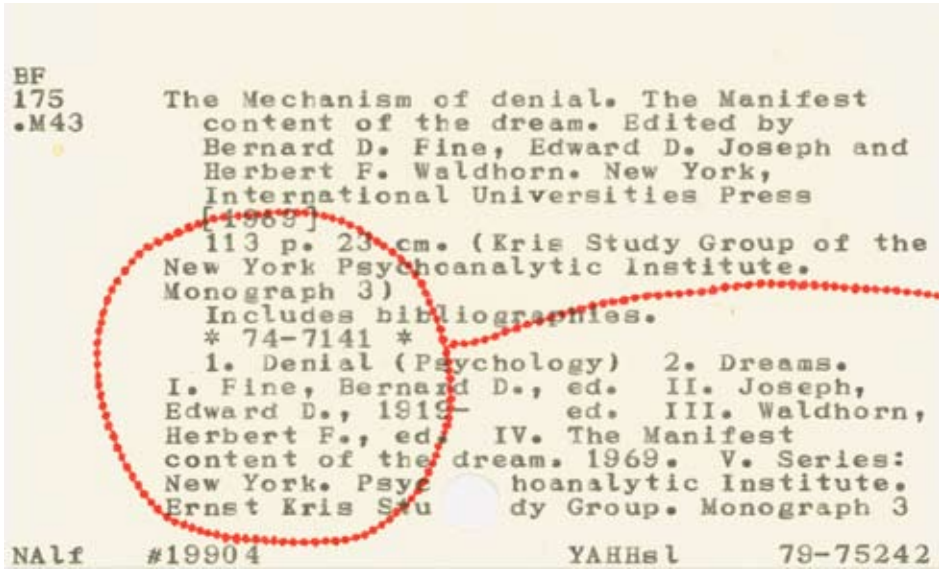
the weight of a tiny bird

Melody Owen
MFA Thesis 2007
NYSCC



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The Mechanism of denial. The Manifest content of the dream. Edited by Bernard D. Fine, Edward D. Joseph and Herbert F. Waldhorn. New York, International Universities Press [1969]
113 p. 23 cm. (Kris Study Group of the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. Monograph 3)
Includes bibliographies.
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1. Denial (Psychology) 2. Dreams. I. Fine, Bernard D., ed. II. Joseph, Edward D., 1919- ed. III. Waldhorn, Herbert F., ed. IV. The Manifest content of the dream. 1969. V. Series: New York. Psychoanalytic Institute. Ernst Kris Study Group. Monograph 3

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Jardine, William, Sir, 1800-1874.
Bees : Comprehending the uses and economical management of the honey-bee of Britain and other countries, together with descriptions of the known wild species / by edited by Sir William Jardine, bart. -- Edinburgh : W.H. Lizars ; London : Henry G. Bohn, 1859.
[17]-301 p., [31] col. leaves of plates : front. (port.) ill. ; 17 cm. -- (Naturalist's library. Entomology ; v. 34)
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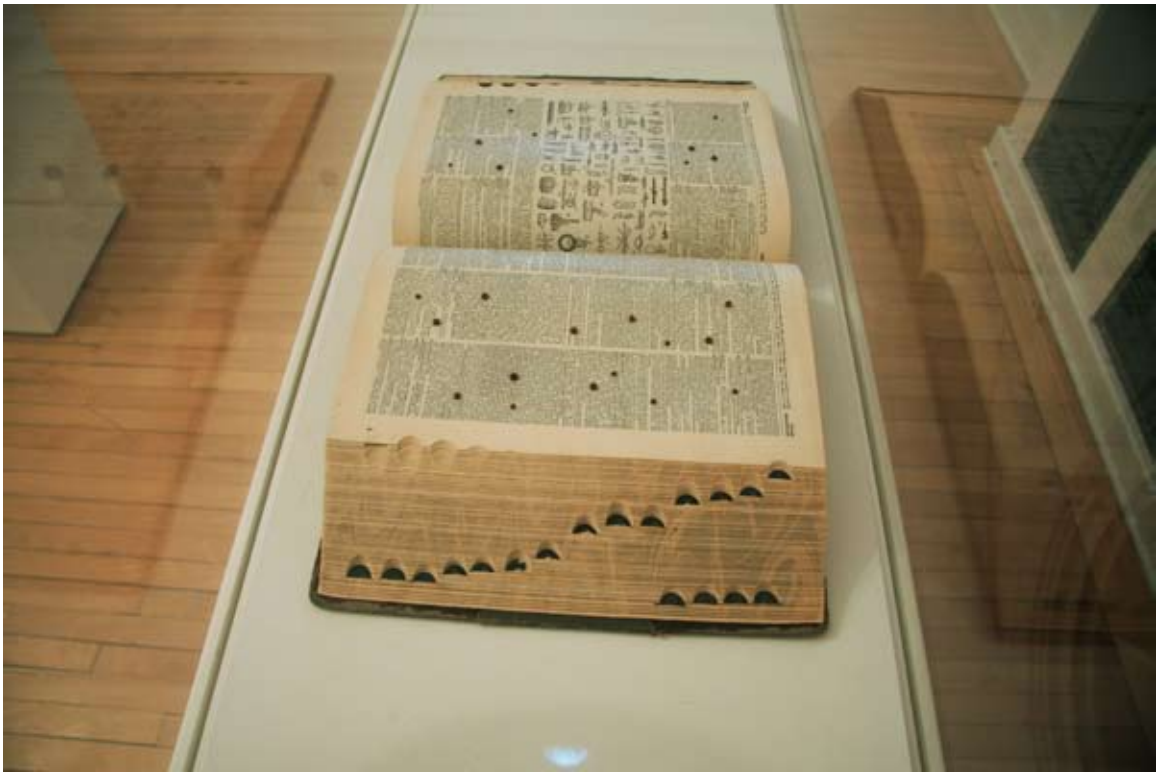
Encyclopedia

