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Aesthetics*

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# Animals and Aesthetics

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# Introductory Editorial:

## Snail, Shark, Spirit

Mandy–Suzanne Wong

Joanna Demers and I independently and simultaneously proposed that the themed section of the Fall 2013 issue be devoted to aesthetic matters concerning animals. But that happy coincidence is only half the story. For my part, I began to wonder what today’s philosophers and scholars thought about such matters as a result of two encounters: one with a shark and one with a snail, one dead and distant, the other very close and so alive.

• The Snail • \_\_\_\_\_

At first I thought it was someone’s feet scuffing the carpet, someone trying to move in silence, betrayed by friction. When nobody appeared, I blamed the miniscule noise on some machine on the verge of malfunction. In summer in my native land, I continued typing, surrounded by paperwork

and that day's mail – and every now and then that tiny sound: a little scratch, or was it a microsonic crunch?

From the corner of my eye, I saw a tentacle testing the air between two envelopes. Slowly, timidly, I removed the letter that crowned the pile of mail.

At the end of that tentacle was a very different eye.

Bermuda, my native country, a bit of mid-Atlantic limestone nestled in the crater of an oceanic volcano, was the scene of hundreds upon hundreds of shipwrecks. That's how humans came to be here; a plethora of other species arrived in the same way. I wouldn't be surprised if that's how snails got here: by accident, stowing away in a coil of rope or between the braids of a basket, riding out the storms that vexed the Devil's Isle in serene estivation until sunlight and stillness and the scent of vegetation kissed them awake. Certainly that's how the young milk snail, *Otala lactea*, ended up in my house: by accident. It was 2012.



Toru. Photo by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

The snail had a pale shell, about a centimeter in diameter, with a distinctive array of brownish stripes. It was inquisitive. I watched it crawl from the edge of a white envelope down to the address label, where it seemed to read our names. Then it meandered to a different edge and peered over the side, the way we Bermudians love to stand on rocks and bridges looking down into our clear ocean at its abundant life.

I was enchanted. I'd never thought much about snails before, except as the gardener's bane.<sup>1</sup> But within minutes, this snail had fresh cabbage from the fridge, some water and a lidless Tupperware to crawl around in, and a name: Toru, for the guileless protagonist of Haruki Murakami's *Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*. The envelope went with him into the Tupperware. I feared that I might hurt him if I touched him, he was so small. And anyway he seemed to like the envelope. That night a late-summer storm rattled the house. It hung around for about a week, howling and whipping the trees, inundating the island with heavy rain. It gave me the excuse I needed, ignorant as I was, to keep Toru with me.

He napped most of the time, but every day, usually early in the morning and again late at night, he awakened and explored his meager terrarium. I waited eagerly for him. I worked with one eye on the Tupperware, and at the slightest sound I went still and fell silent. Toru had a replenished supply of cabbage and clean water every day, at one point he had cilantro (I learned by observation that he preferred his veggies slightly stale), and his meals were my favorite moments: the soft crunching sounds from the little mouth under his tentacles: that I could hear it at all amazed me to no end, his little head bobbing up and down. He ate a lot. A single leafy meal was often longer than he was. But he burned it all with exercise and growing: I've seen milk snails three times his size, he had a ways to go; and to my amusement he moved quickly for a snail. He was free to roam as he pleased, his tiny trails of slime were no bother. In fact his after-dinner constitutionals, during which he covered a surprising amount of ground, seeking and exploring with his tiny tentacles, were rare moments of delight in what for me, at that time, was a lusterless existence. I photographed Toru with a digital camera that boasted a "Mute" setting, until I realized that it bothered him: he could hear the thing's innards working even though I couldn't. Clearly I knew nothing about snails.

When the storm passed, I had to fly to the US. Otherwise I might have kept him longer. Instead and with a heavy heart, I released him into a forgotten garden. Low walls offered some protection from the harsher elements.



Toru. Photo by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

On the night of his release we had more rain. Missing Toru, I looked through a window at the garden. There he was, sliming along the wall with a tree frog for company.

To my dismay, I realized that Toru preferred the rain and dark. That meant that the storm, which provided six days' worth of excuses to imprison him in my company, should actually have been my signal to release him the moment I'd discovered him.

If that wasn't enough, I returned from the States to find that forgotten garden tilled and replanted.

The shame remains with me, along with, I confess, delight in my memories of Toru. I cannot pass a snail – and there are many in Bermuda – without feelings of warmth and wonder, laced with regret, taking root within my consciousness all over again. With each new root there is growth in multiple directions.

