

Women and Other Wild Creatures: Matrilineal Tales

Curated by : Nina Levent

Antediluvian Symptoiesis

Nicole Peyrafitte



Antediluvian Sympoiesis

Antediluvian Sympoiesis is an installation created for the exhibition *Women and Other Wild Creatures: Matrilineal Tales* at Sapar Contemporary Gallery in New York City curated by Nina Levent from June 4-August 25 2022.

This mixed-media installation — 1 video, 1 text hand-painted on the wall, 2 notebooks, 1 photograph & 3 paintings on/in *Limulus Polyphemus* (horseshoe crab) shells — initiates an environment on art's response-ability as healing practice.



BACKGROUND:

Since 2011 *Karstic-Actions*¹ have been the main focus of my artistic activity. These works explore proprioception (sense of body position) & kinesthesia (sense of body movement), as meeting points between painting, poetry, voice & improvised music. They have also at times integrated food elements. From making crêpes, whipping cream or soups to serving full dinners², sharing food with the audience has been part of my performance repertoire since the 90s. The search for sustainability of body & mind is the work's quest: family, art, food, nature observation, physical fitness... all are treated with the same intensity while trying to keep health as the central axis. By "health" I mean taking the word at its core sense:

Health: Old English *hælp* "wholeness, a being whole, sound or well," from Proto-Germanic **hailitho*, from PIE **kailo-* "whole, uninjured, of good omen" (source also of Old English *hal* "hale, whole;" Old Norse *heill* "healthy;" Old English *halig*, Old Norse *helge* "holy, sacred;" Old English *hælan* "to heal"). With Proto-Germanic abstract noun suffix **-itho* (see [-th \(2\)](#)).

Of physical health in Middle English, but also "prosperity, happiness, welfare; preservation, safety." An abstract noun to whole, not to heal. Meaning "a salutation" (in a toast, etc.) wishing one welfare or prosperity is from 1590s. Health food is from 1848.

-th (2)

suffix forming nouns of action, state, or quality from verbs or adjectives (such as **depth**, **strength**, **truth**), from Old English *-ðu*, *-ð*, from Proto-Germanic **-itho* (cognates: Old Norse *-þ*, Old High German *-ida*, Gothic *-iþa*), abstract noun suffix, from PIE **-ita* (cognates: Sanskrit *-tati-*; Greek *-tet-*; Latin *-tati-*, as in *libertatem* "liberty" from *liber* "free"). Sometimes in English reduced to *-t*, especially after *-h* (as in **height**).³

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Many things can change the dynamic & outcome of our practices; for example during the early days of the confinement my response was to broadcast 24 live 30-minute very healthy home-cooked meals from scratch. I was born — literally! — & raised in my family’s hotel-restaurant in Southern France & did run the kitchen as the chef for a few years; cooking is thus in my “nature” & I have done it since I was 6 years old. With poet & husband Pierre Joris as my side-kick, our kitchen became a cooking studio⁴. While cooking these daily meals live we also provided practical, historical & dietetic information. I didn’t think of it at the time, but this action fits the core definition of the word health: “prosperity, happiness, welfare; preservation, safety.”

Then life somehow resumed & we were able to go to Europe to install “*Nicole Peyrafitte & Pierre Joris’ KARSTIC ACTIONS/WORKS*” (June 4th — July 15, 2021). Like many such events, this exhibition had been delayed by the pandemic but in late May 2021 we finally could travel to install it (the second installment) on all three levels of Galerie Simoncini in Luxembourg⁵. *Domopoetics* is the name we give to the daily practice of transformation of & in our works, be that writing, painting, video, physical conditioning, or in our shared household & familial activities. *Karstic*, in reference to the geological phenomena of dissolution & transformation at work in the formation of superficial or underground limestone topographies. By a similar principle of infiltration, language transforms into poem, breath into song and colored chalk become pastel into marks on paper or canvas.



Recently new family health issues refocused my work on a more intimate, private practice. As we were talking about this upcoming exhibition, Nina Levent was sensitive to this aspect & accurately pointed out that my current practice was a healing journey. Indeed, I find comfort & purpose in deepening connections with other-than-human voices like birds, horseshoe crabs, water & elements of landscape.

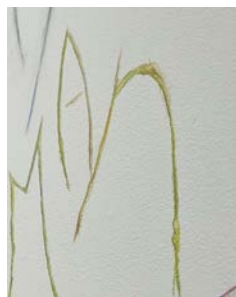
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INSTALLATION ELEMENTS:

- *1 video*
- *1 hand-painted text on the wall*
- *2 sketchbooks*
- *3 paintings on/in Limulus Polyphemus shells + 1 photograph*

My *Antediluvian Sympoiesis* installation samples these current investigations & delineates art's healing response-ability.

