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Radical Empathy in the Anthropocene

Introduction: the E-word

In a period where movements towards “wilding” or “rewilding” exist alongside the assertions of our being in a “post-wild” world, and where the term *Anthropocene* has become increasingly mainstream, the consideration of our relationship to the natural world has transformed from the desire to rescue lost Edens to a more complex and more intimate philosophical question. The forest primeval no longer exists outside of dedicated and highly managed preserves.¹ Given this state, the relationship of humans to nature, particularly the local flora and fauna which live cheek-by-jowl with us (or snout-by-jowl, if you prefer) is no longer just a quizzical philosophical exercise. In his essay for *Becoming Animal, Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom*, Nato Thompson uses the phrase “radical empathy” to describe particular ways of engaging with the animal world. Yet in most of the investigations of animal-human interrelationship, being with, or encounter this use of the word “empathy” is rare. Donna Haraway doesn’t use it as she argues for species interpenetration. It does not appear in David Foster’s writings on putting himself into the worlds of badgers, otters, foxes, deer, or swifts. It is absent translations of Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am,” John Berger’s “Why We Look at Animals,” or von Uexküll’s considerations of the *umwelt*. The word is, perhaps, too touchy-feely, too loaded with the effort of feeling instead of knowing and as such is liable to slip into soppy evocations of pity for animals or fellow humans. However, empathy is not pity; in its way, it is the emotional equivalent of trying to know an *umwelt*, of acknowledging significant otherness, of coming to a horizontal rather than a hierarchical relationship.

¹ Emma Marris, *The Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2011.

The phrase ‘radical empathy’ is a particularly apt term for the attempt to connect with the natural world on something other than exploitative terms. It seems to underpin the explorations of hybridity, the porous nature of the self, and vital materiality as these are used to reconfigure our human to non-human relationships in artistic expression. At the same time, the key to empathy which might be termed “radical” is that it is paired with knowing. Such empathy acknowledges difference (and in this way tries to elide cheaper forms of anthropomorphism) as well as the history of blunders and mis-starts in understanding of a being (bringing a sense of Foucaultian history to the project and thereby attempting to avoid imperial and empirical catalogues of knowledge). What emerges is an oscillation between fellow feeling and careful, open knowing. The result, I hope, is work that in examining the natural world sets itself at play in the previous symbols and systems of knowing which we have used, often in an almost dissecting and belittling way; the current methods of knowing including scientific innovations and understanding and their philosophical implications; and the means by which we gesture towards the other and interpret its gesture back.

Anthropomorphism and It’s Discontents

Whittgenstein said that if a lion could speak, we couldn’t understand a word it was saying, since the form of a lion’s world is so massively different from our own. He was wrong. I know he was wrong.²

Charles Foster’s perhaps idealized hope, that he can indeed put himself into the mind of animals, is tempered in his writing when he acknowledges that “our individual worlds are custom-tailored inside our heads by our unique neurological software [but it doesn’t mean] that the attempt to perceive it through the sense receptors of a nonhuman is doomed to

² Charles Foster, *Being a Beast, Adventures Across the Species Divide*, (New York, Picador, 2016), 28.

meaninglessness or incoherence.”³ The desire to both see the alterity of animal and plant life in its fullness and still to bridge that gap somehow is at the heart of much art-making, writing, and thinking about the natural world. Hybridity often exists alongside a belief in not only radical empathy, but also in a heightened, even materialist, sense of the self as porous and destabilized, opening up areas of investigation, reaction, and mixing of human and non-human entities.⁴

Potentially, hybridity whether psychological, philosophical, or material can be seen as a rehabilitated anthropomorphism, anthropomorphism 4.0, as it were: one that stops short of full shamanism and at the same time avoids a purely exploitative human-centered view. Of course, art made by humans reveals as much about the makers as it can about those things outside; this does not mean that the effort is without value or that it doesn't provide real insight. Thinking oneself out of the hierarchy of animal-human helps, and as Haraway points out, there is an enfolding, a two-way knowing that goes on with humans and companion animals.⁵ As Greg Garrard succinctly puts it, “Unless trained not to do so, humans infer human agency everywhere; probably dogs are canomorphic and bears ursomorphic.”⁶ While human dominance on the planet is undeniable, the continued presence and effect of other forms of life on humans is still present and persistent.

It is almost impossible not to begin thinking about radical empathy, enfolding knowledge, or human-animal or human-nature art without beginning with Joseph Beuys. In particular, the 1974 performance piece *I Like America and America Likes Me* sets off many of the issues with which contemporary art grapples: empire and post-colonial means of seeing the self, the institution and its role in subjugations, what constitutes a work of art, and, of course, the role of human and

³ Ibid., 25

⁴ See Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*

⁵ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 8.

