

The Equivocal Animal

Hybrid Entities in Contemporary Art

Anne Taylor¹

The traditional disjunction between nature and culture has been questioned in recent ecological analysis, which proposes that social constructs influence our concepts of nature, while cultural formations are reliant on natural milieus. Contemporary artists, whose work engages with the social and ethical dilemmas of the technological age, and their effect on the natural world, explore their concerns through the embodiment of these interactions.

The pervasiveness of the concept of dualism in Western culture has been identified by Val Plumwood² as a central cause of the excessive exploitation of nature by humankind. Through the creation of hierarchies applied to difference, qualities are polarized so that one term is devalued and subordinated, as well as being appropriated and absorbed by the dominant discourse, setting up a denied dependency that distorts the significance of both terms. Dualisms are distinct from dichotomies, differences or non-identity in that the qualities of the other term are permanently identified as inferior. Hierarchies of value can be variable and subject to change but dualism initiates a process of domination, in which its judgments become an entrenched and developed cultural expression so embedded in the social landscape that change seems impossible. Consequently dualisms become naturalized, are rendered invisible and are perpetuated in the culture.

This logic of domination assigns moral superiority to humans, sanctioning exploitative behaviour that subjects the animal world to mastery through the methods of denial, radical exclusion, instrumentalization and stereotyping. A mechanistic view based on a reductive empiricism confines animal awareness to impoverished and automatic instinctual reactions. However, recent philosophical and ethical theory has rejected the rigid distinction between human and animal existence, proposing a respect for the variety and interdependence of living entities.³

The neuroscientist Humberto Maturana identifies cognitive processes in the adaptation and evolution of organisms, a self-sustaining process he designates as "autopoiesis."⁴ He asserts that "living as a process is a process of cognition"⁵ functioning in all organisms, with or without a nervous system. Entities are self-regulating in that they define and remodel themselves in response to the changing conditions of life, and given that cognition occurs through responsiveness and interaction, agency is extended to the most basic life-forms.

Identifying cognition in embodied experience disturbs the dualistic coding of culture, constituting human subjectivity as an interplay of natural and constructed categories and situating entities in the urgent flux of the real. Our bodies are in constant

engagement with the environment in a reciprocal interaction, modifying and hybridizing natural and cultural forms, and in turn being exposed to the effects of natural forces over which we have little control. This co-dependency ties physical and social systems into an indivisible and complex relationship.⁶

Much of our lived experience is inflected by cultural attitudes, mediated through artificially constructed spaces and equipment, as well as fields of representation. Social systems operate on a practical, material level, as well as on a discursive level, where ideas coalesce into “symbolic regimes of normative belief.”⁷ These constitute the behaviours and beliefs embedded in social processes that legitimate domination and exploitation of the environment.

In response to our complex relationships with the animal world, contemporary artists have developed an imaginative vocabulary of hybridity to remodel or recontextualize natural entities, as well as adapting or reinventing scientific material in order to explore cultural attitudes to nature.

An organic mutability invades the prosaic world in the disorientating tableaux of Neo Rauch’s paintings, enacting incongruous exploits of barely-remembered dreams. Animal entities appear as disconcerting presences, representing an uncertain symbolism, or as alter-egos cloaking human neurosis. Primeval creatures inhabit the hinterlands bordering forests, farms and industrial suburbs, their incomplete domestication rendering them unpredictable, but also vulnerable. Bridging the disjunction between an abstract, generalized category of “the animal”, used as a binary opposition to the human, and the individuated, particularity of the singular animal, these creatures are obscure boundary-dwellers. Their archaic forms suggest instinctual states of sensual immersion, both primordial and generative, forming a touchstone for the embodiment of primal energy.

For Rauch, the act of painting is staged at the intersection of instinct and discipline, to intuitively orchestrate an oneiric and liminal world. His work is structured through the slippage or decay of meanings, bringing to light images and sensations that are commonly experienced, but mostly dismissed. He refers to these glimpses of the subterranean preconscious as “the strange animal in the cage.”⁹

Rauch’s most recent work employs a tonal intensity that spins into being dramatic atmospheres phosphorescent with the sheen of reflected light, against recessed shadow, rounding some forms into rich three-dimensionality and smudging others into indeterminate fields. The variable scales and mutating spaces used in the structuring of the work elicit unease as well as fascination. The subjectivity embodied by the protagonists in the paintings occupies a destabilized realm. Often human and animal forms coalesce into hybrid entities suggesting mythological sources or evolutionary origins. Rauch’s interest in evoking the obsessions of the unconscious becomes apparent in the manifestation of these chimeras; uncanny composites analogous to the non-cognitive, sensual or intuitive processes underpinning human rationality.

