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Slough: Revealing the Animal

Clay Dunklin

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SLOUGH: REVEALING *THE* ANIMAL

by

CLAY DUNKLIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Studio Art
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Ryan Buyssens, M.F.A.

Abstract

When making my work I constantly reflect on past mythologies, images, and objects. These served people as a way to make sense of and understand the dynamics of the world around them. As we continue to alter and shape the world into one designed for exclusively human benefit, we need new models that reveal the dynamics of our relationship to the world around us. This is what artists have been doing for centuries, and I specifically look to those using animals and animal imagery in their work to further mythologize our contemporary understanding of the human-other animal relationship. My body of work utilizes methods of drawing, printmaking, sculpture, and video to create contemporary icons, objects, and rituals. Icons are re-appropriated, objects are redefined, and rituals are reinterpreted in my work in a way that becomes relevant again for a contemporary audience. Animal imagery is used in a way that explores current trends in genetics, industry, consumerism, and power to reveal this contemporary mythology. These are certainly informed by the prehistoric understanding of this relationship as it is in jarring contrast to our notions today. This juxtaposition serves to illuminate how this relationship has been distorted in this historically recent time while aiming to enlighten us to the power of the other, the thing-ness or vitality of *the* animal and recalibrate contemporary notions in order to achieve reconciliation with a natural order of things.

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Introduction

Often times while working in my dining-room-turned-studio-space, I am unable to avoid the rather low rumbling snore of my dog sleeping on our living room chair. Sometimes I try to tune him out and remain steady in my work but other times I just observe. As I observe, I am flooded with thoughts as to the dynamic of our relationship, and I keep landing on the ideas of ownership and dependency. I certainly care a great deal about him, but to me ownership and dependency seem like such unnatural positions within the animal kingdom. Have we really rescued this poor being from the degrading conditions of the pet shop or does the term ‘pet’ equate to plaything, an object simply owned for our bemusement and benefit? I wrestle with the thought that, generally speaking, we care so much for our pets but do not give a second thought to the treatment of the animals that make up the meal we have just eaten. These animals exist solely within an industry whose practices remain veiled and protected by intense political agendas. The intent here is not to highlight the difference between the meat industry and pet ownership. In a broader sense, I am working to try to piece together an understanding of the human-other animal relationship, what may even more simply be termed an animal-to-animal relationship. How do we begin to come to terms with ourselves as animals?



Figure 1: Guillermo Vargas. *Exposición No. 1*. 2007. Galería Códice. Managua, Nicaragua. Dog, rope, metal cable, dog food. (Image provided by art21.org)

What may be one of the most shocking testaments to the human-other animal relationship within contemporary art comes from Costa Rican artist Guillermo Vargas. In August 2007, Vargas displayed his *Exposición No. 1* in Nicaragua which contained a living emaciated dog tied to the gallery wall. Uproar ensued worldwide when the dog disappeared, with the gallery claiming the dog had escaped, while activists the world over claimed the dog had starved to death. With no animal cruelty laws in effect in Nicaragua, no investigation was opened; however, Vargas did confirm that no one was actively taking care of the dog (Couzens). According to Vargas, the purpose of *Exposición No. 1* was not whether the dog lived or died but

that no one seems to give much thought to a dead dog on the street, yet the populace is maddened when such a death takes place in front of their face. This exposed a sort of double standard (Couzens).

In fact, this idea of a double standard falls in line with the larger contemporary human-other animal relationship as outlined by James Serpell in his text *In the Company of Animals: A Study of Human-Animal Relationships*. Serpell initiates a look into pet ownership and attempts to piece together the human psychology of owning animals as pseudo family members yet jarringly contrasts this against the idea that humans also own animals in an industrialized sense. He tries to make sense of the discrepancy between the treatment of animals that seemingly fall into different ranks within an unacknowledged animal class system before breaking down the myth of human supremacy that has foundations in Judeo-Christian traditions and belief systems (Serpell 163).



Figure 2: Tessa Farmer. *The Depraved Pursuit of a Possum*. 2013. Insects, arachnids, plant roots, wasp nest, crab claws, crabs, sponge, banksia pod, bones, shark egg case, freeze dried brush tailed possum. Commissioned for 'Red Queen' at MONA, Tasmania. (Image provided by tessafarmer.com)

In a similar vein to Vargas, artist Tessa Farmer is remarking on this skewed understanding of other animals within a seemingly human world by way of her delicate and meticulously crafted installations. In her work, Farmer utilizes preserved insects and taxidermied animals in conjunction with her handmade miniature winged skeletons that she describes as fairies. These fairies seem to stand in as the human element in her crafted world and are often seen battling insects or using them to perform tasks (Farmer). The fairies mirror Man as an entity that has

overrun its environment and have appropriated all others to work exclusively for its benefit.

The overrun of our world and the use of animals for our sole benefit are distinctly defining characteristics of the contemporary human-other animal relationship and serve to highlight the distortion of this relationship from the prehistoric one to the current one. When looking to the prehistoric understanding, this seems to have been a relationship of equality, respect, and oneness with nature. Not until the appearance of agriculture and domestication did animals begin to become property and human dominance over nature spread.¹ Humans now thought of society and culture as higher and nature and animals as lower. In the contemporary view, this relationship is distorted by, or maybe simply masked by, our need for power, our urge to consume, and the overwhelming growth of industry. In a time known as the Anthropocene, the human influence, alteration, and even destruction of the earth, its environments, and inhabitants is at a point that cannot be retracted. We cannot return to this idea of oneness with nature and other animals, but perhaps we can ‘slough’ off the current notions and level the playing field to shift in the direction of mutual benefit.

Within the body of this paper, my work is divided into three sections that are all inherently linked to the long history of mythology yet hold something uniquely contemporary that make them culturally relevant. First are the ‘icons’ that explore figurative hybridization followed by the ‘objects’ focusing on body, and last are ‘rituals’ which offer something transformative. These categories are certainly not exclusive, and all of the work could theoretically cross over into the other categories.

