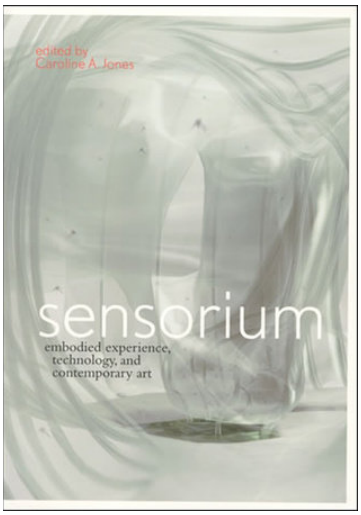
# CENTRE FOR SENSORY STUDIES




Cover image from *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, edited by Caroline A. Jones

## MAKING SENSE OF ALGORITHMS LECTURE SERIES

### Symbiontics, Machine Learning, and the Internet of Earthlings

Caroline A. Jones

Friday, 1 March 2024
11:00-12:40 EST, Virtual
Webinar Registration Link

Symbiosis ("with-living") is a biological fact: all Earth species live in entangled and reciprocal relations with other life forms. Increasingly, life scientists use machine learning to listen, watch, chemically sense, and monitor these more-than-human lives. "Artificial intelligence" is a misnomer; algorithms will only iterate, and machines will only learn, within the compromised contexts and training sets that human cognition has established. Can human thinking and forms of governance take advantage of what anthropologist Karen Bakker calls the "Internet of Earthlings," calling us to *listen* to these soundings? Confronting the task of radically changing our planetary relations, can we adapt our minds and our algorithms to the reality of symbiontics (symbiosis as that-which-is)? Infamously, the US constitution failed to give representation or standing to enslaved persons, Native Americans, or women – much less bats, bees, birches, or bacteria.... If we are to form a planetary polity with the more than human species with whom we ostensibly share the planet, the challenge of representation is even more significant. I argue that sensing our symbionts is a crucial step. Well underway in both art and science (if not yet in constitutions), the "voice" of more-than-human species has been given aesthetic and communicative form. This talk examines how such efforts expand human sensitivities to alien Umwelten (von Uexküll). Enlightenment concepts of enfranchisement based on lucid communication among subsets of humans (back then, property-owning European men) must catch up to the "blooming, buzzing confusion" of other lives. Sound artists, in particular, are working to accelerate that process.

**Caroline A. Jones** is a full Professor at MIT, teaching in the History, Theory, Criticism section of the Department of Architecture and also serving as Associate Dean for Strategic Initiatives in the School of Architecture and Planning. She studies modern and contemporary art, with a particular focus on its technological modes of production, distribution, and reception, and on its interface with sciences such as physics, neuroscience, and biology. Her essays on modern and contemporary art have appeared in journals ranging from *Artforum* to *Critical Inquiry* to *Science in Context;* she is solo author of several books and exhibition catalogues, and a co-editor of volumes that examine technology and the senses, art and neuroscience, and art history and history of science as parallel inquiries. Collaborative work with historian of science and physicist Peter L. Galison will culminate in a book on scientific and viral images of environmental harm, titled *Invisibilities: Seeing and Unseeing the Anthropocene* (forthcoming with Zone Books at Princeton University press). Her research has been supported with fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Humanities Center, the Institute for Advanced Studies, the Radcliffe Institute, the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, the Max Planck Institute, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Social Science Research Council, and other foundations interested in interdisciplinary inquiry emerging from art history. Currently enmeshed with biologically-active art forms, she collaborated on curating the exhibition *Symbionts: Contemporary Artists and the Biosphere,* and on producing its algae-enriched publication from MIT Press, Fall 2022.

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