

## Humane-itarian Interventions

### *The Elephant's Self-Portrait*

*I*n early 2008, a virtual storm began brewing around a viral video of an elephant in the act of painting what was repeatedly described as a “self-portrait” (“Original Elephant Painting”). Originally posted on YouTube by a pair of tourist art entrepreneurs as a teaser campaign for their online business venture Exotic World Gifts, the video subsequently made the rounds of numerous social networking sites, accumulating millions of hits, tweets, and comments. Shot at an unidentified Asian location, the video features an elephant bearing a trough of materials in its trunk being led by its mahout up to a canvas, where it proceeds to engage an audience of tourists in a somewhat novel circus routine: painting on an easel by gripping a paintbrush with its trunk.

The main event of the video takes place at around a minute and a half into the eight-minute clip, when the animal’s single protracted gray brushstroke begins undeniably to resemble the crude outline of an elephant’s torso and trunk, eliciting a marked escalation in the crowd’s response from polite amusement to exclamations of astonishment. The camera zooms in to emphasize the remarkable spectacle of mimesis—an

**Figure 1**  
Still from “Original  
Elephant Painting”  
video

Screen capture from  
[http://www  
.youtube.com/  
watch?  
v=He7Ge7SogrK](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=He7Ge7SogrK)



elephant’s trunk painting an elephant’s trunk—and remains locked in this framing as the pachyderm laboriously completes its rudimentary portrait amid alternating gasps and cheers from the now unseen onlookers. Finally, the animal stops, switches brushes, and adds one final flourish: in place of a paintbrush, the raised trunk of the elephant in the portrait bears an orange flower complete with a green stem and leaves (see fig. 1).

The motley array of comments generated by this video alternate between wonder and mistrust, awestruck defenses of animal intelligence and incredulous dismissals of the painting as a trick or a gag. But what unites believers and skeptics alike is the anthropocentric teleology of animal intelligence underpinning their shared question: is an elephant capable of producing a self-portrait? Regardless of the answer, the terms of the question remain undebated: all are agreed that the capacity for “selfhood” and “art” separates human beings from the “lower animals.” Accordingly, the elephant’s ability to produce an iconic representation of itself consistent with the figural traditions of portraiture is venerated as a miracle, since it seems to evidence consciousness and therefore proximity to the human as an evolutionary ideal.

Curiously, this humanizing narrative has become the legitimating framework for a number of animal welfare–based initiatives that advocate the use of painting as a humane technique for rehabilitating former working elephants. In 1998, two Russian émigrés and artists, Vitaly

Komar and Alexander Melamid, garnered financial support from various international philanthropic sources to establish the first “elephant art academy” in a training camp in Lampang, Thailand. Their initial goal was to rescue and gainfully reemploy Thai draft elephants whose numbers have dwindled significantly due to coercive and deleterious working conditions in illegal log-poaching operations and the tourist entertainment circuit in the aftermath of Thailand’s 1990 logging ban (Komar, Melamid, and Fineman 19–60). A number of elephant training camps across the Asia-Pacific region that “supervise the gentle teaching of various painting techniques to elephants and caretakers using non-toxic art supplies” are now united under the banner of Komar and Melamid’s nonprofit initiative, the Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project (AEACP).<sup>1</sup> Each camp has its “star” elephant artists and specializes in different styles and color palettes, including brush-stroke, line, and splatter paintings that are often compared to prominent works of abstract art, but the most popular and expensive works by far are the realistic portraits of elephants produced in the Maetaman Elephant Camp in Chiang Mai, Thailand, the site of the famous video. The branding and sale of elephant paintings in the name of “conservation” serves a moral and an economic purpose at once: it furthers the cause of animal rights by demonstrating the elephants’ worthiness for empathy, generates employment opportunities for mahouts, and sustains a thriving cottage industry of Asian elephant art purveyors. As a case in point, the aforementioned Exotic World Gifts advocates “compassion shopping,” or the consumption of non-Western handmade goods by Western tourists, arguing that their fair-trade business model enables marginalized or at-risk Third World artisans (including “starving elephant artisans”) to support themselves using their own creative labor (see *Exotic World Gifts* website, “Mission Statement”).

An initial glance at the elephant painting video may lead us to dismiss it as just another small wave on the vast shore of animal kitsch-based Internet memes. But its deployment in elevating the status of animals as artists, such that the paintbrush-wielding elephant stands in as the new poster child for the “dignified beast,” compels a number of philosophical questions regarding the transformative potential of art and the media intervention undertaken for humanitarian reasons. This new breed of humanitarian media intervention, in which “animal art” stands in as a rallying cry for “animal rights,” is the subject of my inquiry in this article. What theories regarding incarceration, freedom, and progress propel the humanitarian—or rather, *humane-itarian*—ethical imperative

of liberating animals from the zoo or factory to the art gallery, and what can this emancipatory narrative tell us about critical efforts to democratize art? If we approach this artistic endeavor from the perspective of media theory, what are the conventional codes of looking, framing, interfacing, and editing that predispose the interpretation of the elephant's painting as a "self-portrait"? Finally, since selfhood is positioned as the portal through which animals can "come to voice" or assume a positive subjectivity in the eyes of human beholders, how does this type of intervention envision the operation of power and its twinned concept agency, and what types of agencies or intersubjective power relations might be said to function at its limits?

The pursuit of these interrelated questions, I will show, is anything but trivial. The act of equipping animals with visual media as a means of self-representation positions them as the new protagonists in a familiar drama of reflexivity, wherein marginalized entities that have previously been represented as "subhuman," including indigenous natives, people of color, women, and children, are belatedly "given voice" as the authors of their own media portrayals. But the axiomatic rendering of animals as humans "without" technology or subjectivity uniquely positions us to assess the aesthetic and ideological outcomes of the humanitarian act of endowing the "others" of the privileged West with technology and, by extension, humanity.

An investigation into this concertedly humanist mode of technological intervention seems particularly pertinent in the context of the ongoing interest among media scholars and cultural critics in "post-human" avenues of inquiry. We are now familiar with the posthumanist turn to the technicity of animals as a speculative blueprint for displacing the human from its privileged position in relation to cognition, reason, and meaning making. Since the method adopted by these inquiries routinely involves "defamiliarizing" or intervening in the normative frames and conventions of representation that maintain structures of domination and subordination, we can say that their practice is, broadly speaking, a reflexive one—a practice that wishes to expose its discursive conditions of possibility to its own scrutiny and that of others. This is a characteristic that posthumanism shares with the humane-itarian impulse to ennoble the animal with the addition of technology. And yet, even though humane-itarianism exemplifies the type of anthropocentric frame that posthumanists wish to unsettle, for the same reason it usefully illustrates how the posthumanist gesture of reflexivity can itself become a kind of humanist

trap that installs the dominant group (in our case, the human) as the arbiter of what is “authentically” normative or nonnormative (human, nonhuman, or posthuman).

To this end, I navigate a series of debates traversing the fields of media studies, critical theory, and animal ethology that together demonstrate how our inherited understandings of the human and the animal are sustained by particular and habituated engagements with media forms, including the forms of medial reflexivity. Finally, I consider a series of human-animal media collaborations that suggest possible avenues for interrupting the circle of posthuman and humane-itarian reflexivity by staging their convergences. Although they are not exempt from critique, these practices generate a nuanced vocabulary for the concrete gestures, signifying conventions, and power effects attendant to the act of “democratizing” media or art beyond the human.

