



HOME(S), BORDERS AND TRANSGRESSIONS

edited by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Réka M. Cristian, Zoltán Dragon and András Lénárt	
Writing on the Margins of Sound and Sight: Augusto de Campos and Transnational Poetic Traditions	3
Enikő Bollobás	
Borderlands in Sandra Cisneros's Short Story Collections <i>The House on Mango Street</i> and <i>Woman Hollering Creek</i>	21
Aleksandra Izgarjan and Sanja Čukić	
"Black Is Beautiful": Black Atlantic Experience and the Black Female Body in Toni Morrison's <i>God Help the Child</i> (2015)	34
Ágnes Zsófia Kovács	
Transgressing the Uncanny: Representations of the Unfamiliar Home in Cristina García's <i>The Agüero Sisters</i>	44
Eva-Maria Trinkaus	
Boundaries, Bridges, Becomings: Interspecies Politics in Contemporary Performance Arts	51
Anna Kérchy	
Possibilities of Being at Home on American Soil: the Concept of Home in Toni Morrison's Novels	61
Eszter Enikő Mohácsi	
Images of Mexico in the Texts of Two Female Travellers at the Beginning of the 20 <sup>th</sup> Century	71
Mónika Szente-Varga	

Butch Cassidy in Bolivia: The Dissolution of Colonial Hierarchies and the Strengthening of Neocolonial Power Relations as Presented in Mateo Gil's Film <i>Blackburn</i> (2011)	82
Marek Paryz	
Borderlands and Humorous Transgressions in <i>Marbete</i> (2010) and <i>Macbete Kills</i> (2013)	93
Zsófia Anna Tóth	
Strangers to Ourselves: A Multi-Disciplinary Approach to Uncovering the Other Within	105
Dominique Rey	
Warhaftige Historia der Wilden Menschfresser Leuterr: Discovering the Americas in Early Modern Hungary	117
Ildikó Sz. Kristóf	
A Jesuit from Central Europe in Paraguay: The Role of Ferenc Limp in the Campaign Against Guaraní Indians	135
Dóra Babarcsi	
Urban Creativity Practices in São Paulo	145
Kata Murányi	
Indian Diaspora in the World: The Caribbean Region	159
Éva Emese Szalai	
Transnationalism and Resistance: The Border at the 49 <sup>th</sup> Parallel, the Vietnam Resister, Then and Now	170
Mary Ann Steggles	
Home(s), Borders, and Transgressions – The Story Told by Inscription Rock	177
Andrea Kőkény	

TRANSNATIONAL AMERICAS

The Dreamers' invisible border Anna Bartnik	186
The Forbidden Fruit Is Cuba isolated? Tamás Rózsás	199
Between Emigration and Immigration: Changing Trends and Policies in Chile Béla Soltész	211
The North African Frontier in U.S. History (?) Historical Aspects of the American Barbary Captivity Narratives, 1788–1829 Zsolt Palotás	223
Transgressing Strategic Borders: Soviet-American Nuclear Spying in 1945 Zoltán Cora	238
Contributors	253

## BOUNDARIES, BRIDGES, BECOMINGS: INTERSPECIES POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE ARTS

ANNA KÉRCHY

My essay examines the transgression of borders from an interspecies perspective focusing on contemporary American artists' controversial 'animal-themed' visual/ performance arts pieces in which aesthetic agenda and humanist politics are conjoint with legal, ethical problematizations of animal rights. I wish to argue that in line with feminist anthropozoological endeavors, these artistic explorations of the philosophical, cultural, and biological aspects of animal-human encounters facilitate the comprehension of human vulnerability, practices of love, connectedness, collective anxieties, violence, and overall knowledge-formations which inform who we humans are or claim ourselves to be in opposition to or in connection with the radically 'abnormativized', 'bestial' not-me.

The modern animal rights movement dates vaguely from the 1970s, frequently associated with Peter Singer's philosophical bombshell of a book *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for our Treatment of Animals* (1975) that outlined those ideas grounded in empathy which led to the foundation of the American nonprofit corporation PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) that counts today over 6.5 million members and supporters worldwide united by the slogan "Animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, use for entertainment, or abuse in any other way" (PETA). The rise of the feminist art movement, driven by the aim to initiate a critical discussion concerning the patriarchal abuse of women and female procreative responsibilities and creative potentialities, dates roughly of the same period, with Judy Chicago's 1970 Feminist Art Program at Fresno State College (now California State University) as a significant political gesture that claimed a place for female artists in a male dominated canon through educational projects and collaborative feminist art exhibitions (see Schapiro 1971: 48-49). The uncompromising critique of injustice, of inequalities, and the insistence on freedom as an inalienable right have remained ever since shared by the feminist- and the animal liberation movements.

