There is no longer a nature that is clearly distinguishable from the cultures that surround it: even rain flirts with human acidity, air with the exhaust fumes of urban living, crops with a new and strange genetic debt that alters the innermost makeup of the plants themselves.

Animated Afterlives: Arts of the Postnatural

Through a curious configuration... animals never entirely vanish.
Rather, they exist in a state of perpetual vanishing... In supernatural
terms, modernity finds animals lingering in the world undead.
— Akira Mizuta Lippit.[1]

Gone are the days when we can retreat to the comfortable historical
oppositions of technology and nature. Despite the rhetoric of artists,
environmentalists and scientists alike, it is not that the power struggle is over,
not that nature is unconquerable, nor that technology has already conquered,
but something substantially more complex. The terms of engagement – the
oppositions themselves – have commingled, copulated, consummated a
relationship that we never thought possible. Some will call this posthuman,
but if it is posthuman, it is also – by necessity – postnatural.

Consider the eloquent argument put forward by Katherine Hayles that
suggests that "the posthuman is 'post' not because it is unfree but because
there is no a priori way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished
from an other-will."[2] Might one not make the same argument with regards to
the natural? There is no longer a nature that is clearly distinguishable from
the cultures that surround it: even rain flirts with human acidity, air with the
exhaust fumes of urban living, crops with a new and strange genetic debt that
alters the innermost makeup of the plants themselves.

Shelter Unit (detail) Brendan Fernandes 2007

. . . art is never quite what it makes itself
out to be, never quite what it pretends,
never quite as simple as a reheating of
prepackaged – then unpacked – meaning.
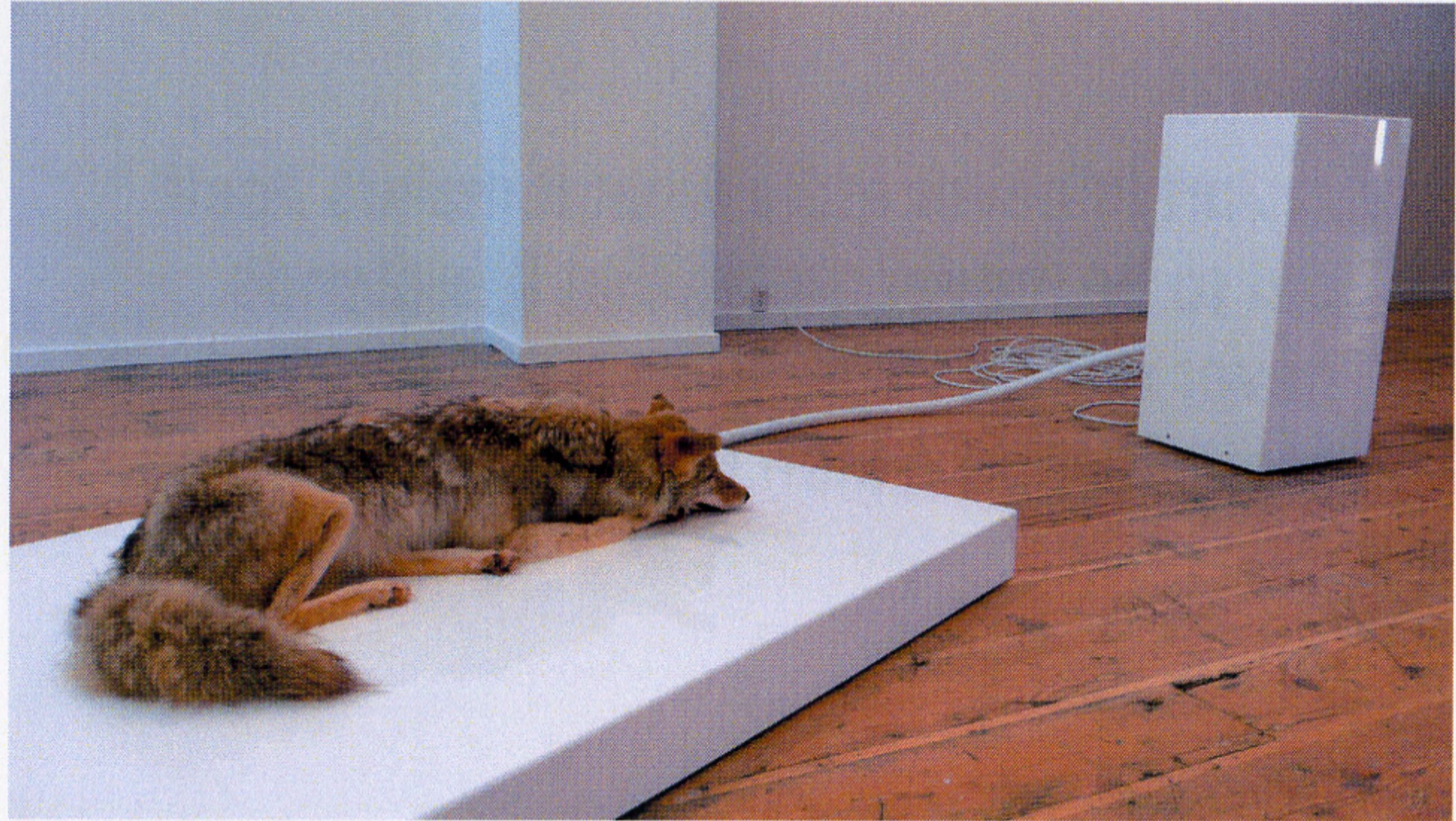
Juniper Ridge (Down in the Valley) Steven Rayner 2006-07