And yet what was he to me, that small creature who, had he not fallen asleep in that day's mail, would have seemed less than significant? He would not be played with like a dog. He couldn't look at me with

knowing eyes; that would have been like one of us sympathizing with the sky. The enjoyment I found in Toru was aesthetic, all looking and listening, but it was so different from the pleasure I take in books, films, and other artworks. And yet hasn't Charles Fisk written of musical pieces as "companions"?<sup>2</sup> Hasn't he suggested that even when I interact with an artwork – I might venture to say: in all aesthetic encounters – I interact with another "self" in a relationship of "mutual recognition of each other's potential subjectivity, along with our shared recognition of the specificity of [our] environment"?<sup>3</sup>

All of the contributors to this issue's themed section reflect on the aesthetics and ethics of animal encounters, but none of those are first-hand encounters between an animal and the author him- or herself. I describe my brief relationship with a milk snail in order to emphasize that aesthetic encounters directly between humans and animals do occur, and that such experiences are simultaneously embodied and reflective. Being with animals is neither a matter of purely involuntary corporeal instinct, nor of cerebral abstraction. Furthermore, aesthetic appreciation may be an appropriate response to certain animal encounters, but it is not the only available response, especially when one is faced with a living animal as opposed to an animal that features in an artwork. We happen upon animals in many different situations, some of which, like my temptation to seek companionship in Toru, can complicate aesthetic appreciation.

Some months after I lost Toru, I became aware of Elisabeth Tova Bailey's marvelous book, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating*. Only then did I begin to do Toru some justice in my thinking. For one thing, Bailey's book illuminated the depths of my ignorance in practical matters (heading-towards-moldy was a good guess vis-à-vis snails' dining preferences; but I'd had no idea that, given time, Toru might have produced and hatched over a hundred eggs all by himself). She also led me to start asking the proper questions.

*The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* is Bailey's true account of her time with a brown forest snail, *Neohelix albolabris*. In a fortunate accident, the snail ended up in a terrarium at Bailey's bedside. It remained there during a terrible illness that confined her to bed for months on end. That small creature's company "sustained" her during hours of stasis and isolation; it was "a true mentor," she writes: thanks to a snail, she survived her seemingly interminable debilitation.<sup>4</sup> In wistful prose, Bailey's book summarizes her twenty-year investigation of gastropod physiology, behavior, and culture. The book is also a memoir about the snail who gave



her hope and a valuable “how-to” manual on snail care, which Bailey arrived at (as I did) via trial and error. In addition, her quest for snail-related facts is a philosophical meditation on matters such as time, illness, confinement, solitude, and wastefulness – a meditation inspired by snail-watching.

Bailey is explicit: her snail was certainly a “companion.”<sup>5</sup> But at the same time, as she was utterly immobile, her interactions with it were necessarily non-negotiable and from a distance: she was capable of nothing more than listening and watching. Moreover, aware of countless unbridgeable divides between herself and this curious hermaphrodite, Bailey found herself loath to give the snail a name.<sup>6</sup> For her it wasn’t just an animal but also an ecology and a new way of being-in-the-world. “The snail was not just an individual creature that I was coming to know,” she writes. “It was introducing me in spirit to its entire line of gastropod ancestors” and their idiosyncratic capabilities, which in her infirmity she began to envy.<sup>7</sup>

I mention Bailey because she confirms my suspicions about my relationship with Toru. It was and was not companionship. Its success (the snail’s survival) depended less on knowledge and communication than on guesswork and sensitivity to difference. The sustenance derived from it, at least on the human end, was aesthetic: nonlinguistic, sometimes contemplative, often purely sensorial. The joy in the relationship was all in slime trails, stripes and spirals, swaying tentacles, the quiet sounds of microscopic munching. The danger was the relationship’s reliance on dissimulation: as I lovingly anthropomorphized Toru, Bailey inquisitively posed as an omniscient evolutionary biologist who could see all the way to the beginning of time, and from that standpoint her snail became a specimen. Nonetheless, like works of art, the creaturely aspects of snails moved us both to philosophical questioning. Such questions showed themselves when at last we started to think through, with, and alongside the animals.

Questions, which I have yet to answer, were Toru’s and Bailey’s gifts to me. Here are some of them.

Both Toru and Bailey’s snail always chose to return to their terrariums, though they had the run of their respective houses: what more is there to learn from such apparently purposeless decisions on the part of animals – decisions which are perhaps aesthetic? What other questions might arise from thinking aesthetically with and through other animals?

What potential is there in human–animal relationships besides the potential for dissimulation, companionship, aesthetics, and exploitation? How can we make the most of that potential in our thinking, for the mutual benefit of all animals? How close is the aesthetic appreciation of an unfamiliar nonhuman or inanimate object to the friendly appreciation of a human or familiar nonhuman companion? How productive is that closeness?

