

Art and the Animal ¹

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In truth, there are only inhumanities, humans are made exclusively of inhumanities, but very different ones, of very different natures and speeds.
—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 1987

Darwinism has opened up a way to engage with animal forces as those with which our own forces participate, and which direct us to a humanity that is always in the process of overcoming and transforming itself. It is the animal forces in us that direct us to what is regarded as the most human about us—our ability to represent, to signify, to imagine, to wish for, and to make ideals, goals, aims. What I would like to talk about today are the living connections between plants, animals, and the earth that makes human art possible. I want to look at the peculiar relations between the earth, animals, and art that have been largely unrepresented in most Western forms of art. Why does it make sense to ask about animal lineages, genealogies, and connections—even bestiaries—when talking about art and architecture? What is at stake in our conception of the human when we place the human not outside the category of the animal, as it has occurred since at least the seventeenth century, but within it? How are our conceptions of human accomplishments (whether in art, architecture, science, philosophy, governance, or social and political relations) transformed when we place the human within the animal? How and why does the animal imperil human uniqueness and dignity? What do we gain in restoring the human to the animal from which it has come?

1. Art

Eight theses about art and the animal:

¹ This text is a lightly edited version of the talk given by Elizabeth Grosz at the Damien Minton Gallery, Redfern, Sydney, Australia on July 9, 2011.

1. All of the arts, from architecture to music, poetry, and dance are the indirect products or effects of what Darwin calls “sexual selection,” the attraction to potential sexual partners for the purpose of some kind of sexual encounter possibly leading to procreation. Sexual selection is not reducible to natural selection, the capacity to survive in given and changing environments, but it is a potentially antagonistic principle that may at times imperil life for the sake of pleasure or desire. The separation of natural from sexual selection is regularly ignored in contemporary Darwinism, when, for example, sociobiologists suggest that sexual attraction and procreation are in fact indirect forms of maximizing the survival potential of one’s genes, that is, they are really forms of natural selection. For Darwin, sexual and natural selection are two irreducible and potentially antagonistic principles. If natural selection can help explain the remarkable variety and adaptations of life then only sexual selection can explain the extravagant, useless, sometimes imperiling qualities that have no survival value but nevertheless proliferate in abundance.

2. Sexual selection can be more explicitly linked to the arts than natural selection, to the extent that it functions to highlight, focus on, intensify the bodies of beings exciting and beings excited by various forms of bodily display—in the courtship songs and dancing of competing birds, the dazzling display of colors in sticklebacks and other erotically attuned fish, the loud and colorful encounters of various mammals in competition with members of the same sex over sexual partners. Sexual selection unhinges, deranges, and complicates survival for the sake of intensification, providing a principle separate from that of mere survival.

3. Art, like science or technology, links living bodies to the earth, not wholesale but through the connections it makes between specific qualities—the shiny objects that appeal to bowerbirds, the balls that attract dogs—and specific organs. But unlike technology which aims to extract useful principles (regularity, predictability, order and organization), the arts redirect these forces through intensification to produce

something no longer regular, ordered, or manipulable but a force which actively alters the forces of the body itself, something appealing, irregular, unpredictable.

4. This emphasis rather entails that wherever art is in play, wherever qualities, features, forms have the capacity to brace and intensify the body, we must recognize that sexual selection is the underside of sexual difference. Sexual selection, the sexual appeal and attraction of members of the same species, is always at least twofold, resulting in the development of *at least two* different kinds of morphology or bodily type, male and female—commonly three types of morphology in the insect world—two different kinds of criteria for attractiveness, and two different types of morality.

5. Architecture is the first art, the art that is the condition for the emergence of all the other arts, for without some cordoning off the earth into territory, no qualities or properties can be extracted, resonate, and transform bodies. It is only to the extent that both the body and the earth are partially tamed through the creation of the frame, provided by a provisional territory that protects the living creature and creates a temporary “home,” that art as such can emerge. Art is, for Gilles Deleuze, the extension of the architectural imperative to organize the space of the earth.