But we are no different. "Technology extends the body outside of itself," says Marshall MacLuhan,[3] and yet the consequence of such extension is that our very organs of perception and comprehension have begun, in the very most literal of ways, a migration of their own. Circular orbits for organs in free-fall, and the gravity of the situation is never quite enough to ground that which floats in artificial suspension of the questions themselves.

The sun, indeed, orbits the world – technological satellite that is also the carrion beast of a postnatural race. And we? Well, again in the most literal of senses, we have fulfilled the prophecy offered first by Antonin Artaud[4] and then reaffirmed by the French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari[5] – namely, we have in the most literal of senses become "bodies without organs," our organs themselves having clued into the fact that a safe distance from bodies is not only wise but inevitable, escape exit for a life without skin.

But it is worth mentioning that the inverse argument is also the case, and here where the question takes on the paradox it is due, something different happens to the inter-relationship of bodies and technology, skins of nature, both animal and human. Perhaps we too have disappeared into the orbit of possibilities, diffused along with our organs of comprehension in the ethereal nebulae of terminal vacuity. We have been unpacked, unpackaged from historically dominant theories of being – not in a transcendent way, but more dangerously as precisely the failure of humanity to erase the vestiges of animality that have always haunted the human spirit. A postnatural humanity is, by its very definition, monstrous.

The monster is monstrous precisely because its life is so enmeshed in death, it is animated death, an abject form of postnatural life, which finds its state of being intolerable, and which vengefully pursues its creator.[6]

Not then, the simple prophecy of the "body without organs," the case here becomes just the opposite. Bodies with prosthetic organs, artificially reheated, our sojourn into the lands of fantasy marked by the prostheses of head, heart and courage, we have literally become metaphors for ourselves: the fate of all caged creatures in a postnatural era. We no longer live in an animated age. Instead, the signs of our times are precisely reanimated – mobilized always in an indefinite process of deferral. Circular in nature, it must also be mentioned that such perspectives are never quite circular in practice, and it is here – in the practicing of animation – that we find the reheating of monstrosity itself.

Unpacked and Reheated

Consequently, a question: What is it that is most striking about the works of Rayner and Fernandes, here brought together in a constellation of technological artificiality? On one hand, there exists in each of these works a decisive political positioning of the question of nature, technology and life. On the other hand, in the work of both artists, it is precisely the presentation of death that allows for such vibrant articulation. This is, indeed, an exhibition about life – but the exhibition itself is nothing if not a flirtation with death proper.

But as we know, art is never quite what it makes itself out to be, never quite what it pretends, never quite as simple as a reheating of prepackaged – then unpacked – meaning.

Not unpacked and reheated but unheated and repacked: the emergent sign of the postnatural rears its heads in defiance of standardized interpretive moulds.

