

Thinking Animal: an essay to accompany Libby Hague's installation, *One Step At A Time*
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Western history is an evolving chain of conceptual distinctions between humans and animals. It seems like a requisite for every philosophical thinker to state up front his or her defining theory about what makes our species special. Aristotle said that while all animals “live by appearances and memories,” humans also live by “art and reasonings.”¹ Karl Marx, in a poetic moment, suggested that “a spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.”² The contemporary philosopher of science Mary Midgley warned “we might do well to remember that this is a species whose members, as babies, communicate with other people long before they try to handle inanimate objects. They also learn other people's names before they learn their own names. And they learn to talk about other people's mental states long before they become introspective enough to discuss their own.”³ Art, reason, imagination, communication — these are all human traits that our culture holds dear. And yet, in the context of global capitalism and climate change, the Western notion of human superiority becomes harder and harder to support. If we humans are so great, how did we manage to mess things up so badly?

Libby Hague's exhibition *One Step At A Time* is a complex, immersive art experience that offers audiences an opportunity to reflect on contemporary Western culture as members of a species. The news is bad, but it's not *all* bad. The exhibition begins and ends with a video of a little girl dancing. Her movement is joyful, expressing a simple, energetic pleasure in being alive. Hague wants her audience to hang onto a sense of ourselves as living creatures. We need this affirmation because, as we move through the installation, the mistakes we've made as technologized strategists become increasingly clear.

The journey begins pleasantly in a rustling paper cornfield — green and yellow — with sunny strings of ribbon stretching up to the ceiling overhead. The scene is pastoral, but corn is a loaded agricultural symbol in the global economy. *The Globalist* reports that “the grain required to fill a 25-gallon SUV gas tank with ethanol will feed one person for a year.”⁴ As demand for fuel increases, more and more of the world's corn crops are designated for ethanol production rather than food.

As we leave the cornfield the city begins to creep in. Prints of buildings line the walls — and the mood becomes more stark and grey. On the back wall, surrounded by prints of razor wire and chain link fence, a cascade of hoarded food tumbles towards us — an overwhelming stream of wasted products. The river rushes along the floor in roils of cardboard box rapids and ribbony foam. Beans, corn syrup, sardine cans, pasta boxes, flour, Advil, bags of rice, candy, cutlery, mustard, stacks of cash and visa cards...if it wasn't being wasted, this stash could feed a nation. “A central cause of world hunger,” says Hague, “is the failure to distribute food that already exists. To eliminate famine we have to address the problem less selfishly.”

If you are feeling depressed right now, that's because you are reading this essay instead of drinking in the exhibition. These words on the page describe a pretty bleak scenario. As Hague herself describes it, “one ultimate thrust of this trajectory is the

extinction of all life.” But the artist knows full well that depression does not solve problems; her goal is to empower us, not to bring us down. The message may be bleak, but the artwork itself is exuberant. With a light narrative touch and a deep love for textures and materials, Hague has embedded her multi-layered environment with bright moments of redemption. As the viewer retreats from the catastrophic nadir of the exhibition, an open network of details being to emerge. Paper chandeliers swag down the walls, their jewelled facets pouring onto the floor like clear crystal streams. Rivers of blue paper mingle with carefully cutout paper chain link fencing, the materials of industry merging with sky and water in a shimmery optical delight. Stark urban landscapes are brightened with splashes of colour on billboards and graffiti, “BABY COME BACK, BABY I LOVE YOU, BELIEVE, I LOVE YOU, SMILE.” And, running in a cryptic counter narrative along the baseboards, segments of poetry reflect and refract these themes. “THEY SMILE, THEY ARE THE GODS, THEY HAVE ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD.”⁵

And, of course, there are animals—a little deer, raccoons, rabbits, a bear and a very intelligent looking fox. They gaze at the human audience if they are waiting for us to come to our senses. Passing back through the cornfield, we encounter a row of animals flanking a tiny baby girl. Hague explains, “the little baby is like the Messiah. There is goodness in the world and in us and we have to connect with it — it’s why we go on. There is a possibility of redemption, but it depends what the animals and the baby think of us. They’re sitting in judgement.” We’ve messed up in increments; perhaps we can fix things again if we take it one step at a time.