The exploits and roles assigned to the characters are obscure, suggesting the compulsion of instinctive behaviour rather than reasoned plans. A general sense of feverish, but somehow futile, activity fills the canvases, as the protagonists act out enigmatic confrontations, uprisings and conspiracies. Though the scenarios are cryptic we feel complicit, intrigued but also alienated by the fanaticism of these chimeras, workers, revolutionaries, hunters and artists. The enactments span ideologies: capitalist and totalitarian; history and industry; urban and natural settings, all marred by incipient collapse.

This is a decaying world threatened by miasmas and swamps, caverns and chasms, gathering storms and spreading fires, conflict and desolation. Rauch’s distinctive imaginative dissonance reflects his experience of the instability and

uncertainty created by the changing political conditions in East Germany, which exacerbated a general sense of global dysfunction.

Though Rauch does not speak specifically of environmental damage, degraded habitats and extreme weather events are pervasive in his work. The overgrowth of technologies supporting hyperactive human expansion threatens to degrade or extinguish all life, including our own. In mourning the increasing extinctions of wild creatures, we are made aware that our own species is not invulnerable.

Entangling elemental forces and animal energies with the restless machinations of humankind, Rauch maps space into areas of action, like a series of stage sets. Multifaceted planes allow simultaneous actions to interrupt sequential time, drawing together the past and the future into a synchronous present.¹⁰ The tension between construction and decay appears as a consistent theme in the paintings, as crumbling walls, dissected rooms, platforms, props and cut-outs are infiltrated by quasi-organic lengths and coils of pipes and tubes.

The artist's materials migrate into the compositions; paint oozes into viscous and glistening heaps, propping up tables or melting into uncertain borders. The coils and extrusions of unspecified matter and energy appear as composites of the natural and technological. They are alive with zoophytic pulsations, yet they are siphoned into, or emanate from, industrial storage systems. The images preserve a direct link to natural resources, supplying an air of alchemical transformation to the complex techniques of practical science. The reliance of technology on natural reserves is made clear, stripping back the convoluted processes that disguise this dependency.

For Rauch the figurative disciplining of the man/animal being is a conduit to creativity,¹¹ revealing an approach to invention which draws on intuitive as well as intellectual insights. The specific allusions to animal existence in the work suggest the subliminal processes of human creativity, which combine all the modes of perception – the cognitive, affective and sensory. Aligned with the intuitive leaps of invention, aesthetic experience provides a nuanced and inclusive apprehension of our being. It is not a fixed or definitive knowledge, but an interplay of perceptive capacities which produces layered and resonant communicative fields. In sensitizing us to unfamiliar experiences, it breaches the boundaries of anthropocentrism.

Many contemporary artists investigate animal experience with an exploratory curiosity, probing and entangling the categories of human and animal. Their imaginative engagements with biology, technology and science expand the bodily sensorium into highly mediated realms. Presenting metaphoric alternatives to the entrenched divisions between humanity, techno-culture and nature, their work employs distortions, slippages and symbiotic conjunctions.

Microbiologist Lynn Margulis suggests that the evolutionary consequence of symbiosis – the duration of a physical partnership of different species – results in “symbiogenesis”, where entities are inseparable from the processes of the ecosystem.¹² Discrete species respond to environmental challenges by adapting to other species, developing new levels of complexity in co-adaptation and competition.

An invented symbiosis becomes a methodology in sculptor David Altmejd's installations, where animal, vegetable and mineral combine into supernatural ecologies. The corroded forms of giants provide shelter for small stuffed birds and animals, while coruscations of beads, crystals and mirrored shards multiply into a shimmering, fractured cosmos.

Altmejd presents the human body as a composite universe, subject to disintegration and regeneration, at once repulsive and exquisite. Basic dichotomies such as life and death, growth and decline, nature and artifice, are depicted as interdependent, conjuring a polymorphic, fantasized nature. This play of contrasts

intensifies both the disquiet and fascination elicited by new life regenerated from decomposition, complicating fairytale transformations that border on kitsch with the poison of decay.

The gridded planes of modernist architecture appear in the structures and plinths supporting the figures, or resolve into cabinets and vitrines containing the disordered taxonomies of an imaginary museum. Futuristic streamlining collides with the monstrous composite creatures of mythology. The shimmering of mirrors suggests the multisensory vitality and potential for transformation inherent in the faculty of perception, human and animal, which refines the chaotic input of the world into life-supporting actions.¹³ Yet familiar perceptive responses can be disturbed, for we see our unexpected reflections as if they were familiar strangers.