Unheated

Consider the work of Brendan Fernandes, a seemingly haphazard arrangement of cardboard boxes strewn across the gallery floor, peppered with ceramic fawns and bubble wrap and masking tape. Here there are too many conveniently labeled signs, too many pre-calculated declarations, too many obvious assertions to be taken as convincingly self-evident. Instead, an uncomfortable proximity emerges, an awkwardness of calculated spontaneity, an uneasy collection of repeated motifs that have been allowed to grow unchecked to labyrinthine scale.

And yet, these seemingly precarious towers of boxes are all identical, betraying from the start the seeming authenticity of material singularity. One might be tempted to read cardboard as a sign of the low-tech installation, an arbitrary mobilization of materials more often encountered as detritus. These however, are not the type of cardboard boxes that one might find – dirty

with their prior histories of use and misuse – not the type of cardboard boxes one might simply collect and rearrange. These boxes, instead, speak to a calculated purchase of clean and unused collective similarity, an investment in the appearance of arbitrary construction. These boxes, further, are bound – to their purpose, to their form, to their presence – taped together and stacked in a loose grid that maintains the illusion of indifference it so partially contends. It matters as well that these boxes are closed, Pandora's boxes whose sole purpose seems to be to stifle the air contained within them. Is this the air we breathe or the air we package, and in either case does not the porous nature of cardboard itself lead one to the conclusion that this packaging is symbolic at best?

This, in other words and despite the way it might seem, is no labyrinth at all. This is, rather, the architectural staging of what can only be read as a declarative monument.

This can be taken further still – for instance – by considering the ceramic deer placed intermittently throughout the cardboard installation. Here one must note that these fawns are purposefully generic, versions of themselves and each other, each admittedly interchangeable with the others, though no less unique for its obvious homogeneity. Like the cardboard boxes themselves, whatever meaning one might attribute to these statuettes, too, can be only symbolic – and again it is an uncomfortable symbolism at best, for in each instance the fawns are too big to fit in the boxes of meaning that surround them. One cannot read this confluence of form as causal, for the simple reason that the causally suggested relationship quite simply does not work. And these fawns, then, are not in any way the revealed interiority of the cardboard
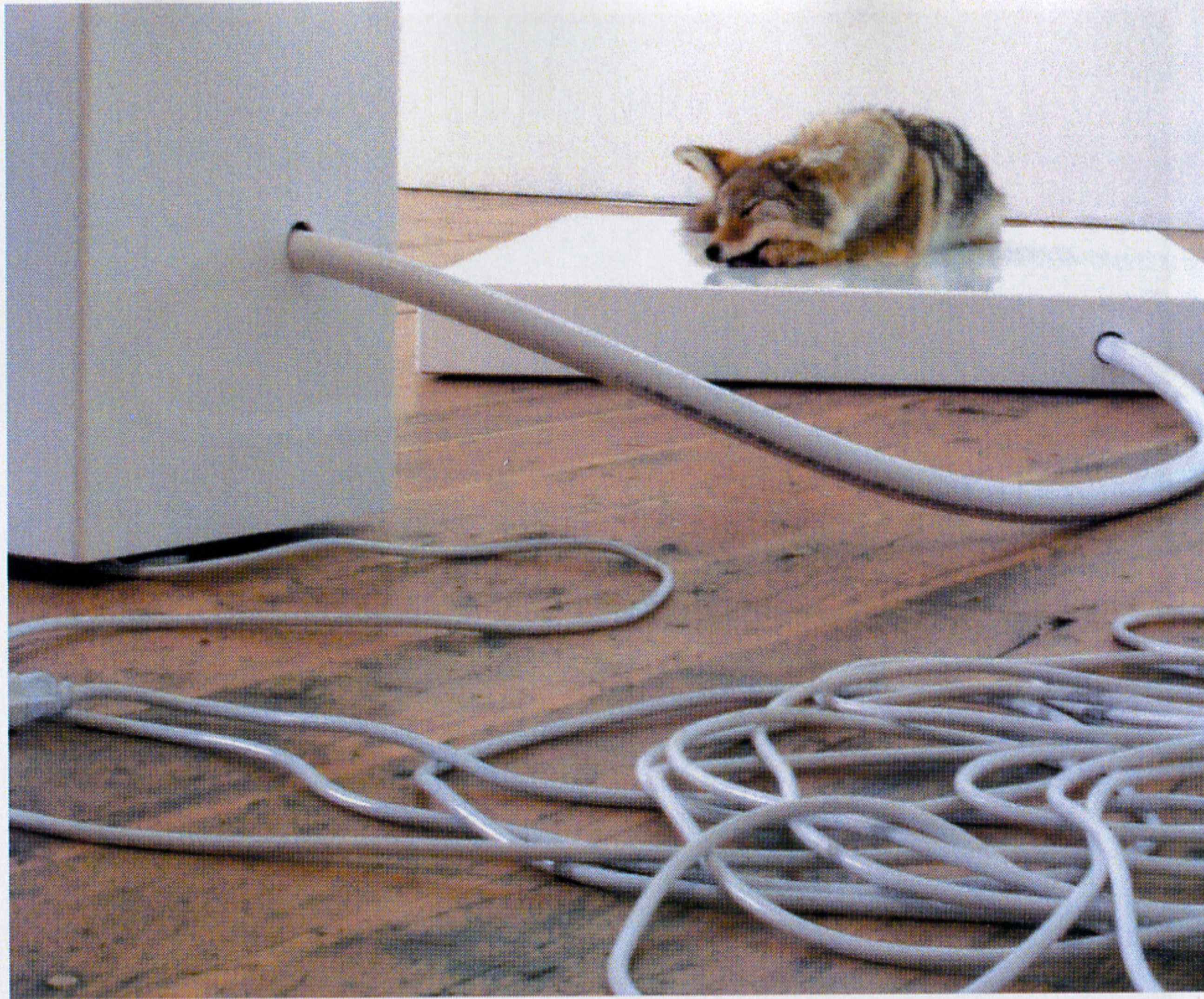
Juniper Ridge (Down in the Valley) (detail) Steven Rayner 2006-07

