

# THE LARGE GLASS

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# The Large Glass

No. 27 / 28, 2019

Cover: Shezad Dawood, Leviathan Cycle, Episode 1: Ben, 2017 HD Video, 12'52" (detail)  
Courtesy of the artist and UBIK Productions (with footage from the Goddard Space Flight Center, NASA)

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# Posthuman Corporeality

Josephine Berry

# How to Explain Pictures to a Dying Human: On Art in Expanded Ontologies

“The allergy to aura, from which no art today is able to escape, is inseparable from the eruption of inhumanity.” – Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>1</sup>

The concept of the posthuman is not really new; the more you think about it the older it gets. Fundamentally it has to do with a non-unilateral conception of the human’s relationship to the world which imagines the species as embedded in an expanded web of physical, biological, semiotic and material relations of exchange. Implied within this is a process of continuous individual and species transformation or becoming based on the passing back and forth of causality, communication and events. All it really means is that there is no human without a world of which it is continuously, emergently and constitutively a part, although there certainly was and can be a world without humans. While this conception of our species’ reciprocal relationship to the world can be found within even the ear-

liest human cultures and religions, today the term has developed a sharp political edge that previously it either did not possess (for instance within animist world views) or did not own (there is doubtless a politics of animism). However, in these earlier times the human was not negated or disparaged by such ‘webbed’ ontological conceptions, while today there is a strong streak of antihumanism running through nearly all notions of the posthuman. The human, most especially in its Enlightenment conception as a species separated from the rest of nature by virtue of its superior capacity for symbolic signification, culture and technological artifice, is today a form to be abandoned as irrevocably implicated in capitalist colonialism, its racist othering of non-Europeans and its violent expropriation of the natural world that is threatening a near destruction of our biosphere. This desire for exodus from European ‘monohumanism’<sup>2</sup> comes at the intersection point of a scientific discrediting of Cartesian objectivity and its techno-positivist worldview,<sup>3</sup>

expanded anthropological conceptions of culture and semiosis as non-exclusive to humans, the context-sensitivity of deconstructionism and identity politics, and the now tangible unfolding of a long anticipated climate crisis. As Rosi Braidotti puts it, human is a term that ensures a ‘privileged access to resources’, and it is this privilege that is in question today.<sup>4</sup>

However, the self-critiquing – or one might say self-hating or antihumanist – aspect of posthumanism is only one, albeit powerful, tendency of the discourse; one which, it should be said, problematically fails to consider the human in this capitalist, globally extended European supremacist sense as victim to, as much as perpetrator of, a social mode of production and relation that has systematically annihilated almost all other forms of being human on Earth today. There are more promising dimensions of posthumanist theory, however, that do not necessarily blame the human for its species self-interest so much as undermine its basis for justifying its difference and superiority to other life. Such a line of argument is convincingly proposed by anthropologist Eduardo Kohn in his ethnography of the Runa of Ecuador’s Upper Amazon, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. Through an extended discussion of the semiotic assemblages that exist between the Runa and the rich diversity of animal and plant life that cluster in the Amazon, Kohn asserts that “all life is semiotic and all semiosis is alive”.<sup>5</sup> By this he means that signification and hence communication, selfhood, and even thought can be said to exist within all living beings and systems, as summarised in his proposition that “life and thought are one and the same: life thinks; thoughts are alive.”<sup>6</sup> Kohn extends this proposition to examine how the non-human production of signification challenges the notion that the human world is in some sense ontologically self-sufficient and therefore closed. “By contrast,” he writes, “The Open Whole aims to show that the recognition of representational processes as something unique to, and in a sense even synonymous with life, allows us to situate distinctively human ways of being

in the world as both emergent from and in continuity with a broader living semiotic realm.<sup>7</sup> Outside of language we are communicating through non-symbolic sign systems all the time with multiple beings, matter, phenomena and therefore, importantly, futures. Accordingly, 'thought' and meaning-making can be radically extended to all of life, positioning the human in a world thick with semiotic production and interpretation. Conversely, semiosis is represented as profoundly material: "Although semiosis is something more than energetics and materiality, all sign processes eventually 'do things' in the world, and this is an important part of what makes them alive."<sup>8</sup> In order to think through the implications of posthuman theory for art, I am interested in this proposition in particular for the way that it impacts art's minimum condition – the production of something whole, a semantic unity, out of what was previously inexistent or amorphous, producing what Theodor Adorno describes as art's ineluctable *semblance* character. For Adorno, the artwork's illusory facticity issues from, yet also differs from, an external reality understood as *indeterminate* in its relation to the artwork.

