

Ecologies of (Imaginary) Friendship

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In August 2015, the media world went wild over a report that the sound of drones makes black bears anxious—reported by scientists who measured the heart rate of a group of bears while flying unmanned aerial vehicles over their heads. The irony of the study is that in order to measure the effects of the drones, it was necessary to technologically upgrade the bears by outfitting them with cardiac monitors and bio-trackers designed to measure, record, and share the real time physiological responses of the animals to their environment.

Around the same time as this story broke, I was reading Amanda Boetzkes's *The Ethics of Earth Art* along with some of her other works. The story of the black bears does not at first seem like a work of art, but it struck me that there was something resonant between Boetzkes's process of inquiry and the scientific experiment. There was something missing from the analysis of the bears that Boetzkes's reflexivity helped me understand, namely the way the experiment implicated itself (or failed to implicate itself) in the causal matrix it was designed to study. The conclusion of the scientists was that drones make black bears nervous (and therefore flying them around wild animals should be more heavily regulated), but I couldn't shake the feeling that the study was designed with nervousness in mind and with a decidedly human sense of entitlement to operate on the

natural world. Something in the experiment refused to be explained by the scientists' data however, something perhaps "unrepresentable," to use Boetzkes's term for a type of concept that stands in for the inability to represent what lies beyond the limits of representation. For the differing registers of scientific intervention seemed to uncomfortably ignore the actual experience of the bears in ways that instrumentalize—and thus also risk trivializing—the ecological conscience that the study advocates.¹ To put it differently, something in the story of the bears seemed to persist in excess of the data, as irreducible to the data as it was ambivalent to the good intentions of the scientists, something that perhaps cannot really be measured, but can certainly be (at least partially) imagined. In other words, something aesthetic.

This essay meditates on the story of digitally enhanced black bears for the ways that it might be understood differently, using Amanda Boetzkes's *The Ethics of Earth Art* as a catalyst for speculating about the ways that contemporary (anthropogenic) life problematizes the boundaries between science, ecology, and art. Indeed, if the story of these digital black bears is any indication, one might suggest that the evolution of technological culture is increasingly just as amenable to aesthetic analysis as it is to the scientific distillation of data. In fact, one might go as far as to suggest that the tools of art criticism have never been more relevant than at a time of widespread human impact on the environment: when it becomes eerily unclear how to examine and engage with the aesthetic implications of scientific discourse or of human culture as a whole.

Making Black Bears Anxious

The study in question was initiated by Mark Ditmer, a wildlife ecologist from the University of Minnesota St. Paul. In the experiment, Ditmer and his team tagged, tracked, and monitored four black bears living in a state park in Minnesota.² To gather the data needed, the bears were outfitted with GPS collars (biologger collars) and surgically implanted with heart sensors—human-grade cardiac monitors that were customized to the physiology of the bears. Once processed, the bears were released back into the wild to resume their natural patterns of behavior. Shortly thereafter the scientists began to fly small drones overhead, purposefully maintaining a distance from the bears in order to register more as background noise than as immediate threat. Meanwhile, Ditmer and his team recorded the heart rate variations that the presence of the drones elicited in the animals. The bears showed no overt behavioral signs of distress, but there was a dramatic acceleration of their heart rates, which in most cases doubled—and in the case of one of the bears, nearly quadrupled. Ditmer summarizes:

In all 17 drone encounters for which the researchers had heart-monitor data, the bears' heart rates soared—one by as much as 46 beats per minute, another by 56 beats per minute, and a third (a mother bear with two cubs) by more than 120 beats per minute, from 41 to 162. While their heart rates returned to a more normal resting rate within 10 minutes after the encounter, the drone's presence clearly caused the animals at least some significant physiological stress.³