Shelter Unit (detail) Brendan Fernandes 2007

mind, but just the opposite – domestic lawn ornaments for the fashioning of artificially constructed identity. This, then (and again), is not about unpacking at all, but about its simulation – the presentation of signs that break with what they pretend to be, an iconic trompe l'oeil that can be so deceiving because it builds its declaration in the silence of an elaborate demand. Unbalanced yet purposefully so, the low-risk investment of form has its analogue in the high-risk interpretation[7] of vacuity itself. In other words, this house of cards is purposefully bronzed, frustrating its seeming contingency, yet in so doing, amplifying the stakes of what such a structure might mean.

Metaphor always carries its death within itself.[7]

And what it means is – at least – twofold.

On one hand, this is a piece that implicitly invokes Roland Barthes' theory of the "death of the author" in which the superfluity of meaning prevents declarative finality in any purely textual form.[8] Here, the artist cannot be made to appear for the simple reason that Fernandes' work is, ultimately, a death-mask of authorial identity. The signs simply do not add up, and the sum of all signs is, in this case, an explicitly falsified equation, leading to the inevitable conclusion that this death is intentional; the birth of the viewer, in this instance, is uniquely ironic – the face-painted ash-ridden gaze of the postnatural phoenix. Here, the unpacked signs require – for their very contingency of form – a repacking according to new and different terms, a possession of sorts which leaves the viewers themselves in the awkward position of actor-on-stage of the Brendan Fernandes show. This is not "Being John Malkovich" but rather being Fernandes himself – the death-mask worn

becomes a life-mask of a different sort – in a similar spirit of reanimation, revivication and interpretive intervention.

On the other hand – but in similar sprit – this work is an unheating of otherwise didactic nodes of meaning. Remember Marshall McLuhan who insisted that only cool technologies require participation – those which are heated precisely speak only with authoritative sanction.[9] From this light, Fernandes' work is most certainly not re-heated, not born again into declarative stance but just the opposite. The cleverly construed failures of the signs of his work, instead of undermining the piece, reanimate it in a spirit of participatory engagement. This requires not only an ideological interaction, but also – and this is the central point – a purposeful opening up to betrayal that is the latent consequence of the artistic presentation itself.