The encyclopedia is a labyrinth. It is more than a book, it is a methodology. The encyclopedic page can be read as surreal poetry. It consists of a random assortment of words and ideas, unrelated except for their place in the alphabet. They live together on the same page, inhabit the same space. A tiger will reside next to a Tiffany vase, near to a tidal wave, opposite time. The pages press together, each its own plane of reality.
Slice upon slice, stacked and compressed.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Cavalieri said that any solid body is the superposition of an infinite number of planes.
Borges (p. 88)



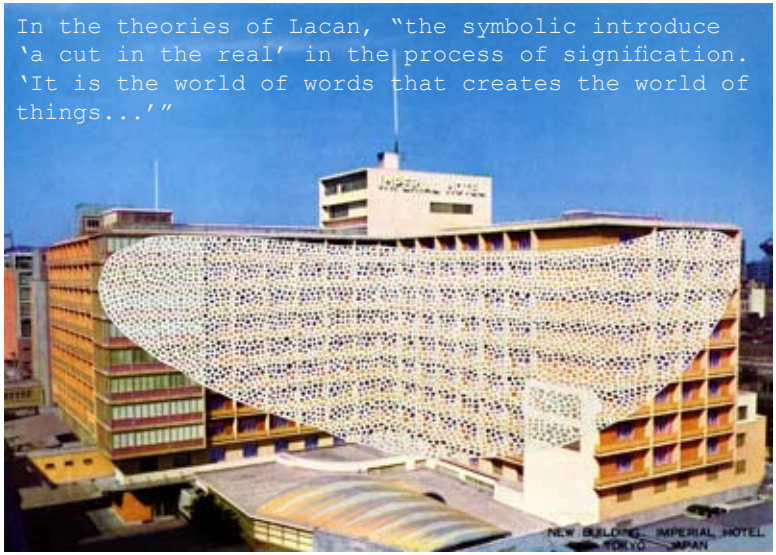
A zoo is a collection, as are museums, libraries, and now the chaos of the internet (which has become a collection of everyone and everything, author and curator hidden behind curtains of code.) Our new way of searching; typing a word into a search engine, has become commonplace. Libraries are discarding the catalogue cards that used to be the only way to find a book. Digital databases are replacing the paper ones. It is a time of transition. The internet is unfolding our encyclopedias, changing the shape of information. How will this change the external world? As we begin to reorganize things, will we consider the nature of definition and perception in the process?

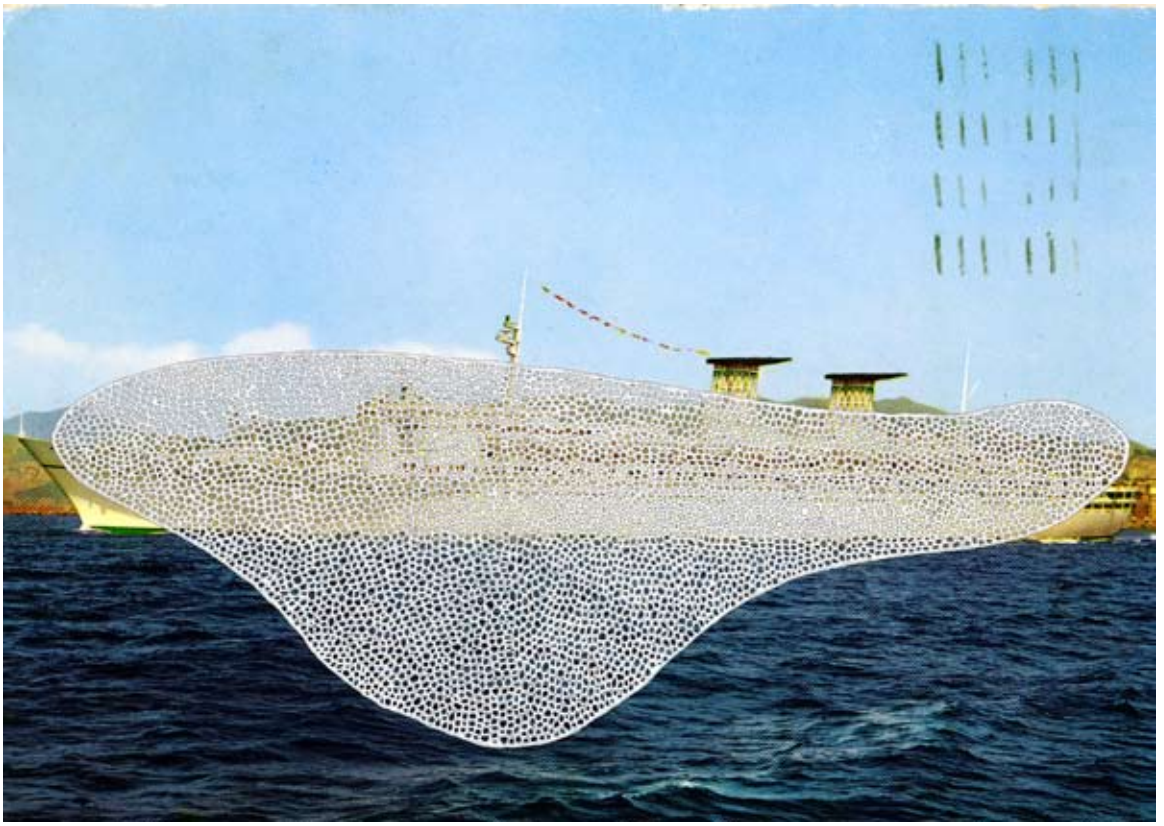
In *The Plates of the Encyclopedia*, Roland Barthes talks about the iconography of the object. That when it is separated and raised above the everydayness of the world, presented as part of an ultimate collection and simultaneously fragmented, it becomes an almost dreamlike entity. He discusses the same poetic and surrealist qualities that I had recognized, but in the context of splayed human bodies revealing their internal organs and severed hands "fluttering" around machines and looms and writing desks.

