

ANTENNAE



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Naturally Hypernatural

Suzanne Anker – Naturally Hypernatural / Gary Sherman – Condition of Possibility / Sabine Flach – The Artificial Sublime / Sabine Flach – In Pursuit of Magic / Irene J. Klaver – Accidental Wildness on a Detention Pond / Beatriz Meseguer and Raul Valverde – Adapted Landscape / Joanna Ebenstein – Morbid Anatomy / Hartmut Böhme and Thomas Fuerstein – Demons of Art / Dana Levy – Poetics of Unwild Things

ANTENNAE

The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture

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Antennae (founded in 2006) is the international, peer reviewed, academic journal on the subject of nature in contemporary art. Its format and contents are inspired by the concepts of 'knowledge transfer' and 'widening participation'. On a quarterly basis the Journal brings academic knowledge within a broader arena, one including practitioners and a readership that may not regularly engage in academic discussion. Ultimately, *Antennae* encourages communication and crossovers of knowledge amongst artists, scientists, scholars, activists, curators, and students. In January 2009, the establishment of Antennae's Senior Academic Board, Advisory Board, and Network of Global Contributors has affirmed the journal as an indispensable research tool for the subject, now recommended by leading scholars around the world and searchable through EBSCO.

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EDITORIAL

ANTENNAE ISSUE 33

This is the first of two issues of *Antennae* titled *Naturally Hypernatural* after a conference organized by Suzanne Anker, (Chair, BFA Fine Arts Department at the School of Visual Arts New York) and Sabine Flach (Chair, Department of Art History at the University of Graz). *Naturally Hypernatural: Visions of Nature* investigated the fluctuating 'essences' of 'nature' and the 'natural' in the 21st century. The talks focused on contemporary issues in the visual arts and their intersections with the biological and geological sciences, confirming that nature remains an intrinsically mysterious, ever more mutable entity. Most importantly, the perspectives of the participants to *Naturally Hypernatural* moved beyond classical human-animal studies approaches for the purpose of considering more complex and intricate interrelations between beings and environments. As Anker and Flach acknowledge:

At the present time, cellular parts are being remixed in laboratories to create synthetic organisms while geological transformations are forecasting wild swings in weather conditions. Human reproduction regularly occurs in Petri dishes while cucumbers are grown in space. The artificial and the natural now combine to form novel entities, never before seen on earth, while animal species dwindle down to extinction every day. Animals and plants are exhibited as contemporary art, while the real is conflated with the imaginary.

This issue of *Antennae* and the next gather a selection of papers presented at the conference. As part of the journal's year-long exploration 'beyond human-animal studies' which began in March 2015 with the publication of the first of two installment titled *Multispecies Intra-action, Natural Hypernatural's* contribution further problematizes the new philosophical and recent artistic approaches to the possibility of viable posthumanist models. The redefinition of the concepts of 'natural' and 'artificial' which so much characterize the Anthropocene are in these two issues embraced by each author in different and original ways. Here, anthropocentric systems are not replaced by zoo-centric ones. Authors thus attempt to grapple with different links and elusive networks between different species, spaces, organisms, and technologies. The artistic repercussions that ensue from this reconfiguration of the traditional object/subject relationship are ripe with new and exciting potentialities.

Besides thanking all the contributors to this issue, I personally would like to thank Suzanne Anker, Sabine Flach, and Raul Valverde for their kind collaboration and help with the curatorial and production stages of this and the next issue.

Dr. Giovanni Aloi

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Author: Suzanne Anker

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In this paper Gary Sherman positions the hypernatural vis-à-vis the conditions of an artificial sublime. In as much as the prefix hyper denotes that which is above or beyond the usual, Sherman defers to the human geography of Michel Foucault and Marc Augé. He locates the hyper or artificial sublime within the network of Foucault's heterotopias and Augé's non-places. Together, this social geography facilitates unusual, and not-so-unusual, encounters across space and place.

Author: Gary Sherman

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In this paper Gary Sherman positions the hypernatural vis-à-vis the conditions of an artificial sublime. In as much as the prefix hyper denotes that which is above or beyond the usual, Sherman defers to the human geography of Michel Foucault and Marc Augé.

Author: Sabine Flach

p.31 IN PURSUIT OF MAGIC

In this paper Sabine Flach discusses the status of reality and present with regard to Conditions of Possibility. Following the phenomenological argument that space perception always includes an awareness for atmospheres and therewith an expanded understanding of reality that does not just refer to a mere existence of physical objects, the paper discusses the ontological status of those objects.

Author: Sabine Flach

p.45 ACCIDENTAL WILDNESS ON A DETENTION POND

'little lake' is a detention pond, a flood control structure, an unassuming place in an average American town, Denton, Texas. Relatively left by itself, the pond attracts small wildlife: from birds to beavers, fish to foxes. People walk their dogs, fish, play disk golf, enjoy the sunset, even have religious ceremonies. This 'little lake' has become a situation, a place of encounters, between humans, animals, plants, weather, and water.

Author: Irene J. Klaver

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When Raul Valverde was invited to participate in the Cartagena Biennial in Colombia, the artist proposed the construction of a new space based on history's reconfiguration of geography. Using a variety of flora from Cartagena, Spain, the artist set up a site-specific installation entitled Adapted Landscape. Its site is a wall fortification built by the Spanish conquerors around the 16th Century.

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In this paper, Morbid Anatomy Museum creative director Joanna Ebenstein will trace the genesis of The Morbid Anatomy Museum--from art project to museum--and how it relates to such liminal, perplexing artifacts as Clemente Susini's Anatomical Venus.

Author: Joanna Ebenstein

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In his process-oriented installations Thomas Feuerstein avails himself of scientific methods so as, by artistic means, to interweave fact and fiction.

In conversation between: Hartmut Böhme and Thomas Fuerstein

p.92 POETICS OF UNWILD BEINGS

Dana Levy works chiefly with video, video installation and photography. Her work investigates historical, social and political situations, while dealing with memory, identity and the relationship between culture and nature. It explores the various ways that life is taken out of its natural context, uprooted from its surroundings and assigned a place on shelves or display cabinets or on the walls of the museum.

Author: Dana Levy

Dear Charles (if I may),

I am sending you this set of words which reflect some of the concerns inherent in the way your beloved nature is evolving, both naturally and hypernaturally. Let me explain what I mean by these terms. Your theories about evolution, the survival of the fittest, and adaptation continue to create controversy in the United States of America, where Creationism is thriving under the rubric of Intelligent Design. There has been and continues to be intense debate as to whether your theory of evolution should only be taught side by side with Intelligent Design in schools in America. I know that in your time you were very hesitant to expose your views on evolution and ancestral descent, fearing that it might upset a theological perspective on the origin of man and his creation on earth. You were even mocked and satirized as an ape. But as we enter an age that has been dubbed the Anthropocene, there really has not been much clamor about God allowing man to succumb to destroying the planet. Do you have any advice?

Your Humble Servant.

Suzanne Anker

NATURALLY HYPERNATURAL: VISIONS OF NATURE

Once thought of as being separate, in the 21st century, nature and culture have moved into a zone of fusion. Akin to cultural practices, living entities are being altered, reconfigured and transformed. Each writer or artist in this introductory text is concerned with the natural world as a system to be tinkered with in one of two ways: the first being the restoration of loss and the other as a fast forward expansion of the properties of matter.

Author: Suzanne Anker

"The totality of life, known as the biosphere to scientists and creation to theologians, is a membrane of organisms wrapped around Earth so thin it cannot be seen edgewise from a space shuttle, yet so internally complex that most species composing it remain undiscovered".

E.O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* ^{[1][2]}

"A membrane of organisms wrapped around Earth", as so elegantly stated by eminent biologist E.O.

Wilson, puts the organic world in a position of being a living, yet sheer, chiffon-like scarf. In shades of green and blue, this membrane comprises all that we know as the living. From enormous forests, vast oceans, rivers and lakes, abundant flora and fauna, and a host of microbes, our diaphanous sheathe of life is in a transformative phase. As gravity holds us in place from tumbling off of the earth's spinning axis, we assume our place in the universe. Life on earth, its origins and manifestations, its fecundity and variation continues to enamor those beguiled by wonder.

Darwin's groundbreaking theories referring to the Earth's "tangled bank" of species, some aquatic, others landlocked and still others airborne, attest to a world filled with distinction. Multi-faceted colors and myriad textures, forms within forms within forms range from exquisite silken treasure troves to grotesqueries of gnarled desiccated specimens. Assortments and abundance of life's variation are on a scale from the microscopic to the mammoth, each endowed to survive in its own way, with its own hue and body

plan to be woven into living tapestries. Add to this mix a theoretical understanding of biology when we consider creatures of all kinds and their responses to environments based on circumstance and sense perception.

Coining the term *Umwelt* as a name for the interaction between living actors and their environment, Jakob von Uexküll's (1864-1944) biosemiotic interpretation of life forms and behavior moves away from standard biological rhetoric.^[3] Von Uexküll's theory is formulated on the recognition of life as a sign system, a communication paradigm based in semiotics. For example, an ant endeavoring to stride to another space may serendipitously catch a ride by employing a blade of grass as a bridge, or the pioneering cockroach may change genders in order to mate with itself, if the opposite sex is not available. *Umwelt theory* is a system based on the ways in which signs between creatures and their environment unfold. It relies on the processes and apparatuses of living actors, which interact with their locale by employing specific sense mechanisms. It is central to the 20th century discipline known as biosemiotics.^[4]

Biosemiotics is a branch of philosophy



Simone Couto

Fig. 1. *Slime Mould* © Couto

whose salient practitioners included Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), Charles W. Morris (1903-1979), Thomas Sebeok (1920-2001), Thure von Uexküll (1908-2004), to more current philosophers such as John Deely and Claus Emmeche. Biosemiotics studies the intricate chemical, olfactory signals and sense perceptions affecting the behavior of living organisms. I, for one, am amazed by the lowly slime mold, who can find the shortest distance between two points, though the organism does not possess a brain (fig. 1).

But a second nature is upon us, the fallout from industrialization's particularly strenuous hold

on civilization commencing in the 19th century. Although, printing presses and steam engines, cotton mills and coal mines, factory labor and slaughterhouses have given way to digital printing and aeronautics, synthetic fibers and solar energy, automated production and industrial farming, to name a few, other problems have arisen from overproduction, radiation and contamination. Chemical industries have merged with seed companies, human organs are now for sale in a thriving black market and global slavery is at an all-time high. The sheer quantities of production and extraction, consumption and waste are also



K. Loo

Fig. 2. *My Little Pony Diagram* © K.Loo

accompanied by experimental recombinations of DNA and novel synthetic organisms produced in scientific laboratories of which the long-term consequences remain unclear. How do we enfold these issues into our rather precarious evolutionary future?

The Anthropocene began some while ago, but conflicting theories offer no exact time. It is a term popularized by chemist Paul Crutzen, a

Nobel Prize in the 1980's. The expression refers to the age of man's infiltration into nature that has fervently and directly changed nature's course. One can roughly attribute the term to the impact of advancing planetary industrialization. Issues with regard to the Anthropocene include an accelerating number of species extinctions, global climate change, the warming of the oceans, rampant air pollution and chronic deforestation.

Several major concerns regarding our

oceans circle around the abundance of plastic and micro-plastics infesting these waters. According to Professor Richard Thompson of Plymouth University and zoologist Dr. Lucy Woodall, microplastic particles have sunk to the bottom of the sea "where the full effect of these plastics on the delicate balance of deep sea ecosystems is unknown".^[5] Thompson goes on to say that "nearly 700 species of marine animals have been recorded as having encountered human-made debris such as plastic and glass." Other aspects of plastic waste are its ingestion by sea creatures and birds, turtles and fish, as well as this debris' propensity to entangle these animals in their web.

At the other end of the scale, laboratory scientists are manipulating nature to recycle and reassemble its parts. Synthetic biology, speculative design, eco-architecture and other practices are all expanding their palettes to include ways in which nature can flourish by diminishing the carbon footprint, recycling waste into usable materials, and creating self-rejuvenating ecosystems. An action brought to help alleviate these problems was brought to my attention by Lucas Evers, Director of the Wetlab at the Waag Society (<http://www.waag.org/en>) in Amsterdam. He spoke of a project called the *Unwanted Animal* in which geese, horses, ponies, crow, deer muskrats and swans were being used as food sources.^[6] (fig.2 -*Unwanted Pony* meat diagram) As part of an urban art project, this undertaking was intended to reduce food waste and provide new sources of protein for consumers. What is especially surprising are the "my little pony burgers." *My Little Pony* originated in 1983 as a line of plastic toys in bright colors, especially marketed to little girls. However after four generations of remakes and an animated television series, *My Little Pony* has grown to include a much wider audience. As a popular icon, one can find these products at any toy store or gift shop, even at airports. Unlike the plastic toys, the expenses involved in having a real horse or pony are weighed against its economic value to family members. Should a child lose interest in a pony or a teenager in a horse, there are now ways to sell these animals as meat. Here are three recipes for the thrifty featured in a 19th century French cookbook that the Guardian endorses.^[7]

Recipes for Horse Meat:

Pot-au-feu de cheval (horse stew)

Take meat of the second class (flank, topside, collar), place in cold water and cook over a gentle fire, removing the foam and grease as you bring it to the boil. Add salt, a clove of garlic, caramelised onion and a colouring of vegetables, such as leek, turnip, celery, cabbage etc. Leave to cook for seven or eight hours on a moderate fire.

Cheval à la Parisienne

Cook turnips in horse grease; add boiled horsemeat in thin rashers, with salt and pepper; wet with a little horse bouillon; add parsley, chives or shallots, and a dash of vinegar.

Cheval à la mode

Take a piece of the best meat, fry with lardons in horse grease, put in a casserole with onions, carrots, a bouquet of fine herbs, a bay leaf, thyme, garlic, cloves, salt and pepper; pour in a glass of water, a half-glass of white wine or a tablespoon of eau-de-vie; cook over a small fire for about six hours; skim off the fat before serving.

Synthetic Biology is an expanding field which employs both genetic and engineering principles to create new organisms. By disabling cellular parts and reassembling them in novel ways, new products from renewable chemicals to pharmaceuticals to bio-fuels are being developed. From synthetic chromosomes to biodegradable Styrofoam, to microbe sensors and microbe repair kits (for cement), synthetic biology is also harvesting the power of microbes to work without pay. Like yeast in the ancient world, microbes have become the engines of the synthetic bio-revolution. On the rise as well is the accelerating trend in 'Do-It-Yourself Biology' (DIY), where community based laboratories are opening up bio resources for professional practitioners and lay people alike. Genspace in Brooklyn, New York (<http://www.genspace.org>) and Biocurious (<http://www.biocurious.org>) in Silicon Valley in California are two such places. This 21st century movement is practically universal with local groups in the USA, Asia, Europe, Oceania, and South America (<http://www.diybio.org>).



Simon Crane and Julian Goulding

Fig. 3. *Synthetic Anatomy* © Crane and Goulding

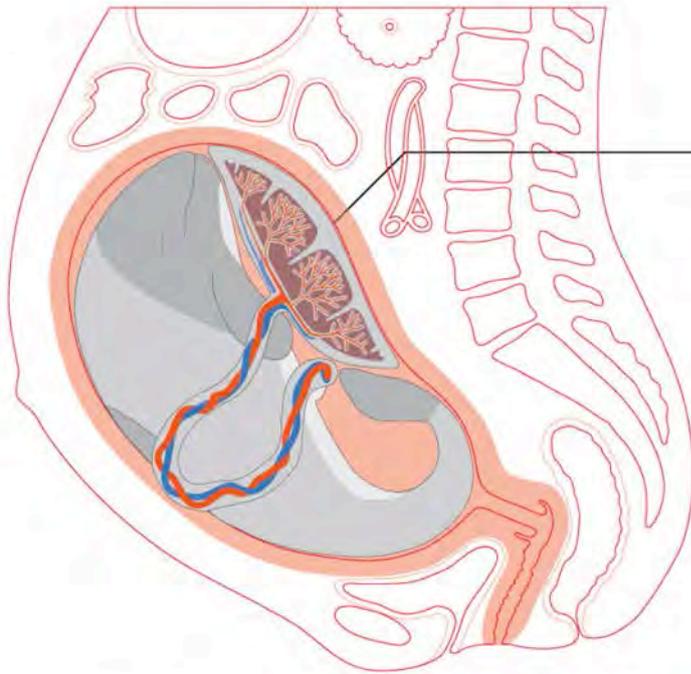
Speculative Design is yet another novel way of thinking through problem solving. Whereas traditional design focuses on “industrial production and the marketplace, speculative design is about ideas, a design more conceptual in nature,” so writes Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby in their text *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction and Social Dreaming*.^[8]

For example, Simon Crane and Julian Goulding's *Synthetic Anatomy* focuses on 3D printing to create life-like prosthetic devices (fig. 3) This manner of production increases accuracy and can easily be fabricated to fit an individual's needs. Ai Asegawa's "Maui's dolphin (Critically Endangered) is a project in which a woman could theoretically give birth to a Maui dolphin, a rare and endangered species.

Eco Architecture is a term used to describe efficiency in building infrastructure such as water, air, heat and waste, and to view the architecture as a sustainable ecosystem. Rooftop gardens,

collections of rainwater, non-toxic and smart building materials support this hypothesis. Blaine Brownell and Marc Swackhamer entitled *Hyper-natural: Architecture's New Relationship with Nature* (fig. 5) state that “the ultimate aim of technology is not antinatural; it is hypernatural. The hypernatural involves working directly with natural forces and processes—rather than against them—in order to amplify, extend or exceed natural capacities.” Hence, for the authors, “this definition can include all living matter and its alteration by man.” Theirs is a concept emphasizing abundance and innovation.

Becoming familiar with what has been identified as *Next Nature*,^[9] or nature that operates not in evolutionary time but in fast forward schemes, has met with consternation on both sides of the dialogue. Is there such a thing as the natural in the 21st century? Is there any place on earth that hasn't been touched by the byproducts of industrialization? Why does the concept of nature



Maui's dolphin (Critically Endangered)

The world's rarest and smallest known subspecies of dolphin.
 As of 2012, it is estimated that 55 Maui's dolphins exist in the world.
 Adults measure between 1.2 - 1.4 m and weigh up to 50 kg.
 The newborn baby is almost the same size as a human baby (50 - 60 cm).
 Life span 20 years. New Zealand, West coast of North Island.

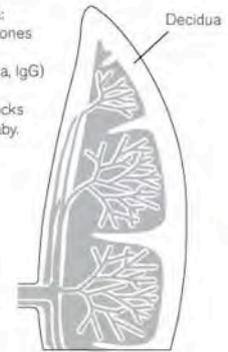
Dolph-human Placenta

The placenta originates from the baby's side, which in this case is a dolphin, and not from the human side. This avoids the ethical and legal difficulties associated with reproductive research involving human eggs.

The decidua is formed by implantation of the egg. Usually, foreign cells in the body (for example from other individuals) are attacked by the immune system, but inside the decidua, they are tolerated. However, even though the decidua accepts cells from other individuals, non-human cells would still be attacked. In the dol-human placenta's case, it has been modified to distinguish mammals from non-mammals, making it even more tolerant.

Normal human placenta:
 Oxygen, nutrients, hormones and antibodies (immunoglobulin Gamma, IgG) delivered to the baby.
 Dol-human placenta blocks delivery of IgG to the baby.

Wastes and carbon dioxide delivered from the baby



First milk

Dol-human placenta blocks delivery of human IgG to the dolphin baby. Usually Dolphin placenta does not pass the immune system from the mother. Instead it is passed by the 'first milk', which contains with high levels of several antibodies. Also, dolphin milk contains high levels of fat. The human mother needs to feed the synthesised first milk to the baby just after the delivery.

Ai Hasegawa

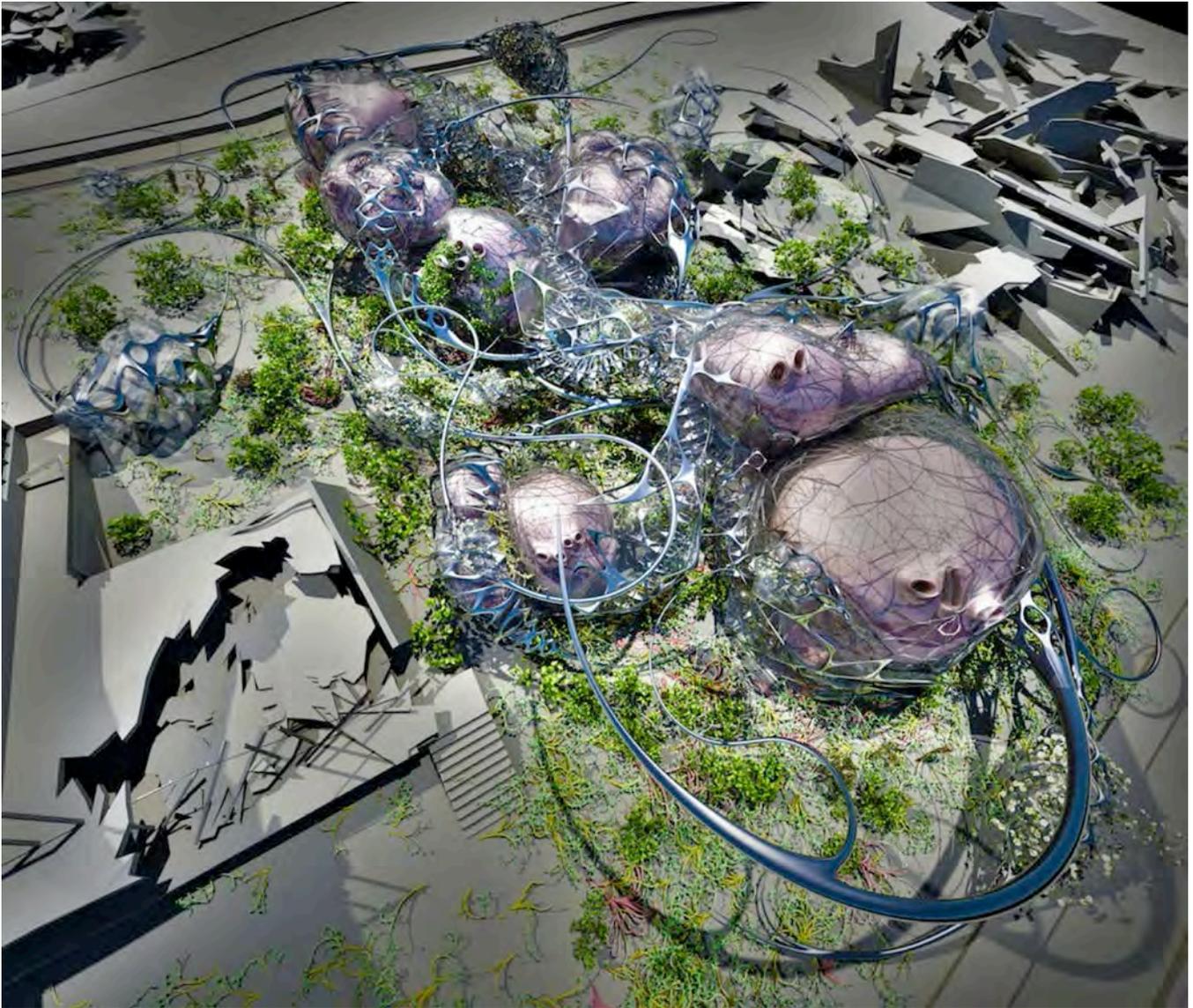
Fig. 4. *I Wanna Deliver a Dolphin* © Hasegawa

and the natural continue to infiltrate our fantasies about nature as being pure, or even sacred, when culture and nature have moved into a zone of fusion, of reciprocity?