What else might we learn from thinking with particular animals? For example, how might an animal who is capable of estivation experience time? What might we learn from thinking time and age with spirals? Is the snail – a creature that carries its dwelling wherever it goes, and that is self-sufficient even in reproduction – perhaps the closest thing to a living monad? If so, or not, what can being-in-the-shell tell us about ecology? What difference might it make to aesthetics to think with eyes projected forward-upward on flexible tentacles? Suppose we think stomach and foot together (*gastro-pod*): propulsion, digestion, and touch as the workings of a single organ?

Vilém Flusser is gifted at this kind of thinking. His fictional-philosophical treatise on another intriguing mollusk, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, “the vampire squid from hell,” invites terrestrial *Homo sapiens* to “vampyroteuthize” our thinking.<sup>8</sup> He speculates on squiddish physics, culture, society, ethics, art – “Vampyroteuthic *Dasein*.”<sup>9</sup> Indulge our snails’ distant relative for a just a moment:

For it, space is not a lethargic and passive expanse supported by a Cartesian endoskeleton. It is rather a realm of coiled tension, laden with energy, that has been banished from its snail shell. ... According to its thinking, for instance, the shortest distance between two points is not a straight line but a coil spring that, when fully compressed, brings two points together. Where the world is constituted in such a way – as a dynamic conglomerate – there can be no immutable and eternal forms ... [hence by] observing the vampyroteuthis we are able to recognize an art of a different sort, one that is not burdened by the resistance of objects ... but is rather intersubjective and immaterial. ... In short, the difference between our art and that of the vampyroteuthis is this: whereas we have to struggle against the stubbornness of our materials, it has to struggle against the stubbornness of its fellow vampyroteuthes.<sup>10</sup>

## • The Shark • ---

I had hoped to receive submissions on living aquatic species. I'd also wanted someone to weigh in at length on Damien Hirst's *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*: a tiger shark murdered for art's sake, suspended in a tank of formaldehyde. I have not seen this artwork in person, but I've read a great deal about it. I am unable to come to terms with it. I'd hoped that one of our contributors might succeed where I have failed, but in the end, we were unable to publish either on sharks or on Hirst. For that reason I venture to offer a few cautious ideas of my own.

*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* is a Romantic piece in the Hegelian sense. In Romanticism, human ideas exceed all objects: no object is adequate to convey our deep and complex thoughts. That is why, for Hegel, the quintessential Romantic form is poetry, whose medium is imagination.<sup>11</sup> In Hirst's work, too, human notions, human purpose, human force and effectiveness, which altogether Hegel would call *Spirit*, exceed and overpower the nonhuman other. But in Hirst, the nonhuman object does not disappear, it cannot dissipate into pure thought as it does in Hegel; hence perhaps (in a generous mood) the "impossibility of death." Neither does Hirst's work convey any acknowledgement of the authoritarianism inherent in his aesthetic process: the shark is not even permitted to decompose.<sup>12</sup> We could say that Hirst's title refers to a general refusal, on the part of the human mind, to recognize its own destructive capabilities – but that is an anthropocentric reading (of a solipsistic title) to which the shark has no relevance.

It seems to me preferable, and perhaps more indicative of the domineering ideologies underlying Hirst's piece, to think of it as ultra-Romantic, as Romanticism on the edge. In Hegelian Romanticism, Spirit – ideas and effectiveness – exceeds nonhuman objects. Additionally in Hirst, Spirit exceeds Spirit, in the sense that one kind of Spirit overcomes and overpowers another: human interests and effectiveness override those of another sentient being that itself possesses Spirit. This is more than a matter of ideas refusing to be contained by images, sounds, or words. Arguably, Spirit exceeding Spirit – human ideas and capabilities refusing to be checked by others', or even by our own notions (for example of endangered species) – is the *ensuing* step, Romantic exceeding *to excess*.

According to Cornelia Tsakiridou, the propensity for excessive exceeding is latent in Hegelian Romanticism, which can take the form of propagandic art: works wherein the Spirit of a particular person (his particular ideas and the force of his particular personality) exerts itself beyond its rightful bounds, imposing itself upon and thus subsuming other Spirits.<sup>13</sup> Isn't Hirst's tiger shark another realization of this propensity?