Donna Haraway, whose philosophy most predominantly influences the artists I examine here, has always been a feminist scholar distinguished by a talent to capture the postmodern Zeitgeist with her potent metaphors of the

blurred self-and-other boundaries. Her 1985 manifesto's Cyborg figure resonated well with western post-industrialist information societies' technologically enhanced embodiments, human biological selves extended by advances in medicine, robotics, AI, through scientific and/or simulated means, including artificial hearts, prosthetic limbs, personal computers logged on internet telecommunications networks, factory production lines, or genetic engineering. In the past decade of our postmillennial times, Haraway kept her focus the posthumanist problematization of the homogenizing, hegemonic logic of self-identity, but shifted the attention to the non-futuristic, down-to-earth, immediately contemporary non-humanity of the Animal—conjoining the feminist- and the animal liberation movements' agendas.

Her seminal works like *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003) and *When Species Meet* (2007) challenge anthropocentrism's ontological, ethical distinction between the human subject and the flora and fauna surrounding it with the intention to place the emphasis on the significance of the natural environment that has been traditionally conceived as a mere background to the agile human figure (--a gendered aesthetic/perspective distinction previously scrutinized by Barbara Johnson in her tellingly entitled "Female is to Male is as Ground is to Figure"). Throughout her systematic challenge of hierarchical relationalities, Haraway ventures to fight speciesism (a form of subjection or abjection inherently intertwined with further ideologies of systematic marginalization like sexism, racism, ableism, or ageism); to debunk the myth of human exceptionalism.

She heralds the end of the anthropocene in which human-kind in the name of his self-proclaimed superiority has caused long term, planet-scale, incurable, maleficant impact, like the mass extinctions of plant and animal species, the pollution of the oceans, the extermination of the rainforests, or the alteration of the atmosphere. In the post-anthropocene era, Haraway thinks in ecologies that are always at least tripartite: humans, non-human organisms, and technologies make part of "the same litter". Hence animals, cyborgs, and humans never oppose but interconnect, interweave, mutually touch one another, and mutually benefit from their cohabitation as companion species, bonded in "significant otherness".

Haraway's theory abounds in poetic neologisms like "autre mondialisation" or alter-globalization (referring to non-anthropocentric multispecies cohabitation), "chimerical visions" (when diverse bodies, perspectives, and meanings coshape one another), "symbiogenesis" ("world-making entanglements in contact zones"), or "situated naturecultures" (in which all the actors become who they are in a dance of relating" as "mess mates in a multipartner mud dance". Yet Haraway's theory weds abstraction with activism, the personal with the political, and shifts the focus from

didactic moralization to lived experience, and becoming humanimal as a survival strategy in an increasingly chaotic, dangerous endangered world.

However, artistic endeavors in critical human-animal studies tread on an uncertain ground and tackle highly sensitive issues threatened by pitfalls of anthropocentric appropriation, albeit involuntary gestures of speciesist engulfment, when humans eventually speak up in the name of and in place of the silent non-human other. After all the question guiding Haraway's project "Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog?" (2007, 3) suggests tactile connectivity as a reciprocal sensorial experience hence an egalitarian alternative to the domineering gazer versus dominated spectacle hierarchies. Yet the agent initiating the reconsideration of interspecies bonds remains a human thinking/speaking subject who exercises ownership over her canine companion. And could our enquiry ever go beyond mere speculation if we attempted to explore the dog's own self-definition elicited by its owner's touch?

When concept artist Pierre Huyghe had his dog called Human wander around his retrospective exhibition in the halls of LACMA, LA County Museum (2014), the hound as a living artwork and the traces left by his paw painted pink certainly had a lasting effect on human museum visitors but in a way the dog's indifferent non-performance stayed undecodable. Relating the hound's indifferent look challenging the museal gaze to the boredom of farm-, or laboratory- animals, or on the contrary, the unleashed, untamable wildness transforming the white cube of the gallery into a randomly changing open space, or the contrasting of the desire to pet the animal and the please-don't-touch requirement of the artwork were matters of very human associations (Theung 2014, MacNeill 2015).

