

A Paper

Of Mice and Men

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So we are here to make attempts at answering the question, ‘Who do we think we are?’ For me the question is weighted in a very specific way: ‘*Who do we think we are?*’ I would like to think about this in relation to the Australian artist Patricia Piccinini and her performative work ‘Superevolution’ from 2001. Piccinini has been working in the realm of art and performance with reference to biotechnologies and the genetic revolution for the last 25 years and there are a number of her works that bear scrutiny, specifically in terms of the broad themes of finitude, anthropomorphism and contemporary ethics. We are living in a rare epoch where the much lauded death of the human has taken on a positivist bent. The death of the human as we know it has been hailed by performance artists such as Stelarc, or science fiction writers such as Moravec, as the open window to immortality: downloading ones consciousness onto a computer; metal body parts that can be easily upgraded; the eradication of genetic disorders and so on. These are not new topics of conversation. However, in terms up Piccinini’s work questions are raised about our relation to other beings or living organisms in the world, the role we play in creating hybrid beings, our position to the animal within us and the effect that these issues would have on the way we function politically.

According to her website, ‘Superevolution’ was:

an Art project which thinks about new technologies and scientific research into genetic engineering [...]. Into the Wombat enclosure [of a zoo], Patricia has placed two new 'animals' which she has designed herself and produced using computers, silicone and plastics. [It was named Siren Mole and it's] head would be very heavy and strong [...]. Its hairless skin would make it quite vulnerable to the sun and therefore it would be happiest to sleep in a burrow [...]. One scientist even suggested that its big head and small legs make it look like a baby, and that it would be best suited to live inside, cared for by people. (Text by Julianna Enberg on patriciapiccinini.net)

This work is problematic for a number of reasons but mostly it comes down to its focus on anthropomorphic concerns. The size and reason behind the design of the mole's head, Piccinini's philosophy for the care of technologically mediated beings and the misconception that this is a new concern, one that belongs to the age of biotechnology and the post-human all need to be addressed.

So, to the first issue at hand: '[Siren Mole's] large head [was] the artist's deliberate attempt to grant it an intelligence superior to its physically kindred species' (patriciapiccinini.net). However, in doing so she has created a creature that is best suited to a life of domestication. In creating this new being with the hope that it would have higher brain function we are stepping into the territory of anthropomorphism, troping animals, speaking for them, domesticating them, making a life outside captivity impossible. By privileging the head, the brain, the artist was privileging human concerns. The head is the vessel for the thought machine, the place in which reason resides, the place in which language is formed. It is from the head that we speak and respond; these abilities are used to distinguish the human animal from the non-human animal and in giving the Siren Mole theoretically superior intelligence Piccinini is essentially making a new creature in the human image. For me this work brings religious rhetoric to the fore. The death of God hailed the human as the all-powerful deity. So, if we are the Creator with a capital C, how is it that we should control those under our dominion?

Piccinini 'would urge us to bring an attitude of love to the products of technology, to accept our ethical mantle as creators, to take care of all our progeny even of the artificial variety' (patriciapiccinini.net). This is an artist who is apparently making attempts at answering ethical questions about the creation of new beings through genetic technology and yet she is unwittingly, through her insistence on parental love for said progeny, placing us in a God-like position of dominance. What this also serves to do is mark off those animals, creatures, beings that we artificially create from those who are of the natural world, setting up a useless dichotomy. I do not want to make the argument that our responsibility lies with one before the other, in whichever order, but I would suggest that all things in the world are at least mediated by the artificial. Do the other animal species we share the earth with not live in the same artificial space we have created for ourselves? It seems to me that the only way Piccinini's insistence on parental love can have any valid application is if we view all animals/beings as our progeny and love them all equally. However, I have fears for this course of action. Agamben has equated the separation between man and animal with the ordinary political conflict, for in placing one thing above the other you create a state of sovereignty, you create a place in which one being, organism, animal is in a position of dominance. Nancy states: 'The highest dominates properly only according to the military sense indicated by the example of the 'large tower': from on high it is easier to survey and strike what is below. Summits have always been places of fortresses and citadels. But then warlike domination immediately involves altitude raised to the sky, standing out against the sky and penetrating into it' (Nancy 96). This is the position we find ourselves in when we equate ourselves with a God-like

figure. However, despite this separation there are a number of things the human animal shares with the non-human variety and in terms of this discussion the most important of these is finitude. What would happen were we not to share this finitude, if we were to expand the great divide to such epic proportions? Would we not increase the value of dominance? Would we not push towards a state of totalitarianism?