¹ Domestication is distinct from taming in that domestication requires the use of the animal for a specific purpose in which the animal is bred with certain traits and altered to meet human needs in large populations. (DeMello 84)

Icons

Icon, deriving from the Greek *eikón* meaning “image” or “likeness,” today typically refers to something that represents or stands in for something larger based on a physical likeness. Eastern Christians procured the term to reference depictions of their saints, and these images gradually began to stand in for their actual presence, being believed to hold divine power. Within the field of semiotics the term has returned to its Greek origin as a reference to something else based on perceived physical likeness, and as a form of the semiotic and religious use of icon, “iconography” within art history has come to denote the mode of analyzing images to be understood historically and symbolically. The work of Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky expanded the use of the term iconography to include secular images and posited that in addition to being read as historical references these icons could stand in for ideas. Today, icon is a popular term in computing jargon and tech-based interfaces and is understood as a symbol or representation that references access to a specific program yet also takes root in the religious understanding as opening access to a larger invisible entity.

It is within the space of understanding images as icons representing ideas that my work is positioned. My images act as signifiers that allude to contemporary themes and trends sitting at the intersection of art, science, nature, and technology. Really, this classification of icon could reference my entire body of work, but the examples I present within this section show a unique grouping of interrelated pieces specially curated as works intended to be viewed as icons in the semiotic, art historical, *and* religious senses of the word. The works that follow are all figurative and based conceptually on current trends in transgenics, genetics, cloning, selective breeding, and animal relationships. The figures represented here are traditionally viewed as expendable

and replaceable within the scientific world, but by my portrayal they could be viewed as religious icons, the saints of scientific testing. Perhaps, however, the understanding of saint as martyr is more appropriate here.



Figure 3: Clay Dunklin. *Ancestor/Descendant*. Diptych. 2015. Silkscreen print on paper.



Figure 4: Clay Dunklin. *Clone*. 2016. Giclée print on paper.

Ancestor/Descendant and Clone

Ancestor/Descendant is a diptych screen-printed on rag paper. The left image depicts a portrait of a man/ape hybrid named Ancestor and the right image depicts a woman/cow hybrid named Descendant. While the man/ape hybridization as ancestor is fairly obvious the female/cow hybridization is probably less so. The discovery of a common ancestor between man and ape had significant implications on the trajectory of evolutionary discoveries in species and allowed for scientific developments in the fields of breeding, genetics, cloning, and transgenics. These fields have been branded with terms such as artificial selection or human engineered evolution as processes in these practices see a distinct human hand in the development of species traits, the hybridization of species, and the conscious selection of admirable traits of non-human species as ideal inclusions in the human genetic code. As developments in these areas continue, is this the genetic future of the animal kingdom?

In *Ancestor/Descendant*, the red bar across the eyes of the figures serves not only to formally unify the two images but acts as a sort of theoretical connection, a timeline that highlights the trajectory from natural selection to artificial selection, or a bridge that connects naturally occurring evolutionary developments for the benefit of species to the man-made evolutionary developments for the benefit and elevation of one species: man.

Developed in conjunction with the *Ancestor/Descendant* prints is a print entitled *Clone*. Here, the portrait of the model is hybridized with a sheep that is then copied, reflected, and pasted together, creating what appear to be conjoined twins. Formally, the portraits rest on a field of two colors that are split on the exact dividing line between the two faces. This piece makes an obvious reference to the story of Dolly, the cloned ewe in Scotland in 1996 and further remarks

on the human engineered development of species.

Rosita ISA: Influence

The choice to hybridize a human with a cow as the representative of artificial selection and the hybridization of species in the *Ancestor/Descendant* prints is founded in the story of the birth of a genetically modified Jersey cow named Rosita ISA. In 2011, Argentinian scientists at the National Institute for Agribusiness Technology in partnership with the Universidad Nacional de San Martín cloned a Jersey bovine with the introduction of two human genes. Born around 100lbs, nearly twice the birth weight of the average Jersey cow, Rosita ISA produces milk that contains the proteins found in human milk that differentiate it from that of other animals. Essentially, Rosita ISA produces human milk, which could have obvious effects on the milk industry and human consumption (an alternative to formula and nursing for infants, continued consumption of nutrient rich human milk into adulthood, etc.). Yet, I must wonder at what cost? I suppose out of all the recent accounts of cloning and animal genetic testing, this case struck me the most as one for inclusion in my body of work due to the recent births of both of my sons and witnessing the production of milk and nursing efforts by my wife.

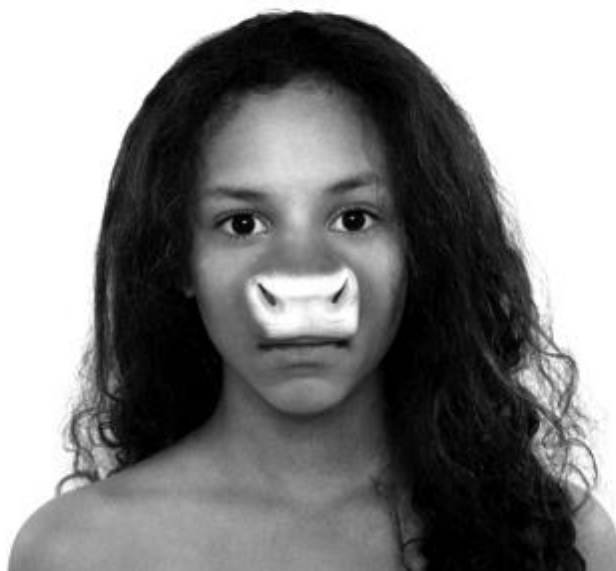


Figure 5: Clay Dunklin. *Descendant (glitch)* Still No. 1. 2016. Single channel video.



Figure 6: Clay Dunklin. *Descendant (glitch)* Still No. 2. 2016. Single channel video.

