

A Final Frontier: Art beyond Culture

Valand School of Fine Arts, University of Gothenburg, Oct. 10, 2011.

Ron Broglio rbroglio@asu.edu

"Secretly or not... it is necessary to become different or else cease to be." –George Bataille

The final frontier of the human is the nonhuman. If we conquer the nonhuman then it is not a *final* frontier but rather a repetition of the human conquest that takes place in every space we explore. (See species extinction.) We plant the flag of culture across space and time and call it history and civilization. The final frontier is final only when we get over ourselves. It is final when we give ourselves over to the nonhuman, when we go native in the frontier, when we arrange our human world according to that which we are not. Do we have the hospitality to let the nonhuman change the parameters of culture and reconfigure how we dwell? This talk will explore how art functions as a way of engaging the problem thinking, dwelling, and becoming beyond the human.

An art for nonhumans:

- not animals making art (chimp painting)
 - not animals already make their own art—see bird's nest (zoology)
- But rather can art as a cultural practice give itself over to that which is outside of culture, the nonhumans? This antinomy drives thinking and art in abysmal new directions.
- allows us to think of an ecology in which humans move from center to periphery
 - in the process of giving ourselves over to another ecology, in the process of dwelling differently, we reconfigure what it means to be human (enter posthumanism and posthuman)

To understand the frontier and what is at stake, consider Nietzsche's "clever animals" in his essay "Truth and Lies in the Extra-Moral Sense." The work opens hauntingly:

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of "world history"—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.

One might invent such a fable and still not have illustrated sufficiently how wretched, how shadowy and flighty, how aimless and arbitrary, the human intellect appears in nature. There have been eternities when it did not exist; and when it is done for again, nothing will have happened. **For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it.**



Is there life *for us* beyond the human? It is not a question of if there is life—yes there is, but the question is: is there life for us.

To understand this question consider the following story reported the 28th of May 2003: A Bull in china shop:

The animal escaped from an auction market next to GB Antiques Centre in Lancaster, on Monday and barged its way into the shop, which was packed with 200 people.

Police had to shoot the animal in order to save customers and stock - china and all. It was herded to an area of the centre and blocked in using two antique organs before a police marksman opened fire. A woman was treated in hospital for a bruised shoulder after the incident. The store owner, Mr Blackburn explained that the bull in a china shop joke was no laughing matter' "What we have to remember is that a woman was injured and for the other customers it was a frightening ordeal Hundreds of items will have been destroyed, at a cost running into thousands of pounds'.

Really, the owner could have invited the bull for tea. Where is his hospitality? Is it reserved for humans alone, and only for select humans...not very hospitable then is it? The absurd idea of inviting the bull for tea once it is in the china shop is a figure for saying: what does the animal want and why don't we think of its desire, which is to say, why can we not be hospitable. [7:30 min]

I thank you for inviting me here. I am from America: a land that brought you George Bush and Wall St. meltdown with near global economic collapse. **SLIDE8** So, I am not sure why you would listen to me. Perhaps it is your hospitality.

Or perhaps I can thank Bryndis Snaebjornsdottir. It is her fault. She is not Swedish, after all. She is from Iceland, a land that brought bank failures and mismanagement. And yet, you've brought her into the heart of the university here. Again, it is a matter of hospitality. Can we then, offer the bull in the china shop some tea?

We dwell with animals (pets and livestock and endangered species) but why can't we offer them tea? The answer lies in Martin Heidegger's 'Building, Dwelling, Thinking.' Before we build, we dwell. How we dwell tells us who we are and how we think. For example how does Scandinavian design tell us something about Scandinavian cultures and histories? What is built here, tells us something about how people live. The various building and social apparatus around coffee alone tells us something about dwelling in Sweden. What about sorting the trash—what is recyclable, what is compost, etc.—how does this sorting trash tell us something about what a culture values? A vast number of US cities have no recycling program. Because recycling is undervalued, recycling centers are not built. Dwelling and building tells us something about or way of being.



We do not dwell in a world that would offer hospitality to a bull in a china shop... that would be a different world. How might we imagine such a world?

Perhaps the best known definition of hospitality is by Immanuel Kant in “To Perpetual Peace”: “Hospitality signifies the claim of a stranger entering foreign territory to be treated by its owner without hostility.” Jacques Derrida takes a more radical position, one much more extensive: “Let us say yes to *who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification* whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female.”ⁱ

Nietzsche’s opening paragraphs of “Truth and Lies in the Extra-Moral Sense” about us “clever animals” takes us outside of history, as he asks us to imagine an end to culture. These “clever animals” that we are live only a minute and then die off and leave the universe to get on with itself. Nietzsche’s tale is not a fiction. It will happen. The universe will fall outside of history—it has, it is and will be beyond history and culture.