There has always been a push and pull between advances in technology and those believers who choose to accept divine grace or even the denial of evolution as their ideology. The accelerating dynamic between matter of all kinds and its manipulation by technology draws us into a bind of coevolution. However, this is a precedent in millennium thinking, when considering the last millennium. Historically, religion's relationship to technological power is embedded in various theologies. By the 9th century the mechanical arts, including medicine and art, are seen to be a necessary part of the human restoration process. In their capacity to augment humans' inferior position to God, technology began to be

understood as a way to recover Adam's fall from grace.^[10] The dualism in millennium thinking, which we are experiencing now, is an embrace of fundamentalist faith on the one hand and an unprecedented ascent of technology on the other. Our changing relations to nature and the natural is part of a growth process, offering clues to the inherent capabilities of life and its myriad forms.

Recently the term *hypernaturalism* has entered into theological debate as a third way to integrate naturalism and supernaturalism. Daniel J. Dyke and Dr Hugh Henry state in their text "Hypernaturalism: Integrating the Bible and Science" ^[11] that when "God created the universe *ex nihilo*, he also created the laws of nature." They go on to say "hypernaturalism is evident in Genesis when God commanded the earth and the waters



Andrew Smith Rasmussen

Fig. 5. *Hypernatural House* © Rasmussen

to bring forth vegetation and animals, respectively, and nature complied.^[12] Where is nature's compliance now in defense of her ravishment? Is this what we mean by *hypernaturalism*?

Revisiting nature's exorbitant breath, the discovery of new species gives one hope. *Phyllopteryx dewysea*, a new species of sea dragon, was recently discovered off of Australia's southern coast. Employing 21st century genetic tools, scientists were able to ascertain its difference from other sea dragons. This stunning creature sports a ruby red skin, which may act as camouflage in its deep water habitat (fig. 6). Also in Australia, new species of ants were found at a bauxite

mine in the Northern territory of Darwin. Although this ant, according to Dr. Ben Hoffman, "was of interest because of the spines on his back, he also remarked that his team has put ninety-eight new species in a current collection." However, the most spectacular find were two new species of peacock spiders, whose extravagant colors of red and blue are in full regalia (fig. 7). In an age of genetic transformation, what new methods of reparation are upon us? How will we come closer to understanding life?

What follows for the reader is a wide range of topics and approaches from the academic to the diaristic, concerning this subject. Each essay or artists' project represented



Greg Rouse

Fig. 6. The ruby seadragon (*Phyllopteryx dewysea*) is a marine fish in the family Syngnathidae, which also includes seahorses © Greg Rouse

in this issue is deeply engaged in the ways that nature is being harvested, altered and transformed. Each artist or writer or scholar positions their concerns in ways that express anxiety, gratitude, and longed for sustainability. All of the following essays express the complexities of living in a world of post-industrialization's excess.

Joanna Ebenstein's Morbid Anatomy Museum, located in the Gowanus area in Brooklyn New York, ironically began as a blog, grew into a small library and has now reached the full force of museum stature. Lectures, relics, volumes of books, prints and other paraphernalia are all supporting her space. There are even taxidermy workshops offered for the seriously curious. During the 1980s, and thereafter, many photographers were inspired by what cultural critic Mark Dery called "the new grotesque." Prominent among them was Joel Peter Witkin whose tableaux included body parts, mannequins, the obese, transsexuals, etc. Like Witkin, Ebenstein interrogates death, its processes and social artifacts. Her photographs record many of the arcane practices of teaching anatomy and

gathering knowledge during prior centuries.

Dana Levy harnesses the museum as a ready-made stage set for her work. Employing collections of natural history artifacts, wax figurines and actual live doves, she creates videos that fuse myth with both living and dead specimens. In these sites she creates images and actions that reverse expectation. For example, in her sensitive work, she crosses the line between what is wished for and what reality harbors. Using a variety of sites, her work is a form of poetry where the dead come alive and the relic is also revisited as a political action.

Janet Biggs is an artist/explorer. Reaching towards the ends of the Earth, her projects have taken her to the Artic Circle, caves in Mexico and across the Taklamakan desert with a camel caravan. However, her piece is breathtaking in its aesthetic sweep and poignant in its depiction of horror. Visiting Ijen volcano in East Java, she managed to set up camp on an active sulphur mine. Equipped with a gas mask and camera in hand, she captured this extraordinary environment. Sulphur is a toxic substance that can destroy the workings of the respiratory system as



Jürgen Otto

Fig. 7. *Maratus volans*, is a species in the jumping spider family, belonging to the peacock spider genus © Jürgen Otto

well as other organs of the body. Spewing out from the underworld, it was considered to be the brimstone of hell on earth. Her pathos in photographing the workers is unmatched as they diligently mine for sulfur with only a handkerchief for protection. Their fortitude and physical prowess is an indication of what a man can do in a desperate effort to support himself and his family. Add to the mix the alchemical and mythological properties of sulphur and we experience the transformative powers of this place, as fumes eat away at bodies in motion.

Nancy Chunn's approach to the subject at hand takes a satirical method based on *Chicken*

Little, an animated children's film made by Walt Disney in 1943. The cast of characters includes: Henny Penny, Turkey Lurkey, Ducky Lucky, Goosey Loosey in addition to the bird-brained *Chicken Little* and ever-so-clever Foxy Loxy. In this parable, metaphors for leadership, truth are replaced by fear and misjudgment. *Chicken Little* becomes convinced the sky is falling and endeavors to lead the brood into a cave, none other than the one occupied by Foxy Loxy. You can probably guess what finally happens to the chickens, as they are outsmarted by their own predator. For Nancy Chunn, this metaphor continues to hold true today as leadership and its spinmeisters manipulate



Victor Drachev

Fig. 8. *Wildlife in Chernobyl Exclusion Zone* © National Geographic

the masses with innuendos and partial facts. Chunn's artistic style consists of brightly colored painted canvases, which silhouette her cast of characters and their activities, as if they were not chickens but human beings tumbling through their actions. In prior centuries, fables were considered morality stories, as Chunn's work so eloquently suggests.

Raul Valverde is concerned with geography and habitat as a forms of cultural exchange and colonization between two continents. He cites two cities named Cartagena: one in Spain on the Mediterranean coast and the other in Colombia, South America, as an example of how conquest transforms social practices of indigenous regions. The transfer of flora, including spices, herbs, fruit and trees, from Spain's Mediterranean region to Colombia's Caribbean coast became the project's thesis as a way to speak to the transplanted of values during colonization periods.

In *Adapted Landscape* (2014), Valverde's garden is placed atop a fragmented city wall overlooking a highway and the Caribbean Sea. Its placement speaks to another time, another set of powers, when fortification was

necessary to prevent further invasion from European forces. To this day, Cartagena is a walled city teeming with restaurants and nightlife. Its cuisine features its rich heritage of those explorers and invaders who have travelled from Africa, the Arabias and Spain.

Adam Stennett's *The Artist Survival Shack* (2012-2013) is a performance project addressing the needs of a visual artist to create time and space to develop artwork. From 2012 through 2013, Stennett built a nine and a half foot shelter equipped with all the necessary conveniences for living, such as a shower, water supply and foodstuffs. He then began his month-long artist's residency in this dwelling in Bridgehampton New York--ironically an upscale village on Long Island. During this time he kept a journal and created a body of new work. Akin to the Unabomber's one room house, Stennett's mission was quite different and also political in nature. This work points to the fact that artists work in unique ways in order to fulfill their practice, which of times has no or little economic value, but adds cultural value to a society. Whereas art market practices play to the needs and taste of wealthy collectors, Stennett's piece draws



Sergey Gashchak

Fig. 9. *Wolf in the exclusion zone* © <http://slate.com>

attention to a socially engaged art, an expanding practice in its own right.

Sabine Flach and Gary Sherman concentrate on Foucault's concept of Heterotopia and conceive of this topic in terms of philosophy and film. Flach transfers Foucault's discussion into the hypernatural, as an extension of excess beyond the normal reaching phantasmagoric reality. Most importantly she cites the work of Pierre Huyghe and Doug Aitken in relation to what she terms "non-places." She cites Huyghe's *Streamside Day* (2003), a film addressing nature as a construct. About Aitken's work *Diamond Sea* (1997), she references Namib, a desert complete with a diamond mine. Gary Sherman creates a site-specific installation by employing an artificial lawn as the ground upon which bright red chairs are placed for the conference attendees.

Like a scene from *The Truman Show*, the

setting is accompanied by the "artificial sublime" in which films from Hollywood's great masters are shown such as Alfred Hitchcock, Jean Cocteau and Martin Scorsese among others.

Laura Ballantyne-Brodie is a research fellow at New York University engaged with a field of study she terms *Earth System Ethics*. In such a field, humans begin to design a philosophy which combines cosmology with social ethics, transdisciplinary epistemology and jurisprudence, to create a broad-based understanding of physical reality.

Irene Klaver is a philosopher who specializes in water studies. Her interest is in rivers and lakes and how they act as cultural bridges. She cites what she calls the "environmental imagination" as she notes that various rivers are attributed characteristics from "muddy" to "glossy and gliding" or "weaving and winding."

Her text focuses on Texas' Trinity River which originates in North Texas, finally merging its "murky waters" with the Gulf of Mexico. She speaks of the Trinity River as a rejuvenated site, whose prior reputation as a "mythological river of death" is now reversed to a waterway seen as a central hub for a redevelopment project in Dallas/Fort Worth. She explores in her project a model for a "technology of engagement" along a biocultural axis.

If we are living in a thinly wrapped membrane around the Earth, is it resilient enough to hold us in place? As we continue to pierce our atmosphere, what ultimate dangers are before us? While man's destruction of the planet is not commendable, there are unforeseen aspects of how life reacts to its environmental changes. In 1986, a nuclear disaster engulfed Chernobyl, which was, at that time, part of the USSR. In an *Exclusion Zone*, one thousand miles around the former facility, scientists are studying the effects of radiation on flora, fauna and fungi. While the *Exclusion Zone* is bathed in radiation, areas surrounding it are relatively free from this blight, which allows scientists to study the differences between similar species in each area. In the absence of humans, many animals have returned to this area, such as wild boar, the Eurasian lynx, red and roe deer, moose, the white-tailed eagle, and wolves in addition to birds, rodents, fish and elk (fig. 7-9). Although they are radioactive themselves and eat contaminated plants and animals, the gross mutations that were expected to emerge are a surprise to many scientists. Of course some species of insects and birds have been hit harder than others in this open laboratory where information on the effects of long term radiation are still being studied. Appearing as a new Eden, most of the toxicity is not visually obvious. The animals take their place in this fecund environment behaving according to their inner script and place in the food chain.

Our globalized world is an open territory in which barriers fail to exclude radiation, deadly viruses, genetically altered crops and other forms of pollution. Alterations in the environment are being found throughout the globe, such as high levels of iodine in milk in New York City,

radioactive Blue Fin Tuna, Colony Collapse and the accelerating disorder of beehives. If nature works in mysterious ways, then we are just beginning to unravel her secrets. The Great Mother, Father Time, the Ouroboros, and all myths, bring us back to the realization that life is a recycling of molecules, with starts and stops along the way. The system, although loaded on the front end with growth, also partakes of life's back end real estate, where fungi have their day to transform decaying matter. As we move into the realm of the Hypernatural, we are already encountering transformations of species in scientific laboratories. We will create new living entities in human time frames and employ reproductive processes yet unheard of. These alterations in nature are on a balance sheet, like equities and other volatile markets. And like equities, they are up for sale and change each day. "All organisms and species are transitory, yet life endures. The origin, extinction, and evolution of species—interconnected in the web of life as 'eternal ephemera'—are the concern of evolutionary biology" is a blurb written in conjunction with paleontologist Niles Eldredge's new text *Eternal Ephemera: Adaptation and the Origin of Species from the Nineteenth Century through Punctuated Equilibria and Beyond*. Fugitive, transient, temporary and fleeting are all words embracing the ephemeral.

In the words of Mary, Mary, Fairy, Fairy, I leave the reader with this poem about what to expect in the future, the future that is now: ^[13]

Fairy, Fairy, Mary, Mary, how does your garden grow? From sulphur bells to cockleshells to test tubes lined up in a row.

Mary, Mary, Fairy, Fairy how does your garden grow? From pure pipettes with no regrets, with green bunny rabbits aglow.

Mary, Mary Fairy, Fairy, how does your torso grow? From a splice here, to add an ear, and ova in the flow.

Mary, Mary, Fairy, Fairy how does your garden know? From super cells to mystery gels all bound up in roe.

Mary, Mary, Fairy, Fairy how does your water flow?
From silver sloths to
tasty broth as ointments in the know.

Mary, Mary, Fairy, Fairy, why are you so merry?
With pharma-pigs and hundreds of gigs, upon a
pile of cherries.

Mary, Mary, Fairy, Fairy, why is your garden so
green?
With fruit of the loom and all its doom, and tasty
puddings of spleen.

Mary, Mary, Fairy, Fairy, where have all the forests
gone?
One by one and ton by ton the creatures are
a dying.
Why are we not crying?

Mary, Mary, Fairy, Fairy, I bid you sweet
farewell. Until that time, there is no wine, I'll stay
the course, of course.

With wondrous wimps and naked chimps,
we'll meet again to tell.

Mary, Mary, Fairy, Fairy, why are your maggots
so haggard?
Return to earth another birth, all clean and
neatly lathered.

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CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY

In this paper we position the hypernatural relative to the conditions of the artificial sublime and the pursuit of magic. We propose a phantasmagorical ontology—a reality of mental images produced by imagination—that is premised on an anthropocentric, subject-oriented perspective, which we align with the approaches of Michel Foucault and Marc Augé. We are especially intrigued by the conditions of possibility that their positions embody. The heterotopias of Foucault are essentially a plexus of institutional and quasi-institutional spaces that contest the normative sites of society to accommodate otherness. The non-places of Augé mediate a whole mass of relations with the self and with the other. It is within this network of spaces and non-place that we locate the artificial sublime and the possibility of magic.

Authors: Sabine Flach and Gary Sherman

The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is the phenomena of the library.

Michel Foucault, 'Fantasia of the Library' ^[1]

Our world —our reality— is mainly understood as factual. What we perceive (as real) exists. Yet Einstein reminded us that "reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." Actually our reality consists of many things, both real and imagined, both artificial and natural. Both fact and fiction. Some versions of reality are socially or politically motivated; they visualize a perfect utopian rapture, or an imperfect dystopian misery. We will introduce the concept of a *phantasmagorical reality*, which consists of creatures that live double lives. They exist and do not exist at the same time. Moreover, phantasmagorical reality implies certain specific spatial conditions: these creatures live in places that are, as spaces, there and not there at the same time. It's the type of probabilistic universe that Einstein would not accept. With the term phantasmagorical reality, we clearly refer to Aristotle. In *De Anima* he defines a phantasma as a *mentales Vorstellungsbild* (mental inner idea/mental inner image). In this philosophical approach, phantasy means to have the ability or skill to produce inner images,

while phantasma are the inner, mental images produced by imagination. Creatures such as dragons and unicorns and the places where they reside are most often in the virtual space of film. The special effects that suspend the film narrative and the awe and grandeur of the artificial sublime provide a new safe haven for all creatures and realities, real or imagined.

We start with heterotopias, or "Of Other Spaces," as Foucault's lecture (1967) was titled, employing the etymological paradigm consistent with the concepts of utopia and dystopia. Heterotopia, however, is distinguished from these nonexistent places by the prefix "hetero." Heterotopias are counter sites that contradict all others and, following Foucault's reasoning, they function as supplements to normative sites within a society. As such, heterotopias are havens for activities that are outside of the normal, everyday. They are spaces that affirm difference and otherness.

If we extrapolate Foucault's exposition of



Gary Sherman

Artificial Sublime, 2014

15' x 38', Centipede Ultra Synthetic Lawn Grass Turf (Two-toned, UV stabilized, kinked monofilament textured nylon, polyethylene/polypropylene), 64 red 40/4 Chairs, lectern and table. Photographer: Beatriz Meseguer.

the concept, heterotopia can be related to hypernatural to the extent that “hyper” denotes excess, over or beyond the normal or expected, or as in the most recent iteration, content beyond a particular text as in a hyperlink. Heterotopias are sites “that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect”.^[2] It’s in that spirit, particularly with regard to the notion of a hypertext as a counter site, that heterotopias are, to an extent, analogous to the hypernatural.

Foucault’s lecture preceded the Internet by 23 years, yet his observations seem particularly relevant to the digital age. Somewhat congruent with Foucault’s notion of our experience of the world as a “network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” is French anthropologist Marc Augé’s hypothesis of non-

place.^[3] A non-place is an ambivalent space with none of the familiar attributes of place. “[T]he word ‘non-place’ designates two complementary but distinct realities: spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces. [N]on-places mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others.”^[4]

The assumption, that there exists a more phantasmagorical reality, brings the argument of our paper seemingly close to concepts like Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern* and the notion of speculative realism, object-oriented philosophy. Bruno Latour’s main argument follows the idea that there has never been a taxonomical split between nature and culture. And therewith it is impossible to think, on the one hand, nature is dominated by culture and, on the other hand, human beings are presented as an ontological domain that is distinct and separate from nature.^[5]

This distinction is, for Latour, the characterization of modernity. The “purification” and “hybridization” of Modernity generates a construction of nature that is separated from society and self, while hybridization creates mixtures of nature and culture. Latour sometimes describes the separation as one between things and subjects, or between human and non-human worlds. The result is that the realms of the real, the discursive, and the social are believed to be separated from each other, each a pure form. In the realm of his argument the purification process is overt, while hybridization creates mixtures between the human and the non-human world. [6] Latour rejects the dualism between subject and object.

Graham Harman’s position within speculative realism implies a ‘flat ontology’ in which even hallucinations and fictions count as objects. “Composite objects such as machines and societies are objects no less than pillars of granite or tiny little quarks”. [7] Here speculative realism could be connected to phenomenological approaches by citing the object prior to its concrete manifestations.

It seems at a first glance that the main argument of this paper has a lot in common with the approaches of Latour and Harman, yet we consider that alignment more as a flirtatious encounter. We believe that talking about our theory of a phantasmagorical reality still requires a subject-oriented perspective.

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THE ARTIFICIAL SUBLIME

In this paper Gary Sherman positions the hypernatural vis-à-vis the conditions of an artificial sublime. In as much as the prefix hyper denotes that which is above or beyond the usual, Sherman defers to the human geography of Michel Foucault and Marc Augé. He locates the hyper or artificial sublime within the network of Foucault's heterotopias and Augé's non-places. Together, this social geography facilitates unusual, and not-so-unusual, encounters across space and place.

Author: Gary Sherman

This presentation will focus on two examples of the hypernatural relative to developments that fall under the rubric of Modernism, particularly as reflected in the peculiarities of mass culture. In each case a notion of the artificial predominates.

The prefix *hyper* denotes an excess, something above or beyond the usual, normal, expected; something *extreme*. So the term hypernatural conjures up notions of nature that are beyond natural, of nature that supersedes expectations. "Hyper" modifies nature to such a degree as to beg comparison with another superlative philosophy that dominated twentieth-century aesthetics – the sublime. One hallmark of the modernist period was that traditional categories of aesthetics – beauty, grace, taste, meaning, expression – were supplanted by the notion of the sublime, particularly with regard to nature. The formlessness, the boundlessness, the raw beauty and the grotesque of the natural sublime were in stark contrast to the classical ideal of perfection and beauty. The artless, untamed quality of the sublime evoked in the viewer an overwhelming aesthetic sense of awe.

Just north of Manhattan is the southern terminus of the Hudson Valley where a group of like-minded painters of the mid-nineteenth century recorded the drama of the natural environment.

The romantic mimesis of the Hudson River School painters provoked a manifold experience of awe and grandeur tinged with a trace of fear that we associate with the sublime. Nature was excessive, beyond normal expectation; it was hypernatural.

That experience of nature as beyond normal was the inspiration for the artificial turf of this installation, *The Artificial Sublime* (2015). But this "lawn" references a reality that is actually far stranger than the nylon simulation beneath you – it is a nature that is itself not natural, but hypernatural. Long before Dolly or GMO corn, the lush, verdant suburban lawn was a marvel of engineering. The front yard that is typical of American suburbia was essentially mandated by municipal "setback" regulations that required homebuilders to establish a transitional space between the natural environment and the built environment. Lawn monoculture developed, in part, as a happenstance of these mandates and has become perhaps the most ubiquitous corruption of nature in the United States.

To provide a pastoral ideal for homeowners across a broad geographic region, grasses have been "designed" to suit specific climactic zones, even if those zones support no indigenous grasses of their own. Once in place these alien patches of nature must be nurtured



Jean Cocteau

Fig.1. Still from *Orpheus*

1950, black and white film, sound, 35mm, 95 minutes.

with petrochemicals, fertilizers, synthetic pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and many precious gallons of water. After it is artificially stable, the nascent lawn requires constant diligence to maintain the “sublime” manicured look that is the standard of suburban conformity.

Nature’s boundless and raw qualities have been tamed into a bucolic ideal beyond any semblance of the natural. The suburban lawn was engineered as a monoculture to abrogate the “messy” biodiversity of nature. In its place is a homogeneous landscape; an artificial utopian sublime. Given the enormity of the suburban milieu, in which the individual registers as almost negligible, one small patch of lawn is not just an isolated patch of “nature;” it is by extension, a token of all the patches of nature in the vast suburban collective. And being part of that enormous whole constitutes an overwhelming,

almost numbing sense of inclusion. In an environment that doesn’t easily tolerate nonconformity, the banality that seems stifling to an outsider, is a refuge against the imposition of the “other.” The suburban lawn is one of the key signifiers of that suburban dream of exclusivity.

The artificial turf of this installation serves as a reminder that artificiality, while often considered a synthetic or manufactured fabrication, can also be nature in a non-natural state; it is a simulation of an idealized nature, nature that is out of place even in its place. Nature as the artificial sublime.

Ultimately, in Modernism, the sublime was usurped by new categories that were not nature based, but industrial in design, or “artificial.” The industrial sublime was dominated by the market driven interests of capitalism as witnessed in Haussmann’s reconstruction of Paris, the Panama Canal, the skyscrapers of New York City, the



Orson Welles

Fig. 2. Still From *Lady From Shanghai*, 1950, black and white film, sound, 35mm, 92 minutes.

Hoover Dam, the modern factory and mass production.

The industrial sublime gave way to the media sublime, especially as exemplified in the film spectacle, which was itself, a technological development. This branch of the artificial sublime also coincided with the development of mass production. Entertainment, especially the cinema, was a means to defuse discontent among factory laborers and provide distraction from their mundane working and living conditions. The Hollywood movie is the prime example of the type of formulaic films designed specifically to appease the masses.

The success of the Hollywood genre is self-evident. But the aspect of film that will be the focus of this essay has less to do with any economic or sociological perspective and more about how filmic space is presented. I have chosen to look at space as hypernatural in relation to film for two reasons. First, because more information comes to us today in mediated, representational form and

less from direct sensory, bodily experience; secondly, because images have attained a mystical or preternatural power.

The filmic space that is the subject of this text is not perceived by the viewer as a Gestalt, as it might be evident in the theater or, more recently, in photography. That space is more accurately a *mise-en-scène* French for "placing on stage." It describes those aspects of staging and movement within the frame that contribute to the atmosphere or expressive nature of the scene. And while *mise-en-scène* is common in film, the spatial construction that is the focus of this essay is a complex fragmented experience that unfolds over time, and it is an experience that contains some semblance of the unknown.