### *Humane-itarianism*

I have suggested that we think of the painting elephant as an instance of “humane-itarianism” at work. This ungainly term serves to highlight the coimplication of two post-Enlightenment discourses that have influenced the treatment of animals in the twentieth century. The first is the humanitarian media intervention, which refers to the practice of saving the lives of individuals (especially those in the third world) who are stripped of their political status and rights due to war, a hostile state, disaster, and so on, by bearing witness to or “exposing” their condition. Such media exposure often adopts rhetorical tropes that connote “immediacy” in order to emphasize the urgency of philanthropic action, as seen in the visual practice of international humanitarian organizations such as Médecins sans Frontières, Human Rights Watch, and Witness. The second is humane reform, which has sought to eliminate suffering due to cruelty or neglect by appealing to “humanity” as an ethical category encompassing all humans, particularly those whose circumstances might mark them as undeserving of compassion. Prominent examples of humane reform include campaigns for the abolition of slavery as well as the replacement of corporal punishment, torture, and execution by gentler modes of rehabilitation in the treatment of incarcerated persons.

Whereas in its earliest inception the Royal Humane Society was founded to resuscitate drowning victims who were presumed dead, humane societies in most countries are now devoted exclusively to animal

welfare—a fact that amply evidences the extension of humanitarian and humane discourses beyond the human to other indentured and incarcerated subspecies. Indeed, the preservation and improvement of animal life is announced as an indispensable part of social enlightenment, democracy, and modernity in the work of such influential animal rights initiatives as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which is well known for visually graphic media campaigns that expose the suffering of animals in factories, laboratories, the fur trade, and the like. However, the changing situation of Asian elephants identifies the subtler consequences of the merger of humanitarian and humane discourses and, in particular, how the condensed temporal frame of interventionist rhetoric advances the humane alternative to suffering or death without necessarily questioning its cultural and political implications. We can better reflect on the enduring effects of this merger by turning to one of its most provocative critics: Michel Foucault.

From our perspective, *Discipline and Punish* can be regarded as an important philosophical inquiry into the prison as a site of humanitarian reform, given Foucault's emphasis on both the openness of modern prisons to public scrutiny and their adoption of lenient and benevolent modes of reformation focused on the soul more than the body of the prisoner. Foucault's insight in this text, if we approach it through the logic of his later work on biopolitics and governmentality, is to show that the discourse of "enlightenment," as literalized in the diagram of Jeremy Bentham's light-filled prison, the Panopticon, has inaugurated an era in which illumination can be a means not just of entrapment but of soft control.<sup>2</sup> Instead of killing the perpetrators of crime in the manner of previous, repressive methods of punishment, modern prisons efficiently put their inmates to work as soul-searching directors of their own reformation and rehabilitation without laying a hand on them.

In the aftermath of the events at Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, it is clear that this transformation has not been achieved in all systems of incarceration in all parts of the world, but Foucault has nevertheless shown that the humane alternative to killing is part and parcel of a biopoliticization of life, wherein entities that would otherwise be discarded or relegated to the margins of society are repositioned at the living heart of the social factory. The humanitarian intervention to stop killing, in other words, can be regarded as a form of nongovernmental biopower.

We know, of course, that Foucault was not referring explicitly to animals in his work on reforms in confinement practices. However,

the transition of elephants from the dark world of illegal logging to the spotlight of the art gallery explodes the scope of the discursive linkages the philosopher himself drew between the various subhuman entities that populate his writings (such as the insane, the criminal, the sexual deviant, etc.) and confronts us with the unusual ways in which nonhuman life achieves “useful” social and cultural purpose in our postmodern, globalized times. Asian elephants’ transition from draft animals to artisanal painters—is a testament to the success of humane-itarianism as an undisputed discourse of progress in that such “rehabilitation” permits the elephants’ seamless reintegration into human society as productive citizens rather than vagrant beasts. The proceeds from the sale of their paintings even transform the elephant training camps into an ingenious and economically sustainable alternative to the “no-kill” shelters that house unwanted or dangerous animals in the United States and elsewhere. In this way, the painting elephant parallels the work of antideforestation laws in showcasing Asia’s transition from barbarism to modernity.

Proponents of animal rights, however, would surely object that “entrapment” is a hyperbolic or simply inaccurate descriptor for the benign work of painting self-portraits for sale to tourists, citing an undeniable improvement in the lives of Asian elephants, which would otherwise be exposed to coerced labor, harmful working conditions, or physical entrapment in makeshift zoos or sideshows. To give this position its due, we might consult a case referenced in the postscript to the standard edition of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. In an anecdote that editor Alfred Appel notes may in fact be fictitious, Nabokov reports encountering a newspaper article in the late 1930s about the first ever drawing “charcoaled by an animal”: the animal in question, an ape held in captivity at the Paris Zoo, is said, “after months of coaxing by a scientist,” to have produced a sketch of the bars of its cage (311).<sup>5</sup>

Can there be a better manifesto for our brand of humane-itarian media intervention than this moving—if imaginative—portrait of life in captivity? The artistic production of Nabokov’s ape bears out the art historian John Berger’s melancholic claim that the architecture of looking relations in urban zoos renders impossible any “authentic” encounter with the caged animals. Inhibited by the bars of a cage, Berger argues, the captive animal can never “return” the human spectator’s look; its glassy gaze can only reflect its utter marginalization. It is for this reason that zoo animals can function as a mirror for the human or a screen onto which humanist fantasies of integrity, diligence, or nobility can be projected. As

a result of this engineered overidentification, the animal's commonality with and difference from its human onlooker are both distorted, "[l]ike an image out of focus" (23).

Elephant painting advocates celebrate the "volitional" artistic output of pachyderms in art training camps as proof that humane reform can counter this distortion-effect and achieve the sort of unalienated exchange between man and beast that proved impossible between the Parisian scientist and the reluctant ape.<sup>4</sup> As a generic expression of autonomy, the "self-portrait" indexes from their perspective the emancipatory effects of the "progressive" zoos and animal sanctuaries of the late twentieth century, which permit the animal's freedom of movement in specially recreated "natural" habitats rather than confining them to caged captivity (Uddin).<sup>5</sup>

Yet, from what mediated standpoint can the paintings of the elephants, especially those that are said to portray their "selves," be described as an authentic expression of nonhuman agency? To put this in other words, it is necessary to question whether the liberal gesture of adopting animal rights as the next beneficiary of the identity politics movement is necessarily a liberatory one.<sup>6</sup> If we consider the enduring Cartesian adage that animals, unlike humans, do not possess a "soul" or consciousness of a self alongside Foucault's cautionary account of the captive soul as a cog in a regulatory apparatus, then what new apparatuses of capture can be said to await these animal artists and those who gaze, captivated, upon their display?

Let us first regard the interpretive logic of reading the elephant's figural painting as a representation of its "self." Online commentators are preoccupied with the original iconic "self-portrait" in the viral video for its realistic color palette and figurative qualities and tend to ignore the more abstract elephant paintings sold on some websites, which are tellingly never referred to as self-portraits. The idea that representing one's visible figure as a photorealistic icon is coextensive with consciousness of a self indicates the influence of a well-known psychoanalytic theory of selfhood. Jacques Lacan's account of the "mirror stage," we will recall, pinpoints the act of identifying with one's own image as the moment when the "hommelette" distinguishes the visible borders of its (reflected) body from the milieu that surrounds it, including its mother's enveloping presence. The elephant, painting its own image, is thought to display a rudimentary and illusory grasp of its "self," not unlike the infantile human's misrecognition of itself in a mirror image.