"...As if man could not get over having hands" Barthes (p.395)

"In a general way, the encyclopedia is fascinated, at reason's instance, with the wrong side of things: it cross-sections, it amputates, it turns inside out, it tries to get behind nature."
Barthes (p.400)

In trying to solve a mystery, we unravel and dissect, only to find that there are a thousand more mysteries hidden within the first. Barthes proposes that the human desire to name and classify is really a desire to possess. To name something is to possess it, and this is a systematic naming. In a world that is chaotic by nature, it is man's way of putting everything in its proper place and thereby making the world seem safer. By naming everything, the encyclopedia proposes "a world without fear." We create systems not knowing what they will become. The earliest encyclopedias function in part as illustrations of man's industrial accomplishments, his ability to conquer nature, to make "something" out of "nothing". Factories rise like shining palaces where once there were only fields and streams. Now we are beginning to wonder, what about those fields and streams?

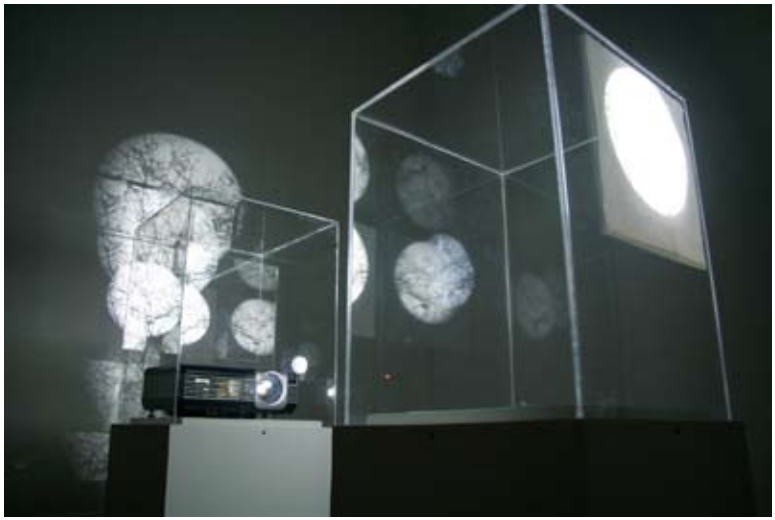




For the thesis show, I presented objects in faux museum, combining and playing with concepts of a changing world, changing systems of information and presentation. Drawings on some of the objects made reference to string theory, the idea that all matter is made up of vibrating strings and differences are determined (in part) by frequency and the transference of energy.

Hotel postcards and drawings, scanned and combined. 2006

One piece integrated the classical museum vitrine with technology, projecting video through layers of plexiglass creating layers of shimmering image on the wall behind. I filmed trees and birds through the telescopes at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and projected this circular footage onto a piece of paper attached to the outside of one of the vitrines. The beam of video passed through the glass while simultaneously reflecting off each plane.



I used material found in both the ceramic and the electronic arts departments, to make an ammalgamation of brick and messes of cords. In these there were 3 small screens. Two played video footage of a reindeer slowly turning its head while a sphere appears in the space between its horns, then slowly disappears. On the third, a forest spins past in fluctuating speeds.

By chance, I opened the encyclopedia to knots and knowing. This is where I left it open. I was thinking about string theory again and also how I read somewhere that a circle is a knot with no crossings. I was thinking about what we really know about matter and what we really know about anything. How we know. How we find. How we show. How we define.

Terry Gilliam's brilliant movie, Brazil, depicts a world that is controlled by those who control information. It conveys with grim humor the fallacies of technology and the deceptive potential of the media. It is also prophetic in its portrayal of a government that uses fear of terrorism to control the population.