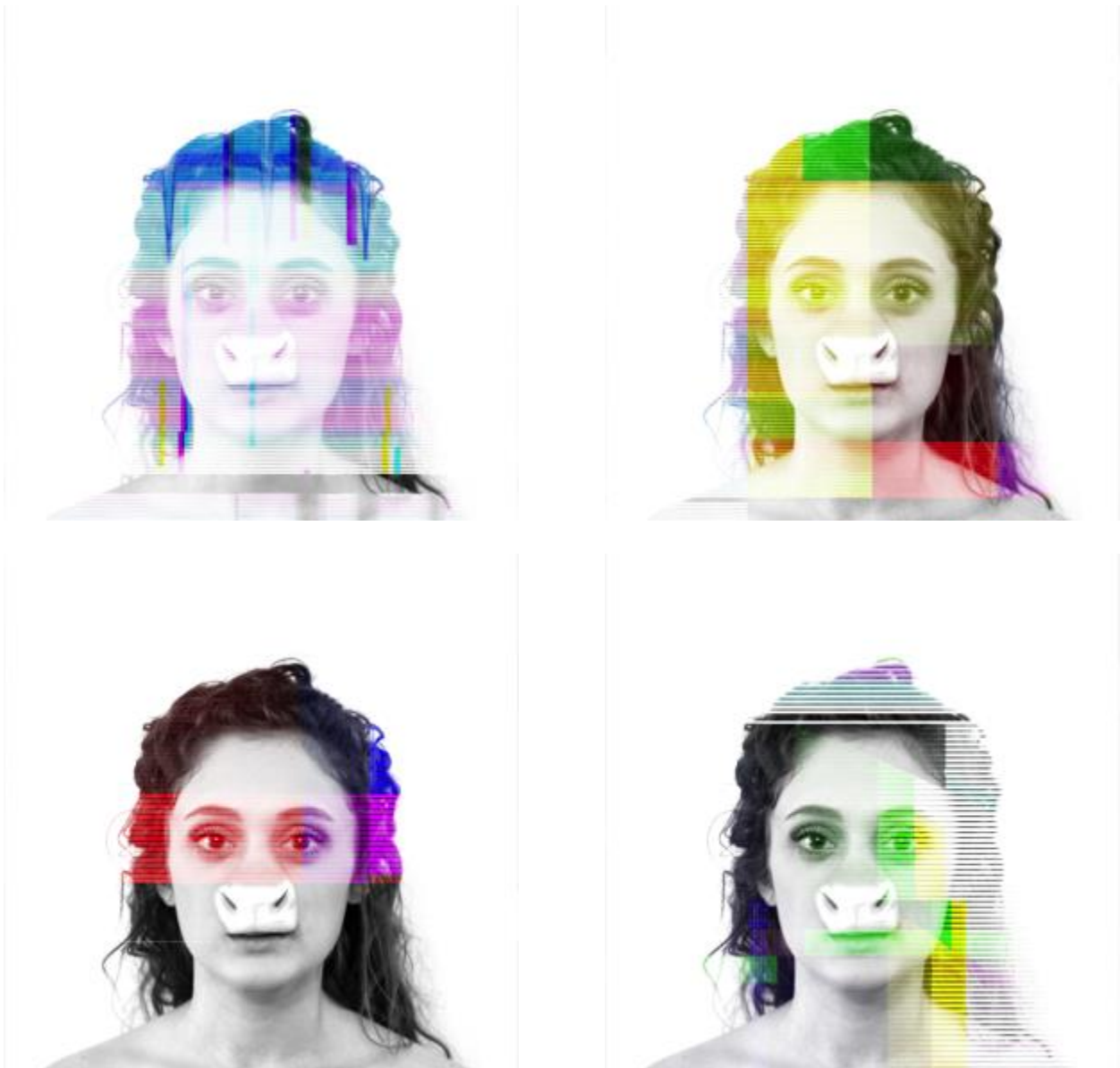


Figure 7: Clay Dunklin. *Descendant Variations 1-4*. 2016. Giclée prints on paper.

Descendant (glitch)

Descendant (glitch) is a variation on the Descendant figure of the *Ancestor/Descendant* prints. In this video variation the model for the figure has been recast to show a pubescent girl/cow hybrid. This age difference is crucial as it signifies a specific moment within the life of a woman; this is literally the time at which she could start producing milk. This distinction not only serves to enhance the influence of the story of Rosita ISA on the development of the piece but also alludes to the implications present in the current trajectory of all genetic and transgenic developments. It signifies a shift in naturally occurring human developments and the outsourcing of these occurrences to other species. It indicates a change in a dependency on human genetic material to guide our aging, growth, and development to a dependency on the inclusion of foreign genetic material for human sustainability.

Also, the model's position has shifted in the video version, moving from one of a submissive position with the head turned gazing up at the viewer to one of a straight forward gaze directly at the viewer in a confrontational manner. This confrontational aspect is more fully realized in the slow growth of the figure in an almost unnoticeable manner over the course of the five minute video from a small figure occupying only a fragment of the video screen to one of imposing size who appears to be bursting out of her confined space.

This confrontation creates an environment where the gaze is reciprocal between the viewer and the subject; in fact it even makes shaky the distinction between viewer and subject. As John Berger states in "Why Look At Animals":

The animal scrutinizes him [man] across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension.

This is why the man can surprise the animal. Yet the animal – even if

domesticated – can also surprise the man. The man too is looking across a similar, but not identical, abyss of non-comprehension. And this is so wherever he looks. He is always looking across ignorance and fear. And so, when he is *being seen* by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings are seen by him (3).

And so, in observing the gaze of the animal other, we must acknowledge the animal's self that we do not know. Jacques Derrida in "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)" uses the example of his cat viewing his naked body to bridge the gap between human and other animal through reciprocal gazes. The cat here represents the otherness of all other animals and the naked man reminds us of the otherness of man that seems less apparent in recent human history.

Lastly, this video variation includes the blinking and shifting of the figure's eyes as well as a soundtrack composed of the model's breathing. These were included in an effort to add a quality of 'aliveness' to the figure, yet the blinking is intentionally stiff and quick to maintain the effect of a still portrait. This seemingly artificial blinking adds a human hand to the work. She more fully appears to be something manufactured and unnatural, and this is heightened all the more by the inclusion of a glitch effect on the figure in the video as well as the distortion of the audio to something almost unrecognizable. Posing on a ground of solid bright white, the glitch takes place on the figure and the figure alone. As she blinks and shifts her eyes in a forced, mechanical nature, she likewise glitches, trembles, and disappears momentarily. She appears to be a thing, some-thing that is fragile, temporary, experimental.

In an effort to visualize the formal qualities of this glitch effect, a series of image tests were carried out producing a set of still images with yet another model as variations of *Descendant*

(*glitch*). These images make permanent something that is fleeting. They freeze an interesting moment in time between appearance and disappearance, between recognizable form and something wholly distorted in an effort to capture a true visualization of such a creature.

Glitch Art: Influence

Descendant (glitch) has obvious foundations in the glitch art movement that is influenced by the absurdity and nonsense of the Dada art movement and arose as early as 1937 with Len Lye's *Color Box*. The movement took off in the 1990's with the development of the World Wide Web and has since permeated our culture so significantly as to lose most of its novelty and be indistinguishable as art seen in the gif phenomenon of current popular social media. As Chicago-based New Media artist Nick Briz puts it, "glitch [is] an unexpected moment in a system that calls attention to that system, and perhaps even leads us to notice aspects of that system that might otherwise go unnoticed." He further states, "Glitch art, then, is anytime an artist intentionally leverages that moment, by either recontextualizing or provoking glitches" (Klee).