For this high modernist aesthetic philosopher, modern art's key paradox arises through its rejection of aura based in the illusion or semblance of its own facticity (whose zenith was reached in the nineteenth century quest for verisimilitude in artwork, a *semblance that denies its own semblance*). Out of this rejection art begins to literalise the material processes of its own making which "release the production in the product" or expose its status as having been made.<sup>9</sup> Yet simultaneously, by wishing to expel the semblance of its own autonomous difference to external reality, the artwork aims to "bring into appearance what is not the result of making".<sup>10</sup> However, the attempt by modern – and, we may add, contemporary – art to overstep the artwork's problematic illusoriness<sup>11</sup> by staging what Adorno calls 'empirical reality' directly within the artwork snags it in a 'second naturalism' which, by eschewing semblance, reimposes it at a higher level: "The difference of artworks

from the empirical world," writes Adorno, "their semblance character, is constituted out of the empirical world and in opposition to it. If for the sake of their own concept artworks wanted absolutely to destroy their reference back to the empirical world, they would wipe out their own premise."<sup>12</sup> Contemporary art can neither aspire to the 'phantasmagoric' semblance character of realism nor to producing something wholly independent of the external reality from which all its "form and materials, spirit and subject matter" are derived; nor too can it aspire to being simply continuous with external reality while holding onto the difference that makes it art at all. Adorno illustrates this dilemma rather charmingly with the image of the artwork trying to shake off its illusoriness "like an animal trying to shake off its antlers".<sup>13</sup> Artists of the last century increasingly included 'external reality' directly within the artwork in such a way that reality is made to *re-enter* into appearance. We can find examples of this at a variety of scales, from Henri Matisse's literal or non-descriptive use of the colour red in his *Red Studio* (1911), to the nomination of huge derelict red shale heaps in Scotland as 'process sculptures' by the conceptual artist John Latham (*Niddrie Woman*, 1975-6). While on the one hand such art merely reimposes semblance at a higher scale by introducing 'external' elements into new aesthetic and semantic relationships, Adorno also warned that anti-illusionistic art risks becoming subject to external determination whereby it loses its constitutive difference from everything else: "Art is indeed infinitely difficult in that it must transcend its concept in order to fulfil it; yet in this process where it comes to resemble realia it assimilates itself to that reification against which it protests."<sup>14</sup> But what if those 'realia' are semantically alive and co-constitutive of the human artist who is making the work of art, and not external at all?

How then can we rethink this defining dilemma of contemporary art in relation to posthumanist conceptions of self and thought as continuous with a world that is itself living thought? What changes for the ontology of art when, in

Kohn's formulation, "Selves, human or nonhuman, simple or complex, are outcomes of semiosis as well as the starting points for new sign interpretation whose outcome will be a future self"?<sup>15</sup> Another way to put this question is to ask how art can protest a reified or 'empirical' reality that is more sentient and intelligent, less objectlike, stabile or docile, than the 20<sup>th</sup> century imaginary could fathom? In addition, is the ineluctable semblance character even of radically anti-illusionistic process art, its 'second naturalism', fundamentally in contradiction with the posthumanist project if artists want to engage a posthuman conception of reality in a way that exceeds its mere use as subject matter, i.e. by declaring art's co-extensivity with a living, thinking world? If posthumanist art simply throws its lasso of autonomy around worldly living semiosis and calls it art, does this not only perpetuate the human exceptionalism it intends to dismantle by reimposing semblance or meaning upon what is already meaningful? If, however, it rejects the power of its own autonomy, how is it possible to attain the semblance that is its vestigial difference from empirical reality, and by which it can interpret and resignify the thinking world? All these dilemmas exist arguably within an even broader one: posthumanism might also risk converting all of reality into creative capitalism's ideal image whereby not only human but also nonhuman creative and semantic production is subsumed into processes of value creation. While the intention of posthumanist discourse is to imagine an 'open whole' in which the man-form fades out into a multitudinous sea of entangled living exchanges and relationships, this opening stands at the brink of capitalism's own world-changing power to map, capture, informatise and commodify all living systems. A question that pertains politically as much as artistically, then, is: What becomes of Gilles Deleuze's formulation that "Life becomes resistance to power when power takes life as its object,"<sup>16</sup> when the affirmation of life risks complicity with the affirmation of contemporary capitalism?<sup>17</sup> Does art's assimilation of the semiotic powers of 'realia' follow suit by affirming that

which capitalism now also affirms? Or alternatively, to what extent can the post-humanist affirmation of the biosphere's different layers and orders of thought and 'trans/individuation'<sup>18</sup> enable us to think beyond our present course of a capitalist ecocide unfolding out of the legacy of enlightenment humanism?

### Art and the Expanded Human

Before the term posthumanism became current, Joseph Beuys was using the term 'anthropological art' to refer to an expanded human creativity that involved communion with other beings, spirits, materials and intelligences. In a 1983 television discussion of his 1965 performance *Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder Erklärt* ('How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare') on the West German TV programme 'Club 2am', Beuys made a crucial statement to deflect his interviewer's requests for a cogent conceptual explanation of the piece. He counters that it is not art's job to be understood through pure intellection, but rather in the sense of a 'full understanding'. He expands this idea by adding: "The work gets into the human being, and the human being gets into the work."<sup>19</sup> The original performance at Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf involved the artist walking around a gallery cradling and gently animating the paws and ears of a hare as he murmurs to it, introducing the dead creature to an assortment of pictures which are hard to discern. Initially the audience is locked outside of the gallery, and only admitted after some time, staging a series of proximities, intensities and assemblies. Beuys's head is covered in a mixture of gold and honey, giving him the disconcerting appearance of a hybrid man-machine-god, part cyborg, part totem. The symbolism of the gold is that of conductivity, while the honey symbolises communal productivity and the hare is a symbol of reincarnation. The animated dead hare is neither living being nor object; it has become instead an aesthetic being or, perhaps, a 'being of sensations'.<sup>20</sup> The artwork compellingly introduces the hare's would-be consciousness into the space of art, while the deadness of the