6. Art is the sexualization of survival, or equally sexuality is the rendering artistic of nature, the making of nature into more than it is, the making of a leaf into a sexual adornment rather than just a part of a tree.² Art is that ability to make qualities

² Of course, the leaf itself is the result of its own processes of formation and the impingement of various forces to which its own form responds. Leaves are not simply random shapes but those random shapes which, through the eliminations of equally random but less useful shapes provided by natural selection, can provide the tree with maximal life, maximal utilization of competing and potentially scarce resources. We will rely in considerable detail on the writings of Jakob von Uexküll, whose works are also relevant to considering plant existence. The leaves of trees are in part the counterpoint of both the tree itself, its various photosynthesizing requirements, but equally the leaf reflects and counterposes the forces of water and of rain, elemental forces which the tree must both withstand and utilize if it is to survive and proliferate: “One of the meaning factors relevant to oak leaves is rain. Upon striking a leaf, falling raindrops follow the physical laws governing the behavior of liquids. In this case, according to Uexküll, the leaf is the ‘receiver of meaning,’ which is coupled with the meaning factor ‘rain’ by a ‘meaning rule.’ The leaves work together by forming cascades in all directions to distribute rain water on the ground in optimal reach of the roots. ... Wherever there is a point, its corresponding counterpart can be found. The physical behavior of raindrops is the counterpoint corresponding to the point of

resonate bodies to the extent that this quality takes bodies away from their real immersion in a particular habitat and orients them to a virtual world of attraction and seduction. This is why the first art is architecture. For qualities to be extractable, a territory (that is a framed and delimited space) must first exist, a space of safety, competition, courtship, and flight; only within such a provisional space, a space always threatened with deterritorialization, can there be the pure joy of qualities, the immersion of the living in intensities. Architecture is the bridge between life and art, the condition under which life complicates itself, and finds transportable, transformable qualities for this complication.³

7. If art is rooted in the ways in which sexual selection deviates from natural selection, making properties, qualities, organs and muscles function, not usefully but intensively, art is the capacity of materiality to function otherwise than what is given: art is the exploration of qualities and properties not for their use or exchange value, but only insofar as these qualities and properties do something, have some effect, on living beings. Art is the means by which nature, materiality, deviates itself from givenness and comes to function in terms other than the useful or the manageable. Art is thus the space in which the natural and the material is the most attenuated, rendered the most visible and tangible for living beings.

8. These qualities and properties, attractive to various forms of life, become art only to the extent that they can be moved, transferred beyond where they are found, sent on a deterritorializing trajectory, function elsewhere to where they originate or are found. Thus, while the raw materials for art are located within territory, as part of the earth, they become art, architecture, dance only to the extent they become transportable elsewhere to intensify bodies that circulate, move, change.

the leaf's form." Martin Krampen, "No Plant, No Breath," in "Jakob von Uexküll: A Paradigm for Biology and Semiotics," ed. Kalevi Kull, special issue, *Semiotica* 134, no. 1-4 (2001): 420.

³ "The territory is first of all the critical distance between two beings of the same species: Mark your distance. What is mine is first of all my distance; I possess only distances. Don't anybody touch me, I growl if anyone enters my territory." Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 319-20.

I want to use these broad claims to frame a more specific discussion of animal worlds through the work of the Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll, a figure of immense interest to Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, and others working on understanding the human in different terms than those that mark the Enlightenment. Uexküll is interested in understanding the worlds in which animals live from the perspective of those living beings themselves; he may be the first animal phenomenologist.⁴ For him, the most basic problem of biology is a problem of design, the bodily design of organisms, insofar as they find themselves within a particular context where their bodily forms, their organs and capacities, must find a way of enabling them to utilize what they need from this context to survive and thrive. The problem of life is the problem of design; or put another way, life is artistic in the biological forms it induces, in the variations in patterns of living it generates, and above all, in the forces of sexual intensification it proliferates.