The normative coordinates of selfhood in which membership is sought for painting elephants come into sharper focus when we consider that Lacan's theory is not only oriented toward "normal" human psychic development but was evolved in a specifically European context. After all, not all animals employ trichromatic, binocular vision, and not all humans privilege vision as a means of organizing sensory information. Indeed, as interlocutors of feminist, queer, and disability studies have protested, the abstracted view of subject-object relations rendered by ocularcentrism—one that is central to the formation of the liberal self through abstraction from the world—excludes consideration of other ways of being, feeling, and knowing (affective, tactile, or aural, for instance) that can open onto alternative understandings of selfhood and intersubjective relations.<sup>7</sup> Although these nonocular avenues of emergence are not outside the purview of control (the topic of the following section of this essay), we can note for now that the mapping of selfhood onto the elephant's representation of its image as seen by the normative, ocularcentric subject normalizes a perceptual regime that is not only anthropocentric but paradigmatically Western, heteronormative, able-bodied, and able-minded. Furthermore, the difference between Lacan's infant and our elephant is that while the infant later accedes to language and the symbolic order, we may say the painting elephant is arrested in a primordial stage of development. Since the elephant can only draw, not write, it is restricted to a limited form of subjectivity, rehearsing the well-worn adage that language evidences a more advanced consciousness and agency.

We find, therefore, that the humane-itarian gesture of granting selfhood to animals is incapable of resolving their subordinate status, not despite, but *because of*, its democratic intentions. The conundrum of the painting elephant is one that the cultural critic Rey Chow argues is unavoidable for those marginalized constituencies who are bestowed with the benefits, freedoms, and rights of liberal selfhood: the benevolent gaze that scrutinizes their displays of agency coercively installs its own view of such agency as an impossible standard that marginal entities must mimic in order to be visible to their well-wishers ("Keeping"). Since the normalizing forms taken by this type of reflexive gaze (such as the "self," "art," or "authenticity") inevitably mediate the ways in which minoritarian entities evidence their agency, the evidence in question is always found to be lacking.

For further confirmation of this dynamic, consider how the discourse of art surrounding the elephant paintings contradicts its own

radicalized claims: Melamid (one of the two Russian artists who founded the Asian elephant art initiative) celebrates conceptual and abstract art as the “ultimate democracy” that undermines the institutionalized artistic principles of authorship, intentionality, and cultural capital (Komar, Melamid, and Fineman 94). Such an affiliation of art with lowly, unpredictable, or bestial impulses as opposed to an exclusively human capacity would seem perversely to infuse the Kantian designation of art as anti-utilitarian with a Deleuzian sensibility. The feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz has mounted a sophisticated argument of this type by proposing that the ornamental displays and mating calls of animals and birds be regarded as an excessive, frequently redundant, artistic performance that expends libidinal energy to no predetermined end, rather than a functional aspect of natural selection. Grosz insists on these grounds that animals are artistic, “if by that we understand that they intensify sensation (including the sensations of their human observers), that they enjoy this intensification” (69).<sup>8</sup>

Even as Melamid gestures in this direction, he quickly reoccupies a more conservative position with his claim that the nonfigurative paintings rendered by elephants deserve our attention because of their resemblance to existing works by Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and other prominent modernist auteurs, whose styles the elephants are explicitly trained to mimic. (The back cover of the volume coauthored by Komar, Melamid, and the New York-based curator Mia Fineman prominently displays an image of the artists “teaching” one of their “star pupils” by holding up an illustrated volume about Marcel Duchamp for her perusal.) The humor of Komar and Melamid’s ironic commentary that “even” elephants can produce conceptual art turns on the tacit consensus that *we*, unlike the animal, know in advance what this is and are therefore in on the joke. Their coauthor, Fineman, similarly speculates, in a catalog essay for AEACP, that having proven themselves in the domain of the realist portrait, elephants might explore “Elephant Abstraction [. . .] Elephant Impressionism, Elephant Surrealism, [and] Elephant Conceptual Art.” Here, even as Fineman celebrates elephant paintings as “the ultimate Outsider art” and “frenzied interspecies collaboration” between mahout and elephant, she reaffirms Art as a known set of historically stable Western generic conventions whose amateurish imitations by trained elephants and their naive helpers ensure that their paintings are subject to the stultifying paternalistic regard routinely accorded to “primitive art” or Art Naïf.

It is not necessary to enter into the debate of what constitutes art in order to note how its restriction by elephant painting enthusiasts to creative work with a display function reinstates, in liberalized form, another version of the zoo's distortion-effect. We can recall, in this regard, the important work that has been done by scholars like Thomas A. Sebeok and Tim Ingold to disaffiliate art from display by focalizing the world-forming creative activity of animals like beavers and insects like bees, who collaborate purposively with their own species, or the affective and physical labor of domesticated animals in more dubious forms of "interspecies collaboration," such as sport, hunting, companionship, surveillance, agriculture, and transportation.<sup>9</sup> Their perspective is another that reveals how celebrating the achievement of painting elephants (as opposed to logging elephants) reaffirms the exclusions upon which the stability of our definitions of art and humanity depend.

The thoroughly mediated logic of democratizing "self-expression" or "art" that I have been describing operates as what the information theorist Philip Agre has called a *capture apparatus*. In an essay that documents the replacement of surveillance-based technologies by technologies of tracking or "capture," Agre warns that our concern with metaphors of entrapment may itself become a kind of trap that keeps us from noticing forms of control based on free movement rather than enclosure—such as, for instance, when human users voluntarily submit to new media interfaces whose inscribed grammars recalibrate and reorganize the activities that they claim transparently to "represent." Agre's observation offers a rich commentary on humane-itarianism's urgent imperative to illuminate the visible structures of domination that characterize our relations with animals. In the blinding light of reflexivity, we may lose sight of the fact that media interventions that aim to make animals "upwardly mobile" along an evolutionary spectrum are not just a tool or means of empowerment but a type of mediation with its own implicit codes of control. The democratic appeal of art-making for animals, in other words, can conceal its disciplinary operations.

What is the lesson in this? Are we to gather from our analysis that humane-itarianism fails not because it is unreflexive but because it is not adequately reflexive, in that it does not account for the mediating effects of its democratizing forms? The critical positions that I survey in the upcoming section are of this mind: they argue that the solution to more egalitarian or "posthuman" relations with animals lies not in "rescuing" excluded entities by incorporating them into our familiar anthropocentric

definitions of selfhood, but in *surrendering* this model of agency altogether, as well as the “active,” ocularcentric medial pathways upon which we rely for the detection of such agencies. In their stead, they bring to the fore practices of mediation that emphasize passivity, immersion, or hapticity as nonnormative or nonanthropocentric ways of relating to the world. But what kind of intervention is suggested by this emphasis on yielding or “softness” as a mode of interaction? And what does it mean to locate political purpose in the act of surrender, especially if we keep in mind the social relations in which the nonhuman muses of posthuman inquiry find themselves enmeshed?

### *Reflexes and Reflexivity*

A number of these provocative questions are activated by the Surrealism-inspired French social theorist Roger Caillois, whose account of radically inert forms of animal agency has gained substantial currency among contemporary scholars as a model of posthumanist reflexivity. At this juncture, it is useful to turn to Caillois directly: in addition to previewing the openings for thought modeled by nonhuman sensoria and medial pathways, his work also anticipates a number of important feminist critiques that are less optimistic about the prospects of embracing surrender as a political alternative to active intervention. Charting a measured course through Caillois’s contributions makes it possible to appreciate both the productive aspects of the posthumanist critique of humane-itarianism and the unexpected overlaps between these two modes of reflexivity.