‘Piccinini’s works appear to suggest that adopting the mantle of good parents might enable us to handle the intervention of technology into the minutiae of our lives in a way that avoids an unproductive, dualist confrontation between ‘us’ and ‘them’, human vs. machine’ (patriciapiccini.net). Firstly, technology has always intervened into the minutiae of our lives, which is something so much of this work seems to forget, or misinterpret. Philosophers like David Pearce hail biotechnology as the future, as the intervention that will end all suffering and of course medically there are so many benefits to recent leaps in scientific knowledge and these should not be ignored. However, they should also not be overestimated. Pearce talks of us moving from humans through transhumans and into post-humans. But what this misrepresents is that we are already transhumans and have been since conception: our most basic cells are transgenic; vertebrate DNA makes up a tiny piece of our genetic makeup; the rest is filled with retrovirus’s and things unexplained. Artworks and performance pieces of this genre are filled with ideas about teaching us how to live in a world of beings transformed by genetic engineering, but have we not been involved in a type of genetic engineering for centuries? Your common garden... well field – cow, for example, is perfectly engineered to fulfil our needs; or dogs that have been selectively bred to satisfy our aesthetic needs. Should we not attempt to make sense of our relationship with these creatures and what our relationship to them does to our relationship with the animal within all of us before we start posting the present and problematizing the future?

Cheating death seems to be the main objective of science in this field. But what of becoming immortal? It has been said that, ‘[a]lthough duties of compassion or kindness might apply – we think it desirable to prevent animal suffering - it could hardly be said that the two species would exist in relations of justice to one another’ (Green 102). There are many arguments against immortality and I will not subject you to a long explanation of Derrida’s take on it, however tempted I may be, but this question of justice is a concerning one. Due to our current position towering above the animal we are moral creatures and they are not, we live by a code of ethics, and yet we are unable to exist in relations of justice with them. There are two issues here, the first is what then happens when we no longer share finitude with the animal and it is less a separation and more a severance. Justice has been impossible. Do we then begin to lose compassion and kindness for them? The second issue is: are we therefore constantly doing an injustice to the animal side of our nature, to that part of the human being that social convention and ideology suppress? And if this is the case, rather than taking the position of parental love, reminiscent of biblical relationships (and remember it never ends well for the progeny - think Jesus or Isaac), should we not actually be asking for forgiveness? Forgiveness ‘is a form of redemption, in which one

reclaims one's own life, tearing it free from the oppressor's grasp, and releasing oneself from thoughts of revenge and those memories of one's loss that might otherwise keep one in thrall to one's persecutor forever' (Jackson 51). And so in a sense the human animal could reclaim their life, perhaps rupturing the oppressing concept of what it means to be human and in doing so redressing the balance with the other creatures we share or will share the planet with.

It seems that the drive of artists and scientists alike is to create new animals with characteristics that 'ill equip [them] for survival in a 'real world' ecosystem; indeed [these] creature[s] of human design would be forever dependent on [their] creators and the provision of an artificial environment' (patriciapiccinini.net). Like the animal in nature or in our homes and even the machine, we want to make these new creatures impotent so there is no fear of threat. It is interesting that this is being done in Piccinini's case by making a mole in our image, as it were, for we too are trapped in captivity, in the artificial constructs we have placed around us to keep us in check, to prevent our animal sides from raising their heads above the parapet. In this way could we not view the world as a zoo, an artificial holding cell for all creatures? 'James Martin, writer and chairman of Headstrong IT Consultancy recently commented that our mistake in the development of artificial intelligence has been to attempt to model it on, and judge it according to, human intelligence. His opinion is that only when we acknowledge that once left to develop independently of original programming computer intelligence becomes fundamentally different, a form of *alien* intelligence, will we be able to investigate a productive relationship with it' (patriciapiccinini.net). Perhaps this is a step towards an answer about how we could realign our relationship with the animals that we are and the animals both created in the wild and in the lab, acknowledging and respecting their alien intelligence, not domesticating and oppressing them for their lack of intelligence.

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