The function of art has been for culture to tell stories about itself, for culture to take measure of itself and its directions. Art then is fundamentally a product of and for culture and one that points to foundational concerns regarding what it means to be human. Can art, which is a human endeavor and for humans, be hospitable enough to give itself over to a culture that is not human? Can art as a marker of human history, a marker of humans in time, can art leave history? This is a significant antinomy for art: this contradiction provides a friction by which to imagine a more hospitable art, an art in which we dwell along with the rest of the universe, an art where we can have tea with bulls in china shops.

Take for example a work I’m currently engage in called Alien Presence. In this work I interview and film astrobiologists, philosophers, anthropologists and even literature professors and ask “what gift would you give an alien?” I then fashion a small scale proto-type of the gift. The exercise causes us to think: what are these aliens like? What if analogy—likeness—does not hold up. What if they are “like” nothing we know. And what will these unlikely aliens like? The exercise is designed to help us see the earth differently and to imagine outside the human in time, scale, space, dwelling, and way of being. Time, scale, space, dwelling, and way of being are all fundamental to art. Changing them shifts art.

Consider another alien example:

Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar exhibit as The Otolith Group and were nominated for the 2010 Turner Prize. in *Otolith III* the artists redesign unrealised screenplay of the epic Indian director Satyajit Ray. In 1967 Ray wrote *The Alien* which would have been the first science fiction film to be set in contemporary India. In the screenplay a



rural Indian boy meets an alien who changes his life. This is well before the famous Spielberg film ET.

As if the British in India were not alien enough, the screenplay takes up the case of a radical other, and extra-terrestrial. *Otolith III* returns to 1967 to propose an alternative trajectory in which the lead character of Ray's *The Alien* attempt to seize the means of production in order to create the conditions for their existence as images.ⁱⁱ What if today's artists, the Otolith Group, create the possibilities for alien encounter?

But we do not have to imagine aliens as somehow out there in space far removed from us. We have aliens among us. Notably, we live among animals. We can ask "what gift would you give an animal?" Would you have the beast in for a cup of tea? SETI (Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence) scientists from linguists to anthropologists to astrophysics see our relationship to animals as the prototype to any alien encounter. Indeed, the animals dwell in another world that seems strange, even alien, to us. Art that works with animals tests the limits of hospitality and culture's ability to think beyond itself, beyond the human. Such art offers a way of thinking outside of Nietzsche's fatal blow to humanity: "For this intellect has no further mission that would lead beyond human life. It is human, rather, and only its owner and producer gives it such importance, as if the world pivoted around it." Could we have a further mission, to boldly go... beyond ourselves?

Artists working with animals point to and cast bridges across the divides to the non-human worlds of animals. What a wonderful disorientation takes place in this gesture of reaching across spaces and times. To invite the animal to art entails a particular sort of hospitality. Hospitality here means the ability to host all sorts of unexpected guests, not always wanted, with their particular demands and eccentricities and to allow them to flourish outside one's own expectations. Will we accommodate the bull in the china shop, realizing he does not like tea but prefers grass rather than brewed tea leaves.

Hospitality to/for the animal other means letting slip particular human values, i.e. characteristics valued as and for humans. Such work becomes not simply an art that tells us stories about ourselves but something which opens onto an earth larger than our own (human) world. Most particularly and strikingly there is a suspension of reason, domination, and control. Art that suspends human values risks instability, unreason, rejection and collapse. Such art does not properly 'serve' culture and so fits awkwardly as an object within the art and gallery world. Indeed, such art speaks to culture by turning from culture, gesturing to an Outside; such art hopes to turn culture with its turn away from culture.

By way of example consider this project which is not an art project but reads and feels very much like a performance piece: House of Rabbit Society (HRS). It is by Julie Smith who keeps rabbits in her home and is a member of what she calls the



House Rabbit Society. She explains 'As a member of the House of Rabbit Society (HRS) who has rescued 200 rabbits and lived with them in my house, I want to live with rabbits as companion animals, including protecting them. But I also worry that this entails considerable subjugation.'

