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Skills and strategies of activist mermaids: from pretty to powerful pictures

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ABSTRACT
One of the most noteworthy characteristics of the mermaiding community, which has arisen since the early 2000s when self-styled performers started to impersonate the mermaid myth, consists in the performers positioning of themselves as ocean conservation advocates. Pictures constitute a main resource for this advocacy. But how can pretty pictures become powerful tools drawing attention to the critical state of the climate? What does it take to make and script such pictures? Which skills are necessary? Based on interviews with mermaids and underwater photographers, we explore how pictures become a way of spurring activism and care for the oceans.

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Preamble

In Mermaid Marina’s words, swimming as a professional mermaid can be reduced to a simple maxim: “Shit, I hold my breath for a living. We can break it down to that.” But, as she goes on to say, “I […] try and make it more artistic, that’s what hopefully makes it somewhat different” (Marina Anderson, interview, 2018).

This perfectly composed photograph, taken in 2019, shows professional mermaid enactor Claire la Sirène (Claire Baudet) as Mélusine, a metamorphosing water spirit, 1 exquisitely costumed amid fish of the Paris Aquarium (Illustration 1). Voiceovers and songs piped into the viewing area narrate the story as the mermaid and her beau (who doubles as her safety diver in scuba gear) enact the episodes underwater. The image is posted on Claire’s Facebook page and in publicity for the Aquarium, so circulates independently of the whole performance. The beautiful shot is facilitated by Claire’s vast experience as a dancer, model, and mermaid swimmer, which enables her to suspend to just the right degree to create a wondrous illusion, the stream of bubbles above her mouth suggesting release of her last terrestrial breath. The blue costume, designed, engineered, and fabricated by Claire, including subtle use of LEDs in the wings, is a major contributor to the impression: she seems to be the mythical mermaid Mélusine manifest in homage to the colors, saturation, and soft focus of much illustrative material of the mermaid-fantasy genre. 2 The effect is possible because

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Claire knows how to utilize her particular forte as a mermaid (vertical suspension as a water dancer, repeated 45-second breath holds as a freediver, slender extension as a performer, and knowledge of myths as an academic) in conjunction with technical skills of design and dramaturgy. A viewer might not know how the effect is created, or where, but there can be no doubt that this photograph plays with seeming and being in tension: the mermaid seems, the fish are; the composition seems, the woman in it is; the myth seems, the photograph is. What is emulated is the received myth, and what is simulated is its enactment.

Recently, costuming as a mermaid and posing in iconic locales has become so popular that businesses have arisen in numerous nations to address exactly these desires (Mellins 128–40). Claire la Sirène as Mélusine among the fishes enacts a myth, but amateurs’ photoshoots seek an iconic look without a narratological entanglement. Pretty pictures of mermaids can be engrossing and involve considerable skill, resulting in a profusion of postings on social media. Embodiment of this iconography can be traced back to specific precursors, performers whose professional mermaiding careers were launched in the mid-2000s. At least since 2012, a subset of the most elite of these performers link mermaiding in ocean settings with marine advocacy. There is not, we argue, a deterministic relationship between achieving sophisticated imagery, distributing it, and performing acts of advocacy. The skills needed for these poses compound and intensify in extreme environments, and the quest to develop such skills fuels aspects of the
mermaiding industry in tandem with the quest for more sophisticated photoshoots. While most mermaids value the ability to "show that – to be a mermaid, to be half ocean and half human, bridge that gap," many also assert concern for "the wonder of the ocean" and what is entailed in being "part of the system, and not above the system" of its caretaking (Courtney Shaw, interview, 2018). While mermaiding serves many purposes for those who do it, it may be merely another use of "image and dramatic performance" in "fictional universes" that "conjure spaces for effective conservation interventions cum profitable investments" connecting NGOs to corporate interests (Igoe 377). And yet, through the mermaids' own use of social media, can mermaid performances do any good for marine ecology?

Two iconic situations, representative of the paradigms, ground our analyses. These are scrutinized in relation to interviews conducted with 73 subjects involved in the industry, many of whom indicate a conviction toward ecological preservation.5

Anyone can put on a tail and jump into water, but the immediate results are seldom pretty. Buoyancy depends on the weight of the tail and the amount of air in the lungs, propulsion is instigated in the lower abdomen and calibrated by the undulation of the body and fluke, and the ability to remain submerged requires rigorous practice of breath control and relaxation. Apnea and scuba training facilitate safer, longer dives and are the basis for stunt work that involves sharing an oxygen-breathing apparatus.6 Beyond this, framing a worthwhile picture entails keeping the eyes open, relating to the camera, hitting and holding one’s mark, capitalizing on grace, and optimizing accessories and make-up. These are all skills, just as in modeling, except that the models and photographers contend with submersion. In this screenshot, Mermaid Raina (Stephanie Brown) demonstrates underwater modeling techniques for a friend. In another instructional video, she emphasizes tricks such as ensuring that the fluke is not perpendicular to the camera, using weights to counteract buoyancy, and managing facial expressions.7

As another pedagogically minded practitioner – Mermaid Kat (Katrin Gray), the "Underwater Stuntwoman & Professional Mermaid" – demonstrates in the 50-second "That’s my Job" video on her Facebook page, there is a range of paradigmatic underwater situations in which to exhibit exemplary mermaiding skills: modeling gorgeous clothing, utilizing props and executing acrobatics, and swimming in a tail along with fish, rays, jellyfish, crocodiles, and different species of shark.8 In this way, mermaids develop techniques that allow them to stay underwater and perform as mermaids. Yet being able to carry out stunt work at depth requires a different set of skills than modeling on land or in shallow waters. Mermaid Kat explains:

This is where I basically draw the line, with the differences, the different types of underwater modeling. When a girl, or mermaid, goes from the surface, holds her breath, swims down two or three meters, poses in front of the camera, and goes back up, and this is in easy water conditions, like in a swimming pool, or somewhere where it’s calm, no currents, no waves, I think almost everyone can do this when they have a little bit of basic training. But underwater stunt work, I would class everything where people breathe compressed air underwater. Because with breathing compressed air underwater, so many more risks are coming. So let’s say, for example, we’re shooting at 20 meters, and I breathe from a safety diver, I’m posing underwater, I can’t see clearly, I have water in my nose, I’m cold. If I had a panic attack in this situation I would bring myself and my team into a very dangerous situation that could easily be fatal. (Katrin Gray, interview, 2018)
Only performers with extensive experience and training in scuba diving and freediving can work at depth and deal with the inherent dangers of underwater stunt work.9 Like freediving and scuba diving in general, working safely requires experience. Ideally, safety protocols become second nature, starting from a conscious act that is trained repeatedly and then becomes an embodied skill so that risks such as panic attacks are rare yet manageable. In the description of her work as an underwater stunt actor and mermaid instructor, Mermaid Kat, like a few other participants in our sample who do similar work, underlines the techniques and skills that are necessary to learn: swimming with the tail, modeling underwater and managing buoyancy, and breathing up in the same was as freedivers who aim to avoid hyperventilation (which can lead to blackouts). Many freedivers utilize pranayama yoga exercises, breathing deeply, consciously, and extending exhalations before diving to become relaxed and thereby extend the range of breath holds. Whereas Mermaid Kat poses in front of a camera at depth, and in that way strives to meet an external request, her way of describing the state of being she experiences while diving highlights internal joy:

the moment down there, when I pose, I absolutely enjoy that, because it – I can’t really describe it – it basically brings me into, like, a zone of relaxation, which I don’t really get on land that much. […] in just such a relaxing zone, so this of course feels really, really good. (Katrin Gray, interview, 2018)

Emphasizing the mental state of deep relaxation, experiencing a sensation that contrasts with life on land, Mermaid Kat portrays her experiences similarly to accounts that freedivers give of their experiences, and in this portrayal inner sensations and a peaceful state of mind is underlined, an inwardly focused attention (Strandvad 52–59).

On the other hand, participants in our sample who excel in aquarium performances call attention to an additional skill set, swimming tricks, which highlights the externality of their work carried out in front of an audience. Swimming in front of a large glass establishes a stage: mermaids dive to entertain spectators, not to have an inner experience. As Mermaid Marina, who specializes in burlesque underwater performances at Fort Lauderdale FL’s Wreck Bar (a hybrid between pool and aquarium) explains: “It’s a service industry. As an entertainer, I am serving the public in that way, giving them something visual to experience. How can I make it as, for lack of a better word, as immersive as possible; a temporary escape for the audience to enjoy” (Marina Anderson, interview, 2018).10 Making the performance engaging for onlookers, who are not in the water themselves, but kept as distance clearly defined by the medium of the aquarium wall, constitutes the goal of aquarium mermaids.

If they are so inclined, mermaids graduate from pools to lakes and seas, seeking more challenging, natural, and exotic conditions for photography. If underwater photography in the open ocean is the mark of merit in mermaiding – requiring adroitness to even posit such an undertaking – documenting swims with large predatory sea creatures is the brass ring. It generally requires considerable investment by the mermaid to travel far afield, fund the crew, and have the exceptional luck to come upon cooperative animals in clear water with appropriate lighting just when the photographer is at hand and prepared to shoot. Proximity to animals is desirable, butyncopation with their movement and mirroring of their form is a premium, as this image of Shannon Rauch off Isla Mujeres, near Cancun in the Gulf of Mexico, demonstrates (see Illustration 2). It was
taken by Chris Crumley during a mermaid portfolio workshop in 2015. This follows a dive prototype most likely set by Hannah Mermaid, who in 2012 was filmed by Shawn Heinrichs swimming with a pod of whale sharks: the YouTube video of the event promotes and (in the closing title reel) notes the end of exterminating fishing practices and development of eco-tourism in the region of Oslob, Philippines (Hannah Fraser). In the motion capture photography, there is a segment where Hannah rolls onto her back, beneath a whale shark’s belly, and matches its pace with exquisite grace and virtuosity (yet compared to the shark considerable motion) until she rolls again and breaks toward the camera. The video is edited so her breach for air is unseen. This invokes playful engagement in a live scenario that contests ideas of what is possible, and endurable, by seeming to corroborate mermaids surpassing human experience. Unlike underwater modeling, which utilizes composition and the manipulation of props to create art photography, documentation of mermaids swimming with large predatory fauna can aspire to witness-bearing.

In contrast to iconic pictures of wildlife in the Anthropocene (emaciated polar bears in threatened Arctic habitat, bedraggled birds plastered with spilled oil, or turtles entangled with plastic pollution, all variants of gross human negligence), mermaids cast blue activism distinctly. When poolside in an inflatable clamshell they enact a myth, or at any rate a set of intertwined commercial versions of mythic desire; in a pool their allure is explained by fluidity and suspension; while in nature, their photographs juxtapose what is highly fabricated with what may be incidentally natural. The human mermaid performer is enchanted, calling attention to an idea of chimeric embodiment, but what does this serve? As Hannah Mermaid puts it, is it possible to “rally the mermaid
iconography to make a change in the world and bring about more awareness for ocean creatures?” (Hannah Fraser, interview, 2018). Can they uniquely signify an exigent environmental problem, and if so can this be conveyed online solely through visual representation?