2. *Umwelt*

Darwin deflects art through the animal. Deleuze too links art to the relation between an animal and its territory. Uexküll develops an account of the centrality of the notion of milieu in understanding the ways in which particular species experience and coevolve with their lifeworlds. Uexküll discusses what he understands as the “musical laws of nature” that bind together in a complex duet the evolution of the spider and the fly, the tick and the mammal, the wasp and the orchid, the leaves of an oak tree and drops of rain, each serving as a motif or counterpoint for the other. Nature is musical, composed of living notes which each play their own melody, a melody complicated, syncopated, and transformed through the melodies of the other living and nonliving things with which it engages. For Uexküll, music is not just a useful metaphor for understanding relations between living elements within

⁴ His work fits into the lineage of vitalist or biocentric works that runs from Friedrich Schelling to Hans Driesch, Hans Spemann and D’Arcy Wentworth Thomson to Kurt Goldstein, Georges Canguilhem, and Oliver Sacks.

given milieus, it is a profound model by which nature can be understood as dynamic polyphony, always playing at least two tunes which produce resonance and dissonance such that forms, dynamic and interacting, result.

Uexküll claims that an animal engages only with certain features in a milieu which are significant to it, which it can discern and act upon, those which are in counterpoint with its own organs. Each organism is surrounded by its *Umwelt*, a “soap bubble” in which each living being is housed. The lived world of the organism is precisely as complex as its organs. Each creature, animal and human, Western and non-Western lives a particular angle on the world, which highlights for it what its organs can perceive and act upon but leaves everything else undiscerned.⁵

Organisms are sense-bubbles, isolated worlds, monads composed of fragments of milieus and organs, musical counterpoints creating a melody. The *Umwelt* is the sensory world of space, time, and objects that form perceptual signs for living creatures, the world that enables them to effect actions, to exercise their organs, to act. Uexküll calls it a “circular island,” a “wall of the senses,” a “bubble-world,” much like a creature enclosed in an invisible snow cone, positioning the subject within the center of a movable horizon. Each living thing lives in precisely the world which accords with its bodily organs. The lived reality of each living thing already includes—mirrored inside the organism—the forces that impinges on it from the outside.⁶ Uexküll argues that we can understand this apparently perfect adaptation of bodily form in terms of the “musical” or harmonic “laws of life.”⁷ This music of

⁵ “Everything that falls under the spell of an *Umwelt* (subjective universe) is altered and reshaped until it has become a useful meaning-carrier; otherwise it is totally neglected.” Jakob von Uexküll, “The Theory to Meaning,” *Semiotica* 42, no. 1 (1982): 31.

⁶ “No one, who has the least experience of the *Umwelten* of animals will ever harbour the idea that objects have an autonomous existence that makes them independent of the subjects. The variability of objects is the norm here. Every object becomes something completely different on entering a different *Umwelt*. A flower stem that in our *Umwelt* is a support for the flower, becomes a pipe full of liquid to build its foamy nest.

The same flower stem becomes an upward path for the ant, connecting its nest with its hunting ground in the flower. For the grazing cow, the flower stem becomes part of a tasty morsel of food for her to chew in her big mouth.” Jakob von Uexküll, “An Introduction to *Umwelt*,” in “Jakob von Uexküll: A Paradigm for Biology and Semiotics,” ed. Kalevi Kull, special issue, *Semiotica* 134, no. 1–4 (2001): 108.

⁷ “It is thus musical and not mechanical laws that we need to study if we want to find out about the laws of Life.” Jakob von Uexküll, “The New Concept of *Umwelt*: A Link between Science and the Humanities,” in “Jakob von Uexküll: A Paradigm for Biology and Semiotics,” ed. Kalevi Kull, special issue, *Semiotica* 134, no. 1–4 (2001): 117.

living things is composed not of vocal or instrumental notes but various tones, frequencies, forms of organic resonance. Each living creature is a series of tonal responses to various “melodies” played by its Umwelt, various performances it undertakes—the world is composed not so much of objects but of tunes with which it can resonate, through its own ego-tone (*Ich-Ton*), its own specific neurological reactions and muscular contractions, its own characteristic behavior.

3. Home

What defines territory, if territory is the most irreducible spatial terrain for many animals? Many insects do not have territory. We are familiar with flies and mosquitoes. They fly back and forth, but they have no home, which is the necessary condition for territory.⁸ While the fly has no territory and thus no boundary as to where it may roam, the spider is firmly located in territory, the immediate vicinity surrounding its web.