Living with rabbits means that what appears to be a "mess" by human taste and aesthetics is a comfortable home by the rabbits' standards. At the end of each day, Smith noticed furniture had been pushed to the middle of the room. She would push it back and tidy the house until she realized a rabbit aesthetic. The rabbits like to have the walls near the floor free of furniture. Pushing objects out of the way, the rabbits make burrows and runs along the edges of the room.

Smith also provides mattresses that rabbits can tear and dig through to create burrows, tunnels, enclosed spaces. Julie Smith is changing what it means to dwell as a human being. This shift in dwelling is possible because of a hospitality toward the nonhuman. Taking the animal seriously, she changes her world.

Perhaps a prototype for this in art is Joseph Beuys famous *Coyote: I Like America and America Likes Me*. Beuys spent almost a week with a coyote inside the Rene Block Gallery in New York. The artist and animal negotiated space and communication: Beuys threw his glove at the animal offering it the artist's creative hand, the coyote tore at newspaper on the floor and even tugged at the blanket wrapped around Beuys. Props, bodies, time and space created a contingent language and a negotiated space for dwelling.

Steve Baker explicates the interaction quoting Beuys: "Beuys was acting out the limits of his own control of the situation, with the coyote figuring for him as 'an important cooperater in the production of freedom.' The animal enabled the artist to edge closer to that which 'the human being cannot understand.'"ⁱⁱⁱ Out of his depths, the artist is forced to take on a new language that moves between the human and the animal.

Kira O'Reilly's *inthewrongplaceness* provides a glimpse at hospitality in a fraught world, in our world, where inviting an animal to dinner means eating it. In this set of works, O'Reilly invites the corpse of an animal into a domestic setting where she cares for it like a friend, a lover, a good hostess.

She responds to the soft, human-like skin of the pig by bearing her own skin. She is naked and exposed echoing the vulnerability of her guest now corpse. O'Reilly performs what Derrida writes, to quote again "Let us say yes *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification* whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female." She is making the animal at home, making the corpse at home. She is giving the body its own and proper space while making over her domestic space and her own body for the other.



Derrida figures hospitality as feminine. In our culture women have had to negotiate difference and make room for difference and live difference in a way not experienced by men. This feminine quality of sensitivity to difference is the possibility for hospitality: “Derrida reminds us that Levinas called “feminine alterity” as fundamentally one of the modalities of welcoming, and she provides a silent refuge and asylum.”^{iv}

O’Reilly’s work is not based on vision but rather the haptic and touch. I’ve said this repeatedly in a number of venues but it bears emphasizing: vision is possession at a distance. With vision, what is out there is now here—housed in the privileged interiority of the human subject. Scopophilia—the love of looking, a mastery through the gaze. In contrast think of touch. Touch collapses the safety of distance in the look. Collapsing distance between the viewer and viewed, such collapse of distance creates risk. In touch we are vulnerable. There is a very old hierarchy of the senses with vision at the top of the hierarchy. It is at the top because it is considered most objective and least involved in implicated in the object of study. Touch—along with taste—are considered the most subjective because they mingle with the thing being studied. They interfere with the object and are affected by the object. This mingling and messiness, this giving over of the body, makes visceral the relatedness we share with others and is fundamental to what it means to dwell. [26 min, 2,700 words]

A radical hospitality means to offer, to give even to the point that the host is not a master of one’s own domain but is vulnerable to the guest. Levinas calls this “feminine alterity” a “silent refuge and asylum”: “a language *without* teaching, a silent language, an understanding *without* words” To “dwell” its to be at home in a “*a land of asylum or refuge* which answers to *hospitality*, an expectancy, a *human welcome*. In *human welcome* the language that keeps silence remains an essential possibility.” Unlike Levinas I do not think hospitality is a human language that keeps silent. Rather it is a language that is silent and that is used by humans. This silent language is one of gestures, performance, and bodies. It is akin to human language and culture but also akin to the corporality of animality—wed to the body and the animal.

Here I will very briefly gesture to the work of Andrea Zittle—her *Everyday Hiking*, her assemblage of clothing and *Institute for Investigative Living* which is in the alien landscape of the desert Southwestern United States. Regarding her *Interloper’s Hiking Club* Zittle explains “All of my friends seem to “do things”-- bake cakes, write zines, bicycle in the nude, ski in costumes, build metal boats, identify bugs, or grow vegetables. And sometimes we do things together - Like getting dressed up and going for hikes... In the early 2000s, our hikes migrated to the high desert around A-Z West, and it was in the isolation of these high hills that our hiking apparel transformed into a combination of utility and fashion, dazzling the tortoises, snakes and other desert creatures.” According to Zittle the oddity of apparel brought the hikers closer to the alien environment—sharp, pointy, sparse, colorful when least expected, and dare I say inhuman. In *Everyday Hiking* Zittle took her hiking into



galleries where she and crew with costumes would camp out inside the space and write field reports as quasi-anthropologists.