⁶ Greg Garrard, “Animal” in *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2012), 155.

animal both as symbolic entities and individual ones. Key to the complexity of the piece is the mixing of symbolic animal (the coyote as a symbol of Native American experience), historical situation (the detrimental effects of manifest destiny on Native Americans and the natural world in the United States) with the personal encounter between an individual human (Beuys) and an animal (the coyote). Beuys' engagement with the animal has been called shamanistic, and his hope for transgressing boundaries, investigating liminal spaces fits that description. Thompson notes that the "distinctions between death/life, human/animal were, to Beuys, barriers to pass through."⁷ Beuys' use of the felt wrapping, while echoing personal transformative experiences, can be seen in *I Like America* as a dampening of his human characteristics, a covering them in order to let the coyote's presence loom more fully in the space. His wrapping and cane tapping can be seen as evidence of a search for authentic expression and connection outside human language and symbolic modes. In interpreting Beuys' work, Thompson argues that "Von Uexküll and Beuys provide a simple lesson that is familiar to many artists: in order to understand animals, we must think like them."⁸

However, Beuys seems to be aiming at more than "thinking like" or the particular worldview and mind-view conceived of in von Uexküll's concept of *umwelt*. Shamanism is a breaking of categories, a level of interpenetration that is fuller and yet also outside of this world or that of any other being. It's an entrance into a spiritual plane, one set aside or outside of any *umwelt*, but instead a temporary melting of human *umwelt*. The dissolution of subjectivity is separate from the kind of significant otherness Haraway describes, or even the radical empathy Thompson looks for, as these both require an acknowledgement of separate animal/plant subjects in their full difference. Empathy is not a dissolution of separate selfhood— without

⁷ Nato Thompson, *Becoming Animal: Contemporary Art in the Animal Kingdom* (North Adams, Mass: Mass MoCA, 2005), 10.

⁸ Ibid.

separate subjects, empathy would not be required or needed, and some kind of idealized Star Trek Vulcan mind-meld would replace it. An act of empathy necessarily requires a bridging, an attempt at knowing what is outside and possibly unknowable. In this way, empathy is enhanced by being aware of a being's *umwelt*— knowing and respecting it are likely to produce gestures of empathy that are less self-serving, clearer, closer to the mark. Foster attributes this ability to the human possession of cognitive skills and a 'theory of mind' or the ability of the human mind to imagine other minds, "to think oneself into another's position."⁹ He imagines early human ability to think into the mind of a wildebeest in order to predict its behaviors, and thereby better hunt it, i.e to "put oneself into another's hooves, pads, or fins."¹⁰ Significantly, this is an act of cognition, and while cognition about another's *umwelt* is helpful to empathy, it is a thinking process.

Empathy, radical or monstrous, is a feeling, tinged with the hope of experiencing what another is feeling. In this way, it is a leap of faith, and it can happen in highly anthropocentric ways (as children, we feel empathy for Bambi when his mother is killed). Empathy cannot completely escape being to some degree anthropomorphic, it is feeling as human, as *anthros*, and it cannot yet be empirically verified whether and what animals feel as well.

If the *unheimlich* can create a de-centering of self, then it can be said to open space for knowing and feeling from a new position. The push and pull of rejection and fascination can collapse into pity, a revulsion that is accompanied by sympathy. However, that push and pull can also crack open areas of the self that were previously impervious to empathy by re-integrating the previously repressed or rejected into the self. Much *unheimlich* artwork involves the re-integration of the "animal functions" of defecation, ejaculation, lactation, or menstruation (shitting, cumming, squirting, and bleeding) into the seen and acknowledged sense of self. In addition, *unheimlich* works of art re-integrate death, fight-or-flight feelings, or desire in a similar

⁹ Foster, 18.

¹⁰ Ibid.

way, and these are physical and emotional states shared with animals, often see as the animal in the human. This animal in humanity that Giorgio Agamben describes as being at the heart of the sense of self as inherently split and dual “only because something like an animal life has been separated within man, only because his distance and proximity to the animal have been measured and recognized first of all in the closest and most intimate place.”¹¹

Empathy and the *unheimlich*, once mixed may have been too often associated with the kind of ‘monster empathy’ of anemic monster narratives. These narratives rely on the kind of simplistic reading of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* that presents the monster as equal and deserving of empathy (or more accurately pity) while glossing over his truly *unheimlich* nature: created from corpses. Further, this involves ignoring that we are also animated corpses, also violent, uncertain of who we are, unhoused in the world, and arrogantly able to think we have certainty. It is a short trip from a simplistic reading of Frankenstein to the easy moral lesson of Edward Scissorhands, Shrek, *Monsters, Inc.*, and other ‘monster stories’ which depend on divorcing the *unheimlich* from the monstrous. Empathy has been associated with these saccharine monster tales, the moral of which is “underneath it all, he/she is just like us!” instead of depending on a real bridging of distance in face of what we find truly unsettling, unknowable, and disturbing to our sense of self. Without a sense of respect for the significant otherness or *umwelt* of a being, empathy can fall into “he/she is just like us;” i.e. into an easy anthropomorphism. Yet without empathy, the knowledge of an *umwelt* or significant otherness becomes just an intellectual game played with no stakes.

Considerations of empathy towards the animal world and the fear of anthropomorphism in a twentieth century context are well captured in Greg Garrard’s description of DH Lawrence that “[a]nthropomorphism was hateful to him because it typified the inability of a petty, grasping

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*. Stamford (California: Stamford University Press, 2003), 15-16.

human consciousness to accept anything truly different from itself.” Calling this perspective “allomorphic” or the recognition of otherness in animal encounters, Garrard sees this as epitomized in Lawrence’s lines: ‘I am not the measure of creation,/ . . . His God stands outside my God.’¹² Garrard’s evocation of Lawrence usefully introduces alterity into a long-standing tradition of artists questioning anthropomorphism, affirming the otherness of animals while undermining the arrogance of a human-centered perspective.