Now, this is not to dismiss Fernandes' work – not by any means. For this recreation of the authorial death-mask is also an indication of spectral presence. It is to say that this is a work that relies on – and in a strangely perverse way even invites – the objections of its audience, a work whose meaning only comes across through the encounter with the artificiality of its signs; a work, in other words, that functions best as a metaphor for itself. In a strange twist, this abandoned mask of identity wears its viewer, challenging in confrontation: a request to raise the dead signs of static presentation and render living again those zombies of calculated meaning. This work is not dead, but undead. The meaning never entirely vanishes and instead it is the viewer caught in a state of perpetual vanishing that is only possible because the skins of the work force one always to encounter the same vanishings at work in our own constructions of being – animated authorial afterlives, left to

roam and explore the boxed hallways of the artistic imagination.

Now, there is something obviously delusional about such an engagement, something perhaps even nonsensical. And it is on this note that the last of the signs of Fernandes' work emerges in full force. One must not underestimate the value of bubble-wrap – freed from its conventional connotation of packaging safely those fragile remnants of boxed immortality – which here emerges as the wearable padded room that is also the consequence of interpretive license: subjective fashion-line for the lawn ornaments of a cardboard-coated postnatural identity.

Not unpacked and reheated but unheated and repacked: the emergent sign of the postnatural rears its heads in defiance of standardized interpretive moulds.

Repacked

One might make a similar argument for the works of Steven Rayner, an inverse case whose similarity is (post)naturally backwards.

Animated animal hides, at their simplest, these works mobilize a strangely pathetic predatory imperative. Here we find, for instance, a coyote who occasionally breathes; a cougar whose tail twitches and turns; a bear that inflates and deflates in regulatory pattern. And, each of these animals is also inconspicuously attached to an electrical current of one sort or another

– prosthetic mobilization of once-natural being. Yet, fair is fair, after all, and the slow-decline of post-human living finds its echo in Rayner's predators on technological life-support, a reanimated presence that directly contradicts the context in which these creature once – one supposes – lived.

These are both our cyborg fantasies and our cyborg fears, taken the form of skin, if not of flesh and machine proper. Here we find domesticated predators, rendered on one hand as the stuffed-animal trophy prizes of art-carnival game and, on the other hand, as the animated display objects of science-fair diorama. And, one must contend, there is nothing dead at all about these animals, these technological zombies of a culture which has precisely rendered themselves as the roadkill of progressive living. Nothing dead, that is, except the self-evident post-mortem exhibitionism that contextualizes their display. Here the spectacle of death informs the form of post-death mobilization, roadkill of the technological imaginary. These creatures are literally repacked, packed in this instance with the cyborg prosthetics that allow for their splayed-displayed manifestation.

This domestication, perhaps, is most explicit with Rayner's stuffed bear, draped awkwardly over a lime green beam. This bear is, and has been, framed and the doubled meaning of the word is, in this instance, intentional. This is not a natural green but an explicitly postnatural, iPod-inspired colour scheme, itself a scheme for attracting the trend-sensitive viewer. That this bear is also inflatable means little – except to give full-force to the dancing circus of life and death itself, here put on display with a two-minute lapse time, just long enough to wonder whether each and every breath might be its born-again last. What matters more is that this bear was (but is not anymore)

A Tree On Allenford (detail) Steven Rayner 2007

A Tree On Allenford Steven Rayner 2007

a bear proper – barely a bear, one might say. Or, to return to the language of reanimation, one might insist that in this case no less than before, this bear – like all caged or displayed specimens of the vestigial natural – is best seen also as a metaphor for itself, both a bear and not – and both at the same time.

> [P]ostnatures do not supersede or sublate one another, but co-exist in the ways we think about the digital domain. Postnature is not a unified zone, any more than nature itself. With each postnatural vision comes a revision of the natural... each vision persists in the others, and the more a schema is historically embedded and the more it is regarded as outmoded and forgotten, the more it returns as repressed... in the others.[10]

What this means is precisely the inverse of a happily-ever-after; in this case an explicit statement to the effect that there is no peace in rest. Instead, this is an ecological extension, as the typical resting place of decomposed oblivion is rendered urban-style – technological resuscitation that maintains the contemporary balance of postnature itself. And here there are no shortage of hauntings either, no shortage of repressions and traumatic returns, yet in each instance it is an always vicarious return to the dislocation of undead living, ghosts that do not quite wander on their own, but whose presence nevertheless implicates a certain extension, a displacement of once-mortal existence.

