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The We of ‘We’ – Re-thinking Back to the Garden

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson

In our belated attempts to steward, care for, or 'repair' environments, and when we transform individual animals and animal populations considered to be ‘endangered’ from beings and societies into data, what of consequence is really captured—and, more importantly, what is lost?

For fourteen years, we have examined, through our art practice, human/animal interfaces both historical and contemporary. These have included, for instance, the critical scrutiny of cultural constructs such as pests, pets, the wild, the domestic and of the colonial appropriation, representation, and strategic elimination of entire species. The focus of our research has been upon the engagement and exchange by which those relationships are constituted, attempting to put emphasis on neither the anthropocentric nor zoocentric perspectives, but instead on their flux and interplay. Pointing ever more insistently to environmental viewpoints and embracing the inclusive dynamics of distributive agency, such relationships themselves are continually subject to reflex and change.(1) This has become particularly telling in light of an increasing willingness to allow consideration of animal consciousness and zoocentric positions into our fields of vision and affect.

The we of “we”

In the news and media, as well as in the context of a growing awareness of environmental decline and degradation stemming from human behavior and activity, much air time and column width is given to environmental issues. It is striking, however, that in interviews about environmental change with experts in the field, such as climatologists and conservationists not to mention less specialized commentators, there is a palpable avoidance and/or reluctance to use the term “we” to signify anything other than the human species. In the anthropocentric view, which in the West we are all conditioned to espouse, it is as if to acknowledge the environmental crisis, by invoking its catastrophic effects upon a multitude of other species, would be to destabilize or divert an otherwise rational argument. Human need is an anthropocentric given, and as such beyond contest—as a consequence, the human “we” remains culturally blind to the needs of an environmental constituency comprising myriad other species and their/our co-relation/co-production.

As artists researching and producing in this field, it is our belief that no significant change in exploitative habits and capitalist consumption will ever satisfactorily or effectively occur, unless we collectively acknowledge, accommodate and mobilize the use of the term “we” to mean not only humans, but all organisms living here on planet Earth.

Conscious of the necessarily misrepresentative effects of generalization, we have always been at pains strategically to ground our work by means of the specific within the context of the general.(2) We take this general context to be informed and constituted by what are accepted cultural constructs. A non-humanly-mediated environment is nothing more than an ecology, or site of ecology. Thinking about “environment” and accepting the concept of interconnectivity, human beings must at some point acknowledge a global ecology and all the chemistry, micro-organisms, and species of flora and fauna that exist within it and by which it is comprised. Rosi Braidotti neatly summons the paradox of complexity and specificity like this:

> *A location is a materialist temporal and spatial site of coproduction of subjects in their diversity. Accounting for this is, therefore, anything but an instance of relativism.*(3)

Accounting for human action must, if it is to have any credence in the future, embody a new way of thinking beyond the anthropocentric and the absolute. In this short text we point to some of our own preoccupations as artists challenging routine thought patterns by destabilizing what Western-thinking humans think they know.

Recurrent issues that we have addressed in our projects—for instance, in a 2009 installation entitled *between you and me*—include the power and consequences of naming and of representation more broadly.(4) In our 2004 project *Big Mouth*, we examined the extirpation of the Tasmanian Tiger or Thylacine from the island of Tasmania which signaled the species’ extinction. We examined this power of “naming” both to affect, and in the latter case, to seal the fate of an entire species.(5) A name is a signifying skin assigned to stand for something. That skin, like all representations, serves unwittingly (or not), to occlude the thing it is supposed to represent – in this case the animal that exists within and part of an environment, for which that environment is an extension and the overall constitution of which informs and contributes to its being. This name, and our human reliance upon it as a handle of convenience, supplants the real. It appears to denote but in fact simply directs our understanding towards an illusion of finite and unchanging difference. This is an unintentional disregard arising from an idea of fixity, in that a name by which something is referenced necessarily must be dependable and remain consistent. It cuts off our ability to recognize, or more importantly

to expect and be alert to difference or deviation within the thing or being observed, witnessed, or experienced. Importantly, when examining a non-human animal, the repeated application of a name reduces our capacity to grasp the idea that it might be something other than a construct that human beings have the faculties to register. In this act of naming, the appreciation of the individual animal itself and its particular ecological conditions is thereby suppressed or extinguished entirely.