Rosa Menkman, in her article "Glitch Studies Manifesto", writes, "While most of these artworks do not have a lot in common, all of them do show that this is the product of an elitist discourse and dogma widely pursued by the naive victims of a persistent upgrade culture" (339). She later goes on to write, "Within software art, the glitch is often used to deconstruct the myth of linear progress and to end the search for the holy grail of the perfect..." (343). While Menkman is certainly referring to technology when using terms like "upgrade culture" and "perfect," surely the effects of that same mentality can be applied when referring to figures like *Descendant* and Rosita ISA. By intentionally glitching *Descendant (glitch)*, the figure points to the elitism of a "persistent upgrade culture" and stands in as the "perfect" whose very glitching is

“deconstruct[ing]” and “end[ing] the search for the holy grail.”



Figure 8: Karina Aguilera Skvirsky. *Blowback*. 2006. Single channel video. (Image provided by karinas.net)

Karina Aguilera Skvirsky: Conversation

A predecessor to the use of these tools in *Descendant (glitch)* is the work of Karina Aguilera Skvirsky in her video *Blowback*. Skvirsky is a contemporary multi-disciplinary artist working in photography, video, and sculpture. Her video *Blowback* from 2005 utilizes sampling and glitch in a conceptual sense that is compelling and thought provoking beyond formal aesthetic. *Blowback* is set on a lush scene of central park in which several war victims who have

been cut from various Arabic news sources are spliced together as a crowd and move in a sporadic and repetitive fashion. As the figures get closer to the viewer, the audio of sampled horror movie soundtracks intensifies and enhances the figures' truncated movements. Skvirsky is utilizing various video effects such as sampling, splicing, and glitching as conceptual tools by which these figures appear as zombies caught in the crossfire of cameras that illuminate our cultural xenophobia perpetuated by the news and media.



Figure 9: Clay Dunklin. *The Immortalists: Sustenance*. 2015. Cast resin, spray paint, cast silicone.



Figure 10: Clay Dunklin. *The Immortalists: Regeneration*. 2016. Cast resin, spray paint, cast silicone



Figure 11: Clay Dunklin. *The Immortalists: Immunity*. 2016. Cast resin, spray paint, cast silicone.



Figure 12: Clay Dunklin. *The Immortalists: Agelessness*. 2016. Cast resin, spray paint, cast silicone.

The Immortalists

The Immortalists is a series of four cast resin sculptural figures whose forms represent human/non-human-animal hybridized fetuses. These fetal forms again play on current trends in transgenics and cloning in the ever-popular search for human immortality. Immortality has long been the center of much scientific research, but in recent years genetic studies have seen a significant growth in the testing of species for choice traits that would extend the human lifespan and improve the quality of life. The prototype for the series was a cow human hybrid that was once again inspired by the story of Rosita ISA.

The story of this cow that is part human, recalls the ancient myth of the bull-human hybrid known as the Minotaur. In this story, Poseidon gifts King Minos of Crete with a beautiful white bull that is to be sacrificed. Out of greed, however, King Minos keeps the bull, and Poseidon in turn curses King Minos' wife to mate with the bull. The result of this meeting is the monster of lore having the head of a bull and the body of a man with an insatiable appetite for children. This story shows the pitfalls of greed and the dangers of playing with nature.

As an amalgamation of these two stories, I created a Minotaur fetus. This sculptural object with the body of a human and the head of a cow reflects the mythic tradition of the minotaur but relies more heavily on the science of GMOs and the current toy culture to recount the story of Rosita ISA.

The fetus is based on the form of a children's baby doll who has seen the addition of a tail and whose head is based on the form of a developing cow's head. The fetus is colored a flesh tone and rests in a brightly colored form acting as a culture seen in a petri dish of a typical lab. These formal elements serve to elevate the man-made, manufactured, and artificial qualities of

the object. These qualities are a direct reflection of the god complex required for humans to create, clone, and genetically modify an animal purely for human benefit by economic means.

The Minotaur has long been depicted in various art forms at different times in history. The images and objects of ancient Greece showed the Minotaur in pieces like *Theseus and the Minotauros* painted on a vessel dating to 550BC and the *Bronze Minotaur* dating to about 520BC. These works were not only objects to be honored but also tools to illustrate myths and stories and could, in turn, carry on the ancient oral traditions. My piece will add yet another layer to this tradition by bringing the story into the contemporary setting and recounting a new variation of the Minotaur myth. I am drawing on the practice of designers like Joe Ledbetter, Gary Baseman, and Ron English whose works have been pivotal in the explosion of the vinyl toy market. With this influence, the piece becomes a sort of collectible, an object for display, a model or diagram that recounts the story of a contemporary cultural Minotaur known as Rosita ISA.

The prototype figure became known as *Sustenance* due to Rosita ISA's achievement as a perfect human food source. Thus *Sustenance's* counterparts were designed to signify qualities of immortality that are based in the scientific testing of animals species exhibiting these traits as useful for the longevity of human life. Namely, *Agelessness* is a human hybridized with a tortoise whose various species boast of internal organs that do not senesce while *Immunity* is combined with the fetal forms of the naked mole rat that is incredibly resistant to disease and can live for well over 30 years. Lastly, *Regeneration* is hybridized with the fetus of a lizard. Various lizard species are able to reproduce separated body parts, namely tails, which scientists believe could hold the key to rapid human healing and regeneration. These four beings carry an

unassuming presence, yet in a four-horseman-of-the-apocalypse-esque manner carry with them the weight of the human hand playing god in intentionally directing the development of life on this planet.



Figure 13: Patricia Piccinini, *The Young Family*. 2002. Silicone, polyurethane, leather, plywood, human hair. 80 x 150 x 110cm. (Image provided by patriciapiccinini.net)

Patricia Piccinini: Influence

The Immortalists were directly influenced by the sculptural work of Patricia Piccinini. Piccinini creates hybridized and unknowable forms that at first appear humanoid yet are undeniably parahuman. Piccinini's work takes a hyperrealistic look at the antithesis idea to Darwin's theory of natural selection – artificial selection or human engineered evolution. She is making visual objects that simulate the realities of our current transgenic trend that provides for the merging of genes from different organisms and even different species (Robertson 265).