Mirrored surfaces confuse depth perception and spatial alignment, reflecting faceted shards of the viewer's body as if it were trapped within the installation. The contemplative gaze of aesthetic appreciation is deflected into fragments that make random reflections of the viewer inescapable, crowding the already replete assemblages in a disturbing evocation of the persistence of anthropocentric viewpoints. However, as the viewer becomes immersed in the installation, the scattering of the gaze into ever more disorienting and fractured facets also displaces our sense of isolated subjectivity into an interlacing with the animal other and a shared environment.

The embedding of alterity within subjectivity becomes apparent through the acknowledgment of others and their recognition of us. As Derrida observes in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, the gaze of an animal, no less than the human face, exposes in us a vulnerability and a shared mortality as an "abyssal limit."¹⁴ Altmejd's installations equivocate between the generative potential of biological complexity and the temporality and impermanence of existence.

The harbingers of decomposition appear as crystalline growths blooming on and around the hybrid forms, replicating the lacy filigrees of fungi, slime moulds and lichens, or the microscopic geometries of protozoa and bacteria. The ashen fur of a dismembered werewolf resembles the fine stamens of an overgrown mould thriving in the dank humus of a primeval forest. Minute ecologies that facilitate the disintegration and regeneration of organic matter are made visible in these intricate ecosystems, eroding the dominance of human existence. The scrupulous hierarchies of scientific taxonomies are overrun by a capricious disorder which unfolds into a fertile multiplicity.

References to scientific enquiry provide Altmejd's work with a foundational analogy, linking the patient attention of scientific observation and experiment with aesthetic experience. Scientific studies of animal behaviour, ethology and psychology have identified increasingly complex examples of animal awareness, indicating parallels with human experience. Interactions between these categories of perception expand our appreciation and knowledge of the animal world, without assuming total accessibility. Intuitive and empathetic modes of interaction are used in both the arts and sciences, and establish a working relationship with animals through the unavoidable perceptual strategy of anthropomorphism.¹⁵

Art borrows from science, but the interaction is a reciprocal process in which scientific imaging adopts the conventions of art to clarify and disseminate its findings. The translation of obscure data and extra-sensorial realms into comprehensible graphic elements helps us to achieve a more sensitive and subtle alignment with the wider world. Though human awareness can be extended beyond its biological capabilities through the technological mediations of prosthetic equipment, the information attained requires translation back into human terms of reference.

Today the notation and concepts of data in science and technology is often indecipherable to the uninitiated. The raw information of scientific method needs to be clarified by the trained eye of artist and scientist, illustrating a shift in approach taken towards scientific imaging early in the twentieth century. Science since the mid-nineteenth century had depended on “objective” evidence as found in untouched photography or drawings from life, sometimes sacrificing clarity and reproducibility in the pursuit of a purely mechanical image.¹⁶ But as science historian Peter Galison notes, complex data required “*interpreted* images – interpreted through creative assessment, unconscious pattern recognition, guided experience and holistic perception.”¹⁷ The individual judgment of experts could identify elements to be highlighted in presenting information, and differentiate important factors from a background of natural variations, in order to educate viewers in a correct understanding of the material. Instructive re-orderings of information not only clarify meanings for the uninitiated, but also capture the imagination in areas where the weight of systemized method and arcane technicalities could discourage curiosity and engagement.

To be successful, the conversion of scientific data into codified forms must retain the stability of the information represented. Though the medium adopted for the purpose of clarification, whether it is a model, diagram, map or photograph, transforms the material represented, a core of essential content is retained. Analyzing images in science and art, Bruno Latour identifies this alignment of mediating practices as particular to scientific methods, in that the construction of the image is elided in order to preserve the precision of the information conveyed.¹⁷ In contrast, the mediations of art practice aim to reassemble or renew subjective experiences, in recognition of interiority and interpersonal connections. This bringing to presence can illuminate esoteric aspects of our world, not as an abstraction or theorem, but as an immersive, inferential exchange.

An elegant example of the capturing of interest through the intermingling of disciplines can be found in the *Hyperbolic Coral Reef*, a project which bridges art, mathematics and ecology. Stemming from a practical exercise in mapping the topology of hyperbolic space using crocheted forms, invented by the mathematician Daina Taimina, the forms represent a mathematical concept difficult to visualize. The convoluted planes of hyperbolic space constantly loop away from themselves in a negative curvature, and cannot be expressed in equations, making conventional graphic visualization inadequate. The crocheted forms were created by increasing the number of stitches in each row according to precise algorithms.