Similarly, Jacques Derrida's seminal essay *The Animal that therefore I am to follow* (*L'Animal que donc je suis*, 2016) starts out from describing from the sense of discomfort he felt on being naked in the presence of his cat looking at him. The troubling feline stare is a pretext to explore how the institutionalized male medical, scientific, philosophical, museal gaze imposes pseudo-objective, naturalized meanings upon the non-human world it presumes to master without taking into consideration the animals' viewpoints. Even if the encounter with the animal gaze allows us to see ourselves seeing and be seen, to face human being's animalistic aspects, and to learn to cherish shared engagements and communal exchanges between species—we shall remain obliged to reduce bestial responses to human language's interpretation, pondering what is necessarily lost in translation.

Hence for contemporary artists willing to implement the animal connection in their work it is particularly challenging to harmonize the aesthetic and the ethical/political considerations when PETA has become "today's most feared art critic" and galleries struggle "to include animal art without getting bitten" as Brian Boucher put it in a recent 2017 article on



*Artnet*. Special care is needed from curators to harmonize the right to the freedom of artistic self-expression and the universal trans-species right to bodily ownership and painless existence. Some exhibitions did the trick by claiming the right of free artistic self-expression for animals themselves.

New York artist Duke Riley's *Fly By Night* (2016) a bird-based art show featured a flock of pigeons flying in the evening sky over Brooklyn's Navy Yard, each with a small LED light affixed to its leg. The organizers tried to assure the safety of the birds and convince protestors by relying on expert advice of the Wild Bird Fund, which rehabilitates sick and injured birds, and argued that the performance "will have a transformative effect on avian welfare by helping us see that the life in the sky—from the under-appreciated pigeon to migratory marathoners—is one of nature's superb art forms, one we can cherish every day just by looking up." (McMahon in Riley 2016) Thus, while the public artwork commemorated the long forgotten New York-based tradition of pigeon keeping on metropolitan rooftops and in naval fleets, the Romantic notion of Nature as Artist became recycled for the sake of postmodern artistic purposes and political correctness.

Elsewhere, local legal regulations and city codes prevented the realization of animal artworks. Amber Hansen's community-based project *The Story of Chickens: A Revolution* (2012) was meant to revise the notion of livestock, and explore humans' ambiguous status as both caretakers and consumers of animals by inviting volunteers to engage in a relationship with chicken they would raise in coops located in Lawrence, Kansas's well-travelled, high foot-traffic urban areas before taking part in their public slaughter by a local butcher, eating them at a collective festivity of a grand chicken meal. The concept art project aimed to promote alternative, healthy processes of caring for chicken—much in line with Haraway who urges humans to feel with animals but is not against meat-eating or laboratory animal testing either—but it never actually came into being because the city opined that the act amounted to animal cruelty punishable by a fine of \$1,000 or six months in jail.

Further American interdisciplinary artists tackling the interface of built and natural environments include Elizabeth Demaray who grew lichens on New York skyscrapers, designed and produced stylish seashells for hermit crabs deprived of the houses as a result of the humans overcollecting shells as souvenirs on vacation resorts, and fed red harvester ants McDonalds Happy Meals for a month to show the impact of fast food diet on creatures dependent on human food waste. Moreover, in her *IndaPlant Project: An Act of Trans-Species Giving* Demaray collaborated with engineer Dr. Qingze Zou putting technology in the service of plant agency: their autonomously guided light-sensing robotic platforms called "floraborgs" allow potted plants to roam freely in a domestic environment in search of water and sunlight, and alert other floraborgs to their locations. As one reviewer, Christopher Mims

wrote, InDaPlant “may be a small step for engineers, but it’s a giant evolutionary leap for plant-kind” (Mims 2013).

Brooklyn-based Kate Clark remains within the confines of the museal space while synthesizing the faraway space of savannas with the metropolitan urban jungle: her artistic taxidermies complement the body of wild animals with clay faces sculpted to have humanoid features. Her hybrids blend boundaries of humanity and bestiality, sublime beauty and monstrosity, to reconnect viewers with the animal kingdom we have grown oblivious about since “we have become so other” (Clark in Clarson 2015). Readers experience an affective ambiguity, sharing mixed feelings of discomfort, horror, curiosity, and empathy, while the artists talk about her intimacy with the animal gained through working on their skins, the often imperfect, wounded outer layer from which Clark deciphers the animal’s ‘corporeal biography’, as claw marks may make the pelt a damaged trophy but tell a life story of struggle and survival.