It is noteworthy, for instance, that Rayner has titled his pieces after geographic locations – whether they be the places where these reanimated animals ended their days or not makes little difference. Instead, what is important is precisely the inversion of the traditional epitaph; not the (geographic) placing of a name, but the naming of a place. Here, in other words, it is exactly not the skins of life that are subsequently bound to a static tombstone existence, but just the opposite – it is the place itself that is forever carried forward in the spirit of postmortem reanimation. Not the spirits of the dead that hauntingly impose themselves upon a place, but a place itself, a contextual as well as geographic history, that first haunts and then possesses that whose destruction it has enabled. It is precisely the world itself that haunts these creatures; the world itself has become their organs – extended organs returned with identity-vengeance as if to perpetually reinforce the fact that nothing and no-one is ever as it seems. And yet, in this confrontation that is not in any way a confrontation proper, there is nevertheless something compelling, something that implicates the viewer, something that lets us believe that our very powers of presence and sight have something to say about the technological mobilization of those whose death implicates we ourselves.

For this is an identity-death, an authorial death, of exactly an inverse sort – as only a possession might be. For if Rayner's animal hides can be seen as themselves possessed of the life and death of their once-natural lifestyle, it is precisely their post-mortem presence that speaks most clearly about the debt they carry forward with them. Haunted, but never merely haunted – death brings with it the always incanted presence of those who in turn are required for the ghosts to be seen. And it is important that Rayner has left his animals blind – a phenomenon that would not be different had he inset glass eyes, for in either instance the prosthesis – of vacuity or of falsified presence makes no difference – denies these creature the gaze of life in favour of an explicit non-gaze of after-living. Under the watchful gaze of possessed spirits, our eyes in

fact become vicarious visionary prostheses: watching these animals back to imaginary life.

> Tortoises and ostriches hatch their eggs just by looking at them, a sign
> that their sight has some ejaculative value.[11]

We, in other words, are implicit in the animated afterlives of Rayner's beasts. Not merely through interpretive interaction, but more explicitly through the actual electronic organs of their reanimated existence. These are hydro-powered animals pumped up with the cultural steroids of postnatural living. But they are also cultural beasts, animated by our own interpretive gazes, as we too join this parade of domesticated living. The nuance should not go un-noticed, for we are no less possessed, in the end, than Rayner's cyborg skins, implicit in the ecology that is urban economy today. And in both instances, it is the visual incantation of objectified living that serves to intensify the debate, placing us in ever closer, yet always uncomfortable, proximity to the awkwardness of a technological living that is always, at least in part, self-fulfilling. Repacked with the ghosts of our own histories and culture, haunted and possessed by technologies of mobilization and reanimation, nothing is anymore ever what it seems.

Not unpacked and reheated but unheated and repacked: the emergent sign of the postnatural rears its heads in defiance of standardized interpretive moulds.

Animated Afterlives

Consequently, taken together, the works of Fernandes and Rayner have something decisive to offer – a paradoxical statement about the problematic of contemporary living. No more nature, no more sanction, no more safety in either the sanctity of death (authorial or otherwise) nor the artifice of life.

If one is to approach Rayner's work through the frame of natural demise – the death of the animal, and by consequence the human – one almost certainly has to approach the work of Fernandes through an opposite gaze: the death of the postnatural and the posthuman themselves – not this time an extinction but a distinction – a disappearance of the natural and the human into their own cultural simulacrum. And yet, these frameworks are not so easily territorialized in the end, for these floating organs of vision, identity and technology congeal into their opposites as well. It is here that, for instance, the work of Fernandes itself becomes a mobilized technological body, an identity-prosthesis for labyrinthine self-encounter. It is also here that Rayner's work becomes precisely about the failure of skins thus mobilized in seeming isolation from the technologies upon which they rely.

And this is perhaps why these works, taken together, result in such an uncomfortable proximity – not because they are so dichotomously different but because each contains within it the spectre of the other. For Fernandes this means that, in the end, this piece is a mobilized skin – a skin of postnatural identity worn, not by a human but in fact by the audience itself. Unheated,

Haunted, but never merely haunted – death brings with it the always incanted presence of those who in turn are required for the ghosts to be seen.