Hegel could not have foreseen art like Hirst's. But if he had envisioned anything of the kind, Spirit subjugating and even killing Spirit in the name of art, then he would have understood it as the end of art. Not in the sense that there can be no more art after Damien Hirst, but in the sense that with Hirst, art ceases to be art – a means of materially contemplating truth, self, and world – and becomes something else. It becomes a self-destructive movement in which Spirit itself expires, conquered and undone; human Spirit murders nonhuman Spirit, but in addition human Spirit does away with itself as it has been, and so it can only go on in a mutated form. Whether or not the artist and his viewers intend this to happen (I doubt that Hirst has any inkling of it), art exceeds itself to become the kind of movement that Hegel describes, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as a change in the character of Spirit on individual and cultural levels: a movement such as that which culminates in the fight to the death – a global change of attitude. Hegel might say that via this kind of art-that-exceeds-itself (art as its own end), human Spirit struggles with itself as it forces itself to evolve, to enter a new age. The way I see it, and even this may be too generous: at best Hirst's horrific work is a violent propulsion towards the difficult realization that prevailing human attitudes towards nonhumans – the anthropocentric, domineering ideological framework in which Hirst conceived his work in the first place – must be done away with. Perhaps this propulsion must be violent and disagreeable, because the attitudes at stake are entrenched.

The time in which they are finally overthrown might be what Tim Morton calls the Asymmetric age.<sup>14</sup> It is the time in which, thanks largely to our own bungling excesses and presumptions, human Spirit finds itself conquered and overrun by nonhuman others and hyperobjects, such as global warming and pollution, and art must contend with that which lies beyond human experience: with the global and the animal, with extinction. Aesthetics in the Asymmetric age, one might say at the height of the Anthropocene, can no longer proceed without wondering if it has overstepped its bounds. We artists now have so much at our control – animals, chemicals, computers, heavy machinery, whole tracts of land – that in the current ecological crisis, we must wonder before doing

anything. Aesthetics and ethics will never be one and the same, but they will always shadow one another, and in the Asymmetric age the tenacious intimacy of those two shadows becomes frightfully and oppressively apparent.

## • The Contributors • ---

There is so much more to animal aesthetics than I have touched on here. I hope I have whetted your appetite for the profusion of deeper ideas and far more eloquently articulated perspectives presented by our contributors.

Andrew Hageman does deal in corpses, but his outlook is worlds away from Hirst's presumption of omniscience. Hageman writes that when he meets a dead animal – he met a whale, or at least part of one – no matter how intimate the circumstances, even if he sits upon its bones, tracing its dry, fissured contours with his fingers, it is the vast distance between himself and the animal that strikes him. Though the experience of a dead animal may be as intense and revealing as a Hirst artwork, from the perspective of knowledge skeletons, dissected corpses, and taxidermied bodies amount to “opaque surfaces and mysterious black holes.”<sup>15</sup>

Hageman's perspective here calls to mind Ron Broglio's incisive look at Hirst's oeuvre, including *The Physical Impossibility of Death*. For Broglio, Hirst's work amounts to an elaborate and cruel expression of the vain assumption that human knowing can be absolute.<sup>16</sup> To this end Hirst determines to make animals completely visible, inside and out, further assuming that seeing and knowing are the same. The attempt, as Hageman knows, is futile. This has not to do with the difference between living and dead but with the finitude of knowledge and the impossibility of being together, the ethics of which Hageman learns to question in the company of dead whales.

But as David Cecchetto observes, the problem of being together is not exclusive to human-animal relationships. In an article for our *@Aesthetics* section, which presents new thinking on all kinds of aesthetic questions, Cecchetto describes the digital sound artwork *Exurbia*, an online environment for sound-editing and composition wherein each user's activities immediately and directly impacts every other user's work. The

vulnerability of every member of the network is thus sorely yet not totally apparent, as “one can only listen for other users’ interventions by listening for differences that are not verifiable.”<sup>17</sup> This paradoxical, interdependent self-sufficiency also characterizes aesthetic media in relation to aesthetic practices. If sound is to function specifically as the medium of music, then it must “point beyond itself”: musical sound is sound with non-sonic aspects (with discursively determined limits, for example). At the same time, musical sound *qua* musical sound must be tautologically recognizable as exactly that and nothing else. “Medial specificity” in music or any given art form is thus “both necessary and impossible.”<sup>18</sup>

Holly Watkins describes how animals and humans relate to music. She argues that when it comes to sensory stimuli, animals’ “cognitive abilities go far beyond the passivity implied by the concept of *reaction*.”<sup>19</sup> Instead, animals *respond* in a manner that itself demands a response. Taking up Jacques Derrida’s call for an inter-species exploration of the similarities and differences between reaction and response, Watkins examines how music occasions both cognitive responses and physical reactions even in humans. The implication is that humans cannot be distinguished from animals on the basis of how they encounter stimuli. Watkins therefore questions the evaluation of human and animal *sounds* according to divergent aesthetic criteria. She calls instead for “a speculative aesthetics that folds human music-making into the broader sphere of animal physiology while admitting animal sounds into an expanded notion of the aesthetic.”<sup>20</sup>