Taxidermy—etymologically a Greek word composite that translates to “the arrangement of the skin”—resonates excitingly with Didier Anzieu’s classic psychoanalytical concept of the “skin ego” (1989) according to which the human notion of self-identity is associated with the exterior bodily surface. The mental image of the ego is projected on the ‘corporeal envelope’ we picture as a vessel of psychic contents, and by focusing on this relatively safe out-look can remain forgetful about the dangerously troubling, invisible corporeal interior, we prefer to reject as the abject not-me. (Skin seems to provide a relatively easy ground for differentiation and exclusion for all species: zebra mothers recognize their offspring on the basis of the pattern of their pelt and human, while humans may build discriminatory ideologies like racism or colorism on dermatological alterity.) The skin is a metaphorically charged battleground of conflicting meanings: it is a container of the self and a surface of cultural inscriptions, it protects from the outside environment and allows to make sensorial contact with it, it is a precious object for which animals are abused and hunted down, or a supplementary layer that has to be peeled away by the carnivore who wants to feed on the flesh, it is a matter of physical lived experience and a subject of fantastic imagination. In therianthropic legends about human-to-animal shapeshifting, people with a supernatural ability to transform into the animal they desire are called skin-walkers.

The themes of skin-shedding, shape-shifting, animal-human transformation, and alterity are tackled in an exciting manner in Neil Jordan’s mystery romance drama *Ondine* (2009), a cinematic recycling of the myth of the selkie-wife with current political implications. *New York Times*’ critic praised the film for “creat[ing] a world that doesn’t really exist, but is as possible as it is impossible—some twilight zone between reality and fairy tale” (Rafferty 2010) The mythological selkie is an in-between being, a seal

who sheds its skin and becomes a human woman on land, often coerced in a relationship by a man who steals and hides her sealskin that she recuperates after a while to regain her animalistic form and return to the sea calling her back. In Jordan's film, a poor fisherman pulls out from the sea one day a beautiful young amnesiac he gives shelter to, in return she sings magical song in an unknown language that helps to fill the fishing nets with seafood, and later becomes his lover. Ondine's enchanting effects are explained by the fisherman's disabled little daughter Annie within the frames of the selkie-wife myth. However, as the movie blurs fantastic and realistic registers, it turns out that the seal-woman story is a fictionalized life narrative, a compensatory fantasy the child invents to substitute the harsh reality of social marginalization with a soothing fairy tale. It turns out that Ondine is actually an illegal immigrant, a drug mule from Romania, who is hiding from the Coast Guards at her 'adoptive family,' and when her secretly hidden seal coat, actually a bag of heroine, is found in the end, the mysterious foreigner faces deportation, legally obliged to return to her home country. Spectators have the impression that is by courtesy of Annie's unbiased, infantile imagination, that her father and Ondine, the native and the refugee, the land person and the sea creature can eventually consider looking forward to a shared 'happily ever after'. In more down-to-earth terms of lived reality they would normally belong to incompatible worlds' separate realms with merely ephemeral intersections not meant to last.

A similar topos—the yearning for a contact that has been lost between fellow sentient beings who live divided on the same planet Earth—is tackled in a composite transmedia artwork, a 2017 song video called “In Harm's Way” that embarks on the political/artistic problematization of the man-made hierarchical distinction between respectable human citizens versus a presumably unworthy (sub)human populace of marginalized others, reduced to the status of despicable animals, whose lives and deaths seem to matter less than the norm-setting majority's. The lyrics and music was composed by indie music band *Dresden Dolls*' lead singer Amanda Palmer for a stage production of *The Little Mermaid*, a classical fairy-tale about an impossible interspecies romance. It focuses on the difficulty of making sense of love, loss, and otherness from the perspective of a being who stands vulnerable on the shore in-between the land and the sea, balancing in the liminal space of no man's land, homeless, lost, wandering to find one's way. The song was inspired by the European migration crisis and the then pregnant Amanda Palmer's voluntary work at the Lesvos refugee camp in Greece when between January and November 2015 almost four hundred thousand refugees were washed upon the shore. More specifically it was a family tragedy captured on camera, a heartbreaking photographic snapshot of the lifeless body of a three-year-old little Syrian boy washed up onto the Turkish shores, who fled his war-ridden home with his family in search of a better life, but got snatched

away from the protective parental embrace by the ruthless sea waves and drowned because of the fake lifejacket the smugglers gave him. Palmer recalls how this iconic incarnation of failed hopes, “the harrowing image of little Aylan Kurdi lying lifeless on the beach in Turkey was enough to thrust a song into [her], but the real fuel was the video footage of his father, wailing in pain as the news filmed on.” Her own son was just a few weeks from being born, and with a painfully cathartic blurring of the personal and the political, her “heart broke for Aylan, for his family, for what we, as a human family, seem to be unable to do for each other” (Palmer in Boylen 2017), for how we seem to have forgotten the fundamental human feature of generosity.

