A'ai: Language, Biodiversity, and the Art of Coexistence

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Transcript of the talk from the recording's auto-generated captions, lightly edited for clarity. The film itself, in the Esselen language, is not transcribed.

My name is Kalie Granier. I'm a French interdisciplinary artist based in Santa Cruz, and we will watch the film I made in collaboration with the Esselen Nation. So maybe we will start by that.

[Screening of A'ai, presented in the Esselen language. The film is not transcribed here.]

So yeah. Thank you. So yeah, my work explores... just to let you know a little bit about me. So my work explores the relationship between our ecosystems and the human body in the context of the current ecological crisis. So I develop a practice at the intersection of art, science and activism, guided by ecofeminist values and particular attention to interdependence between humans and more-than-human worlds. I studied at the School of Visual Arts in Paris, and I also completed a two-year program in Native American literature and poetry [college and professor's name unclear in the recording]. This encounter with a non-Western way of thinking and language deeply transformed my understanding of the world and continues to inform my work.

The film A'ai emerged from this research. It's an experimental film and the first work presented entirely in the Esselen language. It was developed, like I told you, in close collaboration with the tribal chairwoman, Louise Ramirez, from the Nation, and her granddaughter, Alexandria Casares, alongside researchers from the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute and The Nature Conservancy. A'ai means "pelican" in English, and it stages a dialogue between a woman and a pelican along the California coast.

So this project explores the possibility of communication and collaboration among living species, plants, animals and humans, being co-inhabitants of the Earth, bound by a shared struggle for survival in a time of ecological collapse, marked by the loss of 90% of California's kelp forests and an increased awareness of our interdependent existence. Kelp forests are large marine algae and are often compared to terrestrial forests as the lungs of the Earth. They capture carbon, release a quantity of oxygen, but also support an extraordinary biodiversity. Yet today they are severely endangered by climate change.

So in response to this reality, I seek to open a space for reflection on the possibility of communication between species. How do we listen to the living? How do we enter into relationship with forms of life we do not fully understand? Today we know that knowledge is not universal. It is situated, shaped by our perception and cultural frameworks. As human beings, we can only access a partial understanding of the world. This is why it becomes essential to pay attention to ancestral languages and cultures that have been historically marginalized, even erased, and still today.

So the Esselen language, like many Indigenous languages, carries within it a specific way of naming the world, perceiving it, and relating to it. Language is not only a tool for communication; it's a structure of thought, a way of inhabiting the world. In Indigenous cosmologies, the boundaries between humans and animals, plants and elements are often more porous. This worldview contrasts

strongly with the dominant Western perspective, which the anthropologist Philippe Descola describes as naturalism, where humans see themselves as separate from the rest of the living world.

This realization has guided my work in recent years, in collaboration with communities who have maintained deep relationships with their environment. The Esselen Nation, as original inhabitants of this territory, Monterey County, where I filmed, maintain an enduring connection with pelicans, the ocean and kelp forests. At a time when languages are disappearing and more than 60% of global biodiversity is in decline, it felt essential to contribute to creating a space where these languages can be heard.

A'ai is therefore both a film, a sensory experience and a collaborative gesture. It proposes an exchange between human and non-human voices, between scientific and ancestral knowledge, between the visible and the invisible. It's a film that attempts, modestly, to relearn how to listen. But listening here doesn't simply mean hearing. It means slowing down, accepting that we do not understand everything, making space for what escapes us.

Listening to languages means recognizing that each one carries a world view. When languages disappear, ways of feeling and understanding disappear with them. Listening to territory means paying attention to the subtle signs of the landscape, to cycles, silences, and transformations. It means understanding that the land is not a backdrop, but a living entity in constant relationship with those who move through it. Listening to other forms of life means shifting our position, no longer being at the center; accepting that animals, plants, oceans all have forms of intelligence and communication that do not pass through human language.

This listening becomes an attempt at relation, a way of weaving connections between worlds that coexist but too often no longer meet. And perhaps, within this space of attention and humility, something can emerge: another way of inhabiting the world. Less dominant, more relational, where humans are no longer separate from the living but deeply entangled with it. So to relearn how to listen is maybe this: to relearn how to be in relation. Thank you.

I think we have five minutes if you have questions about the film. Unfortunately, Louise Ramirez couldn't be here today; she was struggling with a health problem. But you heard a voice at the end of the film. It was her singing. Thank you.