The otherness of animal and the history of human conceptualization of animals is embedded in an inequality that has dominated for centuries, particularly powerfully in our contemporary period, the *Anthropocene*. Haraway asserts that the “degree to which the principle of domination is deeply embedded in our natural sciences, especially in these disciplines that seek to explain social groups and behavior, must not be underestimated.”¹³ The examination of the animal as other is necessarily accompanied by the various means of subjugation which our conceptions of animals perpetuate. As Thompson points out, “The zoo (animal), the natural history museum (nature) and the art museum (culture) share a common ethnographic legacy of displacing and displaying the exotic ‘other.’”¹⁴ Our contemporary discomfort with anthropomorphism has been hard-won as a result of recognizing the demeaning and destructive effects of colonizing others in human and non-human form.

Michael Oatman’s series of paintings/collages depicting birds holding guns plays with the human constructs that surround animals in both historical and current associations. Oatman’s *Birds* series offers a play on anthropomorphism that questions common meanings layered onto animal life. The depictions of birds in military helmets and holding guns, as Thompson

¹² Garrard, 167.

¹³ Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*, 8.

¹⁴ Thompson, 14.

describes, present “an alternative universe where the hunted become the hunters.”¹⁵ The unequal distribution of power between the war machinery of humans and the familiar creatures heightens the sense of endangerment that accompanies the animal as other, and as an other who in this case is very much on the losing side of a dichotomy, or as Oatman puts it, “nature taking revenge.”¹⁶

The very “otherness” of birds is crucial to the fascination and humor of the imagery: the oddness of a bird holding a gun. The humor and incongruity of Oatman’s Bird series also depends on an anthropomorphic association of familiar, domestic birds with peacefulness and harmlessness. The inclusion of birds which are predatory but not usually associated with it (a jay instead of a raptor) indicates an awareness of this construct’s limitations. Every bird pictured with a gun in *Study for the Birds* is an insect predator. In particular, the inclusion of a robin holding a worm in its beak suggests an awareness of this predatory nature. It echoes Emily Dickinson’s “A Bird Came Down the Walk” wherein the bird, having come down the walk, “bit an Angle Worm in halves/ And ate the fellow, raw,”¹⁷ thereby breaking with the conventional picture of the small domestic bird as a quaint reflection of all things harmless and wholesome. Oatman speaks of birds as the “mysterious but everyday,” indicating that “[a]nimals were among the first symbol forms devised by humans,” and his works bring to the fore the symbolism layered onto birds.

This play with the anthropomorphism and otherness of animals can be seen particularly clearly in Walton Ford’s work, most tellingly in his 2005 *Dying Words*. The use of quite literal anthropomorphism in this piece is indicated by his placing Carolina parakeets into the poses of

¹⁵ Thompson, 84.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 90

¹⁷ Emily Dickinson, “A Bird Came Down the Walk.” *Poetry Foundation*, accessed April 2, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56593/a-bird-came-down-the-walk-359>

the figures from Benjamin West's *Death of General Wolfe*. The birds literally take on the roles of humans, as in a fable. However, the use of the Carolina parakeet, extinct in America, echoes the Native American pictured in the foreground of West's piece: treated with exotic otherness, and eventually to face the threat of extinction at the hands of the colonial policies of both British and American governments. The connection is explicitly drawn between the domination and exploitation of peoples and natural resources that becomes the manifest destiny brand of American colonization. Ford's work rests on the understanding of the historical means of knowing otherness, that of West's use of the Native American but also of Audubon's use of the parakeet. *The Carolina Parrot*¹⁸ is one of Audubon's most famous plates, including seven birds (six brightly colored males and one green female) posed in different dramatic gestures together as if in a section of a flock. Audubon would have seen these parakeets in life, and may have hunted them. He usually painted from either recently killed or taxidermy preserved specimens, as was common practice at a time when the bounty of American wildlife seemed an endless resource. This particular method of killing for the purposes of representation and the satisfaction of a mostly British market for exotic animal life echoes the same Empire methods of acquiring knowledge and dominating otherness through it that informed colonial practices.

Similarly, the mutated and morphed animals found in Joo Lee Kang's ball point drawings seem to call upon the drawings of other types of natural history illustration in America, and in particular seem somewhat akin to the works created by William Bartram to accompany his *Travels*.¹⁹ Kang's animals and insects, sometimes robust, sometimes fragile, display subtle mutations, and her work is concerned with the "ambiguity of such definitions" as "nature" and

¹⁸ The Carolina parrot being the name given to the Carolina parakeet at during Audubon's career.

¹⁹ William Bartram's *Travels through North & South Carolina, East & West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws, Containing an Account of the Soil and Natural Productions of Those Regions, Together with Observations on the Manners of the Indians*, published 1791.

“natural” by considering genetic engineering or cross-breeding.²⁰ The drawings appear to offer a bucolic harmony, recalling Victorian floral arrangements, but within these are squirrels whose bodies are conjoined, birds with misshapen beaks, sheep or turtles with six legs. These mutated beings emerge upon closer inspection, undercutting the apparent playground of natural beauty that is evoked by the references to Victorian sensibilities.