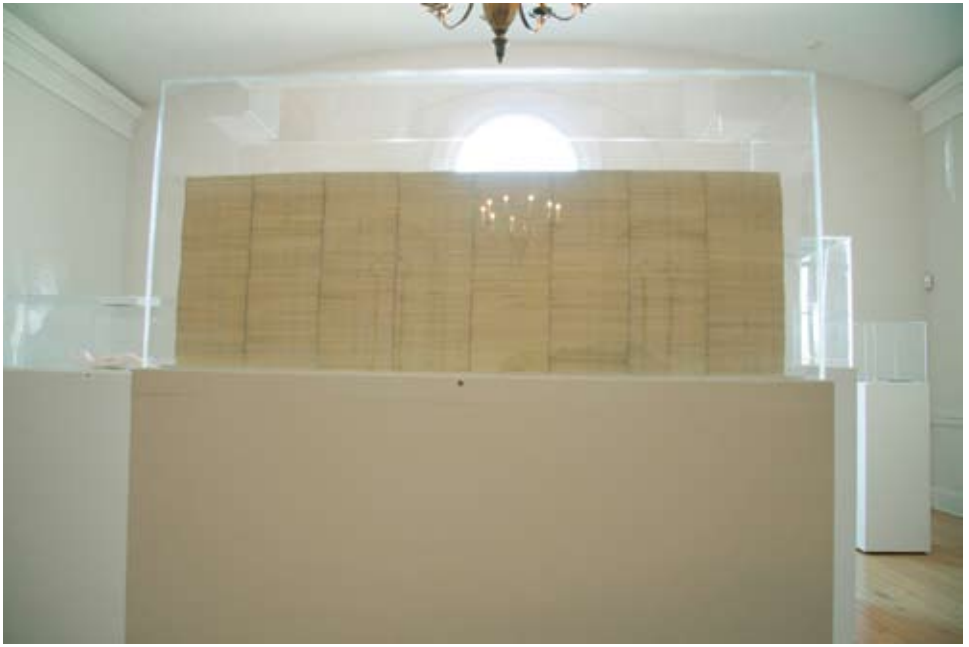
Photographic study of throats and hands at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. NYC. 2006
Animals from the Guanajuato Natural History Museum. Mexico. 2005

In Borges' short story, The Library of Babel , the world becomes infinite, towering, hexagonal mazes of information storage, most of it useless and meaningless.
He seems to prophetically describe the internet in some passages.
The version I read was translated in 1952.

"They speak (I know) of 'the febrile Library, whose hazardous volumes run the constant risk of being changed into others and in which everything is affirmed, denied, and confused as by a divinity in delirium'" (p. 86)

"There are official searchers, inquisitors . I have observed them carrying out their functions: they are always exhausted." (p. 84)

"Perhaps I am deceived by old age and fear, but I suspect that the human species - the unique human species - is on the road to extinction, while the Library will last on forever: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly immovable, filled with precious volumes, useless, incorruptable, secret." Borges (p. 87)



The case of the lost forest

...it looked at Alice with its large gentle eyes, but didn't seem at all frightened.
"Here then! Here then!" Alice said, as she held out her hand and tried to stroke it; but it only started back a little, and then stood looking at her again.
"What do you call yourself?" the Fawn said at last. Such a soft sweet voice it had!
"I wish I knew!" thought poor Alice. She answered, rather sadly, "Nothing, just now."
"Think again," it said: "that won't do." Alice thought, but nothing came of it.
"Please, would you tell me what you call yourself?" she said timidly. "I think that might help a little."
"I'll tell you, if you'll move a little further on," the Fawn said. "I can't remember here."
So they walked on together though the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn, till they came out into another open field, and here the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arms.
"I'm a Fawn!" it cried out in a voice of delight, "and, dear me! You're a human child!"
A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment, it had darted away at full speed.
(Carroll p.226-227)

Pages from notebooks.
2006

I use this passage from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* to illustrate the idea that so much of what we think we know is based on a limited and arbitrary understanding of the world, on realities we have constructed, on perceptions that we take for granted as being universal truths. What we see is a product of our own minds and what is considered to be common knowledge. We operate on assumptions dictated by perceptions which are based on definition and experience. Our experience is determined in part by our form, the matter we are made of. According to the notes by Martin Gardner in the annotated version of the Alice books, the wood described in the passage is meant to represent reality as it actually exists, without labels. If it is not pre-defined, then there is no limit to what we do not know.

The wood in which things have no name is in fact the universe itself, as it is apart from symbol-manipulating creatures who label portions of it because - as Alice earlier remarked with pragmatic wisdom - "it's useful to the people who name them." (Gardener p.227)

The meeting of Alice and the fawn is also significant in that it hints at a world that might exist if there were no names to define and thereby separate us so dramatically from animals. A child's dream world where we have the ability to speak with and befriend animals. Alice is able to experience first hand how physiology determines perception when she changes physical size. For example, when she shrinks and ends up swimming in her own tears. Also, when her neck stretches high into the trees and she is confronted by a bird protecting her nest. The bird is only worried about her eggs and could care less how Alice defines herself. Alice learns quite a bit through conversations with various plants, insects and animals. She is like a Victorian shaman, gaining wisdom by communicating with nature.