**Embodied and experiential knowledge and skill domains**

The anthropologist of art Alfred Gell writes of the artist as an occult technician whose ability to create a captivating effect hides the conditions of own their making (40–66). This is reflected in mermaids’ enchantment: skillfully made performances belie their technical virtuosity. Yet it is possible to detect the skills, techniques, and materials employed in mermaids’ performances and to account for how effects are achieved, such as combinations of love, hate, desire, or fear. Thereby, matters of ability can be understood as skill-based agency connected both to the sociology of production and its reception.

Several of the pioneering performers in our research sample speak about being the first one in their region to create a self-invented practice based on learning by doing, augmented by web resources and online contacts with other mermaids. As Raina Mermaid puts it, when she started “there was nothing” (Stephanie Brown, interview, 2018). When mermaid conventions began, she found other professionals, and authored books to help newcomers (2013; 2014; 2016). Jessica Sobel-Robl utilized the “lifestyle compendium” *The Mermaid Handbook*, created by the editor-in-chief of *Faerie Magazine*, but that was not available until 2018 (Turgeon 2018). In the run-up to the global pandemic, mermaids had the opportunity to congregate at many regional conventions, and local meet-ups were common. Initially, however, establishing a mermaiding practice entailed largely solitary trial and error, especially for the pioneers. For example, Kazzie-Okelani Mahina, who founded the company Mahina Mermaid in 2006, describes how prototyping eco-friendly mermaid fins involved creating something from scratch. Pioneering mermaids such as Mahina launched trends and generated new practices, thereby conditioning the contours of what mermaiding has become. Morgana Alba, an aerialist who transitioned to mermaiding and who now owns the company Siren Circus Entertainment, can be seen as a successful second-generation mermaid performer: as she recalls, when she stepped into the field of mermaiding,

Mermaid Hannah existed. There were people whose photos I could look at but there weren’t resources. Nobody knew what a good tail was or the benefits of latex versus silicone unless you happened to know somebody who knew that. And I was the first mermaid in my area and there was nobody to lean on and say “hey, who’s a good tail-maker?” (Morgana Alba, interview, 2018)

Most of the participants in our sample tell similar stories of their time as newcomers: mermaiding was, so to say, *aqua nullius* apart from pictures of pioneering performers, and to gain knowledge they became involved in the online amateur fan culture of mermaiding that has gradually transitioned into producing more professionalized output (Mellins 128–40). In this transition from fandom to a culture that involves fans, hobbyists, and professional producers, creating an epistemology of practice is critical, and some of the pioneering mermaids are central to documenting and establishing this knowledge.
For example, in addition to her books, Raina Mermaid has posted multiple YouTube tutorials that demystify mermaiding:

> It’s like this collective community. Now that I’ve really developed my technical skills, I think I could do some good e-learning courses. [...] I want to see this community grow. I want to see everybody recognized as professionals. We just need more resources. (Stephanie Brown, interview, 2018)

Concurrent with a developing epistemology of practice, photos of pioneers such as Hannah Mermaid have established the category of mermaiding. Before the performance skills of mermaiding were fully systematized as transferable technical skills, pictures established a tradition and defined what performing mermaids are and do. In that way, pictures of pioneering self-invented mermaid performers act as scriptive things, objects that inspire and structure but do not dictate action (Akrich 205–24; Bernstein 67–94). As the French sociologist of technology Madeleine Akrich demonstrates in her pioneering work on how users appropriate technologies, technical objects entail scripts defined as frameworks of action, yet it may be that no actors will come forward to play the roles envisaged, or they will play different, self-invented, roles (205–24). In that way, scripts define actors, the space in which they move, and ways in which they interact, but Akrich’s argument counters an idea of technological determinism (206). While Akrich focuses on technological objects, cultural historian Robin Bernstein employs the term “script” to identify racialized representation in photographs, changing the question from why specific pictures were made to how they were made, thereby opening the possibility for understanding the formation of a tradition. Bernstein, following Heidegger, speaks of things rather than objects (as objects in Heidegger’s definition stand for dead matter), yet Bernstein’s definition of a thing as a human-made object that demands that people confront it on its own terms resembles Akrich’s definition of technical objects that carry scripts. Bernstein suggests that Althusser’s theorizing on discursive interpellation can be extended to things through enscription, defined as “interpellation through a scriptive thing that combines narrative with materiality to structure behavior” (73). In that way, things from both the stage and everyday life hail a corporeal reaction. By doing so, scripts are not static and unilateral, for “when a thing scripts actions, it manifests the repertoire of its historical moment” (89), pointing both backward and forward in time, referring to and at the same time constituting a tradition, yet as Maurya Wickstrom argues, oscillating temporality “expresses the refusal of finitude” (210). Whereas both Akrich and Bernstein show how things such as photographs entail scripts that define actions of users, Bernstein highlights the hailing of scriptive things and thus stickiness of a particular tradition. On the other hand, Akrich draws a distinction between stabilized technologies where scripts have become naturalized – which resemble the formation of tradition that Bernstein describes – and as yet unsettled technologies where the roles for users can be reversed more easily. In the case of mermaid photographs, this differentiation is crucial as the tradition is still in-the-making and thus changeable, which means that the script may not hail as efficiently as within an established tradition. Mermaids’ photographs refer to previous portrayals of mermaids and position themselves within a developing repertoire of similar pictures, thus offering a standard for future pictures while the actions which they outline remain relatively open-ended.
Live performing mermaids working as party entertainers (usually poolside) highlight how being “on” and in character is inherent to the job. As Morgana Alba notes: “I’m this very enthusiastic wonder-filled character, especially around children” (interview, 2018). When the mermaid’s work is viewed from underwater, as in mermaid modeling, being “on” and beautiful are indispensable, yet many additional specialized performance skills are required. For performance, a kinesthetic sense for corporeal orientation and movement needs to be cultivated (Throsby and Potter). The crucial task for mermaids is not only to master swimming in tails (which can take myriad forms and use many different materials), but moreover to be able to put this kinesthetic skill to use in performance. When doing so, whatever the inward experience, outward orientation becomes central, expectations of audience members start to dominate, and transmission of skills to co-workers, collaborators, and apprentices becomes necessary. This means that athletically skilled apprentices need to develop performance skills: “Just about every swimmer goes through that at first before they are introduced into the show scenario. They have to have or learn stage presence and confidence first before being introduced to the added challenge of an actual performance” (Marina Anderson, interview, 2018). As Morgana Alba explains about recruiting new performers for her troupe: “they may be very good swimmers but if their background is in performance, everything is different when you get in front of a crowd” (interview, 2018).