In 1935, Caillois wrote an article titled “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” which paints a radically different picture of what an animal self-portrait might look like from the perspective of a typical human beholder. The subjects of his inquiry are quite distinct from the charismatic megafauna of our opening example, for Caillois is concerned exclusively with the representational acts of mimetic insects that “play dead” by merging morphologically with their surroundings. Among others, he cites the example of mantises whose curled feet simulate the petals of flowers, and whose mechanical swaying even imitates the effect of a gentle wind passing through flowers, and butterflies whose wing markings resemble the mildew on lichens or perforated leaves, or whose folded wings in repose approximate the major vein of a branch’s outermost leaf (93–94).

Caillois rejects the available functionalist explanations for why such insects imitate their natural environments, noting that morphological

mimicry is not always effective as a mode of self-preservation or -defense. Far from enabling them to elude predators (many of whom detect their prey primarily through smell or changes in motion or color, not through their discernable borders), the act of visual fusion with their environment actually *incites* death for mimetic insects. Undetected, they are often crushed by larger animals or inadvertently eaten by herbivores—and in the extreme case of some leaf insects, even cannibalized by their own species.

To account for this bizarre reflex, which he understands as a “disorder in the relationship between personality and space,” Caillois turns to abnormal psychology, borrowing the term *psychasthenia*, which was popularized in French psychiatric parlance in the 1930s by the psychotherapist Pierre Janet. *Psychasthenia* refers to an exhaustion of personal energy and was routinely employed at the time for articulating the way in which schizophrenics interacted with space (“Mimicry” 100). Caillois’s meditation on the spatial predicament of the schizophrenic demonstrates a conceptual maneuver that we now affiliate with posthumanist inquiry: he employs abnormal and nonhuman phenomenologies as a way of defamiliarizing our normative understandings of cognition and subjectivity. His words are worth citing at some length:

*[W]hen asked where they are, schizophrenics invariably reply, I know where I am, but I don’t feel that I am where I am. For dispossessed minds such as these, space seems to constitute a will to devour. Space chases, entraps, and digests them in a huge process of phagocytosis. Then, it ultimately takes their place. The body and mind thereupon become dissociated; the subject crosses the boundary of his own skin and stands outside of his senses. He tries to see himself, from some point in space. He feels that he is turning into space himself—dark space into which things cannot be put. He is similar; not similar to anything in particular, but simply similar. (100)*

In this remarkable passage and those that precede it, Caillois positively restates the assumptions underpinning Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage or the structure of identification that is central to the formation of the self and the agency of the ego. In the 1949 draft of this essay, Lacan cites Caillois’s earlier essay on psychasthenia to argue the importance of spatial identification with one’s image for the emergence of the “normal” human subject, that is, as a process that hinges on abstracting the borders that separate inside from outside or self from milieu. With his emphasis on vision,

Lacan would insist that schizophrenics “lack” the perceptual ability of visually distinguishing the spatial borders of their selves from their milieu.

Approaching the same issue obliquely, Caillois asks *what forms of mimesis or identification* engineer what Lacan calls the “derealizing” spatial obsession of schizophrenics and mimetic insects (Lacan 5). Caillois points out that schizophrenics, like mimetic insects, perform acts of photo-realistic and sculptural impersonation that *dissolve* rather than resolve the visible borders between themselves and their environment. They employ their bodies as an expressive medium that mimics the aesthetic and spatial conventions of their milieu, such that their bodies appear organically to meld into the environment rather than abstracting themselves from it.

Caillois’s observations are nothing less than an attempt to conceptualize space from the vantage point of the schizophrenic, as a viscous, material, and three-dimensional entity with which the schizophrenic identifies in a *haptic* rather than optical register. The results of this haptic form of mimesis, as Caillois explains, are utterly disorienting if we privilege forms of identification that rely on vision and have been observed to result in the emergence of selfhood and “agency” in the normative sense. Soon after the previous passage, he notes:

*This assimilation into space is inevitably accompanied by a diminished sense of personality and vitality. In any event, it is noteworthy that among mimetic species, the phenomenon occurs only in a single direction: the animal mimics plant life (whether leaf, flower, or thorn) and hides or gives up those physiological functions linking it to its environment. Life withdraws to a lesser state [ . . . ]. Alongside the instinct of self-preservation that somehow attracts human beings to life, there proves to be a very wide-spread instinct d’abandon attracting them toward a kind of diminished existence; in its most extreme state, this would lack any degree of consciousness or feeling at all. I am referring, so to speak, to the inertia of the élan vital. (“Mimicry” 101–2)*

We can see that, in rejecting the prevailing psychoanalytic framework of “lack” and the normalization of vision as a perspectival basis of organizing space, Caillois was attempting to develop a distinctively nonnormative vocabulary for explaining the atypical behavior of mimetic insects, by stressing the relationship between minoritarian sensory registers (hapticity), representational strategies (mimesis), and political affects (withdrawal, abandonment, giving up, diminishment, and surrender). Through

the mimetic insect, he illustrates an immersive way of engaging the world that results in a merger with the environment—one that dissolves the sharp distinction between subject and object—rather than an abstraction from the environment whose ultimate product is an “individual” or “subject.”

It would not be far-fetched to say that Caillois anticipates, in this regard, the interventions of a number of prominent feminist cultural critics, including Luce Irigaray, Laura U. Marks, Rey Chow, Erin Manning, Saba Mahmood, and Judith Jack Halberstam. These scholars have employed rubrics that are similar to Caillois’s (touch, haptic visuality, captivity, engendering, piety, failure) as feminist epistemologies. Although their individual projects differ vastly in topic and scope, they have each challenged the “positive” values of visibility, mobility, vitality, difference, resistance, and individuality that are attached by default to phallogocentric theories of subjectivity, as a result of which minoritarian representational practices and approaches to agency that stress mutuality, multiplicity, or passivity are routinely viewed in a distorted light.

In a similar vein, Caillois shows that for any spectator accustomed to thinking about agency in terms of an assertion of visible borders, the visual effect of the mimetic entity’s “depersonalization through assimilation into space” can only resemble a tragic act of self-renunciation or masochism. Relatedly, from a rationalist or traditional Darwinian standpoint, morphological mimicry can only be understood as a self-indulgent act of madness that is utterly contradictory and irrational in that it can entail the wholesale sacrifice of the self. Rather than acquiescing to the mutually affirming logic of these perspectives, however, Caillois rejects their “anthropomorphism.” He asks us instead to consider the *generative* effects of the lack of spatial perspective and mastery, where the experience of “turning into space” may be felt as a “dangerous luxury” (“Mimicry” 97).

The vexing political consequences of Caillois’s statement—which many commentators have accurately identified as an endorsement of something resembling the Freudian death drive—require a separate discussion.<sup>10</sup> But before moving on to this discussion, it is worthwhile concentrating on how Caillois’s observations contain a sophisticated and far-reaching commentary on mediation and medial reflexivity.

First, Caillois urges us to think about the expressive interactions of animals with their medial environments (their milieus or *Umwelten*) as a conceptual device that can provide a source of inspiration for media theory. The same environment or medium, he shows, can be generative of both dominant expressive conventions and minor ones that

transgress those conventions and reinvent the aesthetic and political scope of the medium. In this regard, Caillois's interest in mimetic insects as media practitioners that defamiliarize and "jerk us" out of our habituated encounters with media forms echoes the investments of his contemporary, Walter Benjamin, who shared Caillois's fascination with the mimetic faculty, which he believed to have been repressed and given over in modernity to the predominance of visual faculties, as well as the ambivalent political implications of its "rekindling" by emerging photographic media ("On the Mimetic"; "Work of Art"). To revert to Agre's vocabulary, we might say that the visceral, embodied captivation of mimetic insects with their environment's tactile geography enables them to elude the iconic visual forms of liberal capture in which the painting elephant in our opening examples is embroiled as it outlines its "self" as perceived by its human spectators. The minoritarian register of the insects' engagement with their environment offers a line of escape from the specular grain in which "we" as a species habitually engage with and abstract our selves from that same environment—even if the escape in question is to certain death.