Piccinini's work touches on our emotions and forces us to consider the cultural implications of current scientific and experimental genetic trends. By simulating this imagined reality, Piccinini is very blatantly displaying the ideas of French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, who posited in *Simulacra and Simulation* that the current human experience is merely a simulation of reality and that advanced cultures have replaced all reality with symbols and signs (Robertson 266). As Jean Robertson paraphrases, Baudrillard further argued, "Viewers of an endless array of simulations lose their ability to separate reality from fantasy" (266). Due to their hyperrealism, Piccinini's sculptures already seem to blur that line between reality and fantasy and may soon become normalized imagery as we witness new scientific developments and advancements in the fields of genetics, transgenics, and cloning.

Objects

In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett outlines a growing philosophical trend known as New Materialism. This New Materialism states that things have a sort of thing-ness or vibrancy. This is an animate quality in which the affect of the object directly engages with the human. Bennett describes the “capacity of things ... to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). She further outlines the “lively powers of material formations” such as omega-3 fatty acids that are known to alter moods or trash that develops into streams of chemicals and gases that affect the environment (vii). This vitality does not exist solely *because* humans have endowed a quality to things but is certainly understood by our engagement with the ‘thing,’ the other. The human-other animal relationship is similar to New Materialism in that it is a subject-object relationship. We live in a time where technology and industry rule, and the exploitation of other animals and nature increasingly serves to benefit human power. If we could begin to understand the other, *the* animal as vibrant matter then perhaps we could begin recalibrating to more ecological practices and ‘greener’ relationships. In contemporary terms, these ideas could be what mythologist Joseph Campbell meant when alluding to a return to the mythic way or a more mythological mindset (253).

The works selected for inclusion in this section are not altogether separate from the work of the previous section but are different in their distinction as objects themselves that have a sort of power. There are two series presented here: first, is a series of sculpted animal penises that play off of phallic imagery and fertility objects to represent literal power; and second, is a series of containers that hold body matter, specifically human fluids, making human into object.



Figure 14: Clay Dunklin, *The Phallacy of Power*. 2014-16. Cast plaster, shadow box frames.



Figure 15: Jaishri Abichandani. *Before Kali. Number 2.* 2013. Clay, wood, paint varnish. (Image provided by jaishriabichandani.net)

The Phallacy of Power

The Phallacy of Power re-appropriates the idea of traditional phallic objects and monuments into a series of sculpted animal penises. The penises are first sculpted, molded, and then cast in plaster. The tips of the penises are painted in various hues of red and pink, and the sculptures are framed in shadow boxes with no glass so as to emerge from their display. The various penises are hung together, and are intended to be viewed as a group.

These objects question and challenge the use of phallic imagery as a symbol of human power. Sexuality and sexual organs have long been used as references to power like images of the vagina as reclamation of feminine power. Artist Jaishri Abichandani critiques individual and social power within her work using sexuality and religion as entry points. Through various series such as her contemporary fertility figures or her monumental works that depict vaginas and fountains, Abichandani employs symbolic materials such as dildos, whips, and Swarovski crystals to reinforce and enhance the sexual and power references evident in her work.

In a similar vein, *The Phallacy of Power*, uses the sexual organ to reclaim power for a disenfranchised group, namely other animals, but more importantly makes reference to the power of *the* animal. Like Abichandani, the techniques in crafting the work and the visual elements at play all serve to solidify the references to power and sex. The technique of casting is ideal for multiplicity, and casting multiples of variously sculpted penises makes for a large group further removing the power from the one: man. The painting of only the tip of the penises is an obvious sexual reference and their display as emerging from the shadow boxes is a symbolic breaking out. As opposed to the frames protecting the work, they are a conceptual element that allows for an object uninhibited and unconfined.



Figure 16: Clay Dunklin. *Consumables*. 2016. Plastic deli containers, labels, human blood, human milk, human saliva, human semen, human sweat, human urine.



Figure 17: Kiki Smith, *Untitled*. 1987-90. Silvered glass water bottles. Museum of Modern Art. New York. (Image provided by moma.org)

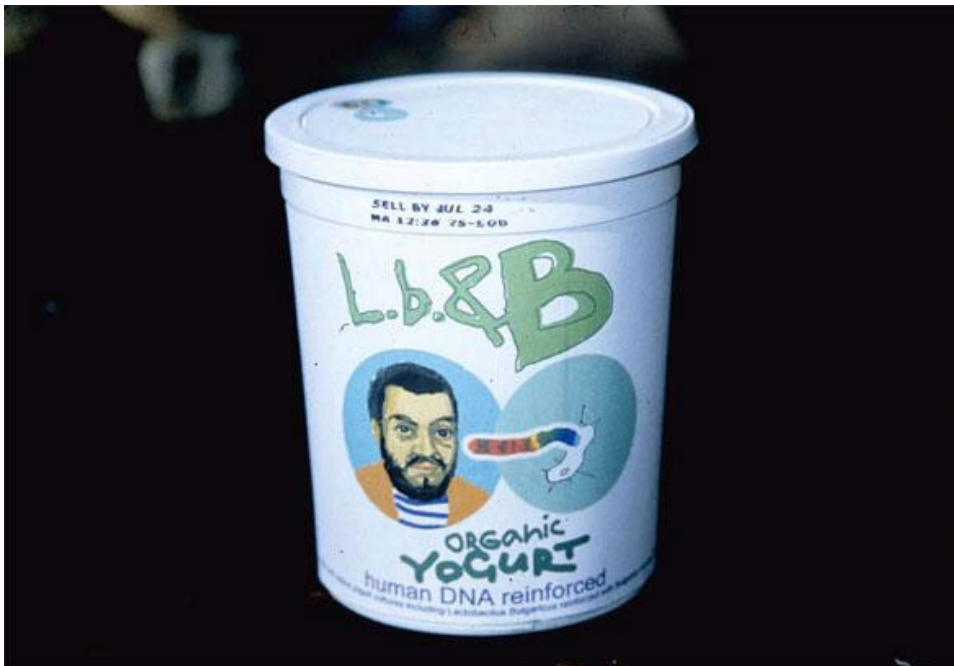


Figure 18: Daniel Bozhkov, *Befriending the Bacteria*. 2001-10. Live yogurt cultures: *Lactobacillus bulgaricus*, Bulgarian human DNA taken from the white blood cells of the artist, plastic yogurt containers, refrigeration unit, wall sign. (Image provided by artadoo.com)

Consumables

Consumables is a series of sculptural objects inspired by edible animal blood and other animal byproducts as commodities. While at an Asian market, I stumbled upon a freezer full of small containers of what the label described as “Edible Beef Blood.” What constitutes this blood as edible as opposed to other animal blood? At what point does an animal become object and how do we as humans relate to these objects differently than the animal being? With these questions circulating, I began working on *Consumables*.

