisse reiterate the entanglement of human existence with the material world, and invite an attitude of receptivity.

Acceptance of the fact that we live in a 'vibrant' or animated reality (Bennett 2010) is a creative and productive approach to the making of sustainable lifeworlds, offering a pragmatic way of dealing with the climate catastrophe on the basis of *what is* rather than *what was* or *what could have been*. More specifically, it means surrendering the human monopoly on agency, intention, and knowledge, instead creating new spaces for curiosity to bloom, based on a willingness to learn from the non- and more-than-human other. It has become clear that this curiosity should find practical expression, with marine futures emerging as a result of real patterns of collaboration between humans and other-than-humans.[5] Examples of how this attitude can help reimagine coastal and marine environments are plentiful: other-than-human entities and assemblages have already opened up new avenues for the production of marine scientific knowledge, identified spaces for near- and offshore habitat creation, carved out the necessary territory for their own proliferation, and generally demonstrated their capacity to speak up and be heard. By doing so, they offer a vision of a future that is not determined exclusively by human beings, but negotiated, designed, and co-produced by the widest possible variety of actors. It appears that a better tomorrow can hail from unexpected corners.

Notes

[1] This article draws on work from a doctoral thesis completed in June 2021, entitled 'Whales and Wind Farms. Towards a Poetics of the Sea in the Twenty-First Century' and available at http://doras.dcu.ie/26034/.

[2] As Harman observes, this makes Latour one of the first philosophers to resolve the problem of mind/body duality by insisting on the irreducibility of every actor: rather than attempting to justify the elevation of the human *nous* over the non-human world, he situates everything on the same plane of significance. In this way '[e]verything will be absolutely concrete; all objects and all modes of dealing with objects will now be on the same footing' (Harman 2009: 13).

[3] Within the context of the work of the authors discussed in this article, the terms 'entity'/'thing' and 'assemblage' are distinguished primarily by the number of their constituent elements and the potentially greater change following from expressions of agency due to the effects of aggregation. Employing this distinction, it is worth bearing in mind that Alaimo, Haraway, and Latour would all argue that individual human beings, animals, or objects can themselves easily be recast as assemblages (or networks) of living and non-living elements (e.g., a human body as a porous collection of bacteria, lipids, proteins, even plastics; cf. Alaimo 2016: 111–112).

[4] For more examples of surprise interventions by non- and more-than-human entities and assemblages (either marine, terrestrial, or somewhere in-between), I refer the reader to Tsing et al.'s bipartite collection of essays *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017). The section on 'Monsters' in particular offers brilliant insight into humans' constant entanglement with

other-than-humans, and the implications of this state of being for our shared future(s).

[5] This also offers an imperative to anyone working in contemporary ecocritical theory, to extend the scope of inquiry beyond speculative imagination and cultural criticism, towards empirical study.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. The author would also like to thank Dr. Michael Hinds (Dublin City University) and Prof. Tasman Crowe (University College Dublin) for their help in preparing this article. Finally, thanks are due to the guest editors of the special issue of *Anthropocenes* on coastal cultures, who provided thoughtful feedback: Dr. James L. Smith (University College Cork), Dr. Rich Gorman (Brighton and Sussex Medical School), and Dr. Sarah Bezan (University of York).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Buitendijk, T. (2023). Non-Human Agency, Surprise Interventions, and Marine Futures. A Commentary on the 'Whale's Tail' Metro Incident in Spijkenisse (NL). *Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman*, 4(1): 1. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/ahip.1360

Submitted: 15 August 2022 **Accepted:** 20 January 2023 **Published:** 23 February 2023

Anthropocenes – Human, Inhuman, Posthuman is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of Westminster Press.