

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

Sophie Davis

*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 Pūpūurangi, *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.”<sup>1</sup> 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/>





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.”<sup>6</sup> 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 Stengers’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”.<sup>7</sup>

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/>

7 Isabelle Stengers, “Another Science is Possible!: A plea for Slow Science” in H. Letiche et al., eds. *Demo(s): Philosophy-Pedagogy-Politics* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2011), p.68.