Raina astutely notes that “if you’re going to a cosplay and you put on a pair of wings you’re not going to fly, but if you put on a mermaid tail, you’re going to swim – and you’re going to be fast and even people who are weak swimmers and nervous in the water find it empowering” (interview 2018). Unlike swimming, however, mermaids’ strokes are not powered by the arms, shoulders, or legs: the arms are either overhead in the Superman position or trail at the sides, and the legs are bound. Instead, efficient propulsion is initiated in the lower abdomen and carried through as undulation of the fluke (monofin), which enables mermaids to position themselves and hit their mark. Buoyancy must be managed with weights or sculling (careful, practiced technique with up and down and/or circular hand motions) to enable a dive, achieve depth, and hold a position. Marina emphasizes being a good swimmer, diver, and artist, therefore in the first lesson her students do not wear tails, “we don’t do any swimming, we just sit, we hang; all it is is hangin’,” which is maintained by sculling. Subsequently, trainees graduate to inversions and window passes (Marina Anderson, interview, 2018). This must be mastered before a camera and costume are involved because then a mermaid is “gonna be an actress, you’re gonna work it, and as soon as I got the shot you’ll go to the surface; and you’ll look at the shot and you’ll see that it worked” (Marina Anderson, interview, 2018).

Any breath hold training (typically based on free diving techniques) better enables mermaids to meet their collaborators’ needs. Amarie is typical in noting that “it helps when you’re mermaiding if you have a lot of confidence in freediving, especially because it’s more challenging with a tail on when it comes to the open water” (Amarie 2018). And as photographer Chris Crumley puts it:

there are about 50 things that a good mermaid needs to know how to do. […] The breath hold is a big deal for photography, anyway, because it gives the photographer time to get multiple frames of images before the mermaid has to shoot [up] to the surface and get air. So some of the girls that I work with have four minute breath holds […] and others
have, like 15 seconds. I barely get two frames in the camera before – and I can tell when they’re about to go, like “whoosh!” to the surface to get air. (Interview 2017)

According to Marina, “They have to have stage presence first” before all the accouterments of performance (such as costume, make-up, and hairstyling) are brought in (interview 2017). Her approach is highly technical. Student mermaids advance to doing tricks (such as loops, barrel rolls, stalls, and lazy-eights, all named after pilots’ maneuvers), with Marina standing on the bottom of the pool giving critique like a gymnastics coach. In advanced workshops such as Malina and Crumley’s, mermaids learn to work with scuba equipment. On set, particularly in marine environments, to reduce the number of the mermaid’s surfacings a safety diver brings an extra regulator so they can share air. Roxy Mermaid describes how gestures universal to the scuba community enable communication.

I’ll never forget, once I swam over to where I thought my safety person was and he wasn’t giving me air and I was starting to panic. I was giving him the signal for no air underwater then the diver comes up behind me and shoves the regulator in my mouth, turns out I had swam straight over to the cameraman instead because you can’t really see right underwater especially saltwater. Obviously it was safe because they’re always close by. (Interview 2018)

Because a mermaid’s extremely limited visibility is an important facet on the set, essentially others see for her. Yet to look good on film her eyes must be open (but not directed toward the camera) and the facial expression pleasant.14

In the multi-dimensional underwater performance space, support personnel focus on the shoot as well as constantly ensuring safety. When a fixed point is either the mermaid’s mooring (as with a rock) or backdrop (as with a reef), this establishes relative positions for framing shots and dictates where collaborators will be positioned. In other circumstances, such as filming in a cenote or next to a wreck, the mermaid needs to be more skilled. As Crumley explains:

I like mermaids in shipwrecks. But you have to be real careful there, because there aren’t a lot of mermaids who [can] … dive down deep enough to be around a shipwreck, they have to go down on scuba, and then hide the tank, and stuff. It’s kinda hard to do, and it’s kinda dangerous. And then there are a few shipwrecks that are like little wrecks, that maybe are like twenty feet underwater. (Interview 2017)

Even there, the mermaid’s athleticism and skill are moot if she is not also lithe, beautiful, and can keep her hair from obscuring her face, all in keeping with patriarchal norms (see also Shields and Coughlin, 183). No wonder, therefore, that in recent years experienced mermaids have teamed up with noted underwater photographers to offer modeling workshops. Malina and Crumley pioneered this, then “other mermaids start[ed] to model their own workshops after theirs. It’s sorta given birth to the rise of these destination mermaid workshops” (Rachel Smith, interview, 2017). Workshops are typically at “destination” locations, and the differentiation between the instructors and registrants reinforces the amateur/professional divide, as well as skirting the more long-term mentor/apprentice structure.

