

Human-non-Human Networks (Chicago, 12 Mar 16)

The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, SAIC Ballroom, 112 S. Michigan Ave., Mar 12, 2016

Giovanni Aloï

Human-non-Human Networks

a symposium organized by Giovanni Aloï, David Getsy, and Andrew Yang

What is at stake in the re-imagining of disciplinary boundaries through the pursuing of new epistemic strategies involving multispecies networks? What may the aesthetic repercussions of such new directions be? How can art produced within these new parameters impact on everyday life?

The reconfiguration of anthropocentrism taken on by queer theory, animal-studies, and posthumanism, has now given over to the emerging methodological approaches of speculative realism, new materialism, and object-oriented ontology. Building upon the established framework of posthumanism, this symposium aims at exploring the productive opportunities these new approaches provide in specific relation to contemporary art. Moving beyond the growing zoöcentrism that characterizes current animal studies, the focus of this event will be centered on the possibilities of reconceiving ethicalities, methodologies, and aesthetic strategies as inscribed in the biotechnological, biocapitalist, and "deep time" frameworks of the proposed Anthropocene. In search of new epistemological opportunities that try to make equal sense of different life-forms within shared and interwoven ecosystems, we will appraise the role art may play in shifting naturalized anthropocentric mind-frames into a more expansive space. From bacteria to fungi, invertebrates to plants, beings that can return the gaze and those who do not, this symposium will contribute to the mapping of new opportunities for considering the role art can play in triggering societal changes.

PROGRAM

10:00

Welcome/Introduction

10:15

Giovanni Aloï: Registering Interconnectedness

It's been ten years since I became actively involved in the field of academic enquiry known as human-animal studies. Its anti-anthropocentric, revisionist, and multidisciplinary approaches have proved largely productive in rethinking human-animal relationships and in challenging the representational tropes that have relentlessly objectified animals in art, as well as other disciplines. Although very active in publishing and well integrated amongst research peers, from an early day,

I was a dissident voice. While many focused on farm animals or pets, I began wondering about insects and amphibians. The more others examined charismatic megafauna, the more I became interested in plants. The recent speculative turn in philosophy including the rise of new materialism, object oriented ontology, and critical plant studies have proved my doubts to be well founded: the zoocentrism that characterizes human-animal studies requires serious problematization. This talk looks at the productivities involved in moving beyond human-animal studies in art.

11:00

Andrew Yang: Networks of the Natural

A seed is a 'small maybe' that intends to not only grow, but also travel. The landscape owes its very existence to the wanderlust of plants and the seeds they release: possibilities in search of new territories. Cities' entangled fluxes of infrastructure, architecture, and creature, present a rich site to examine how plants find new strategies and new vehicles for living out their improbable possibility. As their animal couriers successively fall prey to human innovation, from spear to skyscraper, it remains an open question how these ecologies of interruption reroute and reimagine themselves.

11:45

localStyle: Marlena Novak and Jay Alan Yim: Augmenting Others

localStyle's projects explore how territories and boundaries – whether physical or intangible – are constructed, interpreted, and negotiated, via themes as varied as issues of trespass, the mating behavior of hermaphroditic marine flatworms, the sonification of electric fish from the Amazon, and experimental Eurasian blackbird grammar.

In one of the three works presented in the symposium, Naming Things – inspired by Borges' fictive encyclopedia and Foucault's response – combines field footage, 3D animation, and recorded performances with animal-derived objects. As one of the Borgesian tactics that Naming Things emulates, existing fauna are juxtaposed with invented organisms into a fictitious codification whose credibility invites interrogation of how culturally specific systems of categorization and knowledge are imposed and perpetuated.

A second project, Bird is an intervention into the avian cultural practice of European Blackbirds' song production (deploying a virtual bird creating new songs using real blackbird lexemes), as well as an anthropocentric appreciation of their virtuosic singing, via an interactive moving-image installation.

Finally, in the interactive interspecies sound installation scale, attributes such as consciousness and agency became ethically amplified. Working with live animals, the necessity of mediating the creatures' habitat marked a critical difference between direct presentation (in scale) and the representation of the non-human actor (in Bird and Naming Things).

12:30 Lunch

1:30

Marissa Lee Benedict: Arid Systems: observations on extremophiles in an age of extra- hyper-, super-objects

In a world increasingly produced by Timothy Morton's theory of hyperobjects – a term borrowed from computer science to conceive of objects massively distributed in time and space as non-localized yet cohesive entities – what is the role of the localized organism? Taking up extre-

mophiles, strange organisms that thrive in very specific extreme environmental conditions, from the industrial sludge at the bottom of the Calumet River to the arid deserts of the Atacama, this talk will explore the economic, environmental and social positions modeled and enacted by these organisms in a world increasingly characterized by volatile cycles of drought and flood, "extreme" fuel extraction, and fluid hyper-connectivity.

2:15

Lindsey French: weak media, phytocentrism, and gestures toward transgressing the self

In "Plant-Thinking: Michael Marder calls for, "an infinite loosening up, a weakening of the self's boundaries, commensurate with the powerlessness (Ohnmacht) of the plants themselves." In an ongoing search for adopting a photocentric perspective, can gestures of weakness and powerlessness open us to plant modes of being? In loosening our identities, what new selves might we embody? Phytovision, as both a practice of perception and a plant-oriented media, begins as an experiment to destabilize the primacy of vision, and quietly opens a number of modes of perception beyond the clear distinctions of our human senses. In this talk I consider and present a number of practices aimed toward adopting a phytocentric perspective, weaker boundaries, passive actions, and distributed selves. What is plant media? How can we be both mediated by, and media for, a phytocentrism?

3:00 Coffee

3:30

James Elkins: Social Networks of Non-Human Seeing

This will be an excerpt from material in the forthcoming book "Visual Worlds" (Oxford), concerning the visual capacities of pelagic fish and invertebrates. The notion is to avoid at least five possible approaches: Flusser's half-serious aesthetization in "Vampyroteuthis Infernalis," the temptation to expand Lacan's models of seeing to nonhumans, the abstractions of object-oriented ontologies, and the anti-anthropomorphisms of Uexküll and others. Pelagic communities offer a good example of complex networks of seeing and being seen than cannot be fully interpreted given the current resources of biology: we can watch acts of seeing, and we can appreciate their complexity, but we cannot fully interpret them: they exist as languages of seeing that are not assimilable to existing models.

4:15

Eva Hayward: Cat's Cradle: AIDS, Toxoplasmosis gondii, and Impurrrfect Love

Altering the string figures held by Donna Haraway—most notably from her essay "A Game of Cat's Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies" where she opens with the line: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (59)—I want to pull forward questions about microbial life, particularly Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Toxoplasmosis gondii, and Feline Immunodeficiency Virus (FIV). So often the accounts of human and nonhuman interaction are defined by face-to-face, immediacy, and direct modes of contact, which reinforce anthropocentric (and colonial) notions of encounter. However, microbial life not only complicates "contact zones," but also the certainty of liberal humanist notions of agency, subjectivity, and power. Starting with the ball-of-string figure the "Crazy Cat Lady," this talk follows the ways that human/feline relationships are done and undone by "para-affective" (microbes that alter affect) forces.

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5:15 Round Table

6:30 End

Reference:

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