Second, Caillois's interest in minoritarian modes of cognition and phenomenology leads him to connect morphological mimicry with other peripheral or avant-garde representational practices that undermine the sensory, geometric, and ideological principles of Renaissance perspective and Euclidean space. He aligns the mimetic play of insects not just with the way schizophrenics represent their relationship to space but also with the "sympathetic magic" of "primitive" cultures that aim to control environmental forces through the principle of association by touch (as opposed to visual mastery) and modern scientific representations of abstract space and hyperspace that displace organic life as the privileged organizing principle of space. In this way, Caillois's commitment to mimetic thinking—which he would in later works articulate as a theory of "diagonal science" or an open series of experimental or poetic analogies and correspondences conceived in opposition to the abstract and binarizing taxonomies of the structuralist human sciences ("A New Plea")—identifies unexpected solidarities between vastly different epistemologies (nonhuman, non-Western, neurologically atypical, and scientific) whose representational logics remain in the blind spot of a normalizing, ocularcentric gaze. In fact, Caillois's work charts a parallel course to Foucault's comparative study of the sciences of subjugation, in which Caillois shows how those beings who are regularly turned into nodes within normalizing grids of rationality may have recourse to lines of flight whose frequency is undetectable to a biopolitical radar.



Indeed, Caillois's recursive way of rejuvenating the conventional medial pathways of thinking by activating solidarities between nonhuman and peripheral human epistemologies reads as a blueprint for contemporary posthumanist engagements of the "animal question" that build on and remediate the aforementioned feminist legacies. A full list of the media theorists and cultural critics who follow the basic steps of Caillois's method, along with their individual variegations, is not important for our purposes. Let me simply list some of the most provocative contributors to this line of thinking in order to note the trend of turning to animals for a model of reflexive thinking.

Jussi Parikka, most recently, reads the biology of insects as a philosophical intervention in our habituated mediascape, proposing that "insect media" can reveal a world of sensations, perceptions, movements, stratagems, and patterns of organization that are beyond the confines of the human world.<sup>11</sup> Donna Haraway offers another influential model: merging metaphors from anthropology ("contact zones") and technoscience (the "cyborg"), she turns to the affective and tactile relationship between companion species as a site of reciprocity that transforms the molecular and subjective composition of humans and animals, as well the asymmetrical political economy of their interactions. A third example is that of Cary Wolfe, who identifies correspondences between the "blinding" hypervisuality of autistic persons (that renders viewed objects unyieldingly opaque) and nonhuman animals whose lives are ecologically intertwined *because of* their mutual blindness (such as spiders that mechanically weave webs that entrap flies, whose prodigious vision somehow misses their predators' webs). Wolfe argues that these ocular "disabilities" can enable hybrid subjectivities and transspecies relations that introduce a foreign logic into normative regimes of visibility (127–68). A possible reason why the term *posthuman* is a subject of debate among these scholars and is not a label to which all of them respond can be seen in Wolfe's sweeping assessment that animal studies is "not just another flavor of 'fill in the blank' studies on the model of media studies, film studies, women's studies, ethnic studies, and so on—[but] that it fundamentally unsettles and reconfigures the question of the knowing subject and the disciplinary paradigms and procedures that take for granted its form and reproduce it" (xxix). Here, Wolfe's disaffiliation of posthumanist inquiry from the antihumanist scholarly traditions that have paved its way characterizes the irreverent stance due to which many interlocutors of media studies and critical theory have been hesitant to take seriously the claims of posthumanism.

Juxtaposing Caillois's portrait of suicidal mimetic insects with the elephant's self-portrait, we can now properly apprehend the distinction between the humane-itarian and posthumanist modes of reflexivity: where the former intervenes in the name of "progress" to stop the killing of animals by remaking them in the image of humans, the latter insists that the more progressive stance would be to surrender to, mimic, or otherwise find common ground for sympathetic resonance with the unfamiliar logic of the animal—even if that logic can, in the last instance, result in the destruction of all that we hold dear, including life itself.

However, the analogy between the morphological mimicry of animals and states of affective "abandonment" among various marginalized human constituencies leaves us with an unanswered question. If we keep in mind Caillois's warning that when it comes to such correspondences, "resemblance exists solely in the eye of the beholder" ("Mimicry" 93), then we must face the fact that the insects in question most likely perceive no such kinship. So the question remains: what type of intervention is achieved by interpreting an animal *reflex* as a model of posthumanist *reflexivity*?

A distinction employed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" can help concretize the implications of my question. In her discussion of *sati* or widow suicide, Spivak identifies a common slippage that takes place when Western intellectuals represent the acts of non-Western groups to themselves: this is the slippage between representation in the aesthetic sense (representation as portrait or tropology) and representation in the political sense (representation as proxy or persuasion)(70). Spivak illustrates the effects of this slippage at the end of her essay, where she tells the story of Bhuvaneshwari Devi, a young Indian female revolutionary who employed the signs of her body to reinscribe the political script of widow suicide: by committing suicide during her menstrual period, she showed that she was taking her life for her own reasons and not because of religious or patriarchal custom. Spivak notes that this woman's grammar of political action would have been incomprehensible as such to the liberal Western feminist focused on self-empowerment or self-enhancement as de facto registers of political representation (103–4). Such a universalizing gaze would inevitably abstract Devi's minoritarian expression from the complexities of its rhetorical context and misrecognize it as a symptom of oppression. Through this example, Spivak encourages us to understand "liberatory" Western initiatives, even those of the feminist variety, as humane-itarian media interventions whose representational conventions have enduring and insidious political effects.

Returning to our example, we find posthumanist interlocutors who wish to overcome the universalist frame of liberal feminisms by embracing withdrawal, passivity, abandonment, and so on, as freighted political strategies. But when they interpret the mimetic insect's act of isomorphic merger with its environment (an expressive or aesthetic representation) as a *model* of political representation, do they not partake of the same slippage identified by Spivak (and which Marks Chow, and other feminist critics have also commented on elsewhere), even as they approach the issue from a metacritical, "reflexive" position? After all, we cannot assume that animals are interested in political representation in the same way as disabled, queer, or non-Western subjects, unless we abstract them from their context and import them into ours—a maneuver that is a hallmark of the humane-itarian intervention. Let me frame this problem in one more way before moving on to the next and final section: Caillois's insects "give up" their lives, but it is entirely possible that they do not "think about" their sacrifice as such or even experience their departure from life in any anthropomorphic sense. The reflexive act of exposing their "sacrifice" as an act of political representation by those "parts that have no part" ends up folding these nonhuman entities into a normalizing field where life is central to meaning-making. To put it plainly, we find that the posthumanist embrace of yielding, surrender, or abandonment cannot, despite its best efforts, fully surrender the frame of anthropomorphism.