The brass ring

It is tempting to focus on mermaid photos’ similarities with leisure and tourist pictures, seeing them as an underwater costumed variant of the selfie that amateurs and
professionals alike make to generate content for social media. Such an approach resonates with tourism research that describes the selfie as a performance where the presence of a happy, humor-filled and fun-loving personality constitutes the central component (Gretzel 115–28). The selfie concentrates on the face, communicating individuality; the tourist site setting functions as a backdrop; and, in a similar way, other figures in the photo, such as animals, serve as props. Whatever can make the picture stand out enhances the selfie’s purpose: namely, to be judged on its social media share-worthiness. Ocean-going mermaids, emphatically, do not self-photograph. But artistic poses captured in notable locales (iconically on beaches, rocky shorelines, breaching, or below the waterline) are potentially “Instagram worthy” (Roxy Mermaid, interview, 2018).

As Illustration 3 documents, being photographed as a mermaid-model conveys a professional practice synonymous with the skill set mermaid performers must possess. Generating a portfolio of such photos is a necessary professional work activity, even if the portfolio is primarily or wholly circulated on social media. The scripting of this work process documents a range of skills that need to be mastered and which are constitutive of spectacular mermaid pictures, as in Illustration 2. Following Gell’s reasoning, photos’ impressiveness and magic derive from the skilled work with the technologies that go into making them (apnea swimming and diving but also posing, costume and make-up, and likewise – for the photographer – the lighting, composition, and aptitude with specialized cameras). Depending on the result, pictures may stand out as scripted objects that “simultaneously embody and measure a set of relations between heterogeneous elements” (Akrich 207). Professional mermaid performers post their photos on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to strategically create their brand – a commercial persona – and hence their business. Yet amateurs strive for similar photographs and distribute them in similar ways, thus blending the distinction between professionals and amateurs, producers and users (Månsson et al.; Mellins). Destination

workshops facilitate this within the scope of a leisure practice and as a specialized tourist niche. For example, Alicia and Jim Ward’s Seethroughsea Hawaiian packages that promise a message “of ocean conservation and education” offer mermaids two options: individual and group shots (cited prices start at $400 for a one-hour solo photoshoot), and seven-day package with three underwater photoshoots yielding 100 high resolution jpegs and a 30-second video ($1900 per person, minimum 3 people, inclusive of island transportation). Thus, mermaid photography proves tourism studies scholar John Urry’s point that “photography gives shape to travel. […] Indeed much tourism becomes in effect a search for the photogenic; travel is a strategy for the accumulation of photographs” (128). Seeking pictures of oneself as a mermaid in exotic locations, and especially with sea-life, can indeed be interpreted as a photogenic tourist strategy. As Igoe puts it, buying this experience is “consumption of new commodities which simultaneously promise opportunities for individual self-expression” connecting to an imagined community (383).

Photographs document mermaid performances, and in some cases stretch the category of modeling into performance art. They are work products referring to events that gave rise to them, yet like performance art documentation may be art in their own right. Consider the contrast between the three illustrations at the outset of this essay. In the first, the photograph documents a narrative performance skillfully embodied: it is artistic. The second documents the work of teaching mermaid modeling, where the point is to pose irrespective of a storyline: it is work. Finally, the mermaid and whale shark alludes to a spectacular wildlife encounter in a wide-angle “ecodomain.” The open ocean is a prerequisite for encountering the animal, the mermaid’s intentionality is reenched by the synchrony of the composition: as a script it supersedes work and technology in a seemingly holistic presentation of art (Igoe 381).

There are antecedents that set mermaids in pursuit of wildlife shoots. In “Mantas Last Dance,” filmed in Hawaiian waters and posted on YouTube 27 Feb 2013, the mermaiding superstar Hannah Fraser is filmed amidst manta rays. She is tailless, but uses fabric props to enhance her grace and fluidity, repeatedly reaching out toward passing manta rays. After the pas de deux, the video is made political by a title card that reads “Manta Rays are being hunted toward extinction/ We must act now before they are lost forever,” followed by another with the Oceanic Preservation Society’s logo (Heinrichs and Fraser 03:42–03:53). In a 2015 TEDx talk, Fraser introduces herself as a mermaid and describes the depletion of ocean life through overfishing and pollution as her motivation to become an activist. When she teamed up with photographer Shawn Heinrichs, she said, “our mission became clear. Instead of showing the harsh realities of these issues, what if we could inspire more change through beautiful imagery that personally connected humans to these animals” (Fraser 07:29–07:45). To date, “Mantas Last Dance” has had had merely 40,073 views on YouTube. Given the explicit intent to stimulate action on behalf of this species, what does that rate of viewing in seven-and-a-half years represent? Even if it has inspired some viewer(s) as intended, can it be shown – through YouTube – to be effective vis-à-vis activism? Fraser proudly claims in her TEDx talk that, when the film was screened at the triennial meeting of the Convention on Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora in Bangkok in 2013, manta rays got more votes to be put onto the endangered list than any other land or sea animal (Fraser 09:35–09:45). These two modes of distributing – on YouTube and
before a congregated audience – represent polarities of direct action campaigning. Another Fraser video, “Tigress Shark,” in which she dances (again, tailless) with a shiver of sharks has had 732,273 views since 10 June 2014.\textsuperscript{19} It protests the rapidly depleting number of tiger sharks. According to Fraser, airing “Tigress Shark” on Australian television, where it was seen by over fifteen million people, led to the end of Australia’s shark culling policy. This justifies Fraser’s view that “we live in a time when radical creativity is needed more than ever. Fantasy and imagination are the source of innovation and solution” (Fraser TEDx 12:24–12:35). In the case of both short films, global social media access occurred but it was other formats for viewing that are shown to bring about change.