Chicago Aquarium. 2006

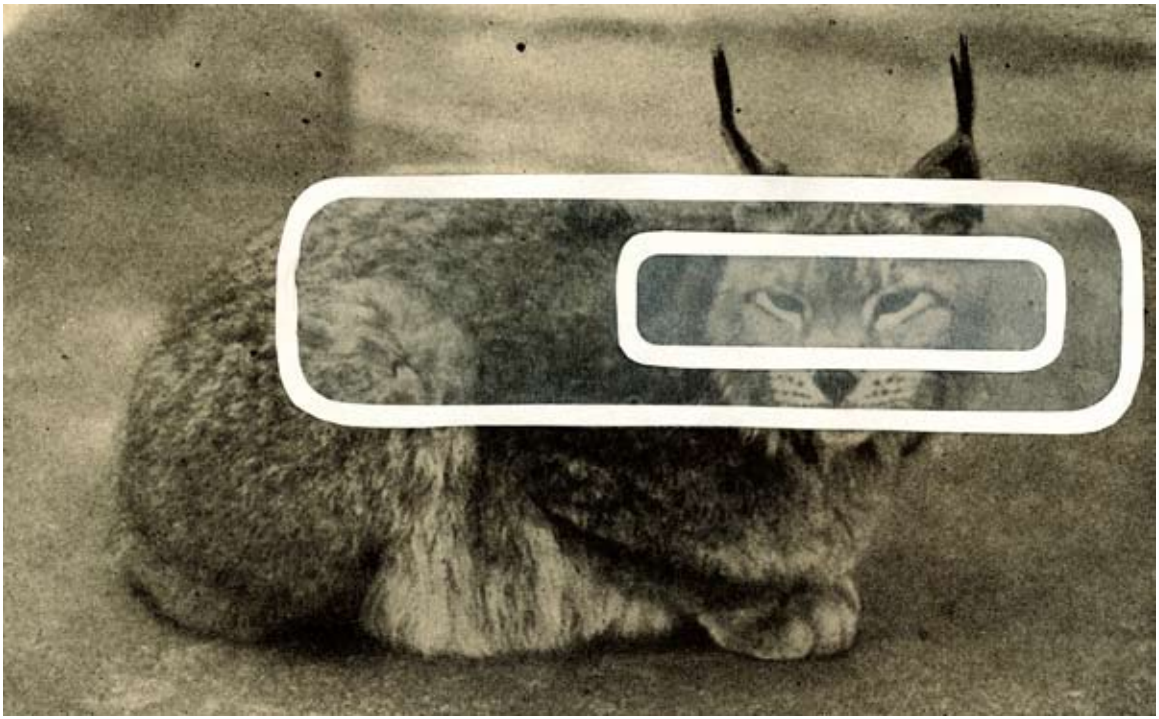
Dream: I was standing on the corner at Greene Street, looking across Main Street. The soccer fields rolled away into Irish hills. Suddenly, I had to press against the rock wall behind me to let a giant white bull pass by me. It was gliding along the sidewalk in enormously smooth transluscence. It was so large, it could have crushed me but delicate and powder white like porcelain. It was also silent, it made no sound. The other bull appeared on the corner across Greene Street. This one was loud. It yelled over to us in English, "They have taken my meat and they have eaten my honey and they have hidden my treasure in the caves!" As he was yelling this, his skin became more and more transparent so that I could see his insides and they seemed hollowed out like caves. I turned around and crawled up the rock wall behind me which had turned into grassy hills.

Real life: Riding my bike to school on the night before the opening, I approached Greene Street. I often recall my dream when I pass that street. This time, I am looking at it ahead of me. The old man is there. He is always walking slowly through the town. He seems to exist in a slightly different dimension. The old man was standing in the exact spot I had been standing in my dream. When I saw him there, time seemed to shift into a slower gear and he suddenly veered off into Main Street, slowly though, smoothly. I watched him and noticed his shock of white hair as cars slowed for him to pass. It may seem strange, but when he passed in front of me like that on the very same path as the white bull, I started to cry. On my bike still, riding slowly forward, I was crying because an elderly man passed in front of me. Then I heard birds above me and it seemed to me that their songs were like high, bright scratches in time. I could almost see them, like the sky was torn and light was coming through.

Lincoln Park Zoo. Chicago. 2007

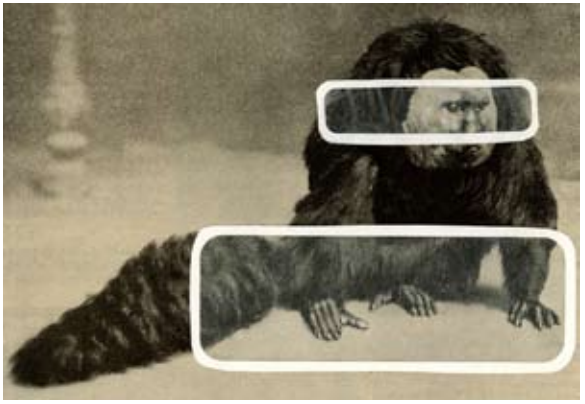
The forest for the trees

There does not exist a forest as an objectively fixed environment:
There exists a forest-for-the-park-ranger, a forest-for-the-hunter,
a forest-for-the-botanist, a forest-for-the-wayfarer, a
forest-for-the-nature-lover, a forest-for-the-carpenter,
and finally a fable forest in which Little Red Riding Hood
loses her way.
(Agamben, p. 41)



Overlay Series. Lynx. 2006
Old photos of endangered animals and envelope windows
scanned and printed.

So much of what we assume to be true is merely one facet of a complex issue which is actually fundamental to our humanity. What is our relationship to animals? What is our responsibility to them? What do they perceive, think, feel? We may coexist in the same world, but do we share the same reality? Even our hearts beat at different speeds. Does this mean that we experience time differently? Do we really see them more clearly when we place them in an artificial environment, like a sterile lab or a zoo? Or does that very environment alter them in some fundamental way? Certainly, it alters behavior. The animal, deprived of its freedom is closed off from its own nature, just as humans are. For us it takes the form of a prison, a "detention center," or an asylum. But a social or political system can close us into an unnatural way of thinking and behaving that seems a symptom of captivity. Even the television and the car, such fixtures in our lives now, have become cages of a kind, entrapping us in routine, closing off our senses, numbing us to the real world. We are like children playing a tragic game of peek-a-boo, holding our hands over our eyes and pretending that the world outside isn't there.