Possibly one of the contemporary artists who is best known for addressing the natural world is Alexis Rockman. His *American Icon* series envisions a future where major monuments in America have been reclaimed by animal and plant life. Underpinning these images is the treatment of the American landscape as a human playground. The most well know of these, *Manifest Destiny*, offers a sweeping science fiction-infused narrative showing the Brooklyn Bridge, tangled in kudzu, surrounded by whales, seals and other creatures, connected to an abandoned and half submerged Manhattan. The use of a style which echoes science fiction novels, particularly from the 1950s-1970s, ties the ways in which the use of natural resources during the Atomic Age and continuing to the present are tied to this same history of Empire, colonization, and exploitation which Rockman presents in what can be considered a hopeful dystopia (animals prevailing finally over human destructive impulses). The animals in Rockman don't appear particularly anthropomorphized in the traditional sense, but instead recall science textbook illustrations. In this manner, the way of knowing and representing these creatures which contributed to their undoing becomes a means of presenting their possible escape from such dominion. They are anthropomorphized only in that they are the remaining beings inhabiting a formerly human landscape, the new aliens taking over the city. In this way, the histories of knowledge and the histories of understanding in rooted in domination are played with as a means to being aware of the dangers of an anthropocentric means of viewing the animal world.

²⁰ Joo Lee Kang, “Gallery Naga Joo Lee Kang,” *Gallery Naga*, accessed December 18, 2017, <http://www.gallernaga.com/artists-list/joo-lee-kang/>.

Such blunders in human understanding are useful to keep in mind: they re-focus on the limits of human understanding, encouraging humans to be aware of their subject position and that of the other beings.

Empathy Through Hybridity: Blending Other and Self

Numerous recent cultural developments have brought hybridization, both in its literal and metaphorical forms, to bear on artistic creation. Phenomena such as the increasing ability to splice genes, the understanding of animals as having culture, language, and a sense of aesthetics, and the impact on human behavior of gut bacteria have all called into question the divide between humans and non-human, particularly between human and animal. Integrated into this fascination with hybrids is the concept of assemblage and several concepts arising from this idea evident in Deleuze and Guattari's "Becoming Animal" from *A Thousand Plateaus*.²¹ In focusing on becoming instead of being, Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the instability of beings, the way they are an arrangement of forces and that is not fixed and which are constantly entering into relations that create assemblages and groupings according to influences that are subject to near-constant flux. This instability indicates that the perceived borders and boundaries of what is conceived of as a 'being' is more porous, more changeable than everyday thought and action typically attest. In this sense, a hybrid is not just a biological entity, but a combining of categories, modes of thought, and influences.

Jane Bennett's concepts of porosity as these are grounded Deleuze and Guattari appear in her assertion of material vitality where matter's "intensities" do not "merely put up at passive resistance to the activity of external agents but they actively endeavor to express themselves."²²

²¹ Deleuze, Giles and Félix Guattari, "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible" in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Duluth, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 232-310.

²² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 56.

She points out that this is a type of spiritual force “absolutely dependent upon the material,”²³ and in this way defines a force in the world that is similar to the new animism that David Abram discusses.²⁴ His view is one of spiritual porosity, hers of material and philosophical. Abram is looking to the world a spiritual place that speaks human-to-animal and animal-to-human, as well as mineral and plant. Bennett sets up investigations of complex systems wherein the particles of matter affect humans on unnoticed levels and where complexity of interpenetration between human systems of technology and natural ones cannot be untangled. Both concepts rest on the porous nature of beings and matter, where one affects another at both the physical and psychological level, or both when the two are combined (a state Bennett proves is more often the case than is commonly assumed). This new animism, this matter speaking to matter, blurs the lines of what can be considered alive as well as what might be considered to have agency (or even the definition of agency itself).

In particular, there seem to be two oscillating or inter-penetrating ways hybridization manifests in art involving the animal. The first is the exploration of hybridization as a means of radical empathy: a strategy for overcoming the binary opposition between nature and culture, or between animal and human. Both within this stance of empathy, and sometimes in contrast to it, is an investigation of the hybrid as a means of recognizing the destabilization of the self. In this instance, hybridization can be a means of encountering the abyss or *unheimlich* in such a way that the otherness of animals is highlighted as well as undermined in an encounter that is as much about the construct of self as it is about the construct of other. It is a fine distinction, but radical empathy in hybridization seems a gesture with less rebound than that of hybridization that

²³ Kass qtd. in Bennett 56.

²⁴ David Abram, *Becoming Animal An Earthly Cosmology*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

focuses more on the destabilized self.²⁵ These two arenas of hybridization are interdependent, often occurring in the same work of art. Radical empathy often emerges from the destabilized self, and acts of radical empathy may in turn cause a destabilization of the self. These two types of hybridization act less as a two-sided coin than an oscillation of frequency in the same wave.

One of these waves of hybridization that works as a means of creating the kind of Deleuze and Guattarian assemblages that Donna Haraway emphasizes are Brandon Ballengee's *Love Motels for Insects*. These works, as Ballengee states, are "intended to construct situations between humans and arthropods."²⁶ The works, ongoing from 2001, are large-scale structures which often resemble butterflies or moths and are filled with ultraviolet light meant to attract nocturnal insects. The works are then integrated into communal events such as "picnics, biodiversity festivals, graffiti jams, political rallies, scientific investigations, musical events and even insect film screenings."²⁷ These works may illustrate Haraway's concept of naturecultures, or the undoing of the binary opposition between nature and culture.²⁸ In creating what could be called a human-arthropod mixer scene, Ballengee in effect invites nocturnal insects to human events in a conscientious way: emphasizing a nature-culture collaboration that often happens as a byproduct and making it one of intention. This is a hybridization not in the sense of an individual being blended into another, but of gatherings and distinct mental categories which are now hybridized into one. *Love Motels* creates a blended space and intellectual category where humans and insects are seen as enjoying the light together.