Techno-scientific modernity, the late-capitalist legacy of the West, is built on dualisms. Mind and body are split, nature and culture are split, humans and animals must be distinguished from one another at every possible turn. Bruno Latour, a French critic of science, believes that the great fiction of modernism is a false divide between nature and culture, a distinction that actually creates hybridity even while hybridity is denied. According to Latour, this dualism has become outdated, and people are turning to a more complex understanding of our place in the world.

The reopening of the question of agency in terms of climate and more generally in terms of ecological crisis, is one of the things that makes my position, which seemed strange earlier on, completely common sense ... humans are not the only ones making agencies in the world.⁶

The nature/culture split has given us a loophole, a convenient way to duck responsibility for the damage we create. But that loophole is no longer open. Climate change is a hybrid disaster. It is caused by humans and at the same time it is natural. As one of the species on the planet that we are destroying, humans are among the victims of chaotic natural systems that rage beyond our control. We aren’t the masters of nature that we once thought we were. As Paul Kennedy describes it, “the future belongs to an ethic of care, not of domination.”⁷ Our responsibility to other animals is commensurate with our responsibility to each other, and to ourselves.

One small first step toward behaving as a caring species is to recognise and celebrate ourselves *as* animals. Just as the nature/culture split is an illusion, so is the mind/body split that defined Enlightenment rationalism. By contrast, a theory of mind that is located in our physiological enjoyments — movement, senses and perception — does not require a denial of cognition. Neuroscience teaches that reason requires

intuition, thinking has co-evolved with doing, and physiology has co-evolved with culture.⁸ Just as Hague has created a perceptually stimulating, conceptually porous installation in which resonances and references flow in crosscurrents of meaning, so the human organism is intimately entangled with the environment on many levels. Cultural theorist Susan Buck-Morss explains,

The nervous system is not contained within the body's limits. The circuit from sense perception to motor response begins and ends in the world. The brain is thus not an isolable anatomical body, but part of a system that passes through the person and her or his (culturally specific, historically transient) environment. As the source of stimuli and the arena for motor response, the external world must be included to complete the sensory circuit.⁹

Absorbing the world and acting in the world are integral to human nature. Art is one of the ways to celebrate and exercise these animal faculties. As Hague describes it, "I love working. It's pleasurable and relaxing. In the process of handling the materials you get ideas from your hands. There is a physical intelligence that — if its not too directed by a specific goal — can connect to other ideas. That's the goodness that we need to connect to, the creative side of us."

We Western humans have a lot of work ahead of us if we are to establish planetary justice and stability for human and non-human life alike. But if we take up the problem in bite-sized pieces, as Hague suggests, we might just make it. A woman is running in Libby Hague's golden cornfield carrying a tiny mouse in one hand. As Hague explains it, "the rescue of one little mouse might seem insignificant, but perhaps the future rests on little actions just like this one."

¹ Aristototele, "On Techne and Episteme," in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition*, Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek, eds., (Malden, MA; Oxford; Victoria, AUS: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) p.22

² Karl Marx and Friederich Engels, "Capitalism and the Modern Labour Process," in *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition*, Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek, eds., (Malden, MA; Oxford; Victoria, AUS: Blackwell Publishing, 2003) p.66

³ Mary Midgley, *Science and Poetry*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2006) p.125

⁴ Lester Brown, "Starving for Fuel: How Ethanol Production Contributes to Global Hunger" in *The Globalist* (August 02, 2006)
www.theglobalist.com/storyid.aspx?StoryId=5518

⁵ Christopher Logue, *War Music*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2001) p.115

⁶ Bruno Latour interview with Paul Kennedy, CBC Radio's Ideas: How to Think About Science, Episode Five, Ulrich Beck & Bruno Latour, available online at <http://www.cbc.ca/ideas/features/science/index.html#episode5>

⁷ Paul Kennedy, *ibid.*

⁸ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, (International: Penguin Books, c. 1994, 2006)

⁹ Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," in *October*, no. 62 (Fall 1992) p.12