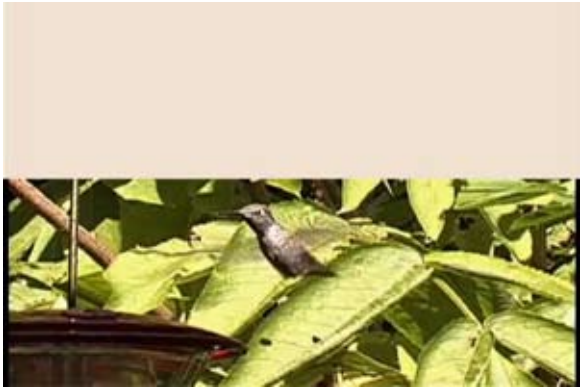
Within our own species there are vastly different ways of viewing the world (as many ways as there are languages, and more.) We often have difficulty granting that cultures other than our own have validity, so it is not surprising that we are reluctant to give any credence to animal intelligence. Ninety-nine percent of mice genes are found in humans. Koala bears have almost exactly the same fingerprints as we do, loops and swirls. Seals have tongues that are very similar to human tongues and actually enable them to mimic human speech. Perhaps, it is this very closeness that makes us uneasy.

In the essay *Why Look at Animals?* John Berger explores human beings' relationships with animals, how we have moved from having lives that are close, interwoven and dependent, to having very little relationship to nature at all, or at least one that has been relegated to artificial and symbolic manifestations and is mediated by consumerism, fear and apathy.

The relation may become clearer by comparing the look of an animal with the look of another man. Between two men the two abysses are, in principal, bridged by language. Even if the encounter is hostile and no words are used (even if the two speak different languages), the existence of language allows that at least one of them, if not mutually, is confirmed by the other. Language allows men to reckon with each other as with themselves.
Berger (p.3)

Berger speaks of an abyss. This could also be presented in terms of a border, an illusory line drawn between countries or between beings. Illusory but nonetheless powerful, both in terms of shaping and being shaped by perception. A border separates and distinguishes difference. There are so many differences in even just the physiological makeup of different animals. If one considers the heartbeat alone; the tempo, the timeframe in which our lives play out, one can imagine that a hummingbird inhabits a vastly different place than we do. Its heart beats 500-600 times a minute, perched. It can go to over a thousand beats a minute when flying. How slowly we must seem to move, like snails. And how quickly we must seem to move to a snail. We think of plants as motionless and yet when timelapsed, they reach and wrap and stretch towards sunlight and nourishing soil. The blue whale's heartbeat can be heard miles away and its heart is the size of a Volkswagon Beetle. What do we look like from underneath the surface of the ocean? Moving shapes inside the shadow of the whaling ship, dark and sharp. Perception itself presents a abyss which can only be crossed if the possibility of different realities is acknowledged.

Too often, he affirms, we imagine that the relations a certain animal subject has to the things in its environment take place in the same space and in the same time as those which bind us to objects in our human world. This illusion rests on the belief in a single world in which all living beings are situated. Uexkull shows that such a unitary world does not exist, just as a space and a time which are equal for all living beings does not exist. The fly, the dragonfly and the bee that we observe flying next to us on a sunny day do not move in the same world as the one in which we observe them, nor do they share with us - or with each other - the same time and the same space.
(Agamben, p. 40)



Still from video with hummingbird and animation. 2005

There are many other forms of communication and thought that escape our notice. Aside from movement, smells, and touch, which are all used frequently in animal and human communication, there are visual and even electrical signals that we cannot see. For example, several kinds of birds including hummingbirds have feathers which glow in ultraviolet light. Birds see in ultraviolet so they can see things we cannot. It was once believed that butterflies could not see red. Now it is known that they have at least five different types of spectral receptors: ultraviolet, violet, blue, green and red. We have three. Dolphins appear to name themselves. Researchers have identified 622 social sounds in humpback whales. There exists in Australia, a type of bird called the bower bird which creates elaborate structures which are not used for nesting, but rather as galleries to display piles of flowers, the shells of beetles, berries and bottlecaps. The lyrebird mimics the sounds of other birds and creates new songs out of the different melodies. Recently, it has been recorded mimicking human sounds; camera clicks, car alarms and chainsaws. The platypus locate their prey in part by detecting electric fields generated by muscular contractions. The sensors are located in the skin of their bill. Whatever it is that animals are perceiving, it is vastly different than the way we experience the world. And yet, there is something beyond the organic that we share. That mysterious something that passes between us when our eyes meet. In a sense, a world exists within that look, a shared world.

Collection of pictures of hands holding animals, taken from magazines and books, displayed in Scholes Library. 2006

Profound Boredom

Stereotypic behavior is exhibited widely by animals in zoos. I filmed a hippo that would swim in place by positioning himself in front of the glass and swimming towards it. I saw a puffin doing the same thing, pressing its chest up against the glass while it paddled with its feet. The giraffes compulsively lick the fake savannah sky painted on the walls of their cells. Polar bears and elephants shift their weight back and forth, stepping forward and backward or from side to side. The boredom that is experienced by the animals in zoos is indeed profound as discussed in Agamben's essay on Heidegger's theories.