The language of narrative and experimental film was developed independently of the entertainment industry in the early years of the Soviet revolution and, by and large, that language remains in place today. It consists of a series of techniques for shooting, cutting and editing a film



Alfred Hitchcock

Fig. 3. Still from *Psycho*, 1960, black and white film, sound, 35mm, 109 minutes.

script. Aside from any semantic narrative implications, film is about space, more precisely, the space created through the editing process. The space in film may be vast or intimate, but with the exception of establishing shots, filmic space is not usually comprehended at once. It is perceived as an accretion of layers that eventually build into an imposing whole. Through montage or clever manipulation of the camera, non-existing spaces – hyperspaces – are actualized. In this scenario, the awe that is typical of the sublime is an artificial construction that is made “real” by running these sequential fragments, along with a sound bridge, through a projector. The spatial incoherency that the viewer initially experiences as a headlong cascade of disparate image fragments, ultimately gives way to a false coherency that is not real or natural in an objective sense.

The filmic spaces in the scenes that follow represent the media sublime. They conform to one of two alternative spatial categories – heterotopias or non-places. Heterotopias, as formulated in Michel Foucault’s essay “Of Other Spaces,” function as social pressure valves. They are a category of spaces that exist within a society to

allow for behavior or activities that are considered outside the norm. They are spaces of “otherness,” such as the amusement park, the prison, the hotel, the nursing home, the cinema, the train, boat, or plane, etc. These are spaces that are simultaneously physical and mental, such as the moment when you see yourself in a mirror.^[1] Non-places, from Marc Augé’s *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, are places often referred to in general terms related to function, such as airports, bus terminals, hotels, highways, supermarkets. In these non-places where nobody belongs except in a transient way, there is recognition that one’s own condition is no different than that of anybody else in these non-places. The ‘other’ is also ‘I’.

The apparatus of the cinema, which comprises all of the hidden personnel, mechanical and technical interventions that make up a film and its viewing conditions, represents the height of artifice. That artifice constitutes a hyper-real state – an artificial sublime.

In *Orphee* (1949), director Jean Cocteau includes a fantasy scene of two men penetrating the surface of a mirror and entering the space



Alfred Hitchcock

Fig. 4. Still from *Strangers on a Train*, 1951, black and white film, sound, 35mm, 101 minutes.

behind (fig. 1). This impossible feat addresses a key aspect of Foucault's theory that regards the mirror as both a utopia – a virtual placeless place – and a heterotopia – a real counter site. *Lady from Shanghai* (1947), directed by Orson Welles (fig. 2), along with *Psycho* (1960), and *Strangers on a Train* (1951), both by Alfred Hitchcock (figs. 3, 4), also involve the space of the mirror (or reflective space), but to significantly different ends. Wells' film employs a "hall-of-mirrors," the type typical of an amusement park, as a space to contain a romantic triangle. In this infinite, virtual space it eventually becomes difficult for the characters to determine which image is real and which is the virtual reflection. The murder scene in *Strangers on a Train* takes place at a carnival, a type of temporal heterotopia in which time is flowing, transitory, precarious. The murder itself is witnessed only as a reflection in a pair of glasses that have fallen from the victim's face. Space of this scene is a mix of heterotopias: the carnival and the virtual space of the reflection within the virtual space of the film. The car pursuit in *Psycho* creates a space of surveillance utilizing two ocular conceits – the windshield and the

mirror (in this case the rear view mirror). And, because the scene is played out on a highway, it is also a non-place.

Spaces of confinement are articulated within three other films by Hitchcock. In *The Birds* (1963) (fig. 5), a terrified woman is trapped in a phone booth during an attack by flocking gulls. A pivotal scene in *The Wrong Man* (1956) (fig. 6) is created as the camera follows the movements of a man pacing his prison cell. The camera lens becomes the man's surrogate eyes as it surveys the lock on the cell, as it pans up the wall and across the ceiling. In both films the visual and the non-verbal soundtrack heighten the existential crisis of the trapped victims. In a similar vein is a scene from *Spellbound* (1945) (fig. 7) in which an analyst recounts the fantasy space of a dream to "unlock" his unconscious and free a suppressed memory.

Some filmic spaces are defined as a collection of peripheral elements. The opening scene of *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961), directed by Alain Resnais, with a screenplay Alain Robbe-Grillet (fig. 8), uses a lengthy dolly shot to traverse the interior of a grand hotel, which is described by



Alfred Hitchcock
Fig. 5. Still from *The Birds*, 1963, color film, sound, 35mm, 119 minutes.



Alfred Hitchcock
Fig. 6. Still from *The Wrong Man* 1956, 1950, black and white film, sound, 35mm, 105 minutes.



Alfred Hitchcock

Fig. 7. Still From *Spellbound* 1945, , black and white film, sound, 35mm, 111 minutes.



Branchings

Alain Resnais with screenplay Alain-Robbe Grillet

Fig. 8. Still from *Last Year at Marienbad*, 1961, black and white film, sound, 35mm, 94 minutes.



John Cassavetes

Fig. 9. Still from *Faces*, 1968, black and white film, sound, 35mm, 130 minutes.



Alfred Hitchcock

Fig. 10. Still from *North by Northwest*, 1959, color film, sound, 35mm, 136 minutes.



Martin Scorsese

Fig. 11. Still from *Goodfellas*, 1990, color film, sound, 35mm, 146 minutes.

a succession of images and narration about wall and ceiling decorations. In *Faces* (1968) director John Cassavetes (fig. 9) employs the improvisational camera shots of cinéma vérité to capture the faces and pulsating bodies of nightclub patrons to define compressed space. *North by Northwest* (1959), directed by Hitchcock (fig. 10), dramatizes the precarious movements of characters attempting a steep vertical descent on a rocky wall as a space of danger. In *Goodfellas* (1990) director Martin Scorsese (fig. 11) presents a continuous shot of a couple making their way through a crowded restaurant kitchen as a tight labyrinthine space.

The cinematic experience is, as a whole, a rarefied experience. A viewer pays an admission fee to be part of a collective experience in a darkened room, to willingly suspend disbelief to passively view a spectacle, which is itself an imperfect construction of reality. Factor in the inherent escapism and the potential for fantasy and you have a perfect recipe for the hypernatural.

This brings the discussion back to the artificial turf. This spectator space, or viewing "lawn", was a performative space – not a space

where a performance was enacted, but a space where all live actions were performative. The audience's interactions on this viewing lawn amplify a condition of "otherness" that is central to the theories of Foucault and Augé. This spectator space is a place of possibility and an affirmation of difference; a single space where a congregation of concerned individuals from various backgrounds interacted – a heterotopia of sorts.

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IN PURSUIT OF MAGIC

In this paper, Sabine Flach discusses the status of reality and present with regard to 'conditions of possibility'. Following the phenomenological argument that space perception always includes an awareness for atmospheres and therewith an expanded understanding of reality that does not just refer to a mere existence of physical objects, the paper discusses the ontological status of those objects. With reference to Michel Foucault's concept of a space as 'Heterotopia' and the philosophy of 'Speculative Realism' where objects are seen as 'Quasi-Things' the paper follows the philosophical approach of Günther Anders to understand art objects as 'Phantoms'. In doing so, the ontological status of objects - and therewith art - could be seen as an opposition to mere illusion. The paper shows that what is established here is phantasmagorical ontology that is a Naturally Hypernatural part of the spectrum of reality.

Author: Sabine Flach

Life as repetition: every Monday and Thursday in the early morning I leave the train at 23rd street, walk on 8th avenue until I reach the crossing of 8th avenue and 21st street. I make a turn to the left and walk down 21st street to go to the SVA building where I teach my Art History classes. During the semester, I do this twice every week. But within and against this repetition of the same, I recently became aware of a change: somebody had built a little fence around one of the old trees – a little frame around the bottom of the tree, turning the soil into a tiny tree garden with an inscription saying “In pursuit of Magic.”

Since having spotted the sign, I catch myself continuously making sure the sign is still there, experiencing it as a tender protective gesture, even if I'm not sure what it is that it was protecting. Would this mean there is something magic about the tree? Hence it is the assemblage of tree, little tree garden and sign, which initiated the following reflections concerning the relation between magic and nature. How could one pursue the study of something that is ephemeral – like magic? Why does any good fairy tale require natural elements such as a forest, a mountain or a lake to function?

Consequently, perception is more than mere reception, creating a *perceptual field* wherever it goes beyond the familiar; it is only details that appear as a *respective other*, hence

opening up “another-seeing.”^[1] This, however, can only succeed if the viewer as such moves into a different “space.” In order to see something, one needs, in the words of Vilém Flusser, to “somehow withdraw into oneself.” “The power of the imagination is the peculiar capacity of stepping back from the world of objects into one's own subjectivity,” Vilém Flusser writes in “A New Imagination.”^[2]

How is subjectivity made visible in relation to nature? The work of French contemporary artist Pierre Huyghe investigates the dichotomies inherent between nature and culture. His film, *Streamside Day* (2003) dramatizes the conflict in terms of the inauguration of what appears as a model suburban community carved out of ostensibly pristine woodland (fig. 1). Pierre Huyghe describes the film in the following words: “Streamside is a small town, north of New York, that was under construction when I found it and invented a custom for it. I was interested in the idea of celebration and what it means to celebrate. I tried to find narratives within the context of the local situation, looking for what the people there had in common. I found they all came from somewhere else, migrated to encounter nature. I invented a kind of score, a scripted program, and filmed the celebration—these people traveling to experience what they think is wilderness. In fact, it's a wilderness totally constructed, rebuilt by man



Pierre Huyghe

Fig. 1. *Streamside Day*, 2003

Event, mixed media, film and video transfers
26 minutes, color and sound

© Pierre Huyghe, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris, Irish Museum of Modern Art

during four hundred years. I started the film with a re-enactment, the beginning of *Bambi*, with the young deer going from a rebuilt nature to this new town. (fig. 2). In parallel you have young twin girls who go from a town to this nature. (fig. 3) The basis of this invented custom is migration. But what really interested me was to create a ritual that would actually be celebrated and repeated, as it's based on what they share."^[3]

A *mise-en-scène* is created by Pierre Huyghe in his work. *Streamside Day*, a film of 26 minutes and in two parts, is introduced by means of a title: *A Score* and *A Celebration*. The first part shows a forest idyll, the second one a settlement in which a celebration takes place. A fawn leaves the forest in the first part, reaching a settlement and a house that has just been finished. Later in the film, it is not only the fawn but also humans who migrate to the new settlement for the celebration.

They have dressed up as animals (fig. 4). In the first part of this film a forest with a waterfall is shown. A white rabbit appears and a fawn is lying on moss and natural stones on the ground. The rabbit is eating a single leaf from a plant growing out of the ground. The next scene shows an owl with orange eyes.

In terms of image composition, the arrangement is a perfect still life; the fawn leaves the frame and in the subsequent scene, we see the animal in the new settlement and in a further moment, inside one of the houses.

The second part, *A Celebration*, by contrast, presents the settlement and the preparations for a celebration. We see people dressed up as animals in a parade.

The set-up works like an enigma, not really explained, which is where the aspect of the magical emerges. The relationship to nature is negotiated through myth and the handling of enchanted practices. But what are the concepts of nature that are highlighted? What landscape and which creatures does the fairy tale require to be a fairy tale?

One concept that seems implied at this stage is that of the idyll, characterized in terms of a harmonious life style. An image or a condition will affect the viewer, giving them a sense of tranquility and peacefulness. The word "idyll" stems from the Greek "eidyllion" and originally meant "small independent poem," or "picture." These staged charming landscapes are memorial or pictorial vistas. In the work of Pierre Huyghe, the idyll is



Pierre Huyghe

Fig. 2. *Streamside Day*, 2003

Event, mixed media, film and video transfers

26 minutes, color and sound

© Pierre Huyghe, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris, Irish Museum of Modern Art



Pierre Huyghe

Fig. 3. *Streamside Day*, 2003

Event, mixed media, film and video transfers

26 minutes, color and sound

© Pierre Huyghe, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris, Irish Museum of Modern Art

created for the viewer through a combination of creatures, objects and places that, paradoxically, as such cannot exist. With Michel Foucault, we might say that Huyghe's suburban idyll constitutes, as wishful thinking, a real site – which is yet to be located outside of space and time, similar to a "locus amoenus." Pierre Huyghe's *mise en scene* seeks exactly the above described relation between fact and fiction. As he himself described it: "On a more abstract level, what interested me was to find the coefficient – the part of the fiction that was contained within the particular situation. I'm always doing that, trying to amplify the part of fiction that is contained in a reality, in a given situation. I was trying to find where the potential was in this new town".^[4]

Animals play a significant part in his work and are often even, as it were, the main characters, such as in his ambitious film *A Journey that Wasn't* (2005). To shoot the film, Huyghe went on an expedition in search of a magical penguin (fig. 5). The first part of the project consisted of a voyage to Antarctica, where Huyghe filmed rare albino penguins (fig. 6). The site for the second part was the ice-skating rink in New York's Central Park, where a musical version of the adventure was performed using fog machines, artificial icebergs, figures of penguins, and a live orchestra (fig. 7). In the film, the two parts are superimposed and ultimately lead the viewer to doubt the truth of the documentary images as well.



Pierre Huyghe

Fig. 4. *Streamside Day*, 2003

Event, mixed media, film and video transfers

26 minutes, color and sound

© Pierre Huyghe, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris, Irish Museum of Modern Art

In most cases, however, the seemingly perfect representation of nature works as an epiphany. The artworks make something appear—while being something else. Pierre Huyghe shows us that in nature, we don't just see what we want to see, but also what we need to see. In this case a phenomenon which appears to be one thing is in fact something else. Nature and landscape become a *mise-en-scène* of themselves.

This involves adjusting atmospheres that we feel and perceive (fig. 8). Landscape as an arsenal in this sense resembles notions of the paradisiacal and is conceptualized as dangerous. In the best possible phenomenological sense, cultural landscapes need to be experienced, since only then can a fairy tale be generated out of nature.

Hence Pierre Huyghe is less interested in a site that can be located than in atmospheres which can be felt and experienced. We engage with a spatial quality in which "the unconscious is not to be looked for deep down inside, at the back of our 'consciousness,' but stretched out in front of us, as an ordering of our field," to quote from

from Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* – where the term "field" refers to a "consciousness of the margin," that is, to the co-perception of an object's environment, or surrounding field.^[5] Huyghe shows populated rooms which only present themselves qualitatively, for "the environment marks the difference between the world as it exists as such, and the world of this or that living creature. It is an intermediary reality between the world as it exists for an absolute observer and a merely subjective field."^[6] It is only under these conditions that space can become qualitative, with different sensual qualities accentuated so as to be able to remain and move in these spaces.

Doug Aitken's works show marked interventions, radical modifications and irreversible changes in the space of nature, and thus create a sense of emptiness, un-housedness and desolation. Places without a place are the themes of his works such as *Monsoon* (1995), *Eraser* (1999) or *Diamond Sea* (1997). Such locations are actual blank spots on a map, comparable to Marc Augé's non-places (fig. 9).

An ambitious work that negotiates these issues is, for instance, the multiscreen installation *Diamond Sea*, shot over several weeks in the Namibian desert. The artist was puzzled by a huge blank section on a map of the Southern "skeleton coast." Trying to gather information about this zone, all the artist could learn was that it is known as Diamond Areas 1 and 2, and that it has been sealed off from the rest of the world since 1908. Behind the computer controlled fences lies a vast territory, more than 70.000 square kilometers, that contains the world's oldest desert, the Namib, as well as an enormous diamond mine (fig 10). Aitken's camera registers smooth banks of sand, lines of undulation produced by the wind, and sharp shadows contrasting fields of complete darkness with those of red-hot desert sand (fig. 11). The landscape, with its distinct and almost stylized shapes, [7] is placed on a line between the natural and the artificial, creating a sense of oscillation between the two (fig 12). In an interview, Aitken describes his experience of the site: "Of the five weeks I spent in the "zone,"



Pierre Huyghe

Fig. 5. *A Journey that Wasn't*, 2005

Super 16mm film and HD video

21 minutes and 41 seconds, color and sound

© Pierre Huyghe, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

the geographic barriers that restricted the space made up the narrative. The landscape itself provided an immeasurable emptiness^[8] (fig. 13). However, in the midst of the vast expanse almost entirely devoid of people, a highly sophisticated mining industry is at work around the clock (fig. 14). The intelligent machines seem to function independently of human involvement. They dig for diamonds, transport sand and rocks, and even survey the territory, aggressively protecting their property.

Against an anthropocentric position, which would observe humans in nature, or observe humans observing nature, the gaze is, in this case, a gaze on landscape. Any aspect of the human is radically excluded. Consequently, these places signify un-housedness. The cultural space is central to Aitken's works, as well as questions of modes of interaction between the technological and infrastructural penetration of space. In an epoch of "layered space", *Diamond Sea* is a work about

exteriority and the vastness of the landscape, while *Migration* (2008) is its nocturne opposite. The work is a 24-minute film that features migratory wild animals of North America as they pass through and inhabit empty and desolate hotel rooms. An owl sits entirely still while feathers that were once contained by a pillow or a comforter flurry down around it (fig. 15). A buffalo knocks stuff over. A beaver finds its way to some water (fig. 16). A fox jumps on a bed and sends pieces of a puzzle flying. In the cinematic orchestration of *Migration (empire)*, various wild animals wander through bizarrely deserted North American motels. Mustangs, buffaloes, pumas, raccoons, eagles and owls enter terrain that is normally reserved for people (fig. 17). The work projects a sense of expansiveness mixed with the repetition of modern dwellings. Each hotel/motel room captures a unique emotion. There is an overriding sense of displacement and emptiness, until unexpected inhabitants gradually become revealed in each of



Pierre Huyghe

Fig. 6-7. *A Journey that Wasn't*, 2005, Super 16mm film and HD video, 21 minutes and 41 seconds, color and sound
© Pierre Huyghe, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris



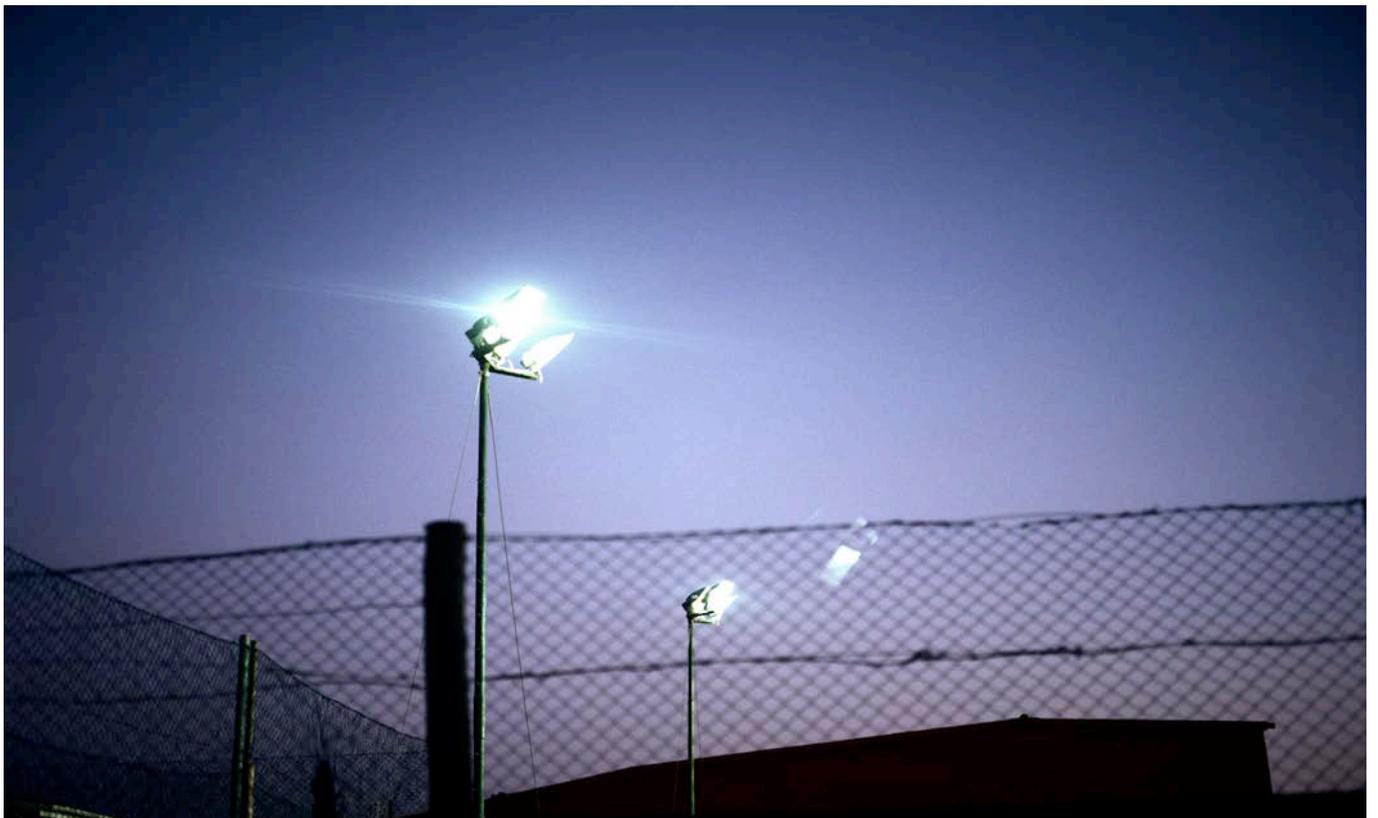
Pierre Huyghe

Fig. 8. *A Journey that Wasn't*, 2005, Super 16mm film and HD video, 21 minutes and 41 seconds, color and sound
© Pierre Huyghe, courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris

the rooms.

In an empty non-descript hotel room at dusk, a dark silhouette walks past the camera frame. The shape is large and seems to fill the shallow room. We gradually make out the details that reveal it to be a horse, a dark-haired mustang. The horse stands in the room nearly motionless, adjacent to the unused bed (fig. 18). Curtains blow in the breeze and let the filtered light of the sun into the room. We focus on the horse's small movements, its hoof pressing down on the carpet, its tail erratically swishing back and forth. As the sun sets and the room darkens, a flickering grey TV light appears to illuminate the room. We see the room reflected in the horse's dark black eyes. The horse's eye blinks, and we see in it the reflection of an image on the television screen. The flickering grey light of the TV lights the room, and on the screen we see the panoramic scene of a large herd of wild mustangs running across the plains. Whereas these beautiful creatures are usually observed from afar, the presence of the large

creature in the small room highlights, in this case, its mass as well as the details of the room. The room seems deficient, unable to contain the animal. We hesitate, as feelings of reverence and admiration mix with fear and trepidation. These are the processes by which the work continuously develops images of the empty hotel and motel rooms into a constellation at once familiar, unique and alien. Different migratory birds and other animals appear, always in different hotel rooms, always in different places. While some animals adapt well to their surroundings, others seem profoundly alien inside these normally human environments; in each case, aspects of the buildings that we so often take for granted are highlighted. Whether it's a buffalo knocking lamps over in a small suite or a jackrabbit picking at a bedspread, the unexpected guests collide with the materials most commonly surrounding us, using them in a way that's as normal to them as it is foreign to us. Each creature is seen as a vignette; we observe in the respective encounter a clash of



Doug Aitken

Fig. 9-10. *Diamond Sea*, 1997, Three-channel, three-projection, single monitor video installation; aluminum lightbox, chromogenic transparency, acrylic Duration: 11:26 min. loop, color, sound; Dimensions variable © Doug Aitken, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich; Victoria Miro Gallery, London; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Doug Aitken

Fig. 11-13. *Diamond Sea*, 1997, Three-channel, three-projection, single-monitor video installation; aluminum lightbox, chromogenic transparency, acrylic Duration: 11:26 min. loop, color, sound; Dimensions variable © Doug Aitken, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich; Victoria Miro Gallery, London; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

the organic and the artificial (fig. 19). In *Migration*, humans never appear; the work is set in a world that is post-human. The architecture of humanity houses a new habitat for animals mysteriously displaced.