The video to the song by Spanish performance artist Abel Azcona was based on his project “El Milagro”/ “The Miracle” dedicated to the more than twenty-five million people who have been forced to leave their homes because of persecution they suffered due to their race, religion, nationality, their anti-establishment political beliefs, or for belonging to an ‘unwanted’ social group. “The Miracle” has been performed in 24 cities and beaches around the Mediterranean, from Marseille to Lesbos, Nice to Palermo. It enacted social criticism by the personal involvement of more than two thousand volunteers from all over Europe who have taken part in the performances, where they walked for hours in their home towns, before symbolically and literally ending up in the water, completely submerging themselves in the aquatic, non-terrestrial, alien yet familiar milieu. As Azcona’s artistic manifesto available on Palmer’s website proclaims, the project participants’ psychically and physically challenging personal journey allowed them to empathize with the pain of the refugees and to reconsider the responsibility of a desensitized, cruel society that left the deaths of thousands of men, women, and children who have disappeared in the oceans without any recognition.

The several long hours pilgrimage performance terminated when the unified yet heterogeneous masses reached a beach, and the multinational, multiracial, multisexual ‘collective corpus’ of participants, all dressed in black, formed together an installation of hundreds of bodies floating in the water before stretching out, lying side by side on the shore, apparently immobile, touching. This embodied communal memorial practice was meant to remember the real-life victims, to enact socio-political criticism, and to gain empowerment for a united fight, for solidarity.

The bodies floating in the Mediterranean ocean evoked mermaids’ seafolk or the mythical selkies yearning to be human, along with the endangered animal species suffocating in their own home waters polluted by toxic waste. Pollution, climate change, and civil war, too, are triggered by human hubris as symptoms of the anthropocene’s harmful impact on the natural/built environment and its inhabitants that turn the homely maternal milieu of the

sea (in psychoanalytical terms, the primeval Thalassa) into a hostile territory, even a deathbed, a burial ground for all living things.

However, for the volunteers taking part in the performance ‘becoming amphibian,’ floating in the sea as if in a suspended fall, also represented a kind of ritualistic purification throughout which humans could cleanse themselves from communal apathy, discrimination, and violence to relearn humanity, humanness, humanism. The mimetic identification with the victims relates to an ethical dilemma often problematized by trauma studies: any artistic commemoration of the dead by the living risks the aestheticization (even commodification) of the pain of others and the appropriation of lost voices. The actors could return home and tell their stories in place of the persons who have disappeared for good.

Still the performance’s identification of living human beings with waste floating scattered on the surface of a disinterested sea communicates a vital moral message about our responsibility to protest the “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death,” and to protect these “precarious populations” as Judith Butler calls this “whole host of persons—women, gender and sexual minorities, persons of color, refugees, immigrants, the undocumented, and those dispossessed of land—whose safety and well-being are now at risk of being compromised” (Butler 2017). Azcona’s and Palmer’s artistic collaboration resonates exceptionally well with the Butlerian move towards a “politics of alliance, cohabitation, and interdependency” grounded in the recognition that “there is no *I* without first a *we*” apt to maximize both intraspecies and interspecies ties. As feminist philosopher Barbara Johnson concludes in connection with the ethical agenda involved in critical human-animal studies and object oriented ontology: “The more I thought about this asymptotic relation between things and persons, the more I realized that the problem is not, as it seems, a desire to treat things as persons, but a difficulty in being sure we treat *persons* as persons” (Johnson, 2010: 2). As Butler points out in her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, “We the people—the utterance, the chant, the written line—is always missing some group of people it claims to represent” (2015: 166)—yet, even if we cannot change mistakes of the past but we can make amends by not repeating them, by grounding our future in the realization of the inevitable intimate interconnectedness of all living beings.

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