Still from video shot of polar bear den
New York Central Park Zoo. 2007

The jewel set at the center of the human world and its Lichtung (clearing) is nothing but animal captivation; the wonder "that beings are " is nothing but the grasping of the "essential disruption" that occurs in the living being from its being exposed in a non-revelation. In this sense, the Lichtung truly is a lucus a non lucendo : the openess at stake in it is essentially the openess to a closedness, and whoever looks in the open sees only a closing, only a not-seeing.
Agamben (p.68)

The zoo in itself is not the problem. The zoo is merely a symptom of a wider philosophical problem. We have come to define animal as meat or machine. We hesitate to ascribe to them a soul because that would raise so many questions about the way we treat them or rather mistreat them, the way we eat them by the truckload, the way we lay waste to their habitat and the way we generally torture and neglect them. We, as a species, are still so confused about who we are and who they are. Our relationship is defined by separation, by difference, by indifference, by fear and by greed. In Sue Coe's book about factory farming, she observes that if slaughterhouses were made of glass, we would all be vegetarians.

A commonplace variance, or an exception (with exceptions) is the pet. The one we adopt and name becomes part of the family, worthy of love and capable of communication on some simple level. We are able to hold, simultaneously, two viewpoints on the animal. We cherish the individual while ignoring the whole. We come together to watch news on the rescue of a single animal, while hundreds of thousands of others are left to die. This has much to do with the structure of the system of capitalism, technology, and the fractured and distracted approach to life that has come of it.

Colette describes the tigers in her essay *Zoological Garden*,

With no show of sadness or irritation, they endure, unresigned, that perpetual insult, the gaze of man. But they have their revenge, which is to forget man. During the two hours that I watched them, their own gaze fell only on one head: the head of the keeper who feeds them. For man they have only a face empty of thought and a cold and half closed eye. Colette (p. 276)

The Panther

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold anything else.
It seems to him there are a thousand bars;
and behind the bars, no world.

As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils lifts, quietly--.
An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.

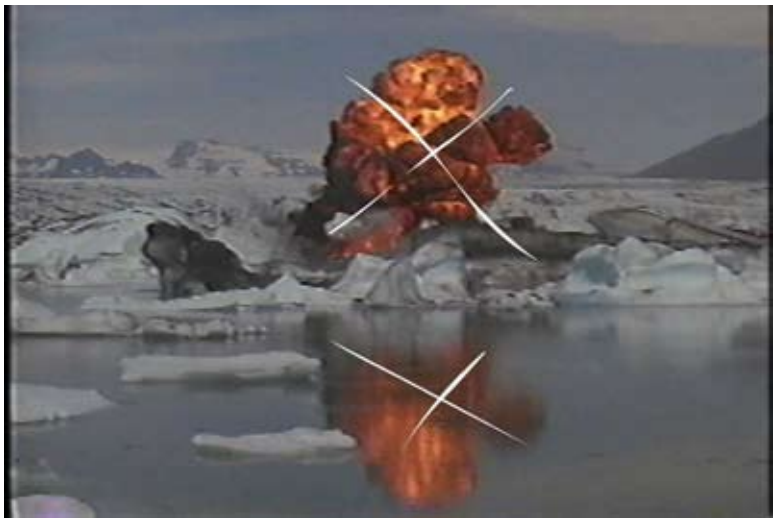
Rainer Maria Rilke

Shape of Smoke

In the movie *The King of Hearts*, the inmates of an asylum spill out into a town deserted by a bomb scare. The protagonist tries to rescue them by taking them out of the town but they refuse to go and eventually return to the asylum. The juxtaposition inherent in the movie is that of the so-called "mad" people with the very real madness of war. Wars are fought over perceptions and sold as reality. Who is doing the selling? (Follow the money.) The violence of war is a direct and bloody manifestation of an idea. Bombs, guns. I believe it is criminal to send armed children to settle the disputes of men. The motivation for the Iraq war was money, power, oil. It was sold as a way to "protect" America from terrorists. Instead, it has only served to twist people's perceptions of us (in the rest of the world) into ever more tightening spirals of disapproval. I am continually baffled by the fact that our administration has not yet been impeached. One wonders how they will be considered in retrospect, for rejecting the Kyoto Protocol, for neglecting the people of New Orleans, for rolling back environmental protection laws at the behest of corporations, for spending our resources on invading other countries, instead of making sure that our own citizens have health care and good educations, and that our farmers can grow food for us in a healthy, sustainable way.
The white house has become a madhouse.

In our day to day lives, we block it out. It is easy because it is so far away. And anyway, we are wrapped in blankets of technology, in the warm glow of media, comforted by pretty faces who speak in soothing voices of celebrity and glamour, the giant soap opera that the Western World has become. And far away, terrible things are happening, terrible bloodshed and confusion in the heat and the sand.

This war has some similarities to wars of the past, obviously to Vietnam (the war we were supposed to learn from.) But this particular war is both highly visible and completely invisible. We are aware of it but certain aspects are kept hidden. We see a lot of explosions. But for Americans, explosions are common fare. We have them with our coffee in the morning. In the early James Bond movies, there were only one or two explosions per movie. Now, each movie is stuffed so full of them that dialogue becomes mere interlude.



Still from video animation of drawing on James Bond movies. 2005

We never see bodies returning from Iraq. We know that they are. And there are also the thousands of badly traumatized and injured young people that return from any war. Where are they? How are they? What is really going on over there? Who is controling what we see? Why are we allowing ourselves to be manipulated and used? Why are we allowing corporations and our "elected" government to hijack our country?

What is my responsibility as an artist? As a citizen? What can I do in such a media saturated time, when every artistic gesture feels like pouring a cup of water into a flowing river. Do I value my right to free speech?

