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...Hijacking...

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Introduction

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Bermuda's native bluebird, also known as the Eastern bluebird, lives in constant fear of hijackers. Were this timid beauty to attempt to nest in trees, it would find its youngsters kidnapped and devoured by Great Kiskadees, vocal and aggressive but equally gorgeous predators.[1] Kiskadees and brown house sparrows were introduced to Bermuda in the twentieth century to control the small Jamaican lizards which were themselves introduced to kill the blight that all but eliminated Bermuda's endemic cedar trees, the favored nesting sites of Eastern bluebirds. Brought in to defend our native species, the kiskadee has instead driven the bluebird to the brink of extinction (and this is hardly due to a shortage of lizards). Called to action by the local ornithologist and activist David Wingate, human Bermudians began to erect bluebird boxes in public and private gardens. The round entranceways of these sturdy wooden structures are just big enough to accommodate adult bluebirds but too small for the stouter kiskadees. For a time, it seemed, these manmade boxes at last provided bluebirds with safe nesting sites, and the number of bluebirds on the island seemed to stabilize. However, with the continuing expansion of the human population, the sparrow also thrives. Unlike the

wary bluebirds, sparrows are perfectly willing to nest under eaves and atop telephone poles. Nevertheless, the sparrows' overwhelming success has resulted in a serious housing shortage. In response, sparrows have begun to hijack bluebird boxes.

Photo by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

The sparrow is marginally smaller than the average bluebird, hence the boxes' narrow entryways do not present a problem; and what the sparrow lacks in stature it makes up for in spleen. A sparrow may slaughter an entire bluebird family, including the adults, in order to co-opt the nest. In 2011, Bermuda's *Royal Gazette* mourned an adult female bluebird who was beheaded by sparrows inside her bluebird box. Her mate became "Father of the Year" when he successfully raised their chicks on his own, a behavior atypical of male bluebirds.[2]

A hijacking is a violent takeover, a misappropriation of something for a purpose other than its intended one, by parties other than those for

whom the thing was meant. A passenger jet becomes a bomb. A family car becomes a getaway car. A bluebird box becomes a sparrows' nest.

The last example illustrates that hijacking is not just a human proclivity. Moreover, hijackers may be motivated by interests other than "terror," destruction, and fundamentalism. The sparrows' desire is in the end the same as the bluebirds'. Both species just want a safe place to rear their chicks. The sparrows have no specific interest in eliminating the bluebird species. But in the sparrows' overcrowded environment, life cannot flourish without violence, negation, and theft.

Can the same be said of other affirmative practices, even aesthetic ones? The authors of the current issue confront this question head-on. Alexander Joy describes a painting that invades and co-opts its viewers' personal space, demonstrating that hijacking may (perhaps always-already) be an aesthetic concept and technique. Kathryn McFadden examines how the unexpected and violent invasion of public aesthetic spaces by exhibitionist performance artists appropriates patriarchal ideologies only to overturn them. Heather Kettenis shows how recent trends in weight management forcibly cause the very definition of human physical beauty to be reconceived in quantifiable terms. And Prudence Gibson proposes an experimental mode of writing about art that accounts for extra-sensory or telepathic aesthetic experience. Such experience forcibly undermines subjective certainty and thus the generally presupposed centrality of human sensory experience in aesthetics, thereby hijacking or "repurposing" art in search of new and unexpected experiences that may elude conceptualization and knowledge.[3]

Unauthorized repurposing is the backbone of several aesthetic practices which are not explored here, such as musical sampling, circuit bending, and collage. Public art often requires the reconceptualization of public spaces in initially unintended ways. For example, the sound artist Max Neuhaus repurposed Times Square, a noisy, aggressive, and scurrying locale, as a space for concentrated listening and meditation. SKL0, the Sticker Bomber of Singapore, illegally hijacked official street signs and refitted them with subversive messages to articulate an "aesthetic of resistance."[4]

There is a sense, however, in which hijacking is neither unusual nor contrary to intention, although it is subversive. As Graham Harman shows, hijacking is a habitual aspect of relational being. Whenever entities interact with one another, they relate to each other *as* things in particular.