hare is also lamented – it cannot 'understand' because it is dead and because it isn't human, and probably it was also killed by humans. Yet the inclusion of the hare, not as a mere material but a potential consciousness (even if cancelled), introduces something of Kohn's 'broader living semiotic realm' to which the artwork is, in certain respects, subordinated. What does or would the hare think, and more to the point, how does the hare think? How does thinking the hare thinking art change our sensibility and therefore change art? Beuys's animation of the hare, making it reach out to touch the pictures with its paw, creates a beautiful and extraordinary sequence of gestures in which man and animal momentarily fuse. In his later television discussion, Beuys explains how we have entered the field of anthropological art, and that we are no longer within an art of 'innovation' but one in which 'mankind' stands in the middle of 'the creative path' as such. "I have," says Beuys, "always seen the connection between humans and their much greater being (*Wesen*) as the most important task of art."<sup>21</sup> This greater being, he explains, relates to magical appearances and to realms that belong to a 'higher principle' than mankind, involving everything above and below us.

Yet here it is important to emphasise that for Beuys the human is not undermined or negated but given a concentrically expanded identity of being-in-relation which does not appear to present any sort of existential crisis for 'mankind'. Within Beuys's proposal, the status of the artwork's semblance is thinkable as a semantic unity that participates in numerous others generated within a monistic reality. The semblance of this artwork is to point out different semantic territories beneath or above the consciousness of prosaic human reality (which includes art as conventionally understood). The human self is thought of in relation to a multiplicity of other selves, yet this does not threaten to dissolve the human as such. The precarious status of the artwork's elements that are drawn together in its unity seem to almost overstep the dilemma of choosing between illusionism or anti-illusionism, mediation or immediacy,

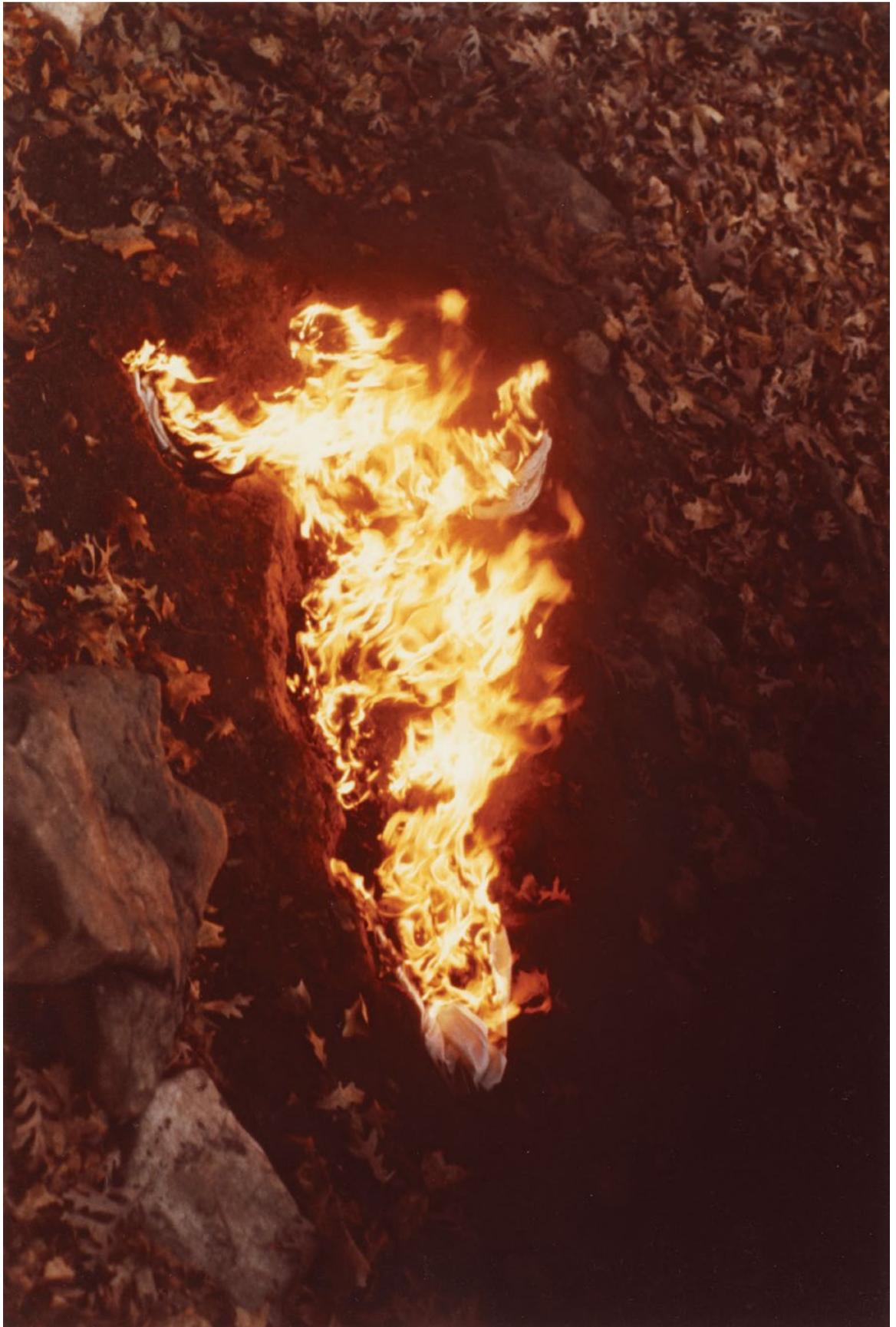
autonomy or heteronomy, because the living world in which the artwork transpires is not of a different, merely 'empirical' order that can be submitted to such treatment. Mediation and semblance, by implication, are not the exclusive province of humans, and art does not exist in exceptional opposition to a reality characterised by facticity and indeterminateness. Yet for all this, Beuys is still a superstar artist, the hare is still dead, the gallery continues to act as the artwork's framing device, the audience behaves as if it is at the circus, and the entire performance is filmed for television broadcast. The connection between the human and its 'much greater being' is scaffolded across layers and levels of mediation that make the artwork's semblance character undeniable and limit the perception of all other semantic unities. The risk and potential of the artwork's loss of distinction is offset by these conventions of separation and autonomy, and the work staunchly occupies its place in the canon of 20<sup>th</sup> century art instead of disappearing into a cacophonous cosmos.