Conclusion – Quasi-Things

The philosopher Günter Anders, who took his doctoral degree under Husserl in 1924, compares the ontological state of an image object with that of a phantom. That is, he conceptualizes it not in terms of the imagination or illusion. The notion of the phantom makes explicit a relation to magic and



the spiritual world. But what does it mean to accept image objects as phantoms, and what does it mean in terms of the framework laid out here? Images do not represent something; they put themselves forward in the sense that they place themselves in front of someone’s eyes. As a phantom, art does not show something real that is absent, but something non-real that is present. The image of art confronts the viewer with the fact that phantoms are visible entities – whose presence does not imply this must be the presence of a real object. In 1881 Konrad Fiedler speaks in *Modern Naturalism and Artistic Truth* of “spectres of reality” in order to describe the presence of that which in art can be seen as an exclusively visible something. The image object shares with phantoms, spirits, zombies and ghosts the same ontologically liminal position. The image object, too, has a visible reality; else it would not be possible to say that you see something, and yet it is not present as something real. According to Fiedler, this is to be understood as a “form of being,” that is, art shows something, a presence that is not real.^[9]

Spaces that function as refuges for “otherness” are built into the social network of all human societies. These heterotopic sites exist so that experiences on the fringe of orthodoxy can be enacted, so that difference, whether it contests or maintains the status quo, can be managed.

Residing within the non-real spaces that are constructed by juxtaposing fragments of film stock—discussed here as an artificial sublime—one can easily imagine the possibility of a presence that



Doug Aitken

Fig. 14. *Diamond Sea*, 1997, Three-channel, three-projection, single-monitor video installation; aluminum lightbox, chromogenic transparency, acrylic Duration: 11:26 min. loop, color, sound; Dimensions variable © Doug Aitken, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zürich; Victoria Miro Gallery, London; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Doug Aitken

Fig. 15. *Migration (empire)*, 2008

Linear single-channel video

Duration: 24:28 min., color, sound

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Doug Aitken

Fig. 16-17. *Migration (empire)*, 2008
Linear single-channel video

Duration: 24:28 min., color, sound
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Presenhuber, Zürich; Victoria Miro Gallery, London; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.



Doug Aitken

Fig. 18-19. *Migration (empire)*, 2008

Linear single-channel video

Duration: 24:28 min., color, sound © Doug Aitken, courtesy 303 Gallery, New York; Galerie Eva

Presenhuber, Zürich; Victoria Miro Gallery, London; and Regen Projects, Los Angeles.

is not real. Two factors are important in this regard: The *mise-en-scène*, the cinematography and the editing establish the *verisimilitude* of a film in the eyes of the viewer, and any lapse of continuity or stretch of the imagination, melt away as the viewer willingly suspends disbelief.

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^[1] Bernhard Waldenfels, *Phänomenologie der Aufmerksamkeit*. 2004, p.170

^[2] Vilem Flusser, "A New Imagination." In Vilém Flusser & Andreas Ströhl, *Writings. Selected Essays from 1920-1991*. University of Minnesota Press 2002, p. 111.

^[3] art 21, Pierre Huyghe: "Streamside Day." An Interview, taken from: <http://www.art21.org/texts/pierre-huyghe/interview-pierre-huyghe-streamside-day> (access March 19th 2015).

^[4] He describes it as an image: This is a town that has no organicity. It's an image – an instant, pure image. Months ago, there was no town. Now, it's a brand new town with roads. In a certain way, it's funny: You arrive in this town, and you visit the model home. It's postmodern. It has a big poster saying: *postmodern*. It's not modern, not a cube, not a Corbusier, not a Mies van der Rohe. It's a traditional, nice New England house. It's a dystopia, in a certain way. This is the feeling of a community. This is the image of the past. This is a fear of the present.

^[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Northwestern University Press 1968, p. 180.

^[6] The Artists institute, Pierre Huyghe. IL Y A, taken from: http://theartistsinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/TAI_S8_EP1_140221.pdf (access March 19th 2015).

^[7] Doug Aitken & Eckhard Schneider, "Doug Aitken. New Ocean: Katalog Kunsthaus Bregenz. 7.12. 2002 – 26.01.2003," König Walter Verlag.

^[8] Doug Aitken & Eckhard Schneider, "Doug Aitken. New Ocean: Katalog Kunsthaus Bregenz. 7.12. 2002 – 26.01.2003," König Walter Verlag. p. 52.

^[9] Konrad Fiedler, "Moderner Naturalismus und künstlerische Wahrheit." In: K. Fiedlers *Schriften über Kunst*. Erster Band. R. Piper & Co. München 1913, p. 133-134.

ACCIDENTAL WILDNESS ON A DETENTION POND

'little lake' is a detention pond, a flood control structure, an unassuming place in an average American town, Denton, Texas. Relatively left by itself, the pond attracts small wildlife: from birds to beavers, fish to foxes. People walk their dogs, fish, play disk golf, enjoy the sunset, even have religious ceremonies. This 'little lake' has become a situation, a place of encounters, between humans, animals, plants, weather, and water. The natural wrapped around the hyper-natural, the experiential boundary between hydrological infrastructure and natural landscape becomes porous, blending a concrete grey-green hybridity of green infrastructure, creating a public space, a bio-cultural nexus. Not designed as a technology of engagement, it has become one. The capacity of the natural in the technological has reclaimed the infrastructure, providing a space for culture, while keeping an edge of wildness. I place this potential as part of a larger cultural mentality, a politics of environmental imagination.

Author: Irene J. Klaver

Texas has no “real” lakes. All its lakes are human made. They are reservoirs, water stored behind dams. The small ones are detention ponds, built for flood control. We walk our dogs at such a pond most evenings before dinner. It is five minutes driving from home, still in town – Denton, TX, North-West of Dallas. A couple of years ago, after a serious rain, the area was flooded – just as it was supposed to be – detaining the water to prevent flooding in the heart of town. Our “little lake” had swollen substantially and the usual paths were ankle-deep under water – fun to plod around in boots. The dogs loved it. New smells to explore, things drifting around, pieces of wood, trash at the flood lines, and, an altogether new phenomenon: floating colonies of fire ants! They were stunning, teeming with activity. Those ants had created their own rafts, by holding on to each other. If we define “hyper” as overly active, unusually energetic, they easily qualify for being *naturally hypernatural*.

With “hypernatural” I do not mean to say that fire ants are invasive, aliens, pests, exotics, or whatever other names entities seem to “deserve” when they are not native to an area. Hyper natural indicates, rather, the mysteriousness of those

floating islands of swarming life, the wonder they instill in us, taking up their situation again and again, a manifestation of the vigor of life, adjusting to the flood. But there is more: the very fact and possibility that those floating rafts of ants appear fascinates me. The appearance of fire ants is not an accident; it is intrinsically linked to the globalized Anthropocene state of our world with countless inadvertent effects of human activities. The notion of human footprint barely covers the phenomenon. The ants set foot in Alabama in the 1930-ies, stowed away in a cargo ship from their native Brazil, and spread like wildfire, eliminating insects, lizards and other animals with their ominous, voluminous and venomous attacks. The appearance of the ant rafts is not an accident either. The ants are winding their ways throughout Texas, and early in the twenty-first century they reached our region. While most nests are relatively hidden under brush or rocks, you see more and more in open grassy patches, especially near water. Our little lake area being a flood plain, the rising water brought the ants out of their hiding places into the open. The engineered functions of the detention pond – the flow control drainage valve of the storm water feature and the dam



Irene J. Klaver and Brian C.O'Connor

Rafts of thousands of fire ants, clinging together, during a flood at the detention pond, North Lakes Park, Denton, TX.

© Irene J. Klaver and Brian C. O'Connor.



Irene J. Klaver and Brian C.O'Connor

Ingenious capacity of fire ants to float as a community until the floods recede and they find dry land again.

© Irene J. Klaver and Brian C. O'Connor.

behind it – made the waters rise, which made the ants form their rafts to survive. It is precisely this relation between technology and the “natural world” that interests me – a Naturally Hypernatural nexus.

Grinding and polishing lenses and setting them into a powerful lens tube of a microscope, Anton van Leeuwenhoek was one of the first, in the early-seventeenth century, to see the teeming life in a drop of water or blood. A new universe of microorganisms revealed itself: bacteria, red blood cells, spermatozoa, and yeast. Some 150 years later, in the 1850s, Pasteur created a refined culture medium that made the microbial activity of yeast fermentation processes visible leading to the possibility of pasteurization of milk. German microbiologist Julius Petri invented, in the 1870s, a standard culture dish, the so-called Petri dish, which further developed the technique of culturing and purifying bacterial colonies derived from single cells.

Technologies take place in worlds and

open up worlds, revealing unexpected dimensions of the material world. Similarly, our little lake’s infrastructural technology opens up new worlds. It is a medium that makes unexpected processes and interactions possible and visible.

Not that this flood control structure was built to accommodate the visibility of floating ants, neither was it built for us to walk our dogs. Nor for the five pelicans who lived for a week on its waters, nor for a local Hindu community to celebrate its Dewali Festival of Light at little lake’s shore.

Little lake is an inadvertent opportunity to make visible what technology mediates in the material, environmental, and cultural world. It leads to an intensification of engagements, of potential identities, possible lives. It creates a realm of affordances.

These new forms of hybridity between technology and natural entities and processes form the hallmark and potential promise of the 21st century. They facilitate an environmental imagination that accommodates a place of culture in nature by questioning its very distinction and questioning the workings of this distinction, thus it



Irene J. Klaver and Brian C. O'Connor

Above: The detention pond as pelican Petri dish: a migration stop in front of the flow control drainage valve.
 Below: The detention pond as cultural Petri dish: Hindu community celebrates the Dewali Festival of Light

© Irene J. Klaver and Brian C. O'Connor.

instantiates the hypernatural of the natural into an environmental imagination.

Environmental Imagination

Philosophically the imagination has run the gamut from a faculty of the mind, connected to a flight of fancy, a far inferior mental process than the faculty of reason, to the seat of creativity, at the root of science and art.^[1] It gained increasing philosophical attention in the last decades of the 20th century.^[2] Within environmental philosophy, the imagination has been taken up occasionally. The formative relation between space or place and narratives or metaphors has been most carefully examined by literary scholar Lawrence Buell (1995), who

who coined the very term “environmental imagination” in his work *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. The book became a seminal text for environmental literature, or ecocriticism. According to Buell, a writer’s imagination is profoundly influenced by the specifics of a place, such as its geological, biological, geographical, historical, and ecological characteristics. Where Buell’s focus was on Anglo-American imagination, ecocriticism has expanded its horizons over the years to include global, postcolonial and environmental justice themes as, for example, in the work of Ursula Heise (2008).

I expand this sense of environmental imagination further by connecting it to a social political body of literature around



Irene J. Klaver and Brian C.O'Connor

The detention pond as cultural Petri dish: Hindu community celebrates the Dewali Festival of Light.

© Irene J. Klaver and Brian C. O'Connor.

cultural imagination. Benedict Anderson's work on the imagination in the context of the nation state is crucial here. In his influential book *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson defines the nation as an "imagined political community." He calls it imagined "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each of them lives the image of their communion." That is, they experience themselves to have similar interests and they identify themselves as being part of the same nation. The nation-state became a powerful master of imaginative narrative in the Western world in the modern age, replacing the two previous dominant Western imaginaries of the religious community and the nobility. Anderson shows convincingly how nationality, nation-ness and nationalism became powerful "cultural artifacts" and "once created, they became 'modular,' capable of being transplanted . . .

to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a . . . wide variety of political and ideological constellations".

Edward Said develops a similar sense of the "imagined" in his concept of "imagined geographies," which refers to the spaces that are created through certain discourse, texts and images. In his book *Orientalism* (1995), Said reveals how the constructed colonial view of the Orient based upon popularized images and travel writings functions as a structure of power, a tool to control and to subordinate certain geographical areas.

As with Buell's imagination, Anderson and Said's imaginaries are not simply located in the individual subject, but are part of a larger dynamic.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai most explicitly explores this sense of imagination as a property of collectives, instead of as a faculty of the gifted individual. Collective representations, according to Appadurai, are not subjective inventions, fantasies or desires, but objective facts, leading to a plurality of imagined worlds.

He takes Anderson's sense of imagined communities from the nation-state to a globalized world, emphasizing the active workings of the imagination as a social practice.

For Appadurai, Anderson's and Said's cultural imagination bespeaks a social-political or *culture*-based field, while for Buell it is primarily a place-related, or *nature*-based dynamic. This nature-culture difference seems to reflect the debate between natural determinism versus social constructivism in the social sciences and humanities. However, the picture is a bit more complex: for Buell and other ecocritics the experience of place is also culturally (and historically and politically, etc.) mediated,^[3] and, vice versa. Social-political-cultural analyses do note that events take place *somewhere*. Still, one could say that the latter have a tendency to underestimate the significance of the natural environment, while the former might tend to over-emphasize it. Bringing these perspectives together facilitates seeing them on a continuum rather than in a dualistic or dichotomous fashion. It accentuates that they are in fact deeply intertwined and predicated upon each other; co-constitute each other (Klaver 2001). Co-constitution is at the heart of the work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Co-constitution is at the heart of the work of French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He shows how oppositions are mutually constitutive or co-constitutive. Already the Pre-Socratic thinker, Heraclitus emphasized this approach; he pointed out how we only experience the cold because we know the heat; if temperature would be constant, we would have neither concept. Similarly with night and day: we experience light because there is dark. Merleau-Ponty contrasts this mutually constitutive approach to a long tradition of Western philosophy to see oppositions in terms of mutually exclusive dualisms. Especially the dualism between subject and object has been pervasive, deeply imbedded in Western thought, and at the root of a variety of interlocking dualisms, such as activity (or agency) versus passivity, resonating in culture versus nature. A dualistic mindset comes with a value attribution, with an implied sense of superiority (culture, agency) versus inferiority (nature, passivity), and

domination and exploitation. The inert material or natural object is waiting for the human intentional subject to do something with it. It became the basis for a Western conception of passive nature, ready to be used by culture. This approach was radically re-thought by Merleau-Ponty in the early 1960s.

In his latest work, *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty (1968) describes his philosophy as developing "the *fungierende* [operative, I.K.] or *latent* intentionality which is the intentionality within being". Intentionality is no longer located in the human subject, neither is it now placed in the object, but it is operative between the two. For example, seeing a glass of water makes me realize I am thirsty. This shifts the locus of intentional agency from a sheer focus on the individual subject as agent to, what I call a situational agency. Intentionality is operative in a situation: the reason why I do something is related to a variety of experiential vectors; intentionality arises in the very interaction of inward and outward forces, neither merely in me (voluntarism), nor completely outside me (determinism), but in a co-constitutive field of the two.

Similarly, I see environmental imagination as operative imagination, understanding operative in Merleau-Ponty's sense of the word. Environmental imagination is not simply located in the individual, neither in the environment, but is operative; arises out of the interplay between the two. Larger cultural and material constellations or patterns (of being) co-determine how we experience and conceive of things. As operative intentionality, operative imagination always takes place in a situation, and is in that sense a situational imagination. Within embedded practices and events we imagine our future, present and past.

This brings us back to the importance of situations. The question now becomes: how can a particular situation facilitate an environmental imagination? For this I will return to the beginning, to our "little lake," our local storm water detention pond. I will locate the detention pond in its larger watershed and relate its increasingly storied life to the shift in mentality that is occurring around

urban watersheds. This shift gestures at the rise of an environmental imagination. Local everyday situations can be places of affordance and create the potential for fostering such an environmental imagination in the most mundane practices and infrastructural places, at the interface of nature and culture, re-writing nature and culture as co-constitutive.

Reclaiming the infrastructure: The emerging of a cultural nexus and environmental imagination around storm water structures.

For the first time in history, more people live in urban areas than in rural communities. One consequence of rapid urbanization is the distancing of people from the other creatures of the planet. Another consequence is an unprecedented rise of impermeable surfaces in the form of roads, parking areas, rooftops, etc. Storm water washes over these surfaces, picking up chemical and microbial pollutants – such as oil and fertilizers – before draining into the storm water collection system, a public drainage system with (usually) publicly maintained pipes, culverts, gutters, and the like. Where wastewater – water from sink, toilet, shower, dishwasher, washing machine, etc. – is generally treated by a wastewater treatment plant before it is released into any water body, storm water flows in most places directly and untreated into streams, rivers and lakes. This is especially the case in highly developed and urbanized countries such as the United States where, according to the National Research Council (2008), “storm water runoff from the built environment remains one of the great challenges of modern water pollution control”.

To deal with storm water in a more sustainable way the notion of “green infrastructure” gained currency in the late 1990s in both public and management discourse on storm water and wastewater management. The President’s Council on Sustainable Development (1999) identified green infrastructure as one of five opportunity areas for sustainable community development, defining it as “the network of open space, airsheds, watersheds, woodlands, wildlife habitat, parks, and other natural areas that provides many vital services that sustain life and enrich the quality of life”.

What is under-developed in these approaches is the potentiality for a cultural

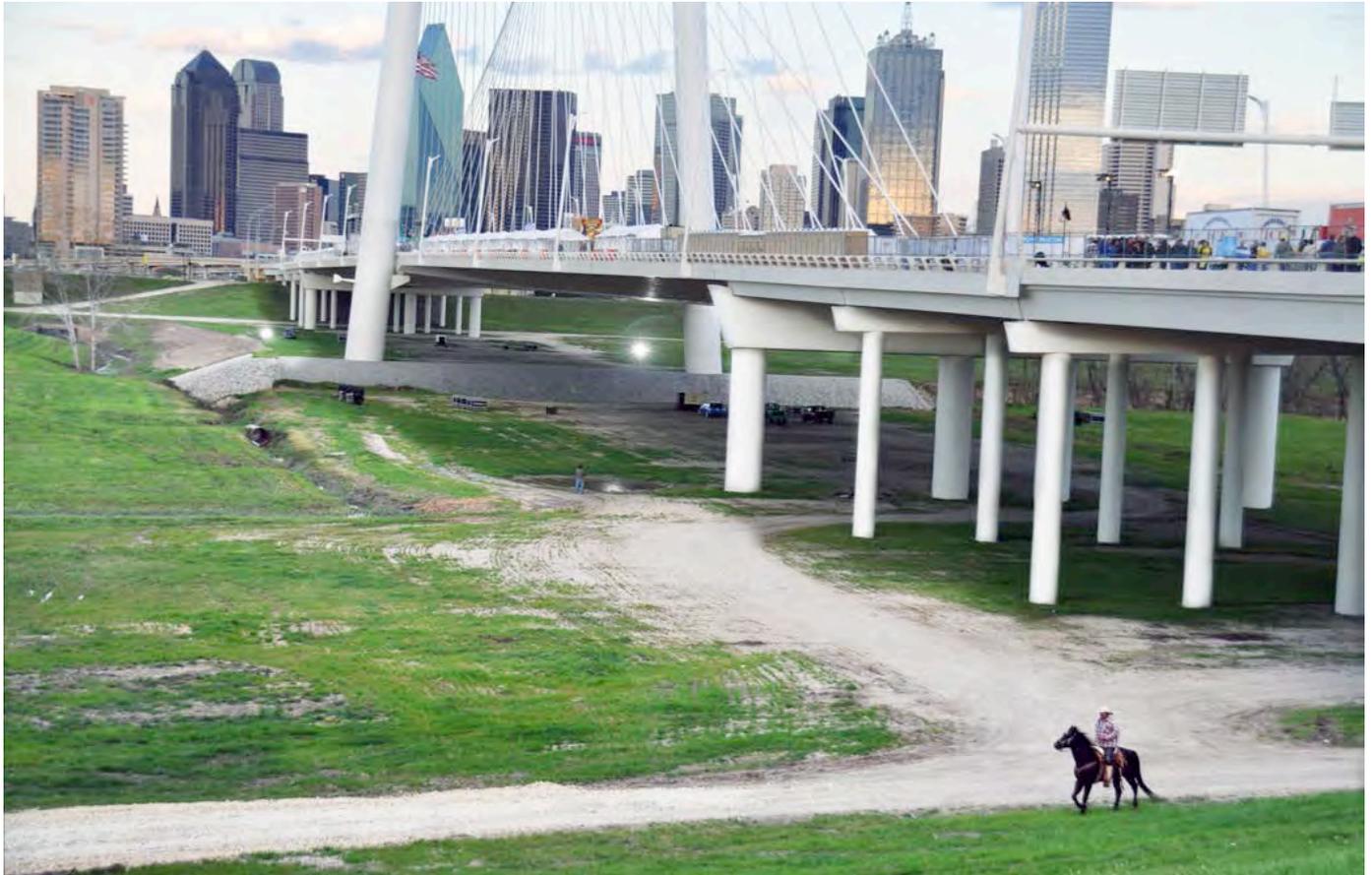
component in the projects. How could they be green, but also create situations, places of encounter? Here our small-scale storm water feature comes back in, as part of an average Texas town in the midsize Trinity River watershed in North East Texas. Let’s begin with a sketch of its larger river basin.

The Trinity River basin and its big cities

Texas is a river state. The state has many charismatic rivers, such as the Rio Grande and the Brazos. The Trinity River is not one of them. In the traditional “Texas Rivers Song,” made popular by Lyle Lovette, the Trinity River is described only as muddy, while the other Texas Rivers in the song run “glossy and gliding” or “weaving and winding.” Cowboy stars such as John Wayne, Gene Autry, and Roy Rogers appear in popular movies with the names of other Texas rivers in their titles. Not so for the Trinity River. Its star, its “charismatic mega-fauna” is the ancient Alligator Gar, a scaly predator lurking in its muddy waters.

Originating in North Texas, the Trinity flows southward through the coastal lowlands, merging its murky waters into the Gulf of Mexico. Along the way it serves the residents of the Dallas/Fort Worth region, one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the United States, as well as residents of Houston and many smaller towns, agricultural users, and the water needs of a large watershed.

Floods long ago gave reason to want to “control” the waters of the Trinity. The 1908 flood in Dallas led to a large scale re-routing and harnessing of the river, creating the longest cement structure in the world at that time. Also, water quality had a dark history: in the 1920s with two major slaughterhouses in Fort Worth and growing populations in both cities, the number of typhoid fever cases was rising to a level that caused the Texas Department of Health to call the Trinity River a “mythological river of death.” Still, in the 1960s, parts of the river were so polluted that the United States Public Health Service called the stretch of 150 kilometers downstream of Dallas “septic.” With the Clean Water Act in



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A lone horseman rides the nearly dry Trinity River bed on the opening day of the Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge, designed by Santiago Calatrava, Dallas, 2012. © Irene J. Klaver and Brian C. O'Connor

the early 1970s, the Trinity was cleaned up, yet remained dormant in the cultural imagination as a forgotten river. Today, the Trinity River is relatively clean and controlled. It has become one of the most heavily developed watersheds in Texas and provides drinking water for approximately half of the State's population (with six million people in the Dallas/Fort Worth (DFW) area in 2010). As is the case with many cities around the world, Dallas and Fort Worth have begun to embrace the civic and architectural potential of their waterways and are planning large-scale urban development around the Trinity. The Trinity is slowly percolating into the cultural imagination: from "Mythological River of Death," to basically forgotten; the river is increasingly perceived as an asset. Glossy brochures featuring Dallas's Trinity River Corridor plans and the Trinity River Vision Master Plan of Fort Worth ("A Vision for the Future and a Plan for Success") advertise a newly found river identity around "a new place to work, live and play." Like all self-respecting river cities, Dallas planned a so-called

"signature" bridge – in this case designed by no less than Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava.