To begin the task of looking aesthetically at the study would be to note that there is something undoubtedly eerie about the idea of these cybernetically enhanced black bears—bears with technological prostheses that allow a strange form of communication, perverse though it may be, with the scientists on the other end of the data exchange. The bears are made to speak in the language of data, through their surgically implanted communication upgrades. The drones become the voices of the scientists in return, creating a biofeedback loop through which people make their presence known by casting technological shadows on the animal world and the bears speak back through a language of physiological distress. That these are cyborg animals is not really anything new—this is a relatively predictable manifestation of a scientific imagination that cares more about registering data than it does about thinking through the paradoxes of its processes. The details are in the particularities however, and one need not try very hard to imagine that these *particular* bears would be *particularly* anxious about the presence of technology—after all they had been tranquilized and operated on and surgically implanted with devices that broadcast their biometrics and location. They had been quantified.

Marshall McLuhan was fond of saying that technology turns the human body inside out, but if that is true for humans it is certainly also true in this instance for the bears.⁴ Naturally, the scientists received standard ethical approval for the study (from the University of Minnesota Institutional Animal Use and Care Committee) and this technological inside-out is not quite the same as the more literal laboratory dissections or other experiments that also accompany the pursuit of science. But these factors all seem fair game to an

analysis looking to study the impact of human technology on this specific group of bears, even if the bears themselves are, for the scientists, seemingly more metaphors for impact than actual animals of concern. And perhaps a first lesson to be learned from the study is that this is just what a “test subject” is—a metaphor. Each bear is both itself and an instance of experimental change, measurements and data. The bears and their data are impossible and yet the (scientific) claim is that the data somehow represents the experience of the bears.

However, if, as Boetzkes suggests, “an ecological stance involves revealing the limits of an anthropocentric worldview and recognizing these limits as thresholds to the excess of the earth,”⁵ then one thing that is clear in this instance is that there is no real recognition of limits by Ditmer and his team. Instead, the scientific ear attunes to the broadcast data, but in the process becomes oblivious to its own presence even while supposedly benign forms of intervention (abduction and surgical implantation) form the conditions of data generation in the first place. A textbook case of anthropocentric conceit.

To follow Boetzkes’s advice in an attempt to think through the complexities of Ditmer’s study would be to first ask where the limits of the anthropocentric reside in this particular case. That is, at what point does the study create its own conditions of possibility? For Boetzkes this is a technological question, one she (re)reads through Martin Heidegger’s theory of technological limits. What Heidegger described as the tool revealing its essence—“the broken tool springs into view when its dysfunction jars it out of the seamless order of equipment operations”—for Boetzkes is the ecological condition of technological implementation.⁶

This is not simply a technical point; it is also one of the tenets of technological and aesthetic culture. McLuhan might have put it best when he claimed that, pushed to a limit scenario, technology will always reverse into its opposite.⁷ The medium is the message, but the message is articulated most strongly when the medium reveals its expressive or technological limits, often through failure. Paul Virilio makes a similar point when he insists that the accident is the hidden condition of any new technology.⁸ Boetzkes goes a step further however to insist that at this point the ethical stakes of a technology reveal themselves as well. Following Luce Irigaray, Boetzkes calls this “recessive ethics,” the act of stepping back from the drive to explain or measure—or of having one’s movement towards an explanation conscientiously interrupted—and in so doing also initiating “a retraction from the mistaken presumption that one knows the other, in order to let the other present itself on its own terms.”⁹

To look back to the black bears with this in mind is to move from technological generation of data to understanding the study as a contextual and environmental intervention, looking not at what Ditmer has discovered but at what he has created. It is not just a metaphor; it is a metaphor that fails the only way a metaphor can—by poetically charting its own limits of representation. The failure of a metaphor will not simply articulate the (failed) conflation that was the scientific intention, but also the differences between the various components. A failed metaphor, in its failure to constitute intelligible sameness, becomes a poignant articulation of difference. And so, a question: What happens when the weird aesthetics of technological experimentation are given analytic priority over the scientific pursuit of

information—when the data metaphor fails to eclipse the bizarrely choreographed performance of scientists, drones and cyborg bears? That is, what happens when science begins to use artistic methods? Is it possible that what seems like science fiction is really just a harbinger for the end of science itself and the birth of something entirely different: the future as an art performance?