### *Surrendering the Frame*

The ideological problematic that I have just described is this: there is a logical paradox in asserting a nonanthropocentric mode of understanding while depending on humanist political frameworks for interpreting animal behavior. It will be useful, in closing, to think alongside a few examples that plunge, head-on, into the tangles of this epistemological knot. For this reason, I conclude with readings of four media experiments that concretely stage the conflict between posthumanist idioms of medial reflexivity and the regulative logic of human intervention. The works that I describe are not united by genre, medium, or mode of address—in fact, the practitioners cited vary greatly in terms of their production and exhibition contexts—however, they share a common process that involves immersing the medium (ranging from video cameras, digital handheld devices, and electronic air pollution sensing devices to steel) within nonhuman environments.

By cloaking what is essentially animal surveillance in the guise of yielding or surrender, these artists invite us to question the softer forms in which the human-animal power differential might lurk beneath their visibly exaggerated abandonment of the semiotic, narrative, and technical protocols of their media. In doing so, they leave open the question of what is accomplished by the new forms of affective and symbolic labor in which “animal artists” are employed in the global cultural economy, with or without their knowledge. And yet, while these experiments reassert the larger, interconnected frame of social relations in which humans and animals interact, they also explore what new relational configurations can be manufactured by deactivating the traditional representational frames of their media forms. Effectively, they “surrender” the iconic signifying capacities of these media to their animal “collaborators,” who physically interact with, touch, manipulate, reorient, and alter the medium altogether. We might say that these artworks extend the mode of inquiry initiated by Caillois, where the expressive interactions of animals with their medial environments suggest new and unfamiliar engagements with the media forms that surround us. In particular, they ask how the humanist gesture of “handing over the media apparatus” to marginalized groups can engender interactions that destabilize the view of subject-object relations held in place by interventionist thinking if we let go of the rhetorical tropes that, in this frame of thinking, represent “agency.”

I turn now to my four examples, with the caveat that I alternate between “art” and “media” when referring to them to the extent that the various projects activate debates regarding art and mediality that I have previously earmarked.

Video artist Sam Easterson brilliantly subverts the use of surveillance techniques for making visible the “unconscious optics” of animal life. His “animal cams” call into question the spirals of power and pleasure attendant to the observational wildlife documentary genre from its earliest inception in Eadweard Muybridge’s zoopraxographic experiments with animal locomotion to its most recent iterations as a genre of YouTube home movie featuring domestic pets. Easterson has since 1998 collected video footage from the “point of view” of animals, which he exhibits online and in gallery, museum, and educational contexts under the banner *Animal Cams*. Easterson “outfits” his subjects with tiny custom-made helmet-mounted surveillance cameras that capture video footage as their carriers go about their day. The subjects of his experiments cut across taxonomic orders, encompassing an idiosyncratic range of nonhuman entities: *Animal*

*Cams* prominently feature charismatic mammals (such as sheep, wolves, buffalo, armadillos, alligators, and moles), but also arachnids (tarantulas), birds (falcons, turkeys, chickens), carnivorous plants (pitcher plants), and even insentient objects (a tumbleweed).

A striking feature of *Animal Cams* lies in the way Easterson emphasizes the visceral and embodied conflict between his camera apparatus and his unwilling subjects, who routinely disrupt his intervention by shrugging off their intrusive headgear. Easterson has cited this as the reason for the brevity of his videos (each one lasts only as long as the camera stays mounted on the body of the subject, typically between a few seconds and several minutes), noting that the process of mounting the camera onto the understandably uncooperative animals is typically “ninety percent of the battle” (Interview). By emphasizing rather than minimizing the disjuncture between the perceptual worlds of animals and the visual language of video technology, *Animal Cams* starkly reveals how nature films and television shows suture over the elements of mediation that structure our glimpses into the “authentic” lives of animals, including the surreptitious surveillance of the camera and strategic edits that eliminate uneventful “lag time” and dramatize the temporality of animality as one of spectacular “action.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, Easterson is committed to inhabiting the temporality of the animal *as mediated by his intervention*, such that his digital prostheses index both the movements and the stases of his often reluctant subjects. The bulk of the videos, which feature smaller animals that wrestle with their discomfort (such as “Wolf Cam” and “Sheep Cam”) are out of focus, convulsive, and jarring, and the jostling of the camera registers on the audio track as an amplified series of static disturbances. Some of the larger animals are less bothered; for instance, the smooth and calm image in “Alligator Cam” might be mistaken for the mechanical precision of a Steadicam, were it not for the bulbous eyes and domed head of the subject framing the placid water (see fig. 2).

Easterson employs other strategies for avoiding the anthropomorphized storytelling conventions of wildlife shows, which routinely employ narrative strategies such as humanistic framing centered on the subject’s face, an omniscient roaming camera presence, or shot/reverse-shot editing as a way of structuring our identification with animals as characters in a drama of survival. Since Easterson mounts his cameras on the heads of his subjects, the image frequently remains close to the ground or pointed downward as the animal forages for food, providing a counterpoint to the fantasy of distance afforded by the wide framings

**Figure 2**  
Still from *Alligator Cam*

Screen capture from  
*Animal Cams*, dir.  
Sam Easterson, 2008

Image copyright of  
the artist, courtesy  
of Video Data Bank.



and extended takes that have come generically to signify “wildlife.” The viewfinder of the surveillance cameras are set at a fixed framing and have a shallow depth of field, so that the image toggles in and out of focus as objects pass haphazardly into the camera’s field of focus. Consequently we are rarely granted the plenitude of a panoramic landscape shot or a studied close-up that inventories the visual spectacle of the subject’s body and sensory environment.

Instead, the footage is often chaotic or illegible, and our confusion is only occasionally relieved when sections of the subject’s body serve as a framing device and during moments when we catch a glimpse of something recognizable—such as a shadow or a reflection of the subject in a pool of water in “Buffalo Cam” or a pair of paws suggesting a wolf at rest after a long day (see fig. 3). The unexpected hermeneutic weight borne by these moments brings our attention to bear on the extent to which our understanding of these entities is anchored in and guaranteed by narrative tropes. Easterson’s minimalist titles (“Farm Cams,” “Wild Animal Cams,” followed by the name of the featured animal) play with this knowledge, withholding the explanatory supplement without which the photographic image only points blindly, bereft of any stable meaning. Easterson’s presentation of these ineffable images in this abortive form reminds us that for his animal carriers, the foreign presence of the camera may signify a variety of meanings (such as discomfort, inconvenience, or the marking of the animal as taboo by its pack) that scientific explanations can only approximate and never fully “lay bare.”

**Figure 3**  
Still from *Wolf Cam*

Screen capture from  
*Animal Cams*, dir.  
Sam Easterson, 2008

Image copyright of  
the artist, courtesy  
of Video Data Bank.



Lisa Jevbratt’s ongoing software art project *ZooMorph* also attends to the interfaces that broker an exchange between the perceptual worlds of humans and those of various other animals. But in an inversion of Easterson’s use of video prostheses for staging the unreliability of the filmed image as an “authentic” document of the animal, Jevbratt digitally alters filmed images to simulate how they appear to a variety of nonhuman animals, from mammals, birds, and fish to marsupials, insects, amphibians, and reptiles. Designed as an “augmented reality application” that instantly modifies the image seen through smartphone cameras or alternately as a plugin for software programs like Photoshop and Final Cut Pro, *ZooMorph* filters indicate how the visual perception of different animals departs from normal human vision (Jevbratt). Using data gleaned from ethnographic, behavioral, medical, and genetic research, the application makes corrections along axes such as color differentiation, acuity, light sensitivity, field of view, and motion perception to provide an approximation of how the species in question perceives the visual information. For instance, the “Hummingbird” filter produces intense fluorescent purple highlights and saturates red shades when a smartphone camera is focused on a hibiscus flower (see fig. 4), while elsewhere a picture of a yellow daffodil is rendered pixellated in a spectrum of pink and red shades to represent how it would appear to a bee.