Since 2005, Margaret and Christine Wertheim, physicist and cultural critic respectively, have elaborated the strictly mathematical geometry of hyperbolic shapes into increasingly complex forms. Noticing the similarity of such frilled formations to foliate and floral morphologies, particularly those appearing in marine organisms such as corals, sponges and sea slugs, the sisters began to construct a crocheted coral reef. Their intention was to highlight the risk to marine life posed by pollution and global warming caused by human technologies. The project has become a collaborative undertaking, with contributions from workshops run concurrently with the exhibitions and from interested individuals. The accumulated forms are arranged into evolving installations that have been exhibited widely, including in the cities of New York, London and Los Angeles.¹⁸ The development of the project uniquely reflects both the convoluted morphology of its initial source, the hyperbolic form, and the florescent, fanning growth of the marine species represented.

Though lacking some of the formal rigour of a purely aesthetic project, the *Hyperbolic Coral Reef* displays a vivid and chaotic allure, fascinating in its intricate and surprising details and the mobile configurations of its evolution. The accumulation of

detail and interlinking of disparate parts manifest a co-operative and generative impulse that is associated with the feminine, a quality reinforced through the use of domestic materials and skills by contributors who are mostly women. A chain of reciprocal validations is established, so that the practical embodiment through handcrafted forms of a difficult mathematical concept renders it easier to theorize; the wild beauty of a coral reef is overlaid with the precision of abstract thought, and collaborative community work is included in the domains of art and science.

The slow and repetitive enmeshing of stitch into stitch produces patiently knotted textures suggestive of the rudimentary and segmented forms of primitive marine life. Barely recognizable as animals, these creatures include some of the most ancient species living, reminding us of our aquatic, single-celled origins. The installations evoke evolutionary time and the unfolding through millennia of biological history, in a continuity which makes us aware of the contingency of our own species.

The animal world will always provide wonder, even though much of it has been exploited, rationalized and recorded. We are attracted by the alien and complex lives of wild creatures and their remote habitats; sites of vitality providing what cultural theorist Jane Bennet describes as a “hyperecological sense of interdependence,”¹⁹ which prompts engagement with animal others and a renewal of delight in their variety, strangeness and beauty. The artists I have discussed demonstrate that animal existence is intrinsic to the representation of human creativity, provides symbiotic companions in a shared environment and can be seen as a fascinating embodiment of even the most abstract thought. These varied manifestations of hybridity sensitize us to the complexity and significance of our interactions with the natural world, and the myriad creatures that dwell there.

Notes

1. Anne Taylor is an artist and academic. Since completing her PHD at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, she has continued her research into the ethical dimensions of contemporary art through feminist perspectives and the role of aesthetic experience in prompting awareness of environmental concerns. Her paintings, drawings and prints depict watery realms as alternative environments, evoking our nurturing but confined uterine beginnings. The work also alludes to the intrusion of human technology into the natural world, and the over-exploitation of its resources.
2. V. Plumwood (1993), *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Routledge, London, p. 33.
3. M. Calarco (2008), *Zoographies*, Columbia University Press, New York, p. 3.
4. H. Maturana (1980), *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, Dordrecht, p. xvii.
5. *ibid.*, p. 13.
6. E. Cudworth (2005), *Developing Ecofeminist Theory: The Complexity of Difference*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, p. 156.
7. E. Grosz (2005), *Time Travels*, Allen and Unwin, Crow's Nest, p. 164.
8. N. Rauch, cited in *Galerie Eigen + Art* (2007), Leipzig, p. 53
9. H. Broecker (2006), “The Touchstone of Painting,” in Holger Broecker (ed.), *Neo Rauch: Neue Rollen; Paintings 1993-2006*, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg and DuMont, Cologne, p. 29.
10. *op. cit.*, Rauch, p. 104.
11. L. Margulis (1998), *Symbiotic Planet: A New Look at Evolution*, Basic Books, New York, p. 59.
12. *op. cit.*, Grosz, p. 165.
13. J. Derrida (2008), *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Fordham University Press, New York, p. 12.
14. S.E. Guthrie (1997), “Anthropomorphism: A Definition and a Theory,” in W Mitchell, N.S. Thompson, and H.L. Miles (eds.), *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, State University of New York Press, Albany, p. 56.
15. P. Galison (1998), “Judgment Against Objectivity,” in C.A Jones, and P. Galison (eds.), *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, Routledge, New York, pp. 329-345.
16. *ibid.*

17. B. Latour (1998), "How to Be Iconophilic in Art, Science and Religion?," in C.A. Jones and P. Galison (eds.), *Picturing Science, Producing Art*, Routledge, New York, p. 426.
18. The Institute for Figuring, 2009, n. p.
19. J. Bennet (2001), *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, Princeton University Press, Oxford, p. 157.