When Nina Levent was planning the show we were in the Spring of 2022 & war had just started raging in Ukraine where she is from & her family still lives. She was clear that the exhibition was meant to have a healing perspective. When we discussed potential ideas, birds & horseshoe crabs came up. It was the spawning season of *Limulus Polyphemus* — a.k.a. the “horseshoe crab,” who in fact is not a crab! These creatures have fascinated me since the first time I saw one. I have been collecting shells, observing them coming ashore & returning to the sea — even helping them to do so when necessary. I am still learning about their antediluvian lifecycle — we trace their development from the Paleozoic Era, 540 million years ago, to the present and stand amazed at how that lifecycle is not only interlocked with the migration of shore birds & their survival, but also with us humans! We totally depend on *Limulus* as for the past 30 years *all* injectable drugs — i.e. any vaccine, I.V., etc. — have been tested to detect possible endotoxins with LAL (*limulus ameobocyte lysate*), the copper-based oxygen-carrying protein found only in the horseshoe crab's blue blood. This was previously accomplished by injecting rabbits & observing the temperature of their bodies & often their demise. *Limulus Polyphemus* survived continents shifting, massive extinctions, & so far at least, us humans who have used & abused them as fertilizer, bait & via the (often lethal) extraction of their blood for LAL.



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VIDEO:

The video was the last piece created. As mentioned before, it was *Limulus Polyphemus* spawning season & like every year I went to Plumb beach — still in Brooklyn & only 20 minutes away from where I live — to once again witness this remarkable event. At full moon & high tide, thousands of these creatures crawl out of the depth of the ocean were they dwell to lay their eggs on the sandy beaches of the Atlantic Ocean. On May 21 2022, during one of my several spring trips to Plumb Beach, I felt the urge to document myself lying among the multi-millennial arthropods. I brought a couple of shells that I had previously collected (both now in the installation). Since *Limulus Polyphemus* has 10 eyes I thought it made sense to place my iPhone pro inside the beautiful female shell — which is in the show now bears this line from my poem: “reliable emergence tidal connection.” Additional footage was taken by Pierre Joris who was assisting me. What happened next was very instinctual, & driven by the desire for a close physical association. I truly felt the symbiosis of depth, strength, truth... all words with the suffix -th (2) pertaining to health & spawning me too. That is when the title *Antediluvian Sympoiesis* imposed itself, pointing to a “making with” that predates biblical times. “Sympoiesis” is a term coined by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*⁶ & which she defines as “a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated historical systems. It is word for worlding-with, in company.”

In her paper “Healing in the Chthulucene: Becoming Beyond Human with Medicinal Plants” political ecologist Laura Dev writes⁷:



Donna Haraway’s concept of the “Chthulucene” is used as an alternate lens to the Anthropocene, which highlights the inextricable linkages between humans and other-than-human species. Healing can be viewed as a type of embodied orientation or engagement with the world, which has the potential to reach across boundaries of the skin, blur distinctions between self and other, and allow for both transpersonal and trans-species reconciliation.

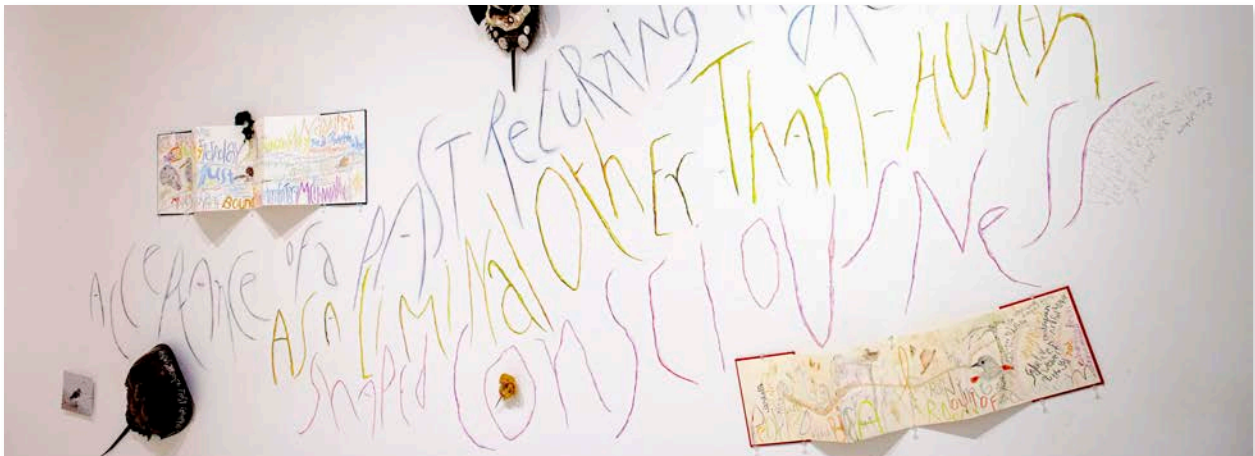
Dev focuses on plant healing practices by natives of the Peruvian forest, but her observations can be applied to any surroundings comprising nature & other-than-human earthlings. Thus the short edited video of the (inter-)actions with the *Limulus* on the beach instances the interconnectedness between horseshoe crabs, birds migration & taking the time to dwell in their/ours speeds & slownesses. It is essential for me to avoid dwelling within the “mostly-dead world” & rather help heal with those “alive and inhabited by other selves.”