Fraser’s premise that “by bridging land and sea, as a mermaid with a cause, we were able to appeal to people’s fantasy and empower them with a new possible reality” is the potentially viral concept (08:10–08:21).\textsuperscript{20} Assumptions about the ostensible danger of the situations, a frisson enhanced by Fraser’s semi-clothed body and an opening title card in “Tigress Shark” assuring that the footage is 100% genuine, is undercut by the presence of a woman among aquatic predators. As Heinrichs states,

> The idea of the project is to take Hannah, who is probably, in my mind, one of the most talented, capable, experienced underwater performers in the world, take her and put her in a position where she can show a human connection, a really close human connection with this fifteen foot massive tiger shark. (Heinrichs and Donaldson 01:28–01:48)

The animals’ gentleness, and even Fraser’s claims that sharks seek her affection, are emphasized in her insistence that this is not a daredevil publicity stunt: “If we can inspire other people around the globe to find that connection point with animals like this then it’s all worth it” (Heinrichs and Donaldson 05:31–05:40).

The performance artists Olly and Suzi, who have descended in a cage off Antarctica to “interact” with leopard sharks and scuba dived in other oceans with sharks and rays, say that when working with animals there is the necessity to “surrender control of the artistic process” (Love). But their online portfolios (on Instagram and their website) evidence a visual rhetoric of daring, highly varied thrill-seeking.\textsuperscript{21} The ethos of mermaids’ encounters is closer to the open ocean Dolphin Dance Project, which Una Chaudhuri emphasizes as having “a framework that carefully balances showing and telling, presence and absence, doing, and not doing, knowing, and not knowing” in a diplomatic encounter of “visitiation” (199–200). The dancing human artists, who wear long flippers and dive without scuba gear, provide copious links to organizations working for dolphin well-being, ocean conservation, and animal protection for anyone who seeks this out on their website (Fasanella).

Following Fraser’s prototype, if the “brass ring” of mermaid photos is to be swimming with a shark, whale, ray, sea turtle, or other large wildlife, can this successfully function as advocacy for ocean conservation? Mermaid Elle told us she wants to do more “ocean free-diving, mostly because I want to get into ocean conservation. I feel like once people see the mermaid in the ocean next to the marine life – and I, I love the marine life so much” (Elle Jimenez, interview, 2018). Can an Instagram account constitute such extraordinary content that it persuades viewers to preserve the oceans? This is not just a differentiation between persuasive and non-persuasive visual rhetoric. Can a social media post hail a constructive action from a viewer, for example harnessing the
power of myth to spur someone to take a political stance, representing an activist’s convictions regarding marine conservation but inspiring a stranger? Hannah spends a considerable amount of time on her campaigns, gratis, and told us “the payoff is the fact that I get to share images that inspire people to direct action. We create petitions and help get laws changed when we actually care about these animals” (Hannah 2018). We have yet to interview a mermaid who eschewed the cause of animal or habitat preservation, but whatever their politics is such a picture on social media activism?

In this regard, videos by the environmentalist, freediver, model, and shark biologist Ocean Ramsey serve as a parallel case. Similar to mermaid models, Ramsey is a young, blonde, athletic, and slim model who is photographed freediving with sharks in order to raise awareness about the species. Yet, based on the comments posted about her videos, her looks are as critical as any other facet of her posts. For example, a GoPro Award winning video shows Ramsey bikini-clad and freediving with a whale shark. The first posted comments are: “what a beautiful and graceful creature. the sharks kinda cool too”; “Whale shark- 100k views. Whale shark and hot chick – 1.9 million views”; and “There was a Whale shark in this video?” (luke; Bob Bob; topgunm). (Since being posted on YouTube 17 July 2016, this video has received 5,435,564 views.) Lately, Ramsey’s conservation footage has generated controversy. In 2019, several photos and videos went viral. Dressed in a camouflage-patterned wetsuit and with her hair in a long bubble ponytail, she swims with and occasionally touches a great white shark. Whereas Ramsey stated that the experience was “Beyond magic!” and would inspire shark conservation because “the main goal is protection for sharks,” several fellow divers, marine biologists, conservationists, and wildlife photographers were outraged by her behavior because it is extremely dangerous for humans and damaging to the sharks (Chiu). As the author of a piece on the influence of the growing numbers of amateur wildlife photographers suggests, based on Ramsey’s footage,

some of the most problematic wildlife imagery online today is being posted by self-proclaimed conservationists who argue that their evocative content helps raise awareness about conservation issues. Although spurring action through compelling photography is certainly worthwhile, [Daniel] Dietrich [who sits on the ethics committee for the North American Nature Photography Association] and other leading wildlife photographers have begun speaking out against those who disturb wildlife under the guise of raising awareness. (Roth)

As Pam Hall argues, environmental crises call for people with many kinds of knowledge to act on behalf of sustainable futures (358). As highly skilled performing artists, mermaids claim a place for their practice. Arguably, in the terms laid out by Tim Ingold’s reflections about nomadic ethnography, it is “by watching, listening and feeling – by paying attention to what the world has to tell us – that we learn” (1–2). If marine environments can, at least in part, be conceived as elite mermaids’ field sites, and if marine life can be credited with teaching them “what to look for, how to track things, and that knowing is a process of active following, of going along,” this may exemplify how

the world itself becomes a place of study, a university that includes not just professional teachers and registered students, dragooned into their academic departments, but people
Performance, according to Mike Pearson, has “a certain independence and generative potentiality, producing effects, making things happen” (125). The question, then, is whether the means by which mermaids convey their “going along” – images taken by collaborating photographers – speaks through this medium to convey their experiential learning and spur others to activism on behalf of sustainability.

