

MONSTROUS

THINGS

AND

OLD STUFF



Planet Earth 2, (2016)
BBC



3D Shepherd Dog Anatomy
DisneyTD / TurboSquid.com

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AND
OLD STUFF**

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

As an artist, I'm concerned with structural issues and ambiguities within our society. I'm interested in how we gather and generate knowledge, and the kinds of implications these practices have on the relations between images, things, beings, people, and myself. In short, I think about things, and occasionally do things about the things I think about, to learn about them, and through that, essentially come to understand myself. I grew up in Finland, the northeastern perimeter of Europe, and so my experience of these phenomena and the mainstream Western culture has mostly accumulated through what has felt like a kind of second-hand experience on the internet and in popular media through films and television. I have always however experienced these virtual things as immensely physical and real, hijacking both my thoughts and my body, leading to a great sense of alienation from the world.

This text is an attempt to grasp and analyze certain phenomena, behaviors, and images that I've encountered and found interesting, and even at times, shaking and unsettling. I've grown with these strange images and ideas of humans, animals, and machines, and am now trying to map out their underlying structures as well as my relation to them. My focus is not so much on specific nonhuman beings or machines, but rather the human-made images, representations, renderings, becomings, and assemblages of things and affects—hybrids and monsters born out of the classical Western dichotomy of culture and nature. The cultural reality we inhabit is post-produced and affected by these kinds of images, and the monsters they continue to proliferate are walking among us.

How do we as a species position ourselves in between what we have come to call nature and technology, these two nonhuman siblings that we find on the seemingly opposite edges of our understanding? How can we make sense of the world and its abyssal potentiality? Our reality is continuously being constructed and shaped by the human gaze and our *lifeworld*, yet we can only experience it through our own sensory point of view, our *umwelt*.¹

We've expanded our ways of seeing with technological developments. One glance at Google Earth gives us a view from above only dreamt of by our ancestors, shifting our once horizontal way of seeing the world into a new vertical axis. Telescopes and satellites allow us to gaze into worlds beyond our own. Artificial sensors in our devices are picking up invisible signals and frequencies, making these once imperceptible worlds visible to our eyes through screens and virtual interfaces.

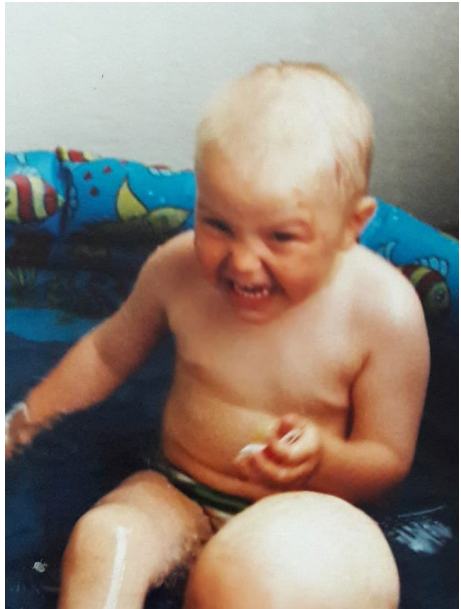
Yet these virtual knowledge systems seem to have existed since the dawn of language. Our species has always fabricated stories about the world, and what we experience as real has been tied to the narratives we tell about it, affecting what we essentially can see and think of as the world surrounding us.

How are the past and current human technologies continuing processes of alienation, purification, and translation? And how are culturally learned biases being translated into these new systems, especially now with fast-developing AI technologies that automate and self-organize these processes? What and whose narratives are becoming automated and systematically enforced? What and whose thoughts make the machines think?

By navigating fragmented case studies and artistic fabrications, I'm attempting to open some of these water-like, yet deeply biased structures that are soaked into the construction of reality I've experienced in the Western European world. In the four main chapters, I will be looking into the construction of the human figure and the human gaze through historical and pop culture phenomena, recent technological developments, and finally trying to take a look into the things yet to come.

While we're moving away from anthropocentrism and beginning to see the world as ever-changing networks of relations between a multiplicity of agents capable of self-organized processes, we still face having to navigate the hierarchies within our often violent social structures and cultural constructions. All the while, as Donna Haraway cleverly states, 'staying with the trouble.'²

Although a final answer to these questions may not exist, there is a possibility of a fragmentation of knowledge and different ways to deterritorialize the boundaries of the biotic and the abiotic so that these co-laboring agents can potentially (de-/re-)compose into new worldings and kinships. Perhaps a world can transgress the boundaries set by us, or the skins that keep us apart, while leaving space for complexities and ambiguities to co-exist alongside each other.



MAN COMES AROUND

MAN COMES AROUND



Terry Notary during the filming of *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, (2011)
Sigtor Kildal / Terry Notary

A creature jumps on the film set, on four legs, a monstrous human quadruped, front arms protruding toward the ground with metallic crutch-like extensions, spotted like a jaguar with a digital motion capture apparatus, grunting and frowning in a perceivably ‘animal-like’ manner. I encountered this strange monster for the first time some years ago while circulating the virtual realms of YouTube and later again in Ruben Östlund’s grippingly satirical film ‘The Square’ (2017).

Terry Notary is an American actor, an advisor, and a movement coach for major Hollywood film productions on nonhuman movement, specializing in great apes. With a background as a gymnast and a Cirque de Soleil acrobat, Notary studied primate movements by observing them at the LA County Zoo during his work on Tim Burton’s ‘Planet of the Apes’ (2001). Having already performed as nonhuman characters on other film productions before, Notary was commissioned to develop an updated version of primate movement for the film, to match the imaginary evolutionary development of the apes in the story, and subsequently constructed special arm extensions to balance the anatomical differences between our species and other primates.