The Trouble with (among other things) Jellyfish

At the 2015 meeting of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts, the artist Mark Dion gave a keynote lecture in which he spoke about, among other things, one of his installations called *The Trouble with Jellyfish*.¹⁰ The installation was a taxonomy of scientific, natural, and historical representations of jellyfish—framed as many socially-oriented projects are towards a doubled aesthetic and educational mandate. The installation even included an aquarium filled with real jellyfish. They were not wired up and monitored by scientists, but they were put on display for public aesthetic appreciation. Also on display were informative panels with scientific data, artistic renderings, and works produced by local students. But it was something Dion mentioned as almost an aside in his talk that captured my imagination, something that I thought brilliantly recasts the way we conceive of our relationship to the planet and the environment. In the talk, Dion recounted the facts of accelerating climate change, global warming, resource depletion, and overpopulation that define the age of the Anthropocene as one of global human impact, noting that as we impact the planet we are quite literally ruining the world for ourselves. He also said something else, that,

strangely, these changes are not equally terrible for all species. As it turns out, while we might be sealing our own fate by impacting the planet so aggressively, in the process we are actively creating a world that is increasingly conducive to the flourishing of jellyfish.

This is almost certainly not what Joseph Beuys had in mind when he so eloquently spoke of how “everyone is an artist” and together we are creating the “total artwork of the future social order.”¹¹ What would happen, however, if we entertained precisely this possibility: that we are indeed living in what, for Beuys, would have been the future, and collectively this is the future we have made? If the Anthropocene is to be defined by the geological impact of humans on the planet, does this not in fact mean that we are responsible for the current state of the world, the perversion of the planet into an unintentional human creation—even, from some perspectives, an artwork of geological scale? It does not mean that it is necessarily a good artwork, but, nonetheless, there may be something to gain by considering it in this way. Less as a trajectory towards the nihilism of human self-destruction and more a species transition project, reshaping the planet itself (even if inadvertently) such that jellyfish are recast as our survival species. Imagine the future of the world we are creating—without us perhaps—but filled with the translucent dancing undulations of underwater interaction: a final choreography enabled by the art project of the Anthropocene itself. Boetzkes writes:

Beuys took the view that everyone should participate in the shaping of society, and in so doing every person could realize his or her potential to be an

artist. This vision of society as sculpture, as itself an artwork that was ever in the process of being shaped by the public, also aimed to reintegrate nature into the human social structure. Otherwise put, Beuys's energy plan was to redefine art as a public dialogue that included all citizens, as well as animals and elemental forces.¹²

To think about the anecdote of the black bears as a component part of the artwork of the present is to suggest that this scientific experiment does not just *seem* like an artwork but actually *is* one. Or, at least, an experiment of our own might be proposed in which Ditmer's study is considered an artwork of the present such as to allow for a different kind of impact analysis. For, as Boetzkes puts it, "art has a part to play in critiquing the ways we frame nature through representation as well as through science and technology. Moreover, it does so by forging an aesthetic awareness of how nature exceeds these discourses and representations."¹³

This story really does have all the components of a gripping science fiction novel—or even better as a piece of contemporary performance art—particularly when read through the lens of what is often referred to as the "social turn" in contemporary art. While optimistically defined by Nicolas Bourriaud's theory of "relational aesthetics" (defined as a form of art that uses social space as its medium¹⁴), it is Claire Bishop that most poignantly counterpoints Bourriaud's vision with a series of examples designed to highlight the perverse, exploitative and sometimes violent forms that such a socially-oriented aesthetic approach can take. Bishop borrows the term "artificial hells" from André