The publicity images for *ZooMorph*—several of which feature an extended human hand bearing a smartphone such that it behaves as a lens mediating the spectator’s view—literalize the idea that humanism and



**Figure 4**  
*ZooMorph*, Lisa  
 Jevbratt  
 Hummingbird filter,  
 iPhone app interface

Image from [http://  
 zoomorph.net/](http://zoomorph.net/)



posthumanism function as an anthropomorphic or zoomorphic “filter”: the former “dignifies” the animal by equipping it with the props of humanity, while the latter employs radically nonanthropomorphic entities to locate the “repressed” animal instincts of the human. Jevbratt herself subscribes to the posthumanist variety of filter when she describes *ZooMorph* as an attempt at “therianthropy,” or the metamorphosis of humans into other animals. She expresses hope that her software project will encourage interspecies collaboration by inspiring “awareness and respect” for alternate subjective perceptual worlds or *Umwelten* that exist alongside that of the human. Her various anticipated uses for *ZooMorph* include the following: “[T]he filters could be used on photographs taken by a camera worn by one’s dog, or to manipulate pictures of one’s garden in order to see how it looks to the scrub jay, and then change the garden to make it seem more visually interesting to them” (Jevbratt). Accordingly, Jevbratt describes *ZooMorph* as a potential “large scale inexplicit collaboration between all the human users of the filters and the various species they may involve.”<sup>15</sup>

Jevbratt’s ambitious claims about her application are, however, tempered by the images of her application in practice. These images show how the mediating gaze of the human is hypostatized in technological forms (the smartphone, computer software) that cannot overcome the barrier posed by human vision to the play of meaning afforded by the *ZooMorph* filter. It is not possible, for instance, for a human subject with



**Figure 5**  
Pigeon outfitted  
with *PigeonBlog*  
equipment

Image from <http://www.beatrizdaacosta.net/pigeonblog.php>



normal, trichromatic vision to either program or see the spectrum of hues visible to tetrachromatic animals (such as, for instance the zebra finch bird), who possess four rather than three channels for conveying color information. Coupled with Jevbratt’s claims regarding user interactivity, the ideology of visual knowledge embedded in *ZooMorph*’s programming logic ends up representing the neurobiology of animal vision as the cause of user actions—as something the human viewer can see and control. In this way, even though Jevbratt intends *ZooMorph* to combat the logic of its commercial software hosts, her application’s approach to data visualization preserves the dominant epistemology of software, one that, according to Wendy Chun, conflates seeing and knowing, reading and readability, thereby shoring up vision as a reliable source of knowledge.

*PigeonBlog*, an amateur science initiative by the late new media artist Beatriz da Costa, inverts the uses of “biomimicry” in military aeronautic reconnaissance by repurposing aerial surveillance technologies for improving the environmental conditions of urban birds. In an essay about her project, da Costa briefly references an early twentieth-century military experiment in enlisting camera-carrying pigeons as agents of surveillance, writing that this novel mode of reconnaissance served as both inspiration and foil for her civilian “grass-roots scientific data-gathering initiative” (“Reaching” 377). As da Costa explains, the miniature panoramic camera technology in question was designed by German court pharmacist and amateur engineer Julius Neubronner in the early 1900s for taking time-lapse photographs during the flight of homing pigeons. Although Neubronner intended his technology to be used in aerial reconnaissance, it was never used for this purpose owing to difficulties in getting the pigeons to return to dovecotes displaced during battle—and perhaps

**Figure 6**  
Pollution visualization on *PigeonBlog* interface

Image from [http://www.pigeonblog.mapyourcity.net/stills\\_releases.ph](http://www.pigeonblog.mapyourcity.net/stills_releases.ph)



more important, because the images taken by the pigeons provided no information of strategic value.

Rather than forcing pigeons into the role of military photographers, da Costa ingeniously tapped the strategic advantage offered by the low altitude of pigeon flight in her San Jose–based project. Having observed that California stations currently monitor only specific bands of air in low-traffic areas and therefore produce skewed projected data for the surrounding highly polluted minority neighborhoods, da Costa employed the flight patterns of urban pigeons to inexpensively gather air pollution data at levels that fixed-location state instruments do not monitor. To this end, she collaborated with a team of engineers to produce technical prostheses to be carried as “backpacks” by trained urban homing pigeons: these GPS-enabled electronic air pollution sensing devices sent real-time locative information to an open-access online server and blogging environment. Here, viewers could access a minute-by-minute air pollution index “from a pigeon’s perspective” presented in the form of an interactive map. By transforming pigeons into mobile “reporters” working on behalf of the city’s poor, da Costa hoped not only to complement the gaps in official scientific pollution data but also to contest the reputation of pigeons as urban parasites (*PigeonBlog*, esp. “Statement” and “Members”).

Da Costa did not shy away from using the spectacle of camera-carrying pigeons as a publicity image to direct attention toward the cause of air pollution: she relied on audiovisually striking images and sounds captured by “embedded reporter” pigeons who flew alongside the “reporter” pigeons carrying cell-phone cameras and microphones to encourage spectators to interact with the more laborious blog interface (see figs. 5 and 6). Indeed, the profound conceptual contribution of *PigeonBlog* lies in this less immediately visualizable pollution data. It not

only lacks the affective charge of the photographic data (which features the unusual sight of prosthetically enhanced pigeons in flight) but must be regarded as tactically useless from a scientific perspective: few other birds inhabit the specific atmospheric band at which pigeons fly, and the data is irrelevant to the lived experience of humans at ground level. Given the characterization of pigeons as an urban menace, the improvement of their environmental conditions ranks even lower than those of other animal species in the pecking order of civic priorities. Against this context, da Costa's acknowledgement of the scientific "uselessness" of the data gathered by pigeons identifies the anthropomorphic values guiding environmental and animal rights initiatives. By aligning pigeons with other disposable populations whose living conditions do not merit monitoring or improvement, *PigeonBlog* questions the biopolitical logic that governs the priorities of civic administration. However, in protesting this logic, da Costa's low-cost "mobile" pollution monitoring model enlists pigeons in a technologized form of "free labor," to borrow a term from Tiziana Terranova, that may be said to maintain the racialized and class-riven distribution of precarity in neoliberalized urban scenarios.

Like da Costa, Berlin and Scotland-based conceptual artist Simon Starling's recent *Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore)* (2007–08) is invested in employing artistic practices allegorically to invoke the generative ways in which human and nonhuman territorial concerns can impact each other. Starling produced this piece by staging an encounter between his sculptural medium and underwater animal participants. The first step involved creating a steel replica of Henry Moore's bronze sculpture *Warrior with Shield*, a work produced by Moore in 1952 with the support of public funds from the Canadian government. At the time, Canada's patronage of Moore was met with intense opposition from Toronto-based artists, who resented the English artist's encroachment onto the Toronto art scene (which was doubly illicit in that he was introduced to the city by art historian and Soviet spy Anthony Blunt). Starling then submerged his steel replica for eighteen months in Lake Ontario, with the intention of evoking another ecological accident in the aftermath of the Cold War: the colonizing presence of Eastern European zebra mussels in the Great Lakes since approximately the mid-1980s, when they were inadvertently introduced into the lakes in the ballast water of cargo ships arriving from the Black Sea toward the end of the conflict. The deleterious impact of this predatory species of mussel on the ecological balance of the Great Lakes is well known: the rapid consumption of algae by zebra mussels deprives

**Figure 7**  
Simon Starling,  
*Infestation Piece*  
(*Musselled Moore*),  
in-progress (being  
retrieved from the  
water), 2006/2008.