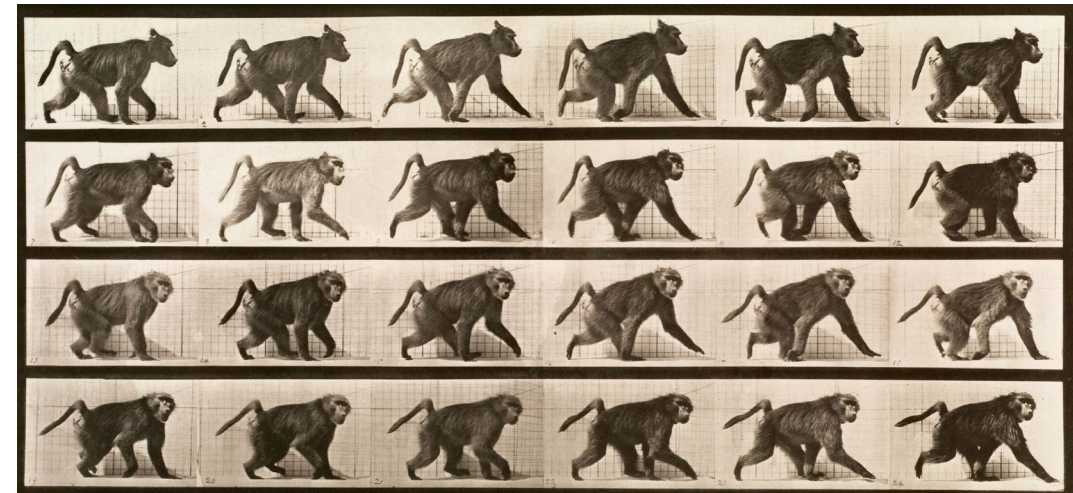
Notary describes his process of ‘becoming an ape’ as winding down and becoming less cerebrally driven. His performance involves mimicking ape-like sounds and facial expressions. His approach to the subject focuses on the translation of the physical appearance of apes’ movement to human bodies, guiding fellow actors when their movement appears to be ‘too human’ for the part.

It's intriguing to analyze the interspecies power relations behind Notary's, a white American male in charge of the portrayal of nonhuman beings in popular films, practice. Who has the right to claim expert status on something other? How can we approach nonhuman beings without exoticism or from a position of superiority? How can we gain knowledge of the nonhuman ways of being with our current knowledge enterprises?

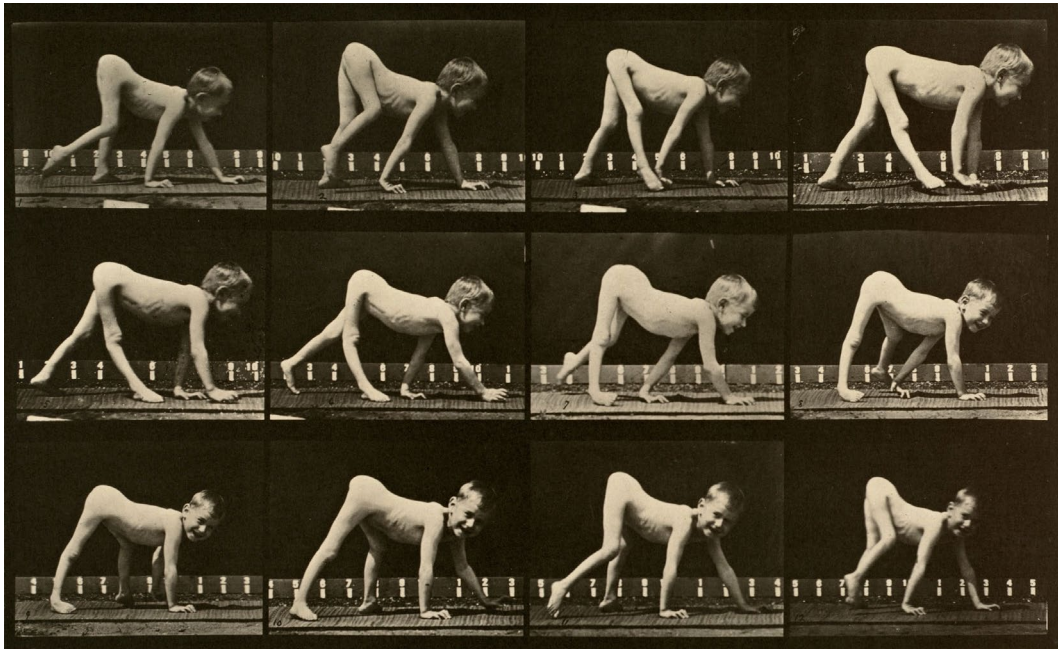
A zoo still acts as one of the main sites of classical natural history, a place where the grand narrative of nature is laid out in a spectacle of evolution and specialization, of which Man is presented as its apex. The nonhumans are categorized by their classified species and presented in a taxonomic system, a tableau, with a clear separation between another, given names and descriptions.

Yet it wasn't too long ago that Human Others were also presented alongside Animal Others, separating Western bourgeois Man from the rest of the world's population at the peak of its colonial conquest. In our current episteme, this Western bourgeois construct of Man has come to represent humans as if it was the Human itself. The overrepresentation of this concept of humans has led it to become the hegemonic figure in the world, homogenizing the multiplicity of ways-of-being and habiting the planet. Following the intellectual revolution of the Renaissance, the Western intellectuals drew a line between rational humans and irrational animals, presenting their constructed natural history as an objective set of facts. The same notion of the 'space of Otherness' was used to validate the socio-ontological line between the rational and political Man separated from its irrational Human Others, as argued by Sylvia Wynter.³

Such biased ways of looking have been present in the production of moving images since the invention of the medium. Beginning with sequences of stop-motion photographic images (a type of early photographic databases), these image-sets gave a seemingly neutral and empirical way of studying biological mechanisms and their movement, bringing the representations to life in front of our eyes. Dissecting fast movement not previously visible to the human eye gave birth to a new



Eadweard Muybridge, *Plate 748*, (1887)
Boston Public Library / Digital Commonwealth



Eadweard Muybridge, *Plate 539*, (1887)
Boston Public Library / Digital Commonwealth

kind of gaze that revealed the secret mechanical machinations of the biological world. What started as an experimental analysis about the mechanics of horses' gallop between Eadweard Muybridge and Leland Stanford in 1878, led to the worldwide domination of the moving image technologies of our present society. These stop-motion photosets and techniques developed by Muybridge appeared to give a blueprint for reconstructing movement and breathing life into the reanimated characters in the form of moving images. The same photosets were later used by Walt Disney as references for animating characters in his early film productions.