Breton to describe this form of work, as a nod towards the surrealist appeal for “more bold, affective and troubling forms of participatory art and criticism.” Such forms often involve what she terms “delegated performance” in which other people—or perhaps, in this case, animals—are set up for a certain type of relational experiment.¹⁵ Importantly, for Bishop the “social turn” in art is only made critically intelligible by importing theoretical concepts from political philosophy—the historical tools of aesthetic analysis are, in her view, not sufficient for the task of parsing social and political complexities of this sort.¹⁶ One might thus speculate conversely as well and suggest that when science begins to behave in strange ways that remind us of fiction and performance art it may be time to think about an *aesthetic turn* in science (or in the collective living of human life) as a way to understand some of the strangeness of contemporary technoculture.

What is it Like to Be a Coyote?

This is not simply the object-oriented proclamation that “aesthetics becomes first philosophy.”¹⁷ It is actually the insistence that while aesthetics might be the first philosophy it will also almost certainly be the last. The age of the Anthropocene is not only an age of human impact; it is the age of fatal aesthetic impact, inadvertent human customization of the planetary landscape. This is a performative collapse of the boundaries between art and life, but it is also one that takes seriously the insistence that performance is not a rhetorical category but one infused with embodied and phenomenological consequences. Instead, this foreclosure of critical distance guarantees

that—when seen aesthetically—the story of the bears is also one that implicates us in its contextual matrix, whether fused by questions of politics, ecology, or technological living. To accept responsibility for ecological crisis as an “artificial hell” is to acknowledge that each of us had a hand in (collectively) shaping the form in which our present world manifests. Boetzkes calls this “ecologicity,” the act of “attuning vision to an ecological reality” that cannot be predicated on a vision of nature that is isolated from human impact.¹⁸

What is at stake in this inquiry is the question of how we communicate with the world around us, as well as the responsibility we accept for our part in creating the context of such interactions. To think scientifically is to insist on a language of statistics, the conceit of which is to pretend that numbers transcend human bias and, as such, gesture towards a non-anthropocentric mode of engagement. I doubt the black bears would agree however, and, at the risk of anthropomorphizing, it seems reasonable to entertain the possibility of giving these animals a voice in the question. The question is, how?

One approach to the question might be to ask how to attempt to reframe the analysis of the experiment such as to try and understand what it means *for the bears*? This is what the scientists purport to be doing, but it is not what they do. To understand how data registers a calculated intervention is not the same thing as to attend to the perspective of a bear. In fact, following thinkers such as Thomas Nagel or Ian Bogost, it would be tempting to say that the question of what it is like to be a bear is one that is exactly unanswerable, even impossible, for the simple reason that we are not bears. Indeed, for Bogost, “we can never understand the

alien [or the bear] experience, we only ever reach for it metaphorically.”¹⁹ The fact that the metaphor inevitably fails is not (for Bogost, or for us) an argument against the attempt as much as it is an acknowledgment of precisely the sort of limit scenario Boetzkes alludes to.

Steven Shaviro, for instance, suggests that “a certain cautious anthropomorphism is necessary to avoid anthropocentrism,” which I take as a first step towards trying to understand a perspective that is neither simply a projection of oneself, nor a forced reduction to feigned (data) impartiality.²⁰ Perhaps we should once more look back to Beuys, for just as he suggested that we are creating the artworks of the future (and consequently the artwork of our present), so too did he himself propose an artwork that was generative of the kind of future he wanted to imagine. Take for instance that moment when Beuys locked himself in a cage with a wild coyote for 3 days, a piece in a performance called *Coyote, I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). A comparison to Ditmer’s black bears experiment is in some ways useful here, since the coyote used in this performance can surely be cast as another subjugated animal put into the service of a human spectacle. At the same time, however, there is a proximity that Beuys creates between himself and the animal, not a disavowal of impact but a foregrounding of the relationship proposal with all of its complex interpretive possibilities. Beuys cages himself too—for instance—and spends the next three days making (proverbial) friends with the coyote. Boetzkes insists that “far from attempting to tame the animal, Beuys was instead attempting to discover a form of communication in spite of the animal’s wildness.”²¹ This is not without problems however, since the coyote, while said to be wild