The bridge now spans the river in the center of Dallas, while a new active urban mixed-use waterfront is supposed to "create a vibrant, active community" in Fort Worth. Words such as urban revitalization, restoring, reviving and reinventing, flow off the brochures' pages, describing a new relationship with the Trinity through river front property, hiking trails, fishing ponds, and constructed white-water boating sections. The Trinity is no longer just muddy.

This comes with new opportunities and new challenges. Gentrification is a major issue: who will ultimately be benefitting from this process and who will be disadvantaged? Also, who is able to participate in the decisions? Here I focus on the possibility of a re-engagement of citizens with their river, and the potentiality of the emergence of an environmental imagination around the river. Through various modes of recreation, there might rise an opportunity of re-creating a new identity around the river. If and how that exactly will happen is still to be seen.



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The detention pond as bird Petri dish: Scissor-tailed Flycatcher, Little Blue Heron, and Great Egret

© Irene J. Klaver and Brian C. O'Connor.

These are rather high-end plans. Purpose-driven and goal-directed – both the history and the current renovation of the riverfront. In contrast our little lake or SCS16 has as its primary purpose flood control; beyond that it has been treated with benign neglect – and, as such, has become a Petri dish of the “what might happen.” It is in that sense a far more fascinating “naturally-hypernatural nexus” for possible water basin relations at multiple scales and in multiple fashions. Our small storm water feature, or retarding pond, has the potential to turn a hydrological infrastructure into a bio-cultural nexus and to foster an environmental imagination. It affords the possibility to follow what happens in less spectacular, more low-key, everyday ways.

Emerging of a hypernatural and cultural nexus and environmental imagination around an ordinary storm water pond

Storm water ponds have become part of modern urban development: you may see them along the road, in shopping complexes, suburban neighborhoods, and industrial centers, because they lead to a substantial increase in impervious surface area. This has serious hydrological consequences, such as a higher rate and volume of run-off, and less infiltration into the soil of pollutants and hence a degradation in water quality. Storm water ponds have been designed to mitigate these effects and to provide storage for storm water. Some are designed to hold water year-round, others are designed to be dry again in a couple of days or weeks after a storm.

Major flood events in the small town of



Irene J. Klaver and Brian C.O'Connor

Flood detention pond SCS #16 in Denton, Texas; a Naturally Hypernatural nexus, an accidental hybridity of technology, nature, culture and public space."

Denton, Texas, which sits in the Trinity River watershed at the northern edge of the Dallas-Ft. Worth metropolitan area, led to a flood prevention program in the early 1970s. Two storm water features were created called *Soil Conservation Service's (SCS) Hickory Creek Basin Retarding Ponds #16 and #17*, designated as North Lakes Park. Retarding pond SCS #17 and much of the land around it was developed for recreation with structured picnic areas, a fishing dock, soccer fields, paved parking areas, a recreation center, and a golf driving range. In a way, it is a miniature and low-budget precursor of the current master plans around the river in the big sisters Dallas and Fort Worth.

The area around the other pond, SCS #16, has been left essentially undeveloped, except for one small dirt parking area and a disc golf path. A haphazard accidental community of herons, fishermen, dog walkers, brushy vegetation, kids, paddlers, beaver, migratory birds, ducks, disc golfers,

turtles and skunks has emerged around the infrastructural feature, fondly called by some "their little lake." SCS #16 or the "little lake" supports a varied community that thrives in the relatively unstructured, inadvertent wildness of the place.

For many people who have stumbled upon SCS #16, it has become an integral part of their everyday life with its own interface between beaver, heron, human, snake, fish, water, disc golfers, and flood management. The experiential boundary between hydrological infrastructure and natural landscape features become blurred in such everyday activities. SCS #16 presents a green and grey hybrid infrastructure and a public space, a place of encounter.

It sets the stage for "'accidental'" natural and cultural opportunities and occasions that have supported unexpected and continuing natural and cultural engagements. Such hybrid technological-natural structures dissolve strict separations between human built/technology and nature, between various social-economic groups, and



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The detention pond as natural-cultural Petri dish Student from Saudi Arabia, smoking a water pipe, and ducks
 © Irene J. Klaver and Brian C. O'Connor.

between different practices (dog walking, disc golfing, fishing, etc.). SCS #16 demonstrates the capacity inherent in structures, such as local retardation ponds, to enhance the lives of local residents beyond the pond's sheer hydraulic role.

Reclaiming the infrastructure: accidental hybrid of wildness and community

In an era of rapid urbanization, infrastructural entities such as storm water retarding ponds could provide much needed ecosystem services as well as public spaces, fostering a *cultural nexus* around water bodies. The narrative of the social constructs around SCS #16 – the purpose and plan that enabled its material creation, the measure of maintenance required to keep up the lake and its environs, and finally the use of the lake area as public space for the community of Denton – provide conceptual and strategic means by which water in urban settings may be reclaimed as more than just an

essentially hidden flood protection mechanism. SCS #16 operates as a piece of hybrid infrastructure. It has become a place of affordance. It affords the appearance of the local wild. It enables people to change habits of simply driving past a detention pond in some way labeled "OFF LIMITS!" Daily concepts and actions can be changed, and can be re-practiced to include the appearance and experience of the local wild.

SCS #16, the hydraulic feature, is physically visible from the road. It is just one block from one of the primary travel and commercial routes in the city of Denton, and it sits on a road that borders a newly developed large shopping area that has a concrete retarding pond behind a fence. SCS #16 is also visible in the sense of not being closed off either by the legislation of "No Trespassing" ordinances (except late at night), or by categorization into an essentially private arena for exclusive use by soccer teams, fishermen or biologists.

We have the opportunity to forge new ways of living along riverbanks, enjoying the river, studying its watershed, and exploring its environment. The Trinity does not have the “excitement” of many great rivers. Yet, it is a crucial watershed for millions of people. It is muddy conceptually, and that is part of its charm. In its unassuming presence it blurs boundaries and in this we find an important message for urban watershed planning.

The “little lake” at SCS #16 gives us a small-scale everyday low level starting place for ways of engaging in our relationship to our watershed, ways of studying our river basin and ourselves, ways of being within our watershed, and ways of promoting consciousness of our watershed environment. Part of its muddy secret is to allow urban planning in some places to stay relatively unplanned.

Nature has, in a sense, reclaimed the infrastructure, providing a space for culture, while keeping an edge of wildness. We can explore a scale of recreational activities in which we relate the expansive metropolitan urban renewal projects in Dallas and Fort Worth with smaller scale interventions such as this one.

Nature in these small unpretentious little places is no longer “foreign” or “external,” but intimate and physically immediate, fostering a connection with the environment and its inhabitants – some locals of Denton, the beavers, ducks, migratory birds, frogs, turtles, and so on. The capacity of SCS #16 to enrich citizens’ lives through diverse, low-key cultural activities is as important as its hydraulic retention capacity. The small cluster of beaver, birds, turtles, frogs, ducks, and fish at the little lake in the Trinity watershed affords links to a “nature” not ordinarily available to city dwellers. Nature and the people of Denton, Texas have reclaimed a part of their hydrological infrastructure. It is turned into a technology of engagement, fostering a dynamic bio-cultural situation and allowing people to develop an environmental imagination.

The narrative of the opening vignette situates the details, forms an exquisite specificity,

an exquisite empiricism. It creates a picture of a place that has become a place of affordance, a place where people experience each other and the other.

Together the ecologist, the artist and the philosopher, researching the *logos* of the *oikos*, our home place, a living technology of engagement, initiate new possibilities by bridging nature and culture, by creating wonder and curiosity. This leads to further beginnings, questioning the taken-for-granted, which has often been our material realm, our infrastructure, the natural world, the background, the soil we live on, the water we drink, the water within us.

Philosophy, art, and ecology meet in this questioning, in creating situations, in acknowledging situations, where they come together to question more deeply, in the watershed, the particular specificity of a detention pond, an infrastructural feature, a living technology, a technology of engagement.

This ecologist does not just create facts, this artist does not just create art, this philosopher does not just create thoughts; rather, together they create knowledge, questions, feelings, commitments, connections, experiences, togetherness, encounters, overtures, situations, shocks, flourishing, places of particularities, conservation for habitats, public spaces where people meet each other and the other, where the river is a bridge, where a detention pond is a bridge. They feed science, the city planners, the ducks, and the imagination.



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Above: The flow control drainage valve of the hydraulic infrastructure of "little lake" in fair weather and in rain

Below: The detention pond as cultural Petri dish: people enjoying "little lake" during prom night celebration, full moon picture taking, and walking dogs.

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Notes

[1] This part is based upon my previous writings on environmental imagination. See Klaver 2012 and 2013.

[2] See for example the works of Casey, Kearney, Sallis, and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. See also Foster and Swanson.

[3] For excellent work on the intricacies of mediation and imaging, see Grusin and Bolter.

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ADAPTED LANDSCAPE

When Raul Valverde was invited to participate in the Cartagena Biennial in Colombia, the artist proposed the construction of a new space based on history's reconfiguration of geography. Using a variety of flora from Cartagena, Spain, the artist set up a site-specific installation entitled Adapted Landscape. Its site is a wall fortification built by the Spanish conquerors around the 16th Century. The visitor finds himself in a Mediterranean scene while at the same time standing on the Caribbean Sea, a means to reconnect these two different places linked by a name and dislocated histories.

In conversation between: Beatriz Meseguer and Raul Valverde

Raul Valverde's Adapted Landscape (Paisaje Adaptado), a site-specific installation featured in the 2014 Cartagena de Indias Biennial in Colombia, brings to his project-based practice elements of history, geography and ethnic cultural practices. Using a variety of flora from Cartagena, Spain, the artist set up this work in Colombia, South America, in the city of Cartagena. Its site is a wall fortification built by the Spanish conquerors around the sixteenth Century. The visitors finds themselves in a Mediterranean scene, while at the same time standing on the Caribbean Sea; a means to reconnect these two different places linked by a name and dislocated histories.

Raul Valverde's initial approach to constructed landscapes was a sculptural mirror-and-light artwork in collaboration with the artist Pablo Puyol, installed in a small rural town in the north of Spain (Paisaje, 2005). The work offered the viewers a vision of the surroundings while simultaneously seeing themselves. A few months later Valverde developed To look and to look inside The Inner Circle of The Regent's Park in London. The park was designed as a picturesque arcadia housing the Prince's palace, and was open to the public in 1835. Valverde photographed the park periodically during one year. This information

was later processed with software to generate chromatic graph animations. The work revealed natural transformations caused by seasonal changes, weather conditions and human intervention. It also reflected the multiple variables implied in the process of perceiving our environment. For a park, after all, is a metaphor, a place where changes occur, causing the viewer to experience what can be termed transitory optical illusions.

Valverde moved to New York in 2009. He wanted to see "how things can be perceived from there." Being in the US, with the opportunity to travel to other countries, such as Mexico, Cuba, Brazil and Colombia, helped him to broaden the understanding of his own definition of "Spanish artist." Part of his early navigation as an immigrant in New York City was completed through a project that connects memory and space. Following an exhibition catalog from 1992 as his map, Valverde photographed all twenty-four locations where the Cuban-American artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres displayed billboards of an empty bed seventeen years before. Raul's project, *24 Outdoor Contexts (2009)*, not only depicts a city transformed, but also reveals the disappearance of an artwork. Together with the black and white prints of the now-empty



Raul Valverde

Fig. 1 City wall before the installation: "La Tenaza", Cartagena de Indias (Colombia). Photograph by Beatriz Meseguer.

Fig. 2 City wall after the installation of *Adapted Landscape*. Photograph by Beatriz Meseguer.

locations, the artist shows a video of an in-bed conversation between Peter Muscato, the photographer who documented the original billboards in 1992, and Gonzalez-Torres's art dealer, Andrea Rosen. The artist utilizes two male actors in this piece to interpret an imagined conversation, while exploring a realm of mediated production and reception. This conversation develops an ontological dialogue related to photography and the politics of representation.

Another series about time started in 2010, the year Raul Valverde turned 30. On this occasion, the project, conceived as a site-specific-video-series in progress, was driven by his interest in the interaction between architectural and psychological spaces. It presents the sunlight of 2030, on the day Valverde will turn 50, as it virtually enters diverse art museums around the world. Each video requires a sophisticated 3D computer-generated reconstruction of the building, as well as a complex analysis of temporal and geographical coordinates. The final work looks like an architectural video recording, projected large-scale inside each museum, but actually shows the same institution in a future tense.

When he was invited in 2013 to participate in the Cartagena Biennial, the artist proposed the construction of a new space based on history's reconfiguration of geography. Part of his research process included visiting the Spanish Cartagena in Murcia. He catalogued the site's flora, food, architecture and urban development. The project brought to light how diverse cultural aspects – historical, political, and economic– are embedded in the construction of landscape.

Beatriz Meseguer: *Adapted Landscape* is a site-specific Mediterranean garden installed on the Caribbean coast of Cartagena de Indias using flora from Cartagena, Spain. How did you come up with this idea? (figs. 1-2)

Raul Valverde: It started from a commission from the first Art Biennial of Cartagena de Indias. The artistic director, Berta Sichel, organized the exhibition around the idea of "presence" in its multitude of meanings, conveying how the past continues with us in the present. I thought this

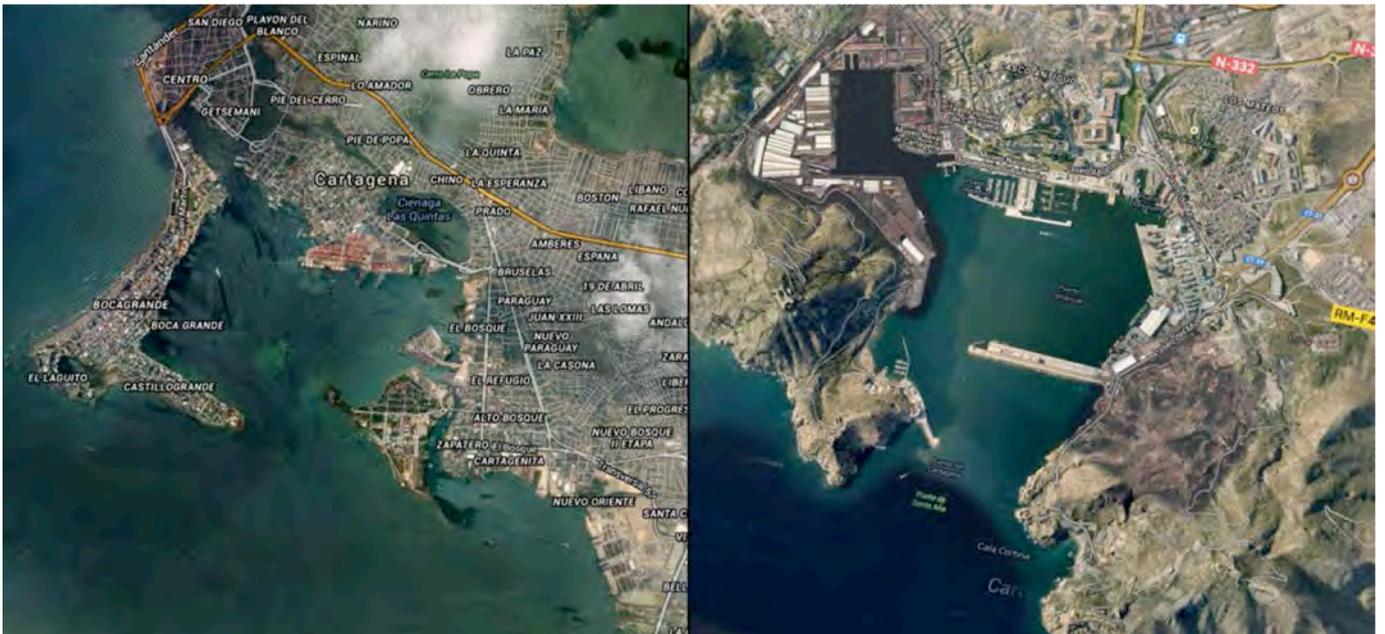
invitation was a perfect opportunity to produce new context-related work. I was also interested in the fact that I had never visited Colombia before and that I was invited as a Spanish artist. Cartagena de Indias is a colonial "monument-city" with a strong sense of memory and almost no contemporary art scene. The Biennial offered diverse narratives around Cartagena, a discontinuous journey presenting multiple approaches to the city's foundation, its central role in the Caribbean slave trade, the weight of Inquisition, twentieth century immigration, and a vibrant tourism industry that is, once more, shaping the social landscape.

BM: Can you talk more about the similarities of both cities and how they are linked in your project?

RV: I studied the connection between Cartagena de Indias, Colombia and Cartagena of Murcia, in Spain, especially the history of how both cities were established. The fact that they share a common name responds to the way the early conquistadors perceived this "new" land. This interdependence of names, time and spaces was very attractive to me and imagined ways of connecting these two places. The topographic relationship between the two Cartagenas is strong. Around 1500, this similarity led the early conquistadors to rename the pre-Columbian town *Calamarí* after Cartagena in Spain.

But the important discovery was that this name was re-used, imposed and translated constantly, and by diverse Empires, during seventeen centuries. The city of Cartagena in the Region of Murcia, Spain, was founded in 227 BC by the Carthaginian military leader Hasdrubal the Fair. He named it *Qart-Hadasht*, which means "New City" in Phoenician. When the Roman Empire conquered Spain, *Qart-Hadasht* was renamed to *Carthago Nova* (the New Cartago), which was progressively hispanicized as Cartagena. Eleven centuries later, the Spanish conquistador Rodrigo de Bastidas and the cartographer Juan de la Cosa entered the bay of Cartagena in Colombia, and gave it this name for being so warm and familiar (fig. 3).

Both Cartagenas share not only a name, but also a similar history from two opposite



Raul Valverde

Fig.3 Similitudes between the natural harbors of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia (left) and Cartagena in Murcia, Spain (right). Photographs by Google Maps.

perspectives. Strategically, they became the best natural harbors of the sixteenth Century Spanish empire, and the effects of colonization are still very present in Colombia (fig. 4). What is interesting here is the fact that renaming a place relates not only to tactics of control, but also to a problem of identification: finding the right old names. When Columbus saw the current Colombia for the first time, he was very disappointed because of his inability to recognize plants, animals and trees. He thought he could not remember what was already described in the books. Similarly, the appendix “de Indias”– of the Indies, as the lands of China, Japan and India were then known in Europe – it is used because early American conquistadors were convinced that they were opening a new route in Asia.

I felt attracted by these historical connections and wanted to see if they could be understood as adaptations. Of course, a work by a Spanish artist in Colombia is loaded with the narratives of colonialism, but I was interested in exploring elements of exchange and referentiality between the two Cartagenas. So I decided to work with the vision of the territory, with how a landscape can be

composed, and find ways of creating a dialogue between the two cities.

BM: In your previous works *Paisaje* (2005) and *To look and to look* (2006-07) you already explored specific ideas and visions of nature. Could you tell us more about these projects in relation to the dialogue between the two Cartagenas?

RV: A landscape emerges from the history of a place. It speaks about certain iconography that was imposed at some point, but that becomes transparent with time. To think about nature is impossible without thinking about the human factor that defines and looks at it. In the case of *Adapted Landscape*, I wanted to understand first what a Mediterranean landscape was, and then how it could be interpreted in Colombia.

BM: And how was the installation interpreted in Colombia?

RV: I guess there was a mix of interpretations. A large number of local visitors were not aware of the connection of this new public garden to the Biennial exhibition, and that helped to transform the wall as a place for contemplation and dialogue. The piece has many embedded



Raul Valverde

Fig.4 The weight of colonization and the Spanish invasion is present in the gift shops of Cartagena de Indias (Colombia). Photograph by Beatriz Meseguer.

layers, and each visitor can unveil certain details that lead to more questions. Moreover, some birds, butterflies and other insects started to regularly visit the space, perhaps contributing to a new eco-social-system in itself. After the exhibition, the plants were transplanted to other areas of the city, where they were distributed and integrated into the environs.

I like to think about *Adapted Landscape* as a translation and sedimentation of cultures, carrying elements of power, authority, interpretation, vision, imposition, etc. Translation has multiple meanings: it refers to the conversion from one form of medium to another, the rendering of the meaning of words from one language to another, but also to moving from one place to a different one.

Sedimentation, on the other hand, indicates the overlay of cultures creating a palimpsest of time.

BM: How did you start this process of translation?

RV: I started by traveling to Cartagena in the southeast coast of Spain (fig. 5). I made a list of what I found to be the “essential” plants: bushes and trees of this Mediterranean area, including native and endemic species. The more I learned about this landscape, the more I understood it is always changing. There is not such a thing as a perennial regional – or national – landscape; landscapes change through time. The history of the world can be the history of migrations, and in some cases, migrations radically force adaptation. For example, the



Raul Valverde

Fig.5 Coast of Cartagena, Spain (left). The agave in the center is native to Mexico, western United States and central and tropical South America; Palm trees and cannons in the port of Cartagena, Spain (right). Date palms have originated around Iraq, and were introduced from Africa by the Moors after invading the Iberian Peninsula in 711. Dates were introduced into Mexico and California by the Spaniards in 1765. Photographs by Raul Valverde.

Mediterranean citrus fruits, originally from China and first introduced in Europe by the Muslims, were broadly used in the Americas for the treatment of the common sailors' scurvy. On the other direction, cacti – extensively common in the dry Mediterranean coast today– were first presented in Spain from the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1493.

My interest shifted toward the species that are integrated in Colombia after five centuries of trade. Food tells a lot of this history of economic exchange. A traditional lunch in Cartagena de Indias (Colombia) includes bananas, onion, lime, sugar cane and rice, all products imported from Europe after the fifteenth century (fig. 6).

BM: How did you continue with your project once you travelled to Colombia? What was the role of the fortification wall in the definition of the piece?

RV: Once in Cartagena de Indias, I designed the garden to contain fruit trees, flowers, palms and dry species (fig. 5). Plants were selected based on my list compiled on the Mediterranean and their availability in the Colombian landscape. The Foundation Verde que te quiero verde introduced me to local nurseries but they didn't use scientific names – and the common names are generally different in South America and Spain. Language, and interpretation itself, became an integral element of the work. There are a lot of differences in the way language is used in Spanish speaking countries. "Limón" refers to the yellow fruit lemon (*Citrus × limon*) in Spain, whereas "Limón" is the green citrus lime (*Citrus × aurantifolia*) in Colombia.

Many specimens finally employed in the garden, such as asparagus, lemons, oranges, date palms, olives, grape vines, or prickly pears, are characteristic of the dry semi-arid climate of



Raul Valverde

Fig.6 Food as a diagram of exchange: A traditional lunch in Cartagena de Indias (Colombia). Includes bananas, onion, lime, sugar cane and rice, all products imported from Europe after the fifteenth century. Photograph by Raul Valverde.

the Spanish Cartagena. In Colombia, Cartagena features a tropical wet and dry climate and during the installation of *Adapted Landscape*, in February, the weather was hot and windy. Some of the plants used were the direct relatives of their European ancestors, while others correspond to different species under the same common name.

The installation of the piece relates closely with the limits that the city wall has defined since its construction by the Spaniards in the sixteenth Century (fig. 7). All plants used in the installation, as well as the nurseries, gardeners and workers came from this outside-the-wall territory: an impoverished area without government infrastructure. The production process allowed me to visit areas inside and

outside the wall, and learn more about how this architectural barrier divides society, with 40 percent of the population below the poverty line (fig. 8).

BM: What was your response to this social and urban conflict?

RV: My role as a guest European artist coming from New York put me in a situation of power by default. I just wanted to open up some questions and discussions. The piece mirrored the complexity of what "adaptation" means, both in terms of imposition and balance. How a history of colonization can be translated, performed and re-articulated, in the name of culture, makes evident the problematics of trade, ideology and social conflict.