I would like to consider this performance by Beuys together with the work of Ana Mendieta, not only because both belong to what, after Beuys, I am calling the 'anthropological stage' of neo-avant-garde art, but also due to their important differences. In her 'earth-body works' of the 1970s and '80s, we certainly find an expanded idea of human/world relations connected to an anthropological and even primordial conception of art. Yet despite, or in spite of their human-centric ontological expansions, the works persistently interrogate the contingent nature of identity, body, culture and power. This should not necessarily be seen as contradictory, since, like the philosopher of technological becoming, Gilbert Simondon, she is interested in the relation between the 'preindividual' that remains in all beings, and the always contingent process of individuation:

My art is grounded in the belief of one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant from plant to galaxy. My



Ana Mendieta: Imagen de Yagul  
© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC  
Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Ana Mendieta: Alma Silueta en Fuego  
© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC  
Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co. Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world.<sup>22</sup>

In her *Silueta* series in particular, she stages her own body – as a direct presence, incised outline or heaped mound – within natural settings in Mexico and her adoptive home of Iowa, USA.<sup>23</sup> The series, captured as photographs and short films, stages the mixing of a female body of colour with earthly elements and shifting temporalities in such a way as to relativise all states of embodiment, cultural signification and material occupation. In *Imagen de Yagul*, the first in the series which began in 1973, she is photographed lying naked in a ruined tomb in Yagul, Mexico, covered with a spray of white flowers. The fresh-cut flowers obscure her face, and her half-exposed limbs evoke both burial and rebirth, even a bride's first conjugal act. The photograph of this performance in particular produces a polysemic eruption of the body as it claims its links to pre-Columbian cultures as much as the exclusivity of contemporary art, to the living and the dead, to seduction and the macabre, to a material continuity with the earth and the discontinuities of modernity and its mediations, to the 'cosmic sap' of the ancestors that creates identity and belonging, and to women's transhistorical sexual exploitation which dislocates us from every society. In contrast to Beuys, Mendieta's work explores an expanded humanness which composites the elemental and ancestral together with a poststructuralist interrogation of identity and power into a complex dialogue. Emphatically, for Mendieta, to be gendered, raced and othered does not mean losing one's orientation within time, culture and sensuous relation to the natural world. In a sequence of occupations and transformations documented in this series, Mendieta inscribes her body (or its projected image) by way of fire, scoring, blood, paint or gunpowder, physical impression or immersion in water, sand and soil, as a way of locating herself, or a self,

within and against the social positionings of the female Latina subject. Her works explore the multiple incarnations of humanness, giving historical specificity to our current capitalist and biopolitical conceptions of identity which flash up as afterimages to her silhouettes. Her simultaneous physical occupation of natural sites and critical excavation of contemporary discursive fields is reminiscent of Robert Smithson's work from this time which performed parallel operations upon singular landscapes and a virtual art discourse – a relation he termed 'site/non-site'. The capacity to project the self onto the external world of nature and living semiosis, to create an autonomous semblance of the self, is explored as a transhistorical human activity which Mendieta seizes on as a means of orientating within the unstable cycles not only of birth and death, individuation and decomposition, but successive orders of culture and power. Thus her work is critically deconstructive and anthropologically expansive at once. It interrogates Eurocentric monohumanism and the autonomous self which it levels against all subjects deemed less-than-human together with the regime of art that this history has engendered. Yet this deconstruction nearly always entails rooting a self sensuously and immanently in the living material world outside the historical specificity of contemporary society and the conventions of autonomous art.