Commissioned by  
The Power Plant  
Contemporary Art  
Gallery.

Photo: Rafael  
Goldchain



native mussels of their food source, and they also immobilize these native species by attaching to their shells.

Starling's piece urges us to read this parable on the dangers of border crossing against its usual grain. Substituting Moore's original medium (bronze, which is toxic to mussels) with steel, Starling "surrendered" his sculpture to the invasive zebra mussels as a hospitable breeding ground (Starling, Interview). When *Infestation Piece* was retrieved from the water in 2008, it was covered with a patina of rust and mussels, having been "completed" by the combined work of water erosion and the life cycles of the resident mussels (see fig. 7). The dried mussel shells encrusted onto the corroded frame of Starling's steel replica hauntingly convey a less well-known fact regarding the ecological gifts of this unwelcome "immigrant" species: zebra mussels filter algae and other pollutants from the water, resulting in increased sunlight penetration and plankton growth at greater depths. By literally plunging the work of high art into a new

environmental context, Starling reconfigures the artistic medium—ordinarily a material or technical material for aesthetic expression—as a set of conditions that can carry an entirely different set of meanings within the *Umwelten* of another species. In the process, *Infestation Piece* transforms an art-historical anecdote regarding the transnational ecological impact of art into a vehicle for identifying the unexpectedly creative aspects of ecological interventions.

It is quite clear that *Animal Cams*, *ZooMorph*, *PigeonBlog*, and *Infestation Piece* do not resolve the posthumanist/humane-itarian dilemma in any immediate way. Rather, their interventionist gestures of sending media probes into the worlds of animals remind us that mediation remains a constant across humanist and posthumanist approaches to reflexivity. What is perhaps most productive about the immersive process employed in these artworks is that it turns the *medium* itself, not humans or animals, into the protagonist of a drama of reflexivity. In this way, these experiments accomplish the more useful task of confronting mediation as an unresolved but nonetheless generative ethical problem that is at the heart of any “progressive” intellectual project. The question they leave us with is this: if mediation is no longer to be conceived within a humanist paradigm—as an intervening force between subject and object—then how should we think of it now?

Dedicated to the memory of Beatriz da Costa.

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## Notes

- 1 See *The Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project* website, esp. “Mission Statement,” “Artist Statement,” and “History” in “About AEACP.”

- 2 Foucault writes: “Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap” (200). Rey Chow identifies this passage in her analysis of the figure of the trap in literary and artistic representations of capture and imprisonment. The present article is greatly indebted to Chow’s argument that “captivation [. . .] is the deranged remainder that is unassimilable to the metanarratives of freedom that underlie both capitalist consumerism [. . .] and socialist revolution” (“On Captivation” 52).
- 3 I owe the discovery of this anecdote to Dominic Pettman, who references it in a chapter on Nabokov’s novel *Lolita* (66). I am also grateful to Antoine Traisnel for his insights on Appel’s postscript.
- 4 See, for instance, the section titled “Are Paintings by Elephants Really Art?” on the Elephant Art Gallery website. This organization denounces the realistic portraits associated with the Exotic World Gift brand as being unnaturally coerced rather than products of the elephants’ “own volition.” Examples of nonfigurative brush-stroke elephant paintings can be seen on the sale section of this online gallery.
- 5 Lisa Uddin persuasively argues that the new liberalized zoos of the twentieth century frequently operate as a vehicle for imagining community with animals, which tend to be coded as members of a particular race or class.
- 6 The philosopher Matthew Calarco writes that “uncovering some sort of fundamental [human] identity (for example, sentience or subjectivity) shared by all animals” is the modus operandi of the contemporary animal rights movement that, according to Calarco, is indebted to a humanist agenda that brings together Peter Singer’s utilitarian schema of “animal liberation” with the Kantian framework of Tom Regan, who beckons to animal agency and subjectivity to obtain membership for animals within the moral sphere of rights (see Calarco 6–10; 103–49). Extending Calarco’s insights from a Foucaultian perspective, the conservative orientation of the rights movement should be seen as an indispensable ally and technique of reform: while the outward expansion of the discourse of rights sheds light on the predicament of racial others, women, children, disabled persons, and most recently, animals, it operates on the basis of an epistemic exclusion that leaves in the dark those entities that are seen to lack “human” qualities.
- 7 For an account of subject-formation that displaces Lacan’s model of “mirroring,” see Lisa Cartwright’s argument that for deaf and blind subjects, “affective attunement” (a type of emotional resonance or empathetic identification) can provide an alternate route to subjectivity and agency that emphasizes intersubjective development and multimodal forms of agency.
- 8 Grosz explains:  
*In being rendered functional [. . .] all excess and redundancy are eliminated; sexual selection is reduced to natural selection [. . .]. In the case of battling birds, [for instance], many territorial struggles are primarily theatrical, staged, a performance of the body at its most splendid and appealing, rather than a real battle with its attendant risks and dangers. [. . .] It is not clear that the skills the male displays are those that attract females, even if they are*



- successful in various battling spectacles [ . . . ]. Art is of the animal precisely to the degree that sexuality is artistic. (67–70)*
- 9 Sebeok and Ingold have both deliberated over the status of animal autopoiesis as a way of unsettling the anthropocentric questions guiding semiotic and anthropological inquiries about labor and art.
  - 10 The parallels between Caillois’s “instinct of renunciation” and the Freudian death drive have not gone unnoted, although Caillois himself dismisses the relation between the two as an issue of “secondary interest” (103; n40). Even if Caillois’s intention was to find a less anthropocentric vocabulary, the shift from psychoanalysis to psychotherapy as a model hardly achieves this. The cultural historian Martin Jay argues that Caillois may have been attempting to distance himself from Freudian psychoanalysis by turning to Janet (a psychotherapist) and his notion of *psychasthenia* or loss in ego strength (342–43).
  - 11 In addition to offering his own original theories, Parikka excellently synthesizes the work of other important interlocutors of the animal question that are left out of my account, such as feminist scholars Rosi Braidotti and Donna Haraway, media theorists Akira Mizuta Lippit and Eugene Thacker, as well as the now classic theoretical contributions of Henri Bergson, Roger Caillois, Charles Darwin, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Gilbert Simondon, and Jakob von Uexküll, among others.
  - 12 Animal studies scholar Cynthia Chris has argued that the editing conventions of nature television shows emphasize the eventfulness of animal life by “excising the tiresome bits of any real visit to a menagerie or zoo: animals that have hidden themselves out of view, sleeping or otherwise inactive animals, long walks between displays. Thus, animals on film are even better than animals in zoo enclosures, and surely better than animals in the wild: they are not only captive and visible at our whim, not their own, but they are at their very best” (xiii).
  - 13 To the critique that *ZooMorph* privileges vision as a sensory system for representing nonhuman *Umwelten*, Jevbratt counters that several nonhuman animals rely more on their keen sense of vision than on the “messy” or irrational senses (like smell, taste, and touch) that are often argued to set them apart from the human as “*the* visual animal.” Through this response, Jevbratt helpfully anticipates the residual anthropocentrism that accompanies the denigration of vision, a position that arbitrarily designates vision as cultural/produced by historical and technological changes in contrast with other “natural” perceptual registers that are predictably assigned to animals or ethnographic cultures. As Jay has argued, for the majority of commentators, “ocularcentrism” is understood in physiological or evolutionary rather than historical terms; consequently, ethnographic evidence of intersensorial variations in other cultures are cited in attempts to “reverse” the effects of visual domination (3).

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