What action can seeing the picture of a mermaid performer swimming alongside a whale shark invoke a viewer to perform? A number of our interviewees speak about instilling a sense of beauty and wonder in the natural world, yet some mermaids aspire to help viewers do more than value their pictures and performances for more their beauty, becoming ocean advocates whose mediated encounters call upon others to produce conservation messages and action. For example, Mermaid Kat wants participants in her Mermaid school not just to learn to swim in a tail but “to make all of them ambassadors of the oceans so that they have more and more people out there who can create awareness for our underwater world” (Katrin Gray, interview, 2018). Whereas it is straightforward to set up a distinction between embodied encounters and mediated encounters, valuing the first over the second, researchers in conservation studies “have begun to explore how environmental consciousness is cultivated and created by an individual’s myriad interactions with both the natural world and media sources,” thereby not privileging place-based environmentalism over knowledge gained from “mediatures” (Wallace 790–803). In that way, the photos that mermaids produce establish a mediated version of the ocean, which can potentially make viewers care.

**Powerful pictures**

*Caring is not enough. In this photograph, Mermaid Kat portrays an angry mermaid with a clear message: get plastics out of the ocean. A second image in this series portrays Kat and another mermaid laying prone on sea rocks, eyes closed (suggestive of death), draped with green netting amidst dozens of plastic water bottles. The overlaid caption “By 2050 More Plastic Fish in our Oceans than Fish Plastic” portrays an implicit option: reverse human negligence or the seas will become devoid of life. This cites an estimate from the World Economic Forum that by 2050 the weight of plastic waste offshore will outstrip all the fish in the world’s seas (14).

Mermaids generate photographs as if obeying Susan Sontag’s concept that the real world requires both things and images (180), and though being pro-activism is a frequent branding tool accompanying images – elevating mermaiding beyond costuming, swimming, and posing – this is not *ipso facto* activism. “Mermaids and Armchair Environmentalism,” a 14.5-minute YouTube rant by Mermaid Raina, includes laudatory shout-outs for Mermaid Melissa and Mermaid Linden but takes others to task for costuming with glitter and sequins, which can damage marine life: they “shoot shade” about environmentalism without really doing anything (Brown 12:01–12:05). As Morgana Alba explains it:

What I see happen a lot is that people, particularly those who have been accused of just wanting to play “dress up” or be pretty, use conservation as a way to legitimiz...
mermaid career. And I think that’s unfair. I think it does conservation a disservice. There absolutely are some mermaids that legitimately want to use their platform to further conservation, and you can tell them apart from the pack because their conservation efforts go beyond what is “instagramable.” (Morgana Alba, interview, 2018)

Mermaids may be “slacktivists,” fashionably posting online to give the idea that they participate in activism (Zuckerman 151–68; Parsons 3). As Mermaid Rachel matter-of-factly states, “I feel like it would be more helpful maybe to go and do a beach clean-up rather than go and paint yourself blue and do a few videos of yourself. […] Now all everyone wants to do is whale sharks and go and take pictures with them. Like how is that helping them in any way?” (Rachel Smith, interview, 2017).

Intentions’ commensurability with actions is in question. When mermaids claim to act on behalf of the ocean by being photographed with wildlife, the resulting picture may instead be read as a recuperation of this logic: promoting oneself by using the ocean and animals for one’s own ends. The attempt to show the vulnerability of the human body in the aquatic element – enhanced and enchanted by the mermaid tail, next to an impressive creature, putting the human on a par with other mythical sea creatures – may instead demonstrate the clear differences between the two. Emmanuel Lévinas differentiates between “suffering through the other” and “suffering for the other,” an ethics of action that Paul Ricoeur and Matthew Escobar regard as a substitution “woven into the reverse side of the fabric of proximity” that demands justice (92, 95). And yet photography may not succeed in sparking concern and care for nature, let alone activism. It may be Instagram worthy but nothing more. What raises the stakes?

Can photos of mermaids draw attention to the ocean and sea-life and be regarded as a popular cultural counterpart to environmentalist art? Contemporary artists Tomás Saraceno and Olafur Eliasson are praised for art that addresses climate change and environmental humanities calling attention to the state of the planet.24 Mermaids, being mermaids – a new performance niche more common at children’s parties than art galleries – are usually met with a radically different level of skepticism. Even so, their emergence in popular culture may actually give them an edge. As Hannah Mermaid states: “I hope it has given many other people a platform to feel empowered to use their art to make a difference in their world” (Hannah Fraser, interview, 2018).

If this is what mermaids mean to social media users – if their epistemology of practice inherently extends to encompass empowerment as well as responsibility amongst those who appreciate them – the practice of exotic location photography could be what Benjamin Haas calls “the first step toward an ethical relationship to extinction and hopelessness” in an ethics of witnessing and calling a future into being (293). Pragmatically, few people can be present with whales, sharks, and other magnificent ocean creatures. Mermaids – unmediated by breathing technology, unseparated by protective cages – stand in for the “epiphenomenon of representation” (Madison 323). Perhaps by being creatures of fiction and social reality but not cyborgs, mermaids in extremis question boundaries of human agency and biological relationality (see MacDonald 169). Perhaps the “brass ring” is not merely the beautiful shot but the one that captivates and compels others to action.