### The Biopolitical Scission

But while these neo-avantgarde works by Beuys and Mendieta critique modernity's severance of the human and its art from the living world, both remain inescapably within the paradigm of autonomous art for which the creation of semblance relates as much to the artist's selfhood as it does to any dialogue with the living semiotic realm. The author-function of autonomous art is a limit these works cannot or do not overstep, and this is what marks their difference to the ancient or animistic cultures they invoke. The presence of the camera in both performances stands in for and enacts this function by splitting the technolog-

ical image from the presentness of the artist to their world. This separation extracts the image from the sensuous and semiotic receptivity between aesthetic concept and living world, removing it for the purposes of discursive valorisation in a more discursively empowered (because institutionally ordered) elsewhere (e.g. the gallery or catalogue). For Martin Heidegger, this activity is indivisible from the defining practices of 'man' in the age of the 'world picture': "What is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth. The Being of whatever is, is sought and found in the representedness of the latter."<sup>24</sup> This insight presents a knotty paradox for the posthuman artwork that wishes to critique the human's expropriative relationship to all other life while continuing not only to induce aesthetic unities as semblance, in Adorno's sense, but increasingly to overwhelm even this (albeit illusory) facticity with the universalising semantic manoeuvre of technical imaging which accords being only on the basis of something's 'representedness'.

We can relate this splitting of sensuous immediacy and the (technical) image to the 'scission' of human life which Giorgio Agamben identifies as running throughout western epistemology from the classical Greek *polis* to the modern biopolitical state. This is the scission that, since at least Aristotle, has divided *zoë* (the creaturely life we share with all animals) from *bios* (the individual 'form of life' specific to individuals or groups), and which is carried over into the schismatic regimes of *oikos* and *polis*, mind and body, universal and particular, subject and object, as well as productive and reproductive labour. This scission underwrites all politicisations of life which entail the normative deployment of biological life as a pretext for the ascription of certain forms of life and life opportunities, be that citizen or refugee, master or slave, transgender person or heterosexual parent – and, we should add, human or animal. The life that is excluded from the *polis*, or the space of politics, as mere biological life is thus

inversely politicised through its separation, by which it is negatively included, becoming 'bare life'.<sup>25</sup> For Agamben, this schismatic ordering of life reaches its nadir in late capitalism with the advent of the Internet and its technical capacity to split the *receptivity* of corporeal thought from the 'simple, massive social inscription' of our collective knowledge. To this he counterposes the authentic human capacity for thought: "Thought is form-of-life,<sup>26</sup> life unsegregatable from its form, and wherever there appears the intimacy of this inseparable life, in the materiality of corporeal processes and habitual modes of life not less than in theory, there and there alone is there thought."<sup>27</sup> Here Agamben is close to Kohn's statement that "all life is semiotic, and all semiosis is alive" but for the fact that Agamben shies away from explicitly connecting his model of corporeal thought to the wider web of organisms that sustains and exchanges with human life. He is more interested in developing a reciprocal model of affection which circulates between thought and the specificity of forms of life and produces a relation between the 'universality' of human intelligence and the sensuous, habitual and suffering experience of each and every human life:

Thinking does not mean simply being affected by this or that thing but this or that content of thought in act, but being at the same time affected by one's own receptivity, gaining experience, in every thought, of a pure potential of thought. Thought is, in this sense, always use of oneself, always entails the affection that one receives insofar as one is in contact with a determinate body [...]<sup>28</sup>

For Agamben, abstract universal concepts do not simply bear down upon the individual life like a knife, as it were, but undergo the self-affection of thoughts as they are lived, and life as it thinks; the living of thought transforms thought and life, uniting them as one. This is also the relation between use of the self and thought, which orientate and experience each other. The motor of recursivity he describes is also the crux of what he

sees as human life's open-ended potential; its world-making 'species being', to adopt Marx's term. The Internet, then, threatens not only the 'simple, massive social inscription' of human knowledge that circulates in a digital stratum devoid of sensuous receptivity, but, still more worryingly, also entails the circulation of informatic inscriptions of planetary life-forms split from their universal, i.e. not only human, potential for self-affection. Like zombies, these data-objects are left to wander the digital rhizome waiting to be deployed for any potential (capitalist) use. This digital proto-life, which is converted into a 'standing reserve' for capitalist production and utility, thus comprises the biopolitical scission writ large.

### Locked-in Syndrome?

If progressive art of the post-war and pre-networked '60s and '70s was interested in elaborating a (not unparadoxical) anthropological art that aimed at reconnecting the human to an expanded ontological field as a way out of modernity's death drive, we find in the 'posthumanist' art of today abundant signs of a dystopian fragmentation of the human whose sense of connection and agency is not so much liberated from oppressive monohumanism as confronted by the massive social inscription of knowledge in the form of ubiquitous informationalisation and technical images. This is different from what cultural theorist Claire Colebrook condemns as the disconnect between the affirmative tone of (posthumanist) theory that jars with our state of late capitalist ecocide. In her account, "Precisely when life, bodies, and vitality have reached their endpoint and face extinction, and this because they have been vanquished by technology and non-living systems (including the systemic and psychotic desires of man) – precisely at this point in history – theory has retreated into an 'affirmation of life'."<sup>29</sup> Instead, these artworks register something like a waning of vitality connected to a general inability to cognitively map self/other relations within naturo-technological milieu. This in turn seems to produce the artwork's weakened semblance, which