Muybridge's vast photographic archive of human and nonhuman movement mirrors the prevalent power dynamics of his time. Plate 539, titled 'Infantile paralysis, child walking on hands and feet' from the series 'Animal locomotion: an electro-photographic investigation of consecutive phases of animal movements (1872–1885),' depicts a sequence of action of a human child with movement impairments in a studio setting. The image-set is classified under the subcategory of 'Abnormal Movements. Males and Females (nude and semi-nude).' The classification, along with Muybridge's photographic gaze, reflects the deeply problematic biases in his way of looking. By privileging some bodies as 'normal' over others within our society, the hegemonic Man is purifying and homogenizing the multiplicity of nature-cultures and human experiences. Others merely become inferior; freaks and outcasts of the system. It is in this state of being forced into Otherness where *becoming-animal* also takes place, to reappropriate the term developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.⁴

In Deleuze and Guattari's thinking, the Animal seems to operate more as a symbol of radical Otherness, without an individual identity, than as an actual living being whose conditions of life are of direct concern.⁵ This symbolic Animal is romanticizing and exoticizing an idea of wildness that exists outside the bounds of the Western capitalist society. Considering that we have come to call animals complex beings with their own agency, not unlike ours, questions arise from the divide between Animal and Human. Animal, as such, appears to be a term of

value in our power-knowledge systems and not the negative ontological space of humanity as it has been drafted out in the current Western episteme.

As explored by Jaques Derrida in his ten-hour lecture from 1997, 'The Animal That Therefore I Am,' to call something an animal is reducing a vast spectrum of living beings under the singular category of the Animal. It's a name Man has given itself the right to give, a heterogeneous multiplicity positioned outside of what we have come to call human. "It follows that one will never have the right to take animals to be the species of a kind that would be named The Animal, or animal in general."⁶ When speaking of these so-called animals, we are in the end only dealing with human conceived representations and substitutes, and not considering them as they are—active and sensing agents with their own material presence.

All of the images in Muybridge's series show the subjects separated from their usual environment and placed in front of a studio backdrop with marked measurements and grids. The same kind of seemingly objective, empirical gaze has been an essential part of the development of the Western scientific project. But can you study something so complex as a living being separated from the network of connections and things it has evolved to cohabit and co-affect? This act of alienating as a means of trying to capture the essence of something, without learning about the subject's relation to its environment and to the surrounding socio-ontological systems, the hybrid relations in between the various agents, generates only a deeper rift between Man and Other. These artificial dichotomies separating humans and animals, culture and nature, find themselves in an urgent need of reconfiguration in order to build a better understanding of the underlying systems shaping our world.

The oppressive human gaze behind Notary's performative practice becomes all the more visible after drawing a critical comparison with Muybridge's photographic representations. Non-impaired bodies performing and mimicking the being and experience of impaired bodies for entertainment purposes is thus inherently violent in its structure.

What is the difference between someone performing and mimicking nonhuman beings, subjected to our hegemonic power, for our entertainment purposes? What is entertainment for others can be a violent reality to some, and this imbalance of power can be traced through the history of images and the human gaze.



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terrynotary It was a true honor getting to play Buck alongside this kind and generous Icon, Harrison Ford in the upcoming Call of the Wild. Check it out on Feb 21st!

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November 23, 2019

Terry Notary / Instagram, (2019)

THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS



Francisco Goya, *Los Caprichos* (preparatory drawing, plate no. 43, 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters'), (1797)
Museo del Prado

THE SLEEP OF REASON PRODUCES MONSTERS

The human gaze, consisting of more than the bodily processing of our visual sensory system, appears to be a virtual construction. It is influenced by the way we ‘see’ things when we are not actively looking, rooted in the physical reality, but rather constructed in the narratives we tell about the world. The human gaze is composed of stories and politics, science and magico-religious beliefs, nature and culture, all at the same time. What and whose narratives are becoming automated and systematically enforced in light of our current technological developments?

When training AI-related technologies, culturally learned biases and structurally violent power-knowledge systems, deeply inbuilt in our society, are transferred into automated forms of seeing and machine learning. What might first appear as autonomous and neutral agencies are in fact mirrors of our already established ways of seeing and the structural problems that arise from it. Biased systems generating new systems only proliferate these biases without first addressing the problems originating from these already established systems. The questions of who are the developers behind these technological enterprises and what kinds of agencies they enforce become extremely important when we are trying to understand the current developments in the field of digital technologies.

As explored by Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen in their project ‘Excavating AI’ (2019), images don’t describe themselves. The way we read images is culturally constructed and entangled with politics and

layers of history. A proliferating amount of images are being gathered and categorized manually in order to train AI algorithms to read and to further categorize and classify data. Often these labor heavy processes that are still too complicated for computers to execute are outsourced by external companies providing low paid workers performing HITs (Human Intelligence Tasks), such as identifying content and writing descriptions for an average of 50 images per minute for thousands of categories. ImageNet, one of the most widely used databases for developing image-recognition algorithms, is made up of more than 14 million images, categorized and annotated by humans using mostly externally sourced and underpaid labor at companies such as Amazon Mechanical Turk. Many of the existing categories and subsets within these human-generated systems are biased, racist, and sexist, reflecting the structures and values of the commercial and political agencies gathering and utilizing the data, their ideologies hardwired into the system.

