

Am I Ancient or a Human-Made Machine? was a monographic exhibition held at the Or Gallery from August 28 to October 2, 2021. Curated by Paz Guevara, it comprises work by Chilean artist Michelle-Marie Letelier that centres around the topic of salmon aquaculture. Letelier spotlights the profound disconnect between humans and nature, owing to the continued appeal of extractivism: the mining of natural resources

for financial gain. She does so by employing technologies that have become widely accessible and familiar to us—namely, virtual reality and live video streaming. A short corridor leads up to the exhibition entrance, where viewers are first met with the interrogative title and a handful of gallery guides to their left. As a prelude to the main space, it assumes a synoptic role—opening up a space for visitors to gain in-

depth knowledge about Letelier’s work before interacting with it. However, the confinement of all didactics to a space outside of the exhibition space signals, from the outset, a significant deviation from gallery conventions. The equally unusual floor-length drapes at the entryway obstruct any immediate view of the exhibition’s contents, allowing the work on the other side to escape the enveloping grasp of natural

light. The act of passing through the parted drapes, thus, becomes a way for Letelier to subliminally introduce the idea of disconnect to the audience. Crossing the threshold closes viewers off from the outside world and the present moment, prompting them to immerse themselves and quite literally lose sight of anything beyond the confines of the space. As such, we are being invited to go beyond a simple survey of the work and make an effort to establish a genuine relationship with the salmon—unencumbered by the exploitative pursuits that

neocolonial structures promote. The exhibition takes its name from a three-dimensional geometric configuration devised to house and display Letelier’s main digital works and their text-based counterparts. As opposed to traditional exhibitions, the museography of *Am I Ancient or a Human-Made Machine?* is an integral part of the installation. The transcription of the diagram into the physical space of the viewer ties all the elements together via what we have termed an “embodied schematic diagram”: a habitable drawing. This provides

a bridge between the different works and creates a dialogic space within which Letelier enables “multiple agencies” to come forward in a spirit of collectivity. A rope on the ground is shaped into a double loop, similar to a lemniscate or figure-eight, but is interrupted at the centre by a short triangular plinth. Flanked by the diptych *From Now Until Now* (2018), the rope rests lengthways within the rectangular room. Therefore, we might say that the installation visually responds to the architecture’s geometric features and, via the use of

Am I Ancient or a Human-Made Machine? The Or Gallery

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Michelle-Marie Letelier, *Am I Ancient or Human-Made Machine?*, Photo courtesy of Or Gallery.

simple, identifiable shapes, brings a sense of cohesiveness to the work and space. The resulting symmetry achieved by the layout, in conjunction with the arrow-like form of the plinth, ultimately proposes a predetermined and unidirectional trajectory: movement from the front of the room to the back; from entrance to end.

Upon entering the space, the question “*Am I Ancient or Human-Made Machine?*” re-emerges as a sort of signpost—suggesting two main ways of navigating the exhibition. Visitors are welcomed by a stack of cards placed on a plinth, which helps determine their starting point. You are instructed to pick a card before beginning your journey. If it reads “Ancient?,” you begin with *The Bone* (2019–21) at the front, a VR

experience that submerges you into the skin of a salmon and is accompanied by an immersive audio-visual experience. “Human-Made?” directs you to *The Bonding—Live Streaming* (2021) in the back loop, a showing of a Norwegian salmon farm in real time. Each work is supported with written material that takes the format of diary entries, script excerpts, and open letters—not to be confused with descriptive or interpretive texts written by curators and collaborators. These materials are displayed as a pile of distributable handouts on the floor and are structurally imperative to our understanding of Letelier’s time-based works. Three floor cushions and a stool are also placed into each loop for a total of eight seats within the room. This set-up physically reminds viewers of the intimacy and reciprocity that belies the work; we settle onto the floor alone or alongside the group with which we came to essentially sit with our thoughts, the work, and the people around us.

Therefore, access to the “Ancient” is through graphic and written material (innately “human” tools) but it is represented through incredibly advanced technological equipment: the VR set. Access to the “Human” side is mainly through a screen, consistent with current times. Ultimately, this back and forth of old and new

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technology becomes another way that Letelier brings a sense of unity to the exhibited works.

Of course, an exhibition always follows a common theme, whether that is a similar art topic or a time period. The monographic exhibition combines different works to create one cohesive installation. It is a testament to the artist’s constant interest in salmon aquaculture and makes for a multi-faceted work, examining politics and the self-alienation of humans from nature. The show relies on dichotomy—specifically, in using technology and paper as an apparatus or when using VR to immerse us in the body of the salmon (before or) after seeing these sentient beings from a distance via live stream. Creating these superficial bonds pushes the possibility of long-term emotional bonds and encounters between the free human and its captive prey; it urges us to regain empathy and kinship lost to alienation of industrialization. Nonetheless, this feeling relies on false relatability, as technology is limited and can never accurately recreate a soon-to-be lost natural environment.

To end on a more practical note, this exhibition is an amazing demonstration of the power of the curator and the importance of arrangement. The choice to leave walls mostly blank invites viewers to sit on the



Michelle-Marie Letelier, *Am I Ancient or Human-Made Machine?*, Photo courtesy of Or Gallery.

floor cushions to converse and experience the work—creating a sense of intimacy, as opposed to claustrophobia, despite the small space. The separation between the exhibition and the didactics offers autonomy of reflection for the viewer, who has been given the space to do so comfortably. The guiding pamphlet evidently provides a starting point for approaching the exhibition, but its scope is still significantly restricted and restrictive; especially if this is the only way one chooses to interact with the exhibit. The online components—namely,

recorded conversations with the artist titled *Poethics of a Sovereign Ocean: Orality, Reciprocity and Geopolitical Trajectories* (2021)—could be useful in supplementing the descriptive material. This additional material offers viewers a deeper understanding of the thinking and research behind the work. However, it is ultimately one's embodied navigation of space that brings prominence and life to the work. The exhibition's immersive nature physically separates you from your surroundings to make you experience the ideas at

hand; you hear the live stream, read their direct words in diary entries, escape into underwater zones, among other things. Its understanding comes from the way it feels to exist in the space while lost in time and meditation, examining our human experience through humanity's consequences on our environment. *Am I Ancient or a Human-Made Machine's* contents exist in such a way that additional explanations simply fall short.