Installation view, *Ophiux*, Joey Holder, 2016  
Courtesy of the artist

may be reflective of the 'meaninglessness' and noise engendered by a ubiquitous technological mimesis of the living world. Bound up with this is a sense of the human's decreasing or imploding field of agency resulting from 'its own' technological extensions which are at odds with the positive valences of posthumanist discourse and the 'open whole'. If we compare what could be called the interspecial work of Beuys and Mendieta in which the human 'grows', to use Beuys's word, into an expanded field of meaning, to certain contemporary formulations of



Installation view, Ophiux, Joey Holder, 2016  
Courtesy of the artist



posthumanism, we see the conspicuous presence of technology now forming their central subject, and with this an exploration of transindividuation which is principally linked to a capitalist, not anarchist, imaginary and potential.

Joey Holder's recent film installation *Ophiux* (Wysing Arts Centre, 2016) is paradigmatic of this sense of disorientation and depotentiation brought on by techno-capitalist mimesis of the natural world. In this piece Holder develops a fictional near future, drawing upon contemporary biogenetic science, in which "synthetic biology has been fully realized and applied to both advance human evolution and increase life expectancy, and where human biology has been computer programmed."<sup>30</sup> The project is set in a scientific 'clean room' belonging to a speculative biotech company called Ophiux, and installed with larger than life-size biological imaging machines and a gene sequencing machine. The lab space is staged as ghoulishly commercial through the inclusion of stacked, illuminated boxes containing preserved crustaceans posed against CGI images that swirl together swatches of seabed and ocean water. These advertorial vitrines are emblazoned with the supercharged, gothic font of the Ophiux logo alongside an image of a reptilian eye overlaid with scanning technology – the sinister *telos* of the cyborg. The intention is to create an all too possible scenario in which all life, having been genetically mapped, has become the property of this faceless corporate entity. Holder's accompanying film dissembles itself as Ophiux's promotional material, which boasts of having mapped 'the entire ecosystem'. Footage of assorted marine life and CGI animated biomorphs are spliced together with footage of real, remote-controlled marine science robots through whose impassive windscreens we watch the trippy underwater world pass by. The film cuts back and forth to images of scanning machines in the lab, whose electronic sounds are woven into a minimalist and eerie soundtrack – the sound of technological a-subjectivities working on speculative lifeforms. This provides the musical analogue to the

film's CGI'd assemblages of scientific equipment and massively magnified micro-organisms, brought together into a series of non-specific and creepy virtual exchanges. Yet for all its cartoonery the film plays out with the inexpressibly sad footage of a robot arm clumsily grasping at tiny albino crabs on the ocean floor. As it hovers over the small colony clustering there, we feel the inexorable consequence of two semiotic universes not communicating but colliding: the preyed-upon semiosis of organisms with their vital processes, and the relentless power of techno-human abstraction divorced from suffering and care. Through this, the reflexivity of living thought is flattened into the stored data of a new economic order which, like the industrial age's reliance upon oil, requires the combustion of millions of dead organisms to unleash its force.

In Cécile B. Evan's 2013 film *Made with Minds* this human capacity to abstract from life is folded back onto the human being, which becomes its object and target. An AI's 'voice' meditating on humanness plays over the slowly moving image of a white female head whose face has been eclipsed by a blank blue disc: "They have arms that have hands that work with fingers. They have made things with those hands or with words that came from thoughts which they also made with their minds."<sup>31</sup> The blue disc acts as a cipher for the technological mapping of emotion and identity, and a

placeholder for what becomes of these once this mapping has been achieved. As with *Ophiux*, the soundtrack is also crucial to the work's overall legibility, but here it reinforces rather than undercuts the disconcerting sense of a hostile 'project' that, through ingenuity and patience, is quietly being built against the interests of human or perhaps all life. This undertaking seems to be the ubiquitous digital mimesis of any and every available 'object'. The indifference governing mass technological replication also structures the sequence of shots and challenges the artwork's claim to semblance, (which nevertheless reimposes itself through its intentional presentation of asignifying, computational aesthesis). In one pan, what appears to be a photographic image of a partially draped body developed on a cloth surface reveals itself as the underside of a parasol with the reflection of water bouncing off it as though at a poolside. The shot continues from the parasol to the sky until the sequence is abruptly terminated through the insertion of a blank magenta field, followed by a doubled image of the female head with a blue-circle face on a grey textured background. The important chink in this poker-faced presentation of the human's computational (and by extension artistic) transcription comes, as it does in Holder's film, through the comical impersonation of the hostile agency it contemplates. The AI's 'desire' to be human fetishises behaviours we ourselves may



Film still, *Ophiux*, Joey Holder, 2016, 21'32"  
Courtesy of the artist

not even consider or acknowledge: “Do you want to act like they did; put security codes on everything, or on vibrate so that their phones don’t even ring? Wish we could switch up the roles and we could be like that. [...] Would you ask them questions like, ‘Where are you at?’ ‘Cos we’d be out, four in the morning, on the corner rolling, doing our own thing.”