Raul Valverde

Fig.7 Soil being distributed on the UNESCO World Heritage colonial wall by the gardener Manuel, from the Foundation *Verde que te quiero Verde*. Cartagena de Indias (Colombia). Photograph by Beatriz Meseguer.

Fig. 8. View of an underdeveloped zone outside of the historical wall. Some flora used in *Adapted Landscape* came from nurseries in this area. Cartagena de Indias (Colombia). Photograph by Raul Valverde.

Raul Valverde is a Spanish multimedia artist based in New York. A recipient of the Fulbright Scholarship and Fellow of the AIM program of the Bronx Museum of the Arts, Valverde received an MA from Central St. Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts London, and an MFA from the School of Visual Arts in New York, where he has taught since 2011. Solo exhibitions include *Raul would like you to be critically happy*, Centro de Arte Complutense, Madrid (2012) and *Colorear/Editar/Ocupar*, Museo del Grabado Español Contemporaneo, Malaga (2012). Group exhibitions include the International Biennial of Cartagena de Indias, Colombia (2014); The Bronx Biennial, New York (2013); *La Casa Encendida*, Madrid (2012); American Museum of the Arts, Washington D.C. (2012); Anthology Film Archives, New York (2011); Instituto Cervantes, Milan (2009); *Círculo de Bellas Artes*, Madrid (2008) and Royal College of Art, London, (2007). Monographs include *I can reach very High*, (Madrid: Complutense, 2012) and *To look and to look* (Santander: Esete, 2010). <http://www.valverderaul.com>

MORBID ANATOMY

In this paper, Morbid Anatomy Museum creative director Joanna Ebenstein will trace the genesis of The Morbid Anatomy Museum--from art project to museum--and how it relates to such liminal, perplexing artifacts as Clemente Susini's Anatomical Venus.

Author: Joanna Ebenstein

I founded *Morbid Anatomy* in 2007 as a blog, a satellite project of an exhibition I was working on: *Anatomical Theatre: The Body, Disease and Death in Medical Museums of The Western World*, shown at the Alabama Museum of the Health Sciences. To collect material for this exhibition, I embarked on a one-month “pilgrimage” in search of photographic material for this survey of the uncanny artifacts housed in the great medical museums of Europe and the United States. I traveled from country to country with only a backpack and my camera. My goal with the exhibition was to bring the art and history of medical museums to a wider audience, and to reframe their artifacts as artistic and cultural objects, rather than simply antiquated science.

I found myself fascinated by the ways in which context could create meaning; the ways the human body could become, in different situations (or sometimes all at once!) an exhortation to contemplate the transience of life, an object of desire, a word in a curatorial essay. I was drawn by the strange alchemy that trans-formed an object in a museum into a specimen, and by the ways in which all forms of human knowledge production—and none more than science—could be seen as autobiographical, revealing the very human need to find stories and meaning. I was especially interested by the way that science so often

sublimates very human drives, such as the desire to collect, the impulse to order, and sexual curiosity.

When I returned from this trip, I was overwhelmed by the volume of material I had collected. Thousands of photos, scores of links to online exhibitions and museum collections, piles of books and articles from the very kind and patient curators who encouraged my interest with Xeroxed articles and book suggestions. When I closed my eyes at night, I saw rows of babies in jars.

The *Morbid Anatomy* blog was born from an impetus to organize this material for use in my own work. It never occurred to me that it would be of interest to anyone else. I simply created the blog that I would want to read. The name was drawn from the medical world, ‘morbid anatomy’ being the term for the study of diseased organs or tissues. To me, the phrase also operated as a kind of medical double entendre, with which to problematize ideas of what constituted the morbid. Why, I wanted to ask, was it deemed morbid to be interested in death? Death, after all, is the greatest mystery of human life, and everyone who ever has lived has died, or will die, and so will I. How could being concerned with such an important thing be seen as morbid?

With a background in intellectual and art history, I had long been intrigued by the ways in which an interest in death had been expressed



Joanna Ebenstein

Fig.1. *The Morbid Anatomy Library*, 2009, photography by Joanna Ebenstein

in other times and cultures. Memento mori, the incorruptible saints in Catholic churches, post-mortem photography, Santa Muerte, anthropomorphic taxidermy, phantasmagoria, ossuaries, mummies on display, the fetal skeleton tableaux of Frederik Ruysch, the *Anatomical Venuses* of Clemente Susini... Clearly death has not always been deemed an inappropriate subject for art and contemplation. How had death become strange to us? How could looking at the past teach us something about the cultural relativity of our own views? Was I morbid, or was it, in fact, morbid to ignore death, to refuse to grapple with its meaning and implications?

On my blog *Morbid Anatomy*, I have excavated the history and material culture of death on a near daily basis since its inception in 2007. To my surprise, this decidedly niche material attracted a readership right from the

start. Over the past six years, interest in this material has grown and broadened in ways that I simply would not have believed when I began this project. *Morbid Anatomy*—which was really my own self-indulgent project in which I allowed myself publicly to obsess over my own lifelong fascinations—has grown not only in readership, but also in scope.

Soon after founding the blog, I opened up my own research collection of books, artifacts, articles and ephemera to the public as *The Morbid Anatomy Library*; many of these materials in my collection were rare and out of print, and unavailable in any other US collections, and I felt strongly that I wanted to make them available to likeminded enthusiasts and researchers. After this, I launched the international *Morbid Anatomy* presents series of lectures, events, workshops and field trips with partners such as *The New York*



Joanna Ebenstein

Fig.2. *The Morbid Anatomy Library* in the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*, 2014, photography courtesy of the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*

Academy of Medicine and *The Vrolik Museum*.

Last April, we released our self-published *Morbid Anatomy Anthology*: a full color, 500 page collection of 28 lectures in highly-illustrated essay form. Contributors included *The Wellcome Collection's* Simon Chaplin, Kate Forde, and Ross MacFarlane, Mark Dery and Stephen Asma. And the book included chapters on books bound in human skin, *Anatomical Venuses*, the Palermo catacombs, human zoos, and popular anatomy.

But how did all this coalesce into a museum? Well, it's an unlikely story, as befits such an unlikely institution. A few Halloweens ago, I was invited by Colin Dickey, co-editor of the *Morbid Anatomy Anthology*, to show some artifacts from the Morbid Anatomy Library as part of a reading to celebrate the release of his book *Afterlives of the Saints*. I chose to speak about Santa Muerte, a

Mexican cult saint in which an anthropomorphic figure of death is worshipped as just one of the panoply of catholic saints. Her devotees tend to be those whom traditional religion have not served, or have left behind; transsexuals, homosexuals, prostitutes, criminals, and the very poor.

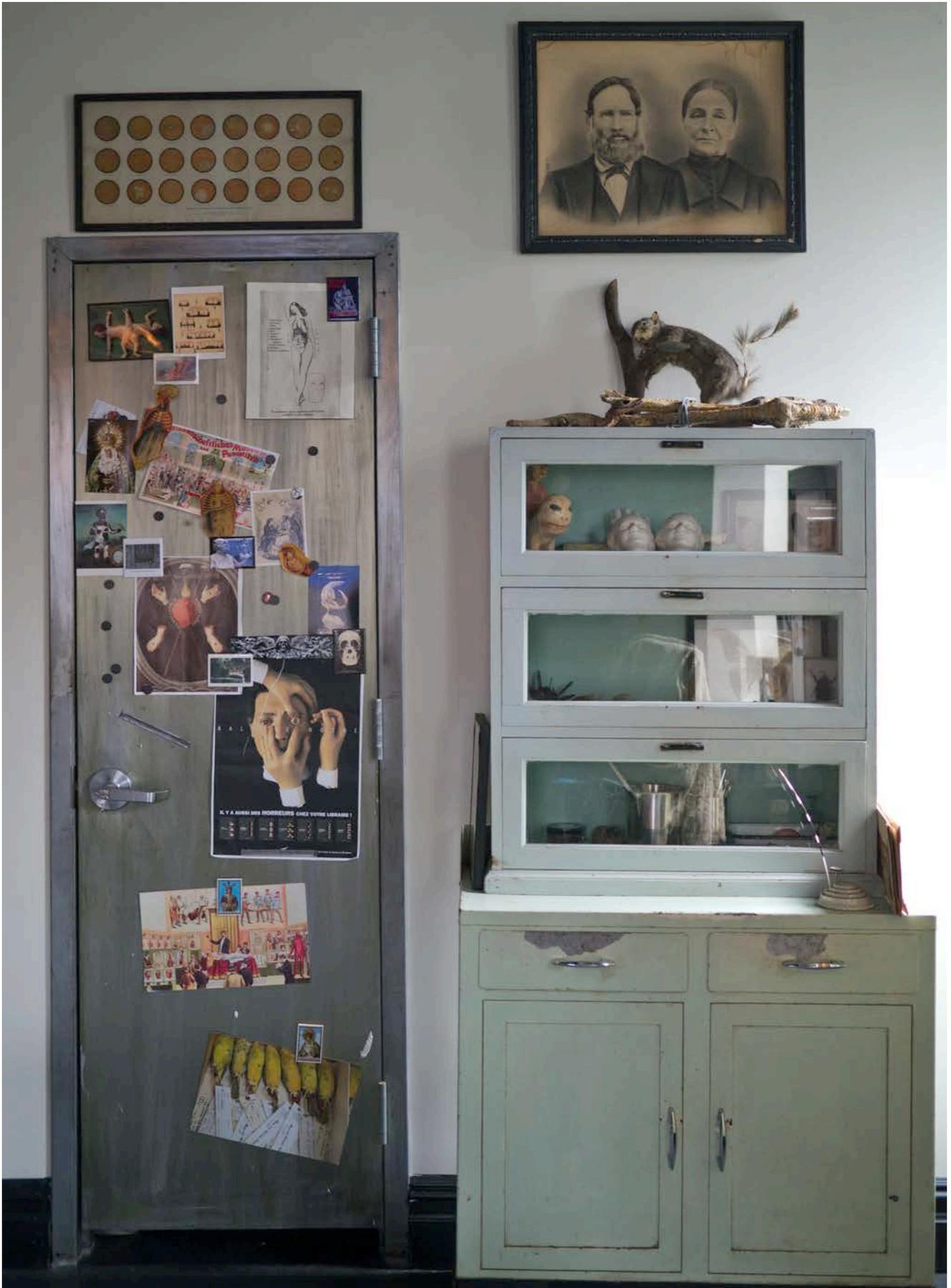
That night, I met Tracy Hurley Martin. She was intrigued by Santa Muerte, and, after the talk, she and her identical twin sister Tonya Hurley—who were off to Mexico in a few days—asked my advice on where to see Santa Muerte shrines. When they returned, they visited the library with a giant box of Santa Muerte artifacts. Tracy exclaimed, "There should be a shop/café like this". "Yes", I replied, "and it should happen now, and in this neighborhood, and I could build you a great museum to go with that".

From this unlikely conversation was born



Joanna Ebenstein

Fig.3. *The Morbid Anatomy Library* in the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*, 2014, photography courtesy of the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*



Joanna Ebenstein

Fig.3. *The Morbid Anatomy Library* in the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*, 2014, photography courtesy of the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*



Joanna Ebenstein

Fig.3. *Installation Shot of the Art of Mourning Exhibition* in the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*, 2014, photography courtesy of the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*

the Morbid Anatomy Museum, which opened June of 2014. The mission is broader than the name suggests: the museum aims to bring to light forgotten or neglected artifacts and histories through exhibitions, education and public programming. It is our aim to show the kinds of things which other museums cannot or *will* not; things which tend to fall through the cracks of traditional institutions because they are not taken seriously, don't fit contemporary ideas, or are difficult or confounding.

This museum is housed in a 4,200 square foot former nightclub; it has a café, a gift shop, and a dedicated events space which hosts our active public program schedule, including lectures 2-3 times a week, and weekend workshops devoted to anthropomorphic taxidermy, Victorian hair, art, and jewelry, and skeleton articulation. Upstairs, you will

find our exhibition space. This hosts changing temporary exhibitions, as well as our permanent collection, the Morbid Anatomy Library, which makes available my own collection of books, artifacts and ephemera related to topics such as art and anatomy; medical museums and medical waxworks; death and culture; and the history of museums and collecting.

The Library is an accessible, informal, label-free space in which, people can handle most of the books and objects can open drawers, engage directly with objects, take photographs, investigate the exhibits, and hang-, reading books or speaking to our docents for as long as they like.

The other space is more traditionally musicological, and houses temporary exhibitions; our exhibitions to date have included *The Art of Mourning*, which showcased objects from the 18th



Joanna Ebenstein

Fig.3. *Installation Shot of the Art of The Collector's Cabinet* in the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*, 2014, photography courtesy of the *Morbid Anatomy Museum*

to 20th centuries, devoted to memorializing the dead. It was drawn from 8 private collections and included post mortem photography, hair, art, shadowboxes, and jewelry; death masks; spirit photography and beaded funerary wreaths. Also included was *The Collector's Cabinet*, a collection of amazing objects hidden behind closed doors in private collections, ranging from a two-headed kitten, prepared by legendary Victorian eccentric taxidermist Walter Potter; 19th century terracotta Danse Macabre, or dance of death, figures; a 16th century oil on panel painting depicting a witches celebration; a collection of erotic ephemera from Weimar Germany from the collection of Mel Gordon, author of *Voluptuous Panic*; and more.

The aim of this exhibition—and the museum itself—is to not only showcase these amazing, rarely seen objects, but also to explore the very special relationship between people and things, between collector and treasured object, as well as pay tribute to the numinous powers objects

continue to exert, even in an age purportedly devoted to the rational. Fittingly, the labels for each object are in the words of the collector themselves.

Future shows will include: *Do the Spirits Return?*, which will draw on a local collection of over 50,000 artifacts related to the life and work of early 20th century stage magician Howard Thurston. It will examine the relationship between secular stage magic and the long history of “real” or “sacred” magic, such as relics and saints, witchcraft, and demonology; and an exhibition devoted to the eccentric Victorian taxidermist Walter Potter.

All of these exhibitions rely on the largely hidden world of private collectors for their content, though our eventual aim is to also showcase material culture from the equally rich world of museum back stages, which, like icebergs, often show just a tiny percentage of their holdings. We would like to provide a space to show things which

no longer fit museum missions, which are not taken seriously, or, for whatever reason, are no longer seen as appropriate to show.

But always, these exhibitions are also about providing visitors a space to encounter material culture of the past. The Morbid Anatomy Museum takes as its inspiration the idea of museums as temples devoted to the muses, as well as cabinets of curiosity, as well as the traditions of popular anatomical museums and dime museums, which put as much primacy on delight as education, and did not see the two as contradictory.

The Morbid Anatomy Museum is open every day except Tuesday from 12-6 and is located at 424A Third Avenue, Brooklyn, NY. You can find out more at morbidanatomymuseum.org

Joanna Ebenstein is an artist, event producer, curator and independent scholar. She is the creative director of the new Morbid Anatomy Museum in Brooklyn, and founder of the Morbid Anatomy Blog and Library. She is also the co-author (and featured photographer) of *Walter Potter's Curious World of Taxidermy*, with Dr. Pat Morris; co-editor of *The Morbid Anatomy Anthology*; and contributor to *Medical Museums: Past, Present, Future* (edited by Samuel J M M Alberti and Elizabeth Hallam, 2013) She acted as curatorial consultant on the Wellcome Collection's *Exquisite Bodies* exhibition (2009) and has also worked with such institutions as The Wellcome Collection, The New York Academy of Medicine, The Dittrick Museum and The Vrolik Museum. <http://morbidanatomy.blogspot.com>

DEMONS OF ART

In his process-oriented installations Thomas Feuerstein avails himself of scientific methods so as, by artistic means, to interweave fact and fiction. Against the background of the artist's work, the cultural scientist Hartmut Böhme reflects on the interaction between natural science and visual arts. In this context, the conversation traces the shift in meaning the term daimon has undergone since antiquity and also, by way of digital and biological processes, questions the sovereignty of modern man.

In conversation between: Hartmut Böhme and Thomas Feuerstein



Thomas Feuerstein

Poem, 2010, glass, steel, technical equipment, dimensions variable
technological realisation: Thomas Seppi, Department of Radiotherapy and Radiooncology, Medical University of Innsbruck
exhibition view POEM, Galerie 401contemporary, Berlin 2011 © Feuerstein

Hartmut Böhme: When we first met a year ago at your exhibition *POEM*,^[1] which featured a wonder machine and a cabinet with bottles, I asked myself: is this alchemy, technology, science, or bio art? The typical means of expression of a fine [visual] artist are images, objects, installations, and matter. But what is special about your work is that you use dialogue, stories and tales. Your works have a narrative structure: They refuse completion or determination as statuesque products; rather, they are always in a state of flux on a processual level. Your work has a relationship to time but also a particular relationship to materiality, where matter acquires voice in the form of chemical reactions and biological processes and partakes in authorship. What eventuates from this dialogicity are diverse connections to the discourses in the sciences and in cultural studies as well as a particular aesthetics. Additionally, there is a moment of play and irony which gives rise to a contemporary poetics.

What is also specific of your work is a literariness in which texts and radio plays accompany the pictorial art projects. Your book *OUTCAST OF THE UNIVERSE* ^[2] features a travel and science fiction novel entitled "Plus Ultra; The Hercules Project", which is rife with utopias and melancholic dystopias. Its title is paradigmatic for the whole of our (Western) culture because the departure into the oceanic dimension of history commences with this "plus ultra." While in antiquity the columns of Hercules marked the end of the world and symbolized a warning against curiosity and the thirst for knowledge, as early as Dante's *Inferno* and later Francis Bacon. The prohibitive *non plus ultra* – no further, not beyond – turns into the imperative *plus ultra* – go on and on, go beyond. Hence, the transgression of limits becomes the attitude of philosophical intuition, as Ernst Bloch repeatedly emphasized, and this has also become an artistic principle.

Transgressions of limits and experiments are characteristics of your work. You persistently transcend genre boundaries between literature, laboratory and art, and you generate varied aesthetics by combining drawing, painting, installation, and computer as well as bio art. From the end of the 1980s to the midst of the 1990s, a critical engagement was to the fore with the medial

and technological constitution of our late capitalist society. While this early phase was contingent on informatics, media and networks with the mid 1990s, the focus shifted towards biotechnology, that is, the organizational processes of living matter. The phenomena of chemical and biological processes have increasingly attracted interest. Anthropological and philosophical questions have been thought through to the level of molecules and it has become evident that the most significant discourse and the strongest phantasm we are confronted with today is not created by literature or art but by the immense prospects and changes that have been emerging in science, particularly with its technological applications. In this second and still continuing phase, the main approach for artists, designers and critics has been to engage discursively and seek involvement. While this opens up new possibilities for art, it also requires new methods, materialities and processualities.

Thomas Feuerstein: The processual has been important for my work ever since my early digital works. In the beginning of the 1990s, real-time data from stock exchange and news networks combined with algorithms facilitated a fluid nature of work. Thus, artworks were no longer determined by a static condition. Each work gained a life of its own and this dynamic generated images and sounds almost endlessly. In the second phase, I developed artworks in greater ensembles, which created among themselves something like semantic nets. They function like correlated communicating vessels that speak with each other: a sculpture, for instance, produces the painting material for a picture; a graphic work, by releasing energy for further processes, becomes the fuel for an installation. Thus, the works create narrative and performative structures that comprise materials and molecules, living organisms, biological methods and practices as well as texts, investigations and conversations. Our conversation is part of such a narrative, too and one of its central knots is constituted by the concept of the daemon.

I am interested in the daemon because it takes up diverse threads of discourse and keeps available surprising transformations of meaning. This, it seems to me, makes the daemon particularly relevant for the present. At first, we are



Thomas Feuerstein

Genius in the Bottle, 2009–2010

72 glass objects in vitrine, 150 x 190 cm

© Feuerstein

reminded of religious traditions where the daemon represents the evil and the diabolic. But there is also the ancient Greek tradition where, to put it simply, it causes both order and chaos and makes people “eudaimon” – happy – or “kakodaimon” – unhappy. *Daimones* were responsible for all that was processual in the psychical and physical worlds, such as the fermentation from sugar to alcohol or from milk to cheese. Today, the daemon acts as a medium, catalyst or enzyme and causes translations and transmutations. It is per se neither bad nor good and may be hardware as well as software. It is found in thoughts and ideologies or in matter and artifacts. Especially its varied meanings, historic transformations and applications for technological processes predestine this notion for artistic narrations, which seek to comprehend

and relate one’s own culture in a contingent and polyvalent way.

HB: I’d like to draw on the concept of the daemonic. It could be argued that the different variations in meaning share a common feature on an abstract level. Let’s think about the relationship to our conscious selves: when we act as subjects we never know whether we are the masters of our action or if something else exerts power over us. We frequently experience a dependence on processes that we either can’t figure out – because they strike us as mysterious, intransparent and obscure – or we are forced to acknowledge that we have no bearing on these processes. The daemonic possesses a driving, productive, creative but also destructive force, which shakes the subject’s suggestion of sovereignty.

TF: We suffer a loss of self when we experience possession or control by alien powers. Angel, devil, djinn or rakshasa incorporate ancient perceptions of daemons, which acquire a new social and consumptive dimension with neuroeconomics, marketing, NLP, digital surveillance, genetic control and biopolitics. The past, the present and the future overlap in the daemon and systems are mixed with categories, enlightenment with myth, technologies with superstition, and autonomy with heteronomy. In this sense, the daemon proves to be a dirty term because of its ambiguity: it shuffles a magical with a rational conception of the world. Since the end of the 18th century, daemons have increasingly emerged in a secular context: We speak of Laplace's demon or Maxwell's demon and here mathematicians and physicians come into play in lieu of exorcists. Eventually, daemons arrive in computer sciences with AI-research and systems development at the MIT, with the result that an email reply of non-delivery is actually sent by a mailer daemon. At least since then we have realized that we are not alone, that daemons lie dormant everywhere as background system routines. They wait on servers, travel on the Internet as search engine bots, navigate our cars to destination or distribute braking force on all four wheels qua antilock braking systems. Thus, they support, but at the same time surveil us, permanently. This could be mythically paraphrased with *circumsessio* and *obsessio*, like in exorcism. Or on a more sober footing, they might be related to a possible etymological meaning of the daemon in the sense of *daiesthai*, which admits to an interpretation of allocator and distributor. Issues of allocation and distribution are crucial questions, which indeed we are all faced with. This holds true for politics, economy, cybernetics, etc., and also for artists and their practices. When I face, for instance, a canvas I am confronted with basic questions concerning the allocation of color.

Various functions and meanings mix and the concept of the daemon becomes a knot where traces of the histories of culture, myth and science are condensed in the present, so as to contingently develop them further into the future. This is why I draw up small literary stories for my projects that

allow me to speculate and fictitiously expand on the factual.

I apply quite a similar approach to my installations and processual sculptures that bear a relation to pataphysical machines. Technology gets processes going and makes growth and change possible and, for that matter, an engagement with a new conceptualization of the material. But this is not yet art, nor is it the essence of what I am interested in.

In my view, superimposing technological-scientific methods and procedures with artistic narrations is precisely what yields a tension that leads to new outcomes. Technological *poiesis*, in fact, is the prerequisite for an artistic poetics, but is, of course, not to be confused with it.

HB: This takes me to the question of the status of the artist. I have an ambivalent impression especially as regards biological machines: the title *MANNA-MACHINE* implies a biblical all-purpose fuel that God granted to rain from heaven. This substance is life itself, a gift from the daemon who is God. In your manna-machines, floating algae grow and are harvested to further feed two distinct utilizations: On the one hand, one can extract pigments and thus the substance of art, or painting respectively. On the other hand, one can produce food off of which the artist lives. This is specifically the idea of the Bachelor Machine, which permits the artist to autarchically and commandingly liberate herself from all dependences on nature. A machine that provides for both paint and food incorporates the maximum of the idea of the autarchic and autonomous genius. However, this in fact also entails the total subversion of sovereignty because non-human entities contribute to the processes and thus undermine authorship. In accord with Bruno Latour and actor-network theory, we can say that collectives of humans and things, of natural and artificial procedures, evolve from the contributions and voices of objects and processes, wherein in turn the daemon manifests. I would be interested in how far the *MANNA-MACHINE* expresses the ambivalence of western self-conception as regards the subject, but also of the sovereign power to act, which found its paramount formulation in the notion of the artist.