In each case, the costumes cause the wearer to comport him or herself differently. It is both a phenomenological and an psychological adjustment to attire. The body becomes an event within the landscape and the landscape an event for the body which gives itself to the world through which it traverses.

[An Aside: I understand that in July here in Gothenburg Anna Maria Orru investigated creative methodology for strengthening our relationship with what we eat, and how we grow food in the city? What we grow? Food fundamentally points to the problem of body, space, and vulnerability.

Food is the transformation of nature into culture. And eating is a performative event. An event that calls on hospitality, of giving of oneself to an other—a guest. I could extend these remarks further having written and taught on food and animals and coming from a country famous for its industrialized agriculture. But for now, I will press on with *A Final Frontier: Art beyond Culture*.]

I would like to ‘get real’ for a moment. All hospitality, however ideal one wishes it to be, must negotiate the actual world. There is the call of hospitality and there are the laws which grapple with negotiating hospitality in the world. Derrida recognizes this when he delineates “*The law of unlimited hospitality . . . And on the other hand, the laws, those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional.*” To dwell in the world is to have both the unlimited hospitality as part of community and the actual laws that impact material life and bodies.

I have said before that you are overly hospitable to invite me here. To illustrate the conflict in hospitality, I will have to be a bad guest, I’m afraid—a bit of an unseemly guest or one who pulls at threads and exposes seams of fabric, problems in clothing and comportment. I would be remiss in this talk of the nonhuman and hospitality not to mention Santino.

Santino the chimpanzee likes to throw rocks at visitors to the Furuvik Zoo in Sweden just north of Uppsala. Early in the morning he combs the grounds of his compound to find handy stones and piles them into a cache along the bank next to where the visitors will gather. If need be, he chips off some concrete and breaks it into a reasonable throwing projectile. It is not uncommon for chimps and apes to throw things at zoo guests but what is strikingly uncommon is his forethought, his planning ahead which is a characteristic reserved for humans: “Planning for a future, rather than a current, mental state is a cognitive process generally viewed as uniquely human. Here, however, I shall report on a decade of observation of spontaneous planning by a male chimpanzee in a zoo” and so begins Mathias Osvath’s report to the academy in *Current Biology* of March 2009.



Forethought is a characteristic fundamentally aligned with being human, so much so that the preeminent philosopher Martin Heidegger uses the concept as the scaffolding for building his world view in *Being and Time*. Visualizing a future allows humans to plan and build, to make objects function as equipment toward future ends, and to fashion technology. Heidegger writes this difference between humans and animals using the figure of the hand in contrast to the paw. While the paw and claw grasp at immediate things of the world, the human hand—a hand which extends human thinking—can not only grasp but fashion things and gives to another in what Heidegger might call a gesture of hospitality. The hand can open and give; it can open up the world.

What happens, then, when a chimp takes hold of temporality? His activity becomes an event which disrupts the comfortable trajectory of human uniqueness. Santino is now on our frontier! He is in a zoo. We should be co-opting him, capturing his world, not the other way around. We see in him an/other us and our origins or as the reporting scientist explains: “The behaviors also hint at a parallel to human evolution, where similar forms of stone manipulation constitute the most ancient signs of culture . . . as 2.6 million years [ago].” Santino gives us the nonanthropocentric gift of realizing we are not alone in the world of thought.

In response to this rupturing event, Osvath wrote his report and the zoo keepers castrated Santino as a mode of control over his behavior and future plans. Castration: is this any way to treat a guest? It makes me a bit fearful as a guest. In the case of Santino we come up against the ideal and the material or actual hospitality. Recall Derrida: “*The law of unlimited hospitality . . . And on the other hand, the laws, those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional.*” Now veterinary scientists will point out that animals—even chimps—feel minimum pain from castration and eventually get over the event. They don’t have the psychological scaring that comes with human castration. Yet, this animal is in our care. He is not in the wild but within culture. The scars are born not only by him but by us.