Consumables is a set of six 12-ounce deli containers individually filled with my blood, sweat, urine, semen, saliva, and my wife’s milk. The labels are a knock off of the labels at the Asian market but instead of “Edible Beef Blood” read “Edible Human Blood” etc. These objects were likewise inspired by Kiki Smith, whose untitled work of twelve glass jars with the name of twelve different human secretions etched on each, reveal issues of human physicality and literally reflect the human viewer as a vessel which holds these fluids. In a Daniel Bozhkov-esque way, whose piece *Befriending the Bacteria* made manifest his attempt to infuse yogurt with his own human DNA, this series was an attempt to break down my body into object and begin to understand human physicality as it relates to other physical ‘things.’ Human-becoming-other begins to level the playing field within our relationships to nature, nonhuman animals, things, etc.



Figure 19: Hermann Nitsch. Untitled. 1998. (Image provided by nitsch.org)

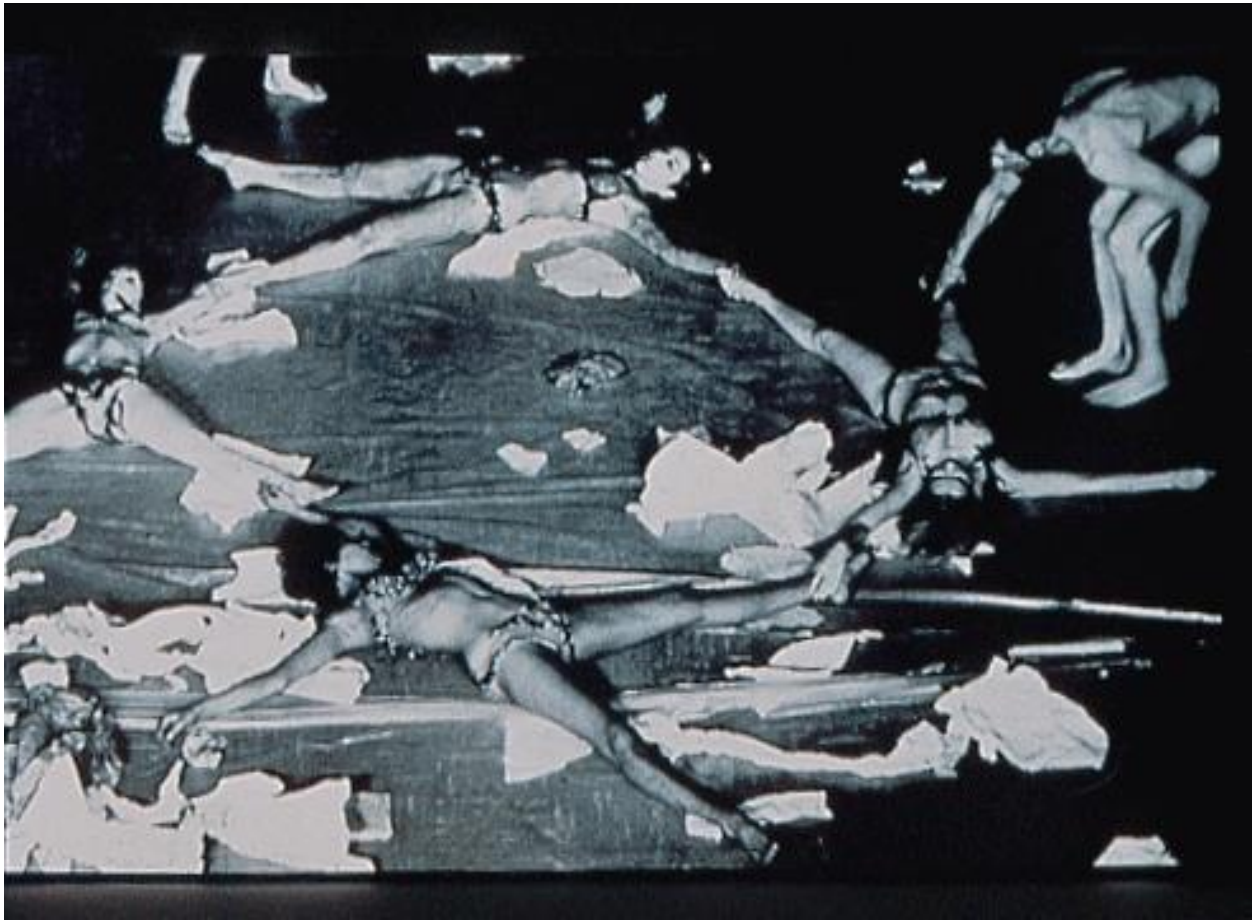


Figure 20: Carolee Schneeman, *Meat Joy*. 1964. Group performance: raw fish, chickens, sausages, wet paint, plastic, rope, shredded scrap paper. Judson Church. New York. (Image provided by caroleeschneeman.com)



Figure 21: Marcus Coates. Journey to the Lower World (Beryl). 2004. Archival inkjet print. 115 x 115 cm. (Image provided by katemacgarry.com)

Rituals

The final subdivision in the categorization of my work stems from the idea of the ritual. Rituals, rites, and practices are inherent to mythologies and according to Joseph Campbell are necessary in order for mythologies to exist and remain relevant. In *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space*, Campbell writes that these symbolic rites and ceremonies are a way for the culture itself to be mythologized and to participate with its universe. Campbell further states that “their effect, therefore, is to wake the intellect to realizations equivalent to those of the insights that produced them” (xxiii). This understanding of the necessity of rituals is one that has been held throughout time by artists the world over. Artists like Hermann Nitsch, who staged participatory rituals for viewers to engage the senses, break taboos, and reactivate religious rites, or Joseph Beuys and Chris Burden, who created more contemporary rituals that commented on society and culture, all understood the communicative powers and intense understanding that accompanies performative rituals and rites.

