The slow knowledge of a gardener: On Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever's Snail Time

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Powelliphanta, a species of carnivorous land snail endemic to Aotearoa, eat earthworms and grow shells up to 10cm in diameter. I'm no expert: the first and only time I've encountered them was as a kid, near a highway picnic area, the first stop on a queasy backseat car trip to Christchurch. Stumbling upon a few glossy shells, nestled between raised roots and a crunch of fine-toothed beech leaves, I remember they were stationary and, at first, seemingly unoccupied. The snails had retreated inwards, the stirrings of their dark flesh barely visible upon closer observation. How huge, how wild and *alien* compared with my only frame of reference, a garden snail.

Of course, garden snails are the aliens, introduced, whereas fossils show that *Powelliphanta*, (much like the northern land snails known as Pūpūrangi, *Paryphanta*, Kauri snails or Flax snails) have existed here on the land for millions of years. Subspecies are confined to their own very small enclaves, which, according to DOC, is probably because of the patchiness of suitable habitat—moist, lowland forests—but also because of the simple fact that snails can't move very fast or far. There have also been barriers to their movement "such as glaciers, rivers, lakes, mountains and volcanic ash."¹ Recounting these hypotheses, I find myself trying to imagine a succession of land snails travelling very slowly through biogeological deep-time.

1 "Powelliphanta Snail: Invertebrates", Department of Conservation, https://www.doc. govt.nz/nature/native-animals/invertebrates/powelliphanta-snails/ I first encountered *Snail Time*, an ongoing project by Lucy Meyle and Ziggy Lever, indirectly via a conversation about a subspecies of *Powelliphanta*. My interest was piqued when a friend made an offhand reference to the project, being familiar with Lucy's video *Loaf* (2020), where a baked bread sculpture in the shape of a snail was placed in a garden and filmed as it was pecked at by birds. *Snail Time* came up while he was telling me about an operation where thousands of native snails had been uplifted near the Stockton Coal Mine—on Te Tai o Poutini, the West Coast of the South Island—and were living in a refrigerated facility, inside stacked tupperware containers so that their offspring's offspring could eventually be released, after mining was completed.²

Biologist Michael Hadfield describes visiting the Stockton Mine and habitat of this subspecies, named *Augusta*, in *The Tree Snail Manifesto* (2019), written in collaboration with Donna Haraway:

... we began to ascend a beautifully forested mountainside. Just at the top, the entire scene changed and I found myself gazing into a giant black valley ... crisscrossed by road traversed by truly gigantic trucks filled with extracted coal... We drove to the top of a nearby peak, Mount Augustus, where the mine was quickly expanding. There, I was able to see both the last of the snail's native habitat and a few remaining snails in it. That entire area would be gone in less than a year...closely related snails occupied nearby habitat, and moving *p. augusta* to those areas could easily result in hybridisation and a lack of endemic diversity...³

The manifesto, which developed out of—and mainly focuses on—work with tree snails endemic to the Hawaiian Islands, explores scientific research as necessarily situated, collaborative, political and personal. In it, Hadfield describes subspecies located in the O'ahu mountains, separated by only a few kilometres, that show "no gene flow between them for at least 10,000 years".⁴ These particular snails move only a few metres in their lifetimes, a scale of endemism and resulting biodiversity that is difficult to comprehend.

At the end of last year, I asked Lucy and Ziggy for a copy of their publication *Snail Time*, published alongside the first iteration of the project at Window Gallery. They sent one to me which, in turn, led to an invitation from the artists to write this response to *Snail Time II* at RM, and to the arrival of a second publication in the mail. This seems important to mention, as their project feels just as concerned with the processes of research, encounter and knowledge sharing as it is with timescales or ecologies. At the time of writing, *Snail Time* encompasses multiple public outputs with different temporalities: two installations at artist-run spaces lasting around four weeks; two print publications and many loose pieces of printed ephemera—all with indeterminate but presumably much longer lifespans; and an open-ended website (snail-time.com), which hosts text, photographs and digital video documenting the project. Then, there are other tangents and traces, described by the artists as "slippery trails of meaning" between *Snail Time* and the two practices around it.

4 Ibid, S220.

² For more information about this, see, for example https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/who-failed-the-snails/

³ Michael G. Hadfield and Donna J. Haraway, "The Tree Snail Manifesto", *Current Anthropology*, Volume 60, Supplement 20, August 2019, S221.

Where to begin with some of these fragments and directions in the lifespan of Snail Time so far? Part one focused on the relationship between the library and playground. Thumbing through that first publication, documentation of the exhibition at Window-located in the foyer of The University of Auckland's General Library—has been printed as glossy 6x4s, placed loose inside so that they slip out, continuing to announce themselves. These photos show two paper-mâché and resin sculptures resembling spring riders, a form of playground equipment. One resembles a snail and the other a leaf. They also show unfolded versions of the publication's dust jacket taped to the gallery's front glass, a reference to a playful gesture that was integral to this iteration of the project: inserting copies of it into the shelves of the library's general collection. This move makes me think of poet and editor Quinn Latimer's observation that books have a "different time", one that is "wildly different, wildly longer, more public and more intimate."⁵ A desire to exploit this "different time" to share wider, look closer, play with notions of posterity and happenstance—and to gently probe paradigmatic structures-characterises the ongoing ambitions of Lucy and Ziggy's project.