was—according to *New York Magazine*—actually procured from a local animal trainer.²² At the same time one might at least propose the performance as another example of an attempt—even if, perhaps, another “failed attempt”—to create alternate scenarios in which non-human-centric forms of communication might emerge. Beuys called works like this a “symbolic beginning.”²³ But he might also have called it the beginning of a conversation in which (some) humans express their intention to live in a world where coyotes (or other animals) also flourish.

What is central is not simply that it is possible to look at our present and future as an artwork in development but that artworks themselves are generative of a certain philosophical—and sometimes ecological—relationship.

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What do jellyfish, a coyote, and a family of black bears have in common? Maybe nothing, but there is a component of Beuys’s work that gestures towards something that Donna Haraway has turned into a central tenet of her theory of “significant otherness.” At minimum there is a certain imagining of possible relationships in play—possible forms of ecologically-conscientious relationships that, while not without problems, begin to form a series of gestures towards framing ecological interactions differently. If, as Haraway argues, “the relation is the smallest unit of measurement”²⁴ then what we inevitably share with each of these ecological entities is at least a series of possible relations. Yet how the relationship is negotiated matters, as do the ways we position ourselves in their formation. And importantly, for Haraway, such relationships cannot pre-exist their negotiation: “The

question turns out not to be what are animal rights, as if they existed preformed to be uncovered, but how may a human enter into a rights relationship with an animal?"²⁵

Haraway's suggestion is to think about models of family and kinship as starting points for consideration, with a caveat that over-identification with animals risks personifying, infantilizing, and ultimately compromising the relationships we build. This is one reason she resists the notion of friendship as a valuable form of interaction, since it risks over-identification (for instance, a dog owner who thinks of his or her pet as a personal friend).²⁶ However, it is also possible that the real problem is not one of over-identification but of under-sympathizing with entities outside of direct human reference. Haraway may critique the dog owner for over identifying with his or her pet as a "friend"—just as I might object to the scientist thinking about a bear as a test subject—but the fact remains that these are both possible forms of relationship-building, though their ethical and ecological consequences are different.

It is possible that to get closer to the story it is necessary to *imagine*, for indeed as Haraway argues, "stories are much bigger than ideologies."²⁷ To then approach the story of the black bears in this way is to realize that we have much more in common with these animals than we might have first assumed. For these black bears are actually bears, but they are also allegories for our own social, political, and aesthetic situations. If someone tranquilized me, implanted me with a cardiac monitoring system, and then set me "free" to be monitored at a distance, I would certainly be a bit nervous when I noticed the sounds and signs of my abductors circling around me. In so many ways my human situation is really not that different—my running watch came with

a heart rate monitor that my phone can read, my phone can automatically upload those biometrics to the cloud, and my data is monitored by algorithms of all sorts to the point where I am sent activity assessment reports and even suggestions for how to upgrade to newer devices that will further improve my performance. Am I a metaphor for the bear, or it for me? Unlike the bears, I suppose I have a choice. Unlike the bears, I grow to love and depend on the suggestions I receive for my donations of data. Unlike the bears I am ostensibly optimized by this relationship—not simply a choreographed test subject, though I’m not really sure it is all that different. If I think of it as a performance it makes me feel a little better—but to be honest it perhaps feels a bit more like science as perverse pedagogy. My sympathies are with the bears, but in many ways my reality and that of these animals may be closer than it first appears.