This power and understanding is articulated clearly by Ron Broglio in his book *Surface Encounters: Thinking with Animals and Art*. In this text, Broglio explores surface encounters in various forms (i.e. the overlap and intersection of the human ‘world’ with the animal ‘world’ in the work of Olly and Suzi or the viewing of the human through the animal perspective via the collaborative work of Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson). In thinking performance, however, Broglio, in his chapter “Body of Thought,” specifically cites Carolee Schneemann and her ritual performance *Meat Joy* as one that examines or fills the gap between the human and the other animal. The ritual is Dionysian in effect and is reminiscent of an uninhibited bacchanal where participants roll around in meat, blood, and paint and engage with the inner animal. He

relates this directly to the contrast between Heidegger's idea of the 'shepherd' and Nietzsche's idea of the 'satyr.' Heidegger appropriated the idea of the shepherd in his work and this modernist symbol can stand in for the understanding of the human-other animal relationship. The shepherd is one who is removed from the animals, he is different, greater, he is master and his crook is the tool by which he engages and relates to the animal. There is a distance and a difference between the two. The shepherd is never seen killing and eating the meat which Broglio describes as a sort of metaphysical meeting and knowing. On the other hand, Nietzsche's 'satyr' is in fact part-human part-other, specifically horse or goat. As a companion to the god Dionysus, he engages in ritualistic acts, acts of indulgence and consumption that allude to the inner animal of the human or the human *as* animal.

In the final chapter of his book, "Minor Art," Broglio directly discusses "becoming animal" as expressed in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari through the work of performance artist Marcus Coates (101). Coates dons various articles of clothing and animal pelts, acts and moves in ways that are foreign to both human and other animal, and utters noises that are neither human languages nor animal sounds in rituals that have been appropriated from ancient cultures and re-contextualized for contemporary audiences. Coates maintains the unknowable quality and unpredictability of ancient shamanic practices and just like a shaman, descends into the 'lower,' fully embracing the other, the animal, and re-emerges with these seemingly absurd acts to shed light on and make sense of contemporary issues and current trends. These and other works address Broglio's interest in "how art calls to us to consider and negotiate the space of this animal other" (xvii).

But how do we understand rituals as contemporary? How are rituals relevant to today

outside of the existence of something spiritual or overtly mythic? In “Rituals in the Modern World,” Bent Steeg Larsen and Thomas Tufte summarize the research on contemporary ritual and how it is ingrained within daily life and contemporary culture. Here, English anthropologist Max Gluckman is paraphrased as suggesting that rituals are the expression “of complex social situations being negotiated and mediated” (Larsen and Tufte 92). Ritual is likewise defined in the paper as sitting in some kind of flux between individual and social, occasional and frequent, sacred and secular, and transformative and mundane.

Perhaps the most interesting reference to ritual within the Larsen/Tufte paper is its role within media studies, specifically viewing media as ritual. In this sense, rituals “suspend the ordinariness of everyday life” yet are simultaneously “*about* this ordinariness.” They further state, “Rituals, then, are not completely detached from everyday life, but are, on the contrary, a continuing reflection of one’s place and position in it” (Larsen and Tufte 94).

The work selected for inclusion in this section represents ritual in these unique, contemporary ways. First, is a series of drawings of meat that, initially, symbolize something greater, much like the icons of the first section, yet under closer scrutiny show a metaphysical state or transformative moment that is closely linked to historical and contemporary ritual in a way that leads the audience to reflection and knowledge. Second, is a video work that portrays everyday activities, cultural activities that are social, frequent, secular, and mundane. However, the video is itself transformative in a formal sense and calls for a position of reflection on the part of its audience.



Figure 22: Clay Dunklin. *Cow Tongue*. 2014. Ink, gouache, and acrylic wash on paper.



Figure 23: Clay Dunklin. *Ox Tail*. 2014. Ink, gouache, and acrylic wash on paper.



Figure 24: Clay Dunklin. *Beef Kidneys*. 2014. Ink, gouache, and acrylic wash on paper.



Figure 25: Clay Dunklin. *Pig Tails*. 2014. Ink, gouache, and acrylic wash on paper.



Figure 26: Clay Dunklin. *Pig Feet*. 2014. Ink, gouache, and acrylic wash on paper.



Figure 27: Clay Dunklin. *Pork Ribs*. 2014. Ink, gouache, and acrylic wash on paper.



Figure 28: Damien Hirst. *Love's Paradox (Surrender or Autonomy, Separateness as a Precondition for Connection.)*. 2007. Glass, steel, acrylic, cows and formaldehyde solution. Two parts, each: 2280 x 1734 x 1734 mm | 89.8 x 68.3 x 68.3 in. (Image provided by damienhirst.com)



Figure 29: Tamara Kostianovsky. *Abacus*. 2008. Clothing belonging to the artist, chains, meat hooks. Each piece 96 x 36 x 45 in. (Image provided by tamarakostianovsky.com)

Meat

In Broglio's *Surface Encounters*, he states in the chapter "Meat Matters,"

Meat is the moment when what remained hidden to us is opened up. The animal's insides become outsides. Its depth of form becomes a surface, and its depth of being becomes the thin lifelessness of an object exposed. Meat makes the animal insides visible, and through sight the animal body becomes knowable. And while meat serves as a means for us to take in the animal visually and intellectually, it also marks the moment when the animal becomes physically consumable (1).

Meat is a metaphysical state, a state of transformation from living to dead, being to object, and interior to exterior. Broglio summarizes philosopher G.W.F. Hegel as saying, "eating becomes the transformation of dead matter into life, and intellectual consumption transforms matter into self-presence" (Broglio 2-3). By visually exploring the landscape of this new exterior surface and theoretically and intellectually consuming the body of the animal, the object or the other can become knowable.

Broglio cites Damien Hirst as a prime example of an artist working in this vein. Some of Hirst's work includes titles such as *Some Comfort Gained from the Acceptance of the Inherent Lies in Everything*, and *Mother and Child, Divided* in which Cows are sliced into various subsections, submerged in clear tanks of formaldehyde and displayed variably as sculptural works. However, as much as animals may seem to be the focus of his work, they are simply the materials used to elicit a reflective moment on the part of the viewer. The shocking death and display of this figures calls for an introspective look at the interior of the collective human.

Another artist working with similar thematic content yet an altogether different approach is

New York-based artist and Guggenheim fellow Tamara Kostianovsky. Kostianovsky, in her series *Actus Reus*, “literally cannibalizes her wardrobe into art—using the various fabrics and textures to conjure flesh, bone, gristle, and slabs of fat in life-size sculptures of livestock carcasses. The material connects our bodies with the ones in the work, bringing violent acts into a familiar realm.” (Kostianovsky) In her own words she states that her “intention is to confront the viewers with the real and grotesque nature of violence, offering a context for reflecting about the vulnerability of our physical existences, brutality, poverty, consumption, and the voracious needs of the body.” (Kostianovsky)

Stemming from this trajectory of meat as a reflective tool and transformative object, my series *Meat* includes 22”x30” drawings of various cuts of meat on paper. Using ink, gouache, and acrylic washes, these realistic renderings in highly saturated color palettes seem to float on a white ground. It is only with closer viewing that the slight appearance of a cast shadow gives rise to the notion that these objects exist in a space, a clean white void. These meats sit in a sacrificial space, on a metaphorical altar table that make them the sole element of the work and allow for room in which to reflect, as Kostianovsky said, on our physical existences, brutality, consumption, and the needs of the body.