²⁵ I recognize the irony in having created a binary of hybridizations. In addition, it is a binary that risks asserting that radical empathy is the more idealistic while the destabilized self is the more honest. I can only ask for tolerance in the name of needing to categorize and examine (and thereby be complicit).

²⁶ Brandon Ballengee, "Love Motels for Insects," *Brandon Ballengee*, accessed April 16, 2018. <https://brandonballengee.com/projects/love-motels/>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Haraway, 8.

Insects lives are highly impacted by the artificial light used by humans, and the sight of insects around outdoor lights is a common one. This attraction insects have for artificial light is usually seen as nuisance byproduct. Within Ballangée's work a system of relationships is set up between insects and humans in their light-love, at times to the benefit or deficit of both parties. *Love Motels* constructs a situation of "significant otherness," as Haraway puts it where "non harmonious agencies and ways of living are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures."²⁹ This is a kind of radical empathy that values difference, and admits to joint culpability. In *Love Motels*, the interdependent nature of this relationship is foregrounded. *Love Motels'* title itself emphasizes the temporary nature of these meetings, their provisionality, as a love motel is one visited fleetingly for a brief affair.

This kind of brief encounter between animal life and human life is highly evident the work of Natalie Jeremijenko whose 2005 work *For the Birds* which also highlights a human-animal exchange commonly taking place: communication between humans and wild birds. *For the Birds* offers a series of smart bird perches which emit phrases, sounds and music, or lights. Some of the perches can dispense food for humans to distribute to birds. The perches are set up in areas where wild birds and humans congregate together. However, the human-bird interaction is particular striking in the perches that emit such phrases as

Sprinkling some of those seeds around here would be appreciated. You might consider that the way you live changes the options on my menu. But I work in concert with plants to cross-pollinate, replant and fertilize, replenish— what do you do?³⁰

Humans can accommodate the request, and birds in the area learn which perches might offer these kinds of responses. The birds' 'tone' might be considered a bit nagging, and certainly there

²⁹ Haraway, 7.

³⁰ Thompson, 68.

is a high degree of anthropomorphism happening in the creation of the bird phrases. It is difficult to know if birds would advocate for their own morally superior role in an ecosystem. Yet similarly to *Love Motels, For the Birds* foregrounds a natureculture which already exists and the fraught and complicated nature of the significant otherness which occurs in it. The perch reminds human as to how their behavior affects birds as well as of the bird's effects on the local environment. The work offers the same hybridization of bird and human groups where the categories of 'generous human givers' and 'bird receiver' are upended so that the birds make the choice to manipulate human actions, via perch selection. A more radical and perhaps informed empathy is kindled through enhancing how humans perceive bird agency.

Ballangée and Jeremijenko's works focus on the hybridization of groups, but the works of Art Orienté and Patricia Piccinini offer an investigation of hybrid at a more individual level. In addition, Art Orienté and Piccinini both create work that oscillates between hybridizing that tends towards radical empathy and that which tends toward the decentering of self.

Art Orienté, a collaborative of Marion Laval-Jeantet and Benoit Mangin, addresses the kind of steps of radical empathy that may result from explorations of von Uexküll's concept of the *umwelt*,³¹ or the entire environmental and sensory world of a being seen from its perspective. In their work *May the Horse Live in Me*, they seek to create an "hybrid man-animal existence experience" wherein Laval-Jeantet was injected with horse blood, made safe by the removal of red and white blood cells, in the months leading up to the performance. In the performance itself, she attempted to interact and connect with the horse from which the blood is taken while wearing specially constructed stilts which allow her to walk on the fabricated lower legs of a

³¹ Jakob Von Uexküll, Joseph D. O'Neil, trans., and Dorian Sagan, introduction, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans: with A Theory of Meaning (Posthumanities)* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

horse.³² This blending of science and art is for Laval-Jeantet a means of addressing what she sees as a “perilous moment of our history” where humanity is “exhausting our ecological environment on one side and strongly modifying it with chemistry and biotechnologies” and to reveal that “actually both are extremely linked” in complex ways.³³ Her attempt to enter into a level of enhanced communication with the horse while carrying some of its hemoglobin in her veins is an embodiment of the breakdown of traditional boundaries of human behavior and biological being. Walking and moving as a horse does puts her body into the gate, the height, and the physical movement of the horse as she interacts with it. This work in particular recalls not only the concept of *umwelt*, but also Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of Little Hans in “Becoming Animal.” They ask whether Little Hans in his obsession with a horse might be able to “endow his own elements with the relations of movement and rest, the affects, that would make it become horse, forms and subjects aside.”³⁴ As they make clear, it is “not a feeling of pity” but “a composition of speeds and affects involving entirely different individuals, a symbiosis.”³⁵ This exploration of ways of being in animals is to some extent manifest in Laval-Jeantet’s breakdown of the boundaries of her own body, which becomes horse-infused and horse-gaited. Her interactions with the horse avoids pity by emphasizing not the horse’s limits as domesticated but re-imagining the self into a position of horse-ness for the period of interaction between the two. Her work also participates in both directions of hybridization: the opening and breakdown of self as boundaries of self are broached and the outward gesture of radical empathy as the goal here is clearly to interact with a horse in such a way that increases the understanding of that being.

³² Meritzell Rosell, “Art Orienté Object, Blurring the Constraints of What It Is To Be Human and Our Relationship with Animals.” *Clot*. Sept. 29, 2015. Accessed April 8, 2018. <http://www.clotmag.com/art-oriente-objet>.

³³ Marion Lavat-Jeantet, *Ibid*.

