

The Speculating Animal

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Animals, for better but usually for worse, have always been objects of speculation.

As Levis Strauss famously said animals are good to think with. Updating this for the advent of the 6th extinction Donna Haraway now says animals are not just good to think with - they are also good to live with.

But how do you live with animals on the occasion of their disappearance? How do you live with animals without reducing them to pets?

How do you live with animals without incarcerating them in zoos or at a planetary scale, in so-called protected areas.

These are design problems: these are landscape architectural problems.

But until now, Landscape architecture has typically prioritized humans and plants over animals and whereas animals have been discussed intently in the humanities ever since Peter Singer's publication of *Animal Liberation* in 1975, there has been very little writing about animals in landscape architecture.

Seeking to somewhat amend this, Kevan Klosterwill —writing recently in *Landscape Journal*—sets out the topic in three parts; the scenic animal; the systemic animal and the social animal. In broad brush strokes he then maps each of these onto the history of landscape architecture from the 18th century to today.¹

The scenic animal relates to the ways in which primarily agricultural animals were discussed by connoisseurs in relation to the aesthetics of the aristocratic English landscape. But so too we could include in this category the 19th and 20th century creation of national parks and the faux naturalism of 20th and early 21st century zoological enclosures.

Next, the systemic animal is that which is subsumed into landscape planning based on landscape ecology as advanced by the likes of Ian McHarg and Richard Foreman. This is the landscape of corridors, patches, conservation easements and protected areas planned from on high according to multi-species networks and wildlife population dynamics.

¹ *Landscape Journal* Vol 38 Numbers 1-2 2019. P 129- 146

Finally, 'the social animal' relates to design that seeks, as Klosterwill puts it "cohabitation and collaboration where humans play a less than dominant role" and to unsettle "the logic of nature and culture on which many conservation ideas were privileged".²

And today it is this last category, the social animal, that is attracting the most interest in theory and in practice across the arts. Now, for the first time in the history of design, a movement of actively *cocreating* with and for animals is emerging, and it was this that the recent LA+ CREATURE design competition sought to consolidate.

So, what I'm going to briefly do is try to capture the essence of this competition because its 259 entries, from all over the world, provide us with a tangible body of evidence into what designers, per Strauss, are thinking about animals and per Haraway, how they are proposing that we live with them.

Specifically, the competition brief asked "*whether we can live with animals in new ways, whether we can transcend the dualism of decimation on the one hand and 'fortress conservation' on the other, and how we can use design to open our cities, our landscapes, and our minds to a more symbiotic existence with other creatures.*"

Entrants were then required to do three things:

- 1) choose a nonhuman creature
- 2) design (or redesign) a place, structure, thing, system, and/or process that improves said creature's life; and
- 3) contribute, through the design, to increasing human awareness of and empathy for the creature's existence.

Now what we could try to do is try to fit this body of evidence fits into Klosterwill's categories – the scenic, the systemic and the social, but I want to use a slightly different nomenclature which will get us a bit closer to questions of aesthetics.

To that end I think the designs can be organized into the following three categories: 1) the Rewilds, 2) the Green Machines, and 3) the Monsters.

The Rewilds are essentially scenic *and* systemic.
The Green Machines can be both systemic and social,
and the Monsters are primarily social.

² Ibid 143

So, briefly, lets take each in turn and try to make some generalizations.

The Rewilds, I would say, typically situate the animal as a victim of human ignorance and environmental despoliation and seek to correct this through the application of the principles of landscape ecology to sizeable tracts of land and water. These projects try to win back land and decouple the land from agriculture and from the city in order to make room for the animal.

Aesthetically in the Rewilds, the city and its infrastructure is largely absent from what typically appears to be a rebounding ecology that is foregrounded, not to say exaggerated, in photoshop. The Rewilds marshal all the power of the arcadian, the pastoral and the picturesque to unambiguously emphasize a world of ecological virtue.

In these frames the human is situated as a caring steward helping the ecosystem through a process of healing and yet the labor and technology necessary to create and maintain this world are rendered invisible. Human interaction with the world of the Rewilds is largely contained to boardwalks, visitor centers and the act of passive observation. This of course is the world of the conservation movement.

Now, whereas the Rewilds display a certain nostalgia for a decoupling of culture and nature, the Green Machines tend to accept and try to work with the contemporary city as a new nature. For the Green machines the city is a habitat which could, if it were innovatively redesigned, bring humans and animals closer together. Indeed, in this paradigm the city itself *is* the ultimate Green Machine, yet to be realized.

That said, the Green Machines can also be designs applied to specific environmental problems well beyond the actual city. For example, if because of human induced changes, Walrus's can no longer navigate through the arctic to find the ice they need, we just design a machine to help them do so.

The Green Machines therefore typically champion the positive potential of design to convert existing structures or make new ones which, if they are to be believed, would seamlessly bring about a more symbiotic, biodiverse and resilient world.

The citizenry in the world of the Green Machines is rational, ecologically enlightened but above all they are pro-technology and interact empathetically with the world through the lenses of technology. The Green Machines tend therefore to be overtly ecotopian without necessarily destabilizing the socio-political status quo. This is the world of ever 'smarter cities' where design, if well-resourced and combined with a bit of hyperbole, can solve

most, if not all of our problems. In short, technology to the rescue, despite the fact that technology created the problems in the first place.

The Monsters on the other hand are more circumspect toward any teleological narrative. The monsters know they can't return to the past, but nor are they naively over-enthusiastic about the future.

Emerging from a critical, post-human, post-natural sensibility that now permeates theory and the art world, the monsters dive right into the fundamental problem of western philosophy and take up their position somewhere between the object and the subject, in an effort to cultivate new degrees of intimacy between the two.

As ecological interventions, the Monsters tend to be catalytic rather than controlling. They aim to incite indeterminate, self-organizing, amoral processes of ecological change.

Set against the backdrop of a brooding technological sublime, the monsters revel in the aesthetics of the dystopian and the cyborgian. They're not only ok with the grotesque, the toxic, and the microscopic, they seem to almost delight in it.

Their creators are critical of the enlightenment and its manifestation in the scientific and corporate state, whilst maintaining an eco-socialist, eco-feminist faith in the liberatory potential of the sciences and arts and new forms of decentralized and democratized technology. The monsters seek to manifest a deep ecology wherein all forms of life have intrinsic, non-hierarchical value.

Above all, as a prerequisite to a more just and equitable world, the monsters seek to deconstruct the exceptionalism of the human, whereas the Rewilds and the Green Machines do not. Or if they do, they do it differently, not to say more conservatively.

Each of these categories (the Rewilds, the Green Machines and the Monsters) has its own preferred scale; respectively large, medium and small. Each of these categories also has its own mythos; respectively the paradisiacal, the ecotopian and the dystopian.

The challenge for landscape architecture as a spatial practice, as I see it, is in fact not to do or be just one or the other, for each has its place and its value. The trick I think is to work across the grain of all three simultaneously: Which is to say that if we are to have any hope of broaching the 6th extinction then design must, to return to Klosterwill, connect the scenic, the systemic and the social.

As I said at the outset typically the work of the landscape architect has privileged plants and humans but it may be that the animal, long neglected by landscape architecture, is a more powerful and productive way into the broader complications of the landscape of the Anthropocene.

Thank you.