A quick glance into ImageNet's categories for 'Person, individual, someone, somebody, mortal, soul' yields negative sounding results such as 'anomaly, ape, bad egg, cripple, drug user, fugitive, nonresident, primitive, sex object, simpleton, suspect, and slave.' Even the more benign-sounding categories, such as 'good person' or 'bad guy,' propose a strange artificial separation of two moral opposites based only on someone's reading of a single image of the person being categorized. Some of the categorizations found under 'Animal, animate being, beast, brute, creature, fauna' include a separation between 'pest' and 'prey,' 'beast of burden' and 'game,' and so on. There are strange metaphysics at play in these kinds of classifications, or as argued by Crawford and Paglen:

There's a kind of sorcery that goes into the creation of categories. To create a category or to name things is to divide an almost infinitely complex universe into separate phenomena. To impose order onto an undifferentiated mass, to ascribe phenomena to a category—that is, to name a thing—is in turn a means of reifying the existence of that category.⁷

Most images today are not meant for our eyes anymore. Digital technologies have moved beyond the need for human supervision to function by themselves. These 'operational images,' a term coined by Harun Farocki, are only used in communication between separate digital agents and machines. Throughout his career, Farocki explored images as sites where multiple gazes and gestures operate and construct reality simultaneously. But operative images propose a paradigm shift in our understanding of images. Instead of being meant to be seen by us in order to read and interpret them, these images are only subject to operative actions within the machines. They have simply become invisible within the system, made inaccessible for humans in favor of more efficient and undisturbed data processing.⁸

Yet everything happening inside these machines is influenced by specific human ways of seeing and making sense of the world, effectively proliferating their biases in the process, without supervision from external agencies. Presets and stereotypes are applied to these images, no matter if they 'apply' or not.⁹ These new forms of machine vision and artificial intelligence are highly likely to make severe miscalculations with real-world consequences.

In 2015, Google's image-recognition algorithm was found to have mistaken humans with darker skin tones for gorillas, a result of the algorithm most likely being trained with biased image datasets of people with predominantly light skin tones, along with an extensive amount of images of nonhuman beings, such as great apes. Google responded to the scandal by erasing gorillas and some other primates from the algorithm's image lexicon, instead of addressing the racist systems underlying the problem. For the algorithm, these categories and species simply ceased to exist, yet the internal structures making these kinds of biases possible continue to persist.

Some forms of artificial intelligence are capable of generating images from mere digital noise, conjuring up endlessly proliferating and shape-shifting monsters from their technological hive minds. These 'deep dreams' or 'inceptionisms,' as they are called by Google researchers, "reveal the networked operations of computational image creation, certain presets



An example of class leakage in a partially trained BigGAN model
 from *Large Scale GAN Training for High Fidelity Natural Image Synthesis*, (2019)
 Andrew Brock, Jeff Donahue, Karen Simonyan

of machinic vision, its hardwired ideologies and preferences,” as argued by Hito Steyerl.¹⁰ By fusing together categories that are not usually thought to coexist, these deep learning algorithms tend to generate weird hybrids of things otherwise unthinkable.

Sometimes these mistakes accidentally open a window to alternative ways of seeing and structuring the world. In AI image synthesis, generative adversarial networks (GANs), are used for generating photorealistic images by setting multiple competing algorithms against each other, using information from large-scale datasets, such as ImageNet. A typical error in this type of image generation is a kind of class leakage, wherein the self-learning (yet entirely dependent on the human created and structured databases) GAN predicts the perceived object to be of multiple categories simultaneously, often producing surprising forms of visual simulations and simulacra. An example can be seen in the rendering of what appears to be a dog and a tennis ball as a single, hybrid object-image, a photorealistic monster. Instead of seeing the dog (biotic) and the ball (abiotic) as two separate entities, the competing algorithms somehow managed to combine the relation of these two agents into one, visualizing the in-between hybrid network of things and affects in the process. The dog catches the ball, and the separate bodies become one. Skins and boundaries keeping things apart, disappear.

It’s easy to fall into thinking that these forms of machine perception have already entered into their own phase of magical thinking, a hallucinatory early stage of consciousness before capability for empirical and systematically self-organized thinking and information gathering.¹¹ Or in the words of Mark Leckey, “technology essentially makes you believe in magic.”¹² These automated technologies make us question the foundation of our own perception and the nature of our consciousness, and thus the special position we have given ourselves in the world. One could even view all life as a form of technology, starting with the imperceptibly small organisms and cells forming their own specialized processes and systems (techniques). Phenomena such as language and other human technologies could then be seen as continuations of the processes of complexification and specialization of technicity.

There is a vast uncharted territory in these new algorithmic ways of seeing, that accidentally open up a world of the otherwise invisible and inexplicable, exploring things in a potential state of non-hierarchy. Deterritorializing the ontological zones between human and nonhuman, individual agents and networks, these technological agents give ambiguous space for assemblages and hybrids to exist as themselves, offering a possibility to rethink and restructure our world as we have come to see it. Sometimes it almost feels as if these algorithms know us deeper than we think we know ourselves, gathering and processing our data and our biases more efficiently than ever before. The algorithm has become the new 'expert' of our current era, with access to what appears to be an endless sea of information, only waiting to be processed, categorized, and predicted into the future. One could also view artificial intelligence as more human than human. Humanity purified into an algorithmic code. A narrative retelling and multiplying itself exponentially.