### The Conatus of Art and Life

How then do these two films relate to Beuys’s image of the reciprocal exchange between artwork and viewer (“The work gets into the human being and the human being gets into the work”) that offers an aesthetic model coherent with his notion of the human’s relational and cosmic ontology? In both these recent projects, the artwork threatens a future that would undermine the receptivity of beings and thought attached to their corporeality. The nascent artificial life would consequently be devoid of what Agamben, citing Spinoza, terms *conatus*: “The demand by means of which each thing demands to persevere in its being.”<sup>32</sup> What is left for the artwork to get into, and what has the artwork become? Albeit with a heavy dose of irony that only adds to their uncertainty, these works register the horror of the human’s simulacral inauthenticity and art’s limited capacity to form any semblance adequate to the replicative powers of capitalist technologies. This could represent a terminus of art coincident with the culmination of modernity’s biopolitical sequence (at the point of life’s mass datafication), which has apprehended life as an abstract value to be invested or disinvested according to its political qualifications. Biopower’s double-edged tendency, by which *zoë* or bare life is invested with value and rights and, by the same token, subjected to a barrage of political decisions,<sup>33</sup> has relied upon the enlightenment discovery of ‘life itself’. Disconcertingly perhaps, this abstraction of ‘life’ as autonomous value also provides the blueprint for the posthuman re-evaluation of *all* life as having value. It is also the necessary precondition for the technological abstraction of lifeforms

from their receptive corporeality, and all subsequent extractions this implies within capitalism. This epochal project of life’s technological over-coding and subsequent deadening as informational commodity is expressed in a simultaneous waning of what Noys, following Foucault, describes as avant-garde vitalism and its aesthetic pursuit of life as a counter-discourse to social and aesthetic conventions.<sup>34</sup> When ‘life itself’ no longer provides a resource of creative self-overcoming onto which art can fall back to elude a ‘fully administrated life’ and the problems of autonomous art’s separation, the exodus from aura also meets its limit. Art, with its ‘allergy to aura’ which has only deepened within posthuman epistemics, can neither celebrate its autonomy from ‘prosaic reality’ nor, it seems, exodus from its paradoxical condition of wanting to ‘bring into appearance what is not the result of making’ through recourse to an anthropological extension in a semantically charged cosmos. This latter is because the possibilities of such an extension seem tainted by the rising techno-capitalist powers to extract and depotentiate living creativity in the same moment.

This predicament is reminiscent of Adorno’s prognostication that, with the advancement of capitalism’s ‘organic composition’, “the will to live finds itself dependent on the denial of the will to live”.<sup>35</sup> He elaborates on this idea by explaining that social existence compels us to act as ‘means of production’ and not ‘living purposes’ which, in turn, thwarts our instinctual life drive. Similarly, art, which is a ‘being of sensations’, an aesthetic organism (a semblance) that moves freely between subjective internalisations, is confronted by a wave of technocratic inscriptions of its own and other vitalities that render all such externalisations and internalisations potentially productive of economic, not only aesthetic value. The result of this is two-sided: on the one hand, an increasing depersonalisation of affect that arises from its ubiquitous codification and normative requirement (from emojis to algorithmic taste mapping to service work); on the other, artworks whose con-

sequent deflection or ironic objectification of expression produce a muted, and latently expressive, sorrow at the self-imposed prohibition on any art that would express a ‘living purpose’.

By way of a necessarily provisional conclusion, we are left with several prospects. One is that the technogenesis that feeds off the replication of vitalities could itself start to produce beings of sensation capable of achieving the semblance attained by artworks – beings, that is, which could attain a unity and completeness that is at once undetermined and ‘purposeful’. Given that the technogenesis currently unfolding is nearly entirely governed by capitalism’s value form and profit principle, this is most unlikely. However, a cyborgian genesis of art made by humans no longer certain of their species characteristics nor confined to a closed ontology may augur something more promising than these recent posthumanist works might imply. This is imaginable as the repositioning of art within a wider creativity understood neither as innovative (as Beuys interestingly insists, given capitalism’s creative proclivities) nor anthropological but as connected to a living realm in which the attainment of semblance, ‘purposeless purposelessness’, is not a talent monopolised by human art but discovered as the productive activity of all life, which, as the reverse face of capitalist half-life, reveals itself in purposeless *conatus* or the purposive purposelessness of persevering in existence. Only within such an open horizon, which should never be confused with indifference to conditions, is it possible for life and art to attain their true purpose, which is to be governed by no ostensible purpose nor adapted to any residual use. □

#### References:

- 1 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), p.103.
- 2 This is the term of black radical feminist Sylvia Wynter, who explains it thus: “There is one profound difference here, however. Rome’s empire was *Roman*. Instead, as studies of contemporary neocolonialism as well as of its predecessors colonialism and postcolonialism reveal,

the West, over the last five hundred years, has brought the *whole* human species into its *hegemonic*, now purely secular (post-monotheistic, post-civic monohumanist, therefore, itself also transumptively liberal *monohumanist*) model of being *human*. This is the version in whose terms the human has now been redefined, since the nineteenth century, on the *natural scientific model* of a *natural* organism. This is the model that *supposedly* preexists — rather than *coexists* with — all the models of other human societies and their religions/cultures. That is, all human societies have their ostensibly natural scientific organic basis, with their religions/cultures being merely superstructural. All the peoples of the world, whatever their religions/cultures, are drawn into the homogenizing global structures that are based on the model-of-a-natural-organism world-systemic order." Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations" in Katherine McKittrick, ed., *On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), pp. 21-22.