³⁴ Deleuze, Guattari, 258.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

The work of Patricia Piccinini, like that of Art Orienté explores the decentering of the self and acts of radical empathy as these are intertwined. Piccinini's most well-known works *Still Life with Stem Cells* (2002) and *The Young Family* (2002) enter the realm of the *unheimlich* while still eliciting a sense of empathy. *Still Life with Stem Cells* presents a young girl, constructed from silicone, polyurethane, human hair, and clothing at a level of high realism in skin texture and facial expression that echoes special effects props from film. Around her are grouped amorphous blobs of human-looking flesh at which she beams as she pats one and cradles another. The arrangement recalls a young girl with a litter of kittens. These blobs appear to have unclear body parts or distinctions, recalling Deleuze and Guaterrri's body without organs, although it is unclear if these beings have organs as the viewer cannot see inside them. The blob-beings do not appear to have eyes or ears or clear orifices. Yet the polyurethane and silicone skin used to create them is almost identical to that of the young girl in texture and color. The familiarity of the skin and the child's pose heighten the *unheimlich* nature of the scene: the blobs are at one level repellent in their fleshy amorphousness bonelessness while at the same time seeming almost cute in their context.

Piccinini's inspiration for the works came from seeing stem cells in a petri dish for the first time, specifically ones that had grown into heart cells and were pumping the way heart cells pump in the human body. While stem cells are for Piccinini "[p]ure unexpressed potential," in their initial state, they are "base cellular matter before it is differentiated into specific kinds of cells like skin, liver, bone or brain."³⁶ It is the un-differentiation that features most prominently here, as the hybrid of formed human and unformed flesh becomes a kind of pet, a being lavished with attention and affection. The act of seeing a child lavish such attention asks the viewer to share in the child's empathy, entering a child-like moment where traditional categories of

³⁶ Patricia Piccinini, "Still Life with Stem Cells," *Patricia Piccinini*, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.patriciapiccinini.net/writing/24/117/102>.

disgusting or disturbing are not yet fully formed, thereby encouraging a redistribution of disgust and empathy.

The same *unheimlich*-empathy exchange appears in *The Young Family* which presents a porcine human hybrid creature suckling three of its young via teats located along the entire belly. The skin, created with the same realistic silicone and polyurethane, and human hair reveals a pale translucent fleshiness with pink flushed face and ears as well as showing veins and arteries working underneath. There are even varicose veins in the mother's legs which descend into feet which are utterly human except for their wrapping, prehensile toes. One of the young ones lies on her back, holding her foot in both hands in a gesture that mimics that of human babies, although the long draping ears, snout, and hand-like feet unsettle the cute gesture. Part of the empathy this image elicits comes not only from the act of suckling and care that is captured, but also from the treatment of the mother's nakedness. All the figures are naked, but the little girl's genitalia are revealed in a pose that depends upon the assumption of sexual innocence. Yet the genitals of the adult pig-woman are covered by her legs, leaving just the teats revealed, as if she is posed in such a way as to preserve her dignity during a portrait session meant to capture the act of nursing. This gives the nudity a vulnerability that belongs to humans, and which elicits a sense of fellow-feeling. The pig-woman hybrid's eyes appear alert and aware of someone looking on as she is suckling/nursing, and Piccinini has given her a mouth which, while in a snout, is human-shaped and looks capable of speech. The repulsion a viewer might experience at the flesh, which is not human and not animal, is again married to a scene that all but requires an empathetic response from the viewer: a re-configuring of the possibly monstrous genetic mutant into a caring mother. Piccinini's work reveals the desire to undo the traditional human-animal divides by letting the animal permeate the human.

The 2014 video *Untitled (Human Mask)* by Pierre Huyghe offers a hybridized human-animal figure in a similar vein to that of Piccinini's. His is a work of hybridization which rests less in radical empathy and explores to a greater degree the dissolving of the borders and boundaries that seem to keep the self in place. *Untitled (Human Mask)* depicts a monkey wearing a traditional theater mask of a human face and girls' clothing pacing around a deserted restaurant, listening for customers who never arrive. This restaurant, the film establishes, exists in the aftermath of the tsunami and nuclear disaster at Fukushima, and the monkey wears clothing similar to those she wore when working for humans in a sake house. Abandoned, she repeats actions learned from previous owners and the customers.³⁷ The human mask-face with the human-like gestures performed amidst monkey gestures calls up levels of the *unheimlich* that rest on destroying the divide between human and animal culture. Unlike *Love Motel for Insects*, the natureculture which is revealed here is exploitative, one where a monkey has been given a role in human commerce and a life in a human world which it cannot escape even when all the humans are gone. The gestures and movements of the mask-wearing monkey are fascinating, but the inability to see the monkey's face, the blankness of the mask, inhibits and interrupts the kind of empathetic response elicited by Piccinini's pig-humans. In contrast, the separation and isolation of this in-between being, its lack of home in either human or monkey camp is emphasized. The film highlights the tragedy of the monkey continuing its human-hybrid activities instead of reverting to monkey-based ways of being. At the same time, as the film reveals the repetitive roles of humans in their lives, and it emphasizes human ways of being trapped.³⁸ In this way, the existential realities of human and monkey are hybridized and blended, leading to a breakdown of the sense of human as agent with greater self-will and resource than that of the

³⁷ Jennifer Higgie, "One Take: Human Mask," *Frieze*, last modified Dec 17, 2014, accessed April 8, 2018. <https://frieze.com/article/one-take-human-mask>.