Trevor Paglen, *A Man (Corpus: The Humans) Adversarially Evolved Hallucination*, (2017)
Dye sublimation metal print, 121.9 x 152.4 cm
Trevor Paglen / Metro Pictures

BECOMING HUMAN



Leonardo da Vinci, *The anatomy of a bear's foot*, (c.1488–90)
Metalpoint, pen and ink, white heightening, on blue-grey prepared paper, 16.1 x 13.7 cm
Royal Collection Trust

BECOMING HUMAN

Making images is as much meaning-making and world-building as much as it is representation. Even when we are trying to be objective, a strictly empirical gaze seems to be a nearly impossible task, as our neural system is busy mixing information of what we are seeing in front of us with what we already have come to know. We reflect our societal narratives onto images, often passively, yet these choices play an active part in constructing our world. All images are fiction to a certain degree, and fiction is always a form of worlding, or world-building. The stories we tell about the world effectively shape our reality as we come to see and experience it through them.

Leonardo da Vinci's early anatomical drawing, 'The anatomy of a bear's foot' (c.1488–90), is a depiction of something so familiarly human yet something so unsettlingly distant from the human figure. Lacking access to human corpses to study at the time, Leonardo used a bear as a way of studying human bipedal anatomy to draw and paint in a more lifelike manner. With the anatomical similarities between the feet of the two different species and with both being capable of standing upright, the bear's foot became a human foot. The drawing shows greater anatomical accuracy than many of the depictions of his human dissections from around the same time, as Leonardo had no preconceptions about how a bear's body works, yet his human depictions were influenced by the medical knowledge of the episteme. These established ways of seeing seemed to be obstructing him from understanding the inner workings of the human bodies even as they were physically laid open before him.

But what constitutes Human, this figure we have come to define ourselves with?

Anthropogeny is the study of the origin of humankind. How something that wasn't quite human somehow became human. Anthropogenesis seems to suggest a kind of narrative paradigm shift that takes place outside the linear evolutionary development of our species, an ontological shift from a state of otherness to what we now consider as human. This modern idea of the beginning of humanity overlooks the birth of non-humanity as the byproduct, as argued by Bruno Latour in his text 'We Have Never Been Modern' (1991).¹³ The other order of things is that of objects and beasts. This nonhumanity, positioned outside the perimeter of the so-called human as a binary opposite, is a hollow negative, with both concepts dependent on the empty shadows of one another to reify their own existence. These binary opposites also fail to account for the active relational spaces in between, or what Latour describes as hybrid relations. Things become what they are, only through these complex and shifting relations.

The constitution of modernity has tried to keep culture separate from nature through processes of translation and purification, yet this separation has led to the proliferation of hybrids and monsters, creating an ever-growing rift between what we can understand of the world around us, and what we can essentially know of it.¹⁴ These hybrids and monsters exist everywhere we look. The invisible and intangible networks are entangled with our cultural reality, making the world around us more difficult to understand by trying to separate ambiguous and complex phenomena into simplified notions of politics, science, technology, and so forth.

So if we have never been modern, have we ever even been human?

As theorized by Lynn Margulis, one could say we are *holobionts*, assemblages and chimeras made of various things and species.¹⁵ Our bodies consist of different biotic and abiotic agents, nature and culture, material (actual) mixed with meaning (virtual). These assemblages extend from the imperceptible microbial agents inside our gut and crawling on our

skin, to the pan-microbiome distributed by our social networks, all the way to the prevailing narratives and power-knowledge systems in our society. We are monsters made of multiple bodies and virtual stuff.

Yet it's hard to give up on the constitution of the figure we have created to represent ourselves. Our species has developed through evolution into being highly effective in recognizing patterns and underlying systems in the world. We've organized this gathered knowledge into taxonomies and categories, through scientific enterprises and fictional fabrication. Fiction and false information however, are easily misinterpreted as fact. This over-effectivity to interpret things has also led to a sort of apophenia or pattern misrecognition. We see patterns where they aren't present, like faces in the clouds and fate in the chaos of life, or an alienated human figure in the messy hybrid networks of multiplicities. As argued by Hito Steyerl, all data processing requires various levels of apophenia to make sense of it as information.¹⁶ We are constantly bombarded with stimuli and random bits and pieces of information, and without organizing all of this data internally, the world becomes incomprehensible, and information becomes mere noise. Categorization and seeing patterns are, to a certain degree, necessary to navigate the world and to generate meaning.

We are also highly effective in mirroring ourselves and our experiences onto other beings and our representations of them, through our own needs and desires, in the process of anthropomorphization. Hybrids and chimeras have always been prominent subjects in our images and stories. We have explored our position in the world, in relation to what we have come to call as animality and technology, with the use of these composites and surrogates conjured from our imagination to tell our often biased human stories through them.

In Pierre Huyghe's single-channel video 'Untitled (Human Mask)' (2014), the cinematic gaze follows a macaque dressed as a human child wearing a white Noh mask of a stylized human face. The macaque is observed in its solitude, continuing to perform everyday routines in a now desolated restaurant after a natural disaster, still following the role assigned and taught to it by humans. Based on a real-world situation

and mixed with elements of speculative realism, the anthropoid has been used as an actual waiter in Kayabukiya Tavern in Utsunomiya, Japan. The 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and the following tsunami rendered large areas of Japan's east coast inhabitable, causing the worst nuclear disaster in the world since that of Chernobyl in 1986. It is in the aftermath of these kinds of large scale disasters, with the areas deserted by previous human inhabitants, where nonhuman beings slowly take over and continue to live undisturbed by us in the ruins of the Anthropocene.