Advocating for particular causes contextualizes mermaids and their photos as statements of activism, and some mermaids endorse specific environmental organizations.26 Lending their image, literally or figuratively, mermaids can co-produce messages.
Illustration 4 offers a different approach – more generic – that aligns with environmental activism broadly by pictorially citing a widely circulating statistic. Mermaid Kat embodies an enraged sea creature – also a human woman, also an activist – utilizing the entire composition to depict a spectacle of nature speaking back to humanity. Her beauty is defiled and her expression shows that she is not merely a scowling model but one very pissed-off mermaid. This is not enchanted tourism but nature de-idealized hailing a complacent land-based species with land-based media.27 As anthropologist of conservation James Igoe has demonstrated, spectacles of nature play a role in world-making; images of wildlife and wilderness transform our imaginations and lived realities of the world. With the example of African nature tourism, Igoe shows how images are not merely representation, but also defining for how we see the world (375–97). Inspired by the situationist Guy Debord,28 Igoe suggests defining “spectacle as ‘separation perfected,’ the ultimate expression of alienation and fetishization” and uses this to reflect on how images of nature both refer to and redefine the conditions that they portray (378). In a similar manner, Illustration 4 foregrounds the mythos and materiality of mermaiding as an ecological message, depicting an affective experience of what is amiss in the world in humanity’s disconnection from the beleaguered oceans (see Lavery 261). And to ensure no one misses the point, this mermaid is personally caught in the narratological entanglement of a plastic net: she is a postmodern Undine, doomed to die as a result of human neglect.

Can dis-enchantment be a solution to the blue crisis? Rather than reminding people of the mystical beauty of nature through pretty pictures, or the coexistence of beauty with menace, mermaids can turn the tables: the menace is humanity, defilement of the sea is
tragic, these messages must be distributed, and humanity must act now. Rather than solving “the problems of visual essentialism and nature essentialism at the same time,” mermaids can utilize exactly this dialectic to defamiliarize mediatization, including of their own uncanny category (Ito 132). This approach to an “immanent relationship of encounter and sensation,” literally in the shoals, makes possible “a new distribution of the sensible, the sayable, and the performance-makeable” via “transcendent bodies” that are first corporeal and then digitized (LeVan 211, 216–17).

Notes

1. Méliusine is both a specific shapeshifting women in folklore (first recorded by Jean d’Arras ca. 1393–94 in a story of the offspring of a fairy and the king of Albany) and a general name for a water spirit. For illustrated examples showing both the serpent tail and wings, see Nicholas Barnaud, Solidonius philosophus, ca. 1710, Beinecke Rare Book & MS Library (Yale University) Mellon MS 83, an alchemical work; Mélusine (Paris, 1530), British Library C.97.bb.30; and Couldrette, Dis ouentürlich büch bewiset wie von einer frawen genannt Melusina (ca. 1477), British Library General Reference Collection C.8.1.5.

2. Contemporary examples can be found in abundance on Pinterest and the website DeviantArt.

3. Earlier cinematic precedents in Esther Williams and Annette Kellerman are also relevant, however our interview subjects typically cite the twenty-first century progenitors.


5. These interviews were carried out with 58 mermaid and mermen performers, 3 mermaid photographers, 2 tail-makers, as well as 2 filmmakers, 1 illustrator and 7 researchers involved in the mermaid community. Interviews were carried out in person or online from 2017 to 2019. Informed consent was secured for each interview, all interviewees are over 18 years of age, and all interviews focus on subjects’ work lives. For this article, we rechecked with each subject to get approval for direct quotes. Modifi cations were made when requested.

6. “Solid apnea training and at least 500 dives in scuba diving as well as various underwater stress tests are an absolute requirement for every underwater model” (“Mermaids: Can you work …?”). See also “How to Become an Underwater Model?” https://blog.divessi.com/becoming-an-underwater-model-5591.html.


11. This covers the gamut of events created specifi cally for web-based distribution, such as celebrity interviews, testimonials, and product endorsements; participation in events such as beach clean-ups; and glamor shots on location and sometimes with sea-life (see Igoe 381).

12. Stephanie Brown self-published through Lulu, which also distributes the books.

13. Without question, this has a bearing on the cis-predominant beauty culture of white femininity in almost all professional mermaiding. Yet within amateur communities, body type variants, racial diversity, and LGBTQ+ gender and sexuality diversity grow in prominence. For example, see the Scales and Tales podcast hosted by Courtney Mermaid (Courtney Shaw, https://anchor.fm/scalesandtales) and The Everyday Mermaid podcast hosted by

14. Regulating sinus pressure through the Valsalva or Fresnel techniques is inimical to a good shot as well as the illusion of a waterborne creature (Pelizzari and Tovaglieri 197–200).


16. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BditFjmAJSM.

17. It is also on Vimeo through Blue Sphere Media’s website: http://www.bluespheremedia.com/2013/02/mantas-last-dance/. Accessed 19 November 2021.


20. Fraser and Heinrichs have also made “Betrayal,” a protest against commercial whaling. Blue Sphere Media (posted on YouTube 26 October 2013). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SG1dzH_VFzY. It has 41,664 views as of 19 November 2021.


25. See also Haraway 149–81.

26. For example, Mermaid Linden is on the board of directors of Reef Check Foundation, “a non-profit which monitors the health of our world’s coral and rocky reef systems in an effort to conserve and protect them.” See https://mermaidlinden.com/pages/about. Hannah Mermaid campaigns with Greenpeace. See https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/what-would-a-real-mermaid-think-of-the-way-we-treat-our-oceans-we-asked-one/.

27. This image heads the “Ocean Conservation” section on Mermaid Kat’s webpage, also offering “6 Easy Ways to Reduce Plastic Waste” and recommending getting involved in specific ocean clean-up organizations. https://mermaidkat.com/2019/01/15/ocean-conservation-and-reducing-plastics/

28. See Debord.

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