I am also interested in the idea of *possible* relationships, not yet bound to particularities or subject to the interpretive projections we mobilize in their formation. Because there are no pre-established rules regarding how we speculate on these questions, I think there is a certain merit to considering “friendship” as a model of engagement to add to the mix. As psychologist William Rawlins notes, friendship is not bound to institutional definitions the way that other forms of relationships tend to be. According to Rawlins, family relationships as well as romantic commitments both involve certain formalized behaviors and conventions that are as much socially mediated as they are inter-personally determined. Friendships, for Rawlins, do not have the same kind of social and cultural duties associated with them, which means that the terms of engagement are almost exclusively built and negotiated on the fly between

the friends themselves, often resulting in “contradictory terms of engagement.”²⁸ In friendships, Rawlins notes, behaviors may be erratic and sometimes even hurtful, but the friendships persist because of an intent to preserve an “assumption of good intentions” upon which future possibilities for engagement depend. In many ways, though he doesn’t use these words, Rawlins’s theory assumes a performative trust at the core of friendship—not a contract-based or technically mediated form of relationship, but one built on willingness, suspension, and belief. In fact, it does not take too much imagination to see a link between Rawlins’s idea of an “assumption of good intentions” and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 19th century notion of aesthetics as the *request* for a “suspension of disbelief” in the act of poetic (or in this case, perhaps ecological) faith.

To re-imagine possible relationships in this way is not simply to create new forms of friendship; it is to create possible forms of imaginary friendship. To think of cyborg black bears as imaginary friends is not necessarily an intuitive suggestion, though it is one that animates the impact of a larger culture too often reduced to logistics. To anthropomorphize in this way is not so much about projecting agency onto the bears as it is about acknowledging the limits of our own capacity to dictate the terms of the relationship and to understand how a friendship—imaginary or not—might be a different way of acknowledging the limits and conditions of the relational stage. Boetzkes calls this “a commitment to others beyond anthropocentric boundaries.”²⁹ I might call it an ecology of (imaginary) friendship.

Notes

- 1 Amanda Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 16.
- 2 Mark Ditmer et al. "Bears Show a Physiological but Limited Behavioral Response to Unmanned Aerial Vehicles." *Current Biology* 25.17 (August 2015) 2278-2283.
- 3 Amanita Khan. "Don't like drones in your backyard? Neither do black bears, study finds." *Los Angeles Times*. August 14, 2015.
- 4 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 38.
- 5 Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art*, 3.
- 6 Amanda Boetzkes, "Interpretation and the Affordance of Things," in Amanda Boetzkes and Aron Vinegar, eds. *Heidegger and the Work of Art History* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2014), 272.
- 7 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 38.
- 8 Paul Virilio. *Politics of the Very Worst: An Interview by Philippe Petit*. Sylvère Lotringer, ed., Michael Cavaliere, trans. (New York: Semiotext(e), 1999), 89.
- 9 Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art*, 62.
- 10 Mark Dion. Keynote talk at *After Biopolitics: Society for Literature, Science and the Arts 2015*. Rice University, Houston, TX. November 12, 2015.
- 11 Laurie Rojas, "Beuys' Concept of Social Sculpture and Relational Art Practices Today," *Chicago Art Magazine*, November 29, 2010.
- 12 Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art*, 36.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 14 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du réel, 1998), 13.
- 15 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 6.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 12-13.
- 17 Graham Harman, cited in Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 13.

- 18 Amanda Boetzkes. "Ecologicity, Vision and the Neurological System," *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Politics, Aesthetics, Environments and Epistemologies*. Eds. Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2015), 276
- 19 Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 66.
- 20 Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 61.
- 21 Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art*, 37.
- 22 Thomas B. Hess, "The Germans are Coming! The Germans are Coming," *New York Magazine*, June 24, 1974, 54.
- 23 Johannes Stüttgen, *Beschreibung eines Kunstwerkes* ("Description of an artwork"), (Düsseldorf: Free International University, 1982), 1.
- 24 Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 24.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 94-96.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 28 William Rawlins. *Friendship Matters: Communication, Dialectics and the Life Course* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1992), 9.
- 29 Boetzkes, *The Ethics of Earth Art*, 182.