In building a home, the spider defines both a home and the space surrounding it as territory.⁹ The web is the space of the home, and the surrounding region—the trees or branches between which its strands are threaded—are the spider’s territory. And yet the spider and the fly are still commonly bound together in a kind of musical duet in which the operations of each harmonize with the other without the slightest conscious planning or coordination. Uexküll discusses the production of the spider’s web as a kind of spatial counterpoint to the movements of the fly. The threads of the

⁸ The fly is itself a highly underestimated creature whose morphology has enabled it to survive and thrive in a wide range of terrains and geographies. It has itself a quite rich world, marked by a number of *I*-tones, a flying-tone (never direct or in a straight line but in a zigzagged line), an eating-tone, a walking-tone: flies are by no means driven by instinct alone. Their behavior is rather linked to the transformations of activity undertaken through the acquisition or transformation of meanings: a fly will continue to hit a glass window over and over until it switches from a flying-tone to a walking-tone. “The fly, which comes to the window-pane, hits it with its head several times, and then no longer treats it as though it were air, but walks about on it as if on the ground ... through the coming in of an indication, a rearrangement of the action is undertaken.” Jakob von Uexküll, *Theoretical Biology*, trans. D. L. Mackinnon (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1926), 328.

⁹ Jakob von Uexküll likens the spider to the mole: the network of underground caves and tunnels the mole has excavated for itself is, for him, “spread out underground like a cobweb ... In captivity, it plots its tunnels so that they resemble a cobweb.” Uexküll, “A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds,” in *Instinctive Behavior: The Development of a Modern Concept*, ed. and trans. Claire H. Schiller (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1957), 55.

web must be strong enough to capture the spider's prey, yet invisible enough for the prey to be unable to see them. There are, for example, two kinds of thread in every web: smooth radial threads that the spider is able to stand on and spin from, and sticky threads that function to catch flies. The size of the web, its holes and gridding are a quite exact measure of the size of the fly or specific forms of prey for the spider. The fly is contrapuntal to the web, or equally, the fly, the web and the spider form a unique coupling. The fly is already mapped,¹⁰ its place accommodated in the spider's bodily behavior before any particular spider has encountered any particular fly.¹¹ Just as the goanna and its prey, the plants and their environment are all in a relation of harmonic resonance.

Each living thing is a melodic line in a symphony composed of the larger and more complex movements provided by its world. Both the organism and its Umwelt taken together are the units of survival. Each organism is a musician completely taken over by its tune, an instrument, ironically, of a larger performance in which it is only one role, one voice or melody.¹²

¹⁰ It does matter whether the codes instructing the spider are genetic or environmental or a mixture of both. There is much to suggest that even if the design of the web is genetically structured, it seems unlikely that the location of the web is genetically structured: "Individual spiders repeatedly make webs in their environments, generation after generation, because they repeatedly inherit genes instructing them to do so. Subsequently, the consistent presence of a web in the spider's environment may, over many generations, feed back to become the source of a new selection pressure for a further phenotypic change in the spider, such as the building by Cyclops of dummy spiders in their webs to divert the attention of avian predators. ... In this case, although the bird predator may not be a direct part of the spider's Umwelt, this Umwelt has, nevertheless, accommodated itself so as to fit (though faking) into the bird's Umwelt." Jesper Hoffmeyer, "Seeing Virtuality in Nature," in "Jakob von Uexküll: A Paradigm for Biology and Semiotics," ed. Kalevi Kull, special issue, *Semiotica* 134, no. 1-4 (2001): 390.

¹¹ "In the case of the spider's web it is easy to point out the properties that are contrapuntal to the fly. Here, we have the strength of the threads that have to withstand the collision of the fly, and the thinness of the threads to make them invisible to the fly. The threads are of two kinds: smooth radial ones that the spider uses as steps and sticky ones that are for catching flies. The mesh of the net is also matched to the size of the fly's body. In the same way as with the spider's net one can analyze the counterpoints in the nests of birds and the labyrinths of moles." Uexküll, "The New Concept of Umwelt," 121.