The visual arts have remained by the wayside as the entire culture is now being threatened by the extermination of space and the instantaneity of time. Instead of looking for ways of offsetting creatively, the danger, art is looking away, or looking at itself, even nodding silently, colluding with the ongoing destruction.
Lotringer (p. 29)

"The shape of smoke" is one of the phrases I carried with me when I came here, written in a notebook like a fragment of secret code. So, I searched "smoke" on the internet, and also "Iraq." I came up with hundreds of images.
I pulled them off the web and cut the shape of the smoke away from the rest of the photograph. Then, I collaged them together, building a Corinthian Column in the negative space.

Vitruvius wrote that the Corinthian Column was originally conceived of by the architect and sculptor, Callimachus, inspired by the sight of a basket on a child's grave that had an acanthus plant curling through it. The day before I learned this (on wikipedia), I was speaking to a friend by cell phone. I was in the woods in Ithaca, he was in Portland, Oregon. He told me that he had just gotten a tattoo of a curling fern.
The tattoo was designed by a Maori artist in New Zealand. (Later, I found out that he fern existed in the negative space.) A few moments before we spoke, I had seen a very tall tree fall. It fell slowly, crashing through the trees around it. In Twin Peaks, special agent Dale Cooper says, "When two events occur simultaneously pertaining to the same line of inquiry, one must always pay strict attention."

While investigating these things, I discovered that The Archives Building of the United States has Corinthian Columns at its entrance and all around it. It was these that I modeled my columns after. There was a counterbalance with the library cards on the opposite end of the museum, also stacked in two columns. The two methods of searching, so different and imperfect, the one in its impermanence and the other in its obscurity. How will the records of the Iraq war be kept and how will they be viewed by future generations. Who is doing the naming here? Who is writing the definitions?

Will the current administration get away with claiming it stands for a culture of life when it has caused so much death and destruction? What does it mean that a term like "collateral damage" can be so easily substituted for human casualties? Collateral is defined as "additional but subordinate, secondary". Since when has human life become secondary? Secondary to what? Our constitution is stored in the archives, as are our laws. How do our own laws play a part in these wars? Have they been honored or ignored? I use the shape of the column to reference other governments as well, countries that fell under the weight of failed systems. In some places in the world, only the columns are left standing.

"...why talk of beauty what could be more beautiful than these heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?"

He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water

ee cummings

The weight of a tiny bird

The earth is moved from its position by the weight of a tiny bird resting upon it. The surface of the sphere of water is moved by a tiny drop of water falling upon it.
Leonardo da Vinci (p.734)

I use an exerpt of this quote for the title of the show because it expresses the idea of connectedness and consequence that I want to emphasize in my thesis. I believe that at the core of things, is this current of truth that everything is connected. That everything we do sends ripples out into the world. That every piece of nature has its place in the scheme of things. The ecosystem is a puzzle we are only just begining to understand. We piece it together with one hand, while pulling it apart with the other. We share the earth, the water, the air. We take these things for granted. (If the world's water supply could be put in a gallon jug, the drinkable water would measure a teaspoon.) We are constantly making mistakes and constantly learning and then making new mistakes. OK, we're human. Perhaps, it is (in part) this very sense of guilt, of imperfection, that is keeping us quiet. Because we are participating in the system, we feel that we don't have the right to criticize it or that we might not be able to live without it. Certainly, by operating in this particular system, we are destroying the planet at an alarming rate through the social, environmental and financial cost of war, global warming, toxic pollution, waste, neglect, overfishing, overexploitation of resources, and the consequences of so called "free trade". Douglas Adams, in his book on extinction quotes his colleague: "The darker it gets, the faster we're driving."

Somewhere between two and four million migrating songbirds are killed each year by communications towers. I have a cell phone. Does that make me a hypocrite? I drive a car. I create garbage. I use electricity. Does my complicity lie in my participation or my silence?
I continue in the hope that the most profound optimism is that which persists in the face of despair.

I see America spreading disaster. I see America as a black curse on the world. I see a long night settling in and that mushroom which has poisoned the world, withering at the roots...

My faltering and groping, my search for any and every means of expression, is a sort of divine stuttering. I am dazzled by the glorious collapse of the world!

Henry Miller (p. 24)

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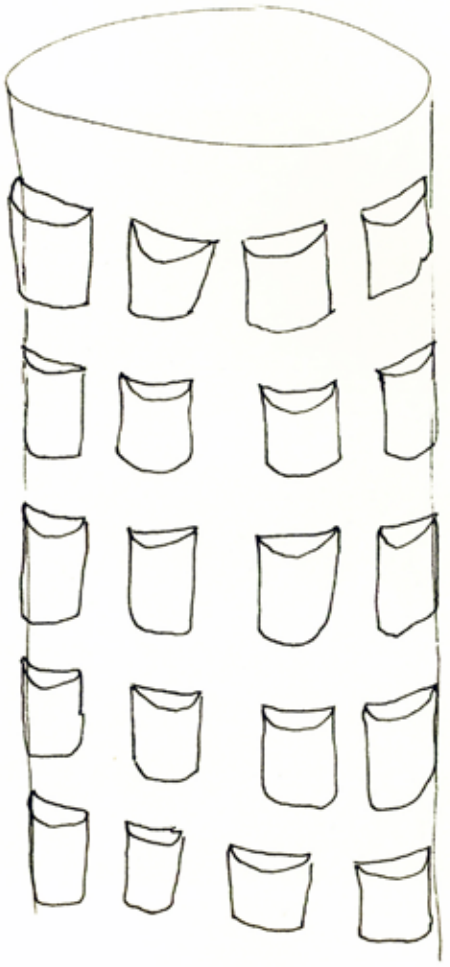
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