Thomas Feuerstein

MANNA MACHINE IV, 2009
 algae (*Chlorella vulgaris*), glass, pump, plastic tubes, dimensions variable
 left: Thomas Feuerstein, *HARVEST*, 2005
 algae (*Chlorella vulgaris*), oil on wood, 290 x 200 cm
 exhibition view *PLANET PARADISES*, 401contemporary, Berlin 2009
 © Feuerstein

The artist, and not the king, is the paradigm of sovereignty. The *MANNA-MACHINE* evokes and deconstructs this at the same time. How is the artist defined in this context and how is his art related to technological environments and biological processes?

TF: This is an apt description of the ambiguity that allows me to interact with disciplines and cultural codes in an unresolved, dirty in-between – literally in the *inter-esse*. The way I see it, the role of the artist is shifting from the traditional producer of images to a second-order artist who creates biotopes where works grow autonomously. But functions and discourses overlap also in the works. The *MANNA-MACHINE*, whose double structure you have just outlined, produces pigment, which I use as painting material – and this would be the symbolic disposition. Also, it grows food with which I feed fruit flies, for instance – and this would be the real function. The algae I harvest – *Chlorella*

vulgaris – and the flies I cultivate – *Drosophila melanogaster* – are model organisms of biology, and thus tell a piece of the history of science. The title *MANNA-MACHINE* quotes a biblical bioreactor. Not without irony, though, it also refers to contemporary scenarios of a paradise machine. All possible hopes have been projected on algae in recent years. One aims at producing biofuel, eliminating the food shortage or halting climate change by carbon dioxide binding. As in the daemon, various and diverse threads converge in a tiny plant cell where crisis and desires, scientific and cultural histories, economy and politics and issues of resources and climate meet. All this renders the cell a narrative knot that, amongst other things, includes the statuses of the subject and the artist as well as the concept of autonomy.

HB: Metamorphoses and transformations play an important role in your work, both in an artistic and a political sense. It mirrors the crises of our time, like ecology, food and climate. When *Drosophila*



Thomas Feuerstein

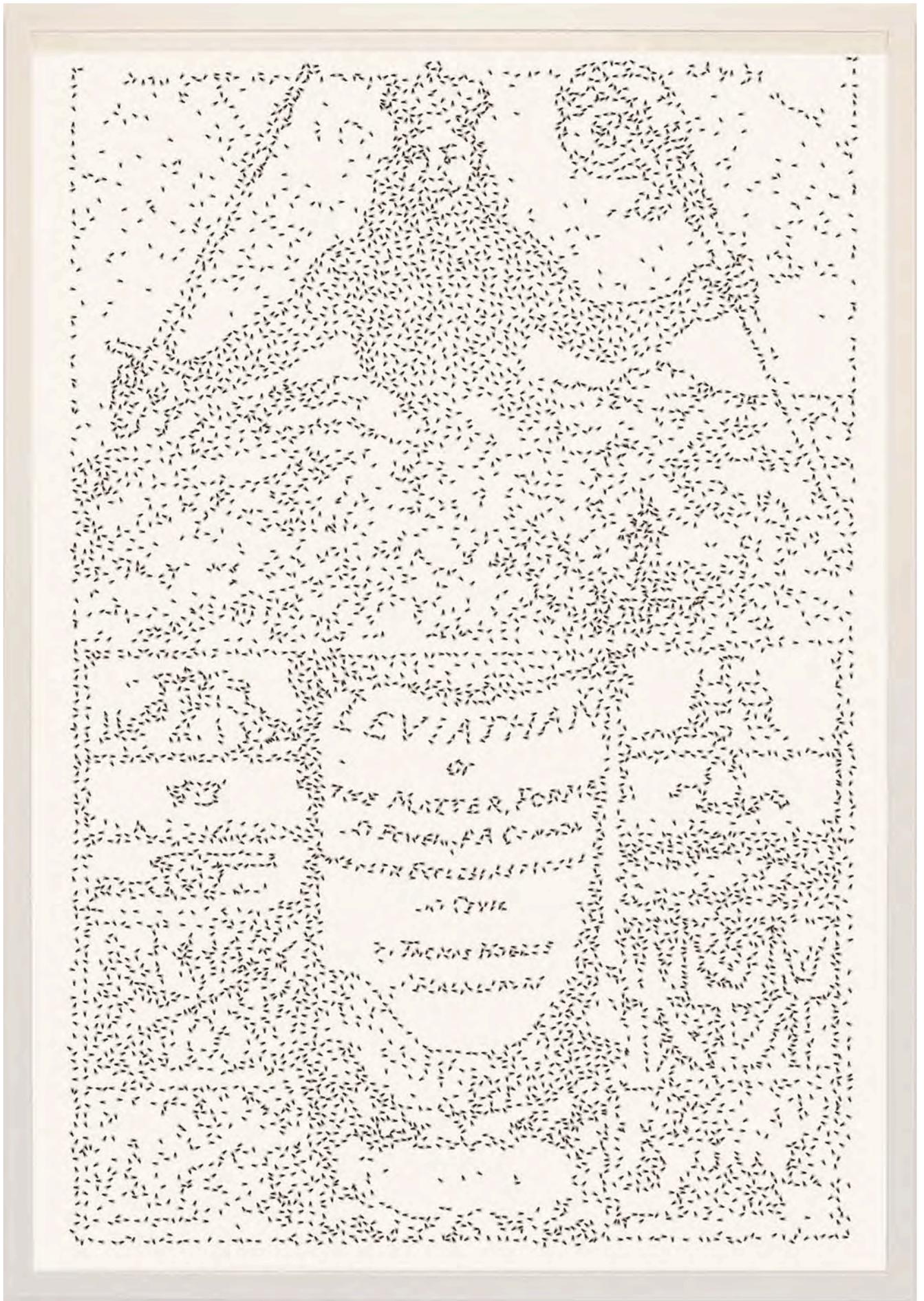
MANNA MACHINE II, 2005

Bioreactor, fruit flies (*Drosophila melanogaster*), algae (*Chlorella vulgaris*), pump, plastic tubes, dimensions variable
exhibition view FOCUS UTOPIA, Gallery Lelong, Zurich 2005 © Feuerstein

flies are cultured with algae and the former configure pixel portraits and pictures, this entails a long process replete with material and symbolic transformations. I see this process as an aesthetic and poetic act that ultimately produces actual fly-portraits of Darwin, Marx, Habermas, Luhmann, or Hobbes and the frontispiece of his Leviathan. It is not by accident that the first of the series of fly-paintings depicts the Leviathan and thus the paragon, or the allegory, of the total, the powerful state. It becomes apparent in the genealogy of your fly-paintings how far you think the political dimension in excess of art proper in your installations. Here, the tradition of political theory meets with artistic materiality and thus raises the

issue of a political ecology and the government of our Earth. How do you see the relation between art and politics in your work?

TF: My work is not political in a short-term sense. It rather poses the old question of the *conditio humana*: What are the current conditions of human existence in the world of today? Where do the varied and partly divergent developments derive from and above all, where do they lead us? Which putative necessities and, more importantly, which possibilities, contingencies and degrees of freedom can we conceive of? It is at this very point that the daemon as allocator and distributor, as both the donor of order and disorder, comes into play again. Democracy and politics are likewise

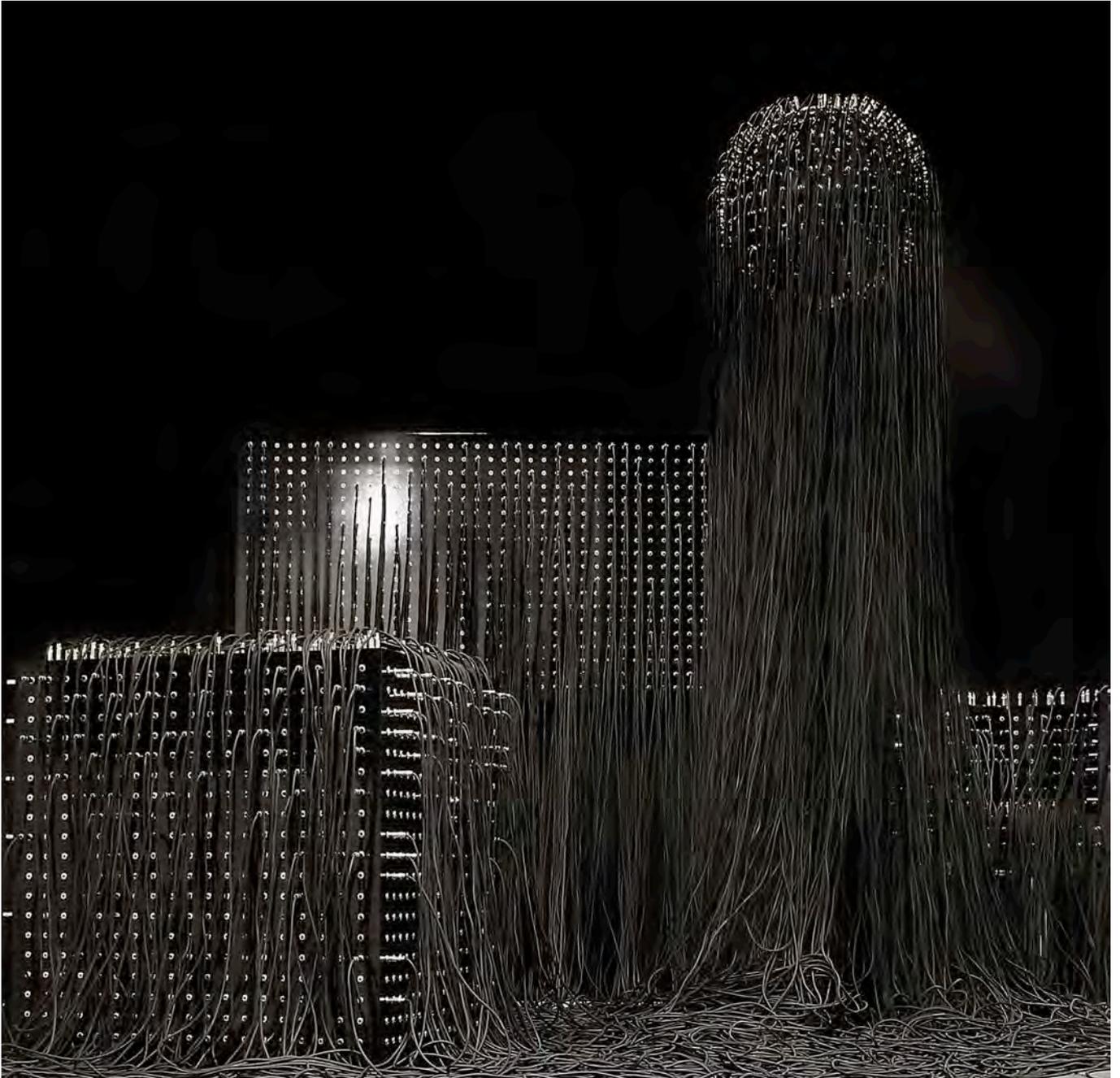


Thomas Feuerstein

Leviathan (Social Emergence I) 2003

Drosophila flies on paper, 170 x 130 cm

© Feuerstein



Thomas Feuerstein

Daimon, 2007

network installation, wood objects, cables, computer/audio technology, dimensions variable

software: Peter Chiochetti

© Feuerstein

about the amount of disorder we seek and how much order we need as a society. Since the *daimon* is etymologically connected to democracy, that is, to the term *demos* (Greek for people), politics is always a daemonic question. Everything that affects society through regulation and is established by law or constitution is a daemonic mechanism of order. Particularly today, surveillance, control and alleged security beg the question of how much order we actually want.

HB: As regards the daemonic, the dichotomy of order and chaos could also be linked to the topic of utopia. Utopists from Plato to Bacon, through to modernity, were always philosophers of order who wanted to produce a kind of *Eudemonia*, a blissful society. Eventually, however, this leads to a terrorist order, which constitutes a mode of ossification and ultimately of death. Your portrait series that is composed of *Drosophila* flies starts with Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* and ends with the

skull of a larder beetle of the kind taxidermists use to dissect carcasses. At the end of this sequence we find the emblem of the *facies hippocratica*, as Benjamin would say, that is, that allegory of history where it enters into "rigor mortis." The catalogue, which features these works, is entitled *OUTCAST OF THE UNIVERSE*, and this is interesting because the outcast is the pariah, the outsider, the derelict who is also waste and trash. Is there a latent subversive sympathy for the destabilization of order and a turn towards the filth of the outcast?

TF: Regimes are narratives that provide orientation. Settled order leads to dogma or to harsh, immutable narratives, which ought to stabilize us morally, religiously and politically. Too much order and morality, therefore, limits the freedom of thinking. For me, one role of the artist is to challenge putative constraints, necessities, values and social models that construct order, by opening up to heretically different possibilities. Regulations are routines of life that occupy us obsessively. In *Wakefield*, Nathaniel Hawthorne tells the story of a daemonic possession in the mode of a parallelization that ends with the words "outcast of the universe." *Wakefield* lives in 19th century London. On a day in October he bids goodbye to his wife to go away for a couple of days. In truth, though, he moves into a small room in the vicinity of his house and stays there for the next twenty years. What starts out as a self-experiment, turns into years and years of omniabsence. For his wife and friends he vanishes without a trace and as a consequence is declared dead. He observes people for whom he is invisible. Each day he asks himself, what drives me to stay here? I lived a happy life, so why do I vegetate in this parallel universe? Hawthorne describes a stealth phenomenon in the sense of a stealth bomber, but not only does *Wakefield* vanish from his environment, he also gets into a daemonic loop of total self-loss. The story ends when he returns to his wife, as suddenly as he left her, and resumes his life. This odd, irrational story is an allegory of our lives: In a nutshell, we go to university and then on pension and what happens in-between is somewhat fuzzy. Regardless of whether you dissent or blend in, you are always an outcast of the universe. The outcast is a singular type, but as

individualism has become the conformism of our times, we are all consciously or unconsciously outcasts.

HB: So, he who leaves for a minute but vanishes for twenty years is the unobserved observer. Looking at your work, this also seems to be the strategy of your artistic interventions. While you are indeed the observer of a great number of social, aesthetic, political and natural processes, you do not expose yourself to observation.

TF: I mistrust the concepts of the genius and the subject because above all they serve to construct myths that are induced by the market. I am more interested in creating things in the background that put themselves into effect on their own. The actual work of an artist, to me, is not to express myself on the surface – these are only symptoms. Rather, it is about building settings in whose framework something happens that produces art. This approach is different to the one of a "painter prince." The fly pictures, for instance, are painted with transparent sugar water. Flies love sugar, they feed on it and get stuck. The work of the painter remains invisible while the flies produce the pixels of the motive. In this respect, I construct aesthetic traps that visualize processes.

HB: May I come back to the flies once again since they are my favorite animals to which I have devoted a lot of time? In traditional emblematics, the fly is the animal of vanitas. For me, therefore, your picture cycle, which ranges from Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan* to the skull, is really an enunciation of this tradition. The god Baal is the lord of the flies who poses a challenge to the monotheistic system god Jahveh by means of disorder and the ecstatic. The fly symbolizes the moment of sin, chaos and the diabolic. When you create a picture cycle made of flies about the history of philosophers of order, this to me is a narrative, or one of our conceptual narrations. Fixed order is broken up by destruction when an ephemeral form of life bursts in. A new virulence of the living emerges out of such an excluded, dirty residual that indeed represents an essential part of life, the *ens* of entity.



Thomas Feuerstein

Myzel #10, 1999

Psilocybe cubensis, nutritive medium, skull, 20 x 20 x 20 cm

© Feuerstein

TF: I have a preference for organisms like flies, larder and museum beetles, fungi, and bacteria because they accelerate entropy. The used beetles are pest insects in the sense that they could, for instance, eat up paintings and sculptures in museums. Of course, there is something morbid about them due to the fact that in the case of inhumation they are the actants that return us to the cycle of life. These destruenters are closely linked to the Vanitas-motive because of their involvement with the aesthetics of putrefaction and entropy. Art has traditionally nothing to do with entropy, but to the contrary with form and information. Art creates cultural values or generates, so to say, cultural heritage by accumulating and condensing

information in materialized form. Entropy and putrefaction, however, are the nemesis of culture. Hence, we maintain museums and libraries as storages and safes in order to rescue from entropy artifacts and information. We care for our cars because otherwise they would rust. In other words, entropy corrodes our things, it's a drain on our pockets, and it's the inflation of life. Likewise, biological entropy means aging and with telomeres becoming shorter, we acquire wrinkles and eventually we die of old age or of cancer. Entropy is the trauma of our existence, and we consider art and culture as our medicine to protect or at least to console us. We wage a fierce battle against entropy in all our sedulous activities and



Thomas Feuerstein

Myzel #10, 1999

Psilocybe cubensis, nutritive medium, skull, 20 x 20 x 20 cm

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everything that had to do with vanitas and entropy was traditionally deemed bad, poor and devilish. The experience of entropy is the innermost humiliation of the human being because it undermines our aspirations and implicates the condition of the potential for something more complex than us. This frightens us, yet in a mythical sense it would be something divine. By contrast, though, we pray to an orderly God so that he makes our world stable and preserves a paradisaical

state. Though life is commonly described as a negentropic machine, I would venture the theory that we wouldn't exist without entropy: Would evolution have happened and would proteins have ever developed? Entropy might just create the prerequisites for complexities and higher orders. Artistically, I am interested in the aesthetics of entropy because it causes the other and the strange to invade. This is the reason why I work with destruent, such as mushrooms, which secretly

spawn miles of mycelia, or microorganisms, which invisibly colonize our bodies. We mustn't forget that we are colonized: extraneous organisms exceed endogenous cells by the tenfold, which clearly illustrate that we are not ourselves. It would turn out badly for us if the cells and microorganisms in our body were eligible to vote on our identity. We simply wouldn't be called human beings anymore.

HB: Entropy can be seen as the trajectory of being, or in a Freudian sense, as Thanatos, that is, as the reversion to a state of motionlessness and torpor. The keyboard is the instrument par excellent with which we produce signs, set values and fight against the second law of thermodynamics, the law of entropy. When you use ground meat to form a keyboard and feed it to maggots, it lives through a metamorphosis because they transform into beetles. In this respect, we could say that entropy is the precondition for metamorphosis and new life. There wouldn't be any energetic processes without entropy and death. One presupposes the other. And this is how I regard your approach to vanitas and the imagery of death, not only concerning biological processes and matter, but also concerning language. For example, your ice sculptures freeze our breath, and thus produce an object in space whose condensation water is in turn used to synthesize amino acids, which are the elements of life. The congelation of breath is a hypothermic and thus entropic death of language. Metamorphosis, however, brings into play a semantic articulation that is not available to us except in the form of art, and also constitutes a reflexivity of art. Nothing but ice remains after the mists of discourse have cleared away. We witness it at play with articulations that on the one hand show a romantic and vitalizing conception of metamorphosis and on the other involve that linear process of decline, vanitas. An entropic as well as a negatively entropic interpretation becomes apparent and both these lines overlap and form a knot. This might perhaps be the reason why you speak of your works as knots because they contain both aspects. At first sight, knots often seem tangled and thus highly disarranged. This stands in opposition to a hierarchic order, as demonstrated

by your library pictures that feature registers, collections, systems, archives, arsenals and so on. One might refer to these libraries as vast burial sites or graveyards of cultural semantics. Nevertheless, they are expressions of the mind and their organization is required for a new and animating spirit

The ambivalence and double structure of entropy and information, ossification and metamorphosis seems to me constitutive of your work. This becomes especially clear in your use of fungi. Fungi construct the largest organisms in the world, gigantic hypogean networks. What is described by discursive theory as rhizome, finds expression in the mycelium of a mushroom. Hence, a different model comes into play in which nature and culture, science and technology, the person and the collective, the micrological and the macroscopic are intertwined.

TF: Rhizomes are clonings of one and the same plant. They can be vast and interconnected but they are genetically redundant. Mushrooms, however, commonly live in symbiosis with other plants or trees. In other words, mycorrhiza provides a linking between different species. So, for me, the mycelium is a biologically far more adequate term for networked thinking. As a metaphor for the Internet, though, it would presumably, for most people, be too subversive a term because mushrooms are destruentals that have decomposing effects. This includes, for instance, that pictures suddenly dissolve from the outside and characters go missing in texts.

There is this ancient mythological topic that is also a paradigm of information and biotechnology: letters or general information are consumed and metamorphically transformed, objectified and enfolded. When maggots consume the ground meat keyboard, the tools of poets and philosophers start shapeshifting and crawling away. The German typewriter has only one letter combination that forms a noun: WERT (i.e. value, worth, merit). This is symptomatic because the use of the keyboard, and thus of language, implicates a positing of values regardless of whether bills, formulae, love letters or novels are written. The transvaluation of values, to



Thomas Feuerstein

Pancreas, 2010–2012

Glass, metal, plastic, technical equipment, brain cells, bacteria, 230 x 800 x 200 cm

biotechnological realisation: Thomas Seppi, Department of Radiotherapy and Radio- oncology, Medical University of Innsbruck
 exhibition view CANDYLAB, Kunsthalle Krems, 2012 © Feuerstein

freely adept Nietzsche, sets in motion a different mode of circulation. What occurs is literally a translation, a transsubstantial objectification or enfleshment.

HB: We have fungi, mycelia, networks and, of course, knots because without knots we could not think a network. You create overlappings and heterogeneities with different threads that conflate and translate each other. Connections and conduits between the knots are crucial and here I'd like to address a further aesthetic element, the line. The hose, the cable, the line in the meaning of conduit are all pivotal elements of your form vocabulary. Even a glass object like *PARLAMENT* conflates octopus-like tubes into a knot that is evocative of a crown. Here, material and information flows happen as biological as well as symbolical processes of exchange and amalgamation. The conduit is a continuous and in

several aspects connecting motive of your lab experiments, drawings, sculptures, and installations. These formal elements, which are essentially the basic principles of living organisms, visualize the mechanisms of living matter. Do art and science work on the same phenomena in this context, and not for the first time today? When we look back on the renaissance period, for instance, the intersection of *ars* and *scientia* concerned questions of aliveness. Today, with the biological occupying center stage, your art seems to be rooted exactly in this tradition.

TF: I am not a scientist, but I'm interested in scientific materials and methods. From the onset of modernity to the present day, materialities have featured prominently in art at an increasing rate. It might sound paradoxical, but the new molecular age is mobilized precisely by the wedding of the digital – that is the virtual



Thomas Feuerstein

Pancreas, 2010–2012

Glass, metal, plastic, technical equipment, brain cells, bacteria, 230 x 800 x 200 cm

biotechnological realisation: Thomas Seppi, Department of Radiotherapy and Radio-oncology, Medical University of Innsbruck
exhibition view CANDYLAB, Kunsthalle Krems, 2012 © Feuerstein

and immaterial – information age to materialities. In ancient mythology, the spiritual needed matter and body invariably to incarnate, that is, to become flesh. In other words, gods require avatars to log in as if the latter were servers. Historically, fine art ranked low in the hierarchy of the arts because it was tied to matter. Music and literature, however, were considered free arts – *artes liberales* – because apparently they were not bound by any constraints material or physical and are closer to the spirit. Fine art, in contrast, was deemed trapped in matter and thus ascribed to the *artes mechanicae*, or technical arts. In the present molecular paradigm, this ancient flaw is now affirmed and has therefore turned into a specific quality of fine art. As an artist working today I'm therefore bang on target with fine art because it offers opportunities to work with atoms and molecules and thus dissolve the schism between body and mind, materiality and information.