3 For an account of the philosophical and political implications of quantum physics and the discovery of the 'intra-active' nature of matter, see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Half Way: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

4 See Rosi Braidotti, 'Posthuman, All too Human', Durham Castle Lecture Series, Durham University, 25 January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZ7GnwelrM0&t=3262s>

5 Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 16.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., pp. 15-16.

8 Ibid., p. 34.

9 Adorno, op. cit., p. 102.

10 Ibid, p. 107

11 This problem is conceived in numerous ways, from the 'mendaciousness' of illusionistic or harmonious art, to the acquiescence of beautiful art with the status quo, to the privilege or exceptionalism of autonomous art underpinned as it is by the radical unfreedom of all other social production.

12 Adorno, op. cit., p. 103.

13 Ibid., p. 102.

14 Ibid., p. 103.

15 Kohn, op. cit., p. 34.

16 The quote continues: "[...] When power becomes bio-power, resistance becomes the power of life, a vital power that cannot be defined within species, environment or the paths

of a particular diagram." Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Séan Hand (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 77.

17 This is Benjamin Noys' question: see Benjamin Noys, "The Recirculation of Negativity: Theory, Literature, and the Failures of Affirmation", *Stasis* 1, no. 1 (2013) pp. 140-155.

18 Here I am referring to Gilbert Simondon's interrelated concepts of Individuation and transindividuation. In Muriel Combes's explanation: "*Apeiron*, nature indetermined because still nonstructured, is charged with potentials; indetermined is thus not synonymous with *undifferentiated*. Moreover, successive individuations of being do not leave the preindividual unchanged; the share of preindividual nature put to work in collective individuation is something biological individuation has deposited in living beings, but living beings can only gain access to it by *resubmersion* deeper than their vital individuality, for it is pre-vital reality. The only term that Simondon has to describe this preindividual is *transindividual*, which creates some confusion to the extent that it designates the preindividual deposited in subjects through vital individuation insisting in them, available for subsequent individuation, as well as its mode of existence as reality structured as collective. But it is possible to resolve this difficulty insofar as it is a matter of referring to something whereby any subject, to the extent that it harbors such a share of uneffectuated nature, is already a collective being, which means that "together all individuals thus have a sort of nonstructured ground from which new individuation may be produced". Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*, trans. Thomas LaMarre, (Cambridge, Mass; London, England: MIT Press, 2013), p. 49.

19 Joseph Beuys, Club 2am, 3sat, 27 January 1983, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo47lqk\\_QH0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mo47lqk_QH0)

20 This is Deleuze and Guattari's term to describe the sensations objectified and therefore also autonomised by and in the artwork. See, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Percept, Affect, and Concept," in *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 164.

21 Beuys, op. cit. Author's translation.

22 Ana Mendieta, 'A Selection of Statements and Notes', *Sulfur* 22 (1988), p. 70.

23 Mendieta and her sister were sent to America from Cuba as children after Fidel Castro came to power. After several unsuccessful fostering attempts, they found a long-term home in Iowa.

24 Martin Heidegger, 'The Age of the World Picture', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New

York: Harper Row, 1977), p.129.

25 'Bare life' is Agamben's term for biological life politicised through its 'exclusive inclusion'. In modernity the situation is reversed into an inclusive exclusion, whereby the *zoë* of citizens becomes the central object of political decision as they are 'included' on the basis of their reduction to bare life: "The entry of *zoë* into the sphere of the *polis* - the politicization of bare life as such - constitutes the decisive event of modernity." See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 4.

26 In *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben introduces this third hyphenated term, 'form-of-life', to articulate 'life indivisible from its form' (p. 206), a reconciled state of life in which *bios*, or the habits and uses of the body, and *zoë*, the flesh, are united as one living thinking self-affecting form in which neither is fixed.

27 Ibid., p. 213.

28 Ibid., p. 210.

29 Claire Colebrook, cited in Benjamin Noys, 'Vital Texts and Bare Life: The Uses and Abuses of Life in Contemporary Fiction', *CounterText* 1 no.2 (2015), pp. 165-185, p.181.

30 From the Ophiux project webpage, <https://www.joeyholder.com/ophiux>, 2016.

31 See Cécile B. Evans, *Made with Minds*, 2013: <https://www.nownews.com/story/cecile-b-evans-made-with-minds>

32 See Agamben, op. cit., p. 171.

33 "If anything characterizes modern democracy as opposed to classical democracy, then, it is that modern democracy presents itself from the beginning as a vindication and liberation of *zoë*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life and to find, so to speak, the bios of *zoë*. Hence, too, modern democracy's specific aporia: it wants to put the freedom and happiness of men into play in the very place — 'bare life' — that marked their subjection." Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 9-10.

34 Noys, op. cit., p.171.

35 Theodor Adorno, 'Novissimum Organum' in *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (London: Verso, 1999), p. 229.