The human trained routine the macaque continues to perform in the abandoned restaurant, along with the performative costume it is dressed in, functions as a kind of becoming-human of the subject. What is human is what we have created, and what we have created, in turn, creates us. Our human gaze, directed and experienced through the point of view of the camera, meets the eyes of the living being beneath the mask. This gaze creates a space that is abyssal and ambiguous. The limits of our knowledge and the shores of the unknown are reflected in the eyes of the Other. In this same gaze, we have to face what we as species do unto others. As beautifully put into words by Jacques Derrida describing the act of gazing into the eyes of the Other, or in his case, in a naked encounter with a cat:

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called “animal” offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself. And in these moments of nakedness, as regards the animal, everything can happen to me, I am like a child ready for the apocalypse, *I am (following) the apocalypse itself*, that is to say, the ultimate and first event of the end, the unveiling and the verdict. I am (following) it, the apocalypse, I identify with it by running behind it, after it, after its whole zoology. When the instant of extreme passion passes, and I find peace again, then I can speak calmly of the beasts of the Apocalypse, visit them in the museum, see them in



Fukuchan Monkey in wig, mask, works Restaurant!
Doug Meet / YouTube, (2012)



Pierre Huyghe, *Untitled (Human Mask)*, (2014)
Single-channel video, color, sound, 19 min
Pierre Huyghe / Marian Goodman Gallery

a painting (but for the Greeks “zoography” referred to the portraiture of the living in general and not just the painting of animals); I can visit them at the zoo, read about them in the Bible, or speak about them as in a book.¹⁷

The macaque followed in the film has been exploited and exoticized for our entertainment purposes, taken from its usual environment, and diverted from its species-specific behavior with extensive training by our species. It has been forcibly humanized in an inhuman and inhumane manner, subjected to our monstrous anthropomorphic machine. Is there a way for interspecies co-laboring to happen in the form of kinship instead of exploitation, or is the only way to coexist in varying levels of violence?

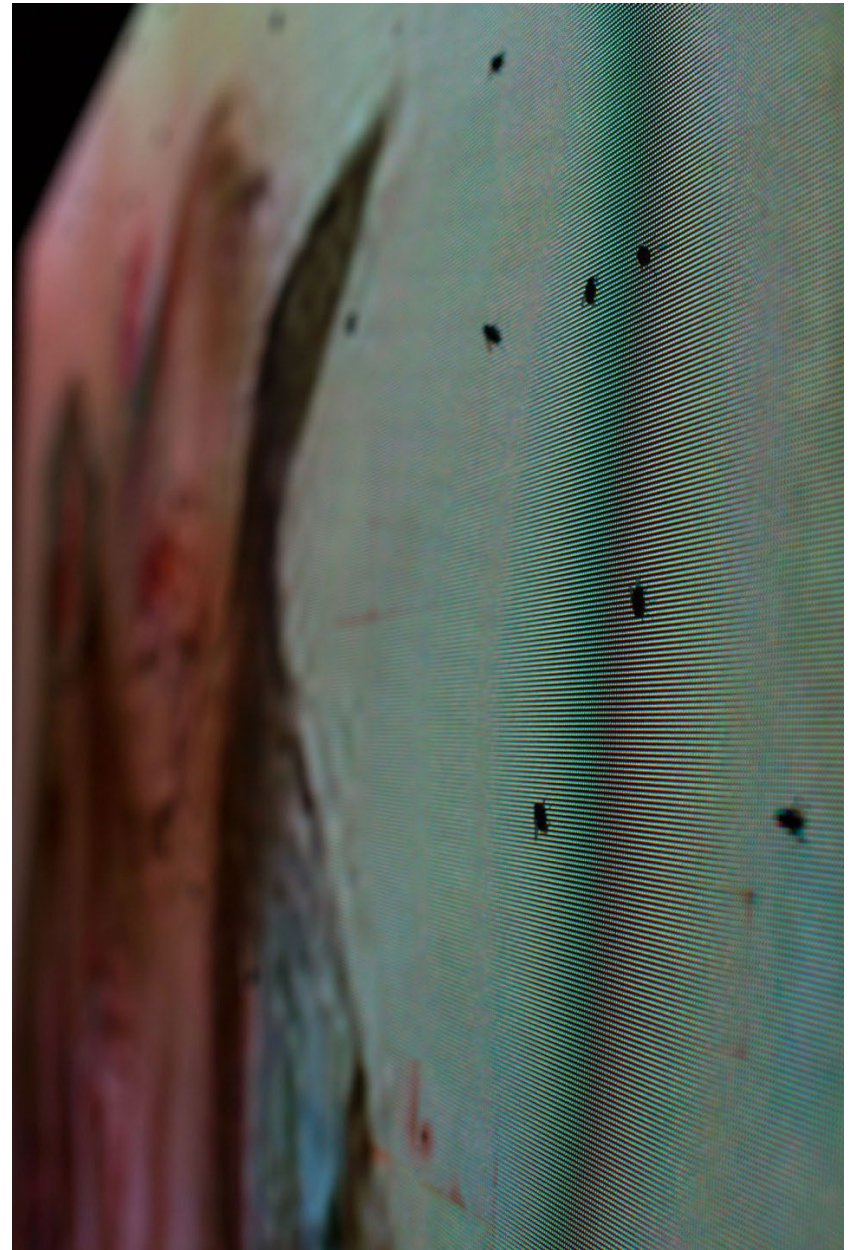
In ‘Umwelt’ (2018), Huyghe set out to create a non-hierarchical system between humans, nonhumans, and machines. The speculative environment consisted of large scale LED screens hosting self-evolving GAN-images regenerated continuously by algorithms using data created with human brain imaging technologies (images reconstructed from data gathered from brainwaves after presenting selected images to the subject), with multiple generations of bluebottle flies incubating and inhabiting the space among the passing human audience. During the exhibition, the algorithms continued to develop without further need for human cooperation, mixing the human brain data with their own computational minds. The bluebottle flies with relatively short lifespans of approximately six weeks, lived and died, with multiple generations passing during the duration of the entire exhibition. The human audience came and went, with parallel processes continuing to develop and exist without the need for human interaction and exchange, the human spectator becoming an unnecessary factor from the viewpoint of these nonhuman agents, indifferent to its presence.