HB: Although there are indeed transitions – I'm thinking about your language distillates.

TF: In *POEM*, and with the distillates, I was interested in the very conjunction between matter and language. For me, each bottle is a molecular sculpture. In synthesis, chemical processes with amino acids enrich the condensate of breathing air, and reactions with gases produce ethanol. These organic molecules are sculptures for me that link narratives from science, art, literature, myth, and epistemics in their production process. Translations and transmutations happen on a scientific as well as artistic and fictive level. Even today, something spiritual and daemonic resonates when we say spiritus or spirit of wine instead of alcohol. And something else speaks glossolally out of us when we are inebriated. Thus, the bottles and their molecules are at the same time sculptures, liquidized literature and information memory. An incorporation takes place when I consume them; drunken I perhaps experience a molecular inscription and become a performative item.

The work *PANCREAS* performs this principle on the layer of written language, of writing [script]: the sculpture consists of artificial intestines – a bioreactor containing bacteria – that

convert cellulose, which is provided in the form of paper, to sugar or glucose respectively. Books and pages are digested and the glucose obtained feeds human brain cells in a second bioreactor. What I find so fascinating about glucose is that each and every cell of a plant, an animal or a human being lives off it. The human brain in particular squanders glucose so lavishly that up to 75 percent of it fizzles out in our heads.

Translating language, symbols and signs into matter might seem a rather wry notion, which is otherwise only found in wizardry where things vanish or emerge by the uttering of a magic formula. We encounter this in the tradition of Kabbalism or in Christian transubstantiation where blood becomes flesh. Technologically speaking, we are currently witnessing a "neokabbalist" era in which, by use of 3D-printers, computer texts materialize and become real things. My processual sculptures are somewhat pataphysical and ironic but nevertheless reflect a genuineness in the sense that the notion of text is extended by the life sciences today. This extension of the notion of text that we find, amongst others, in Derrida might experience a possibly illegitimate bastardisation of immateriality and materiality in my work, but hence a current knot emerges. Knots are somewhat transhistorical, as threads from the past converge at present and link to a possible future. For me, artworks act as knots when they operate as thick descriptions, as machines of possibility and translation. Therefore, visual materialization is not contradictory to processes. Materialities are part of visual thought especially as regards sculptural practice. The idea to realize language sculptures, which freeze humid breathing air to chunks of ice, plays at the same time with physical and symbolic translations as well aggregate states. The more people talk about art in the exhibition space, the more hot humid air comes out of their mouths and the faster and bigger the sculpture grows. And the more condensate *POEM* has available, the more alcohol is distilled that in turn is consumed by the visitors of the exhibition who thus become more and more talkative: speaking, distilling, drinking. This at once entails a trifle irony, seriousness and banality. And even if nothing



Thomas Feuerstein

Where Deathless Horses Weep, 2010 (detail)

Cooling unit, founding, wood, acrylic glass, 160 x 60 x 65 cm

© Feuerstein

but empty, warm words were exchanged on art, a work of art comes into being at any rate.

HB: The spirit distilled from words.

References

[1] The exhibition *Thomas Feuerstein. POEM* was on view at the 401 contemporary gallery in Berlin from September 9 to October 15, 2011.

[2] Klaus Thoman (Hg.), *Thomas Feuerstein. Outcast of The Universe*, Köln 2006

Thomas Feuerstien is a universalist. Born in 1968, he has received a doctorate in art history and philosophy, been a co-publisher of the journal *Medien.Kunst.Passagen*, won research grants for electronic art, published articles on art theory, biotechnology, and other subjects, and taken part in exhibitions since 1988. In 1995 he initiated his Biophily project, named for Erich Fromm's concept of "biophilia," the love of life, as opposed to "necrophilia" (love of death). <http://thomasfeuerstein.net/>

POETICS OF UNWILD THINGS

Dana Levy works chiefly with video, video installation and photography. Her work investigates historical, social and political situations, while dealing with memory, identity and the relationship between culture and nature. It explores the various ways that life is taken out of its natural context, uprooted from its surroundings and assigned a place on shelves or display cabinets or on the walls of the museum. The consequences of ecological change that impinge on Western society has triggered inspiration for these works. Here Levy explores the origins of natural history collections, and questions their role as informers about the essence of the natural world. Expanding upon Dana Levy's Poetics of the Unwild is an interview between the artist and former MOMA curator, Barbara London. This interview took place in April, 2015 as a way of referencing Dana Levy's biographical source material. The discussion is in keeping with E. O. Wilson's concept of biophilia.

Author: Dana Levy



Dana Levy

Fig. 1. *Fish*, 2008

Lambda print

© Dana Levy

In 2007 when I visited *La Specula* museum in Florence (fig. 1), which was founded by the Medici family in the 16th century, I was fascinated that the division between the arts and sciences was much more fluid than other Natural History museums. These collections simultaneously encapsulated order and disorder, the natural and the artificial, life and death. They captured a whole range of divergent views, with diverse objects and styles.

In the museum one can find works of the sculptors Clemente Michelangelo Susini (1754–1814) and Gaetano Giulio Zumbo (1656–1701) who created highly realistic wax models as references for medical students. Susini's female figure's braided hair flows into her spleen (fig. 2).

Zumbo's dramatic wax statues depicting the effects of syphilis are of great artistic value (fig. 3). This museum contained a mix of the imaginary alongside the factual. Here the displays not only fed the mind with informative facts, they also provoked various emotions and thoughts.

In my video *Dead World Order* (2012, France) (fig. 4), a curator organizes a museum display around a wealthy ship-owners home, *Maison de L'armateur*. Due to his wealth and travels, he had many little *Wunderkammern* containing taxidermied animals, exotic minerals, artifacts and art objects.

Modern natural history museums often try to convey specific narratives. They are very informative but one fact they do not convey is



Dana Levy

Fig. 2. *Reclining Female Figure*, Clemente Michelangelo Susini, 2007, C- print, 26x34 cm

© Dana Levy

that nature will always be somewhat mysterious and have an unpredictable aspect to it. I doubt we will ever have all the answers about nature. In the past it was more obvious that so much was unknown, so much room was left for imagination. If we look at the first botanical catalogues that were meant for medical use, they often contained myths and folklore. For example, a plant whose roots were shaped as a human figure was believed to heal a person from evil spirits. Today there obviously is a more distinct separation between art, science and magic.

In my work I try to bridge this gap. In Le Havre, the same city where I filmed *Dead World Order*, I discovered a huge storage warehouse full of natural history museum objects (fig. 5). Packed shelves of taxidermied animals were stored in its dark rooms because they were thought to be too archaic for the modern world

in, since spectators can watch animals in slow motion on HD screens.

But I was drawn to these storage rooms as they were chaotic and full of surprises, and therefore made a more accurate representation of the natural world. I came across a room that was full of confiscated souvenirs. Le Havre is a port town, where many arrive with odd keepsakes from around the globe. Some were made from real animals, and therefore confiscated (fig. 6). Perhaps, like the first collectors of *Kunstkammern*, today's collectors of these objects also gain a sense of control of the world by possessing these now dead, but once wild, animals. According to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), it is illegal to trade in objects of these kinds. But in Florida, I found many gift shops displaying similar souvenirs in colorful displays from which I created



Dana Levy

Fig. 3 and 4.

Il Morbo Gallico- Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, 2007, C- print, 26x34 cm.

Dead World Order, 2012. Video, 6:00 min.

© Dana Levy



Dana Levy

Fig. 5

The Ark at Fort de Tourneville, 2012. C- print, 75.14X50 cm.

© Dana Levy

the photographic series *Florida Store* (2012) (fig. 7).

In my work I aim to bring back the unpredictable aspect of nature into these over orderly museums. This idea is what led me to bring 100 live doves into a natural history museum in Israel for my video *Silent Among Us* (2008, Israel) (fig. 8). The birds symbolize life and death, war and peace and living with the silent presence of those who have passed. In *The Wake* (2011, USA) (fig. 9), I brought 100 live butterfly specimens into the Entomology department at the Carnegie Natural History Museum in Pittsburgh.

Expanding upon Dana Levy's Poetics of the Unwild is an interview between the artist and former MOMA curator, Barbara London. This interview took place in April, 2015 as a way of referencing Dana Levy's biographical source material. The discussion is in keeping with E. O. Wilson's concept of biophilia.

Barbara London: I grew up in and around New York. I loved visiting my father's office in the Empire State Building and pounding the sidewalks just as much as spending family summers in an outback kind of setting. There I swam, caught bugs and frogs, and watched beavers build dams. Were you also close to nature as a child?

Dana Levy: That sounds like a good mix of 2 worlds. I was born in Israel but we left when I was 3 and I grew up in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. In our back yard there was a creek full of snakes and poison ivy, there was a tree we called the Tarzan tree, which had thick hanging vines that we would swing on, over the deep fall of the creek.

But the most interesting thing for me was that at the time the area started to change and in this very green tall tree landscape, big houses started to be built in the area, and my sister and local friends and I would spend our days in construction sites of large private homes. So the wild nature was now framed with large wooden structures. When they finished one house we



Dana Levy

Fig. 6

Confiscated Souvenirs, 2012. Archival print, 60x40 cm.

© Dana Levy

would move onto the next house and spend hours there. It was dangerous, and sometimes one of us would get injured, but we kept going back. I think this is where my fascination with the contrast between the wild and the man made began. My mind sought structures to contain the wilderness. Later, when I was 10, we moved back to Tel Aviv, and even though we lived near a big park, I longed for the wild green nature I was used to.

BL: Media is a relatively recent form of contemporary art. You received an MA in Electronic Imaging from Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art Dundee, which has a strong electronic arts program. What drew you into media?

DL: Since childhood I was tech savvy. We had an apple computer at home since I was a child in the 80s and I even went to apple computer camp and learned some programming when I was 7 or 8.

During high school I painted a lot. But I found it to be too messy and I didn't have room to store my paintings. In college I started hand-drawn and collage-based frame-by-frame animations, and later started working with an Amiga computer. I experimented with Super-8 too. When I turned 18 my grandfather bought me a high-end video camera and I didn't put it down. Things were quickly changing at the time. During my first year in college I edited on an analog station, onto Umatic tapes, and by my final year I was using software such as *AfterEffects*, *Adobe Premiere* and *Avid*.

I felt I could be more innovative in this medium. In London, we were encouraged to be different and unique, it may be a British thing, and this medium let me make work that was unique. Bill Viola had a show at the South London gallery, which was attached to my college, and I remember seeing this show and being very inspired. He made video into poetry with no narrative structures and this made a lot of sense to me. You, Barbara



Dana Levy

Fig. 7

Florida Store, 2012. Metallic print, 60x90cm.

© Dana Levy

curated one of his first major shows at the MOMA in 1987. I felt like his works validated my desire to make videos more like moving paintings, or visual poetry, rather than narrative films.

BL: I'm curious about the formal concerns that seem to be the foundation of some of your work. Did this grow out of analytical studies in London and at Dundee?

DL: I think this started earlier. My father's brother was a painter, although he didn't gain much recognition. I admired him very much as an artist and person, despite witnessing the financial hardships that he experienced due to his dedication to his art practice. But this didn't discourage me at all. He encouraged me and mentored me. The last two years of high school I spent in England in a school with a big art department and gallery and a wonderful teacher. I was encouraged to focus on painting and do

everything else only to fulfill the minimum requirements. I spent hours studying paintings at museums and sketching them. Until today I think I am more inspired by painting than any other medium. Interestingly I always started my work by painting the canvas a very dark hue, and gradually I would introduce light. Video is similar; it starts in a darkened room into which light is introduced.

BL: Your works *The Wake* and *Silent Among Us*, are set in very special collections housed in natural history museums. In these works you judiciously investigate nature. You are a thoughtful observer of the methods naturalists use to study life. What drew you to these museum collections? Is it the ornithologists and the lepidopterists' apparent delight in their systematic learning processes? Or is it your own discovery of the splendor of the butterflies and the birds, which out in the wild move about beyond our reach?



Dana Levy

Fig. 8

Silent Among Us, 2008. Video, 05:24 min.

© Dana Levy

DL: I think what initially drew me to these museums was the grid – all the species assigned a place on the shelves of a cabinet in a grid, making order as if to tame the wild. At the time I was working on a series of very long panoramas of half-built hotels in the Sinai desert in Egypt, in which the vast desert landscape can be viewed through the half built structure’s grid. Natural history museums offered another kind of grid. But both put the wilderness into some kind of structural order, and this contrast has always attracted me.

Whilst on an artist residency in Italy, I first discovered La Specola museum in Florence which blew me away, it was like a time capsule, a last reminder of the old world. These museums are a dying breed. And are also full of death. Reminders of life that once was. The more I spent time in them, the more I felt the urge to fill these places with living things, to contrast the dead. It was just a desire I had, without knowing much about birds or butterflies. To my surprise, I got permission to bring 100 live birds to the small natural history museum in Israel with a taxidermy collection of local birds, and filmed *Silent Among Us* (2008) (fig.

8). A few years later, I brought 100 live butterflies to the Entomology department of the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh and created *The Wake* (2011) (fig. 9) The live butterflies fly out of the glass cabinets, amongst the dead species, and seem as if they are being resurrected. For me these works have symbolic meaning, they are about awakening, revolt, and about living with the constant presence of death and the past.

BL: The natural world seems to be an important topic. How and when did this become one of your main concerns?

DL: Even though I’ve spent most my adult life in urban environments, I’ve always loved nature, ever since those formative years growing up with plenty of wild nature around. Being politically engaged, my works after college were more focused on the political situation in the Middle East and had more documentary elements. But then I started to look to nature for metaphors. In 2005, when Israel disengaged from Gaza, I happened to be on a residency in the picturesque Austrian countryside



Dana Levy

Fig. 9

The Wake, 2011. Video, 05:20 min.

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(named Hotel Pupik), far from the conflicts of the Middle East. I looked to my surroundings as my vocabulary, and created "Disengagement," (fig. 10) which shows a rural tree house being constructed and dismantled gradually from the tree. This was a poetic symbolic work, and that's when I realized that looking to nature as my vocabulary of expression gave me more freedom to create a universal language of symbols. Especially after moving to NY, the urban landscape made me seek nature more and more. Some of my works became about nature and man's relationship it, raising environmental issues, but often they also express social – political metaphors too.

BL: Is the natural world represented in natural history museum collections connected to your interest in history?

DL: 17th-18th century in Europe is a time in history I'm fascinated with 'the age of wonder'. People, especially the ruling class, created cabinets of curiosity with collections of objects from faraway lands, paintings, animal parts, insects, and other

oddities and organized them in a cabinet (fig. 4). These eclectic collections made order of the world they were discovering, and gave them a sense of control (fig. 11). On the base of these collections, museums were later formed. This sense of wonder can still be felt in old natural history museums. It's a window to the past. But there are so few left and I would love to visit them all and document them before they are gone.

BL: You recently said that you have become fascinated with objects, perhaps because as a filmmaker you don't make "objects" per se, the way painters and sculptors do. But it seems to be much more than this. Is there something else?

DL: I like the challenge of telling stories and creating drama without dialog or even people. Objects contain stories, histories. A mundane object becomes significant if it has a significant story. In my two-channel video *Refuge* (2012), I shine my flashlight onto different objects I find while walking through underground caves near Caen, France (fig. 12). My flashlight shines onto tin



Dana Levy

Fig. 10

Disengagement, 2005. Single channel vertical video.

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Dana Levy

Fig. 11 and 12

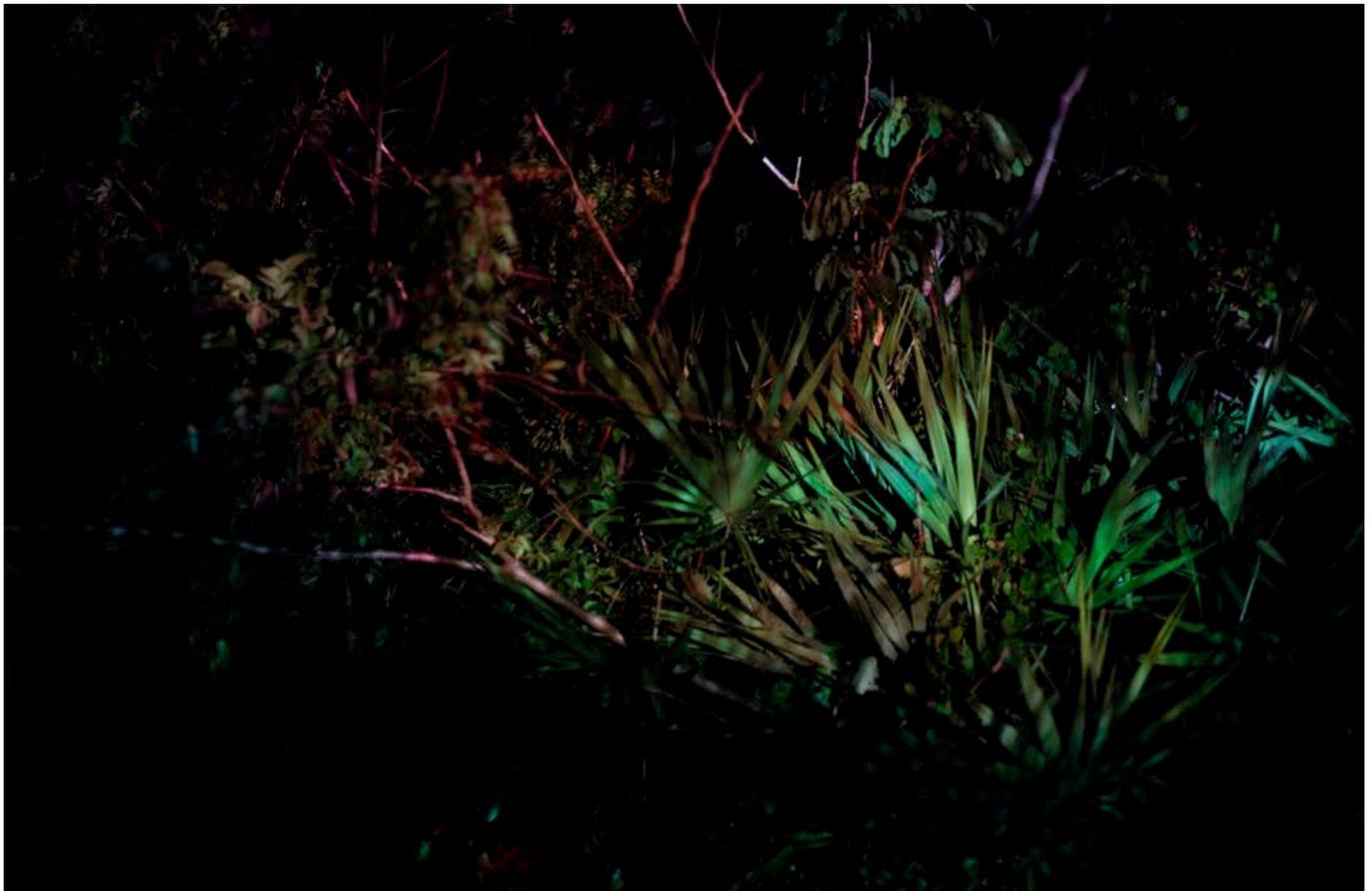
Impermanent Display, 2014. Single channel video.

Refuge, 2012 two channel video.

© Dana Levy

cigarette boxes, broken plates, shoes, simple everyday objects of the working class, but the fact that they belonged to refugees hiding in these caves while Normandy was being bombed above them, make these objects heroic. The objects that helped the refugees stay alive for the many weeks they were hiding down there. Finding them laying in the same place, seemingly untouched, 70 years later, give these eroding artifacts the power to

transport one back in time, more so than reading about the story in a history book or even than seeing these artifacts neatly cleaned on the shelves of the museum. Authentic historical objects and documents, even just from a few decades ago, interest me as they have witnessed and survived through history, and can act as time machines. Studying and holding a single antique postcard, with its signs of wear and faded ink, can be an



Dana Levy

Fig. 13

Everglades, 2014. Single channel video.

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effective transporter into another era. I guess this is the role I like objects to play in my work. Storytellers that cannot lie, yet do not tell only one specific truth either, they leave room for the unknown while they give a lot away at the same time.

BL: I'm curious about your recent work, *Everglades*. The colors are so lusciously alive. To make this installation, you spent several nights with an assistant alone in the wilderness. Surrounded by darkness when dangerous snakes and alligators lurk unseen, you projected bold, colored lights onto adjacent ground coverage and trees. The piece is so visual and seems so alive; as a viewer I can feel your spirit soar. You appear to have opened yourself up more to chance with this production. Is there a reason for this change?

DL: I had a very powerful experience during my time as the sol artist in residence in the Everglades

National Park in 2014. Unexpected, yet powerful occurrences are constantly taking place – a rainbow appearing in the sky on a sunny day, bright pink birds enter the green brown landscape, vultures eating a rotting dead yellow alligator as another bird is performing displays in the tree above to attract a mate. But everything happens so subtly, almost hidden from view unless one is observing constantly. I tried to portray this “magic” I kept experiencing, by projecting synthetic colors onto the vegetation in the jungle, merging the natural and the unnatural.

Actively painting with light onto the dark landscape of the night. Oddly enough the first night, when we finished filming past midnight, a bright moonbow (a rainbow that appears at night) stretched across the horizon. The moon was full, and so the colors could be distinguished even late at night. I like to imagine it was nature’s response to the colors I had just projected onto the landscape.

When dealing with nature, or live animals, there is always room for the unexpected. which I like, I like to let things unfold and surprise me. The filming was very difficult because of the mosquitoes, even though I was wearing a full body net suits and mask. It was unbearable and felt like being eaten alive. I think this intensity comes through in the work. (fig.13)

BL: We've just been discussing the content of your work. Now I want to ask a different kind of question. What new or old tools are you attached to in your art practice? Are there tools that you have rejected?

DL: Throughout my career my main medium has remained chiefly time-based media. Some artists use many mediums, and while I admire that, I actually like deepening my knowledge and experience of one medium. Just as painters can investigate painting for a lifetime, I feel the same. I love deepening my investigation into time based media and working with its limitations. I also create still images, but when I do its usually part of a series of images, so it's also in a sense time based, like the frames in a film. I also like the idea that my entire life's work can be stacked in the small space of several hard drives, which cannot be seen without electricity and certain technologies. This adds a risk and mystery to it.

Dana Levy was born in Tel Aviv and lives and works in New York. She completed her Post Grad in Electronic Imaging at the Duncan of Jordanston College of Art Dundee University, Scotland, and holds a BA from Camberwell Art College London. Prizes include 2006 Hamburg Short Film festival jury award, 2008 Young Israeli Artist Award, 2010 Dumbo Arts Festival best studio award, and the Beatrice Kolliner young Artist Award from the Israel Museum, where she currently has a solo project titled Literature of Storms (until August 29th 2015) curated by Noam Gal. Other solo shows include the Petach Tikva Museum of Art (2014), Center for Contemporary Art in Tel Aviv Israel; Ron Mandos Gallery Amsterdam (2012), Braverman Gallery Tel Aviv (2012), Loop art fair Barcelona (2012), and Nicelle Beauchene Gallery NYC (2010). Her films have been screened widely around the world in film festivals, galleries, cinemas and museums including The Wexner Center OH, The Tate Modern, London, The Norton Museum, FL, Bass Museum Florida. Pompidou Center, Paris, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tribeca Film Festival, International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Cartagena. <http://www.danalevy.net/>