¹² The idea of the organism as a melodic counterpoint to its milieu, the milieu that comes to compose its territory, is elaborated by many examples in Uexküll's writings, for instance: "The dependence of the cellular musicians on the tune was already evident from the sea urchin experiments by Driesch. Cutting the embryo of the sea urchin in half reduced the number of cells to half but did not change the building tune. This was continued by the other half. This applies to all orchestras. When half the musicians leave, the other half of the orchestra goes on playing the same tune.

Spemann reports an astonishing experiment. Inserting frog cells, that normally evolve into frog brain, in the mouth area of a triton larva, the insert obeys the mouth building tune of the triton larva, however, it does not become a triton mouth but the mouth of a tadpole, true to its origin.

One could do a similar experiment with a strong orchestra. When replacing the violins with horns in a certain movement, the orchestra can go on playing the same tune but with a very different tonal quality." Uexküll, "The New Concept of Umwelt," 121.

Uexküll claims that if we could explore any tract of land carefully, we would discover distinct territories that, like the ever-shifting map of nations and of struggling groups within nations, represent a political division of the activities undertaken within them. Territories are divided and mapped by dogs through scent; by birds through the songs and dances that emanate from their nests; by spiders with their webs; and wasps, bees, and ants in movements in and around their hives or nests.¹³

The architecture of the home defines the space of territory which is the condition for the eruption of qualities, rhythms, sounds, colors, all capable of being extracted from objects to be able to be deterritorialized, transported elsewhere. Whether the ingenious elaboration in stucco of the neatly organized oval nests of termites, the beautiful ordered regularity of the honeycomb, the architecture of the home is the condition under which art is unleashed on the world.

Without the bee's attraction to the perfume of flowers and plants, there would be no art of smell for humans; without the bird's capacity to make melodious tones to charm and amuse us or to strut about fluffing up its most dazzling and colorful feathers in acts of courtship, we would be blunted to the allure of sounds, melodies, or color, texture and shape. These animal arts are the conditions under which the resources of nature are plucked or dragged away from their given context to

¹³ The body of an animal is an inverted map of its world, and equally, its world, the bubble-world it extracts from a larger blurring indeterminacy in which to live, is a projection of its bodily capacities. Similarly, the objects made, produced, by animals—nests, hives, webs, but also love-objects, small toys, balls, and objects of play—have their counterpart somewhere in the body of these animals. These animal-objects, objects constructed and invested with animal desire, are both the contrapuntal impression of materiality, of material forms—trees, branches, sticks, stones—used in animal construction and the contrapuntal responses to the specificity of the animal body. Birds' nests attest to the form of "treeness" from which they are composed, but also each nest is a measure of both the form of the body of the bird whose nest it is, and particularly of the eggs the bird lays in the nest. In taking over the activities of other insects should they succumb to some illness or death, they reveal a kind of hidden design, a plan in nature that is not designed by any planner but nevertheless adds up to a mosaic of impulses, orders, designs: "In this way we get the impression of a comprehensive harmonic totality, because the properties of lifeless things also intervene contrapuntally in the design of living things." Uexküll, "The New Concept of Umwelt," 121.

become the raw materials of the human arts.

Art is the human capitalization of these inhuman, animal qualities, the submission of these materials to other requirements than the instinctive. Art is the human transportation of these qualities, through framing, to any place whatever. The human arts are thus as inhuman as the human itself is: both are the transformation, the reworking, the overcoming of our animal prehistory and the beginning of our inhuman trajectory beyond the human. Art is that which most directly returns us to the animal lineage to the extent that art's qualities are not purely bound up with the contents, the concepts, the meanings, and the values art represents but primarily reside in its capacity to affect and transform life, that is, in what it does more than what it means. The animal reminds us of this movement in which we are bound up, this movement beyond ourselves that our art best represents. The animal is that from which qualities emanate, territories proliferate, and life is framed—framed by more than need. The animal is that from which the “all-too-human” comes, and that through which the human moves beyond itself into a new kind of artistic animal. Contemporary Aboriginal art, perhaps more than any other, makes explicit the intimate and necessary connection of the human with the animal, plant, and territorial environments that condition art and make all its qualities possible. It is perhaps the art most alive to the nuanced interconnections between all things.