Startlingly, the effect of this is that when difference is encountered beyond that conjured by the behaviors-set of the representational image, it is dismissed as being idiosyncratic. In effect, the name serves or attempts to neutralize the non-human animal as a set of recognizable, familiar, repetitive, and repeating behaviors. Rather than being an extension to the species' ontology and human knowledge, newly observed traits are thought probably to be aberrant and not worthy of attention.(6)

This is the notoriously reductive nature by which science is seen by many to function in the world. The need to repeat and to be able to predict behavior and conditions is one of the qualities necessary for scientific endeavor to be recognized as such. Curiously, the idea of the repeatable so often fails to take into account and even precludes an allowance or recognition of conditional differences—differences very often signified by, or arising from, changed contexts and circumstances. In short, when considering the behaviors of elements, minerals, environmental growth patterns, biological systems, or species of plants, animals and birds, those conditions which mediate and potentially challenge the repeatable (and thus render it more mutable and more unstable) are eradicated. For taxonomic and classification purposes, it is almost a tautology that the rational mind is conditioned to seek static and reliable models.

We assume that this is a cultural rather than a blanket human tendency—that Western societies have come to be this way—to look first for 'things' in order subsequently to scrutinize them in isolation and to use their assigned characteristics as maps and models by which to proceed.

Paradoxically, this kind of taxonomy—the kind that strips away the conditional—exists as an antithesis to ideas of flux and change, and thus to evolution. Taxonomy sits in opposition to what is fundamentally accepted as an ever-changing world, one that is intrinsically responsive and reactive to specific and local deviations that, when concentrated and sustained within a particular locale at sufficient intensities, will assimilate and reflect profoundly and irrevocably such changes.

As a means of tracking and understanding the world it has become common practice to generate data, turning populations of beings into sets of tables which reflect broad tendencies and effects. As a kind of 'boiling down' process, the figures are used as a basis from which to deduce and draw conclusions, which in turn drive the mobilization of particular actions. Such data and actions rarely privilege or acknowledge animal individuation. By accumulation they simply constitute a generalized body of information from which action can rationally be promoted.

The reluctance to corral a consciousness of the human species into the same frame as others stems from a long-established tendency to consider the human as special—literally, as exceptional. Popular knowledge and all manner of data and facts now support the idea that we are biologically very close to plants, never mind our animal cousins. As Donna Haraway points out:

> *I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only 10 percent of all the cells that occupy my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions* [...] *To be one is always to become one with many.* (7)

If the case is to be made regarding the term "we," and its potential as an ecological tool for modifying and improving our perceptual grasp on our place within the world, then this understanding is key. We have to re-imagine our human selves as existing alongside and in some way equalized with all other flora, fauna, bacteria, fungi, protozoa etc.—but in fact this imaginary is made simpler because we are ourselves constituted in large part by these other species. "We" all carry each other around. "We" replenish each other and continually move in and out of "us." We are part of and collectively, the entirety of the flux of an interspecific "us."

What I do to the world, therefore, I do to myself.

Part of the perceptual inadequacy that obstructs this view arises from an inability to conceive of the timescales involved in evolutionary change. The human lifespan is simply not long enough to take seriously or even recognize signs of significant, large-scale environmental change. Any awareness there may be of the proliferations of storms, flashfloods or heat-waves is often qualified and countered by the delusional reassurance that such extremes have always existed and, therefore, signal no change of any lasting consequence. Science tells us otherwise, but the tendency is to take "uncomfortable"

science with a pinch of salt in ways that run counter to a more characteristic acceptance of and passive reliance upon it.

Implicit in this reluctance is a bleak message about human nature or, more specifically, the impossibility of the distance we have travelled as a global society from understanding a world that we knew previously as hunter-gatherers. Where once the relations between place, denizens and seasons would have been ontologically implicit, human dependence now is on a world of specialist services, skill-sets, and technologies supported by intermediary currencies and language that extend the perceptual gap and our inability to engage with the reality of the planet. Irrationally, there seems to be an unbreakable relationship between what is seen as rational thought and its foundation in the imperative of human need.