³⁸ Pierre Huyghe, "Untitled (Human Mask)," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org>.

monkey. Beyond the simple interpretation that under our societal masks is nothing more than a monkey, there is the sense that monkeys, like us, can undergo an existential crisis of belonging and that humans can undergo the futile, repetitive neuroses of a trained animal.

Earlier work by Art Orienté Objet also rests more in this de-centered self that the *unheimlich* can trigger. While there is an element of *May the Horse Live in Me* which may verge on the *unheimlich*, as Laval-Jeantet's feet seem to morph into those of a horse, works such as *Skin Culture* present the hybridized self in an abject state outside the circle of empathy. In the 1996 piece, epidural cells of the artist were grown in a Boston laboratory, then grafted onto pig derma.³⁹ The resulting combination is then tattooed with "the most popular animal imagery in fashion in tattoo parlours in the United States"⁴⁰ as well as tattoos of endangered species. These small squares of tattooed skin material, ideally meant to be grafted onto the skin of collectors once purchased, are displayed together in canning jars and petri dishes, swimming in fluid. The effect is that of a row of tattoo photographs for purchase blended with a specimen cabinet, described by Laurie Attias' *Frieze* review as leaving the viewer less with a sense of the fate of the animals depicted and more "the weird flavour of human mutation the pieces of skin seem both strangely alive and disembodied" as well as being "downright creepy."⁴¹ These tattooed pieces of skin are alive and disembodied, and they are literal hybrids of skin from pigs and humans, with the conceptual added element of the future hybridization with a collector. In addition, these squares play off of the hybridizing of canvas and skin that happens in tattooing, where pigment becomes part of the living skin. These methods of hybridity seem to take what is part of self

³⁹"Art Orienté objet; Marion Laval-Jeantet & Benoît Mangin - Artists' Skin Culture (Culture de Peaux d'Artistes) Roadkill Coat," *Sk-interfaces* in *Fact*, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://www.fact.co.uk/projects/sk-interfaces/art-orient%C3%A9-objet-marion-laval-jeantet-beno%C3%AEt-mangin-artists-skin-culture-culture-de-peaux-dartistes-roadkill-coat.aspx>.

⁴⁰ "Art Orienté Objet Marion Laval-Jeantet & Benoît Mangin Skin Culture," *Symbiotica Presents Still Living*, accessed April 22, 2018, <http://www.stillliving.symbiotica.uwa.edu.au/pages/artists/aao.htm>.

⁴¹ Laurie Attias, "Art Orienté Objet," last modified May 6, 1997, *Frieze*, accessed April 22, 2018, <https://frieze.com/article/art-orient%C3%A9-objet>.

(skin) and make it something other than self, pulling out the first and most widely used example of the abject and uncanny: the bodily separated from the body as a whole. The tattoo's flat and formulaic nature make the skins appear somewhat commercial so that the commodification can overwhelm the unbodied skin that houses it. This final hybridity is less about a radical empathy with beings which are other than with examination of technology and commodification. It is a hybridity that while it de-centers self, does not necessarily do so in search of empathy or a gesture towards knowledge.⁴²

Hybridization itself can be seen as a colonizing force, as the human-pig hybrid skin cells would conceptually be colonized into a person. This would mean the kind of other-as-resource that informs much of the interaction with other species that artists such as Ford critique as a troubling part of history. At the same time, there are means of hybridity that are less forceful and rest more in a being-with, that acknowledge significant otherness, and which can thereby allow for an imaginative gesture of understanding. Therefore, the *unheimlich* nature of art such as Art Orienté Objet, Patricia Piccinini, or Huyghe's certainly un-houses us in our placement alongside nature, drawing upon a psychological porosity to the self. *Love Motels*, however, might be seen as a gesture of empathy in sensory experience, dependent upon a shared experience of light spectrums.

Haunted Houses: Empathy, the Abject, Presence, and Absence

Nature is a Haunted House - but Art a House that tries to be haunted

—Emily Dickinson⁴³

⁴² That not all hybridity is about empathy or knowing the other may seem a self-evident statement, but in the context it is useful to note.

⁴³ This is an often quoted passage from a letter to Thomas Wentworth Higginson found in Thomas H. Johnson, *Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography*, Harvard, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 1971.

Images that represent the dead may seem an odd subject matter for radical empathy. *Memento mori* works traditionally are conceived as a meditation on life's fleeting nature, on the weight of time moving continually towards death. In contemporary study, death exists more in the realm of the abject, that which reminds us of our ignored or rejected bodily nature, and thereby of our finite, physical end. If a *memento mori* points at an experience of time by pointing at a future death, then the abject points at embodiment and attempts to snap the now into that dying, oozing physical form. A classic example of the abject, bodily fluids, also offers a way of exploring the relationship between death and the abject. A bodily fluid inside the body is integrated into a living subject, can be swapped via transfusion or sexual contact. Once it has left the body, turned cold, it becomes a kind of dead thing, a type of corpse, contaminated and waiting to rot. Traditional *memento mori* works depend upon a level of identification with the corpse or often the skull, an acknowledgement of the future nature of the viewer and the reciprocal acknowledgement of the previous bodily and subject nature of the corpse. It is an act of imagination, and potentially also of empathy. In seeming contradiction, the desire to gaze at the abject is a desire to experience the abyss, the screaming animal edge of meaning. Fluids are less empathy-inducing than full bodies, they resemble less beings than entities. But much of the abject simultaneously points back to the subject or body from which it emerged. It's a ghost of subjectivity that works similarly to the *memento mori* skull but in a more amorphous form. The abject or the corpse is a type of other which is rejected and embraced, a movement back and forth, connection and disconnection. One of the ways to get at empathy, or play in and around the gap between subject and other, between self and void, is to play with the ways that one not only faces it but also attempts to reach into it or cross it.