Although it may be a romantic thought, this human-created system would collapse without someone providing electricity for the machines, and with the whole exhibition being supported by the complex socio-economic system porously seeping through the art world and the Serpentine Galleries. Art can however be a powerful discursive apparatus in the

project of reintegrating culture with nature, reconnecting human and nonhuman agencies, through fabulation and artistic fabrication. Raising awareness of unjust power-knowledge systems or exploring alternative structures and speculative systems in which these various agents can co-exist in a shared environment, gradually evolving together into their new futures. And these new futures start with new narratives.



Pierre Huyghe, *UUmwelt*, Installation views, Serpentine Gallery, London, (3 October 2018 – 10 February 2019)
Ola Rindal, (2018)
Pierre Huyghe / Serpentine Galleries



WHAT COMES AROUND GOES AROUND



The Löwenmensch Figurine
Oleg Kuchar / Museum Ulm



The Lion King, (2019)
Jon Favreau / Walt Disney Pictures

WHAT COMES AROUND GOES AROUND

What have we become, and where do we go from here?

By declaring ourselves human, haven't we become inhuman, in its most literal meaning? Savage, cold and merciless towards others, declining a vast spectrum of beings and things of what we have deemed as humane conduct only reserved for what we have come to call human (only in restricted cases and only when it is convenient for us to do so, even within our own relations). The genesis of humanity and of the humane opens up the realm of inhumanity and the inhumane, the oppression of those excluded from it. The hegemony of boundless human exceptionalism and individualism has left us at the point of no return, with the so-called nature we deemed to have tamed for our purposes and needs, escalating into chaos and catastrophe around us. It appears as if our virtual narratives have rendered the world in their true image as they have entered into the material reality through our actions.

The Western conception of humanity, even though often presenting itself as the morally superior configuration of being, the voice of reason above the irrational nature and the irrational others, finds itself in an identity crisis. In the end, it wasn't the sleep of reason producing the monsters, it was the reason itself.

But where to locate this new figure or configuration needed to better represent our position in the world? We are not posthuman, as that would require us to have once become human as proposed by anthropo-

genesis. The same way we can never be postmodern as we have never really been modern, or even individual as we have always been dependent on the symbiotic co-relations of beings and things that make our life possible on earth.

The project that we face is not to necessarily get rid of the human figure entirely, but in its fundamental reassembly and redistribution on both the social level of our species and in the interspecies relations we find ourselves tangled up with, extending from the tiniest micro-organisms to the planetary scale. Humanity, as such, could be viewed more as a universally extended project than as a special ontological position only reserved for our species. As opposed to merely becoming-something-else in the process of deconstructing the human, we need to become-with what we have positioned as the others. Instead of becoming-inhuman, becoming-ahuman, or becoming-nonhuman, new semantic tools need to be established to better represent the position we inhabit and to reflect those of the others. Perhaps we can use language to (de-/re-) compose ourselves in order of becoming-with-others into the chimeral multiplicities and assemblages we have always been, but what we have only quite recently come to acknowledge in the Western sciences.

Sciences, narratives, and images remain the main tools of this project. By studying and understanding the complex and ambiguous networks of changing relations between beings and things, in-between where we find the alienated human locus, we can hope to transgress the restricting boundaries established by the Western society within the last few centuries. Our current narratives, despite often presenting themselves as universal and constant truths, are bound to change and evolve. As concluded by Michel Foucault in 'The Order of Things' (1966):

One thing in any case is certain: man is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge. Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area – European culture since the sixteenth century – one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it. ... If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, ... then one

can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.¹⁸

Maybe we can look at our past to find some ideas of what is yet to come. Most of the oldest surviving visual images made by our species show almost no interest in the human figure. The depictions in these images are mostly centered around nonhumans and humanoid hybrids, such as bipedal figures with bird heads. These images don't differ that much from the images we create today. One look into the 'Löwenmensch (lion-human) figurine,' the oldest-known uncontested piece of figurative art, takes us to the anthropomorphized lion in the hyperrealist 3D remake of 'The Lion King' (2019), yet approximately 40,000 years have passed in-between.

Caves were active operational sites of constructing these images and virtual narratives for our species in the past. In today's society, we have painted some of our artificially built caves into chroma key green, sites of constructing new narratives where the location can virtually transform into anything imaginable through digital post-production, affecting and producing our cultural reality in the process. This is a locus of abyssal human alienation, and yet it embodies infinite potential for transgression and radical storytelling at the same time.

One striking image appeared early on in the caves: proliferating silhouettes of hands (not all of our species) coming together, enveloping the field-of-vision of the spectator. Individuality dissolves into tentacular multiplicity, a swarm of beings long gone, generating a larger entity with no beginning or an end, dispersing into space. A decentralized human figuration that we may yet need to become again, in order to redefine our current position, that in the end has turned us inhuman.



Cueva de las Manos, Santa Cruz, Argentina
Maclemo / CC BY-SA 3.0, (2013)

(IN-)CONCLUSION

(IN-)CONCLUSION

While figuring out new possible configurations of humanity, we need a deeper understanding of how the images we create play a part in the narratives that shape our reality, and in how we position ourselves in-between things, other beings, and our technological creations. Images are the very surface on which we reflect these narratives and through which we construct our reality.

We need to become aware of whose gaze is in power and is being translated and transferred into automated technologies and artificial intelligence, that in the end act as mirrors of the biases of their creators. The face drawn into sand, virtually reconstructed in the sea of data, further affirming its hegemonic status. By exploring alternative ways of using these technologies, we can potentially harness them in the project of reconfiguring our current narratives, reconnecting what has been artificially separated as culture and nature, and subverting our position of inhumanity in the human figure we have constructed in the last few centuries.