In this fragile context the sustainability of conservation strategies is as much under threat as its respective subjects. For as long as funding is made available, conservation programs may be sustained and individual species conserved. But when that funding dries up or is redirected, strategies will be curtailed and species' survival put in jeopardy because the complex factors threatening the species are not holistically addressed. Conservation is a costly and temporary life-support system, but it is also an admirable practice predicated on sweet hope. Its optimism and most promising prospect is that cultural approaches to the environment will become more joined-up. In this context, at this time, conservation’s holding strategy is a bid to stay the hour of what seems like inevitable execution.

Rebecca Solnit observes:

> *'It is in the nature of things to be lost and not otherwise...*
>
> *...It is as though we make the exception the rule, believe that we should have rather than that we will generally lose. We should be able to find our way back again by the objects we dropped, like Hansel and Gretel in the forest, the object reeling us back in time, undoing each loss, a road back from lost eyeglasses to lost toys and baby teeth.*
>
> *The story of extincting species, especially now, is the story of the failure to love. It is a letter of affection never sent.*(8)

And so it will remain until some as yet unseen epiphany reveals the mutuality of our shared predicament, and human selfishness at last provides the necessary consensus and spur to act.

Humans are heavy animals—they move through the landscape crushing and pounding the ground, damaging myriad small organisms beneath their feet without knowing what it is they destroy. As a knowing species, however, humans have extensive knowledge of the metaphorical footprint applied to the organisms of the earth. The ever-growing human population weighs more and more heavily on the planet while simultaneously commanding comprehensive and precise data by which to register and record its impact.

Given that artists in any discipline are not obliged to tell “the truth,” there may be nothing at all of worth here. This is particularly true when the authors are equally complicit in matters environmental—we aspire and fall short. Everything uttered regarding the we of the “we” is open to ethical critique and charges of duplicity. Indeed, our wavering in the world mirrors precisely the human inertia to which we point and flap in this text.

As artists, being asked to act as go-betweens or facilitators between science and the general public raises a curious paradox. From our perspective, there’s no doubt that science commands more passive trust in the public mind than does art. The opinion of the general public regarding art is largely one of disinterest arising from a perception of its irrelevance. To a smaller segment of the public there is undoubtedly interest in more palatable and “attractive” art that offers little or no threat to a populist status quo. To a tiny proportion of the public, an interest in art coalesces around challenge and critique—even philosophical radicalism. So given that what we are likely to produce from our research addresses the third, small audience directly, and perhaps uses strategies of aesthetics and spectacle in ways that may tempt the second, the question is: How can what is produced as art effectively or in any way, tax the consciousness of an environmentally aloof and unconcerned majority?

In light of what can only be described as the international inability to respond imaginatively and ecologically to an obvious environmental need, the ambition for recalibrating our cognitive thinking towards constructive ecological uncertainty and deference is unlikely to be realized across the board any time soon. The imperative therefore must be to introduce incremental shifts in our cultural approach. As artists, we see our work in its project-based and serial manifestations as a way towards that end. The nature and implementation of the work as critique and discourse, both short term and longer term, quite naturally sits as components of, and in extension to, the work itself. It functions as a tool to increase the visibility and impact of embedded ideas, to extend

the resonance of the work across multiple fields, and to serve as a means by which to test its effects.

Endnotes

(1) See Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010.

(2) Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome. A Cultural Life Of Polar Bears.* London, Black Dog Publishing, 2006. See also Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *nanoq: flat out and bluesome*, February-April, 2004. Spike Island, Bristol. Exhibition included ten taxidermic polar bears.

(3) Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, 171-172.

(4) Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *between you and me*. Kalmar Museum, Kalmar Sweden. August-October, 2009. Exhibition. Installation included video works *the naming of things* and *Three Attempts*.

(5) Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *Big Mouth* Tramway, Glasgow, Scotland. April- May, 2004. Exhibition. See also Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson, *Big Mouth*. Glasgow: Tramway & Cumbria Institute Of The Arts, 2004. Catalogue.

(6) An alternative approach might be additive rather than reductive—one that recognizes capacity rather than tendency and that solicits and embraces complexity rather than peddling caricature.

(7) Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet*. Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 2008, 3-4.

(8) Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to getting LOST*: Edinburgh, Canongate Books Ltd., 2011, 186 (first published 2005).