A human traveller, for example, encounters a bridge *as* a place of transit; a seagull alights upon the same bridge *as* a place of rest. Neither "place of transit" nor "place of rest" comprehensively sums up the existence of the bridge. The bridge is also an artwork for its architect, an impediment for the winds above and the boats below, perhaps a home for barnacles. To relate to the bridge *as* one thing *or* another is therefore to hijack it, to misleadingly reduce its complex ontological reality to a much simpler reality which enables one to appropriate the bridge for one's own practical use or epistemological comprehension.

Photo by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

In the same way, Harman writes, "the bridge is not simply an innocent entity that is later hijacked by the as-structure so as to manifest itself in such and such a way." In addition, "the bridge has already committed a hijacking in its own right, appropriating bolt, cable, trestle, and asphalt, devouring them into its own being."[5] The bridge *relates* to its asphalt surface as I relate to my skin, for example. I stand apart from my skin in the sense that I can care for it or damage it, even cut it or tear it off. Similarly, the Golden Gate Bridge would remain the Golden Gate Bridge even without its asphalt coating. However, at the same time, I most certainly *am* my skin, just as the bridge *is* its asphalt surface. By demonstrating that relation is always a matter of appropriation – or hijacking – Harman embarks on his thrilling theory of relations as entities and vice versa.

Hijacking is thus a productive aesthetic and theoretical concept as well as an apparently "natural," even necessary aspect of being-in-the-world. Hijacking is not, as the American media would have it, simply a terroristic outlet for aggression or an excuse for xenophobia. In making such a claim, however, must I necessarily endorse Karlheinz Stockhausen's view that Al Qaeda's attacks on the United States by means of hijacked airplanes were "works of art"?[6]

My decision to agree or disagree with Stockhausen is a subjective one, the foundations of which will most likely lie in my ethical convictions, aesthetic preferences, religious ideologies, personal experiences during the attacks (I was in Boston and advised to cover my windows with black garbage bags, a recommendation with which I neglected to comply), or the extent to which I swallow the rhetoric of the "war on terror" propagated by the American media. As I hope to have suggested in these paragraphs, my decision to correlate hijacking with art *cannot* ride on the assumption that art, beauty, aesthetic experience, or even "life" are always, through-and-through, and by definition *affirmative.* Artistic practice and appreciation, naming and definition (including the definition of beauty), and indeed relation in general always entail some negation, some violence to the entities involved therein. Aesthetic practice therefore should not be expected to promote ethical or moral behavior, or to necessarily correlate with it. In no sense must any idea of pleasure or comfort – moral or otherwise – necessarily go hand in hand with "great" or "profound" aesthetic experience (as Stockhausen's doubtlessly innovative but not always enjoyable music demonstrates). The work in the ensuing pages explores some of the traumatic appropriations on which art and aesthetic thought rely.

It may interest our readers to know that in 2014, the Bermuda Audubon Society developed a new way of deterring sparrows from hijacking bluebird boxes by arranging fishing line in a star-shaped pattern around the entryways. Sparrows, who almost invariably flutter their wings upon landing, find their feathers entangled in the line and must fly away or risk injury to their wings. Bluebirds, in contrast, fly straight through the entryways without fluttering. Owners of bluebird boxes are urged to erect this fishing-line fencing.[7] In this sense, does the Audubon Society in turn hijack these small, brown, flying hijackers?

• Notes •

1 The Kiskadee appears in the cover art for J. Marie Griggs' Collision, "Failed Aesthetics: Life as a Rupturing Narrative," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 64-77. Accessed November 19, 2014, http://eventalaesthetics.net/back-issues/animals-and-aesthetics-vol-2-no-2-2013/.

2 Nadia Arandjelovic, "Father of the Year Award Goes to a Bluebird," *The Royal Gazette,* June 24, 2011.

3 Prudence Gibson, "Hijacking Telepathic Art Experience as a Speculative Aesthetic," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 2 (2014): 41.

4 Louis Ho and Mayee Wong, "The Sticker Bomber and the Nanny State: Notes from Singapore," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 3 (2012): 14.

5 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 261.

6 Karlheinz Stockhausen, quoted in Terry Castle, "Stockhausen, Karlheinz: The Unsettling Question of the Sublime," *New York Magazine's 9/11 Encyclopedia,* August 27, 2011.

7 Bermuda Audobon Society, Accessed October 31, 2014, http://www.audubon.bm.

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