Through collaboration and with the help of constantly emergent understanding of our evolving technologies we can facilitate the processes of decentralization, deterritorialization, and redistribution of what we have come to call human, to explore new possibilities and compositions of being while learning to understand the simultaneities of various nature-cultures and experiences co-existing alongside each other, and the ambiguities that follow for all things that exist in the open.

NOTES

1 A concept developed by Jakob von Uexküll defining the self-centered world of an organism, as experienced by the organism itself. Different organisms can have different *umwelten* even in a shared environment. Jakob von Uexküll, *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds* (1934)

2 Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2016)

3 Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument”, *CR: The New Centennial Review, Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 2003* (Michigan State University Press, 2003), 313–314

4 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 232–309

5 Susan J. Pearson and Mary Weismantel, “Does “The Animal” Exist? Toward a Theory of Social Life with Animals” In: *Beastly Natures: Animals, Humans, and the Study of History*, ed. by Dorothee Brantz (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 20

6 Jaques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, Trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 31

7 Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, “Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets” (September 19, 2019) <https://www.excavating.ai>

8 Trevor Paglen, “Operational Images”, *e-flux journal* #59, November 2014

9 Hito Steyerl, “A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition” *e-flux journal* #72, April 2016

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Paul Laster, “Mark Leckey: “technology essentially makes you believe in magic” (an interview)”, *Conceptual Fine Arts*, 25.11.2016

13 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, Trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 13

14 Ibid, 3–5, 49–50

15 Lynn Margulis, “Symbiogenesis and Symbioticism” In: *Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis*, ed. by Lynn Margulis and René Fester (Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1991)

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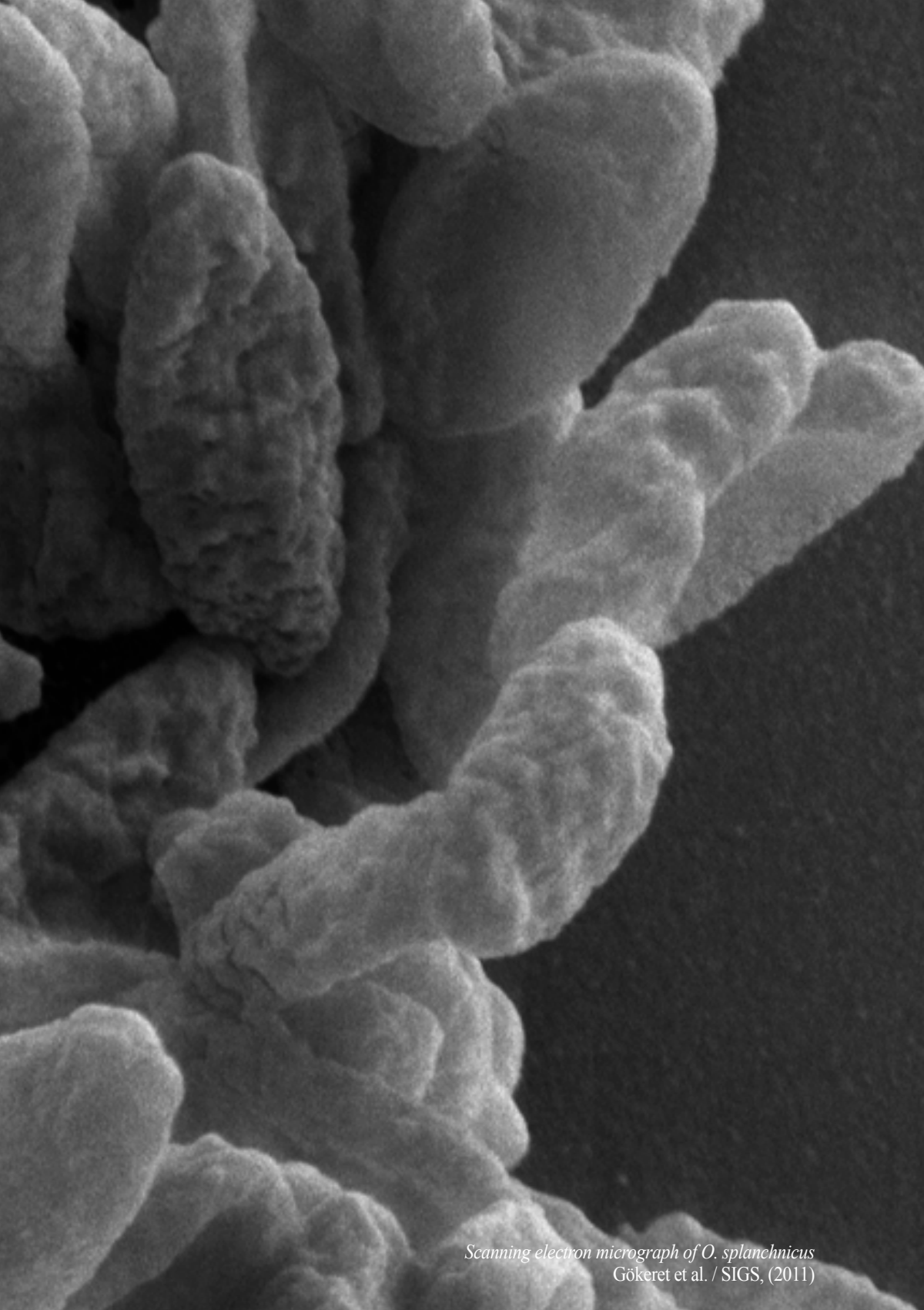
17 Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)*, 12

18 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Trans. Tavistock/Routledge (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 421–422

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Scanning electron micrograph of *O. splanchnicus*
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