Radical empathy is a gesture we make towards, mostly, the fellow living. In recent years this category of 'living' may need to expand to include entities previously considered non-living

in our range of porous existence, as Jane Bennett argues.⁴⁴ However, to contemplate a corpse is a means of contemplating the lack of the thing shared, the common living being-ness, the sentience one hopes to connect with when making a gesture of empathy. In the contemplation of that lack, that absence, there is an awareness of the presence one would look to recognize, salute, or acknowledge in beings: beings with fur, wings, scales, carapaces, or flagellum. After experiencing the void, the lack of living, one acknowledges it and then returning to the corpse as an empty vessel.

As the works of Rachel Whiteread in particular indicate, representation also is a kind of corpse. It is the presentation of what is not present, whether an illusionistic image, a recording of emotions and states experienced, a presentation of concepts, or a series of events. There is a shamanistic “suspension of disbelief” needed for artistic representation to work. We present such corpses and hope for a moment of imagination on the part of people who see or experience them which brings them partly to life, and which thereby points back to the actual lived experiences which are so bound, fleeting, or gloppy that they are almost impossible to grasp.

Corpses can be examined, dissected, posed and prodded in a way that would simply inflict and destroy if done to the living (see Carolina parakeets mentioned earlier). Treating the living like the dead is one of our most horrible and heinous acts. Treating the dead like the living is macabre and disturbing, as it points to a failure to understand the important difference between the dead and the living, as well as value of the latter. The hybrid spaces between the living and the dead provide a fascinating playground of imagination (the werewolf, the vampire, the ghost, the resurrected). However, there is some final boundary that, while porous in the sense of constant cell death and regeneration, is still a boundary between dead and alive. A corpse

⁴⁴ See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

might infect the living, change them, alter their chemistry and psychology forever. But it is still dead, and the living still alive (up until the point that they are also dead).

Quite traditionally, works of art that dwell in representation, the play of signs and symbols and imagery, are considered to echo this same corpse-like lack, as in Dickinson's assertion that "Art is a house that tries to be haunted." These types of work may succeed in piercing habituated norms and repressions, or send us face to face with the abyss at the center of our being, depending upon its forms and our psychology and culture.⁴⁵

To evoke this type of *momento mori*, particularly the corpse of an animal or plant instead of a human, presents problems of tone. It is crucial to avoid dwelling purely in pathos, or of mourning alone, but also to make sure the works don't reside purely in cold scientific inquiry. In addition, works can evoke a beauty that invites identification with death, letting the abject sneak in or soak in, subtly, if this is possible for the abject— an abject as the slow warming of that pan of water in which the frog cooks without knowing it. I want the seeming presence and the actual absence of the living to be foregrounded, not a ghost, a reanimation, or an epitaph. My hope is that it is not just a negative or hollow, but a presence which points at what is there and not there, points elsewhere back to livingness. Creating empathy in the abject requires lightness lest it become a keening while necessitating enough gravity to avoid the theatrically macabre.

Conclusion

In my own work, as that is what to some degree this investigation hopes to shape and inform, I pull the natural world into the realm of our signs and symbols, problematizing it, re-

⁴⁵ This is that long plumbed difference between procreation and artistic creation. There are works created by altering and writing DNA, then implanting that into living beings (Eduoardo Kac's petunia comes to mind). Whether this is representation as we have known it is unclear for me. I find a high level of discomfort at moral and other quandaries of intruding on other living things with a designed intrusion of self for artistic purposes. This human-plant-ness which gets to live according, to some degree, its own needs and wants, is living. It is a kind of procreation. Yet the idea of brushing up against what is living, conscious, animating and knowing in something else is more than the sharing of genetic material (otherwise the words "fatherhood" or "motherhood" and "biological parent" would not have differing and sometimes drastic meanings).

examining it, and playing with knowability or lack of knowability. This process involves the history of knowing, those blunders we have made that seemed to isolate the non-human, or gave a fictional sense of all-encompassing understanding seen in the history of natural history. At the same time, I wish to present and re-present these non-human entities in a gesture of radical empathy, of trying to know even with and in my cloud of cultural subject-position limitations. I offer the drawing, painting, installation or arrangement as a thing which enacts an invitation to contemplate the difficulty of connecting to and knowing other beings as well as the empathetic attempt to do so. Beings are thereby present in different ways that might interfere with connection, being either presented at a remove (drawn, painted), or as remnants of themselves (in death). At the same time, they are presented as having an aura of meaningful presence left as echo. The work is a record of my gesture of empathy, a game of presence and absence, of the desire to connect and the limits of connection. It is a confrontation with something's absence and the game of imagining it, an echo of the imagining into another being, a gesture of belief. Radical empathy is, in essence, a re-infusing of empathy with otherness, with the acknowledgment of otherness, and knowing with a sense of responsibility towards the known. The natural world as we know it is a hybrid space, one with which humans are intertwined, and there is a constant process of building and undoing knowing that must happen to connect in a hybridized and porous living world. I am attempting to get at the heart of this making and unmaking, revealing and concealing that the shifting self and shifting world that can be known only from these provisional ways.

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