Shelter Unit (detail) Brendan Fernandes 2007
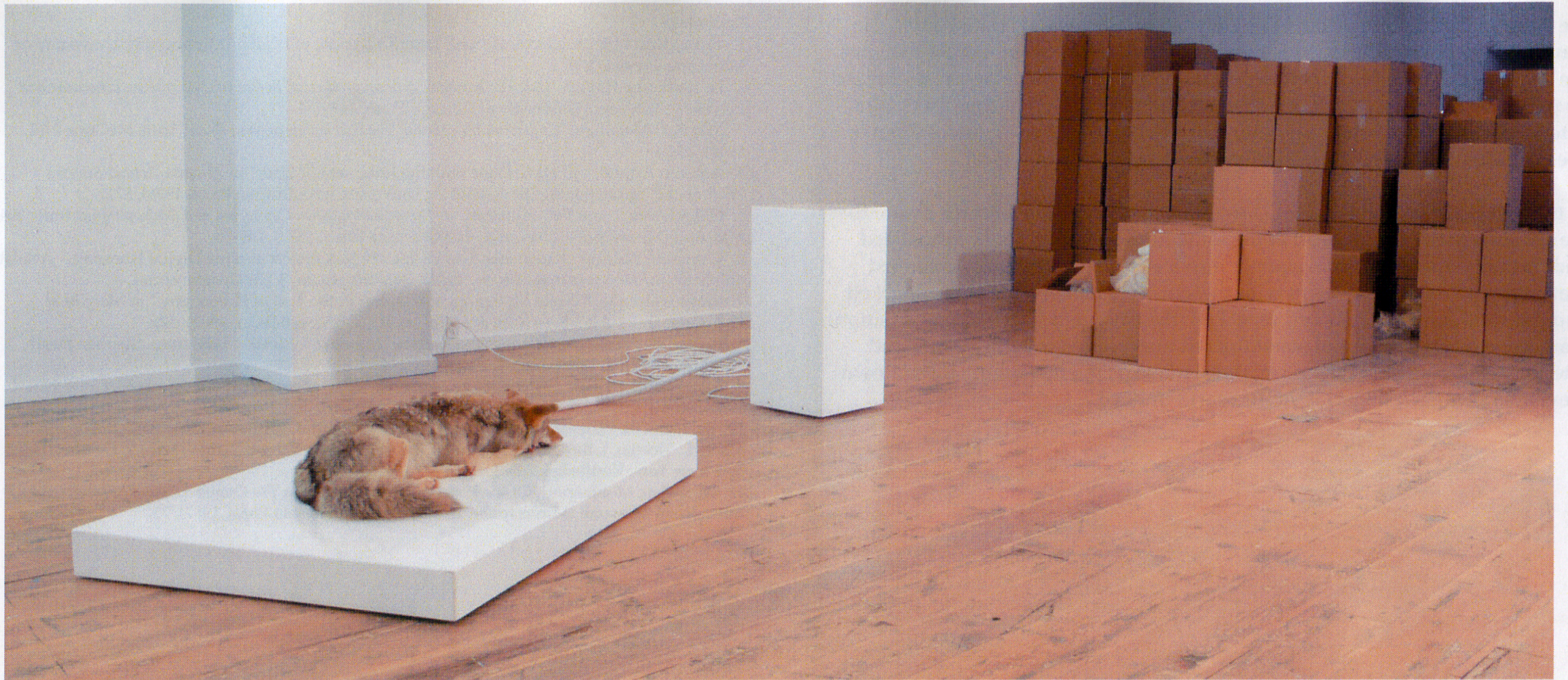
the work of Fernandes speaks ultimately to the always-negotiated and consequently always inauthentic nature of social interaction. For Rayner, just the opposite is the case – here it is the audience proper that is worn, mobilized by participatory necessity, deer in the headlights of cyborg fashionistas, our extended organs stuck in a still motion orbit. Repacked, the work of Rayner speaks ultimately to the impossibility of not-being-technological.

In this sense, through the lens of *Unpacked and Reheated*, we become aware that we are always living and dead at the same time, inauthentically formalized and formally unauthorized – equally implicated in the postnatural context that emerges from engagement with these works themselves. Not unpacked and reheated but unheated and repacked: the emergent sign of the postnatural rears its heads in defiance of standardized interpretive moulds. Animated afterlives, these artists of the postnatural make us too metaphors for our own inevitable demise… lingering in the world undead.

Endnotes
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