When we video call to talk about Snail Time II, it's the last day of the show. The artists are in RM sitting next to what they describe as a helical plywood ramp, elevated around a central gravel pit. Installed next to RM's library and archive, this structure was first deployed by the artists in their previous installation Looking Forwards and Backwards (2017) at Blue Oyster, a kind of experiment in how an atmosphere of collaboration could translate into exhibition making. Ziggy takes me on a laptop tour of the ramp, so I can register the rise and fall of his footsteps on the uneven surface. Various found objects, printed and organic materials are strewn around, all accumulated over the course of the exhibition. It takes me a while to discern what I'm seeing on screen: two revolving mirrors held up by motorised, rotating structures placed on the gravel, which reflect and interrupt the path of two projectors tucked underneath the ramp. This setup complicates the experience of looking, refracting and blocking different parts of the projector beams, rotating images around the walls of the gallery, and throwing back partial, shifting views of the installation. It's tempting to cast the mirrors as stand-ins for the artists, their thoughts circling one another.

Leaning against the wall on one side of the ramp is another kind of fragment: a paper-mâché and resin sculpture. It's a recreation of a cinematic prop, a piece of shell from the giant pink sea snail of *Dr Doolittle* (1967). In the film, the shell of the fictional sea snail is empty, inexplicably unoccupied by its body, and the Doctor and his companions take advantage of this, riding around inside the shell and using it for food storage. This recreation, produced by both artists, seems to have grown from Lucy's sculptural preoccupation with things that have shells, crusts, bark, skins or covers— such as peanuts, logs, fruit, bread and blocks of butter. In previous work, she has recreated each of these objects in what she describes as a "baggy" fashion—a process that involves close, but not entirely faithful, study of an original form or reference point. Sculptures that *look like* something else but with *wiggle room*, enough to move around inside *the idea* of an object or form—in this case, a replica of a prop that is literally larger than life—to think and feel what comes up.

After creating their ramp at Blue Oyster, Lucy and Ziggy stumbled on a photo of a fresco painted for Palais de Papes, Avignon, France, which depicts a *vivarium* loosely resembling the proportions of the structure they have created in the gallery. This image features across the documentation and promotion of *Snail Time II*. Latin for "place of life", a *vivarium* is an enclosed area for keeping or raising plants and animals for observation and research. The fresco depicts a rectangular pool with a recessed centre filled with water, fish and ducks. It is framed by lush-looking forest and four people on the water's edges, two of whom are holding nets while the others appear to be feeding the fish or picking plants. The image is both a reminder of the enduring human practice of displacing animals from their natural habitat for study or enjoyment—one that is rooted in the idea that nature and other species could be contained or controlled—and an illustration of a leisurely and social mode of study that suits the *Snail Time* project.

This kind of casual inquiry resonates throughout Ziggy's practice, which often explores what terms such as "observation" and "research" could mean-as they relate to scientific study, and to institutions such as the archive, library or gallery. This extends to The Observatory Project, another collaboration between Ziggy, artist/musician Eamon Edmundson-Wells and astrophysicist Tim Natusch, which focuses on what the trio describe as "the creation of new observatories as a framework that allows artists and scientists to explore the language of the observatory outside of the context of scientific empiricism."6 The resulting installations and activities are experiments in how we study things, and how these findings are shared. This way of working shares an ethic with Isabelle Stenger's meditations on the importance of "slow science". Scrutinising Western research cultures, Stengers describes a "fast science", which often equates paying attention with a loss of time in an arena shaped by academic competition, opportunism and conformism. Slow science, however, entails a shift to affect the future in an era of climate change. For Stengers, going slowly and paying close attention can create a kind of transformational knowledge together—one that is "more similar to the slow knowledge of a gardener than to the fast one of so-called rational industrial agriculture".⁷

Despite its shell, a snail is vulnerable; they are small, prone to being stepped on, dehydrated by the sun, sometimes live only in very small areas with the right conditions, and, as Lucy's *Loaf* video reminds us, eaten by birds and other predators. The *Augusta* snails of Te Tai o Poutini are a particularly tangible example of the vulnerability of non-human species, and our alienation from them, particularly when an animal is often viewed as pitiful, small or inconsequential. After spending time with Lucy and Ziggy's project, when I read the words "snail time" I still jump to the image of a the *Powelliphanta* species moving at a glacial pace, and to creative processes like reading, writing and grappling with ideas—which are also vulnerable, and like Stengers illustrates, require significant personal investment, attention and dialogue. *Snail Time*, however, despite all this, feels joyful and optimistic. It constitutes a makeshift arena for the amateur, enthusiastic observer, for lumpy recreations, reflections on pop culture and history, and unexpected discoveries.

⁶ See The Observatory Project website: http://observatory-project.info/