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TEXT PAINTED ON THE WALL:

Acceptance
 of a past
 returning in dreams
 as a liminal
 other-than-human
 shaped consciousness
 half prey
 half me
 they fix me
 they love me
 I too love them
 for ever
 yet
 I never met them

I first wrote a version of this poem in 2009 & this text keeps evolving. A version was published in my book *Bi-Valve: Vulvic-Space/Vulvic-Knowledge* & recorded with Michael Bisio on double bass (<https://soundcloud.com/nicole-peyrafitte/12-crane>). Cranes, as in the recording, other birds & more recently *Limulus Polyphemus* or just observing nature, all spark my imagination; they always reveal the outline of what response-ability & tying human & non-human ecologies can become. Sympoiesis or making-with is an asana that requires constant practice; this poem is a memento & I often perform it during my live Karstic-actions. It had to become a painting emulating *Limulus Polyphemus*' tracks on the sand.



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SKETCHBOOKS:

My sketchbooks are my mementos. I draw/write/mark & make notes about what I see, read, listen to, question, study and/or want to remember. Shown in *Antediluvian Sympoiesis* is my latest finished carnet, a double sided leporello *Connection en Mille-Feuille*⁸ that was just published by Red Fox Press. It was my daily companion from November 21, 2021 to February 13, 2022.

I have seen, photographed & learned something from & about all the birds & subjects drawn on these pages. The writings — when not my own — quote books & lectures by Donna Haraway, Suzanne Simard, Maureen Raymo, Betsy Damon, Native American dictionaries & history books, geological studies of where I dwell, that is the tip of the Bayridge terminal moraine & the shores of New York City.



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PAINTINGS & PHOTOGRAPH:

3 paintings on/in *Limulus Polyphemus* shells.



Limulus #2: Horseshoe crab shell (with sanderling photograph next to it)

Text painted w/ gouache: “reliable emergence tidal connection,” a note from a 2020 sketchbook taken at Plumb beach during the 2020 migration & spawning season. This shell was the one held up between my feet with the iPhone camera inside.



A Sanderling. Sanderlings are small shore wading migratory birds. In spring, like many shore birds migrating north from South America, sanderlings, ruddy turnstones (the bird in the video), red knots consume large amounts of horseshoe crab eggs rich in proteins, essential nourishment for these birds, some of which will travel thousand of miles to High Arctic breeding grounds.



Limulus #3: Horseshoe crab shell with painting inside & the epibionts that were on it when the *Limulus* was found dead on the beach. Other organic elements of the painting were found at Owl’s Head Park (tip of the Terminal moraine).



Limulus #1:

Horseshoe crab shell & mixed media.

This shell was used as a “mask” in the video & the organic elements of the painting also come from Owl’s Head Park. I tagged the round little painting onto the shell to mirror & emulate the program conducted by the US. Fish & Wildlife Service: every spawning season trained volunteers walk the beach at high tide to collect valuable information. *Limulus* are counted, observed & some are tagged with a small numbered disc, before being released back into the ocean. The information about these is documented & one is encouraged to report the number. This information is entered into a database that records their movements year after year. You can see a couple of such tagged *Limulus* in the video.

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The layering of these elements establishes an unfathomable scale of presence on earth: 450 million years for *Limulus Polyphemus* & 35 million years for the shore birds, while the final form of the terminal moraine & the shore delineation reach back 13 million years. The shores I dwell on are all thus antediluvian formations, with *homo sapiens* a very recent apparition. This brief summary reveals the symbiotic complexities of this eco-system. Antediluvian Sympoietic “makes with” beyond the biblical & is my art’s response-ability as healing practice.



photograph not included in this exhibit

¹ Karstic-Actions : <https://www.nicolepeyrafitte.com/karstic-action/>

² Kartic-Actions: *Sens iLimités*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Sa5zry5Val>

The Bi-Continental Chowder: <https://www.nicolepeyrafitte.com/bi-continental-chowder/>

³ https://www.etymonline.com/word/health#etymonline_v_6246

⁴ Confinement food videos : <https://www.nicolepeyrafitte.com/cov-19-live-cooking-videos/>

⁵ 2021: <https://www.nicolepeyrafitte.com/peyrafittejorissimoncini20201/>

2017 exhibition: <https://www.nicolepeyrafitte.com/domopoetics/>

⁶ Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

⁷ Assistant Professor of Environmental Sciences & Society at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville

⁸ *Connection en Mille Feuille : a Mille-Feuille is not only an exquisite layered pastry but a also literally means a thousand fold. So whether it is about the ground beneath us, the birds we see, the books we read, the people we talk to... all are composed of discrete layers of (often) imperceptible but rich & complex formations.*