In a contrasting discussion, Eric v.d. Luft suggests that it is distance, both physical and intentional “perceived or invented distance,” that enables us to perceive animals aesthetically and, more importantly, to perceive them as perceiving subjects. A human-animal encounter should include a deliberate intentional shift, in which one “transcends” the ontological differences between oneself and the animal, and makes a deliberate “move” from the cognitive standpoint that objectifies the animal other to one that “believ[es] in the ‘other’ as subject.”<sup>21</sup> In a move that to my mind resembles Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological reduction, Luft works towards the same goal as Watkins – an inclusive and respectful aesthetic relationship with animals – from the opposite direction: Luft imposes a transcendental distance from which the differences between animals and humans as perceiving subjects appear contingent; Watkins delves into the particularities of animal and human sound-making, working through the corporeal idiosyncrasies of divergent species towards a shared aesthetic.

But J. Marie Griggs takes a hard look at what can happen when animals are forced to participate in aesthetic deceptions. She studies remediated landscapes: polluted landscapes that, because they are inhabited by wildlife and flora, are advertised as parks or preserves – as safe havens from pollution. But that is precisely what remediation is not: the toxicity of a polluted landscape cannot be undone, though it may be somewhat attenuated. Promoters tout aesthetic appreciation as the appropriate response to such wronged landscapes; but for Griggs, aesthetic appreciation constitutes a failure to respond to the violence that continues to sicken the land from behind the opaque ideological curtain supplied by words like “nature preserve.” Griggs considers the work of artists who, in contrast, “*express* pollution” by “accentuating fragmentation and failure,” demonstrating that while human attempts to remediate ecological damage must fall short, there are other, vulnerable agencies at work.<sup>22</sup>

Gray and Kanta Kochhar–Lindgren take up Griggs’ challenge to aesthetically confront pollution head-on. Together these performance artists devised a series of conceptual artworks, or rather instructions for performance, “in order to shape a research method for encountering garbage, its many guises and potential for transposition into new forms.” The artworks are fascinating, and despite the apparent simplicity of their wording they are nothing short of intimidating. Each set of instructions, or *score*, is a challenge to research by reaching out into “the opening that enables both the determination of form and the emergence of the unexpected,” which (echoing Alain Badiou) Gray and Kanta call an event. Garbage is just such an event, as is a score and the scoring/scratching in which the Anthropocene mars the planet with garbage, and so is “the interminable scratching of that which is buried alive, planetary recycling as we scratch out a living by peeling the skin of the earth ... .”<sup>23</sup>

## • Notes •

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy Stovell, "Milk snails prove to be a real pest," *The Royal Gazette*, April 26, 2011, <http://www.royalgazette.com/article/20110426/ISLAND05/704269929>

<sup>2</sup> Charles Fisk, *Repertoires: Composers of My Life* (unpublished manuscript, 2012), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Fisk, "Chopin's 'Duets' – and Mine," *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 35, no. 3 (2012): 185-6.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Tova Bailey, *The Sound of a Wild Snail Eating* (New York: Algonquin, 2010), 160.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 42.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 108.

<sup>8</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 71.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, 63.

<sup>11</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Volume 1, trans. T.M. Knox (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> And when it dared to do so, at first on the inside, another shark was murdered to replace it. See Ron Broglio, *Surface Encounters: Thinking With Animals and Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 17.

<sup>13</sup> C.A. Tsakiridou, "Art's Self-Disclosure: Hegelian Insights into Cinematic and Modernist Space," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 1 (2013): 65.

<sup>14</sup> Timothy Morton, "Art in the Age of Asymmetry: Hegel, Objects, Aesthetics," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 1 (2012): 131-134.

<sup>15</sup> Andy Hageman, "Dead Whale Watching," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 107.

<sup>16</sup> See Broglio, *Surface Encounters*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> David Cecchetto, "The Sonic Effect: Aurality and Digital Networks in *Exurbia*," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 51.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Holly Watkins, "Music Between Reaction and Response," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 80.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Eric v.d. Luft, "Bullough, Pepper, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenology of Perceiving Animals," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 115.

<sup>22</sup> J. Marie Griggs, "Failed Aesthetics: Life as a Rupturing Narrative," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 73.

<sup>23</sup> Gray Kochhar-Lindgren and Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren, "Scratch: Garbage, Scores, and the Event," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 22.



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