These drawings reflect on the long history of animal sacrifice and the use of animal bodies in rituals whose role was to “wake the intellect to realizations” yet also play on the obvious use of meat for eating (Campbell xxiii). While this notion of eating may allude to a metaphorical knowing as stated earlier, it also reveals a connection to ritual in the contemporary sense of consumption as a social, regular, and mundane act that is crucial to cultural negotiation and mediation and by which the very act of viewing these drawings “suspend the ordinariness of

everyday life” yet is “*about* this ordinariness” (Larsen and Tufte 94). These drawings situate themselves within the context of contemporary ritual by continuing to reflect not only our own interior as object or other but also our place and position in the mundane of everyday life.



Figure 30: Clay Dunklin. *Fast Food / Slow Food* (still). 2015. Single channel video.

Fast Food / Slow Food

Fast Food/Slow Food is a two-channel video of cows being let out to pasture set against the goings on in a typical fast food chain. As the cows run, jump, play, and feed, the fast food footage is increasingly sped up, creating a dramatically blurred image and a whirring sound. This footage is then slowed back down to normal speed but, because of damage due to editing, we are left with a series of haunting still images accompanied by an arresting ambient sound in which a typical cultural activity becomes unrecognizable and distant.

As stated earlier, this video is ritualistic in nature, first by the sheer act of its viewing and second due to its portrayal of a social and routine activity that is crucial to everyday life. However, what is arguably more important here is the opportunity for personal reflection as the video itself literally transforms. Through the distortion and unrecognizable imagery, the human element of the work becomes some-thing, an other. This is certainly distinctive from the shamanic sense of become other as evident in the work of Marcus Coates and is more closely akin to the becoming present in Schneemann's *Meat Joy*. The becoming other in this video is due to an act of Dionysian indulgence, an act of uninhibited consumption riddled with the effects of big agribusiness, genetic modification, and industrial processes, that is so ingrained in culture as to not even appear foreign to the natural world.



Figure 31: Matthew Barney. *Drawing Restraint 9* (film still). 2005. (Image provided by drawingrestraint.net)

Matthew Barney: Conversation

In the coda of Broglio's *Surface Encounters*, he recalls Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint 9* as the apex to his research on human-other animal encounters and human becoming other. Matthew Barney repeatedly uses animals and draws on past folklore and myths to initiate dramatic narratives that imbue his work with a new, contemporary mythology. He creates elaborate sets and characters for his big-budget films that serve as a very blatant mythology yet, in subversive and visually enthralling ways, his work is piecing together and making sense of the constructs of human physiology and the human relationship to environment.

In *Drawing Restraint 9* specifically, Barney and his counterpart, played by Björk, embark on a journey on a Japanese whaling ship. Throughout the trip they are ceremoniously de-robed,

washed, groomed, and dressed in traditional Japanese clothes combined with horns and arctic furs. This initially symbolizes a change to embrace the animal, yet it is not until the ritual event in the tearoom below deck that something transformational takes place. In the tearoom ritual, Barney and Björk begin moving and touching in ways that are foreign to human yet oddly sensual. As the room slowly floods with water, knives are brought out and they begin cutting away the flesh of their legs to reveal whale tails. *This* is the moment of transformation, a true becoming. This is beyond the ritualistic encounter with the other seen in Schneemann's *Meat Joy* and even pushes further than Coates' shamanic rituals to embrace human as other – this is something altogether unrecognizable. As Broglio most eloquently puts it, “One comes to know the other through fragility of the human subject, which is stretched beyond its limits not to incorporate the other but to transform the self beyond itself” (131).

Conclusion

While it may seem fitting to conclude here with human becoming other, I am not content. It feels too open ended. There has been a clear path and development to the work over time from human-other animal relations to searching for the animal to human becoming animal/other. But what do we do with this idea of becoming? I propose one next step in this logical trajectory, one that at first may seem to break this logic – the human has been the animal all along.

Dominic Pettman in his book *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines* asks these questions:

Where is the human indeed? Is it something that flares up during moments of compassion, only to disappear when self-interests are compromised? Is it an ontological property found nested within condominiums, or slums, or space stations, or caves? Or is it an unstable element that needs precise criteria and conditions to emerge? Does it in fact cut across current taxonomic species lines, as happens when we seem to communicate with dogs, horses, or elephants? Are we, as the philosophers might ask, merely simulating these conditions of emergence in a controlled experiment? Moreover, is that which we call “the human” really confined to the invisible souls of *Homo sapiens*? Is it projected onto the historical development of these souls, as relentlessly figured in speech, text, and (moving) image? And finally, if humans are the tool users par excellence, than has not our quintessential property been outsourced to objects?

(42)

As Slavoj Žižek comments in his essay “The Animal Does Not Exist” on the title of Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” “At the level of substantial content, I am nothing but the animal that I am. What makes me human is the very formal declaration of me as an animal” (42). Žižek goes on to comment on the rise of the idea of “the animal” saying, “We mustn’t forget the ‘the animal’ is a differential category. There is no unity of ‘the animal.’ ‘Animal’ emerges with the rise of man” (46). “The animal,” as a category encompassing all others apart from human, is only a distinction made from the human perspective. But again we must ask, where is the human? If “the animal” is the other, the outcast, the foreign, who, then, is the animal? Humans are of course “the animal.” Humans are the other, the foreign, the piece that does not fit. Žižek concludes that humans are “a stranger on earth” and that, “[s]omething went simply wrong, genetically maybe. We got stuck in this malfunction. At some point we even started to enjoy this malfunctioning. And what if our ‘becoming human’ happened precisely because of our getting stuck?” (56).

This understanding, then, actually brings us full circle. This brings us to a position where we can begin to recalibrate our understanding of the human-other animal relationship in order to achieve a reconciliation with an intuited order of nature. This likewise opens an entirely new range of possibilities to explore *the* animal within my artistic practice.

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