As a project for an art exhibition on “Human Origins” at Arizona State University, I gift wrapped a copy of Martin Heidegger’s book *Being and Time* and fitting it into a hand-crafted wooden box while reading resonant quotations from Heidegger on time, the hand, and gifting.

The book was a present for Santino. I sent it along with an accompanying letter to Santino care of the Furuvik Zoo. I called this work Santino’s Gift since I wanted to give Santino a gift which he can make use of while in confinement and down on his luck but also because he gave us the gift of recognizing the world outside of human culture. Despite including a postage reply card, I never heard from Santino nor the zoo. I can only hope he liked his gift.



Mailing the book is an idea I took from Ross Birrell who in Envoy delivered a copy of Thomas More's *Utopics* as a gift to the International Court of Justice at The Hague. It is a performance where the ideal of hospitality meets the court of law.

There is a wonderful graffiti piece by Banksy in which a down and out, sad chimp holds a sandwich board sign which reads "laugh now but one day we'll be in charge." There is a resonance of a political underclass in revolt. A class who has been treated as animals wants more. Beyond a class revolution, what Banksy is gesturing toward or what I am gesturing toward with the Banksy piece and with Santino is a space outside of culture and history.

Is this or will this be a Planet of the Apes? The future is not mine. I am too old. Perhaps it is not yours either, we "clever animals." With the inevitable transformation of the ecosystem over centuries, the future belongs to other life, including species that do not yet exist. The future belongs to something radically different, something outside of culture and history which is always already human history. What is this revolution, this animal revolution. I often say it is an event to come. "To come" is an infinitive form. It has a temporality outside of the present timeline and yet suggests not only a future but an ongoing event. It is what Giles Deleuze calls the virtual, which means it is ongoing but outside of history. The early 20th century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said that the actual—things here and now—bear the scars of their birth. What he meant by this is that what we have today as the real was a violence done to all the other possible things that could have happened. All the unrealized possibilities died off from history but the real, the actual carries with it the scars of battle with these other possible events. It carries marks of the violence and the loss of other realities.

Otolith III recovery of the Ray film *The Alien* is an attempt to think a lost trajectory—what could have been and in an alternative universe exists. They make this other world in our own. This alternative space-time exists virtually and the Otolith group has made it bear actually upon our world—but only as an image, a set of images as if ethereally floating and mingling between our world and a virtual world.

Works of alien art and animal art unthing human time. Time unhinged: this is the revolution. It is a time outside of history. I'll note in passing that this is in part what Giorgio Agamben figures in his work *The Open: Man and Animal*. Art has the ability to create a wonder in excess of culture. We must be hospitable enough, we must be open, as Agamben would say, open to that which we are not. An inhuman art would realize the virtual. Reading the scars and violence of this world and its actuality, might we be able to materialize the virtual which haunts this world of ours?

Quentin Meillassoux's essay 'Spectral Dilemma' provides the following insightful summary of the problem of the spectre:



What is a spectre? A dead person who has not been properly mourned, who haunts us, bothers us, refusing to pass over to the 'other side,' where the dearly-departed can accompany us at a distance sufficient for us to live our own lives without forgetting them, but also without dying their death--without being the prisoner of the repetition of their final moments. Then what is a spectre become the essence of the spectre, the spectre par excellence? A dead person whose death is such that we cannot mourn them. That is to say: a dead person for whom the work of mourning, the passage of time, proves inadequate for a tranquil bond between them and the living to be envisaged. A dead person the horror of whose death lays heavy not only upon the nearest and dearest, but upon all those who cross the path of their history.

Meillassoux mentions person—not human but person. The unmourned deaths of animals killed by the millions haunt us. Their possible worlds are worn scars on our world—a world where we might have tea with a bull in a china shop, where Santino is taught to pitch baseballs, where Joseph Beuys's coyote has a voice.

As it turns out, as reported in The New York post, the coyotes have come back with several sightings including one roaming the posh TriBeCa neighborhood. Is this an offspring from the coyote Beuys met? Is the critter looking for Beuys or his artistic descendants? Does he want a rematch? There is more reckoning to be done--more thinking, more reconciliation, more action in an Event "to-come." What artists haunted by Beuys will meet the animals who haunt art? Do such artists yet exist?

ⁱ Derrida On Hospitality

ⁱⁱ <http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/professionals/films/otolith-iii/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Steve Baker "Sloughing" 149-51

^{iv} Irina Aristarkhova <http://www.constantvzw.org/verlag/spip.php?article16>

